**From the creator of "Traces of the Sun", a new western fantasy BL web novel with a romance between a necromancer and the hero described to be the son of god.**

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### Description

"Prisoner number 444. It's time for your meal."

He had possessed the body of a prisoner.

And not just any prisoner, but one condemned to die the next day.

However, before he could even grasp the situation, a deafening explosion shattered the prison, and he was dragged outside. Now, he was not only a death-row inmate but also a fugitive.

“Allow me to introduce myself. My name is Harenir von Luchete. I am the **Commander of the Holy Order of Sidon**, which protects the Holy Empire of Solares, and the First Sword of the Order. And... I'm the hero who was reported dead today.”

His eyes were soft, his smile gentle, and his demeanor exuded a kindness that seemed to embrace all.

Everything about him made him look like a saint.

**[Help the Hero!]**

**[Reward for success: Freedom]**

**[Penalty for failure: Death]**

"I need the souls you command.

Would you rather return to die as a condemned prisoner, or would you like to help me and have your sentence reduced?

"Why do you need my necromancy? What reason is there that it has to be me? Surely, I'm not the only necromancer in the Empire."

"Because you're the one who's been wandering around collecting the most corpses, extracting their souls, and enslaving them. No one else has been able to control human souls by the dozens, by the hundreds, like you."

Reluctantly accepting the quest, Isaph embarked on a journey with the hero, who harbored hostility toward him. Together, they began to uncover the hidden truth behind the monsters...

“You... You seem different from when we first met.”

In this hopeless game where there were no benefits for the player, could Isaph ever hope to find ‘freedom’?

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**Status in COO**

Main Story: 189 Chapters (Completed)  
Side Story: 46 Chapters (Completed)

**Language**

Korean

**Type**

Web Novel (KR)

**Genre**

Action, Adult, Adventure, Fantasy, Romance, Yaoi.

**Tags**

Adventurers, Amnesia, Calm Protagonist, Comedic Undertone, Contracts, Demons, Divine Protection, Enemies Become Allies, Enemies Become Lovers, European Ambience, Fairies, Fantasy World, First-time Intercourse, Ghosts, Handsome Male Lead, Hated Protagonist, Heroes, Hiding True Identity, Interdimensional Travel, Loyal Subordinates, Male Protagonist, Monsters, Necromancer, Possession, R-18, Seeing Things Other Humans Can't, Sickly Characters, Slow Romance, Soul Power, Souls, Strong Love Interests, Tragic Past, Transmigration.

**Translation**

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### Chapter 1

**Part 1. 1%**

He had possessed a body in another world.

If one day you were suddenly hit by a *truck-kun* and sent to a fantasy world, what role would you want to take on?

A swordsman or magician boasting special abilities, or a noble or royal with the power to control the world, or even a life of wealth and leisure where you can play and eat to your heart's content. The options one can imagine are endless.

He too had dreamed of such a hopeful life, but…

"Prisoner number 444. It's time for your meal."

He had possessed the body of a prisoner.

And not just any prisoner, but one condemned to die the next day.

\*\*\*

To explain how this happened, the story goes back a few hours.

It was a day like any other.

He woke up late, spent most of his time in bed, made do with frozen meals, and prepared to go out late at night. He put on a black hoodie and jeans, and finally pressed a dark purple baseball cap firmly onto his head.

"Phew..."

Feeling the winter's lingering chill in his visible breath, he began walking. After being cooped up all day in a tiny studio apartment, his joints felt awkward as he moved.

Still, he had to move if he wanted to earn money. Just across the crosswalk and he'd soon reach his destination…

*Ding.*

A cheerful notification sound stopped him in his tracks. The pedestrian signal was on, so he could have crossed, but some instinct made him pause. He took out his phone to check the message that had just arrived.

—--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

DU Convenience Store Manager

*Evan... I'm sorry but you don't need to come in to work starting today. I'll deposit your pay for the work up to yesterday. Thanks for your hard work all this time.*

*PM10:50*

—--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

It was a sudden notice of termination, but he had only one thought about it.

*You could have contacted me earlier. I came all the way out here for nothing.*

He had expected to be fired soon, since it had been about a month since he started working. Still, if they were going to fire him anyway, it would have been nice if they had told him at least a few hours before his shift, or even 30 minutes before. Was it reasonable to contact him just 10 minutes prior? It was especially vexing since the convenience store was right in front of him.

The manager must have felt awkward about this too, as another message was added.

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DU Convenience Store Manager

*Sorry for telling you at the last minute ᅮ Did you already come out??*

*It's absolutely not because you did a bad job!! You did really well. It's just that late-night sales have been declining a bit lately ᅮ So I'm planning to take over the night shift myself... I'm sorry…*

*And I'm saying this for your sake... Try to smile more from now on~ Brightly~ Sometimes I was startled when I saw you ᄒᄒ;; Looking at the CCTV, it seems customers were also startled by you and didn't come in...~ᄏᄏᄒ;; I hope you don't take this the wrong way...ᄒ PM10:52*

—--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

It's common to ramble on when feeling embarrassed, but in doing so, one often ends up saying unnecessary things. He looked up at the manager whispering with the evening part-timer in the convenience store, then looked back down at his phone screen.

Sometimes people seem to believe that as long as they preface something with "I'm saying this for your sake," any statement becomes warm advice and encouragement. While it had been a while since he'd received such unsolicited concern, this too was nothing to be surprised about. He stuffed his phone into his pocket indifferently.

"I wonder what the customers said..."

No matter which part-time job he got, he was always fired within a month at most, and while the attitude of the boss giving notice of termination varied each time, the reason was always the same.

*'The customers feel uncomfortable around you.'*

It had been like this since he was young. Pale skin with veins faintly visible, sunken eyes, dark circles, a gloomy expression. Honestly, even just his appearance might make people want to keep their distance, but there was an even clearer reason.

He could see ghosts.

He had probably seen them since the moment he was born. That's why the staff who cared for him as a newborn in the orphanage sometimes felt a chill from the baby's gaze directed behind them, and why all the children he grew up with avoided him. So as soon as he was old enough to live independently, he left the orphanage as if he had been driven out.

Having seen ghosts for so long, he wasn't scared unless it was a particularly malevolent spirit. He generally ignored them, but when he was younger, he occasionally tried to help those who had ghosts attached to them. He would warn them to be careful on night roads, tell them not to go to certain buildings, or ask if they had recently brought home any strange objects.

About half were grateful, while the other half got angry. Even if he had only intended to focus on the former and be glad, later on they too would persistently question him and try to get more out of him, so in the end both sides were just troublesome. He hated getting involved in complicated matters.

As a result, he gradually stopped saying anything at all, and now he only occasionally observed ghosts that looked interesting.

*'It's unpleasant.'*

But just staring blankly into space was enough to make others uncomfortable. Throughout elementary, middle, and high school, students avoided him, and teachers were wary of him. He was referred to as "that kid, you know" throughout the school. He felt like a piece that didn't fit in this world at all.

He wasn't particularly hurt by this treatment, but it was a bit unfair when he was chased away with salt thrown at him the moment he set foot in a shaman's house. He thought they would accept him as a kindred spirit, but to be treated like an evil spirit instead.

He wondered if something would change when he became an adult, but nothing did. The only difference was that he heard less unsolicited advice to "be more cheerful" than when he was younger, which was more comfortable. Unfortunately, he had just heard it again today after a long time.

"I was going to buy juice at the convenience store..."

He was reluctant to go into the place he had just been fired from to make a purchase. Although he had grown up receiving all sorts of stares, he wasn't that thick-skinned, and he didn't want to cause unnecessary discomfort to the part-timer and manager who were probably still talking about him.

Instead, he decided to go to the convenience store on his way home. It was strangely colder than usual, so he picked up his pace. It was a dark night with clouds covering even the moonlight.

*Meow–*

Just before turning the corner of the alley, a small sound stopped him. He reflexively turned his head to check the source of the sound, and a faint smile spread across his face. It was a black cat.

Somewhere he had heard that black cats were a bad omen, but he thought it was complete nonsense. All cats in the world are cute, and cute things can't be sinful, so why label them as a bad omen? How dare humans say such rude things about cats. Ah, perhaps there had been a factional dispute among cats. Maybe the Cheese, Mackerel, Calico, and other factions had deliberately tried to slander black cats.

This imagination was a bit cute, but he couldn't continue with such pleasant thoughts in the current situation.

"It's dangerous there. Come here."

The black cat was sitting in the middle of the road. Feeling very uneasy about its position, he gestured for it to come out quickly, called out, and even tried to intimidate it, but the cat didn't budge an inch and just stared at him. Somehow, it seemed as if it was calling him.

*Can't be helped,* he thought as he reached out and began to approach the cat.

*Screeeeeeech–*

The last things he registered were a heavy sound assaulting his ears, intense headlights flooding the road, and the truck bumper right in front of his eyes as he turned to the side.

That was the end.

There was no pain.

\*\*\*

And so, in the present, he opened his eyes here.

At first, he naturally thought he was dead. He believed the reason his consciousness remained instead of being cut off immediately was simply time given to reflect on his life one last time before dying. The only thing he was curious about was whether the cat was safe.

Strangely, it seemed like the cat had whispered something to him at the last moment…

*'Now... ― has ...become.'*

Pfft, he laughed. Death was so empty that he was having such nonsensical delusions. He hadn't had great expectations or passion for life, nor had he lived particularly diligently, yet was he hoping for a death that wasn't shabby? Just as he was thinking that dying while trying to save a cat was more than he deserved, he froze.

*...Did I just laugh?*

*How?*

*I should be dead… is this an illusion?*

*Clang!*

At that moment, as if to prove it wasn't an illusion, an external sound struck his ears. It was the kind of sound that might be made when opening a heavy door. Simultaneously, he gasped and opened his eyes.

The faded monochrome scenery gradually took on color. This place was... a bright space where sunlight poured in abundantly.

Sunlight.

It had definitely been an ominously dark night, but now the midday sun warmly touched his body. The pitch-black robe that remained distinctly dark even under the sunlight felt unfamiliar.

With eyes wide open, he kept looking around the space while fumbling to touch his body with his hands. His hands moved normally and he felt no pain anywhere on his body.

Could this be... the *truck-kun*?

Since he was always alone and bored, he had read web novels a few times. And in the case of novels tagged with "*isekai*," the main character, who had a hard life in their previous life, would possess a new body in another world and live a wonderful life.

As the *isekai* genre became very popular, most novels explained the death process that the main character encounters before moving to a new body as the *truck-kun*. On the way to school—splat. On the way to a job interview—splat. Even on the way to take the college entrance exam—splat.

Death may be empty, but the new life afterwards is brilliant.

Excitement started to build within him. It seemed like he had also been hit by the *truck-kun*. Now, what kind of life awaited him? Maybe he was the eldest son of the imperial family or part of a renowned family of swordsmen or magicians. Maybe he was the youngest heir of a powerful duke’s family, feared even by the imperial family. Or perhaps he was part of a secret guild that held the entire empire in its grip.

Anything would be fine. A new life full of hope…

"Prisoner number 444. It's time for your meal."

*What?*

Before he could even understand the words pronounced in a thick voice, *clang!* Something fell to the floor. It was a sharp sound like that of metal dishes hitting a stone floor.

Only then was he able to expand his field of vision. The small square space, where nothing could be found except a blanket that looked like a sackcloth, looked like a prison. The sunlight he had perceived earlier was pouring in through a small window above, but it was so small that one could barely stick a hand through it, and the window was densely covered with bars.

*Thud!* A heavy sound came from the side. As he was blankly staring up at the window, the man, thinking his words were being ignored, had kicked the prison bars.

Startled by the noise, he reflexively flinched and turned around, and the man sneered. The man's dull blonde hair and dark blue eyes, presumably those of a jailer wearing iron armor, came into view. It was an unfamiliar appearance that seemed to indicate this was definitely another world.

"You're going to die tomorrow, so you don't feel like eating? Then I'll kindly throw it away for you!"

The man completely flipped over the food tray with his foot. The pieces of black bread rolling on the cold stone floor looked as hard as rocks, and what was probably soup was dark and murky. It seemed that from the start, only inedible garbage had been placed on the tray.

Belatedly, he also noticed the handcuffs on his wrists. Combining his situation, the space, and the words the man had uttered, he finally reached a conclusion…

*I'm... a death row inmate?*

*But I just died?*

### Chapter 2

They say the most common reaction when faced with a shocking reality is denial.

He faithfully denied reality. Perhaps he was dreaming because he had died, or maybe he was having strange delusions while in a coma after being hit by a truck.

With the intention of waking up from this nonsensical dream, he pinched his arm hard, but it only hurt terribly. This body seemed to have been even more malnourished than his own, as the skin and bones were so close together that it was difficult to even pinch the skin.

No, when he was hit by the truck earlier, it didn't hurt, so why should a mere pinch of flesh hurt so vividly? Why was this his reality? He had read novels where the possessed person was mistreated as an illegitimate child of a noble family, or was a servant or slave, but a death row inmate who would die tomorrow?

Chilling imaginings began to unfold in his mind.

Judging by the man's appearance, this seemed to be a fantasy world modeled after the Middle Ages, so how would they carry out executions here? Poison? No, poison was rather a high-class execution method for the upper classes. Even the poison chalice was considered an honorable death for the upper classes. Considering the guard's attitude, the poor condition of the prison, and his own emaciated body, this body didn't seem to belong to someone of high status.

Then, perhaps a clean beheading? Ah, was this also a bit of a high-class punishment? It seemed that people who died on the guillotine usually had some rank. Maybe hanging? If this body belonged to a serious criminal who had caused social unrest and was to be made an example of... Dismemberment? Burning at the stake? He had heard that in the past, they sometimes killed people by putting them in boiling water.

As his imagination grew increasingly grim, he grabbed the prison bars in terror.

"Excuse me. Actually, I'm not this person. I had an accident and my soul entered this body by mistake. Is there any way to fix this?"

"What's he saying?"

"I think that even if someone has to die, it should be the original owner of this body. Shouldn't we find the person who truly deserves punishment in order to properly uphold the authority of the judicial system? If you could help me leave this body..."

He had barely been able to bear the pain of pinching his skin—how was he supposed to face execution? No matter how he thought about it, the form of execution didn't seem like it would be a quick service that would kill him instantly, so words poured out of him in a rush.

But then, something odd struck him—he was speaking in the language of this world. Come to think of it, he had understood the guard's words earlier, and now he was speaking without any difficulty. It was different from stumbling through a second language learned in school. He could think entirely in this language, as if he had learned it first. Such a phenomenon could only be explained by possession.

Half amazed and half desperate, he blurted out words, but the guard shouted angrily.

"Shut up!"

Not stopping there, the guard opened the prison door, came inside, and kicked him in the stomach with a thud. The direct hit to his abdomen made his body curl up involuntarily.

"It's because of scum like you that the hero suffered and died!"

"Ugh...!"

"I was reverently observing a moment of silence because I heard the coffin was passing nearby, you ruined it! Do you know how kind, merciful, and noble he was? You piece of trash!"

The guard’s claim to have been observing a moment of silence was laughable, considering he’d been playing cards just a moment ago, but there was no time to argue. He curled up his body and struggled to avoid the pain from the continuous kicks.

Back in middle and high school, some bullies had picked on him to establish their dominance. He was the easiest target with no guardian. As a result, he had become accustomed to being beaten and instinctively assumed the position that would hurt the least.

And that posture seemed to provoke the guard's cruelty.

"Oh ho. You're trying to avoid it? You've been lying there like you were dead all this time!"

It seemed the guard had kicked this body a few times before. At that time, there had been no reaction, so he must have quickly lost interest, but now, seeing the body writhing and trying to avoid the pain, he seemed to find a taste for kicking, and his kicks became even more violent. He had made the wrong choice.

Now, with each kick, the man shouted, "Soul, what, soul!" The words he had said earlier must have been quite absurd. Well, if a prisoner suddenly requests to postpone the execution because their soul has changed, it would be laughable…

"After tormenting souls like that, you expect me to believe that your soul has changed, of all people?!"

*Ah, so that was the reason?*

*Wait, what exactly had this body done?* Tormented souls? Could it be that the 'hero' the guard mentioned earlier really died because of this body?

...No, he had said 'scum like you,' so it probably wasn't the exact cause. It had to be that way. But whatever it was, it seemed clear that he would face the most terrible death.

After the guard's violence had passed, he curled up miserably in the corner of the prison. Night had fallen, and a gloomy darkness had settled. His whole body ached, and the stone floor was cold. He felt like complaining to someone. Since he had possessed such a lousy body, couldn't they at least provide an on/off setting for pain sensation?

Why did he have to feel pain and cold here too?

After a few hours of curling up, he finally entered the stage of acceptance. Yes, it seemed impossible to escape from this prison anyway, so it might be better to die quickly tomorrow. Maybe then he could possess a new body? This body was just a trial and error encountered on the way to a hopeful life. A mistake, perhaps.

And in creative works, they often explained that the reason for a life of great suffering was 'because the soul was misplaced,' so maybe the next life could unfold even better, if only out of apology for the mistake.

A life where he wouldn't be chased by ghosts, wouldn't roll on the floor, wouldn't shiver from cold, and wouldn't starve. A life without fear, pain, loneliness, or sorrow…

Wait, this sounds like death?

He belatedly realized that what he had been doing was going through the five stages of grief — accepting death. *Pfft*, he let out a hollow laugh at the absurdity, then refined his imagination. He had never lived a good life, so it was vague, but he tried to picture the form of a happy life often described.

Perhaps a life of living with beautiful looks, receiving the respect and love of many people, possessing countless vast fortunes, and enjoying power that no one could approach? What would it feel like to live such a life…

*Boom!*

Just as he was about to drift off to sleep, a sudden roar struck his ears. Not only that, but the entire space shook violently, making the prison bars vibrate. The guards jumped up from their seats, showing confusion.

"What's that?"

"It's over there!"

It seemed like something had collided heavily with the building.

It looked like some problem had occurred, but it probably had nothing to do with him. He was already overwhelmed just accepting his current situation, so he tuned out the commotion outside…

The roaring sounds continued, and at some point, a whitish smoke spread, and suddenly his body was grabbed, and a blanket was wrapped around his face. Then, in an instant, he was seized by rough hands like a paper doll and taken out, bumping into all sorts of things along the way.

"Huh?"

He was outside.

Wasn’t this progressing a bit too fast? If this were a novel, readers would probably complain about the pacing. But that was all he could perceive. Just crash, bang, boom, and he was outside. How could he know anything with the blanket covering his view?

However, one thing he could be certain of was that moonlight was now pouring down on him unobstructed.

The moon that he could barely see earlier through the densely barred window was now cleanly positioned right above him. The moon, visible in its entirety without any obstacles. What? Why was he brought outside?

Kneeling down, he unfamiliarly felt the ground. It wasn't a hard stone floor, but a soft grass field. The feeling of the cool night air freshly enveloping his entire body was welcome.

When he turned around, he saw a tall tower that had collapsed about halfway. Since he had been carried down for quite a while, he must have been imprisoned at the top of that place.

Could it be that this body had an ally? The timing was just right, one day before the execution. Yes, someone had come to rescue him!

*Swoosh*– A blade was pressed against his neck.

"Isaph. Listen to me carefully."

For the second time today, he experienced his expectations being shattered. He blankly looked up at the man holding a sword to his neck. This seemed to be the person who had carried him out earlier. He was a large man with dark red hair and a fierce look, with a scar running straight across the bridge of his nose.

Next to him, a woman with long silver hair reaching her waist was looking down at him coldly. There wasn't a hint of warmth in her navy blue eyes.

He could tell just from their gazes. They both utterly despised this body. But then why did they break him out?

"From now on, you must cooperate with us. Our orders..."

It was his first time having a sword pressed to his neck, so he was flustered and simply bewildered. Cooperate with what? Who are you people? And this dazed state of his must have been clearly visible on his face, because the red-haired man suddenly frowned.

"Are you ignoring me right now?!"

*Drip*... Blood flowed from his neck. It seemed this wasn't just a threat, but that they really intended to kill him if he didn't comply, as his skin was cut. Just as he was freezing up from the blood wetting his nape, a gentle voice was heard from behind.

"Lower your sword."

Although the tone was extremely soft, it seemed to instantly draw all attention. Even in his dazed state, he was struck by how pretty the voice was, capturing even his nerves.

The red-haired man immediately stepped back. Just as he was about to think that someone as kind as their pretty voice was going to help him…

"I'll talk to him directly."

At those words, he noticed the large man flinch. Not only that, but the woman on the other side also gave him a strange look before quickly turning her head away. It was as if she was averting her gaze from what was about to happen.

### Chapter 3

The night breeze blew quietly. As the figure that had approached him silently, without even the sound of footsteps, removed the hood of their robe, golden hair fluttered gently. The strands of hair sparkled under the moonlight, so brilliantly it was almost blinding.

The azure eyes, like a clear autumn sky, somehow gave the feeling of truly gazing up at the sky. With soft, gentle eyes and a smile that radiated kindness, there was an air of compassion surrounding them. Everything about him made him seem like a saint. The light shimmering around the man, who stood with the bright moon behind him, only added to the sacredness of his appearance.

It was almost disconcerting to see such a beautiful face for the first time. It was like looking at a religious painting. The unapproachable, holy atmosphere even evoked a strange sense of rejection. Perhaps it was the distance felt by someone who had been pointed at as gloomy all his life when encountering a being of the opposite nature.

As he stared blankly, the red-haired man standing behind the figure shot him a fierce glare. It was a look that demanded he show respect immediately, but unfortunately, he didn't know who this person was.

"Who...?"

At his question, the red-haired man staggered as if struck by a great shock. Then, thinking he must be joking, he frowned deeply.

"Have you truly gone mad? How dare you pretend not to know him?!"

"Calm down. He must have heard the news of my death today, so perhaps he's surprised to see me alive."

No, he really didn't know who this was. He had only just learned the name of the body he was in... Wait a moment.

...News of his death today?

His thoughts connected slowly. The guard's shouts from a few hours ago, as he kicked him, came back in pieces, forming a complete picture in his mind.

'It's because of scum like you that the hero suffered and died!'

He had yelled angrily that he had interrupted his reverent moment of silence. Recalling that memory, he looked at the man before him again.

A man with a holy face that anyone would recognize as a 'hero'.

"Let me introduce myself. My name is Harenir von Luchete. I am the Commander of the Holy Order of Sidon, which protects the Holy Empire of Solares, and the First Sword of the Order. And... I'm the hero who was reported dead today."

He smiled, his eyes crinkling slightly.

"You don't seem very surprised. Did you perhaps guess that I wouldn't have died? You once said my soul was beautiful, so maybe you looked for it."

*Was this trash body that flirted with the hero? No, wait, not even a compliment about a pretty face, but saying the soul is pretty? What's that about?* Confused, he remained silent, which Harenir seemed to take as affirmation, tilting his head slightly. His smile deepened.

A faint sense of disgust flickered in his gaze, as if to say he had expected as much.

"Isaph, I need your cooperation. If you come with me, I'll advocate for a reduced sentence for you when everything is over."

"But... weren't you reported dead?"

"You could be applauded as an assistant who helped with the hero's return."

He saw the man behind flinch at his informal speech, but Harenir raised a hand to stop him. It might seem disrespectful to speak casually to the empire's hero, but right now, resolving his confusion took priority.

So that was the purpose of breaking into the prison at night and extracting this body. From the current situation, it seemed more like a threat than a request for cooperation, but did they need this body's abilities enough to cause such a commotion by destroying the tower? What kind of ability did he have?

"What kind of cooperation...? Where are we going?"

"I need the souls you command. And our destination is the Encroachment Zone."

At the word 'Encroachment Zone', a pained groan was heard from behind. Though it was already a planned event, the red-haired man frowned as if distressed by Harenir's declaration that they would ultimately go there.

But unfortunately, not only did he not know where this Encroachment Zone was, he was also bewildered by the fact that this body could command souls. Piecing together the clues, it seemed that this body... the one called Isaph, might be a necromancer.

At that moment, suddenly, there was a rustling sound right beside him.

*–Meow.*

A black cat sprang out from the bushes. Its slender form seemed familiar—was it the same cat he had seen on the road?

The purple eyes were so unusual that he was certain. Just as he was about to cry out 'You!' in surprise, the cat approached him.

The moment his eyes met the cat’s violet gaze—

—------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

**Hidden Network activated!**

—------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

—------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

**Quest**

**At last, the opportunity has arrived! Help the Empire's hero!**

**Reward for success: Freedom**

**Penalty for failure: Death**

—------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

—------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

**Do you accept?**

**Accept**

**Reject**

—------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

Suddenly, several translucent blue windows appeared in front of him. It was very startling, but as he read the floating text, a wave of relief washed over him. Something inside him clicked into place.

*Ah, this is a game...*

Although it seemed to be set on an extremely hard mode, just accepting it as a 'game' immediately put him at ease. The situation had felt unfair and overwhelming, but now he could view it objectively, like a third-person player, and he felt that everything up to now had just been the opening. Was this cat an NPC?

While he was surveying the situation with a much lighter mood, Harenir, apparently interpreting his silence as hesitation, asked in a kind voice.

“Are you having trouble deciding? Should I help you a little?”

The smile that formed as the corners of his mouth curved up and his eyes crinkled was extremely beautiful. His gaze was captivated by Harenir behind the status window. Harenir met his dazed eyes directly and spoke gently.

As if to prevent him from being caught up in unnecessary thoughts any longer, very kindly.

“Would you rather return to die as a condemned prisoner, or would you like to help me and have your sentence reduced? Ah, let me correct that. Now you're both a death row inmate and an escaped prisoner."

"..."

"I heard your execution was to be flaying. They say they kill you by peeling off your skin layer by layer, but since you've escaped the day before your execution, what additional punishment might be added? I've heard there are many who want you dead..."

Anger welled up inside him. *Speak properly! I'm an involuntary escapee, I was dragged out!* It absolutely wasn't because the sword the red-haired man was fiddling with was enormous that he was keeping his mouth shut.

*'Do you know how kind, merciful, and noble he was!'*

The guard’s earlier outburst echoed in his mind. If that was the general sentiment towards this hero, was this his true nature? Or was he only like this to him?

Although he had intended to accept anyway, since the first quest in a game usually has to be accepted, he felt extremely wronged. He had only been pondering over the strange word 'freedom' that appeared as the quest reward.

Usually, the rewards for such hard mode quests would be money, experience points, or special abilities, but freedom? It's quite an ambiguous word. He had occasionally seen cases where returning to the original world was given as a reward, but since that was already impossible due to his death, what could this freedom mean?

Freedom from prison?

Or from this strange world?

At the moment, these were the only two guesses he could make, but both were very appealing rewards. It seemed that Isaph, the body he had possessed, was universally disliked in the empire, so it might be better to go to a different world and start a new life.

With that thought, he answered without hesitation.

"Alright, I'll do it."

Nothing was frightening as long as there was a status window. Wasn't it the master key of possession? He hadn't been much of a gamer on Earth, and he had no memory of encountering characters named Harenir or Isaph, or a game with such an opening, but perhaps it would come back to him as he progressed.

Wondering if there might be a clue in the status window, he stared blankly into space. But as soon as he agreed, the 'Accept' button lit up, the window slowly disappeared, and finally, the letters H.N appeared.

*H.N? Hidden Network?*

What's with this name that seems forced...

Is it the name of the game company, or just a term explaining the status window? As he was looking at it with curiosity, the silver-haired woman approached him and swung her sword.

With a *swish*! sound, the thick handcuffs fell off like leaves.

As the old, thick iron shackles that had restricted his movement while in prison and were practically proof of his death row status disappeared, he felt refreshed. He even felt elated, realizing he had truly left the prison.

“Am I part of your group now…?”

“But since we don’t know when or where you might try something foolish, we’ll be placing a control device on you.”

*It would’ve been nice if you’d mentioned that before I spoke.*

Knowing that the more embarrassed he acted, the more humiliating it would become, he brazenly kept his mouth shut, pretending he hadn't said anything. Harenir chuckled softly. It seemed he found his reaction amusing.

*Is it funny? Are you enjoying this?* Unable to ask out loud, he instead thrust out his hand sharply. Since they mentioned a control device, he thought they might put something new on his wrist.

Suddenly, Harenir leaned forward.

In an instant, their faces were close. For a moment, his gaze was captured by the azure eyes meeting his at a distance close enough for their noses to touch. Those eyes, as if containing the sky, looked down at him benevolently. Despite the closeness being enough to startle anyone, he was helplessly caught in that sky.

A fresh scent, full of vitality, like one might smell in a sunlit meadow in the morning, grazed his nose. Ah, the clear fragrance was addictive...

*Click–*

"...?"

Suddenly, something cold and hard touched his neck. Harenir had fastened something like a shackle around his neck. The smooth, metallic object strangely had no weight to it, but the way it was connected to a translucent red line that appeared in Harenir's hand seemed...

"It looks like a leash..."

### Chapter 4

"That's right, a leash. We need to keep you from running off on your own, don't we?"

As Harenir lightly waved his hand, the line floating in the air swayed gently, and he could feel the vibration clearly on his neck. It seemed that the 'line' would appear when he needed it and be used for control.

"If you do anything contrary to my will, I'll activate the device on your neck. Then your head will go pop- and explode, so be mindful of your actions from now on. Oh, and it'll explode if you try to forcibly remove it too."

"..."

"And no matter where you try to run, as long as you have that leash on, you'll be pulled towards me, so don't entertain any foolish ideas. What if you get hurt while being dragged back after going too far?"

His tone of concern was extremely affectionate. His eyes softened as if worried about the injuries he might sustain from rolling on the ground, hitting trees, or falling into rivers...

Was there no way to cancel the quest? Could he not log out?

With such thoughts, he stared blankly at the black cat, but the cat only made a cute "Meow" sound. Usually, cats make sounds like "Mew," "Mrreow," or "Nyah," but was this one meowing by the book because it was an NPC? He kept trying to convey his intense thoughts through his eyes, but the cat just tilted its head as if it didn't understand.

*Right, NPCs are only capable of one-way communication...*

He closed his eyes tightly, swallowing a sigh. The situation of having a leash put on him right after his handcuffs were cut was really unwelcome, but there was nothing he could do about it.

This game, he'd quit as soon as he cleared it.

**#Part 2. 2%**

In the dead of night, they moved while hiding in the grass.

As soon as he put on the leash, Harenir said, "Let's move," and turned his back. The other two seemed to know the destination and naturally followed, while he trailed behind them, feeling dazed.

Those two must be holy knights, right? Close enough to share the truth that their commander hadn't actually died, perhaps his left and right hands. Maybe they were the ones who had falsely reported the hero's death in the first place. Could they have been the ones who carried the 'coffin' that paraded through the streets today?

"Why did you pretend to be dead?"

When he openly asked one of the questions that had been piling up, Harenir stopped. Encouraged by his action of turning around to look at him, he poured out a few more questions.

"Why do you need my necromancy? Is there a reason it has to be me? Surely, I'm not the only necromancer in the Empire..."

He threw in the last part cautiously. In creative works, necromancers were often seen as unrighteous beings, and since this was called a Holy Empire, they would be even more frowned upon by the state, but surely this body wasn't the only one. There must be other necromancers, so why?

Was this body's ability so exceptional that it was worth the trouble of breaking someone out of prison? Or did he deliberately target someone with a weakness because he needed to move in secret? Did he think an escaped prisoner would obey more easily? But wasn't destroying the prison too much trouble?

"And why are you going to the Encroachment Zone?"

He was also curious about what the Encroachment Zone was, but it seemed dangerous to ask that as well. Since both knights immediately understood the term, it was likely a place commonly known in this world. For now, it was clear that it was dangerous, so he could probably deduce more if he knew the purpose.

Harenir smiled slightly and asked,

"Are you done with your questions?"

"...For now."

"Alright. Let's continue moving then."

His voice was so refreshing that for a moment, he thought Harenir had kindly answered but he had missed it. He blinked a few times before belatedly protesting to Harenir's back.

"Why aren't you answering?"

"Did I ever say I would answer you?"

*Well, that's true*. He found himself nodding unconsciously at the extremely matter-of-fact retort, before getting annoyed a beat later. The trap was that his voice made every sentence sound like a factual statement, making him accept it without question.

*No, isn't it normal to answer when someone asks a question? Isn't that an implicit rule in human communication? Even if you don't treat me like a person...!*

"Your role is to summon the undead when I instruct you to. That's all, so why do you need to know more? You wouldn't be interested in anything that doesn't involve souls anyway."

The blue eyes that turned to look him over were infinitely cold. It was a look that seemed to view his questions as deceptive behavior. It seemed difficult for a smiling face to express such disgust...

"But I'll answer one thing. The reason it had to be you is because you've been going around collecting the most corpses, extracting their souls, and enslaving them. You're the only one vicious enough to control human souls by the dozens, by the hundreds."

"..."

"Satisfied?"

*Hmm*, so he was a subject capable of evoking disgust even through that saintly face. He quickly nodded and shut his mouth. There wasn't a single curse word in what was said, yet every word stabbed sharply as if criticizing him.

Necromancer, or sorcerer of the dead. One who summons the souls of the dead to seek answers to current problems or prophesy the future. In fiction, this ability was often portrayed as evil. Summoning evil spirits, controlling corpses like zombies without permission, conducting strange experiments on souls, and so on.

So he had expected something like that, but *hmm*, actively seeking out human corpses and extracting souls to use as slaves... It did seem worthy of execution...

He felt dejected, thinking that he couldn't escape from ghosts even in this life after seeing them in his previous one, but he also felt suddenly indignant. If he was put into such an evil body, couldn't the NPC have explained it properly to avoid awkwardness? He glared at the cat walking beside him, but it only meowed in response.

*'Status window! Quest progress! Map! Inventory!'*

No matter how hard he shouted internally, nothing appeared before his eyes. He tried calling for the most common features in games, hoping for anything to pop up in the air, but to no avail.

*Where did that H.N from earlier go? Does this bastard only show up when it wants to? If it's going to act like this, at least add a one-time 'Punch the Hero in the Face' ticket to the quest rewards!* As he was grumbling internally, the red-haired knight suddenly clicked his tongue.

"*Tch*, of course he's with a black cat."

The tone of disgust made him wonder if the knight disliked cats, but this was followed by a surprising realization. When the cat suddenly sprang out of the bushes earlier, no one was surprised; rather, they seemed to have expected it.

And even now, as they were moving somewhere, the cat was following beside him, and no one questioned it. It was strange enough to wonder about, but could it be that this cat had always been with this body?

*Isaph, could he have been a cat butler...*

"How did you create that familiar? Did you subjugate a cat's soul too?"

*Ah, a familiar.*

No wonder its purple eyes weren't ordinary, it was a familiar. An animal bound in a master-servant relationship with Isaph? Somehow, he felt an even stronger aversion than when he heard about extracting human souls, and as he was feeling a bitter distance from this body, the red-haired knight suddenly stopped.

His face suggested that he had interpreted the lack of response as ignoring him, so he reluctantly opened his mouth.

"I don't know either."

"*Ha*. What a reliable answer."

The knight sneered, but he really didn't know, so there was nothing he could do. In a normal game, a name or information would appear above the character, but even such a function wasn't provided. The UI was really terrible. No wonder he couldn't remember this game. He must have turned it off right after starting because it was so inconvenient.

The man's thick eyebrows shot up. He seemed displeased that there was no reaction even to his rather fierce sarcasm. Obvious disgust rose in his reddish-brown eyes as they looked him up and down. With a much more aggressive aura than Harenir, his gaze seemed to say that he was only refraining from beating him up because the commander was present.

"Are you not going to answer?"

"...I never said I would answer you."

"You little-!"

He tried using what he had just learned from Harenir, but it backfired, of course. The knight flared up and grabbed him by the collar. He had thought that since the knight seemed to greatly respect the commander, if he imitated him, he might be treated as a fellow fan who remembered even the smallest details of their favorite person, but... apparently not.

He had actually thrown out the comment intending to provoke, but he was surprised when his body was lifted into the air as soon as his collar was grabbed. Was this knight incredibly strong, or was this body as light as a paper doll?

"Be quiet, Kalterik. We've arrived."

The silver-haired knight calmly interrupted the commotion. It wasn't out of concern for him being lifted into the air by his collar, but simply to restrain the noise because they had reached their destination.

And Harenir, perhaps intending to warn about the same thing, turned around and said,

"Please refrain from unnecessary disturbances. And you too..."

He looked at him with a very strange expression. He seemed quite bewildered by what he had said in front of Kalterik, who had a large build and a fierce appearance. Moreover, even now, he was strangely looking at his feet dangling in the air, as he wasn't struggling at all despite being lifted up by his collar.

### Chapter 5

In the end, Harenir shook his head lightly, and Kalterik dropped him as if throwing him away. Seeming deeply ashamed of receiving a warning from the commander, he glared at him while grinding his teeth.

"Consider it an honor. How else would someone like you get a chance to be with the hero? Researching necromancy in a peaceful world built on sacrifice—how ungrateful. And in the Holy Empire, no less..."

Could it be that when he was brought out of prison, he had bumped into things not because of urgency, but due to Kalterik's animosity? It was a reasonable suspicion. Even now, as he barely managed to grab a tree to keep his balance after nearly falling flat, Kalterik, perhaps thinking he was being ignored again, started spouting words. Something about the history of the empire.

Harenir suddenly turned back towards them.

"Quiet."

"He's the only one talking."

When he pointed accusingly at Kalterik out of indignation, the man flinched, and Harenir looked at him even more strangely. But really, all the noise right now was coming from him.

"...You two, separate."

Harenir declared the separation in a voice that conveyed the weariness of a kindergarten teacher. In the end, the silver-haired knight ended up standing between Kalterik and him.

Only after the commotion had settled could he observe the scene before him. At the edge of the forest, softly illuminated by moonlight, stood a pure white temple.

It was overwhelmingly huge. Though it showed signs of age at a glance, it was clearly meticulously maintained daily, with all sorts of characters engraved on the tall pillars and ceiling. In the center, what was probably the temple's symbol, a sun, was sacredly etched.

As he was curiously taking in the sight, Kalterik quickly surveyed the surroundings and raised his hand. Perhaps wanting to make up for his earlier mistake and earn praise from the commander, he promptly called out.

"It's definitely clear. Everyone seems to have gone to check on the tower. Haha, I deliberately made a big commotion!"

"Hmm, by now they should have realized that 'that' death row inmate has disappeared, so they won't be back for a while."

If it had been just the collapse of the prison, they probably wouldn't have paid attention all the way from the temple, but with a death row inmate set to die tomorrow having escaped, everyone would be on high alert. Especially since he wasn't an ordinary prisoner, but someone treated as a villain by the empire.

"Well then, let's go find it now."

Perhaps wary of any guards that might still be around, all three moved silently, causing him to tense up and move cautiously as well. What were they looking for?

That question was soon answered when they reached the front of the main hall. Looking through the long windows, he could see long benches arranged on both sides, and at the end of the open central aisle stood an altar. On top of it, along with colorful flowers, a peach-colored coffin was placed at an angle.

Inside the open coffin, a single pure white ‘sword’ was visible.

Just from its appearance and atmosphere, it seemed sacred—perhaps it was a holy sword. Probably Harenir's sword, the one that all citizens of the empire knew was used by the First Knight of the Order.

He had been curious about how they had faked the death, and wondered if today's funeral had been held with just the holy sword. With only the sword symbolizing the hero placed alone, everyone would assume his death even without a body.

"Fortunately, the sword is where we expected it to be..."

Harenir said calmly. He seemed satisfied that it hadn't been moved yet, as holy relics would usually be kept in hard-to-access places. But then he lightly tapped the door with his index finger.

"They've put up a barrier before leaving."

"Ugh, I'm sorry. I should have caused an even bigger commotion...!"

"No, it's right to put up at least this minimal safety measure if all the guards were to leave their posts. It would have been stupid not to do even this much."

It seemed they had placed a barrier around the entire main hall to guard against potential intruders. It was fascinating to see something shimmering in front of the door even with his own eyes. Would an alarm go off if someone tried to force their way in?

Harenir turned to the silver-haired knight and said,

"Mela. Can you create a 'gap'?"

"I'll try."

He finally learned the names of all his companions. As he was internally condemning the game for not having a single possession buff and cursing that it must have been a failed game... he came to a chilling realization.

*Wait, if the holy sword disappears from the main hall now.*

"If the hero's sword disappears right after I escaped, won't everyone think I stole it?"

"I suppose so? You're already on death row, what difference does one more charge of theft make?"

*Well... that's true...*

He found himself agreeing with that matter-of-fact voice again, before belatedly feeling indignant. What was it about that voice? It resonated so sacredly, as if reciting scripture, that he kept accepting it as an eternal truth. He wanted to argue out of frustration, but the problem was that his words were right again.

After all, he was already seen as such a villain in the empire that he was sentenced to death, so what difference would it make if he stole the hero's sword too? In game terms, it would just raise his infamy level. Even if it was notoriety.

While he was grumbling internally, Mela drew her sword. Even in the shadow of the building, the well-forged rapier exuded a sharp aura.

*Swoosh!*

As Mela drew her sword straight down, the shimmering around the door began to part. There was no time to marvel at the amazing sight as the three moved quickly, and he was swept along with them.

However, wanting to distance himself from the crime scene like a last line of defense, he stayed far from the altar. He stood firmly by the doorway, watching the backs of the three knights as they approached the coffin. Yes, he was present at the scene of the sword's theft, but he didn't steal it himself. That's how it was, anyway.

As he was making these meaningless arguments in his head, he kept hearing rustling sounds from behind. What was it? He turned around curiously, and...

[Kyaaaaaah!]

[Grrrr--]

Through the long glass windows, he came face to face with dozens, no, hundreds of crimson eyes. Some looked like centipedes or spiders, while others resembled wolves or snakes. The sight of their glistening eyeballs rolling around was horrifying.

Their abnormal appearance evoked an unpleasant revulsion, and his whole body tensed up. The malevolent energy mixing into the air revealed their identity.

They were monsters.

"Gasp."

As he took a deep breath at the chilling sight, a centipede's head suddenly squeezed through the gap in the barrier. As it moved, seemingly widening the gap, the monsters poured into the main hall in a flood.

*Ding-dong-dang-dong—*

*Ding-dong-dang-dong—*

A loud bell sound violently struck the space. It was a reaction to the barrier being forcibly broken, wider than the gap Mela had opened. Kalterik glared behind him and shouted,

"Those bastards dare to covet the holy sword!"

Dozens of monsters rushed towards the coffin. Their eyes glistened with what might have been greed or anger. Saliva dripped long trails onto the floor.

Normally, monsters would avoid holy objects, but had they cut off the holy sword's energy to ensure the hero's death was convincingly faked? Holy swords were often described that way in stories. They would only accept a person with specific qualifications as their master, and only shine their true light in that person's hands.

If so, the holy sword was essentially sealed now, so were the monsters taking advantage of this moment? They might want to destroy it, or they might desire its powerful energy. Whatever the reason, it was clear they had gathered for nothing positive.

Kalterik and Mela drew their swords and began to engage the monsters, while he frantically fled to the wall to avoid them.

He had seen monsters in games and webtoons before, but encountering them in person right in front of him was a completely different dimension. A wave of revulsion welled up, and his body trembled with fear. The difference between 2D and 4D was this great. Ah, if he had known, should he have practiced with 3D VR games? Jumping two dimensions at once made it hard to adapt.

*Slash!*

*Swish!*

Monsters were crushed under Kalterik's greatsword, and Mela's lightly thrust rapier pierced through them in an instant. Meanwhile, Harenir simply walked towards the altar. Whether he naturally trusted his subordinates or not, he never once looked to either side.

There was no sense of tension in his walk through the chaos. He seemed to have expected monsters to swarm like this on the way to retrieve the holy sword. There would be a commotion, but as long as they got out with the sword before encountering others, it would be fine.

As he was blankly watching Harenir's profile, he suddenly looked up at the ceiling and was startled. A centipede-like monster was crawling on the ceiling, trying to ambush Harenir. He couldn't even tell when it had climbed up there. There were far too many monsters for just Kalterik and Mela to handle, and more kept pouring in.

"Hey, over there...!"

—------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

**Follow the arrow and run.**

—------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

As he was about to warn Harenir of the danger, a window suddenly appeared before his eyes. *Huh?* There was even a blue arrow flashing.

### Chapter 6

It was an incredibly bewildering moment, but he decided to follow along as if he were crazy. Since the center of the main hall was filled with monsters, the arrow pointed towards the path along the wall.

As he ran along the wall, circling the main hall towards the altar, he came face to face with Harenir. He seemed surprised to see him coming this way, but there was no time to explain. He simply moved according to the status window's instructions.

At some point, his vision began to flicker repeatedly. Like the prelude to fainting, his sight shook and alternated between zooming in and out. The whole world became blurry, and occasionally, flashes of red light rippled sporadically. It felt as if his body wasn't moving according to his will. In this strange sensation, as if someone was forcibly controlling his body.

As he ran towards Harenir, using the altar as a springboard to leap over...

Suddenly, he reached out his hand towards the head of the centipede-like monster that had descended right above Harenir.

"Fall."

The air twisted. The moment he uttered the word like a sentence, a purple energy whirled out from his arm and struck the monster's head directly.

That instant was perceived slowly. As if the frames per second had been stretched out, each moment was etched clearly in his mind. The purple light reflecting in the monster's crimson eyes, its body staggering, and... finally, the sight of its 'soul' detaching. Its body and soul had been forcibly separated.

*Thud*. The monster fell to the floor like a puppet with cut strings.

Before he could even breathe a sigh of relief at the sight, *bang!* He too fell over the altar onto the floor. Unable to control the momentum of his run, he tumbled over.

*Gasp, huff.* It had been a chilling moment. His hand had almost been caught by the monster. He had witnessed hundreds of sharp teeth filling its gaping mouth up to the palate. The sight was so disgusting that he felt nauseous.

It seemed like an out-of-body skill, but damn, it was incredibly difficult to use.

"...Ah."

Harenir's exclamation sounded quite strange. His reaction suggested he hadn't guessed at all that this was the reason he had come running. A peculiar light flashed in his eyes as he alternately looked at the monster behind and him beside.

Only now could he see the red line in Harenir's hand slowly disappearing. No wonder there had been flashes of red when his vision flickered earlier—Harenir had been considering blowing up his head. It was unfair, but his own situation was more pressing at the moment.

*Ugh*, as he kept dry heaving, Harenir looked at him with an increasingly subtle expression.

"...Well done."

"*Huff*, I didn't—*gasp*—do it to get your praise."

"...I see."

When he rejected the praise while panting, Harenir nodded with a very disgruntled look. *Ha*, he thought he might have heard a faint chuckle.

*Thud*, Harenir took a step forward and said,

"Well, thanks to you, we've made it to the end..."

Harenir, who had already reached right in front of the coffin, stretched out his hand. As his hand touched the sword's hilt.

*Whoosh—*

In an instant, the entire space was bathed in pure white light. Just by Harenir grasping the sword, light exploded outwards, spreading to every corner of the main hall. It was as if the sword was trembling with joy and welcome, finally in the hands of its rightful owner. Harenir's lips curved into a faint smile.

As he lightly swung the sword, all the monsters pouring into the main hall froze in their tracks. It was truly a shockingly intense moment.

"Ah..."

He looked around the space in a daze. The monsters, unable to make any more wicked movements in the face of the sublime light, stopped and then... simply dropped to the floor with a rustle. It was a scene that unfolded in an instant, like the dawn chasing away all the darkness in the world. Violently sacred.

How could one express the impact of this moment? It even gave him the distant feeling of witnessing a divine manifestation. He had never believed in religion, yet he felt such sentiment. It was worthy of being recorded as mythology. With phrases like, "As the hero raised his sword, light came to the whole world, and all evil things vanished."

Only now could he see the situation inside the main hall again. He had thought Harenir was walking straight ahead, trusting his two knights, but it seemed that Kalterik and Mela had trusted him instead.

That the moment Harenir grasped the sword, everything would be resolved.

"Let's leave now. It's been noisy enough."

Having found the holy sword, the key now was to quickly leave the main hall. Moreover, with the loud warning sound ringing due to the barrier being broken by the monsters' attack, speed was even more crucial.

But the problem was...

"Urgh..."

He simply couldn't walk. As if in reaction to the momentary pause from the shock of the earlier scene, he felt even more nauseous. His head was spinning. This symptom couldn't be explained simply by the disgust at the monster's mouth.

Could it be a side effect of the skill? The sensation of something else possessing his body was quite chilling. It was a ridiculous situation. Strictly speaking, 'he' was the soul possessing Isaph's body.

*Meow—* The cat mewed softly beside him. No matter how cutely it meowed, he wouldn't use such a skill again.

"You bastard, stop exaggerating and move quickly!"

Kalterik snapped at him irritably. As he staggered and retched while barely trying to follow, Kalterik stomped his foot threateningly right next to him, but unexpectedly, it was Harenir who restrained him.

"I'll take care of him."

"What?!"

"...He did help us just now, after all."

Harenir grabbed his back. Thinking it might be an apology for almost blowing up his head due to misunderstanding, he relaxed his body. He thought Harenir might throw him over his shoulder, tuck him under his arm, or perhaps carry him dangling like a shopping basket, but...

"...?"

He found himself lifted in Harenir's arms. This posture—wasn't it called a princess carry? Seeing Harenir's face so close made him feel uncomfortable, and paradoxically, the fact that this position was comfortable made him very uneasy.

"Why, why like this..."

"If I carried a retching person upside down, they'd vomit, wouldn't they?"

He was at a loss for words at the matter-of-fact answer. It was bewildering, but this time he didn't feel indignant. Rather, the fact that Harenir gave a reasonable answer made him feel more at ease, giving him an excuse that it couldn't be helped.

He could feel Kalterik glaring at him with fiery eyes, but he didn't have the energy to focus on the outside. Instead, feeling an urge to tease him, he completely relaxed his body and sprawled comfortably, leaning on Harenir. It would look like he was treating the hero completely as a means of transport.

As expected, Kalterik cried out, "You...!" but Harenir only hesitated for a moment. As Harenir looked at him with a very strange expression, he brazenly closed his eyes. *I'm tired, so move on your own—bed*.

...He wouldn't throw him, would he? He tensed up belatedly, but Harenir just let out a small sigh and continued moving.

It seemed they had gotten out quite peacefully, but a problem soon arose.

"There's a commotion in the main hall...!"

"That's where 'Piarus' is stored!"

Just as they were about to leave the building, several shouts were heard very close by. It seemed to be not just one or two, but dozens of people. With the warning sound ringing so loudly, it was no wonder people had come to investigate.

In a hurry, they all hid in the bushes. It was a thicket just big enough to hide if they crouched down. The vast forest they had used to come from the prison to the temple was still far away. This place was practically in the middle of the temple grounds.

He also managed to gather his wits and got down from Harenir's arms. There were too many knights. Moreover, from the moment they started looking for what they called 'Piarus', probably the holy sword, the outcome was obvious.

The knights were shocked to find the interior of the main hall devastated by the monster attack, and then gasped in dismay upon discovering the empty coffin. The priests sank to their knees, lamenting, "Oh, Solnium..."

"Find the holy sword!"

"They couldn't have gone far. Move quickly!"

Booming orders rang out, saying they needed to find it quickly since the warning sound hadn't gone off long ago. As they were not far away, he anxiously looked in that direction and asked,

"Should I summon some undead to divert their attention...?"

"Are you planning to advertise that an escaped prisoner is here?"

Harenir furrowed his brow as if the situation had become troublesome. As the number of searchers kept increasing, Kalterik said gravely,

"I'll go out! I'll divert their attention elsewhere, and in that moment, you can escape...!"

"You can't lie."

"Mela..."

But Mela cut him off firmly. She looked him over with cold navy blue eyes and shook her head. Her gaze seemed to say it was obvious he'd be caught the moment he stepped forward to speak.

### Chapter 7

"I'd rather go myself. I'll say I came to see the Commander's sword and witnessed a suspicious commotion, then point them in a direction. Use that chance to escape."

"It would be difficult to get away if you're caught by the Order."

"That... I'll manage somehow..."

But Mela's voice lost strength as she continued. It seemed that she and Kalterik had secretly slipped away after reporting the hero's death and bringing the holy sword to the temple, trying to avoid questioning. When the hero's death was first announced, everyone must have been in chaos, so they could have seized that opportunity, but...

As everyone was pondering, suddenly a clear voice rang out from the distance.

"A suspicious person went that way! Everyone, move quickly!"

It was an incredibly clear voice. What was this? Was someone helping them, or had they genuinely mistaken someone else for a suspicious person? Through the bushes, he could see someone repeatedly pointing somewhere.

The petite figure was about 150cm tall. Brown hair and lime-green eyes. A youthful appearance like a boy, with particularly noticeable pointed ears. He didn't seem to be an ordinary human. So he was seeing different races in this other world.

As he was curiously watching the round-spectacled boy pointing in the opposite direction from where they were, he turned his head to find everyone else silent.

"So we were discovered after all..."

"...I expected he'd figure it out."

Kalterik and Mela murmured quietly. Even Harenir sighed softly, and just as Isaph was beginning to wonder, the bushes were suddenly parted. He was the only one who flinched.

The boy had somehow approached right in front of them.

"Everyone! How could you try to leave without me!"

"...Haha, ha. Well, that..."

"We were..."

"That's too much! It's really too much!"

The boy stomped his feet repeatedly as if feeling hurt. Judging by his behavior and the knights' reactions, he seemed to be a long-time acquaintance. Moreover, while everyone looked troubled, they naturally stood up, apparently trusting that he had sent away all the nearby search party members.

Tears welled up in his sprout-like lime-green eyes.

"How could even Haren not tell me the truth! I'm your aide!"

It was a voice that made even the listeners feel sad. Aide? He looked like a young boy, but perhaps age couldn't be determined by appearance for different races. Moreover, the familiar way he addressed 'Haren' was intriguing.

Harenir softened his gaze and asked in a voice as if soothing a young child,

"Noi, were you very surprised?"

"I was a bit surprised, but of course I believed it was a lie. I never thought for a moment that Haren had died!"

The boy, whose name was Noi, shook his head urgently. He said he didn't believe it even when the vice-commanders of the Holy Knight Order announced the commander's death and the holy sword Piarus was brought in a coffin.

He watched this situation curiously from a few steps away. There was a bond between them that went beyond a simple superior-subordinate relationship. It was evident in Noi's behavior, and even more so in Harenir's expression. He was smiling faintly as if looking at a younger brother.

Somehow, this was a bit shocking. Perhaps because of his overwhelmingly sacred and beautiful face, even the simple act of wiping away tears seemed like bestowing a great blessing. Was this why rumors spread about the hero's kindness? And perhaps it wasn't a lie after all. It was just that he wasn't like that towards 'him'.

Soon, Noi hugged Harenir's waist tightly and said,

"Haren doesn't die. Because you're the son loved by God."

It felt less like a statement of simple trust and more like mentioning an obvious fact. The sentence seemed to be grounded in mythology.

He was overcome by a strange feeling. Suddenly, he recalled Harenir's face in the main hall. What expression did he have when he was heading towards the peach-colored coffin to reclaim the holy sword? At that time, he alone had faced him and witnessed that expression.

It was like...

The face of someone looking at an unattainable dream.

"A hero who heals instantly from wounds, revered as God's manifestation, couldn't possibly die just from a search. Most of the empire's citizens don't believe it either. They're just confused because Piarus has lost its light."

It seemed that the holy sword losing its light was interpreted as meaning its owner had disappeared. Moreover, with the knights closest to Harenir testifying to his death, everyone seemed to be in a state of uncertainty.

However, Noi seemed to have come to the main hall because he had greater faith in Harenir than others and knew him well. He had anticipated that Harenir, who hadn't died, would certainly come to reclaim the holy sword.

At Noi's bold declaration, Mela and Kalterik muttered "As expected..." while shaking their heads. It was a reaction suggesting that of course he would have deduced this.

"You're planning to go to the Encroachment Zone, aren't you?! Right?"

"You figured that out too?"

"Because that's the only place Haren would go after telling such a lie! So... I want to go with you."

Noi stepped back and spoke gravely. But Kalterik immediately shook his head.

"It's too dangerous for you to go."

"Yes, the air in the Encroachment Zone would be more fatal to me. But I can use purification tools for that!"

"Noi..."

"How long do you think you can keep hiding after suddenly lying about being dead? You need an assistant! And do you have a way to leave the capital right now? All three of you are incredibly conspicuous! You need to create disguised identities and make plans to get to the Encroachment Zone! You all know how smart and capable I am."

Finally, Noi looked straight up at Harenir.

"And... 'that person' asked me to stay with Haren."

"...That's a very old request."

"It's a request I must keep until the end of my life!"

Harenir smiled strangely. He remained silent for a moment, then finally nodded slowly, seemingly unable to resist Noi's persistence any longer. Noi immediately cheered and jumped around.

He didn't know who 'that person' was, but it was clear they had a significant influence on Harenir and Noi's relationship. Moreover, considering the mention of an 'old request', it seemed the two had known each other since childhood.

Although the party had suddenly grown, a grin spread across Kalterik's face. Seeming quite pleased with Noi's joining, he ruffled Noi's hair vigorously and exclaimed, "This kid, I knew you'd follow us!" While Mela's expressionless face showed little change, her eyes looking at Noi were somewhat less cold.

*Is this what the atmosphere is like when dealing with real 'companions'...*

As he was curiously observing, Noi suddenly let out a loud cry. *Gasp!* Trembling all over, he pointed in his direction. Having been behind Harenir, it seemed Noi had just noticed his presence.

"N-n-no way! Is that person coming with us too? I heard about a prison break, could it be...!"

No one answered, but Noi's eyes flickered as if he had immediately deduced the answer. The commotion at the prison tower, and then coming together to find the holy sword. Stammering that it was a perfect method to divert attention, he continued.

"Are you really taking Isaph with you? 'That' Isaph Dina?!"

*Oh*, so this body's full name was Isaph Dina.

In truth, he was secretly glad about Noi joining. Being smaller and having a gentler impression, he seemed easier to deal with than the three knights, and moreover, his talkativeness was a good thing. He gave the strong impression of someone who would explain things in detail, scolding "You don't even know that?!" but then proceeding to explain everything thoroughly—not just an explanation enthusiast, but a godsend.

In these *isekai* stories, there always needed to be someone like that to explain things. He had struggled to deduce things on his own since he couldn't learn anything from the previous three, but finally, such a character had appeared. Now the party balance felt right.

However, the shock evident in Noi's green eyes was so great that it slightly hurt his feelings. Even though he didn't like Isaph either, to look at him so horrifically... He had an annoying premonition that he would be treated like this for the entire journey to the Encroachment Zone, no, until their companionship ended.

*Geez*. Sure, Isaph was a necromancer viewed negatively in the Holy Empire, and a vicious person who collected many souls by searching for corpses, but... *Huh?* Was there really a reason to be looked at like trash to that extent...

"The Klam Massacre perpetrator? Are you really taking the person who killed all the villagers and subjugated them as undead?!"

*Ah.* He shouldn't have been seen as trash, but as absolute garbage.

### Chapter 8

He suddenly understood why the prison guard had been so hostile towards him. While the guard's nasty personality might have played a part in venting his anger, he deserved to be a scapegoat.

Meanwhile, Noi continued his tirade.

"He's the one who tortured and killed villagers painfully, saying that the more terrified they were when they died, the more aggressive undead he could obtain! No, we can't even call him human!"

*That's right.*

"I agree that necromancy could be helpful in searching the Encroachment Zone. But no matter what, he doesn't seem like an appropriate person to be involved in this! How could we spend at least a few months with someone like that?!"

*What?* It was a long-term quest that required spending months together? He felt like cheering on Noi's opposition. If Noi could persuade Harenir, would the quest be automatically canceled?

*Noi for Congress.*

As he quietly stood there, agreeing like a fervent supporter with a red band around his head and a picket sign around his neck, our Noi shouted vigorously. Despite having to look up at the much taller knights, his spirit wasn't dampened at all.

"We finally caught him at the scene after he had been evading arrest with his wicked abilities, and now you're taking Isaph out of prison...!"

"Noi."

"..."

But Noi's mouth clamped shut at a single call from Harenir. Though he had only called his name softly, Noi's momentum deflated as if all his right to speak had been revoked.

*No, don't give up. Noi! You can do it! Here's someone on your side...*

"Haren..."

"Speak."

"...I understand."

*What?* The conversation ended just by locking eyes? Even though Harenir gave him permission to speak again, why did it end? Why did he agree so quickly? *Get angrier, say you can't go along with trash like me!*

But his inner cries didn't reach Noi. When Harenir gently smiled and patted Noi's shoulder a couple of times, a smile spread across Noi's previously sulky face. It seemed he didn't mind at all that his long tirade had been cut short by just two words, as long as he received the hero's kind touch.

While he was feeling dejected, Noi suddenly glared at him again.

"Remember this. I'll go along with you only because of Haren, but I will never acknowledge you! I'll be watching you every hour!"

His expectations were crushed. They fought among themselves and made up, but in the end, he was the only one who got scolded. Of course, their criticism was directed at 'Isaph', but it was extremely tiring.

When he didn't say anything, Kalterik's eyebrows shot up. Thinking he was ignoring the small and seemingly gentle Noi, his expression quickly turned fierce.

"Hey, you. Keep ignoring us and..."

"Do as you please. I'm not here to seek your approval anyway."

A dry voice popped out. It wasn't even worth grumbling about irritably. After all, the evil deeds Isaph had committed weren't done by him, and their criticism wasn't directed at him.

Still, those unpleasant gazes were exhausting him.

He had received similar looks in his previous life on Earth, which had now become his past life, and even after possessing a game character, he couldn't escape those gazes.

"There's already a leash around my neck, so if anything seems off, that hero will blow my head off. No need for unnecessary effort."

"..."

"So I'd appreciate it if you'd focus on the task and quickly search the Encroachment Zone or whatever and get this over with..."

He meant it sincerely. Now that it was clear that none of the companions could go against Harenir's decision, it seemed unlikely that the quest would be canceled due to external factors. So all he could do now was hope for the quest to end quickly.

After speaking in a voice drained of energy, he stared at the empty space. He hadn't looked at any of his companions from the start, afraid that if he looked at Noi while speaking, it might seem like he was picking a fight. The fatigue had intensified due to the side effects of using the skill earlier.

And right then, he felt nauseous again.

"Urgh."

Along with the sudden dizziness, *damn*, his paper-doll-like knees buckled. It wasn't a graceful collapse like a pitiful protagonist in a drama, but literally a flop- forward like a piece of paper. The thud was even small and pathetic.

*Chir... chirp...*

The sound of insects in the silence made him feel even more ashamed. What was wrong with this body?! Why?! He had been weak in his life on Earth too, but not to this extent! As he trembled, trying to prop himself up with both arms, Harenir approached him with a soft sigh.

Meanwhile, Noi spoke in a dazed voice.

"...He really has become weak, hasn't he?"

A rather surprised voice quickly followed.

"Even when I heard the news of his arrest at the scene, I secretly thought it was impossible to catch 'that' Isaph, but the rumors of him becoming weak were true..."

"Noi. We need to move now. We can't stay here like this."

Sensing that the conversation was about to get longer again, Harenir cut it off. Only then did Noi exclaim "Ah!" and nod.

Then Harenir bent down, and remembering how he had carried him like this when leaving the main hall, he quickly tried to refuse. Seeing his face up close was still uncomfortable.

"I can walk..."

"Don't waste more time by falling again."

"Then, I won't retch, so can't you just carry me like a shopping basket?"

"You sure talk a lot of nonsense."

Harenir cut him off sharply, as if it wasn't even worth reconsidering. Since he obviously couldn't push Harenir away with this body, he had no choice but to be picked up. It was more like carrying luggage than holding someone close, but hearing Noi shout "Eek?!" from behind, he finally closed his eyes.

He desperately wished for a logout function, or at least a sound-off option, right now.

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Unexpectedly, the group headed to Noi's office within the temple.

Noi said they should stop by his office briefly to submit his resignation and gather more supplies, anticipating a long journey. He seemed to have prepared to some extent before coming to the main hall, but upon confirming that an escaped prisoner was part of the group, he apparently thought of more things to pack.

Fortunately, they didn't encounter anyone on the way, perhaps because the strategy of hiding in plain sight worked. As he was looking around the unfamiliar, warm office, Noi suddenly approached him.

"Here. Drink this!"

What Noi handed him was a finger-length transparent bottle containing a softly shimmering golden liquid. What's this? As he just stared at it silently, Noi grumbled and explained.

"It'll restore your strength to some extent. I'm only giving it to you because if you keep falling, it'll slow us down, so don't misunderstand! Hmph, and don't get in Haren's way!"

"I won't misunderstand."

He cut off the rambling explanations. Although Noi had openly hurled insults at him, this was the first person to provide him with a health potion, so his likability increased. Surprisingly, this was the first food he was consuming in this dimension. Though he wasn't sure if this could be considered food...

As he drank the tasteless liquid, he looked around the office. The bookshelves lining the walls were packed with books, and various decorations caught his eye. A huge carpet with a green background embroidered with gold, plush sofas, and even pillows. It was fascinating to see a space imbued with someone's life in this world for the first time.

As he kept looking around, his gaze fell on a mirror. Oh, come to think of it, he didn't even know what this body looked like. Curiosity welled up, and he immediately approached the mirror, but.

"Hmm."

Only a disappointed sigh escaped. Given that the state of the possessed body and its environment were all terrible, he had hoped that at least the face might be decent, but...

The jet-black hair had grown messily, almost reaching the shoulders, and the skin was so pale it seemed to have never seen sunlight, with veins visible beneath. The straight, protruding eye line was deep, and the corners of the eyes were sharp, giving a cold impression at first glance, but with dark circles under the eyes, the overall impression was just tired and gloomy.

It was the kind of face that looked like it might be plotting something suspicious. A weirdo who might giggle to himself while conducting experiments. *Ah, no. Cancel that last part*. It wasn't really a face that looked like it would smile. The dark, gloomy impression that seemed to have never smiled even once fit Isaph perfectly. An aura of living alone in the world.

Wearing a loose black robe only intensified the eerie atmosphere. The hood attached at the back seemed slightly worn, suggesting that Isaph might have always covered his face with the hood in daily life. That's how the image of Isaph as a being in a black robe, accompanied by a black cat, must have been established.

Lost in idle thoughts, he absently played with his bangs. In his previous life, he had grown his hair long to cover his face as much as possible, but never as long as Isaph's. No wonder his bangs had been poking his eyes all this time.

He brushed his hair to the side and looked more closely in the mirror. His gaze was caught by the purple eyes. They hadn't been distinguishable earlier due to the shadows, but now they were clear. Mysterious purple eyes.

The more he looked, the more vivid the purple seemed to become. Was it becoming more noticeable now that he was aware of it? Fascinated by the way the light seemed to spread, he leaned closer to the mirror.

"I'm ready!"

Noi's clear shout stopped him in his tracks. *Ah*, he had almost bumped into the mirror. Though no one was probably looking at him, he awkwardly rubbed his forehead and turned away.

### Chapter 9

He noticed Noi, neatly wrapped in a deep green robe. Since he and the three holy knights were all wearing robes, it seemed Noi had matched them.

"It's the first time we're all going out on a covert mission together!"

"It's not like we're going on a picnic. Why are you so excited?"

Kalterik poured cold water on Noi's subtly excited tone. Noi pouted and kicked Kalterik's leg. Although Noi's kick wasn't threatening at all, given that their size difference was at least twofold, he felt secretly satisfied.

He felt he had grasped their dynamics to some extent now. As he followed the four towards the forest behind the temple, he casually tried to strike up a conversation with Noi.

"You said you were packing supplies, but isn't your bag too small?"

"This is a magic bag!"

Oh, so this was the spatial magic commonly found in fantasy worlds. Looking curiously at the light brown bag Noi was carrying, he was inwardly delighted that he got a 'response'. While everyone else had just ignored him, his first impression seemed to be correct after all.

He probed a bit more to gather information.

"You packed additional items after confirming I was here. Are you planning to attack me?"

"Huh. Me, attack you?"

He had asked thinking that Noi might have packed something to control Isaph or protect himself from Isaph. Given that Noi had even said he would watch him directly, he thought Noi might have prepared additional precautions, not feeling secure with just the leash. But Noi let out a scornful laugh.

A bewildered look shot at him fiercely.

"Are you mocking me now?"

"...?"

"You could easily take me down if you wanted to. What could I possibly do?"

The eyes looking up at him as Noi said this were strange. They went beyond simply detesting and avoiding an unpleasant person, closer to the vague gaze of someone facing something they couldn't stop.

As if looking at a disaster.

Suddenly, he recalled what Noi had said behind the main hall. When he had collapsed retching, Noi had asked if he had really become weak, saying he couldn't believe the news of Isaph's arrest...

Come to think of it, it was odd that Isaph, who was considered evil in the Holy Empire, hadn't been restrained earlier. He hadn't thought about it because his body was in such terrible condition, but could it be that the original Isaph was actually very strong?

When he met Noi's gaze in confusion, Noi hastily turned away.

"Of course, now that you have a leash on, there's nothing to worry about! Whatever you try to do, Haren will notice immediately, so take good care of your head!"

"...Okay."

Noi's shout was fierce, but it seemed like an attempt to hide his momentary flinch. It felt like he was putting up his defenses to hide his fear, so he deliberately answered compliantly, which caught Noi off guard. It seemed Noi was at a loss for words when his criticism was calmly accepted.

Soon, Noi muttered while fiddling with the strap of his bag.

"I just packed more purification filters. Since we're taking you along, we won't be just looking around one Encroachment Zone."

The explanation that Noi was a fairy and thus more vulnerable to the air in the Encroachment Zone went in one ear and out the other. There was a faint hint of embarrassment mixed in his very small voice, but he was more shocked by the content.

*There's more than one Encroachment Zone?* He had expected a long-term search given that it would take several months, but did that mean they had to go around to multiple locations?

He asked in a trembling voice.

"How many... Encroachment Zones are there... in the empire?"

"You don't even know that?!"

"...I'm asking because I wondered if you might be searching additional places I don't know about. After all, it's serious enough to take 'me' out and even fake the hero's death, as you said."

It was a hastily made excuse, but surprisingly, Noi hesitated. Finding it quite plausible, Noi nodded with a "Hmm" sound.

"The number of Encroachment Zones hasn't changed. One in each cardinal direction, four in total."

*I see, four of them*... They had to go around four places that everyone avoids, spaces so dangerous that some couldn't even breathe there... Sadly, he had a feeling that even those spaces would be very vast.

As he was inwardly sighing, Noi looked him over with a very strange expression.

"Judging by what you're saying, did you also notice something suspicious about the recent state of the Encroachment Zones?"

It seemed he had stumbled upon the right answer by backtracking. Welcoming an unexpected hint in this terrible game without any possession buffs, he listened as Noi began to pour out information.

"For the past 20 years or so, the Encroachment Zones have been quiet. It was unsettling that they remained even after those monsters were dealt with, but there was no other way to remove them. However, recently, there have been increasing reports of the Encroachment Zones' boundaries 'expanding'. Some say strange energies are flowing out. Since this information hasn't been officially confirmed through investigation, it hasn't been made public, but..."

He organized Noi's words in his mind, feeling as if he had struck gold. It seemed the Encroachment Zones were related to some monsters, perhaps spaces they had used, which was why those areas had become abandoned land. Did the expression that there was no way to eliminate them mean they were difficult to approach?

"But whenever Haren said he wanted to search the Encroachment Zones, the Order wouldn't give permission. They dismissed it as just rumors circulating among civilians and told him not to stir things up unnecessarily."

"Why? If the hero investigated, it could instantly allay people's fears."

"On the other hand, it could also be seen as proof that the changes in the Encroachment Zones are serious enough to warrant the hero's attention."

Noi shrugged as if it were obvious. There was so much attention on the empire's hero, and everyone attached meaning to his every step.

"And since they were 'perfectly' eliminated, there's no way the monsters could still be around..."

"..."

"But, no, maybe that's why Haren wants to check thoroughly. To make absolutely sure if they, if the 'Dium' might still be alive."

There was deep fear in his voice as he uttered that name. As if even just saying it gave him chills.

A sudden brake engaged in his mind. He wondered how they could be so certain that they had 'perfectly eliminated' them, and he was also bewildered at the thought that the hero had lied about dying just because of a disagreement with the Order... But an even more chilling intuition struck the back of his head.

*I know this.*

*This is a definite flag that the monsters are still alive, damn it.*

"The number of missing persons has also increased abnormally recently, so while we're looking around..."

Noi's subsequent words no longer registered in his head. He asked painfully, hoping that this flag was just an illusion. There was no sense of relief at finally understanding their purpose.

"...What if, what if the Dium are still alive?"

"I'm certain they're dead! We dealt with them perfectly!"

*No, Noi. I may not have played many games, but this rule applies to all fictional works and virtual worlds, even if it's not a game. You're going to play the role of crying and shouting "How could this happen! It's impossible!" in front of the monsters later, unable to avoid the flag.*

He tried to ask again about considering the possibility, but Noi's stance was firm. He shook his head resolutely.

"Still, seeing that they're bringing you along, perhaps Haren's ultimate goal isn't just to search the Encroachment Zones, but to completely eliminate them..."

Noi's voice sounded distant as he expressed concern that the hero was taking on too much burden, but right now, he was more concerned about his own situation. The more Noi denied the survival or resurrection of the monsters, the stronger the flag became, and this meant that he, being dragged along on this search, would inevitably encounter the monsters.

The 'Dium' that had plunged this land into chaos over 20 years ago.

Why was the world he had possessed like this? Huh? If he was going to be hit by a *truck-kun* and sent to a new world anyway, why couldn't he have entered a hunter world and become a cool awakened one? Since he didn't want to meet monsters, he could have been made into a restorer who worked outside dungeons, instantly restoring collapsed buildings with a ta-da!

Or he could have been possessed in a beast-kin world and become a popular fox-kin celebrity! Ah, but maybe that wouldn't work since he had no talent for using his body. Then what about other settings... He hastily shook his head as images of a disaster apocalypse with sudden fog and a retreat that turned out to be catastrophic despite seeming like a school trip came to mind.

Why were these things coming to mind? Next, a peaceful cafe with a sweet scent briefly appeared in his mind, but it was followed by strange content about the same day repeating dozens of times, so he discarded the imagination. It seemed like he was in a strange universe with unsatisfactory possession options.

While he was grumbling internally, the group had moved far ahead.

"You're walking too slowly. Should I carry you again?"

"I'll do it!"

When Harenir turned back and asked sarcastically about the lagging Isaph, Kalterik quickly raised his hand. His determination to prevent the commander from exerting effort for someone like him was palpable. Of course, neither of them were welcome carriers, so he had no choice but to quicken his pace with a frown.

He hoped that with the 'freedom' he would gain when the quest ended, he could go to a peaceful world.

### Chapter 10

**#Part 3. 4%**

*Bump, bump, bump...*

His consciousness floated in the sensation of his body shaking. His mind flickered as if falling into sleep, or wandering in a light REM sleep state. Each time he briefly opened his eyes, the scenery in his view changed. A dark forest path, a desolate field, a vast prairie, and at times even a glimpse of blue...

"Let's move now."

A soft voice settling near his ear sharply pulled his consciousness up. *Harenir*. Reflexively identifying the owner of that voice, he looked around in a daze and only then realized they had arrived at some village.

Last night, the group had traveled for a long time through the forest behind the temple. Just as he was about to collapse from exhaustion while following them, a wagon appeared before his eyes. It was a wagon with a white tent covering the cargo area, which they seemed to be using to travel to the first Encroachment Zone.

The initial excitement of riding a wagon for the first time was quickly crushed by the uncomfortable ride that followed. Perhaps they were moving only through sparsely populated routes to travel in secret, but it was incredibly bumpy. His body, already nothing but bones, felt like even those bones might shatter.

He had barely managed to fall asleep, but he felt stiff as if he hadn't slept at all.

"Hey! Do I have to wait for your laziness too?!"

Everyone except him had already gotten off the wagon. Kalterik's fierce shout made him sigh involuntarily. In his arms, wrapped in his robe, the black cat was curled up sleeping.

He wanted to remove it immediately, but the cat's warm body temperature seemed to have eased his fatigue a bit. It's a familiar, but it still has body heat. Feeling curious, he got off the wagon while holding the cat in his arms.

He reflexively raised his arm to block the bright sunlight pouring onto his face.

"Ugh, sunlight..."

"As always, such a gloomy fellow."

As he shrank back as if being exorcised by the sunlight, Kalterik clicked his tongue. By now, he had grown accustomed to Kalterik's provocations and pretended not to hear. He had experienced such hostile attitudes often in his previous life, so it didn't require much effort to deal with.

As his vision adjusted to the brightness, he looked around. Unfamiliar shaped houses, people walking around in unfamiliar attire. With no tall buildings and an overall quiet, rural atmosphere, it felt like they had arrived at a countryside village on the outskirts.

"Weren't we going straight to the Encroachment Zone?"

"What did you hear when I was talking? I said we'd also look into the missing persons!"

"Ah."

He vaguely remembered Noi saying something like that last night. As he slowly nodded, Noi's explanation continued, much to his relief.

"We'll start by looking around the village near the southern Encroachment Zone, where the most disappearances have occurred recently."

"...We got to the southern Encroachment Zone quickly."

"Of course, we used a warp!"

He had seen a flickering blue light while half-asleep; perhaps that was the light from passing through the warp. Since they had ridden the wagon for quite a while after that, maybe only the empire's major cities were connected by warps.

The place where he first opened his eyes, where the prison was, must have been the capital of the Holy Empire. Only the holy city would have a place suitable for the hero's funeral and for storing the coffin and holy sword. And since the Encroachment Zones existed in the four cardinal directions of the empire, and it would take at least a few months to travel around them, the capital was probably located roughly in the center of the empire.

For it to be called an 'empire', it couldn't be a small land, yet they had reached the south in just a day after taking the warp. It felt strange to have used a mode of transportation he had only seen in games. Would he be able to see it with his own eyes next time? And if they could travel like this using warps, they could probably get around the Encroachment Zones quickly...

"If the tail gets too long, it might get stepped on, so this will probably be the first and last warp..."

Noi's quiet muttering shattered his expectations. By now, he was no longer surprised at feeling disappointed right after having expectations. Apparently, using a warp not only required paying a hefty price but also going through strict identity checks, making it difficult to use continuously.

Tch, they had probably factored this in when estimating the few months' time, but he still felt unnecessarily disappointed. He had hoped this labor would end a little faster.

Feeling the warm southern air, he followed the group.

*"Did the hero really die?"*

*"Come on, man! Surely not!"*

*"But the knights closest to him said so, and even the holy sword lost its light..."*

The hero's death seemed to be such a shocking event that it had spread quickly even to this place far from the capital. Everywhere people gathered in the village, they were all talking about it. There were even rumors about discussions in the Order on whether to declare the hero dead or keep him in a missing status.

*"What will we do if the hero disappears? Not just other countries, but perhaps even the imperial family immediately..."*

Amidst the worries pouring out from all around, the hero Harenir walked calmly. It seemed like it should draw attention, but he paid no heed to his surroundings at all. Even though he was wearing a dark blue robe with the hood pulled down, his build wasn't exactly common.

Perhaps acting confidently reduced the chances of looking suspicious, but suddenly he felt strange. It was a really random thought, but Harenir's back view looked quite refreshing. The empire must have been relying on the hero quite a lot.

A being that everyone revered as sacred, praised, and depended on.

"What did the missing people look like?"

But even hiding his identity now was ultimately for the greater good. He watched blankly as Harenir approached the villagers to ask about the missing people. Kalterik, Mela, and Noi were also bustling about.

He was just standing dumbly in the back when Noi stopped Kalterik from glaring at him. The reason being 'if Isaph approaches, it might startle the villagers' was bewildering, but it didn't seem entirely wrong, so he accepted it along with Kalterik.

After about two hours of the four of them, excluding him, diligently moving around, they gathered information. Noi spoke gloomily.

"It seems more people have disappeared than were recently reported..."

"Is the reporting system a mess, or have there been additional cases since then? *Tch*!"

"Most of them went missing while gathering in the forest to prepare for the coming winter."

As Kalterik expressed his irritation, Mela reported calmly.

To the south of this village stretched a vast field, and after going quite far beyond that, there was a forest. Half of that forest was the Encroachment Zone, and due to poor harvests this year, people had risked going there to gather supplies and gone missing. They had been optimistic that it would be fine this time too, since nothing unusual had happened for the past 20 years or so.

However, forests are inherently dangerous places. One could fall into unexpected swamps or pits, and there were wild animals too. So the villagers didn't seem certain yet that these disappearances were due to the Encroachment Zone.

Harenir's blue eyes were calm as he gazed towards the far side of the field.

"Let's head to the Encroachment Zone now."

He moved his feet, saddened by the increasingly strong flag. No matter how vast the forest, wouldn't people avoid entering if half of it was called by the ominous name 'Encroachment Zone'? Moreover, it would be difficult to clearly distinguish the boundary inside the forest.

*Is there some kind of marking*... he was vaguely thinking, when he was finally struck dumb by the sight before him. He couldn't close his gaping mouth.

This was impossible not to distinguish.

Even if you did forward rolls, backward rolls, high jumps, bungee jumps, and all sorts of physical challenges, you could clearly discern where the 'Encroachment Zone' began. It was impossible to confuse this. Even he, who had only heard the term Encroachment Zone yesterday, recognized it immediately upon seeing it.

"This is... the Encroachment Zone..."

The Encroachment Zone was *'black and white'*.

It was a truly bizarre landscape. Walking through a lush green forest, from a certain point on, a colorless forest spread out before his eyes as if all color had faded. While shades of gray and black could be distinguished, no vibrant colors could be found at all.

Just looking at it made him feel nauseous. It seemed like a different world. Moreover, a dark fog was thickly spread, and he reflexively realized that this must have been the reason why the Order had been unable to resolve the Encroachment Zone issue and had left it unattended all this time.

But, *damn it*, he would have to go in there, wouldn't he?

As expected, Harenir turned to him and spoke. His gently creasing eyes wore a smile so beautiful it was irritating.

"You've rested for a long time, haven't you? Now it's your turn to move."

### Chapter 11

Somehow, they hadn't given him any hints when gathering information about the missing persons earlier while he stood idle. Perhaps it was all for this moment. He swallowed a sigh internally.

From the moment Harenir had taken him out of prison, he had said he needed the souls that Isaph commanded.

"What do I need to do with the summoned undead?"

"I'd like you to survey the 'paths' of the Encroachment Zone as much as possible. Living beings start to become contaminated the moment they enter the Encroachment Zone, so if we scout the paths with souls in advance, it will be easier to move around inside."

*Ah, so that's why they need a necromancer who could control souls by the dozens or hundreds*. It would be difficult to survey the vast Encroachment Zone with just one or two, and he also intuitively guessed that even undead probably couldn't wander around for long periods in such a space.

So they had to survey the interior of the Encroachment Zone at once, and within a short time. He was essentially playing the role of a shortest route finder.

"If you sense any areas where the contaminated energy feels particularly strong while surveying the space with souls, tell me. It will probably be energy emanating from stones about the size of Kalterik's body, and there should be several of them."

Harenir was finally giving him an explanation, but aside from the fact that the content was not at all welcome, he suddenly felt puzzled. The description of the stones was quite detailed.

"Have you been inside the Encroachment Zone before?"

"Yes. When I was young."

"I guess even heroes played in dangerous places when they were young..."

As he spoke indifferently, Harenir hesitated for a moment before simply smiling. And somehow, there was a bigger reaction from the others rather than from him.

"You...!"

"How dare...!"

Kalterik and Noi suddenly flared up and glared at him, and Mela's eyes also turned cold. Her navy blue eyes stared at him coolly like the deep sea. He had a terrible feeling that he had touched on something wrong, but Harenir's instructions continued calmly.

"Anyway, though the chances seem low, if you happen to sense any trace of the missing persons, identify their locations too."

While he was giving instructions to him, it was also firmly suppressing the actions of the others. It seemed less like he was helping him and more like he was trying to prevent unnecessary commotion.

He nodded dazedly and asked,

"So I just need to survey the paths and draw them on a map?"

"You'll have to guide us from the front, won't you? How else could we trust that the map isn't false?"

"..."

*That's true*... If he were to deceive them about the paths with the intention of tricking this group, they would wander endlessly inside the Encroachment Zone and become contaminated. It was an aspect he hadn't considered, but it was such a valid point that he didn't even feel wronged. By now, he found himself agreeing along with that matter-of-fact voice.

*Well, then it seems I should summon the undead now...*

**—------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------**

**Look down at your shadow.**

**—------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------**

A blue window popped up in front of his eyes as if it had been waiting. *Hah*, although he really didn't want to do it, anticipating side effects, summoning the undead was a condition of the contract. Forcing himself to calm down, he followed the status window's instructions.

The moment he lowered his head to look at the shadow at his feet, his vision swayed—*woozy*. Once again, a strange sensation of losing control of his body welled up like nausea. However, now the sight of the shadow at his feet vibrating grotesquely was even more shocking.

The pitch-black shadow trembled, and finally, like vomiting a sticky liquid, it expanded in all directions. It happened in an instant. The shadow grew endlessly, and before he knew it, he was reaching his hand down. As a deep purple energy poured from his palm—

[Uuugh...]

[Ah... ah...]

Dozens of souls rose up. Their appearance was very much like zombies rising from graves. Heads suddenly shot up, and some crawled up while grasping the ground. There seemed to be about thirty of these translucent souls.

While this scene was incredibly shocking to see for the first time, it was also a bit disappointing. If he was going to summon undead, he had hoped they would appear like cool subordinates, but the souls standing before him now looked too ordinary. They were creepy with holes and smudges here and there, but overall they looked like very common villagers...

"You, trash of a bastard!"

"How could you bring out the victims of the Klam Massacre..."

*What did they say?*

Kalterik and Noi looked at him in shock. Klam village. The place where Isaph had tortured and killed all the villagers to obtain aggressive undead. He had heard that after committing that massacre, Isaph was arrested and imprisoned... *Fuck*. This wasn't what he had wanted either.

Noi muttered, trembling, that he hadn't known it would be this bad, Mela looked at him with even colder eyes, and Kalterik tried to rush at him with vicious curses. Harenir stretched out his arm to stop him, but there was clear disgust in the blue eyes that looked at him.

"I had no expectations of you, but this is surprisingly shocking."

He had no words to say, as he deserved all kinds of curses. Fully agreeing with their feelings, he wanted to join them in cursing Isaph, but unfortunately, he was inside Isaph's body.

Isaph was said to control undead by the hundreds, so why had he only summoned thirty now, and why these particular ones? Perhaps this was also an effect of becoming weaker. He felt frustrated, wishing he could read a skill description or something, but there was nothing like that.

*Thud.*

At that moment, the black cat approached and lightly pressed against his leg. Was it trying to be affectionate, or what? The NPC's approach was entirely unwelcome in the current situation, so he subtly moved to the side.

*Whoosh*— Just then, all the souls flew towards the forest together. His movement must have looked as if he had cleared the way for them. Like trash who just commanded undead without caring about the angry gazes from the Order members.

Unable to explain the situation, he finally resigned himself and decided to maintain a brazen face. He vaguely speculated that the reason the flying souls looked smudged might be due to the torture they had endured.

*Whooosh—*

A chilly wind blew from the Encroachment Zone. The gray forest trembled as if rejecting the external energy. A chilling sound rang out as if trying to drive away the undead, but the souls enveloped in purple energy smoothly penetrated the gaps.

Even though they were far from the Encroachment Zone, a creeping chill spread, causing the holy knights to warily watch the forest, while Noi, seeming distressed, took out a translucent mask from his bag and put it on. The mask that stuck closely to the lower part of his face seemed to function as a gas mask.

There was no time to be glad that their gazes had left him. Right now, he was suffering from a truly bizarre sensation.

"Ugh..."

Dozens of viewpoints were being shared with him. He had expected the undead to scout the Encroachment Zone and return to report the information to him, but that wasn't the case. The scenes they were seeing unfolded directly before his eyes.

It was like watching dozens of CCTV feeds simultaneously, or sometimes all those scenes overlapped. The scenery in his vision changed depending on how much he concentrated. Extreme motion sickness and a headache hit him at the same time.

He couldn't tell if seconds or minutes had passed. While he was suffering from the flood of information, the souls returned to his side and even knelt down, looking up at him. It was as if they were serving their master with utmost devotion. Was it because they had been subjugated by necromancy? Whatever the reason, keeping them summoned was burdensome, so he casually waved his hand, and they faded away.

This gesture of dismissing such troublesome beings must have seemed quite shocking, as Kalterik ground out a curse.

"You bastard, really...!"

"It was your superior who brought me out knowing all this."

Anger welled up suddenly. He was struggling to organize the information flooding his mind, so why the provocation? It was Harenir who had dragged him out of prison and requested 'cooperation' despite knowing about the Klam Massacre incident and that he was a necromancer reviled in the Holy Empire.

As he glared at Kalterik while panting, Noi unexpectedly flinched. Kalterik, seeming even more enraged, shouted "What?!" but this time Mela stopped him. Glances were exchanged, silently telling him not to cause unnecessary commotion since the commander was staying calm.

Harenir quietly looked at him and asked.

"...So, did you survey the Encroachment Zone? What about the missing persons?"

His blue eyes were infinitely calm. A gaze as if looking at a necessary evil. After all, summoning dozens of souls, sending them into the forest, and then having them return to his side had essentially proven his ability.

Somehow, a sneer escaped him. It was amusing that even 'the' Harenir had to wait for his answer in this situation. How ironic that the necromancy they so condemned was the only way to survey the Encroachment Zone.

Deliberately taking a deep breath, he answered leisurely. Even though Harenir knew he was putting on airs, he didn't rush him and waited, which somewhat improved his mood.

"There are five stones in total. As for the missing persons, well, I don't think I saw any movement of living beings."

"Are you sure you checked properly?"

"If you can't trust me, why don't you go in and check for yourself."

### Chapter 12

Kalterik bristled at his indifferent tone from behind, but Harenir simply nodded. It had been at least a week since they went missing, so if they had indeed been dragged into the Encroachment Zone, they wouldn't have been able to survive anyway.

Noi finally managed to add,

"Th-that's right. An ordinary human can't even withstand an hour, no, not even ten or twenty minutes before becoming contaminated—"

"Still, let's look for the missing persons' bodies to be certain."

Everyone busily began preparing to enter the Encroachment Zone. They gathered their robes and fixed them like capes so they wouldn't restrict movement, and Noi, looking worried, put on an extra layer of mask.

Then he witnessed them enveloping their bodies in golden energy. As the holy knights drew their swords and took deep breaths, a soft golden light swirled around them, and when Noi muttered something, a light green aura surrounded him. Just looking at them, they seemed sacred and fresh respectively—probably holy power and fairy magic.

Since living beings start becoming contaminated the moment they enter the Encroachment Zone, it seemed they were each putting up a kind of shield to protect themselves.

*So then...*

"...What about me?"

At his question, all four looked at him. Especially Harenir, who even let out an "Ah" of realization, which sounded very subtle. He looked him over and muttered,

"Right, you're human too."

*...Was that an insult? It was, wasn't it?*

Judging by Noi mumbling from behind, "I thought he'd be an exception since it's a space dangerous to living beings..." and Kalterik chiming in with "He looks like an evil spirit...", it was clearly an insult. Even Mela nodded this time.

"Take this."

In a situation where everyone was unanimously treating Isaph as non-human, unexpectedly, Harenir handed him a necklace. It was the very necklace he had been wearing. It was a simple design with a round jewel hanging from the center of a gold chain, but a blue light swirled around the jewel, clear as an autumn sky.

"It's an object filled with holy power, so it should allow you to withstand the Encroachment Zone for at least an hour or two. It will also heal wounds, so wear it well."

"*Gasp*, Commander! That's such a precious holy relic..."

"That's why it's right for Isaph to use it now."

Harenir calmly cut off Kalterik's protest.

"We can't have him collapsing inside."

It felt less like he was treating him preciously and more like he was preventing things from going wrong, but in reality, if he had treated him like the former, he would have been more bewildered and suspicious of the other's intentions, so he immediately accepted the necklace. Still, Harenir seemed to have clear interests.

The description of it being a precious holy relic wasn't an exaggeration—as soon as he put on the necklace, his headache disappeared. It also became much easier to breathe, so he willingly took the lead, as if bestowing a favor.

The moment of entering the black and white forest was very strange.

Everything he looked at was faded, but only his companions retained their colors. Even Mela's silver hair, which he had thought cold, looked warm here. The thick scent of grass had disappeared, and the only smell he could detect was that of charred remains, like in a completely burned space. The sense of dissonance was quite severe.

The tension that began the moment he set foot in the Encroachment Zone gradually intensified as they went deeper. Even without him being conscious of it, his subconscious recoiled from this space, and he felt like the energy was being drained from his entire body. To use a game analogy, it was like taking real-time dot damage.

Normally it would be HP -1, -1, -1... but with the holy power shield, it might be more like HP -0.1, -0.1, -0.1.

*This must be what they call 'contamination'.*

And perhaps when fully contaminated, the color of living beings might completely fade away. He absently stretched out his hand from the wide sleeve of his robe, repeatedly clenching and unclenching his fist. He was glad to see even the faint hint of color in his pale palm.

"We, we really entered the Encroachment Zone..."

Noi trembled, his shoulders hunched tightly. As a fairy, he seemed to have an even harder time walking through the Encroachment Zone, but not wanting to worry his companions, he tried hard to act fine. It was pitiful to see him deliberately looking around, marveling at how strange it was, and saying he was probably the only fairy to have entered an Encroachment Zone.

So he quickened his pace a bit to guide them to where the black stones were.

"I think if we go left at the bent tree..."

The thick fog made it difficult to discern the path, but he moved, straining his memory as much as possible. He was worried that what the souls had seen might differ from reality, but that wasn't the case. They really did see a tree with a bent trunk, and then...

"It's here."

They found the pitch-black stone.

It looked less like a simple stone and more like a crystal of condensed contaminated energy from the Encroachment Zone. Facing that pure black devoid of any light sent chills down his spine. Noi also gasped, seemingly surprised at encountering the massive crystal, and Mela and Kalterik were on guard. The ominous energy made their bodies tense involuntarily.

Only Harenir stared at it blankly, without any change in expression. Suddenly, his gaze was drawn to Harenir's blue eyes.

He just realized that even the sky was black and white in the Encroachment Zone. The saturation had gradually lowered from the edges, and now that they had come deep into the forest, it had completely faded. So Harenir's eyes, gazing at the contaminated stone, felt just like a small sky.

The eyes finally facing the stone he had seen in his childhood were infinitely calm. There was no sign of pleasant reminiscence. He just looked down quietly, as if a saint was looking down on an irreverently contaminated land, and then for a moment, a flash of terrible disgust seemed to cross those eyes.

*Whoosh!*

The pure white holy sword was swung diagonally downward. It seemed to have been swung very lightly, but with a crash! the huge stone shattered into pieces. Black fragments fell heavily.

At the same time, the air became fresher and breathing became much easier. Throughout their walk in the Encroachment Zone, his chest had felt tight and his body sluggish, but now the pressure was greatly reduced. Whether the crystal had formed naturally as the energy of the Encroachment Zone condensed, or whether the land had become contaminated as the crystal was embedded, it seemed that this thing functioned as a 'core'.

Oh, just as he was marveling, a black energy spread out with a hiss. Before he could properly examine what it was, his arm was suddenly grabbed and he was pulled into someone's embrace.

The movement came first, and the realization followed. As the miasma spread from the scattered stone fragments on the ground, Harenir had pulled him close to protect him, as he had been closest to it. As Harenir raised his robe like a shield, the miasma bounced off.

It had been a potentially dangerous situation, but the warmth enveloping his entire body was even more shocking, causing his whole body to stiffen. Meanwhile, Harenir looked around at the other knights and spoke casually.

"It seems that when we break the core, the contaminated energy bursts out one last time. Let's be careful to suppress it with holy power when we destroy them from now on."

His tone was extremely calm. He seemed so composed, as if it had merely been an action to protect their guide, that he alone slipped away with an uncomfortable feeling. Kalterik's eyebrows shot up, but he nodded, considering the priorities of the situation. It was a moment when what needed to be done in this Encroachment Zone became perfectly clear.

Kalterik gripped his greatsword firmly and shouted vigorously.

"I'll smash them all!"

From now on, it was a race against time.

They had to destroy all the cores before their bodies became contaminated. Although no Dium had been discovered yet, it seemed that Harenir's goal was to eliminate the Encroachment Zone itself, as Noi had guessed.

But would the Encroachment Zone really disappear just by destroying all the cores? He had a vague doubt, but he kept his mouth shut and quickly guided them to the next location.

*Crash!*

At the second location he led them to, there was indeed a core. As Mela destroyed it, Harenir nodded and said,

"Let's split up and deal with them now. You just tell us where the stones are located."

It probably wasn't a decision based on trust. He had likely just judged that the urgency of the current situation outweighed their distrust of Isaph as a being. It had also been proven that he wasn't lying.

He shrugged. He had just started to feel that walking was becoming difficult, so he was glad they were splitting up like this. And it wasn't just him who seemed to need a rest—Noi looked the same way.

As soon as he told them the locations, the knights quickly dispersed.

*Boom! Crash*... Almost simultaneously, the sounds of cores being destroyed came from the directions Mela and Harenir had gone. The sound carried well in the quiet space.

Now, if they heard it one more time, all the cores in the Encroachment Zone would be destroyed.

*"Aaaaargh!"*

But what echoed through the forest was not the sound of a stone breaking, but Kalterik's loud scream.

### Chapter 13

At first, he was startled, thinking the shout was a scream, but it was repeated several times. It even sounded quite irritable, and just as he was beginning to wonder, Kalterik returned, panting.

"It's not here! You bastard, did you lie to get revenge on me?!"

His approach, pointing accusingly, was very threatening, but rather than cowering, he just felt bewildered. He had only told them in which direction the core was located and mentioned any peculiar landmarks that could serve as guides. The knights had divided the locations among themselves and dispersed on their own.

"How was I supposed to know you'd take the 12 o'clock direction?"

"You little—!"

"Kalterik. Don't pick unnecessary fights."

Mela, who had returned quickly, sighed. Harenir, who had gone to the farthest location, hadn't returned yet.

Still, Mela seemed to have gained some trust in his information and suggested they check the 12 o'clock direction together again. Even Noi seemed to view him a bit differently and said casually,

"Sir Kalterik is rather hasty, so he might have really missed Isaph's clue..."

"What? Even you, Noi!"

He was pleased by the situation where it seemed he had gained more allies. Yes, even if Isaph's infamy was at Lv.999, they couldn't deny his abilities. After all, that reputation itself must have been built on tremendous necromancy skills. Why, even dark guilds are avoided as ominous, but their quest success rate is still acknowledged as 100%, right?

*Yes, yes. Now I might even receive trust from my companions and perhaps even special treatment...*

"...It really isn't here."

However, at the scene they arrived at, it was his expectations that shattered instead of finding a core. He blinked blankly. The 12 o'clock direction Kalterik had headed towards had more distinct features than the places the other knights had gone. Two tree trunks were strangely intertwined, and there was a clearing around them, so it couldn't have been mistaken.

But the area in front of the trees was empty. As he looked around in confusion, Kalterik exploded in anger.

"This bastard really is trying to screw us over!"

"If we can't destroy the core, I'd be screwed too, wouldn't I? I definitely saw it here..."

At his rebuttal, Kalterik seemed to lose his words and shut his mouth. Regardless, he frantically turned his head. He had clearly seen the ominous crystal at this location through the souls' vision, so why...

*Rustle—*

At that moment, along with a faint sound from behind, the hair on the back of his neck stood up.

"Ah."

A chilling realization struck his brain like lightning. The blood drained from his face at the sudden shock, and a terrible tension gripped his entire body. Until now, everything he had seen through the souls matched the actual landscape, but there was a difference in just one place. The truth this pointed to was singular.

"...The core moved."

*Whoosh!* Something flew towards them. The ferocity was so intense that he instinctively dodged. *Bang!* The object that had barely grazed right past him collided with a tree, spreading a thick smoke.

Kalterik and Mela raised their swords, on guard. A being that could move the core, and aggressively charge at the group in the Encroachment Zone...

[Kihihihi.]

The moment he directly faced the figure that appeared from the smoke, his skin crawled. It had a human form, but its imposing build was at least twice the size of a well-built adult male. Above all, the fact that all the colors making up its body were 'black and white' evoked a sense of rejection stemming from the dissonance. Its clothes, which looked like armor, were purely black, as if carved from the crystals they had been destroying until now.

Its arms were abnormally thick, and its four long fingers were stretched out sharply, looking like weapons in themselves. Its legs were relatively thin, but its feet were large, with the same number of toes as fingers. Its mouth was stretched up to its cheekbones in a ghastly grin, adding to its eeriness.

Moreover, the most distinctive feature was the horn protruding from the center of its forehead.

"D-Dium..."

Though it was the first living creature he had seen, it was, as predicted, a monster from the Encroachment Zone. The Dium, the being that had brought catastrophe to the world over 20 years ago.

Noi trembled and exclaimed in shock.

"How could this be... It's impossible..."

His reaction didn't deviate one bit from his prediction. If he had guessed the flag this accurately, shouldn't he be given some possession experience points? To commemorate leveling up, they should unlock a hidden skill or at least award some points.

Then, using those points to increase stats like health, wisdom, or attack power—isn't that the typical structure of game possession stories? Why was there still no change!

*What a terrible game, as always.*

He looked around the scene indifferently. Though surprised by the Dium's appearance, he had predicted this situation itself, so he calmed down relatively quickly. In contrast, everyone else was frozen stiff, unable to even breathe.

"What are you doing? Aren't you going to eliminate it?"

Finally, when he casually threw out a comment, everyone flinched. It was fortunate that the Dium was just staring, as if assessing the combat power of those present, creating a gap; otherwise, things would have already gone awry.

"Damn it. They were definitely all gone... How the hell..."

Kalterik ground out a curse. His face contorted for a moment, then he stepped forward, swinging his sword so fiercely that it created a whooshing sound.

"Fine! I guess a runt managed to hide and barely survive! Now I'll kill you perfectly again!"

"If it's one with a single horn..."

Mela also stepped forward, holding her rapier vertically. The two charged forward almost simultaneously, strongly enveloping their bodies in holy power. While Mela thrust sharply, Kalterik attacked as if crushing heavily.

[Grr, aaaaargh!]

Attacks rained down on the Dium without giving it a chance. The Dium couldn't properly respond to Mela's quick movements, and just as it barely adapted and tried to counterattack, Kalterik's greatsword flew heavily. He couldn't help but admire their perfect coordination.

*Whoosh!* However, just as Mela and Kalterik's attacks were about to pour in from both sides simultaneously, the Dium leaped upwards. *Ah, it dodges at the last hit*. While he was feeling disappointed, the two knights quickly dashed after identifying where the Dium would land.

But the two knights chasing the Dium stopped abruptly with a start. The Dium had fallen closer than expected...

"It's not just one..."

Noi sighed in dismay. Diums rushed out of the forest in droves. He was surprised to see that there were easily thirty of them, but there was no fear on the knights' faces. They were just taken aback by the fact that more Diums were alive than expected, and even Noi didn't seem worried about them.

Well, they had just easily overwhelmed the one-horned one, treating it like a small fry, so it should be fine. As he was vaguely optimistic, he soon saw Kalterik stumbling backwards.

Kalterik muttered in disbelief as he withdrew his threatening greatsword.

"P-people...?"

Several humans appeared from the forest along with the Diums. They walked unsteadily, constantly looking around with cloudy white pupils, and wildly swinging their arms, looking very much like zombies. But even more shocking than that was the fact that their entire bodies were in black and white.

They looked just like contaminated beings from the Encroachment Zone.

Suddenly, his gaze was drawn to the clothes they were wearing. On the tattered clothes of the man standing at the front, there were traces of other fabric patched on.

'I think that uncle was wearing an orange work uniform. Even though it was old and worn, he didn't throw it away, but kept wearing it after his wife mended it...'

He vaguely remembered hearing such a story a few hours ago when gathering information about the missing persons in the village. Even though he had overheard it from a distance, that voice suddenly came to mind. Although the color had faded and was indistinguishable, the traces of other fabric patched onto the work uniform were unmistakable.

Noi, who had spoken with that villager, sighed painfully.

"The missing persons...?"

Did staying in the Encroachment Zone for a long time turn them into colorless zombies like that? No, perhaps they turned out like that if killed by a Dium. That must be why the time when they ran rampant was called the 'Great Catastrophe'.

[Grrrrrr!]

The zombies charged forward, making strange noises. The way they twisted their bodies oddly and thrust their arms forward as they rushed was quite threatening. But the ones facing them, Mela and Kalterik, were knights. Knights skilled enough to serve as vice-commanders of the Holy Knight Order.

However, no, because of that, hesitation tainted the knights' swords. Though the villagers were already dead, they seemed unable to bring themselves to cut them down and stepped back hesitantly. *Whoosh!* Kalterik swung his greatsword widely, but even that only pushed them back with the flat side.

Attempts to knock out the zombies didn't work either. Even when struck on the back of the neck, they quickly got up again, or even crawled to cling to the knights. The Diums fiercely pushed through the gaps that were gradually forming. The knights were blocking well, but just as it started to feel dangerous—

*Crack, cra-cra-crack—*

Suddenly, the ground shook. As he was about to fall, staggering from this completely unexpected anomaly, tree trunks suddenly shot up from the ground. Barely avoiding falling flat by grabbing onto one, he looked around in a daze. About ten trunks had sprung up, creating a prison that engulfed the Diums and zombies.

Those trunks contained a vibrant 'color'. Like new buds that had just sprouted from the ground, trees full of vitality. The light brown trunks and the glimpses of light green leaves between them were incredibly fresh. He immediately turned his head to look for the being that came to mind.

Around Noi, who had his hand on the ground, a green light was rising like a heat haze.

"Quickly find the core and destroy it!"

### Chapter 14

*Oh, so that's why Noi had come along into the Encroachment Zone*. He was a hidden talent. Seeing trees with intact colors in the black and white forest was so welcome that his tension even dissipated completely.

While he was marveling, the knights moved quickly. The core was where the Dium had just fled from, that is, the place where it had appeared leading the other Diums. They probably couldn't hide it far away due to the rush.

However, the path to the core wasn't easy either.

[Kiiiieek!]

There were a few Diums that had nimbly avoided the rising tree trunks. They rushed at Mela and Kalterik, blocking access to the core, while meanwhile, the Diums inside the tree prison were frantically tearing at the trunks.

It was natural for new sprouts barely emerging from lifeless soil to be fragile. Under the Diums' tremendous grip strength, the trunks broke one by one, and while the larger Diums couldn't escape through the gaps, the zombies were trying to squeeze through and escape.

"Ugh, urk...!"

Noi barely managed to add more energy to pull out more trunks. He reinforced the prison with new trunks, but even that seemed to be gradually overwhelming him. The Encroachment Zone was a space where living beings became contaminated. The tree trunks Noi had raised gradually lost their color, and as the trees' vitality was drained, it seemed to take a toll on Noi as well.

Though he tried to endure stubbornly while sweating profusely, Noi's concentration finally wavered. Taking advantage of this gap, some zombies escaped, and they immediately charged at Kalterik. He, who had gotten closest to the core, flinched and stepped back. His face turned pale, having almost cut down a zombie.

Perhaps he wanted to return at least the intact bodies to their families.

"..."

He watched the scene blankly. In terms of attack power, the zombies were much weaker than the Diums, but the knights struggled more in front of the zombies. Flinging the zombies far away seemed to be the best solution they had come up with.

*They could just cut them down*.

...At this point, it would be standard to criticize the foolish behavior of these game data fragments. To sneer at their inefficiency, to click one's tongue at their frustrating display, saying that both the zombies and knights were just the same data. Whether it's a holy knight's oath or personal sentiment, the factors holding them back shouldn't mean anything to a game player.

But was it because the game was unfriendly? Because the UI was terrible, because it was a terrible game that didn't provide the player with any of the functions games typically offer.

And yet, it made all these scenes as vivid as reality.

*Crack-crack-crack!*

All of Noi's tree trunks broke. In the end, as they became contaminated and rotted, the Diums tore them apart. Dozens of Diums and zombies rushed towards the two knights. The vibration of the ground shaking as they charged was unnecessarily clear.

*Fucking terrible game*.

He stretched out his hand and recited the words that appeared in the status window before him. When the blue window popped up, he was probably sneering. The target of that sneer was not the foolish believers, but himself.

"Block."

Dozens of undead rose from the ground. Even though it was a land where sunlight didn't reach, a dark purple shadow spread from under his robe, instantly expanding its area, and then, as purple energy burst out explosively under his hand, the undead were summoned all at once.

They immediately obeyed the command. *Whoosh!* The swiftly flying undead clung to the zombies. It was quite a bizarre scene. While they all looked like ordinary villagers, half had lost their color, and half had become translucent, engaging in a fierce melee.

It would be nice if he could summon strong undead to hunt even the Diums, and he had secretly dreamed of such cool scenes ever since hearing the necromancer profession...

"Urgh."

Sadly, this was his limit. The shock from using the skill hit him much harder than the previous two times. Dizziness struck, and he staggered and fell. He barely avoided falling face-first onto the ground by leaning against a nearby rock.

He heard Noi calling his name like a scream, and he answered wearily, "I know..." while continuing to stretch out his hand. The summoning of the undead didn't stop.

"...Must... do it...!"

"..."

He heard the knights shouting something from afar. His head was buzzing so he couldn't understand properly, but it seemed they had assessed the situation and concluded to move quickly together. With the zombie obstacles gone, the two picked up speed in their advance.

*Bang! Boom!* There was no hesitation in the swords swung at the Diums. As he struggled to watch, his vision kept flickering. Why was using the skill more burdensome than other times? Was it the effect of staying in the Encroachment Zone for too long? How much time had passed? It seemed well over an hour, so he was reaching his limit...

He pressed hard between his eyebrows. Just as he was thinking that everything would somehow work out if they could just destroy the last core.

[A living human, I see.]

Just as he felt the chilling words of a being that had approached without even the sound of footsteps settling near his ear, suddenly his body toppled sideways. The cat had suddenly flown at him and pushed him.

Simultaneously, *crash!* The rock he had been leaning against shattered into pieces.

"Gasp..."

Goosebumps ran all over him. If the cat hadn't pushed him, he would have ended up just like that rock. After breathing roughly, he managed to shift his gaze. As he looked at the being that had destroyed the rock, his vision kept shaking. Was it an aftereffect of the skill, or was it instinctive terror?

A Dium with two horns stood before him.

It looked somewhat different from the Diums he had seen earlier. It was twice as large, its armor was more intricate, and it even wore a helmet, but the horns protruding from both ends of its forehead looked terribly sharp. Perhaps this Dium was the leader of this Encroachment Zone. Moreover, hadn't it just 'spoken'?

"T-two of them..."

Noi's entire body trembled violently. For the first time, he read fear on that face. Recalling how he hadn't been afraid even when the horde of Diums appeared earlier, he could tell how dangerous the current situation was. Kalterik and Mela were nowhere to be seen, having gone to find the core.

The helmeted Dium looked back and forth between him and Noi.

[I thought fairies had gone extinct in this land long ago... Hmm, one of the few remaining descendants?]

In any creative work, when monsters, demons, ghosts, etc. can 'think', the difficulty of dealing with them increases sharply. It's tricky to face beings with intelligence. As the Dium stared, Noi's complexion turned pale as if terrified.

Would it kill the fairy it was interested in first? What should he do, among the souls he could summon, there didn't seem to be any undead that could stop this Dium...

[Your sorcery is the most irritating right now, so I'll have to eliminate you first.]

*Ah, it's me first?*

He blankly marveled at the Dium's gaze turning towards him. Well, it would be a waste to kill a rare fairy. Wouldn't it be worth keeping alive, either as an experimental subject or a collectible? Was it because all his concentration was focused on maintaining the summoning of the undead even at this moment that he felt no sense of reality about his own situation?

*I see*. 'Death' was listed as the quest failure penalty, but he could die even just while progressing the quest... *No, is that the same thing? If I can't stop this Dium, that would be quest failure*.

While making such idle judgments, he looked up curiously at the approaching Dium, and subconsciously thought it was unnecessary trouble as Noi came running, screaming from afar.

*Crack*- The moment the Dium's 'mouth' opened, he froze. Its entire black face split open like a Venus flytrap, revealing sharp teeth. *Ugh, damn*. It's not a mouth, but the whole face opening up. *Why does the last thing I see have to be such a disgusting sight...!*

*Whoosh*—

At that moment, a golden energy rushed in like a flood, filling his vision. It boasted a vivid presence like a wave soaking dry land, or sunlight falling on a dark, treacherous place. Though he had seen the holy power used by the two knights earlier, the owner of this light, so distinctly different, was clear.

"I'm late."

*Harenir*. He rolled that name in his mouth before finally swallowing it.

By the time the brilliant light faded, the scene before his eyes had changed. Harenir was standing right in front of him, and somehow the Dium had been flung away and crashed into a tree. He thought he might have vaguely heard a thud just before.

[Cough...]

The Dium, its upper body deeply slashed, coughed up black blood. But Harenir's pure white sword had no foreign substance on it. Though it seemed that something black had splattered for an instant, it disappeared as if burning away in the sunlight with a sizzle. Was this what they called a holy sword?

Then Harenir turned to look at him with a strange expression. As if he had grasped the entire situation just by glancing around lightly, he moved his lips a couple of times before speaking.

"...Good work."

"Yeah. I worked hard."

Though it was probably just a courtesy, he didn't reject it. He quickly nodded, welcoming Harenir's praise this time. With the quest failure penalty having come so close, he strongly emphasized that he had cooperated, feeling even more desperate for a reward.

Even if he died, if he died after helping the hero, couldn't it be judged as a quest success?

### Chapter 15

Harenir looked down at him with an even more enigmatic expression. As if he hadn't expected such a response, he pressed his lips tightly together, and just then, Noi came running towards him, crying.

"Waaah, Haren!"

His face was a mess, as if all the tension had suddenly drained away upon seeing Harenir. He ran staggering, almost falling, and cried loudly, and Harenir gently patted his head, seeming to guess Noi's efforts from the scattered tree debris in the clearing.

"The way back was blocked, so I was late. But you held out well, Noi."

The three knights had dispersed and moved simultaneously, and although Harenir had gone to the farthest place, the sound of him destroying the core had rung out almost at the same time as Mela. In other words, Harenir had been that fast, yet for some reason, he had been late in returning.

Perhaps the Dium had judged Harenir's presence to be the most troublesome and had interfered with his return. Maybe by deliberately piling up rocks or felling trees in his path.

*Pat, pat*, as Harenir praised him for doing well, Noi's trembling gradually subsided. To calm down with just a few touches, was this the presence of a hero? As he curiously watched their amazing bond, which was always surprising to see, he heard the Dium getting up from afar.

*Rustle*— The momentum of the creature rising while breaking the tree was ominous. It glared straight at Harenir, seemingly enraged at being caught off guard.

[You...]

But Harenir's expression, meeting that murderous gaze, remained calm. It was his first encounter with a Dium in this forest, and even though the creature had two horns protruding, there was no particular agitation on his face.

"...In the end, it comes to this."

He might have predicted this from the moment he saw the blocked path, but from the beginning, he had suspected the Dium's survival and wanted to search the Encroachment Zone. Even though the other knights and even Noi, his aide, had been skeptical about it.

Looking back, it seemed that Harenir had not just guessed, but 'known' for certain. Otherwise, he wouldn't have come here, even faking his death. Though he couldn't know why Harenir had been so certain, his calm demeanor even in front of the Dium brought a sense of relief.

Rather, strangely enough, he looked like someone who had been waiting for this moment.

*Boom!*

*Thud! Thud!*

The battle began as the Dium charged at Harenir. It swung its massive arm down fiercely, but Harenir avoided the attack with a movement as light as a feather. The Dium repeatedly scattered only his afterimages, breaking innocent trees and rocks.

[You little rat!]

"Having hidden here all this time, wouldn't you be closer to a rat?"

The Dium became even more enraged at the voice that hadn't lost a single breath. *Bang, bang, bang!* It charged, wildly swinging its arms, creating craters in the ground. The dust raised by the impact spread like fog, obstructing vision, and just as he hoped it would settle quickly... black mist began to spread slowly over it.

From the beginning, mist had been lying all over the Encroachment Zone. It was the reason why no one had dared to touch it, leaving it abandoned for so long after the Great Catastrophe. Now, that mist spread even thicker, following the Dium's movements, obscuring vision.

Harenir swung his sword horizontally in a wide arc. The mist cleared slightly, and he immediately turned to look at Noi and him, saying,

"For now, you two take shelter behind the rock..."

*Whoosh!* At that moment, an attack came flying. Something sharp extended from within the mist, shooting towards Harenir. The pitch-black thing was the Dium's finger; it seemed the Dium could freely transform its body.

Instinctively, Harenir stepped back half a step to avoid the attack. But it might have grazed his cheek, as a thin line appeared on his face and blood trickled down.

"The wound..."

His exclamation, tinged with bewilderment at the seemingly deep wound, turned into puzzled surprise towards the end.

"...is gone?"

The wound on Harenir's cheek disappeared in less than a few seconds. When he wiped the blood from his cheek with the back of his hand, there wasn't even a trace left. He wondered if there was some healing magic in the back of his hand, but then.

'Haren doesn't die. Because he's the son loved by God.'

Suddenly, he recalled what Noi had said. He had said that a hero who heals instantly from wounds couldn't possibly die just from a search, and that wasn't just simple praise, but a statement based on clear fact.

*Whoosh, whoosh!* Several more surprise attacks shot out from the mist. Occasionally, faint wounds appeared on Harenir, but they disappeared in the blink of an eye. He didn't seem to pay any particular attention to them. As if it were natural, without needing to focus on it, the hero existed flawlessly, as if that was how it should be.

*Is this what they call 'God's love'?*

While marveling at this, he tried to escape with Noi. But attacks were flying from everywhere, and they couldn't find a moment to move, so in the end, Harenir stood in front of them, guarding their position and blocking the attacks. The Dium seemed to want to take the two weaklings hostage, consistently targeting them.

Usually in such situations, the hero's hands would be tied protecting the weak, and one would read frustration even in the hero that he couldn't do anything, while those being protected would feel both gratitude and guilt. But he kept falling into a strange sense of dissonance. Rather, he seemed almost as if he had been waiting for this moment...

*Crash!*

At that moment, the sound of something breaking came from afar. Though they had heard all sorts of loud noises in the forest until now, that one reached their ears particularly clearly. It was the same sound they had heard four times before.

"I've destroyed it!"

Kalterik's booming shout rang out welcomingly. He had finally broken through the interference of the single-horned Diums and destroyed the core.

With this, all the cores in the Encroachment Zone had been eliminated.

As the last core disappeared, not only did the heavy tension pressing down on the forest decrease incomparably to before, but it also became much easier to breathe. Just then, he thought he saw the corners of Harenir's mouth, standing in front of him, lift slightly.

*Whoosh!*

The moment he drew his sword horizontally, a burst of pure white light erupted, and the mist in the area cleared in an instant. Though the motion was similar to before, the result was completely different. A fierce wind blew, shaking even the Dium's helmet far away.

[Y-you...]

"I was bored."

Harenir smiled, looking at the flustered Dium. Now he clearly understood the source of the dissonance he had felt earlier. Ah, he had deliberately stalled for time to prevent the two-horned Dium from approaching the other knights. He had purposely fought as if it were an even match, pretending to struggle in the mist.

*Whoosh!* With a single leap, Harenir flew right up to the Dium's face. He lightly shot forward and swung his sword gracefully, and *bang!* A terrible roar erupted as the ground shattered.

"I'm curious about something. How did you come back to life?"

[Ugh, guh...!]

"Or rather, did you not die in the first place?"

Harenir approached, calmly asking questions. Though his movements seemed light and fluttering, the earth overturned wherever his steps passed. It was as if the forest was collapsing. The ground flipped, trees fell, and rocks shattered. Nothing stood in the way of Harenir's steps.

The Dium was frantically trying to escape. It ran, dodging Harenir's sword, staggering on the violently shaking ground, leaning against trees only for them to break, causing it to roll on the ground. The situation was vastly different from before.

"You don't intend to answer, I see..."

Harenir spoke as if disappointed, though he hadn't given any chance to answer in the first place. It was unclear whether he was sincere or mocking, but the Dium, now in tatters, seemed to take it as the latter and trembled.

[Graaaaargh!]

Finally, the Dium spread its arms wide and let out a terrible roar. A pitch-black miasma burst out from its entire body with a terrifying force, then exploded outwards in all directions. The aura was so vicious that it was impossible to even stand properly.

Kalterik and Mela, who had been trying to join them, stopped with groans. What the Dium had released wasn't just simple miasma. It felt as if the whole body would rot and crumble just from touching it.

The contamination of the Encroachment Zone accelerated.

"Huff..."

In the end, he fell to his knees, trembling with both hands on the ground. It felt like his life force was draining away. He couldn't tell if his fingertips were white from gripping the ground or if it was the process of being contaminated in the Encroachment Zone.

Terrible pain arrived, as if the earlier ease in breathing had been an illusion. It felt like his lungs were solidifying.

[Did you get cocky just because you destroyed the cores! Did you think you could eliminate our land with such tricks! Kekeke, how laughable, that arrogant delusion!]

The Dium burst into mockery. Its laughter echoed through the forest and swirled dizzily in his head. In fact, that part had been something he had found questionable from the beginning.

Would the Encroachment Zone disappear just by destroying all the cores? If so, why had no one tried it until now? Although he had felt the ominous energy of the Encroachment Zone decrease when Kalterik destroyed the last core earlier, that only meant it had diminished, not disappeared.

Moreover, with the Dium's miasma now filling the space like this, it wouldn't be strange if new cores formed at any time. The Dium laughed madly at Harenir's reaction as he stood stock-still.

[How could we give up this land we've taken, we will surely bring back our era...!]

"Actually, I wasn't sure at first."

Harenir's calm voice was heard amidst the Dium's frenzied shouts. The somewhat abrupt content made not only the Dium but also him look at Harenir in bewilderment. What on earth was he saying? What hadn't he been sure about...

"I was uncertain whether eliminating the cores would really be effective."

[What...?]

"But, you hid the last core."

In the midst of the pitch-black raging storm, Harenir smiled slightly. The gentle smile seemed eerily out of place in this urgent situation.

### Chapter 16

Harenir seemed to have deduced the situation as soon as he came to the clearing to find them. That the last core had moved, and the knights had gone to deal with it.

"That became the answer."

Harenir nodded slightly as if in gratitude, and then raised his holy sword vertically. With a distant mind, he watched this scene while retracing Harenir's attitude up until now.

Although Harenir said he hadn't been certain of the answer, he hadn't hesitated in destroying the cores. From the moment the contaminated energy in this space decreased even slightly, a faint satisfaction had appeared on his face.

Moreover, all his companions believed that Harenir had some solution. Even though they were greatly shocked by the existence of Diums that had appeared after decades, they ultimately followed the commander's orders while facing them.

All those attitudes were clearly based on 'trust' and.

Harenir's eyes, following the tip of the sword up to the sky, were clearer than ever.

"... ... ..."

He couldn't understand the words Harenir muttered next. It was an unfamiliar language, not the imperial tongue. Though it wasn't translated by the possession buff, he guessed it might be some divine language.

The only familiar sound was 'Solnium', the name that the priest in the main hall had uttered when he fell to his knees upon seeing the holy sword disappear. It seemed that Harenir was saying something to the god worshipped in the Holy Empire.

The son said to be loved by God. His murmur seemed to be directed only to the god, scattering softly in the wind, but.

Only one word resonated in his mind as if engraved.

"[Purification.]"

The moment the calm voice fell like a sentence, *whoosh*— brilliant golden light poured down into the forest. The light that gathered at the tip of Harenir's vertically raised sword exploded outwards the moment he turned the sword and thrust it into the ground. As the holy power surged magnificently, his vision was dyed white.

It was as if the warm sunlight of midday enveloped the entire space. It was a golden energy that, though he hadn't even known of its existence, made him feel as if he had desperately longed for it the moment he encountered it.

The forest began to find its 'color'.

The black and white world finally bathed in complete light and began to take on fresh colors. A verdant light swirled around the ground where Harenir's holy sword was thrust, painting the grass and coloring the trees. All of it was fresh and brilliant. Even the color of the rocks seemed vivid, as if imbued with life force. An exclamation escaped his half-open mouth at the marvelous sight.

"Ah..."

This space felt almost like a 'sacred realm'.

[I-impossible! This can't be...!]

The Dium trembled and struggled violently. As if the sight of diverse life force settling into the faded black and white land was utterly disgusting, as if the scene of their conquered land disappearing was horrifying, it let out a terrible scream. *Rumble*— As if the Dium had summoned all its strength, a pitch-black energy swirled fiercely.

It was such a vicious miasma that even his body, far away, tensed up. Centered on where the Dium stood, contaminated energy spread again, and the forest slowly lost its color, but...

*Step*. The moment Harenir took one step towards the Dium, vivid greenery spread again. The storm of miasma summoned by the Dium and the brilliant light surrounding Harenir collided in opposite directions, and the result was as obvious as it was futile. All of the Dium's actions were nothing more than pitiful struggles.

With each step, each step closer, the Dium's energy scattered and its body began to crumble like ash. It lost its legs and collapsed to the ground, and its outstretched arms also disappeared.

[Ugh, aah, aaaaargh!]

"The answer to my question..."

[Ah... aah...!]

"It seems you still don't intend to answer."

It was an extremely insulting remark to make to a Dium whose mouth had already disappeared. But Harenir's eyes softened as if he was genuinely disappointed, and blood vessels bulged in the Dium's eyes as it looked up at him. Even those blood vessels being pitch black was quite alien, but... soon even the Dium's face eroded away.

Finally, they had succeeded in eliminating the Diums hiding in the Encroachment Zone and purifying the zone itself.

"Woohooo!"

"As expected of the Commander!"

While Noi and Kalterik burst into noisy cheers, he also marveled along with them.

*Is this the level of ability one needs to be called a hero?* The purification just now would have been a kind of ultimate skill or special move in game terms. Max-level self-healing ability and even a skill to purify contaminated spaces.

Usually, when a specific character shows such overpowered abilities, people ask if they're the developer's child... *That's right*. *Harenir is really called the son of God. So are these abilities natural for him?*

While secretly thinking how envious he was of him, he quickly scanned the area. The forest was gradually regaining its colors, and even the fallen zombies—the villagers—in the distance were regaining their colors as well.

Strangely, all tension dissipated from the scene. Was it relief? He had mocked the knights for fumbling in front of the zombies, but in the end, their actions had affected him too. *It's just a game scenario, after all*. After creating some distance by grumbling internally, he grabbed Noi and asked,

"Are you sure it's resolved?"

Noi, who had been about to run towards Harenir, flinched as if surprised by the unexpected touch. But upon hearing his question, he frowned deeply. As if he had received an incredibly absurd question, he raised his voice to answer.

"Of course! Haren solved everything!"

"I see..."

"You saw it just now too. The light from the holy sword...!"

He nodded slowly to Noi's continuous praise. If Noi, who played the role of the intelligent aide in this party, was this certain, the situation must surely be resolved. *Yes, if that's the case...*

*Thud*.

He collapsed face-first onto the ground. It wasn't a gradual collapse while kneeling, but a fall like a log, with his face hitting the ground first. He couldn't even stop himself from falling forward. He heard Noi scream "Aaaah?!" but now he didn't have the strength to move even a finger.

The aftereffects, which had been temporarily delayed due to the tension from the shocking scene, rushed in all at once. He had asked for at least a sound-off function if logging out was impossible, but the developer provided a fainting function instead. Even a mountain spirit would shake its head at this bastard...

His vision turned pitch black, and his consciousness was abruptly cut off.

**#Part 4. 8%**

*Blink, blink...*

He slowly opened and closed his eyelids. Somehow, the body moving according to his will felt unfamiliar, so he repeatedly lowered and raised his eyelids several times while staring at the ceiling. As he blankly looked at the dark brown ceiling of what seemed to be a wooden building.

–*Meow*.

A small sound was heard, and then a soft sensation touched his chin. Startled, he looked down.

A black cat.

No wonder his chest had felt heavy, how long had it been there? While surprised, he realized he was still in the game only upon seeing the cat. Waking up in this world was still unfamiliar.

The cat's mysterious purple eyes scanned him intently. Its gaze, seemingly checking various parts of his face, looked almost worried, which felt strange. Come to think of it, even in the Encroachment Zone, the cat had pushed him to save him from the Dium's attack.

Do familiars usually have a special bond with their masters? Or was it because of an NPC patch? It seemed to be looking after him almost like a guardian.

"Hey NPC. I went through a lot, isn't there a mid-game reward?"

–*Meow*.

"Judging by your response, you seem to understand."

-...

"Now you've suddenly stopped answering."

He tried asking the cat a few more times, but the conversation didn't continue. Both the status window and the NPC were in poor condition in this game. Feeling annoyed, he tried to grab the cat to interrogate it, but his newly awakened body lacked strength. The cat noticed his intention and ran away faster than his limp arm could move.

Regretfully watching the cat's retreating figure, he slowly got up from the bed. Judging by the inn room, it seemed they were taking a brief rest after eliminating the Encroachment Zone...

*Creak*—

He staggered to the door and barely managed to open it. It was connected to a large living room that looked like it might be for common use, and as soon as he opened the door, he came face to face with blue eyes. The only being with eyes containing a blue light more vivid than any sky he had ever seen was him, Harenir.

Harenir always wore his uniform under his robe, so the more casual attire looked unfamiliar. A flowing shirt and light gray pants. Even in such simple clothing, the beauty of his face hadn't diminished. Though his personality was rotten, he had to admit that face was exceptionally handsome.

Did God, loving his son, meticulously craft even his face when creating him? At first surprised, he soon found himself curiously observing Harenir, but unexpectedly, Harenir was also staring at him intently. Rolling his blue eyes, he slowly looked him up and down before speaking.

"...You woke up after three days."

### Chapter 17

*Ah, so that's why walking was even harder*. He had thought his joints had completely given out. Belatedly understanding why the cat had examined him earlier, he nodded slowly.

"Yeah. Because I worked hard."

He didn't forget to make a careful appeal for a success reward. By exploiting these gaps, he hoped that even Harenir might acknowledge that he had 'helped' him. Painting a bigger picture, he added,

"Blocking the zombies was especially tricky."

"...That's what happens when killed by Diums. They would have become more aggressive while staying in the Encroachment Zone."

"Right. Even when the two-horned Dium attacked, I tried not to release the necromancy..."

Excited by Harenir's agreement, he emphasized the situation again. As he pleaded that he had made an effort even in life-threatening situations, Harenir tilted his head slightly. It was a strange look.

"You. You feel a bit different from when we met before."

*Ah, right*. Wasn't Isaph the person who had thrown that strange flirtation at Harenir, saying his 'soul was pretty'? That meant they were already acquainted, had he acted too casually? As he worried that his possession might be noticed, Harenir muttered,

"Though you only said one thing and left back then..."

He barely managed to hold back a sigh of relief that was about to burst out. *Right*, there was no way a hero and villain would have spent much time together in the first place. It's bewildering that he suddenly approached and said such a thing, but anyway, an escape route had appeared.

According to the rules of possession stories, there's a cheat key to get past such suspicions.

"...A lot has happened since then."

"Hmm. Well, I heard you didn't show any resistance when you were arrested. Even when you were imprisoned, and then quickly sentenced to death."

He simply shifted his gaze to the side. Even the prison guard had sneered, saying 'You've been lying there like you were dead, now you're moving?', and Noi had also found Isaph's arrest strange, so clearly something had happened.

"So rumors even spread that you had died, and another soul might have entered that body."

*Yes, quite perceptive.*

Barely swallowing his surprise, he maintained a calm expression. He had been good at hiding emotions in his previous life, and it was even easier in this body. This body seemed to lack even facial muscles. He was sure he had a blank expression without even needing to check in a mirror.

Harenir looked curious at his reaction. The suggestion that another soul had entered a necromancer seemed quite an insulting jab, but he seemed surprised that he only remained silent in response.

"It seems you've weakened more than I thought. Judging by what I've seen so far..."

Harenir slowly trailed off. His staggering and dry heaving must have been confirmed as not an act by the three-day fainting spell. Yes, even though this body had weakened so much, he had still struggled and helped in the Encroachment Zone...!

"However."

Harenir, who had uttered that one word, smiled slightly.

"I heard that your confession was 'I tried to extract the souls of the Klam villagers and absorb their essence to recover my body...' I didn't know such a thing was possible with necromancy..."

He marveled as if it was truly impressive. Of course, even a passing cat would know that admiration wasn't meant in a positive sense. Moreover, he said this was 'confessed', so it must have been blurted out after the arrest... *Hah*, he really did deserve a quick execution. It was a wonder his head hadn't fallen off on the spot.

"In that body's condition, it must have been hard to even kill the villagers, but you tortured and murdered them to the end, yet your scheme ultimately failed, it seems. Ah, or is controlling them now part of the process of absorbing their essence?"

"..."

"I acknowledge that you helped in the Encroachment Zone, but don't try to take credit for it."

*...Sigh*. It seemed that appealing about how hard he had worked while controlling the victims of the Klam Massacre as undead was a bad move. Looking back, it was obvious. The hero's acknowledgment had been given surprisingly quickly, but he realized that the quest couldn't possibly be completed with just this.

He didn't even feel rebellious at the criticism he had just heard. He just felt newly disgusted with Isaph, and faintly regretted that his ploy had failed because of him, as he turned his head to the side.

"You can rest a bit more until you recover."

Whether it was consideration, or a favor given thinking that 'those' undead would be summoned less if his body recovered, he accepted it readily. Having nothing to say, he just wanted to avoid the situation. Though he wasn't sleepy after having slept for so long, being alone in the room seemed better.

So he tried to close the door quickly, but...

*Grumble grumble*.

A sound he didn't want to believe came from him rumbled from his stomach. It wasn't even a small sound. Before he could even think about how to react, his stomach growled loudly again. Come to think of it, the only food he had eaten since waking up in this world was... the potion he had in Noi's office.

"...We'll provide food."

"...Okay."

Though he hadn't been in the habit of eating regular meals originally, he suddenly felt extreme hunger as soon as he realized how long he had been fasting. Plus, hadn't he used up a tremendous amount of energy?

*Bang!*

Just then, the door opened and the other companions poured in. As soon as Noi saw him, he shouted, "Oh, you're finally awake?!", while Mela looked him over briefly, and Kalterik flinched in surprise.

"Ugh, I thought you were an evil spirit..."

The appearance of Isaph, who had collapsed for three days and just gotten up, must have been quite miserable. The clothes under his robe were all pitch black too.

He suddenly understood why they hadn't worried about Isaph when entering the Encroachment Zone. With pale skin and wearing only black clothes, and even his lips lacking color, it wouldn't be strange to mistake him for an already contaminated person.

"Go wash up. I'll order some food."

He obediently followed Harenir's words. Now that he was aware of his hunger, he could think of nothing but food, and thanks to that, he didn't find the bathroom of this other world unfamiliar at all and came out quickly after washing. The bathroom here was even larger than the cramped one he had experienced in his studio apartment in his previous life.

However, he had naturally assumed he would receive food like rations in his room, so he was puzzled when no food came even after waiting for a while, and opened the door to step out. The smell of food was coming from outside, in the common area. And there, on the round table, lots of food was laid out.

All his companions were seated in chairs, with just one seat empty.

"...Wasn't it supposed to be brought to the room separately?"

"Now that you're awake, we need to discuss what comes next."

Harenir answered in a calm tone, but he felt very disgruntled. Why are they suddenly sharing plans? It was in contrast to their previous attitude of dragging him to the Encroachment Zone before explaining anything. Was it because he had proven his ability this time and hadn't lied, that they were including him in the conversation?

Feeling somewhat unfamiliar with the situation, he stood at a distance, just staring at the table, when Kalterik shouted loudly,

"I don't want to eat with someone like you either!"

His feelings must have been clearly visible on his face. In truth, it was more that he felt awkward rather than disliking it, but if he had to choose between liking and disliking, it was closer to disliking.

He had rarely eaten with anyone before.

In his previous life, people had avoided him, and even if someone approached, they had ulterior motives. He had declined to be with those whose intentions to use his ability to see ghosts for their own gain were obvious, and had avoided such situations himself.

Perhaps it had been the same for Isaph. So his hesitant steps weren't just due to the influence of his previous life. Feeling awkward for no reason, he inwardly defended himself as he deliberately approached the table as nonchalantly as possible and sat down. It was uncomfortable that it happened to be next to Kalterik, but...

Reading his expression, Kalterik frowned deeply.

"I will absolutely never thank you. The undead you controlled were victims of the massacre! It's obvious that you weakened yourself by researching some suspicious sorcery..."

"I never asked for your thanks..."

Kalterik faltered at his muttered words. Having already realized during his earlier conversation with Harenir that quest success was still far off, Kalterik's words only fanned his disappointment. Absently fiddling with the utensils in his hand, he quietly murmured,

"Your gratitude means nothing to me."

The only thing that held meaning for him was the true acknowledgment of the hero. Something that now seemed very far off.

As he moved his fingers with an increasingly troubled feeling, he heard Noi across from him inhale sharply with a "Heek." Somehow, even Kalterik, who should have flared up immediately, remained quiet, so he raised his gaze in puzzlement... and only then realized that the utensil he had been fiddling with all this time was a knife.

*Ah.*

It would indeed look strange, even eerie, for a person exuding a gloomy aura like an evil spirit to mutter while holding a knife.

[Q. Then what has meaning for Isaph?

A. Your soul.]

It seemed like the kind of atmosphere where such a question and answer might be exchanged.

Even though he was said to be weakened now, he had once been a being treated like a calamity that even the Holy Empire couldn't control.

"W-w-what did you say...!"

"Kalterik. Let's refrain from unnecessary commotion."

Belatedly, Kalterik jumped to his feet. As if ashamed of having been momentarily tense, he reacted even more strongly, but sat down immediately at Harenir's words. Though the sight was amusing, he carefully hid his expression.

He felt he had figured out a way to deal with Kalterik, at least a little. Of course, since he was a holy knight who despised necromancers, using it often would backfire, but for now, the analysis showed that a calm response worked much better with him.

### Chapter 18

*Clatter...*

The meal began only after the commotion had passed. Unfamiliar with the food of this other world, he carefully followed how his companions ate, only after observing them. Though wary of the unfamiliar appearances, once in his mouth, the tastes were mostly familiar.

This was potato, that was chicken. This vegetable he didn't know, but it had a texture similar to spinach, and so on. The spices were unfamiliar, but it was edible enough in its own way.

As he slowly chewed one bite at a time, Kalterik glanced at him and said,

"You're eating like it's your first time."

"Isaph was locked up in prison, so he probably hasn't eaten for a while."

Unexpectedly, it was Noi who took his side. He even added an explanation that the prison where Isaph had been confined was known for its poor conditions, causing Kalterik to close his mouth sheepishly. He had been grumbling to himself from the start, conscious of Harenir's warning.

The hostility in Noi's eyes when looking at him was less than before. Previously, whenever their eyes met, he would flinch and then glare in response, but now he just slightly turned his head away.

It couldn't be that he was grateful for blocking the zombies in the Encroachment Zone, as the identity of the undead Isaph controlled would still bother him. If he had to guess... it was because he kept staggering, dry heaving, and collapsing that the hostility had been withdrawn. He must have judged that with such a pathetic body, he couldn't cause any mischief even without being closely watched.

Though it was fortunate that conflicts had decreased, he couldn't shake off a somewhat miserable feeling...

*Gulp*, after drinking some water, Noi lightly began to speak.

"We've been observing the Encroachment Zone, and the purification has been progressing smoothly for three days. It will probably be completely purified within two weeks."

"...Wasn't it all purified that day?"

"Do you know how vast the Encroachment Zone is?!"

*Well*, the area of the forest he had surveyed with souls was enormous. It wasn't a forest in the concept of a walking trail, but one that should be understood as a scale where people frequently went missing. It seemed that from the point where Harenir had infused the purifying energy, the forest was gradually regaining its color.

"Still, the fact that it's being purified at all is truly amazing. It's something no one has ever succeeded in doing before! Perhaps Solnium has given the hero the mission to eliminate all the Encroachment Zones. There was a reason why God bestowed that grace!"

As Noi exclaimed in an emotional tone, Kalterik quickly agreed.

"It's the grace that only a true hero receives. Throughout the empire's history, those who have received grace can be counted on one hand!"

A hint of boastfulness mixed into his loud voice. The glance he cast at him seemed to proclaim that the superior he served was such a great being, and therefore, someone like him was nothing.

Mela also quietly added a word.

"The grace called the Sacred Realm..."

They were all grandiose titles. The son loved by God, the Holy Knight bestowed with grace, the being who spreads the Sacred Realm and purifies an area. He even bore the title of the Indomitable Knight whose wounds healed quickly. No wonder his companions might become Harenir's fanatics.

He mumbled while chewing on whole wheat bread.

"God's making one person work too hard."

"..."

"..."

"..."

*...I’m screwed.*

The words had slipped out unconsciously. It gave the impression that by giving such overpowered abilities to just one person, it was rather pushing all responsibility onto him and driving him. Having been an atheist in his previous life, seeing these amazing abilities didn't immediately create religious faith. Acknowledging the existence of a god and revering one were different things.

The atmosphere turned cold with his remark. Though his voice had surely been quiet, his dining companions happened to be excellent knights and a fairy who didn't miss even the smallest sound. Everyone looked at him.

*W-what should I do?* Explaining that he was an atheist in front of them would only make things worse. As he panicked, unable to even chew the bread in his mouth, suddenly a soft laugh was heard from across the table.

It was close to a small chuckle, like air escaping, but surprisingly, it was Harenir who had burst into laughter. A faint hint of amusement settled in the blue eyes looking at him.

"Now that we're certain the purification is effective, I'm thinking we should continue eliminating Encroachment Zones like this."

Harenir spoke in a calm voice. Though grateful for the action that reconnected the abruptly cut atmosphere, he didn't understand the content.

"...Now that you've confirmed Diums are alive, shouldn't you return to the Order?"

Wasn't confirming the Diums' survival the first objective? Now that they had witnessed Diums alive in the Encroachment Zone, the Order would have to believe that fact. Although that body had vanished in the purifying light, there were enough people to testify.

"We only discovered single-horned Diums. There was only one two-horned one."

"...?"

"I want to investigate more thoroughly. Whether the Diums that luckily survived were only gathered in the southern Encroachment Zone, or if they're hiding elsewhere too. And whether they were revived, or if they never died in the first place."

The more he heard, the more confused he became. So, to investigate properly, shouldn't they inform the Order of the current situation and form an official search party?

That Dium was said to have brought about the Great Catastrophe in the past.

Was it because the hero's presence was so significant that they wanted to move cautiously? Considering the possibility that only small fry had survived in hiding, perhaps the goal was to find out more certainly to prevent unnecessary fear.

Though there were still unclear parts, he had a feeling that even if he asked Harenir, he wouldn't get an answer. He'd probably just say again that he never said he'd answer. He should be grateful that he had shared this much.

As he kept his mouth shut, reading the atmosphere, Harenir smiled slightly.

"And ultimately, the goal is to check if 'that' might be awakening."

"What?! Commander, that's...!"

"Haren! Surely, that's impossible!"

Kalterik and Noi were shocked. Even though he had referred to it with the pronoun 'that', they immediately understood and denied it, and even Mela shook her head.

*Hmm*, contextually, it probably referred to the Dium leader. It could possibly be a successor, but considering the others' reactions and the danger level according to the number of horns, it was more likely to be the leader. Was the reason Noi had been so certain that they had 'perfectly dealt with the Diums' because the event of taking down the leader had been so intense? Usually, when you take out the head, it's easier to eliminate the underlings.

*Ah*, another flag was being raised.

Though still faint, he couldn't shake off this ominous feeling that made his chest cold. Amidst the noisy atmosphere, he quietly tore and ate his bread alone before casually asking,

"So. Are we going to the next Encroachment Zone now?"

Harenir's eyes widened. He seemed quite pleased with his behavior of calmly asking about future plans in a situation where everyone else was denying the possibility. He smiled slightly, his eyes crinkling.

"Why do you ask that?"

"...What do you mean? To confirm according to your goals, we need to go to the Encroachment Zone."

"You sighed just before. What's bothering you?"

*When did he see that?* He met Harenir's gaze reluctantly. Somehow, it felt like he was being led in questioning.

"...I was wondering if we could continue searching the Encroachment Zones with just this number of people. Since it seems likely we'll encounter Diums in the next Encroachment Zone too."

It's a rule of games that the path to the boss gets increasingly difficult. Now that they've cleared phase 1 of the raid, phase 2 will naturally be much trickier. But Harenir didn't seem to have any intention of returning to the Order, so he could only see his own hardships ahead. Though Harenir had said he only wanted him for the role of a guide, as long as they entered the Encroachment Zone together, he would inevitably be in danger too.

At his answer, Harenir's smile deepened. The smile on that incredibly holy face was enough to evoke non-existent religious faith just by looking at it, but somehow, the back of his neck felt cold. Why was he smiling? There was no way he could interpret positively being smiled at by someone who disliked him.

This was clearly an ominous sign.

"That's right. We'll need some aids. Since most magical items don't work properly in the Encroachment Zone, I'm thinking of obtaining some holy relics."

"...From the temple?"

"No. That's impossible since we can't use our original identities. Not only do I not want to draw unnecessary attention, but what I want isn't in the temple to begin with."

He blinked blankly. One was a hero reported dead, the other two knights had fled the Order's interrogation with the excuse of following the hero's footsteps, and Noi had resigned on his way out of the holy city. It was for the reason that he needed rest, unable to overcome the sorrow of losing the hero he had been with since childhood, or something like that.

Then, the way to obtain holy relics from somewhere other than the temple...

"I'm planning to go to the first emperor's tomb. A place filled with relics and holy objects imbued with the glory of when the Holy Empire of Solares was first established."

...*A tomb?* Though it was amusing to see holy knights becoming grave robbers, he was thinking that at least the terrain of a tomb seemed easier compared to the Encroachment Zone.

"And that tomb, as you know, is in the sky."

*Huh?*

What did he say? No, why suddenly a sky island after a misty forest? Why was the map difficulty jumping like this? He wasn't the only one surprised; Kalterik and Mela also looked at him in shock, and Noi was astonished.

"But until now, no one has been able to approach that place...!"

"That's right. But since it's a 'tomb', won't Isaph be able to make a path?"

*Don't talk about finding a tomb like it's my hometown.*

He felt extremely wronged, but what was even more bewildering was that with Harenir's answer, the other three all seemed to understand. Was the tomb Isaph's house?

### Chapter 19

He had just learned about the existence of that tomb! And this terrible game didn't even provide him with a minimap, so how was he supposed to find the way? There were no special items given only to the player, and not even hidden skills had appeared yet!

Regardless of his internal struggles, Harenir smiled gently, his eyes crinkling, and spoke. In an extremely kind and affectionate tone.

"You'll probably have to work hard both in the process of entering the tomb and after entering. So eat a lot."

*Ah*, so that's why he was invited to dine with them.

Behind the dejected realization, he felt a surge of indignation. Usually, this kind of thing would be worth a separate quest, but they just included it under the theme of 'Help the Hero'. He had vowed to press reject the moment the quest appeared, but. *Terrible game. Fucking terrible game*.

He dejectedly tore into the meat as a self-reward. Sadly, it was delicious.

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They traveled by carriage for a long time from the village near the southern Encroachment Zone. They had to change vehicles several times to avoid leaving traces.

They mostly used cargo wagons, and though he suffered from the uncomfortable ride at first, he soon adapted. The long journey could have been boring, but he just kept sleeping, so the days passed quickly. As if the fainting spell had been some kind of catalyst, he had become much sleepier since that day.

"...That bastard is still alive, right?"

Even Kalterik was concerned about his endless sleeping. He dozed like a sick chicken, and when he was awake, he just blankly stroked the cat. Though he knew it was an NPC, in his drowsy state, it was difficult to push away the cat that had naturally curled up in his lap. As if addicted to the warm heat, he repeatedly stroked the cat's back until he dozed off again.

After experiencing the scenery changing every time he opened his eyes a few times, he finally heard the news that they had arrived. The scene he saw as he staggered out of the carriage was markedly different from the previous village.

This place looked like a city.

Tall buildings stood densely packed, the roads were better maintained, and there were many people walking around the streets. It had the bustling atmosphere unique to prosperous areas. The previous village had seemed quite empty, perhaps because people had left due to its proximity to the southern Encroachment Zone.

"Here, everyone take one!"

As soon as they got off the carriage, Noi, who had quickly gone somewhere, handed each of them a round plate. Two thin diamonds embedded in the center of the palm-sized silver disc sparkled slightly. As he looked down at it curiously, Kalterik exclaimed in admiration.

"You brought silver badges? Grade 2 is just right. You managed to avoid the mercenary guild's surveillance well."

"Hehe. Who do you think I am!"

Noi raised his nose proudly. *Hmm*, so these were the mercenary badges used in this world. In a situation where they needed to travel to various regions, there was no better identity than this. In other fictional works too, wasn't it common to disguise oneself as a mercenary when hiding one's identity?

Names were also engraved on the back of the intricately made silver badges.

"Be careful when calling each other outside too. Sir Kalterik will be 'Derik', Lady Mela will be 'Mel', and since my name is common, I'll just be 'Noi'..."

He peeked at Harenir's badge. A large light shape was engraved in the center, which, considering Noi's reverence, was probably a higher grade. Grade 1 silver badge. As expected, Noi explained that since the knights might habitually call him 'Commander', they had registered him as the commander of this fake mercenary group. He had even meticulously prepared the documents.

However, the name engraved on the back of his silver badge was 'Haren'. Wait, wasn't that the nickname Noi was still using?

"Is it okay to use that name? Won't we be found out?"

"There are already plenty of mercenaries named 'Haren', so it's fine! Most people don't use their real names when registering as mercenaries, and it's extremely common to name themselves after their idols! How many people do you think want to be like the hero who is respected by all citizens of the empire? But since the name 'Harenir' is revered like a divine name and no one dares to use it exactly, they try to use something similar instead."

He was saying that many people used the alias 'Haren' out of respect for Harenir, wanting to become a great hero like him. There were even survey results showing that 'Haren' had become the most common name given to children born in the empire after he received His grace...

He nodded at Noi's explanation. It wasn't a bad strategy. Especially since there were even people who dyed their hair blonde and deliberately carried white swords trying to imitate the hero, they were hiding among them. The real one hiding among the fake Harens.

Even if someone was suspicious, well, they'd probably just think, 'That guy really copied the hero a lot'.

"So when I registered your name, they even sneered, saying 'Is he copying that guy?'"

"...Huh?"

"Ah, I registered you as 'Saiph'. They found it amusing to put names imitating both the hero and the villain in the same mercenary group. After all, you're quite famous too."

He blinked blankly. Were there people who imitated Isaph's name even though he was pointed at as unrighteous in the Holy Empire? He was about to ask why, but a very disgruntled realization came to him. Was it like a black dragon of the left hand, darkness of darkness kind of feeling?

Until his arrest, he had been a being feared and avoided by everyone, and even evaded the empire's pursuit while boldly using necromancy. Just the kind of person that people with such tastes would want to imitate. *Ugh*, he rubbed his arms vigorously as goosebumps rose.

Just then, conversations could be heard from various places.

"Hey, have you heard the story? They say 'that guy' has escaped..."

"How long has it been since that rumor spread!"

It seemed that not only the hero's death but also the news of Isaph's escape had spread, causing a commotion. Judging by Noi's quiet mutter of "The temple failed to suppress the rumors...", it seemed they had tried to quell the story initially.

They had finally caught Isaph, who had been evading capture and running around, thrown him in prison, and even sentenced him to death, but he had disappeared with the tower exploding the day before his execution. He wasn't just an ordinary death row inmate, but a being referred to with the modifier 'that', so it was natural for the empire's prestige to fall.

Moreover...

"I'm telling you, it was suspicious from the moment he was caught so easily. Wasn't he caught on purpose from the start? And now even the holy sword Piarus has disappeared!"

"Are you saying he deliberately got imprisoned in the capital to steal that holy sword? Come on, wouldn't that mean he predicted the hero's death!"

"The hero had left to scout several areas for a while, so he might have guessed then, or maybe he even set up the whole thing aiming for the holy sword. It's 'that' guy after all. So he might have just..."

"Oh, come on! I believe the hero isn't dead!"

He listened with interest to the conversation between two middle-aged men at a nearby shop. Just how great of a villain did the people here consider Isaph to be? In reality, Isaph had probably been lying on the floor, groaning at that time.

Inwardly sneering, he walked nonchalantly like Harenir had a few days ago. When the southern village was in an uproar over the hero's death, he had moved proudly through the crowd, so he imitated him as well, but...

"..."

Somehow, people's gazes began to converge on him one by one. His boldness yielded a completely different result from Harenir's boldness. Suspicion spread in the eyes of people looking at the figure in a pitch-black robe with the hood pulled down to cover even his nose, accompanied by a black cat.

*What, is there really a formula of 'black robe + black cat = Isaph'?*

"It seems we'll have to hide you after all."

"I'm already hidden..."

Harenir approached him and spoke in a tired tone, causing him to protest embarrassedly, but he agreed that his judgment was reasonable.

"As long as I'm not suspected of being me, right?"

Grumbling, he quickly scanned the nearby street vendors. In fact, simply wearing a robe of a different color would solve the problem, but having always worn black clothes in his previous life too, that didn't appeal to him.

So he found a new method to replace the robe.

"Hah! Isn't it creepy to treat a familiar like a real pet?"

He picked up a light purple ribbon from a street vendor's stand and tied it around the cat's neck. Ignoring Kalterik's sneers, he was trying to tie the ribbon carefully in his own way when, unexpectedly, the cat struggled violently.

*–Meow! Meoooow!*

"What's wrong? Stay still."

*–Mrrreow!*

*Why is it making a fuss now when it's been mostly quiet until now? Are you trying to maintain the concept of being Isaph's familiar?* It even abandoned its usual meowing and struggled noisily. It's a much more cat-like sound, but he was bewildered, wondering if it had been acting all this time.

Still, since it didn't scratch with its claws out, he stubbornly tied the ribbon on the cat. In fact, the cat's dislike made him want to do it more. It was a small revenge against the NPC that had forcibly assigned him a quest.

"Oh, that might work in its own way."

Noi marveled, saying it was exploiting a gap in perception. He said that since Isaph's familiar had never been seen decorated like this before, it would reduce suspicious glances.

### Chapter 20

Noi, who had paid for the ribbon, asked softly. Though he knew this cat was a familiar, his gaze seemed captivated by its cute appearance.

"Does this cat have a name?"

*...I don't know either.*

However, for some reason, he didn't want to give that answer. He could have just said it didn't have one, but then he'd probably receive disapproving looks, thinking 'You didn't even name it because it's a familiar?' While that was the kind of look Isaph would deserve, and he was used to such looks, he didn't want to invite them unnecessarily.

And in fact, among cats, he especially liked black cats. In his previous life, the few moments of luck he had always involved black cats. For someone who had no family, black cats were almost like family. In the backyard of the orphanage, and even at school...

Suddenly recalling old memories, he impulsively opened his mouth.

"...En."

Since the letters that appeared in the status window were H.N, he took 'En' from it. 'Aitch' was five letters, and he didn't want to put in the effort to call it that long, so he chose two letters. It even overlapped with the first letter of NPC, didn't it?

-...

At that moment, the cat stopped struggling. It looked up at him quietly as if it had understood his words, which gave him a strange feeling. Though it was a simple name, it felt odd to give a name to an NPC. After all, once you name something, you tend to get attached to it.

*Tap tap*, he checked once more that the ribbon was tied securely before turning his gaze away.

"Is this okay now?"

He asked, looking at Harenir, who regarded him with a subtle expression. Was giving a name to a familiar and tying a cute ribbon on it inconsistent with Isaph's character? Was it out of character? As he was pondering this internally, Harenir shrugged.

"Always be careful not to draw unnecessary attention. In that body's current state, it doesn't seem like you could escape as well as before."

It was an absurd warning to hear from the very person who had elevated Isaph's notoriety. But if he were discovered, there was a possibility that the others would be implicated as well, and Isaph's abilities were essential for searching the Encroachment Zone. He nodded obediently.

The companions seemed very familiar with this city.

They moved without checking a map, and despite the complex streets of the bustling area, their steps showed no hesitation. Given that the streets were full of people and robed mercenaries were a common sight, he wondered if this was a place where many travelers stayed...

Based on their destination, this place was likely related to the first emperor. It was said that all sorts of treasures were buried with him in his tomb, but since it was 'floating' in the air and no one could approach it, there probably wasn't a place that stimulated adventurers' exploration desires more. Old buildings were noticeable throughout the city; perhaps this was the capital at the time of the empire's founding?

As he connected various deductions, he inwardly heaved a deep sigh. He had heard of the technique of deliberately limiting information to increase immersion in games, but wasn't this too much? How was he supposed to find a way into the tomb when he was barely figuring out the city...

Just then, *ding—* a blue light appeared before his eyes.

**—------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------**

**Rus, the first capital of the empire.**

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**Objects cherished by their users have a part of their soul imbued in them.**

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**If you succeed in summoning that soul, you can obtain clues.**

**—------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------**

Was that possible with necromancy too? He was pleased that his guess about the city was correct, and while surprised at this application of necromancy, he was also very bewildered. There had never been such an informative notification like this before.

To begin with, the status window itself rarely appeared. It had only shown up when giving the quest at the start, and then when using skills. Even those skills were provided without proper explanations, just giving action keys recklessly.

As he read the text in a daze, he suddenly had a lightning realization. Could it be that if he got closer to the cat, that is, if he built up affinity with the NPC, it would provide more information? Had the affinity increased because he had just given it a name?! Was that why it had been sleeping next to him all this time?!

Surprised, he looked down at the cat, and their eyes met exactly. A strange light swirled in its purple eyes, as if it had been watching him from the start.

Feeling elated, he tried to hug the cat—no, En—tightly, but it quickly ran away. *Whoosh!* It walked daintily on top of a distant wall, far beyond his reach.

As he regretfully watched its retreating figure, they arrived in front of an inn.

"We plan to move at dawn, so rest until then. Everyone's tired from traveling by carriage."

At Harenir's gentle explanation, he tilted his head back to check the sky. The sun was still high. According to the information the status window had just given, it seemed he needed to summon the souls imbued in objects, so they probably had to raid a museum or ruins at dawn. The companions would also need to enter the sky island avoiding outside attention, so they had no choice but to move at a quiet time.

As soon as they arrived at the room and put down their luggage, Harenir turned around.

"I have some business to attend to, I'll be back around midnight."

"Yes! Have a safe trip!"

Kalterik answered loudly. Harenir gave him one last glance, and even without words, the message 'stay put' was conveyed. Having already sat down on the sofa as if lying down as soon as he entered the room, he didn't bother to answer. His whole body conveyed 'I don't have the energy for that'.

Even after Harenir left, the other three bustled around the room. Noi took out various items from his bag and organized them neatly, while the two knights polished their swords with oiled cloths. How were they not tired after traveling by carriage for so long...

As he watched this curiously, at some point he started dozing off, and in the meantime, some conversation must have passed because the three were preparing to go out. Noi came up to him and suggested,

"Isaph, you come with us too."

"...It's bothersome. I'm not going to run away anyway."

The reason they probably wanted to take him along was the possibility of him escaping. Wouldn't it be a big problem if he disappeared while the commander was gone?

But he had no reason to run away at all. Not only because of the quest, but also because of the leash around his neck right now. *Tap tap*, he tapped the collar on his neck and answered indifferently.

"Even if I ran away, I'd just get caught by the hero, so why bother? It's a waste of energy."

"You bastard, even if you were brought here forcibly, aren't you being too uncooperative?!"

But Kalterik suddenly became angry. *What's this about?* Wouldn't it be better if he just stayed quietly by himself? Wasn't it uncomfortable to be with Isaph?

As he looked up in confusion, Noi stopped him with a troubled expression. A few days ago, Harenir had specifically told him and Kalterik not to cause unnecessary commotion.

"He must be confident in his necromancy. He probably judged there was no need to gather information..."

"...Huh? Where are you going now?"

His attention was suddenly piqued. Information?

"We were planning to go to the historical hall. We thought we might find clues about how to enter the tomb, or information about the tomb's terrain, by examining the records of the first emperor..."

"I'll go."

He quickly got up. *You should have said that from the start!* Places like this historical hall or library were often quite important in games. Not only could you find small clues, but sometimes even crucial strategies were hidden there. It was a very welcome place for him, who had been struggling due to lack of information.

While information about the current empire might be limited in the first emperor's historical hall, that was better than nothing. Noi looked at him very bewilderedly as he suddenly showed enthusiasm, but he urged them to leave quickly.

[History of Rus]

Following his companions, he arrived at a magnificent building. The tower, so tall that it was difficult to take in at a glance even with his head tilted back, seemed to be the highest in the city. Perhaps it was built so high to commemorate the first emperor's achievements.

As a building tracing the empire's history, the exhibition hall near the entrance was open to everyone, but access became more strictly limited the deeper one went inside.

"If we had our original identities, we could have gone in deeper..."

Noi muttered regretfully, but he thought this was just right. Not only could they view the displayed items like in a museum, but there was also a library inside. He had never been so glad to see books before. Did people really change after nearly dying and coming back to life? He had actually died, but anyway, he walked around happily.

Even with history books, the more recently published ones tend to contain more stories about modern times. Following this assumption, he looked for the cleanest and newest-looking books. It was meaningless to check the publication year, as he didn't know the imperial calendar. His tricks were only increasing since coming here.

Just then, he saw a librarian inserting a very shiny, seemingly brand-new book into a bookshelf. He immediately approached and asked,

"Is that a new release?"

"Eeeek!"

The librarian was terribly startled. While a sudden approach would be surprising, after checking his appearance, the librarian's face turned pale.

Suspecting the gloomy figure in a black robe, he lightly nudged En, who was somehow beside him, with his toe. Though he didn't know when it had arrived, he had gotten used to it suddenly appearing and disappearing. That too was very cat-like.

*–...Meow.*

At the cute cat sound En made, the librarian's face softened. Seeing the cat with a light purple ribbon tied around its neck, which definitely didn't look like a familiar, the librarian even smiled.

Somehow, En seemed a bit embarrassed.

### Chapter 21

"Yes. It was released recently."

Regardless, he welcomed the librarian's answer. He quickly took the book and approached the table where his companions were gathered. They gave him very strange looks at his proactive behavior, but he ignored them and opened the book.

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**The Day Rus Opened**

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The title was quite meaningful. *Flip, flip,* as he turned the crisp pages, the first passage caught his eye.

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**In the beginning, this land was covered in darkness. When Solnium, taking pity on the desolate earth, gestured, spears poured down from the sky like beams of light, splitting the darkness, and from where those spears struck, the land embraced life...**

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*Ugh.*

He quickly turned the pages, grimacing. Even when playing games, he tended to skip world-building explanations, so he flipped through rapidly. Thinking he should read it since he had possessed someone, he went back, but after reading a few lines about spears and light, he felt drowsy and gave up. It was too much for someone without religious faith. What he wanted to see wasn't mythology, but something more practical.

Then, finding an illustration on the next page, his expression brightened. This was it. History books must always be accompanied by illustrations. It's absolutely not because he liked picture books.

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**The First Emperor's Tomb (presumed)**

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An island floating in a sky full of clouds was visible. He curiously examined the black and white illustration, delicately drawn with charcoal. From the moment he heard the explanation that the tomb was in the air, he had expected that not just the tomb alone, but the entire area would have risen...

Reading the explanation on the side, he learned that the first emperor had ordered a large tomb to be built during his lifetime. It was said to have been created with many architects working together, and its form was not a common burial mound, but closer to a temple.

"He's using quite a large tomb..."

He muttered silently as he turned the page. *Well*, the size of the tomb symbolizing power was a universal thing across all eras.

The first emperor had created a vast garden by hollowing out the center of the huge building. The coffin was placed in the very center of the garden, where the sunlight shone brightest, and the funeral was successfully completed, but that night, the tomb rose. The eyewitness accounts of those who saw the commotion in the deep dawn were recorded together. It was shocking, it was marvelous, and so on.

The exact reason why the tomb rose was not clear. There were speculations that the emperor had given a task to the imperial citizens, and rumors circulated that God loved him so much that He called him to heaven. *Hmm, if that's really true, isn't it a bit scary? God being so obsessive.*

Adding a still rather atheistic comment, he continued reading the book, and on the next page, his gaze was suddenly fixed.

"The first hero..."

The first emperor was the first hero of the Holy Empire. It was said that when humans gathered to face the rampant demon race and monsters, the holy sword Piarus descended from the sky to the one who stood at the forefront.

A pure white sword that cuts down all that is unrighteous. It exerts greater power the more evil the opponent is, and only shines in the hands of one who truly has the qualification. That's why after driving out the demon race, the sword's owner was elevated to emperor.

*Oh, isn't this the sword Harenir uses?*

It was a sword with much older and more overpowered abilities than he had expected. A sword that doesn't get contaminated by any impurities, doesn't break, and emits light according to its owner's will. With such a good holy relic already in his possession, what else could Harenir be looking for?

Coincidentally, the book also contained information about Harenir, the current hero who possessed Piarus. *Ah*, this is why he had looked for the newest publication. He happily read the text.

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**The Fifth Hero, Harenir.**

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**He became a holy knight at twelve, and at his coming-of-age ceremony at eighteen, he received grace from Solnium. Grasping the power said to be given only to those with the true caliber of a hero, he rose to the position of Commander of the Holy Order of Sidon in one breath. Everyone in the holy city revered him.**

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**The name of the grace received by the hero is 'Sacred Realm'. When the hero proclaims the Sacred Realm, all unrighteous things in the area are purified at once, which, considering that there are still contaminated lands called Encroachment Zones in the empire today, is an incredibly special ability...**

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As the book was focused on Rus, it seemed to have written about modern times as briefly as possible, but the author's intense fanaticism was palpable.

Judging by Harenir's current appearance, he was at most in his late 20s. He had been revered as a hero from an incredibly early age. He became a holy knight at the youngest age in history, and after becoming commander, he even traveled around the empire doing relief work. Newly realizing the influence he held, he lowered his gaze.

A short explanation was attached below the word Encroachment Zone.

**—------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------**

**The Dium are a calamity that suddenly appeared in the world. They emerged when the long war between humans and the demon race ended in human victory and a peaceful era had arrived, turning the entire continent into ruins. Countless people died and numerous kingdoms were erased. It had only been a few months since then when the Dium appeared.**

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**The Order called them the 'new demon race' and speculated that they were weapons created by the demon race that had been defeated in the human-demon war.**

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**But when it had been a year since the Dium ran rampant, the Holy Knight Commander of that era stepped forward and perfectly dealt with them. From that day on, the Dium disappeared from the world and peace returned.**

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"...That's it?"

*What?* Wasn't the explanation suddenly too abbreviated? Was it because the content about the Dium wasn't the main topic, or was it because everyone knew the truth so there was no need to describe it? With a subtle sense of dissonance, he traced the words with his fingertip.

Should he be glad that he at least learned about the Dium? If his companions had later changed to calling them the new demon race, he wouldn't have known at all.

He continued reading the book, but there wasn't any particularly helpful information. He only found out how cruel the Dium were, and how much the holy knights struggled to deal with the humans who had died and become black and white zombies because of them.

In the past, they had just cut down those zombies to kill them. The state of the corpses was so miserable that they gathered them all and burned them. *Hmm*, if it became known that Harenir's purification ability could restore color to zombies too, there might be quite a reaction in various ways. *But it's not like that grace could be used unlimitedly*...

*Flip, flip*, as he turned the pages, he started to get bored and looked up. Two hours had already passed, but his companions were still engrossed in their research. Even though the commander wasn't right in front of them, they were all working so hard wanting to be helpful to him.

After watching them curiously for a while, he stood up. He headed towards the bookshelf to find another interesting book, but even that became tiresome, so he quietly moved towards the outside. Fortunately, no one noticed, so he thought he might as well take a walk.

This historical hall was said to have been built on the 'site' where the first emperor's tomb had been located. They had refilled part of the hollowed-out land and erected a building commemorating the emperor, so if you went straight out behind the building, you could see the remaining site.

It would probably be an empty land with nothing there, but that itself would be evidence of the legend. He moved, guessing that the crowd he had seen heading to the back of the building before entering the historical hall was a procession trying to see that relic. There would be many adventurers as well as tourists or pilgrims.

It seemed they would be going there at dawn, so should he look around in advance as a preview? He made a plausible excuse for not wanting to read books and moved. His steps were light.

However, after several dozen minutes, he had to stop abruptly.

"Where am I?"

He had lost his way.

He had been following the arrows inside the historical hall, but at some point, the path seemed to twist, and he ended up outside the building. He was surprised for a moment but believed this was the path leading to the tomb site and continued walking... but where he arrived was in front of a gloomy alley.

A narrow, dark alley that one might see in a corner of the old town. The sun was just setting, making the gloomy atmosphere even stronger.

*...What is this?* Does Isaph's body have a tendency to be drawn to gloomy places? Though bewildered, he decided to retrace his steps. He needed to return before his companions found his absence suspicious. He could already hear Kalterik's loud voice ringing in his ears.

However, just as he was about to turn around, *thud!* He bumped shoulders with someone.

"Ah, I'm late! Why are you blocking the way...!"

While the other person was shouting irritably, he staggered, leaning against the wall. This paper doll-like body was about to collapse ridiculously just from a shoulder collision. He was panting, feeling like he had almost been thrown off, when suddenly his arm was grabbed.

"What! Are you a follower too?!"

"...?"

"Black robe and black cat! You're 'His' follower, right?"

*...Huh?*

He belatedly checked the other person. A boy with a youthful impression, slightly shorter than him, was wearing a black robe with the hood pulled down deeply. The boy's eyes lit up as he confirmed En beside him.

"Wow, it's even a completely black cat! Cats are hard to tame, and you even matched the color, that's amazing. The guy who said he just brought one last time only had cat legs! Everyone will be jealous, right?"

"What... what would they be jealous of...?"

"You know what? They say one of 'His' closest aides is coming to this meeting. Someone who actually communicates with 'Him'...!"

He just blinked at the words pouring out like a machine gun. *What is this about? 'Him'?*

In front of him, who had mentally established the formula 'black robe + black cat = Isaph', mentioning that combination and calling him a follower only led to a very chilling imagination...

"So at today's meeting, they're going to show us how they communicate with 'Him', let's hurry! If we're lucky, we might even hear the voice of Him, of Lord Isaph!"

### Chapter 22

With goosebumps all over, he was dragged to the meeting place.

Without a chance to refuse, his arm was grabbed by the boy and he was pulled along. When he came to his senses, he was inside some warehouse building. The space, neatly arranged with several chairs, looked almost like a lecture hall.

The warehouse was packed with people wearing black robes. While some didn't cover their faces, most had their hoods pulled down to cover even their noses. Some, pursuing an extreme concept, even wore black masks.

*I want to leave, I need to get out—*

He tried to escape, but the grip of the human who had dragged him here, who introduced himself as 'Sile', was terrifyingly strong. Thinking that his attempt to break free was due to shyness at his first meeting, Sile encouraged him to sit down, saying everyone was nice.

If they were nice, would they follow Isaph?

He had heard from Noi that there were people among mercenaries who imitated Isaph, but he didn't know there would be a follower meeting. They must all be crazy. Barely suppressing the urge to shudder, he attempted self-hypnosis.

*This is a gathering of people who love black robes, a meeting that reveres black cats...*

However, the reason he had entered this terrible space was half out of curiosity. While he had been dragged in out of shock, he was not only curious about what kind of people would follow Isaph, but also thought they might know a lot about Isaph.

While information about Harenir could be found in all sorts of books, there probably wouldn't be any books about Isaph. To begin with, it was impossible for a book about a villain to be published in the Holy Empire.

On the other hand, he was also curious about the existence of the close aide who was said to be in contact with Isaph. Did Isaph have a companion? Did they really communicate? ...*Wait, surely notifications wouldn't ring in a form I couldn't perceive?* He felt around his robe warily.

Just then, *clap clap clap*, applause was heard from the front.

"He's coming in!"

As if it were some kind of custom, the people sitting in chairs all stood up and followed suit, clapping their hands, and he dazedly joined in while watching the podium. Who was this body's companion?

"His closest aide, Mr. Bart!"

The person coming onto the podium had a thick build and was also wearing a black robe. With the hood pulled over, only half of his face was visible, but a scar on his chin was noticeable. The scar, which looked like it had been scratched by fingernails, was slightly red as if it was recent.

The silk robe shimmered as he walked. *He's wearing expensive stuff.* While he was making these idle observations, the hype man in front of the podium even induced cheers before seating the people.

Bart tapped the desk on the podium, *tap tap*, and spoke in a meaningful tone.

"You've all heard the recent news, haven't you?"

"Of course!"

People shouted, vying with each other. Praises for Isaph's actions, who was said to have exploded the prison tower the day before his execution and escaped, even stealing the holy sword Piarus along the way, poured out from all around.

It was strange to hear someone speak that name favorably for the first time, but on the other hand...

"I heard that the Order will soon issue a wanted notice, and it will have the highest bounty in the empire's history!"

"Wooow!"

...*Isn't this bad news?* It meant that many more people would be targeting and chasing Isaph. Oddly enough, he felt he should stick close to Harenir. Even if he could escape, which he probably couldn't, it was obvious he'd be caught by bounty hunters.

Bart grinned at the people's reactions.

"That's right. All of this is His plan. Getting imprisoned, taking the holy sword! He knew the future where the holy sword would leave the hero's hands!"

People cheered at that exclamation, but his eyes turned cold.

*This bastard is a con artist*.

He had secretly hoped to meet one of Isaph's companions, but that hope was not just crushed but pulverized. As he sat with an increasingly poor posture, people kept nodding.

"I knew it would be like this!"

"Isaph has never been caught before, right? He blocked pursuing holy knights with just a gesture, and even when the cardinal stepped forward, he easily repelled him! He summoned dozens of undead and they fled with their tails between their legs, haha!"

"A noble called a warlord said he would definitely catch him and persistently pursued him, but instead his own mansion collapsed and he was trapped there! He cried out pathetically for help, buried under the rubble!"

"No one can catch Him. He suddenly appeared one day and has been turning the empire upside down, but no one has been able to find out anything about Him...!"

...*Was Isaph that overpowered?* He looked down at his hands in bewilderment. He had only perceived him as someone with a very pathetic body.

While he still couldn't understand this follower meeting, if he had to guess, perhaps Isaph's actions of messing with those in power were seen as satisfying. Somehow, people's praises seemed to be getting more and more excessive, but thanks to this dark fan club, he was learning about Isaph's past.

Just then, Sile shouted from beside him.

"When that noble's mansion was destroyed, there was a big commotion because a warehouse full of gold and treasures was discovered. They said it was grain and treasures extorted from the people of his domain! He made it possible for them to return to their original owners!"

"That's right. He's actually standing against those in power...!"

*Ding*, a blue window popped up in front of his eyes.

**—------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------**

**This is an unfounded rumor.**

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He burst into laughter at the sudden appearance of the status window. *What*, it didn't bother to explain about the appearance of the fake close aide, but it wanted to prevent Isaph from being interpreted as a good guy?

In fact, there was no need to correct it. That incident was probably closer to Isaph taking revenge on the noble who dared to persistently chase him, making an example of him. It was a warning not to bother him in the future, showing what would happen if they did.

Snickering, he quietly asked Sile beside him.

"Do you really think the hero is dead?"

"W-why are you asking that?"

"Actually, I think he might be alive. Well... *sigh*, I believe He might have stolen the holy sword, but I can't believe the hero is dead."

"I-I actually think so too...!"

When he deliberately left room for agreement to the hesitant Sile, the boy quickly agreed. Although he hesitated a bit when saying 'He', feeling creeped out, the boy didn't notice anything strange and kept nodding.

He had expected this from the moment he saw Sile's naive face, and he had also noticed that the follower meeting was 'delighted that Isaph had messed with those in power'. Moreover, the fact that they never mentioned the Klam Massacre incident and vaguely considered it as some kind of misunderstanding added strength to his guess.

The people here just wanted to show off using Isaph's reputation. Perhaps they had been marginalized in society due to timid personalities or weak physiques, but found that people flinched and avoided them just by wearing a black robe, so they got into it.

His thoughts were further solidified as most of the people he had encountered in this space were small in stature, and the lower halves of their faces visible under their hoods looked youthful. If they were kids, it would make sense for them to be drawn to such sentiments...

Just then, Bart tapped the desk to draw everyone's attention.

"Now, I will contact Lord Isaph."

He said this while carefully taking out a palm-sized crystal ball from his bosom. *A communication artifact?* He watched curiously. This place was starting to get interesting.

*–Yes, Bart.*

As a purple light swirled like a vortex in the transparent crystal, a voice was heard. The sound was very faint, mixed with surrounding noise, but that was probably intentional too. There was no way anyone here would know Isaph's voice to begin with.

People seemed unsure, but with the appearance of such a rare magical tool, they seemed to believe it was real and their eyes lit up. The voice phishing scammer Bart's performance continued.

"Yes, Lord Isaph! Where are you now?!"

*–I'm hiding near the capital. I need your help.*

"Your faithful servant is waiting!"

*–Cause a commotion elsewhere. We need to divert attention.*

Was the fake Isaph they were contacting nearby? Somehow, he felt envious of him. The real Isaph had a collar around his neck, but the fake Isaph was free. People in the warehouse even sympathized, saying, "You're going through so much..."

"You all heard that, right? We must help Lord Isaph."

He gradually grasped Bart's purpose. Bart slammed the desk with a bang and said gravely,

"Let's cause an explosion at the Rus Historical Hall. Since Lord Isaph caused a commotion by blowing up the prison in the holy city, if we destroy a major building in Rus, the first capital of the empire, it will confuse their tracking, making them think He is here."

"Gasp. The H-Historical Hall...?"

"E-E-Explosion....?"

"Yes! You all just heard Lord Isaph's tired voice! We must unite our strength!"

Finally, Bart spread his arms wide.

"So if you all provide donations, I will try to obtain an explosion artifact!"

He was inwardly roaring with laughter at this absurd scam, but suddenly stopped. A cold uneasiness spread to the back of his neck.

*Wait, 'I' am really in Rus, aren't I?*

While it was purely for the purpose of extorting donations, what if they caused a commotion just for show? Like causing a small explosion at the Historical Hall. If that really drew attention...

Not only would it be very uncomfortable for him, but he could already imagine the tremendous looks his companions would give him. Wouldn't Kalterik shout that problems were tangled up with Isaph's very existence? It was obvious that Harenir would smile and say, "You really..."

After heaving a deep sigh, he finally stood up. It seemed he had to end this absurd scam. He was somewhat concerned that most of the people gathered here were young.

He couldn't let them fall victim to voice phishing right in front of him.

### Chapter 23

"Yes, you're our first donor!"

In the commotion that arose the moment donations were mentioned, everyone turned to look as one person abruptly stood up. Bart welcomed him with a brightened face.

"I'll make sure to pass on the name of our first donor to Lord Isaph..."

Using his nonsense as background noise, he quickly scanned the space. There were men who had entered with Bart and were now blocking the warehouse door. Though they wore black robes, their burly builds weren't hidden. Considering the hype man sitting in front, it seemed these people moved as a group.

*Sigh*, he let out another deep breath before speaking.

"Why don't you guys play in another city?"

"...What?"

"Our settings seem to overlap a bit. I was planning to operate here. You seem to be acting as His closest aides, but I've been preparing hard to imitate Him completely. Do you know how much trouble I went through to find a black cat that matched perfectly..."

"What nonsense are you spouting!"

Though he had stood up abruptly with the thought of stopping the commotion, no suitable solution came to mind. So he blurted out whatever came to mind, and Bart shouted angrily. *Hmm*, it seemed this strategy wouldn't work. He had tried to gain credibility by grabbing En and showing him to everyone, but...

*–Mrrow*.

En made a displeased sound and quickly slipped away, so in the end, he just shrugged and changed his approach.

"You, are you really Isaph's closest aide?"

"What? You clearly heard me contacting him just now!"

"How can you be sure that voice wasn't manipulated? And to begin with, who among the people here knows Isaph's voice? You could bring anyone and have them act."

"...H-How dare you! Don't casually use His name!"

*Ah*, still maintaining the closest aide setting? It seemed he couldn't find a way to refute his point and was just nitpicking, but people were already starting to murmur and express doubts one by one.

And if he really wanted to stick to that setting...

"Can you take responsibility for your words?"

"...Responsibility?"

"Isaph escaped from the heavily guarded prison in the holy city and even stole the holy sword Piarus. Do you think someone like that would let a person who dared to steal his name to commit fraud live?"

He spoke in a low voice.

"Think about it. It's 'that' Isaph."

"..."

"The one who horribly tortured and killed all the villagers of Klam, the mass murderer."

"Th-that's a misunderstanding...!"

"Can you be sure it's a misunderstanding?"

They wouldn't be able to ignore the ominous atmosphere exuded by Isaph, the original gloomy one. With that belief, he deliberately lowered his voice, and Bart's shoulders trembled. Even Sile, who was right next to him, turned pale, which made him feel sorry, but he had to maintain the atmosphere.

However, Bart seemed quite determined to make a big score and stood his ground firmly.

"You! I learned necromancy directly from Lord Isaph!"

Was this level of stubbornness necessary to commit fraud? He looked at him indifferently and tilted his chin. At this gesture challenging him to do it if he could, the man became even more indignant and stretched out his hand.

*Showing off, huh*. He was inwardly sneering, but then he faltered as he saw the shadow on the floor ripple stickily. Bart's shadow seemed to writhe... and then something really rose from it. A translucent black soul was floating in the air.

Though it looked like a small-bodied ordinary person, it was clear that this was an 'undead'. As he stood there speechless, people screamed.

"It-it's really an undead!"

"What should we do...!"

Though they claimed to be Isaph's followers, everyone panicked at the sight of a real undead. It was natural, as they had probably gathered to play around sharing a dark edgy sentiment. They likely had never seen an undead before.

And their naivety became good prey for the scammer.

"Quiet! If you hand over all your money and belongings, I'll let you go!"

Bart shouted, seemingly switching to threats, and the burly men standing by the door also stomped their feet, creating a threatening atmosphere. Some tried to escape but were blocked by the big men and thrown back. People's fear grew even more.

Now the big men didn't even bother to keep their hoods on. They all had fierce looks, and identical tattoos were engraved beside their ears. It was a complex pattern inscribed within a triangle.

Seeing him standing there blankly, Bart sneered and took off his hood. His fully revealed face was the very picture of a con artist.

"How about that! Do you have a little more faith in my words now?!"

He remained silent. It wasn't simply because he was shocked by the undead Bart had summoned. Rather, his gaze was fixed on what was flickering around Bart.

Besides the undead Bart had summoned, something was clinging thickly to his back. *What is it?* As he wondered and focused his eyes, he let out a soft exclamation.

*Ghosts.*

They were exactly the same as the ghosts he had seen to the point of nausea on Earth. He hadn't seen any ghosts since entering Isaph's body, so why could he suddenly see them? Perhaps they hadn't been visible because he hadn't wanted to see them until now. This body was called a genius in necromancy, wasn't it? So maybe his eyes had been closed, and now that he wanted to see, he could see the form of ghosts.

He suddenly felt disgusted. Not only was the sight of ghosts clinging to one person creepy... he knew when this phenomenon occurred. He had witnessed it on Earth.

This happens when people are killed painfully.

Those who were killed by him were lingering around, harboring grudges. Perhaps the scar on Bart's chin was also because of this. Maybe he had deliberately killed people for necromancy. It could be that out of many attempts, he had only managed to subjugate one small-bodied undead.

He had thought they were just scammers using Isaph's notoriety to extort money, but they were more terrible than he had imagined.

...Was this unpleasant feeling what the holy knights had felt? After all, Isaph had also committed the Klam Massacre and then subjugated the victims as undead, using them like slaves. A headache came on, and as he was pressing between his eyebrows, Bart approached him, snickering.

People screamed and cleared a path. Parting the crowd, Bart instantly came right up to his face and tapped his shoulder.

"You were so sarcastic earlier, but now why have you gone quiet?"

"Is there a way to break the subjugation of the undead?"

At this unexpected question, Bart responded with a "What?", but he had no attention to spare for him. He read the text on the blue window that had appeared before his eyes.

**—------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------**

**Neutralize the necromancer.**

**—------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------**

**"How exactly do I do that?"**

**—------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------**

**Reach out your hand towards the man's head.**

**—------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------**

Though he had never communicated with the status window before, now the conversation flowed as if they were talking together. He didn't even feel particularly strange about the change in attitude of the previously unfriendly status window. He simply reached out his hand as instructed.

*Whoosh—*

A dark purple energy began to spread around him. The chairs clattered, shaking, and his vision flickered and darkened. It was a phenomenon that occurred as the light from the lamps on the walls rippled strangely.

"W-w-what's this!"

Bart backed away in shock. He had good instincts and quickly distanced himself. He watched him blankly as he slowly moved forward.

"Attack that bastard! Kill him!"

[Graaaah!]

Following Bart's order, the undead flew towards him. It approached with its hands outstretched threateningly as if to strangle him, but when he waved his hand, it flew and crashed into the wall. Though it was a very light gesture, the soul was thrown away as if swept up in a typhoon.

It was probably a scene just like the eyewitness accounts of Isaph that the followers had been shouting about.

Bart's face turned deathly pale. He tried several times to call the undead back, but the purple energy was suppressing that soul. *Eek!* Bart screamed and fled in a hurry.

*Thud, thud, thud...*

He calmly pursued Bart. The man kept glancing back at him as he ran, and eventually his steps tangled and he fell to the floor with a crash, looking ridiculous. Even in that situation, he tried to crawl away, propping himself up with his arms, as if a danger alarm was instinctively ringing that he needed to get away from him.

"W-what are you all doing! Protect me!"

"Don't be a nuisance. If you don't want to get caught up in this."

The gang members who were about to follow Bart's words froze at his murmur. The energy rippling around him must have looked eerie.

And it wasn't just the other men who stopped at that voice, but Bart as well, so he was able to easily stand in front of him. He bent his knees to meet the eyes of the man fallen on the floor. He looked down expressionlessly at the terror-stricken eyes that were trembling.

He now thought he understood what the 'neutralization' the status window had mentioned meant. He could guess even without specific instructions appearing. Grasping Bart's head, he quietly repeated the same command as before.

"Fall."

His soul was ejected from his body.

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That scene was clearly reflected in his eyes. The soul trembled slightly as if resisting the purple energy spreading from his hand, but it was eventually extracted. Bart's body went limp.

A thin thread was connected to his soul, and as he followed it with his gaze, he saw it was linked to the undead bound to the wall. As the thread gradually faded, he could see the undead raising its head.

*So this is the process of breaking subjugation*.

That small soul didn't exist for long. However, its final action of turning its head this way and that was probably due to joy, he guessed. It calmly accepted the gradual approach of oblivion.

After the connection with the undead was severed, Bart's soul floating in the air returned to his body.

"Haaaargh!"

Bart was shocked by the extremely traumatic experience. It was understandable, as he had probably experienced an out-of-body experience for the first time in his life. Cold sweat poured down his entire body like rain, and his limbs trembled. He kept touching his body repeatedly.

In fact, he was surprised too. When he had detached the monster's soul in the main hall before, he had completely separated it, but this time he had only temporarily detached it and then returned it. So this level of control was possible. Wasn't this a skill that required tremendous concentration?

And as if to prove that, a tremendous headache hit him.

"Urgh."

Suddenly, as he collapsed to his knees on the floor and dry heaved, the gang members looked at him curiously. Bart was in a state of shock beyond panic and couldn't register him, but to the others, it must have clearly looked like 'that being's energy has dropped'.

*Ah, this is bad.*

In fact, when they first tried to approach, he had deliberately spouted plausible words, calculating that he couldn't use many skills. He had even spread a purple energy to create a gloomy atmosphere, and while he had been secretly pleased that the tactic had worked, his heyday ended this quickly.

He staggered to his feet. He had to leave this place before it became completely obvious that he had weakened. This was his only chance while they were still wary.

"Move."

He tried to leave, acting out a calm voice with difficulty. He had dealt with Bart, who was the central figure of these scammers, so they wouldn't be able to commit fraud for a while, and there wouldn't be any more victims.

Now all the other people were trembling against the walls, looking at him with terror. He hadn't originally wanted to receive looks as if they were seeing a hero, but it stung a little. However, the dizziness was more serious than that, so he had to leave quickly.

"W-what should we do with this guy?"

"He seems to have lost his strength, should we capture him...?"

However, people who bully others have an uncanny ability to perceive when their target has weakened. As the burly men slowly approached him, he deliberately sighed loudly and reached out his hand towards them. They hesitated and took defensive stances.

In fact, everything would be resolved the moment he summoned the undead.

Even if his undead's combat power was ordinary, they were several times more numerous than these people, and their very existence could shock them. Even without action keys provided by the status window, he now vaguely knew how to use his skills. Judging his current stamina, he thought he could summon them briefly...

At that moment, Harenir's warning came to mind.

'Always be careful not to draw unnecessary attention.'

...It seemed that in the Holy Empire, only Isaph could control undead in double digits or more, but could he control the number? If he failed and summoned a horde, wouldn't he be truly screwed then?

"...Hah."

The moment he lowered his arm with a deep sigh, the men exchanged glances. With the dizziness that hit him just then causing him to stagger slightly, it must have looked like a perfect opening to them.

*Wham!*

Finally, a fist flew at him. They must have put tremendous force into it to subdue him initially, as his face turned sharply and he fell to the floor. Then *thud!* They even kicked him in the stomach, making him curl up and groan. This body could be subdued without hitting so hard, but this was too much. His head rang, and he kept feeling nauseous.

Perhaps this was karma returning for him, of all people, punishing Bart. Wasn't it ridiculous for Isaph, who had killed countless people and enslaved those victims as undead, to be angry about someone else's undead?

If there was anything he realized from this incident, it was that he needed to be able to cause out-of-body experiences to free Isaph's undead. But was there a necromancer in this empire who could separate Isaph's soul from his body? Would dying be faster?

*Thud. Wham!*

But he didn't want to die here from being beaten. As he crawled on the floor groaning, the gang members gained confidence and swarmed around, trampling him. It was violence pouring out like a backlash for the brief moment when they had been wary of him. In times like these...!

He went completely limp.

"This guy seems to have fainted."

"Hmm. He seems to have quite an interesting power. He might be useful, should we take him?"

His acting skills from multiple rounds of pretending to faint successfully fooled the thugs. He had worried they might kick him more, but fortunately, his ability seemed to have piqued their curiosity. Inwardly cheering, he calculated the time. It seemed quite a while since he had left the historical hall, would his companions have noticed his absence by now?

Harenir had said he would return to the inn around midnight, so he would probably realize he had disappeared and use the leash around then. Since they needed his ability to enter the sky island, they wouldn't immediately blow up his head and kill him, right? *...Please*.

By the way, what would happen if he was dragged by the leash? He had heard that it would drag him forcefully even if there were obstacles, but would it work even if there were buildings in the way? Surely he wouldn't die from crashing into walls? As he was stringing together these idle questions, someone grabbed the back of his head.

Specifically, the back part of his hood.

"Let's see this bastard's face first."

*...Wait*, what if Isaph's face was well-known? They say no one knows Isaph's voice, but aren't there many eyewitness accounts? So there might be descriptions circulating among people.

He flinched and grabbed his hood with both hands.

"What, you were pretending to be unconscious?!"

The gang members were bewildered by his action, and then became angry. Saying how dare he try to deceive them, they grabbed him by the scruff of his neck and shoved him sideways with a *thud!* It happened to be an old iron door, so his face was roughly scratched.

The man who had shoved him against the door snickered and grabbed his hood. He desperately held onto the hood with both hands, but he was reaching his limit. As the cloth was slowly being pulled away.

"No matter how much you resist...!"

*Creak*— The door opened. The door right next to where his face was pressed opened, and someone entered. He made direct eye contact with that person. Though shadows covered the eyes under the hood the other was wearing, they were still brilliantly bright.

Blue eyes that seemed to contain the sky.

"...I thought you had run away, why are you in such a state?"

It was Harenir.

The moment he saw him, his tension dissipated with a thud. Had he returned to the inn early and noticed his absence? Or perhaps his companions at the historical hall had reported his disappearance, and he had moved.

Instead of pulling on the leash, he had come after locating his position; how kind of the hero. As he was having these dazed thoughts due to his dizziness, his companions poured in. The moment Kalterik spotted the black-robed figure pressed against the opposite wall, he pointed and shouted.

"Isa— Saiph, you bastard...!"

Having barely corrected the name, he then noticed the numerous people in black robes and tilted his head in confusion. After muttering, "What, the gloomy guys have multiplied," he finally followed Harenir's gaze and gasped in shock.

He compared the build of the gang members with the triangle tattoos he had seen here to Kalterik's. After realizing that even the largest man in the gang didn't match up to Kalterik, he said,

"You guys hate Isaph, right?"

"...What kind of random question is that? You're asking the obvious!"

Kalterik responded in bewilderment to the sudden question, then immediately shouted, "Wah!" Harenir was looking at him with a very strange expression.

"Right. You absolutely despise that guy. You probably want to kill not just Isaph, but anyone associated with him."

"...?"

"These guys say they serve Isaph. They claim to be Isaph's closest aides and that they're in contact with him. This gang with the triangle tattoos."

As he pointed it out specifically, the gang members flinched. It was understandable for them to be startled, as all four who had entered gave off an ominous aura. The holy knights were all tall, and paradoxically, Noi looked suspicious because his build was so small. In parties like this, the small one was often a magician.

"What the hell are you talking about! Are you messing with me now? Do you know what I went through to find you...!"

The moment Kalterik roared irritably, the triangle gang made their move. Though they didn't know exactly who their opponents were, they seemed to think they needed to subdue them quickly, so they attacked him by surprise. The gesture of swinging their fists was almost solemn.

### Chapter 25

But of course, that surprise attack didn't work on Kalterik. *Thwack!* He easily blocked it by raising his arm, then in a linked motion, he threw the attacker over his shoulder. *Boom*! The man who fell with his back slamming into the floor convulsed for a moment before finally passing out.

"Who the hell are these guys!"

"A-attack them all at once! There are only four of them!"

Thankfully, the triangle gang rushed in all together, regardless of Kalterik's bewilderment. About 10 people swarmed towards Kalterik like a flood, but *thud! boom! bang!* It didn't even take a full minute for all of them to be knocked down.

He took them down one by one, and even when they tried to exploit the openings created, they were just caught together. Kalterik grabbed two at a time, lifting and throwing them.

At this point, shouldn't he be considered a bear rather than a human...

While he was blankly observing, the man holding the back of his neck screamed "Eek!" and ran away. In an instant, only that man was left. It was wise of him to retreat after realizing these newcomers were not to be trifled with, but unfortunately, he dragged him along.

The man pressed a knife to his neck and shouted.

"If, if you move, this guy dies!"

"Using me as a hostage probably won't be very effective..."

He seemed to have figured out that he and the others were companions from their earlier conversation, but this was not just ineffective, it was close to a meaningless threat.

*You know what? They're the original ones who held a knife to me...*

As he was slumped there, too tired and annoyed to react, unexpectedly, Harenir stopped. He raised his hand to stop Kalterik, who was about to step forward, and carefully scanned the space.

"Hmm. Then let's make a deal. We'll stay still, but in exchange, let the other people go."

"What?"

"Even if you escape with that person, we won't move from here."

The man was bewildered, but Harenir nodded, pointing at the people trembling against the wall. It was as if he was saying it was a good deal. As if mesmerized by his incredibly persuasive voice, the man looked back and forth between him and the people behind.

With all the gang members knocked down, the only hostage he could subdue now was just one person anyway. Also, his usefulness was proven the moment Harenir proposed the deal. As if to help the hesitating man's deliberation, Harenir raised the corners of his mouth and said kindly,

"We knocked out someone we encountered on the way here. That person also had a triangle tattoo, probably your comrade?"

*Ah*, could that be the fake Isaph who had communicated with Bart using the artifact earlier? The fake Isaph must have been pacing around worrying about the commotion in the warehouse when he encountered them. The man trembled and shouted,

"...Th-then put down your swords first!"

He had somehow spotted the swords hidden in their robes. Kalterik hesitated with an "Ugh," but Harenir calmly moved his hand. He was the first to unfasten the scabbard at his waist and throw it to the floor.

The holy sword hidden in an ordinary scabbard rolled on the floor. *Thud, thud,* Kalterik and Mela's swords followed.

"Ha. Everyone get out!"

After carefully checking, the man shouted irritably at the people behind. They moved, trembling and shrinking. They left through the door, hunching their upper bodies like criminals and covering their heads with both hands.

"You, you..."

Sile, who had been sitting next to him, looked back at him anxiously. Was it a grateful look, or an apologetic expression? Maybe he was just scared, shocked by the recent situation. He just gestured with his chin for him to leave quickly.

Don't follow strange bastards anymore and live a good life. Otherwise, you'll get hit with the karma beam like this body.

Finally, when everyone had left, the space became quiet. The man seemed satisfied that the companions remained still even as he dragged him towards the podium. As if intending to leave through the path Bart had entered, he pressed the knife closer to his neck and shouted,

"All of you stay here! It'd be better if you don't think about following me after I leave...!"

"Why didn't you resolve it yourself?"

Harenir's question, disconnected from the man's warning, was directed at him. It was such an out-of-place question, and the fact that it came from him made it even more bewildering. He answered in a tired tone,

"You told me to stay put..."

Harenir stared at him blankly. After gazing at him intently with his blue eyes as if piercing through him, he glanced to the side. He pressed his lips together at Harenir's gaze directed at Bart lying on the floor. That guy had been having a fit until just now before completely passing out.

Was he trying to point out the contradictory part to mock him? Or...

"Don't talk! I'm leaving now...!"

*Whoosh!* At that moment, a red light flickered in his vision, and his body was suddenly pulled. It happened just as the man holding him hostage was turning to open the door.

A red line appeared on the collar fastened around his neck, and his body was pulled towards Harenir. *Urgh*, even he hadn't expected the timing, so he staggered and fell. He had half-expected this from the moment Harenir proposed that absurd deal, but he didn't know he'd be pulled so suddenly.

*Thud*. Of all places, he collapsed onto Harenir's chest. Perhaps out of the kindness ingrained in the hero's body, he wrapped his arm around his waist. A warm, sun-like scent wafted to his nose, and frustratingly, a sense of relief spread.

"W-what?! You guys...!"

"We stayed still."

Harenir smiled gently at the man who was screaming and pointing at them.

"Mel."

With that light call, a clear order was given. Mela shot out like a bullet and *thwack!* kicked the man's chin. *Whoosh*, her motion of striking down his rising body was as natural and clean as flowing water.

*Splat*, blood burst from the man's mouth, splattering on the floor, and three teeth fell out and rolled on the ground. The situation was resolved with just two kicks. The fact that they had unfastened their swords earlier hadn't been a problem at all. Their bodies themselves were all weapons.

As soon as he confirmed that the situation was clearly resolved, he wriggled out of Harenir's arms. As he hurriedly moved away and staggered, he heard Harenir let out a chuckle. He seemed to find it amusing that he was stubbornly trying to move away in this state.

Regardless, he steadfastly moved and collapsed into a chair at the back. *Phew—* As he let out a long breath, Noi asked in a very puzzled tone,

"Why on earth did you come to a place like this? An Isaph follower meeting..."

"Ha! Did you want to see if there were really people who worshipped you?! Or were you trying to plot something?!"

"I was mistaken for one of them and dragged here..."

Kalterik's loud voice echoed in his head. He had expected him to mock him, so it didn't have any impact. In fact, even he thought it was ridiculous. To think that Isaph, attending an Isaph follower meeting, would end up getting beaten by scammers.

"Do you know how much we...when we realized you were gone!"

"That's enough. We found him anyway."

Harenir cut off the atmosphere that was about to become noisy again. He quietly looked down at him and then grabbed his chin to lift his face. His gaze towards his mouth was calm. Judging by the stinging sensation there, it seemed he had been injured when he was shoved against the door earlier.

*Swish*, he pulled off his hood.

"Gasp!"

Noi was startled. Since his face had been punched too, he could roughly guess his condition even without looking in a mirror. Actually showing his beaten face to his companions made him feel awkward, so he just touched his mouth without saying anything. Harenir let out a soft sigh.

"At this rate... we won't be able to move at dawn today."

"...I can use my ability. I have that much energy left."

"We need to hand over these scammers to the guards anyway. There are probably guys like this committing fraud not just in Rus but in many other places, so we need to issue a warning quickly."

With the recent incident in the holy city, Isaph's notoriety had increased, and moreover, with rumors of the hero's death circulating, it was speculated that many would try to take advantage of the confusion caused by that vacancy.

"If you were going to end up like this anyway, why did you bother to act?"

Harenir's suddenly dropped question was unfriendly but not difficult to understand. Was he wondering why he had knocked out Bart, the ringleader, while getting beaten by the gang? After all, if he had intended to stay put as Harenir had warned earlier, he shouldn't have acted in the first place.

He moved his lips. If he said he got angry at the undead Bart was controlling, he'd probably just get scolded. Wouldn't that be almost like the pot calling the kettle black?

So, the most plausible reason would be...

"Just, that guy lied about learning necromancy from me. But he was so bad at it, I just showed him a bit of what real necromancy is."

"..."

"I tend to get angry when I see shoddy necromancy."

*...Th-this is the best I can do.*

Although it was an answer steeped in the sentiment of "Ah, 'this' is what real necromancy is," there was no helping it. Noi shuddered as if he had goosebumps, Kalterik grimaced with an "Ugh," and even Mela shot him a very disgruntled look.

Only after a very long silence did Harenir say one thing.

"You know, sometimes... you're really weird, right?"

*Sometimes, he says. That's a relief.*

*...Yeah, it's a relief.*

### Chapter 26

**#Part 5. 13%**

The next night.

Harenir really rested for a day and only moved the following day. Although handing over the scammers to the guards was quickly done, he deliberately refrained from trying to enter the sky island.

He guessed that Harenir had probably waited because it would be troublesome if he, already tired from using his ability once, collapsed in the sky island. While he didn't know what the inside of the sky island would be like, it was a place that required caution from the very fact that it had risen. It was fortunate that his necromancy was still considered an efficient means for Harenir.

As soon as they arrived at the inn, all tension seemed to drain from him, and he fell asleep as if collapsing. He must have been unconsciously holding on, not wanting to pass out in an unfamiliar space with weak children around. While he slept as if unconscious, when he woke up briefly, there was a potion on the bedside table.

*Maybe Noi had given it...*

With a hazy mind, he drank the potion and went back to sleep. After a full day passed like that, he was in a state where he could walk, and only then did Harenir say it was time to depart.

The first place they arrived at was the 'site' where the first emperor's tomb had been located. The place they headed to, avoiding the watchful eyes of the relic caretakers, was the exact opposite of the path he had taken yesterday. The bewildering self-deprecation that he had completely misread the direction paled in comparison to the shock he faced in front of the empty lot.

He had heard that part of the empty lot created when the first emperor's tomb rose had been filled in to build the historical hall. So he had thought they had deliberately left the site for preservation as a relic, and thus imagined the scene he would face would be just a slightly sunken ground, but...

The ground was completely hollowed out.

This wasn't intentionally left, but something they couldn't fill in to begin with. The pitch-black cavity was so deep that its bottom couldn't be seen. It was like looking into an abyss, and the wind sound that occasionally echoed as if stagnant there was chilling. He instinctively felt a revulsion, not wanting to approach.

Probably to prevent accidents, there was a fence around the area, and he felt tense even just walking at a distance. He casually asked Noi,

"...How deep is this thing?"

"Huh? The depth of this place has never been measured. We've tried various instruments, but none of them worked. Even when we tried lowering ropes, at some point the ropes would just snap and we couldn't retrieve them."

*Is it a sacred space?* He looked up at the sky with a dazed feeling. No matter how hard he strained his eyes, of course, the tomb wasn't visible.

Harenir, checking his reaction, asked,

"Can't you find any special clues? Like seeing souls?"

"...There's nothing like that at all."

It seemed they had visited this place first to find clues on how to enter the sky island. This was probably the first place all adventurers checked as well. But unfortunately, he shook his head as he couldn't feel any energy at all, and Harenir accepted it quite readily.

The place Harenir headed to next was the historical hall.

"I thought we'd go to the relic exhibition hall."

"Ah, I looked around there yesterday, but there wasn't anything special..."

"No, not the area open to the general public, but a bit deeper."

"...?"

"Shouldn't we touch the relics directly?"

The empire's hero is trying to damage the empire's treasures right now.

Moreover, it seemed he was planning to infiltrate a restricted area, not a space he could enter simply with his status. While it was surprising, on the other hand, it appeared he had guessed the application of necromancy from the beginning. He had only realized it after seeing the status window, but had Harenir known about necromancy in advance?

While he was in a daze, Harenir lightly moved his steps.

**—------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------**

**No Entry Except for Authorized Personnel**

**—------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------**

Such warning signs were no obstacle to him at all. No, rather, they might serve as signposts indicating he was heading in the right direction. His movements in avoiding the occasionally patrolling caretakers were extremely graceful.

He had felt it since they were sneaking into the relic site, but Harenir's movements and his expression...

"...You look like you're enjoying this?"

"Yes, it's a bit fun."

His answer came readily. He looked at him with a very bewildered expression. Having been bound by all sorts of regulations since becoming a holy knight at twelve, had he developed some rebellious spirit? It was fitting for someone who had gone to play in the Encroachment Zone when he was young.

However, unlike him, Noi and Kalterik were anxiously looking around and whispering.

"Will this be okay...?"

"O-o-of course it will!"

Kalterik's cry, which didn't sound certain at all, was amusing. He followed because he trusted the commander, but was inwardly nervous. Maybe living a moral life all this time made such actions prick his conscience more. If he thought about it this way, it would mean that Harenir, who was calm now, had no conscience, but that was probably right.

However, Harenir's steps, which had been moving smoothly, stopped in front of a certain door.

"Hmm. This place has a surveillance barrier around it."

"Can we make a 'gap' like last time?"

Previously, in the main hall, Mela had cut through the barrier placed to protect the holy sword with her sword to create a gap. So he expected the same method to be used this time, but Harenir shook his head.

"The barrier in the main hall was to prevent 'intrusion'. But this is for 'surveillance'."

"...What's the difference?"

"To explain it simply, in the main hall, it was fine once we broke through the door, but here there's a barrier monitoring malicious energy throughout the entire space. There must have been various attempts to rob the historical hall over time."

*Ah*, he understood. If they had only briefly left the main hall empty then, hastily blocking just the entrance, this time it was like having all sorts of infrared sensors inside the room. In his mind, he played out a spy movie scene of crossing lasers filling the room.

So how did he intend to enter? Harenir just touched the door a couple of times and made a "Hmm" sound, but judging by his relaxed face, it seemed he had a solution, so why was he pondering? Wanting to continue the spy movie in his head, he asked,

"So how are we going to get in?"

"Actually, it's simple. If you completely envelop your entire body in holy power, you won't be caught by most barriers. The belief that beings who can use holy power won't commit unrighteous acts is unnecessarily firm."

The latter part of his words had a somewhat mocking tone, which was puzzling, but holy power...? He blinked, and he felt all the other companions looking at him. It was the look of people staring at someone who obviously couldn't use holy power.

*Wait a minute*, Noi couldn't use holy power in the Encroachment Zone last time either, so why was he the only one receiving these looks?

"Let's do it this way."

Soon, Harenir shrugged lightly. As if he had reached a conclusion to the problem he had been pondering since checking the barrier, he spoke in a very refreshing tone.

"We'll enter by surrounding you with holy power."

"Ah, by wearing a necklace like last time?"

"No, the energy contained in an object isn't enough. I'll have to hold you as we enter."

"..."

He fell silent, and his companions were silently shocked. No, Kalterik tried to let out a cry of astonishment, but Mela, as if anticipating it, covered his mouth with her hand.

Meanwhile, Harenir gave instructions very calmly.

"Noi will hold Sir Kalterik, and I'll hold you as we move."

"Why, why...? Rather, with him..."

"Commander! I'd rather hold that guy...!"

Kalterik and he cried out almost simultaneously. If they had to be held to move, they wanted to switch partners, but just then, their eyes met, and they both made disgusted expressions at the same time. *Ugh!* Though they both disliked it, he found Harenir more uncomfortable.

However, Harenir firmly shook his head.

"Since Isaph is larger than Noi, more holy power will be needed, and even when we go inside and he uses necromancy, he'll need to be constantly enveloped in holy power. Can you concentrate that long, Sir?"

"Th-th-that's...!"

"The moment your concentration breaks, it's all over."

It was a point that Kalterik, who particularly abhorred his necromancy, would be prone to lapses. *Ugh*, he grimaced and looked for other candidates. But the only person left now was...

The moment he met Mela's calm navy blue eyes, his mouth clamped shut. Not only was there the issue of different genders, but he also had no memory of properly exchanging even a single word with her. She was generally quiet and only acted on the commander's orders.

Harenir, seeming to guess the meaning of his gaze, said,

"Mela isn't possible. She doesn't have much holy power."

It was strange that a vice-commander of the Holy Knight Order had little holy power, but more than that, he felt despair about what was to come. The meaning of those words was that he was the only one who could use enough holy power to cover Isaph's body.

Moreover, it seemed he would have to be held in his arms not just while passing through the door, but the entire time inside the space. *Hah*, no wonder Harenir had explained the barrier in detail. All the moments when he answered his questions were uniformly not positive.

*Haaah*, as he let out another long sigh, Harenir smiled gently. While smiling a smile that looked so beautiful, kind, and good.

"I'm not thrilled about holding you either."

"...Yet you manage to endure it well."

"I'm quite good at enduring terrible things."

He wanted to punch that mouth just once.

### Chapter 27

Swallowing his curses internally, but thinking they probably showed on his face, he nodded slightly. Refusing would only result in being dragged by the leash, and being uncooperative would only prolong the time he had to be held by Harenir. *I’m only complying to finish the job quickly*. Brainwashing himself with this thought, he let Harenir hold him.

This time, unlike the previous occasion where he was carried in both arms, he was held completely enveloped in Harenir's embrace. It was almost like a back hug. It was an unavoidable choice since his entire body needed to be wrapped in holy power to move.

He suddenly felt the size difference between him and Harenir more acutely. While Isaph's body was particularly weak, he was almost completely buried in Harenir's robe. From the outside, it probably looked like two faces attached to the outside of a robe.

*Sigh...*

"How about sighing internally?"

*Ah*, had he sighed out loud? He thought he had swallowed it, but his breath must have touched Harenir's hand as he held him. He wanted to protest for the freedom to breathe, but he gave up.

Suddenly, he became curious about why Harenir was so good at enduring terrible things. There was no trace of forced effort on his face, and as always, only a beautiful and benevolent smile like a holy painting was present. He wondered if that smile was a mask, but then dismissed the thought. He needed to focus on the task.

*Creak...*

The space protected by the barrier was clearly different from before. It looked more like a relic storage room accessible only to staff rather than an exhibition hall, and it seemed the most crucial items were stored here, as everything in sight sparkled.

The first national flag used when the empire was founded, the empire's declaration document, the old hat worn by the first emperor, the scabbard used for a long time, all sorts of items used by the imperial family at the time, and so on...

"The empress's crown...?"

Even the crown said to have been used by the first empress was visible. Noi also kept looking around curiously. He was being held in a similar way to him, much shorter than Kalterik, but the gap between the faces sticking out of the robe was a bit wider on their side. Both teams certainly looked ridiculous.

Noi marveled,

"I heard there would be a special exhibition to commemorate the upcoming millennial anniversary of the empire's founding, but it looks like they're really going all out in preparation."

*This Holy Empire is a thousand years old?* Along with the impression that it was older than he thought, a sudden speculation struck him like lightning.

Perhaps Harenir had made plans to go to the sky island after hearing about the exhibition. His actions of skillfully finding his way here supported this inference. It must have been very easy for someone with the hero's status to find out the location where the exhibition items were gathered.

*Just how far ahead had Harenir planned in his mind?*

"Do you think it's possible?"

Just then, Harenir asked. As their eyes almost met, he hurriedly turned his head and refocused on the situation. It was somewhat cumbersome as they had to move together, not just him moving alone.

"This way, no, that way—"

"How about thinking while walking?"

Was that a comment that he wasn't thinking right now? It was really unfair, but he couldn't explain. How could he explain that the status window only appeared in front of his eyes when he got close to a relic?

**—------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------**

**No soul is imbued in this relic.**

**—------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------**

**—------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------**

**The soul in this relic is too faint to summon.**

**—------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------**

**—------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------**

**Not possible at current level.**

**—------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------**

The last status window appeared when he approached the red cloak said to have been worn by the first emperor at his coronation. The content was subtly different from the other status windows. Was it a warning that even Isaph's necromancy couldn't touch the first emperor, or was it because his body was too weak right now?

He fell into deep thought. He needed to approach the relic of someone who knew well about the emperor's tomb. The emperor was impossible, so the empress? Or the second empress who was brought in after the death of the first empress due to the nobles' persistent pleas? The children the emperor was said to have loved?

Just then, Noi shouted,

"Wow, Haren! There's a holy painting here of the first emperor wielding Piarus on the battlefield...!"

"The aide. Yes, I want to see the aide's relic."

It was regrettable to cut off Noi's exclamation, but he bore no ill will towards him. Seeing him had opened up his thinking, and he was only grateful.

Noi was Harenir's aide and had been with him for a long time, even sharing information about 'that person'. Though he didn't know who it was, they were strongly connected by the request of a being who seemed very important to both of them. Similarly, an aide was usually closely connected to their superior and knew a lot of their information.

Noi tilted his head in confusion.

"The aide...?"

"The first emperor was said to be frugal. But he ordered his tomb to be built lavishly, so maybe he anticipated that the tomb would rise after his death. The first emperor and his aide were said to be particularly close, so he might have shared information only with the aide who had to handle the practical matters."

The emperor's relics he had seen here added to his confidence. The emperor was said to use any object until it was worn out, yet he had built his tomb like a huge temple. So the person most likely to know the hidden meaning of the sky island was the aide who conveyed the emperor's will.

Harenir made a "Hmm" sound at his inference. Interest gleamed in the eyes looking down at him. It was also a look that said he didn't know he was interested in history, so he tried to act nonchalant. His cramming had succeeded.

The space occupied by the emperor's aide in the millennial anniversary special exhibition would be small. Perhaps because of this, the items related to the aide, who wasn't even part of the imperial family, were limited to just an old fountain pen, a notebook, and a document for a mansion bestowed by the emperor.

Among these, he picked up the fountain pen that was tucked away in the corner. In front of it, a status window with welcome content finally appeared.

**—------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------**

**Grasp the relic.**

**—------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------**

As purple energy spread with a whoosh, *crack!* The tip of the fountain pen broke. Beside him, Noi let out a "Eek!" in surprise, but he pretended to focus only on his ability.

This had nothing to do with him. This was all on the hero's orders.

But this time, a different scene unfolded from when he had used his ability before. The purple energy slowly formed what looked like a magic circle. A pentagram was drawn inside a round circle, and even tiny languages were inscribed, making him marvel at how intricate the technique was, but there was no time to appreciate it for long. As the energy drained out, a terrible dizziness hit him.

An enormous amount of energy was used for the difficult task of summoning a soul contained in an object from about a thousand years ago. His vision flickered and blurred, and nausea welled up again. Harenir supported him from behind, and though it was unwelcome, he ended up leaning on him as he continued to pour out energy. His vision mixed chaotically.

At the end of this time of endurance, finally, a soul leaked out of the fountain pen.

[Who... are you people...]

Unlike the souls or undead he had seen before, this one was quite blurry in form. The only things he could make out were that he had short hair, and he was wearing what appeared to be ancient ceremonial robes. Kalterik, upon seeing him, was shocked.

"W-what. Did you really summon a soul?!"

"To be precise, hah, it's not the real thing. A fragment attached to the fountain pen. A chunk of memory...?"

It's difficult for the soul of someone who died long ago to remain until now. In the case of great figures who achieved enormous feats, the public memory honoring them might lend strength for their souls to continue existing in the present, but most naturally disappear as time passes.

So the soul that appeared before them now was closer to a thought-form containing the memories of the time this fountain pen was used. Just like how a cherished doll hugged for a long time in childhood might hold memories of that time, but if one parted with the doll, it wouldn't have memories of adulthood.

But this fountain pen was an object used by the aide until the very end of his life. He was newly amazed at Isaph's ability, that necromancy could even do this.

At this level, perhaps his *otaku*-like statement about being overly immersed in necromancy from last night could be understood. Thanks to Isaph, his companions could now directly ask someone involved about how to enter the sky island, which no one had been able to approach until now.

While he was secretly feeling proud, Harenir asked the aide,

"We want to know how to enter the emperor's tomb."

It seemed this abrupt questioning was applied equally not just to him but also to ancient souls. The aide quietly looked at Harenir and then said,

[Grace dwells in your soul... Are you this era's hero?]

"Yes. I'm looking for the holy relic said to have been used by the first hero."

*Hmm*, perhaps someone of the first emperor's aide's caliber could respond calmly to such matters. He seemed as if he had anticipated being summoned like this someday.

### Chapter 28

The aide slowly looked around the space, then down at his own body before answering.

[I'm sorry, but I don't know how to enter His Majesty's tomb either...]

The sincerity was evident in his head-shaking gesture. The lord he served had died long ago, and he himself had been summoned as a soul after a very long time, so the probability of him lying was low. It was hard to suspect him of keeping an oath even after death, as a gentle smile appeared on his lips as soon as he realized that Harenir was a hero blessed with grace like his own lord.

In other words, the ancient aide was clearly favorable towards the current era's hero, and thus he was genuinely sorry for not being able to provide the answer they needed now.

Noi cautiously asked,

"Th-then do you know why the tomb rose?"

[His Majesty said that we 'must escape from the unrighteous'. It seems he had already anticipated that it would rise, so he ordered the tomb to be built in the form of a temple to be closer to God...]

It seemed that even the aide only learned about the fact that the tomb would rise after the emperor's death. Kalterik's eyes also lit up, fascinated by the idea of conversing with an ancient soul. The way he raised his hand was the very picture of a model student.

"Could we perhaps find clues in the sacred texts?!"

[I thought about that too and looked into it at the time, but not really...]

"...Did you not hear any separate stories related to the tomb?"

Even Mela joined in quietly. She who always exuded an atmosphere of calm bordering on coldness, seemed to have developed curiosity just for this moment.

[Why is your soul...]

But the aide let out a strange sigh as he looked at Mela. Being in a soul state himself, he seemed able to see others' souls as well, and his expression changed to one of confusion. There was a hint of wariness, but also bewilderment.

While he was curious about the reason too, unfortunately...

"Um, sorry, but I think I'm going to collapse in 10 seconds."

He had reached his limit. While he was secretly proud that all his companions were marveling at his necromancy, that alone wasn't enough to keep him going. Beyond just feeling drained, he could feel his brain shutting down in real-time.

10, 9, 8...

Only then did the aide realize that his own form was fading, and he hurriedly returned to the original topic. He was truly grateful that the aide even increased his speaking speed.

[Ah. When I said I would visit the tomb every day, His Majesty said this.]

7, 6, 5, 4...

[Any being of this land is welcome, if they have courage—]

The soul disappeared.

"It hasn't even been 10 seconds yet!"

Kalterik raged, but he had already collapsed. It was only because Harenir was supporting his waist with one arm that he didn't fall to the floor in an unsightly manner, but he had practically melted. Seeing this state, even Kalterik seemed unable to stay angry and pressed his lips shut.

Still, he too was disappointed that he couldn't hear the aide's story to the end. *Ah*, if he could find out everything perfectly here, he would receive recognition from Harenir for being helpful.

"Just let me rest a bit, and I'll do it again..."

"That's enough."

"No, I, I can... Urgh."

"Putting aside the fact that your state is not at all trustworthy, I think I know how we can enter the tomb now. So that's enough."

Then Harenir took out a potion from his bosom and tilted it to his lips. So heroes carry around things like this too. He drank the potion in an exhausted state. In fact, it was closer to Harenir forcibly pouring it into his mouth rather than him voluntarily drinking it.

He burst into coughs, but the effect of the potion was incredibly good. As soon as he swallowed it, warmth spread throughout his body and the nausea quickly subsided.

...*Wait*, was the potion he drank at the inn like this too?

He started in surprise and touched his lips. Come to think of it, all his wounds had disappeared. His lip had been split during yesterday's commotion, but now it didn't hurt at all. He was bewildered, as the potion Noi had given him in the past didn't seem to have eliminated wounds.

It seemed like a very expensive potion, was he being taken care of because he was recognized as a talent? Or was it meant for him to keep rolling around in the future? *Hmm*, it was probably the latter.

Afterwards, Harenir left the historical hall. His steps towards somewhere showed no hesitation. Although the clue the ancient aide had tried to give was abruptly cut off, he really seemed to have made some kind of inference.

Expectation welled up, but he couldn't help but be puzzled in front of the space where Harenir stopped.

"Why did we come back here?"

They had come to the site where the first emperor's tomb had been located, the very first place they had visited. Looking down into the deep, dark cavity was still chilling. As he was peeking over the fence and trying to subtly step back, Harenir leapt over the fence in one bound.

His companions followed him in surprise, and while he really wanted to stay behind, he reluctantly moved under Kalterik's fierce gaze. *What's going on, why are we getting closer and closer to the cavity?* Just three or four more steps and it would be the end.

"One wrong move and we could fall in."

"Yes. That's the plan."

"What?"

Harenir just shrugged at his concern. As if this was the result of a perfectly reasonable deduction.

"The first emperor said, didn't he? Anyone with 'courage' is welcome."

"That courage probably doesn't mean the courage to die."

"What greater courage is there than leaping in prepared for death?"

"Have you been having a hard time as a hero? I understand, so let's step back a bit and talk..."

As he was blurting out words in panic, Harenir let out a small laugh. *Chuckle, chuckle*, it seemed like a genuine laugh, and his gaze was caught as if unnecessarily mesmerized.

But then his hand was grabbed too.

*Wait, hold on.*

"I don't want to fall...!"

"It's okay. If you're not prepared to muster courage, it's a hero's duty to guide you."

"No, it's not! Anyone can see this looks like a double suicide! No, for me it's murder!"

"You, you talk a lot when you're flustered, don't you?"

These were words he would usually swallow internally, but now his filter was broken. And soon his body would be permanently broken and face the crisis of being discarded.

Harenir held his hand tightly and stepped backwards. Was he opening his fingers to block necromancy, or was he deliberately making eye contact to prevent any rash actions, even using his face?

Suddenly, his appearance looked very unfamiliar.

While the abyss-like cavity was gaping like death, his face, as he headed towards it, was filled with a strange expectation. Was it anticipation from figuring out how to get to the first emperor's tomb, or was he hoping for something else as if by chance?

He tried to shake off the feeling of being mesmerized by those sky-like eyes and stand firm on the ground, but it was impossible with this weak body.

"...!"

Finally, his body tilted.

He couldn't even scream. The saying that you can't make any sound when you're too surprised clearly referred to this situation. Moreover, as Harenir pulled him into a tight embrace the moment they fell, he completely froze, trapped in his arms.

Afterwards, as golden energy rushed into his vision, he realized it was Harenir's intention to wrap him in holy power like in the historical hall, but being tightly held in his arms with no gap was shocking all the same. Behind them, Kalterik screamed loudly enough for his share.

"Commander!"

"Sir. Just in case, wrap Noi and come down."

*Don't give orders so calmly while falling!* He struggled wildly belatedly, but it was impossible to escape from Harenir's arms. In the end, he grabbed Harenir's collar resentfully. *You bad bastard, you X bastard, you XX bastard!*

*Whoosh—!*

The fierce sound of wind announcing their fall brushed past his ears and his clothes flapped wildly. Endless darkness spread beyond the golden energy enveloping his body. Seeing this situation with his own eyes was so chilling that he buried his face in Harenir's chest as if blaming him. It was meant to be an attack, but Harenir's chest was so firm that only his forehead hurt unfairly.

*I don't want to die again...!*

*Thud.*

"..."

At some point, everything around them became quiet. But he was already so terrified that he couldn't immediately grasp the change and just kept trembling in Harenir's arms, when Harenir spoke in a very subtle tone.

"This is unexpected. I thought you'd be nonchalant about death since you use necromancy."

"...?"

He raised his head in shock. *Where are we now? The afterlife? But do I have to hear Harenir's voice even there? Well, I mean, it is a voice that would sound fitting in the heavens... but Isaph doesn't seem likely to go to heaven...*

Only after all sorts of thoughts whirled through his mind could he finally calm down.

So, right now, he was in a position lying on top of Harenir, and Harenir was lying on a lush grass field looking up at him. His golden hair was disheveled among the grass.

Harenir smiled gently at him as he remained frozen in a daze.

"We've arrived at the sky island."

### Chapter 29

The grass swayed gently in the breeze. The vast field was dotted with colorful wildflowers, creating a scene like a painting, and every time the wind blew, a fresh scent wafted through the air.

In the distance, several old buildings were visible. The structures, covered in vines, wore the unique stillness of a space long untouched by visitors. The temple at the center of the various buildings seemed to shimmer with ethereal light as it caught the moonlight.

He looked around in a daze.

"Clouds..."

White fluffy clouds floated at a distance that seemed close enough to touch. There was even a waterfall in the distance, with the stream of water pouring into the void creating a rainbow, giving an overwhelmingly surreal impression.

They had really arrived at the sky island.

Though it was deep in the night, the moonlight was bright enough to see the surroundings clearly. After gazing blankly at the heavenly landscape, he turned his head. Harenir was looking around the area where they had just fallen, and his nonchalant behavior sparked a surge of anger.

They had managed to reach the sky island somehow, but Harenir had enveloped them in holy power as they fell. Didn't that mean he wasn't certain they would arrive safely? They could have both died. *No, no.* Since Harenir was the son who received God's love in abundance and didn't get hurt, only he would have died.

*Wow*, what a way to carry out an execution.

But before he could confront him, their companions came pouring down from above.

"Ugh, uuuuugh!"

"Aaaaaaaaaaah!"

"..."

Kalterik and Noi's resounding screams echoed through the space, while Mela seemed to have already grasped the situation and was falling calmly. She looked at the two with eyes that seemed to want to distance herself greatly.

As they got closer to the ground, the speed of their fall gradually decreased. But only Mela noticed this, so she was the only one to land safely by putting one foot down first, while the other two realized belatedly, flailed, and ended up rolling on the ground with a thud!

He looked up at the sky where they had fallen from. They had suddenly appeared in the sky at some point, but how was it connected to the relic site on the ground?

Noi got up with a groan of "Ugh," then marveled at the pile of objects nearby.

"Wow, these are traces of the numerous attempts to measure the depth of the tomb over about a thousand years!"

The mountain-like pile of objects turned out to be measuring tools. It seemed that these were what Harenir had been examining earlier.

There were hundreds of devices that had been lowered on ropes but had suddenly snapped and couldn't be retrieved, and quite a few magical tools were visible as well. It was amusing to see some trash mixed in, but that also made it feel more real. It really was a connected space.

But then...

"How are we going to get back?"

If the huge tomb site in Rus was connected to the sky here, the question of how to return naturally arose. *If we fall from this island again, will we be connected to that place? No, where would we end up then?*

He looked at Harenir in confusion and asked, and Harenir shrugged.

"Don't you know?"

"...Huh?"

The answer came back in a tone that suggested it should be obvious. *Are you talking to me?* He pointed at himself quizzically with his index finger, and Harenir nodded. His gently creasing eyes created a beautiful smile.

"Yes. After we find the holy relic today, we can rest for the night and leave tomorrow. Who knows when we'll get to come here again?"

The smile full of trust might have been something he would have wanted, but in the current situation, it was not at all a welcome belief.

It felt somewhat spiteful, but this time a realistic vagueness set in. The only being resting in this tomb would be the first emperor, and in the historical hall, it had shown that he couldn't summon the emperor's soul at his current level. What should he do in this situation? He worriedly looked down to find the NPC and was startled.

En was nowhere to be seen.

While it had always been an NPC faithful to its cat setting, appearing and disappearing at will, he had a feeling that this time it hadn't been able to follow at all. When was the last time he had seen it? They had been together while walking through the historical hall, but it hadn't been able to enter the special relic storage room because of the barrier.

After that, he had no memory of seeing En as they quickly headed to the relic site and he was grabbed by Harenir and fell. Should he have found it and jumped together? He looked up at the sky with an oddly empty feeling. Nothing else fell.

"The sky island seems to have grown in size!"

Just then, Noi exclaimed in wonder. As if more and more surprised the more he looked around, he pointed to the distant temple with a flushed face and said,

"It's much wider than the area measured in the past. Look how far away the temple is!"

The records stated that the first emperor's tomb, the temple, and its surroundings had risen, but now that temple was far away beyond the vast field. Well, there were no records of a waterfall rising together in the past either.

The sky island, much larger than what he had seen in book illustrations, was almost the size of a small village.

"This must be the land touched by God's hand for a thousand years..."

"Solnium..."

At Noi's murmur, Kalterik called out the name of God in an overwhelmed voice and clasped his hands, while Mela also placed her hand on her chest and closed her eyes. She wore a necklace with Solnium's emblem around her neck.

There probably wasn't a place that proved the existence of God more than the sky island. Even for an atheist like him, it was an amazing sight. However, he wasn't about to pray like the devout believers, so he just looked around awkwardly, feeling somewhat out of place, when unexpectedly, he found Harenir standing still.

His back view, gazing up at the sky, was quiet. Was he perhaps communicating directly with God? But for that... his blue eyes were quite cold, and even seemed cynical at a glance. His eyes, with the moonlight falling obliquely on them, looked infinitely chilly.

"..."

Harenir tilted his head slightly and met his eyes. He seemed not to have expected him to be staring so intently, and for a moment he made a strange expression before quickly putting on a gentle smile.

"Shall we set off now?"

Now that they had entered the sky island, it was time to go find the holy relic, which was their purpose.

The temple was visible even from afar. It was covered in vines, as if to show the passage of time, but even that looked sacred. *Step, step.* It felt strange to walk across a field that must have been quiet for a very long time. The night air was thick with the scent of grass.

"Hmm hmm, hmm—."

Noi seemed to like the sky island so much that he walked as if he might fly away at any moment, even humming a tune. Was he happy because it was not only touched by God's hand but also full of life force? According to what the Dium had said in the previous Encroachment Zone, fairies had gone extinct long ago, and Noi was thought to be one of the few remaining descendants. Perhaps this land was like the land from the distant past when it was full of fairies.

When they finally arrived in front of the temple, Noi rummaged through his bag and pulled out a parchment.

"They say that while the exterior looks like a temple, the interior was built to be as complex as a maze. There were no floor plans left, and no one could go and check, so everyone just made guesses... but they say they excavated a floor plan from the past while investigating the ruins two months ago! They were planning to reveal it at the special exhibition, and I happened to find it in the relic storage room!"

"...Did you steal it?"

"What are you saying! I'm going to draw it from memory now!"

Noi raised his eyes as if greatly offended by his question. The parchment he unfolded was indeed blank. Then he knelt on the ground and quickly began to draw incredibly complex intertwining paths, leaving him bewildered.

*He remembers all that?* The time spent in the relic storage room was less than twenty or thirty minutes, and he thought Noi was focused on the ancient soul he summoned at the end.

However, his companions accepted Noi's words as if they were natural. Kalterik let out a big exclamation of admiration when he saw the map Noi had completed.

"Woooow, as expected of a genius aide. A genius who remembers everything after seeing it once!"

"Of course! Do you think I became the hero's aide by luck?!"

*Ah*, so there was a clear reason why Noi had insisted on being taken along, saying he would be helpful. He felt awkward and just rolled his eyes to the side. Before he could even apologize, Noi was already happily smiling at the praise Harenir had given him among the companions.

In a normal game, brief information about characters would be displayed, but this game didn't provide any such convenience, often leading to situations like this. *What a terrible game, as always.* Muttering the phrase that had become like a catchphrase internally, he vowed to torment En when they returned.

Anyway, now that they had a map of the temple, finding the holy relic should be a breeze. All the companions thought so too and entered confidently, but.

*Clank, clank, clank...*

As soon as they entered, they encountered soldiers in white armor. Noi, who came face to face with them moving in groups as if on patrol, exclaimed blankly,

"Oh, this wasn't on the map."

Of course it wouldn't be.

*Ah*, they had overlooked the 'tomb + maze = trap' formula. He sighed inwardly, suspecting if the first emperor might be an *isekai* version of that emperor from a certain country who searched for the elixir of immortality. There were too many soldiers. If there were this many just in this corridor, how many soldiers were there in the entire temple?

### Chapter 30

But he was soon enveloped by a strange sense of dissonance. The *clank, clank* of their movements kept bothering him oddly, and after straining his eyes to check...

"...These things, they have no souls."

They were not living beings, but closer to 'dolls'. The sight of the empty white armor was somehow chilling. The soldiers, all wearing helmets, were all the same size, making it feel like looking at a scene where copy and paste had been repeated hundreds of times. Were these soldiers sent by Solnium to guard this tomb?

"Let's try to move quietly for now."

At Harenir's instruction, everyone nodded firmly. Though there was a terrifying feeling that they would eventually encounter these beings, it would be good to at least delay that moment.

However, less than a minute after having such a wish...

"Hmm."

They came face to face with soldiers appearing from the adjacent path. The maze-like twisted paths had many branches, making it impossible to predict what might pop out from where.

[Intruders, kigik, intruders...]

The soldiers approached, their helmets clanking. They all held spears longer than their own bodies, and as soon as they detected intruders, they thrust their spears forward. Kalterik clicked his tongue and drew his sword.

*Whoosh!* As he swung his large sword widely, the soldiers flew away with a rustle. Though they might be considered light for being empty dolls, the sound of them falling to the floor was very loud. It was the scene of Kalterik pushing them away with terrifying strength.

"...Do they break?"

And an unexpected scene unfolded. Like ball-jointed dolls, the soldiers' necks, torsos, arms, and legs broke apart. While the scene was bizarre, he was just thinking that if they could be neutralized like this, their progress would be smooth, when.

*Kigik, kik, kiiiik...*

[In this sacred space, unrighteous beings, cannot, enter...]

The dolls reassembled themselves and stood up. *Thud*, fallen arms crawled on the floor by themselves, reconnecting with the other pieces. Some pieces might have been mixed up, but since all the dolls had the same form anyway, it didn't matter if they got mixed.

It seemed they would keep getting up endlessly unless completely pulverized into dust. Kalterik sighed, and he swallowed a sigh internally. With such a conflict occurring as soon as they entered the temple, he had no idea how many more gates they would have to pass through.

"Wait."

However, Harenir stepped forward in front of Kalterik, who was about to regroup. As if he had gained some clue from the doll's words just now, he quietly took the lead.

*Rumble*, the soldiers approached with their spears extended. Though they didn't charge quickly, the momentum of dozens forming a group to surround them was fierce. As the distance narrowed to where the spear tips might pierce Harenir, Noi inhaled sharply.

But the soldiers who arrived right in front of Harenir just stopped.

"..."

They stopped just before the spear tips could touch his chest and just stared at him. Though it was impossible to tell if they were really looking with their eyes because of the helmets, at least their faces were turned towards him.

At the end of the tense silence that gripped everyone, the soldiers lowered their spears.

[Not, intruders, kik, not...]

[Kiik, those with courage... are the emperor's guests.]

The soldiers' attitude changed even though Harenir hadn't used holy power. Was it because he was the son loved by God, so God's soldiers recognized him? However, when the other companions also remained quiet, the soldiers clanked past them.

They glanced over Kalterik as they moved, then tilted their heads this way and that in front of Mela before passing, and when they discovered Noi, they even muttered softly.

[Fairy, it's a fairy...]

As long as they weren't unrighteous beings and didn't attack first, would the soldiers not try to fight? He was about to be glad that they had found an easier strategy than expected, but...

The soldier who discovered him standing last stopped abruptly. Even though he knew the helmet was empty inside, he felt an intense gaze as the soldier stared at him fixedly.

[Unrighteous...]

*This is driving me crazy.*

Had the stack of sacrilege that Isaph had committed over time been neatly piled up and detected even by God's soldiers? Not only had he committed a massacre in Klam village, but wasn't necromancy itself considered an act against God's will? Because life and death were God's domain, humans binding souls to the earth was seen as overstepping their bounds.

[Punish, kik, punish...]

With nothing to feel wronged about, he just let out a dry laugh, when Harenir strode over and grabbed his arm to lead him. As he was enveloped in Harenir's embrace like in the historical hall, the soldiers' movements stopped. Then, as if to give them further assurance, Harenir even surrounded him with holy power.

[Kigik, disappeared...]

Only then did the soldiers withdraw their spears and retreat. It was a situation where he didn't know whether to be relieved at the soldiers' simplicity or to feel bitter about them trying to punish Isaph for being unrighteous. Because this incident was as good as a herald of future troubles.

In other words, while the companions would be free from the soldiers, only he would be endlessly considered an enemy by them.

"Sigh, really..."

Kalterik clicked his tongue and shook his head. His eyes seemed to ask, 'Do you now realize how great a wrong you've committed?' He even seemed to be urging him to repent, but it was too late to do so now. And what good would it do if he repented? It wouldn't be Isaph doing it anyway.

After pondering for a while, Harenir said,

"The temple is too large for me to keep surrounding you with holy power as we move around, and we don't know what variables might occur, so it would be difficult. For now, since the dolls' intelligence doesn't seem high... let's try walking with you in the center of our group."

He meant for the four of them to stand protectively around him in all four directions, while he walked as quietly as possible in the center. Harenir added that if this method didn't work, he would step in himself, and he just nodded. Kalterik's glare became even sharper.

He seemed to have been somewhat helpful until they entered the sky island, but as soon as they arrived, he became a hindrance.

*Clank, clank, clank...*

Fortunately, Harenir's strategy worked, and their subsequent progress was smooth. The soldiers would reflexively take defensive stances when they discovered intruders, but if their side didn't attack and remained quiet, they would also withdraw after checking.

Although this slowed their pace each time, it was much better than depleting their energy through combat. The companions moved step by step, following Noi's map.

"According to the records, the burial goods were stored this way."

His eyes lit up at Noi's explanation. Come to think of it, wasn't it said that all sorts of treasures were buried in the first emperor's tomb? Since no one had ever entered the tomb until now, the treasures must still be there.

Should he try to make some money on this opportunity?

The success reward for his current quest was 'freedom'. Whether that meant freedom from prison or freedom from this world, he didn't know, but assuming the former, he wanted to leave the empire. No matter how much Harenir might advocate for Isaph's sentence reduction for helping with the hero's return, even if he was released on probation, the views towards Isaph wouldn't be favorable.

So he wanted to go to a very distant place, wash away his identity, and live quietly, but of course, he needed money for that. Wasn't that the eternal law and unchanging truth?

His eyes sparkled as he guessed the reason why Isaph had always worn only a spacious black robe. It was the perfect clothing for hiding objects...!

"...There are no treasures?"

However, the space they arrived at was full of ordinary objects. Old books, clothing, writing tools, worn weapons, and so on. There were no glittering jewels or gold coins to be seen anywhere. None of the items one would typically imagine as treasure could be found, only antiques lined up.

At his muttering, Noi became indignant.

"These are all treasures! Objects touched by the first emperor!"

...While they might fetch money if auctioned off, items too important would be difficult to trade even on the black market due to the risk of being traced. It would only increase the chances of unnecessary trouble. His interest quickly faded, and he became indifferent while the companions looked around.

*Right*, since the first emperor was said to be frugal, he probably wouldn't have included flashy jewels as burial goods. Feeling deflated and disappointed, he wandered around the space.

Still, wouldn't there be treasure hidden somewhere? Usually, in maps where the 'tomb + maze = trap' formula applies, there are secret spaces. Like a wall opening when a specific book is pulled from a bookshelf, or a special space appearing when a certain handle is grabbed.

As he wandered around looking for such things, Harenir muttered behind him.

"Hmm, that holy relic isn't here. To another place..."

"Was this wall always open?"

He abruptly cut off Harenir's words with a question. He had no choice.

The dazzling moonlight brightly illuminated the interior of the temple, but the walls were shadowed and dark. So, inevitably, as he was feeling along the wall to check it, suddenly his hand went through. Then, as his eyes adjusted to the darkness, he froze at the sight before him.

The wall was wide open.

"...Isaph. Step away from there."

As if something enormous had passed through.

### Chapter 31

Not only was it clearly different from the structure of the map Noi had drawn, but the way the wall was caved in was definitely not a normal way of creating a path. Harenir seemed to have realized this too, as he ordered him to step back, and as he was hesitantly following, Mela muttered.

As if she had identified 'its' identity just by taking one deep breath.

"...Monsters."

*Rumble—* The ground shook enormously at the same time as Mela's sigh. Before he could even properly steady his staggering body, something poured out of the pitch-black hole.

[Kyaaaaargh!]

[Hyaaak!]

The things that gushed out of the hole like sewage were all monsters. There were far more of them than what they had seen in the main hall before, and they were even larger in size. He sighed internally.

*There are a fuck ton of unrighteous things here.*

They had said the reason the tomb rose was to escape from the unrighteous, and the soldiers filling the temple also drove away the unrighteous or something. They even pointed spears at him, but they couldn’t drive these monsters away?!

Even as he was thinking this, monsters kept pouring in endlessly. Harenir, judging that it would be difficult to deal with all of them in this narrow space, quickly gave instructions.

"Let's get outside for now."

The monsters chased after them as they exited the room. It was a very unpleasant feeling to be fleeing with these creatures making all sorts of eerie noises on their tail, but he believed that once they got to the corridor, the doll soldiers would take care of them.

He hoped they would come quickly to deal with these things, after chanting "intruder, intruder" like a mantra, but.

"Why are they nowhere to be found when we need them...!"

Now, the soldiers couldn't be found anywhere in the temple. Just as he was becoming indignant, Harenir swung his sword widely. A dazzling light enveloped them. The dark green liquid that splattered as the monsters' bodies burst was horrifying.

[Kiek, kiiiiet...]

However, the creatures that appeared this time seemed to be stronger than the monsters they had encountered in the main hall, as they didn't die instantly from Harenir's attack. They hesitated, retreated and lowered their bodies... then finally charged all at once with a terrible scream.

The monsters poured in as if to completely cover Harenir. His figure disappeared in an instant.

"C-Commander!"

As Kalterik was flustered by their sheer numbers, the monsters were also flung towards them. They moved as if following someone's orders, seemingly trying to disperse the companions. Mela and Kalterik were instantly separated, and Noi was also isolated.

But he felt no worry for them. The holy knights immediately drew their swords to face the monsters, and Noi summoned trees from the ground with a crackle to capture them. As for Harenir, well, he'd come out on his own.

So the person to worry about now was himself.

"Ugh, ah, ack."

He was so out of breath from running that he couldn't even scream properly. It felt like he was really going to die trying to run with this pathetic body. He ran frantically, avoiding the monsters pouring in like waves. There was no need to look back to check the distance. They were right behind him.

Should he summon undead now? But aside from the fact that the attack power of Isaph's undead was low, he hesitated because this place was the first emperor's tomb, considered a 'sacred place'. Wouldn't he get hit with a karma beam immediately if he summoned undead in a land raised by God?

Then should he use the out-of-body skill? But it seemed like it would only work on one at a time, and there was no time for that, and wouldn't it be dangerous if his energy dropped instead? As he was pondering, he spotted a tombstone in the distance.

It was where the first emperor was buried.

The center of the temple had an open ceiling, with moonlight pouring in abundantly. What caught his eye was not the complex inscription on the tombstone, but the large statue of a deity behind it.

He knew it clearly since he had seen it in the main hall too. It was a statue of Solnium. One hand was stretched out towards the sky, and the other was extended towards earthly beings, a posture that was probably related to some myth about distributing light or something.

On the hand that the statue extended downwards, 'something' was placed.

Could that be the holy relic?

With that one hope, he squeezed out the last bit of strength left in his body. By now, the monsters had gotten close enough to grab at the hood of his robe.

[Grrrrrr! Grrrk!]

It was extremely chilling to hear the monsters' roars right behind him, and even feel the heat from their mouths. He ran forward, almost collapsing, and grabbed the object placed on the statue's hand.

*Now that I have the holy relic, I can attack too...!*

*Whoosh!*

"...?"

[Grrrk...?]

As he grabbed the object and turned around, the monsters retreated hesitantly. They stepped back one or two steps, seemingly wary of the being who had been only running away suddenly turning around confidently, but he could only be dazed. The clicking sound fell pitifully.

He had been hopeful when his vision brightened at first, but.

"It's a flashlight?"

What he had grabbed was just a stick about 30cm long. When he pressed the transparent jewel embedded in the center of the stick, it clicked and sank in, and light burst from the end of the stick. It seemed to be a structure that emitted light using a magic stone.

*Well, it does give light...*

As he let out a dry laugh in disappointment, the monsters made irritated growling sounds. As if annoyed that they had hesitated in front of him for a moment, they all charged at him at once.

*Crack!*

But just before the monsters could get close, dozens of tree trunks shot up from the ground, binding them. Seeing the vivid trunks, he immediately recognized who had summoned them and felt relieved. It was Noi.

Perhaps he could use his ability more powerfully in a space full of life force, as a brilliant light green energy rippled around him. There were far more tree trunks than in the Encroachment Zone, and they were also sturdier.

*Slash—* Kalterik approached while killing the monsters inside the tree prison. Whether it was because Noi's tree trunks themselves had no killing power, or because he avoided direct killing due to being a fairy, Kalterik was cleaning up after him, shaking his head.

"You managed to run quite far. Is that how you avoided getting caught all this time?"

Mela was also with him, and it seemed they had each defeated all their monsters before coming to look for him.

"Sigh, there's never a quiet moment around you. Ever since we entered this place..."

"That's enough, Kalterik. We got to the sky island thanks to him, after all."

Surprisingly, it was Mela who cut off Kalterik's sarcasm. He had grown used to Kalterik and wasn't even paying attention to him, just tidying up his clothes, so Mela's words startled him.

Kalterik's eyes widened as if they might pop out, and he stammered.

"Me-Mela. I thought you hated that guy more! He's 'that' necromancer! The kind that conducts illegal experiments and research!"

"...Enough. The Commander told us not to create unnecessary conflicts, didn't he?"

The conversation passing between them was somehow strange. Was there some bad blood between Mela and necromancers? But she seemed unwilling to talk about it and cut off the conversation completely.

Just then, *thud thud*, Harenir approached from behind. Of course, not a single wound could be found on him, who had been covered by monsters. There was a bloodstain on his arm, but judging by its dark green color, it must have been a trace from the monsters.

Harenir muttered while tossing a red stone in his hand into the air.

"It was embedded in the monster's forehead."

It seemed that it had taken time to extract it. Mela examined the red stone closely and sighed.

"...It seems there's a being controlling the monsters, a demon."

"It seems so. This is a magic stone that enhances obedience."

It seemed his feeling that the monsters had strategically isolated the companions earlier wasn't a misconception. Kalterik shouted irritably.

"Ha! With the Dium reviving, now even the old demon race is causing trouble! It's a double disaster!"

The Order had called the Dium the new demon race, he had said. That after losing the long human-demon war, the demons had created new life forms to counter humans. So they probably called the existing demons the 'old demon race'.

As he was feeling pleased with the results of his preview, Harenir analyzed the situation more closely. Monsters hiding in the first emperor's tomb. And the huge hole in the place where the burial goods were stored. The existence of demons controlling the monsters.

"It seems that demon is also looking for the holy relic."

"Perhaps the temple soldiers were also patrolling to protect the holy relic?"

Harenir nodded slowly at Noi's opinion. With the doll soldiers filling the corridors densely, it was highly likely that the monsters had moved secretly by breaking through the walls of the rooms.

"We need to find it before the demon tries to destroy or contaminate the holy relic..."

Noi said, nibbling on his thumbnail. *Oh*, thanks to that, his question was answered. He had wondered why monsters were drawn to holy relics in the main hall too, and had guessed at the time that they were either mindlessly attracted to powerful forces or trying to destroy opposing energies.

But adding 'contamination' to that made everything make sense. Didn't contaminated holy relics usually have the opposite effect? Even in games, corrupted holy swords usually had higher grades than regular demon swords. If the former was a common grade, the latter would be rare, unique, legendary, and so on.

### Chapter 32

Meanwhile, the companions' speculations continued.

"According to what the first emperor said in his lifetime, it's an object that doesn't lose its light even in the darkest place..."

"Then it must be in a corner of the temple! Since the center has an open ceiling, they might have deliberately placed it in a dark place where light doesn't reach!"

Kalterik quickly added his opinion to Harenir's muttering. He still didn't know what holy relic they were looking for, so he stood back like an observer, fiddling with the stick. *Does this really only have a flashlight function?*

*Click, click, click, click, clickclickclickclickclick.*

"You bastard, you keep being annoying...!"

As he was trying various experiments, wondering if it might only work when pressed in a specific rhythm, Kalterik shouted, "Wah!" *Ah*. They were in the middle of an earnest discussion over there, and not only was he showing disinterest, but he was even being disruptive.

"...Wait."

As he was sheepishly putting away the flashlight, Harenir reacted. Did he perhaps know the hidden purpose of this stick? He raised the stick high with a welcoming feeling, but Harenir looked at him with a strange expression and just lightly pressed down his wrist. As if he had no interest in such a stick, he adjusted the direction of the light.

The place that had just been illuminated by the flashlight. It was the lower part of the tombstone, and some letters were engraved in a place that had been barely visible in the moonlight alone.

**—------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------**

**If you earnestly wish, the sun will always rise for you.**

**It will save you from the darkest despair.**

**—------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------**

*...Isn't the sun supposed to rise whether you want it or not?* While he was internally making indifferent observations, his companions read the letters seriously. Noi quietly recited the passage several times before finally exclaiming, "Ah!"

"The name of the holy relic itself is Arux, 'small sun'. So wouldn't it be in the direction where the sun rises, the east?! The eastern corner!"

While Kalterik had suggested each corner of the temple as candidates, Noi had narrowed down the inference to one of them. It sounded very plausible, so the companions nodded and immediately headed east.

A small sun. Thinking that the name sounded quite grandiose, he casually asked Noi,

"Will that holy relic alone really help in eliminating the Encroachment Zones?"

"Of course!"

"How can you be so sure? Arux has been hidden in this tomb until now, so you haven't used it while the Dium were running rampant."

At his question, Noi made an "Aha—" sound and narrowed his eyes.

"Well, since the history of Arux was cut off at the same time the tomb rose, it's understandable to think that way. But even after that, Arux has been consistently revered. It was a holy relic sought after in every turbulent era!"

"...Why?"

"It's obvious, isn't it?! It's a holy relic that amplifies holy power by five times!"

*Ah, so it was a buff item that upgrades stats by five times.*

Now that all his questions were resolved, he felt completely refreshed. He understood why his companions were trying to find it even while facing these numerous monsters and considering the possibility of conflict with demons.

"And the place where that sun shines its light was also called a 'Sacred Realm'. You could say it has very good compatibility with Haren!"

*Sacred Realm + Sacred Realm = 2 Sacred Realms? No, maybe it could be Sacred Realm2.*

Such an item should definitely be eaten.

While he was inwardly marveling, Noi even explained that Arux shines brightest only when it's in the hands of its rightful owner, which would most likely refer to Harenir. Wasn't he already using the holy sword that the first emperor was said to have used? Even tossing it on the ground casually.

Belatedly, he thought that perhaps Harenir was indeed the protagonist of this game. If he were to play a game, it would have been much easier to play as such a hero. All the empire's citizens revered the hero, and he even had close companions who would go along with the absurd plan of faking his death.

Although it didn't seem like an entirely comfortable life since he had to fight on the front lines while traveling around Encroachment Zones, he suddenly felt envious. It was as if everything in the world revolved around him.

*Clank, clank, clank...*

Just then, a strange sound broke his reverie. As they were heading east, the repetitive noise made the companions stop one by one. This sound was unnecessarily familiar.

[Intruders, kigik, intruders...]

[Must, punish...]

As they headed towards the source of the noise, they discovered a very deep and huge pit. There were even multiple pits, and the soldiers in white armor were all stuck in them, clanking. The sticky liquid flowing from the walls of the pits seemed to prevent them from crawling out.

It was clearly a trap.

This meant that a demon with 'intelligence' enough to come up with traps as a way to deal with the annoying soldiers had stepped forward. Just as Kalterik was grinding out curses, *whoosh—!* An ominous wind swept through.

*Tap, tap,* something appeared, stepping on the marble floor of the corridor.

[Oh my, humans?]

Blue-tinged skin and peculiar pink hair flowed down to the waist. Though it had a human form with an alluring face, two sharp horns protruded from its forehead as if to announce its different race, it had a long tail, and moreover, its eyes were inverted. The sclera was pitch black and the pupils were blood red.

Looking at the demon that had appeared on the wind, Mela muttered as if sighing.

"Succubus..."

This demon, also called a dream demon, was said to have the ability to invade human dreams. It would secretly enter dreams and steal and consume life force. It could manipulate dreams into nightmares to extort energy, but generally, it stimulated lust to bewitch the human mind and absorb vitality.

Usually classified as a lower-level demon, the one that appeared before them didn't look like such an easy opponent at all. From the moment the succubus appeared, the atmosphere crackled with tension.

[I like humans. These ones gave me trouble because they have no souls.]

The succubus said, glancing at the pits on the floor. It meant that if they had souls, it could have more easily trapped the soldiers in nightmares, but it couldn't. He wondered if perhaps the reason soulless dolls were placed here was for this purpose.

Harenir gazed steadily at the succubus.

"After being utterly defeated in the human-demon war, you've been hiding. Why have you appeared again now?"

[Oh my, why are you talking about ancient history? And to say we were utterly defeated, didn't you also crumble pathetically afterwards?]

The succubus covered its mouth with its hand and laughed, "Hoho." That 'afterwards' probably referred to the period when the continent was devastated by the appearance of the Dium. The succubus spoke in a dreamy tone, as if having a happy dream.

[We've always dreamed of revenge. And we didn't miss the opportunity that came...]

"So this time, you've crawled in here to wake 'that' up, I see."

[Crawled in? Your choice of words—]

*Whoosh!* The succubus flew at Harenir.

[You're quite beautiful.]

It snarled fiercely from a distance close enough for their noses to touch, but Harenir didn't move a muscle. As if nothing had happened, he just calmly met its eyes, and instead, the succubus hesitated.

It muttered blankly, looking at Harenir's face up close.

[...You really are beautiful.]

It was in the form of an exclamation that had escaped without it even realizing, and Harenir responded with an eye-smile. He saw clear disgust settle in those blue eyes. He recognized it faster because he was familiar with it.

But as if enchanted by Harenir's face, the succubus flew around him this way and that, saying,

[Shall we make a deal? If you give me this face, I'll tell you how I got in. Aren't you curious?]

"You're a succubus, so you used dreams, right?"

[What? You even figured that out, how clever? After infiltrating this island, I brought out the monsters I had put in my dreams! It's an ability that most dream demons can't use at all, so it shouldn't have been known!]

"It was a guess, but I was right."

He had been thinking this for a while, but Harenir seemed quite skilled at acting. He even smiled gently as if grateful that it was now spilling everything on its own, which made the succubus frown for a moment, but soon its displeasure at being toyed with turned into interest.

The succubus reached out its hands as if to cup Harenir's cheeks.

[Ah, I really do want you. Won't you become my pet human?]

"You bastard, how dare you! Who do you think you're touching!"

*Whoosh!* Finally unable to contain his anger, Kalterik swung his greatsword. He even surrounded it with ominous holy power, causing a terrifying sonic boom. The succubus, who had quickly retreated, blinked its wide eyes as if surprised.

Then it said in a quite amused tone,

[You're holy knights, aren't you? It's always the most fun to break holy knights. Do you know how enjoyable it is when these chaste ones fall apart?]

*Oh*, a dangerous statement in terms of age rating. He had been estimating this game to be rated for 15 and up. There was quite a lot of blood, and the appearances of undead, zombies, monsters, and Dium were extremely creepy, so it should be around that level.

While he was considering the rating criteria, Kalterik ground out not to insult them in an even more indignant voice.

### Chapter 33

The more they reacted, the more the succubus looked at the two knights who had drawn their swords with amused eyes. However, when the succubus looked at Mela, its face changed strangely.

The succubus tilted its head slightly.

[...What are you? Why...]

"It seems this demon hasn't found the holy relic yet."

However, Harenir cut off the succubus's words abruptly and drew his sword. The pure white holy sword shimmered faintly under the moon. Holding it straight and pointing it directly at the succubus, Harenir ordered.

"Everyone, move."

The meaning was intuitive. He would keep the demon occupied, so the rest should hurry and find the holy relic.

The companions quickly headed into the building. He also followed them, not wanting to get caught up in unnecessary fighting. And at this action, the succubus laughed and chased after them. Dark red wings rose from its back.

[You think you can escape from me...!]

"You said you liked me, has your heart already changed?"

*Bang!* The sound that rang out as Harenir blocked the succubus's path was fierce. Harenir's mockery mixed in sounded quite chilling. Though the wings were quite large, indicating it wasn't a weak demon, he didn't seem to be struggling at all.

Their fight began in earnest in the corridor under the moonlight. The succubus fiercely shot demonic energy as if trying to distance itself from him, but Harenir dodged it gracefully and charged.

As expected, there was no need to worry about that human, no, that superhuman-like hero. Turning his gaze away from him, he chased after his companions.

"We need to find it quickly!"

"The sun, the small sun...!"

Kalterik and Noi noisily ran around inside the temple. The east wasn't maze-like but was completely open, formed like a spacious hall. Various statues lined the walls, and a grand holy painting covered the entire ceiling supported by massive pillars.

The three of them searched everywhere thoroughly, while he felt along the walls, wondering what the holy relic named 'small sun' might look like. As the moonlight coming through the windows was limited here, the flashlight he had just obtained came in handy. Outside, the *bang! boom!* sounds continued endlessly.

"The small sun would be round, right? Or maybe it's triangular or square to subvert expectations."

"What nonsense are you talking about!"

He had asked quite seriously, but unfortunately, the person near him was Kalterik. Already at the peak of his anger from the succubus's actions towards Harenir earlier, he raised his voice irritably.

*Whoa, whoa. Calm down, bear. I'm an ally. I may not be on your side, but my desire to help Harenir is just the same...*

*BOOM!*

Just then, an enormous sound erupted right next to them. Dozens of monsters broke through the wall from outside the temple and charged in. Whether the succubus had summoned them in advance or just now was unclear, but they charged aggressively as if to interfere with them.

[Hyaaaaargh!]

[Grrrr...!]

*Whoosh!* Kalterik swung his sword widely and clicked his tongue in annoyance.

"Tch! Annoying bastards!"

Even faced with large monsters, Kalterik didn't shrink back at all, just frowning as if they were bothersome as he swung his greatsword. On the opposite side, Mela also calmly raised her rapier and eliminated the monsters one by one.

Then *crack!* Trees shot up from the ground, pinning down the monsters. The trunks seemed thicker, as if drawing more life force from the fields outside through the broken wall. Having experience dealing with monsters before, they all coordinated skillfully.

Just as he was thinking that Noi's binding ability was overpowered and about to relax, *whoosh!* Flames shot up. The flames rose high enough to reach the lofty ceiling of the hall.

*Crackle, crackle,* the flames caught on the tree trunks Noi had summoned and burned fiercely. As if the monsters had learned, this time fire-attribute monsters that were Noi's weakness joined the fray. Just as the wall-breaking monsters had scattered the group in half, the rising flames completely split them apart.

"Ugh, urgh...!"

"Noi!"

On the other side, Noi groaned painfully. It seemed that when the tree trunks burned, the summoner was also affected, as Mela could be glimpsed through the flames, holding him and looking worried.

He looked for Kalterik while checking the situation on the other side. It seemed they would have to deal with the monsters on this side, but strangely, Kalterik was quiet. Usually, he would have been shouting about how annoying these monster bastards were, but now what was he doing...

"Huff, hah..."

However, he stopped abruptly when he saw Kalterik's state.

Kalterik was leaning against the wall, trembling. He who had seemed fine just moments ago when facing the monsters was now convulsing, holding his head as if in great pain.

Like someone suffering from trauma.

"...Hey. Are you okay?"

When he approached and tapped his shoulder with a bewildered feeling, Kalterik startled violently. His widened eyes trembled wildly, as if he hadn't noticed him coming right next to him. Only after taking several rough breaths did he shout, "Wah!"

"Of course! What, unnecessary worry..."

*Well, I also think it's unnecessary worry...*

But it felt very strange when Kalterik said it himself. Rather, such an outburst felt like an attempt to disguise a normal reaction. Realizing that he was looking at him strangely, Kalterik frowned even more.

[Grrrr!]

Just then, Kalterik regained his posture as he swung his sword at a wolf-like monster that charged at him. The monster was crushed by the heavy greatsword and died. After instantly eliminating one, Kalterik turned to look at him.

"You... never mind. Just find the holy relic."

*What's with that ambiguous silence?*

*Is it uncomfortable to receive help from necromancy in a sacred place, or do you expect that even if I summon undead with this pathetic body, I'll collapse after barely dealing with a few monsters?* *Why is the latter imagination so vivid?* He felt a bit miserable.

Anyway, if Kalterik was going to take on dealing with the monsters entirely, he was grateful. As he didn't feel like facing the still creepy monsters up close, he focused on checking the statues.

However, Kalterik was still breathing roughly at times while fighting the monsters.

"Huff, hah, huff. Where, where are the fire-breathing bastards..."

It was a strange reaction to be struggling just because of the smoke filling the space. He even staggered at times. Still, he managed to find the fire-breathing monster and succeeded in cutting off its head.

*Whoosh!*

"Huff, hah..."

Kalterik let out a long sigh of relief in front of the monster's head that had fallen to the floor. As soon as the monster that had been continuously breathing fire and fueling the flames collapsed, the fire weakened considerably. It seemed the flames would naturally subside after a little while.

*Hmm,* it seems he has some bad memories related to fire. He had no desire to ask about the reason, so he just shrugged and continued looking around the space, but...

*Whoosh! Bang, boom!*

The succubus flew in, breaking through the walls of this place. The walls on both sides of the hall were destroyed, and it was chaos.

[Hah, hah. I was told to be careful of the holy knight with an exceptionally beautiful face, was that him?! There were rumors he had died, what the hell is this?!]

The state of the succubus, who let out a shrill cry, was a mess. Its left leg was broken and limping, blood was pouring from its shoulder. Its left wing seemed to have been cut off entirely, leaving one side empty. It looked like it had barely escaped after being completely tattered from the fight with Harenir.

And, there's a choice that those cornered like this usually make.

[You, you're afraid of fire, aren't you?]

It was taking a hostage.

The succubus, who had flown near Kalterik just then, grinned from ear to ear. As if it had read his fear just by making eye contact briefly, it stretched out both hands. The gesture of enveloping Kalterik's head while floating in the air must have seemed terribly lascivious to him.

*Whoosh!* Flames rose in a circle around Kalterik. To be precise, it wasn't fire but the succubus's dark red demonic energy, but Kalterik's face instantly turned pale. It seemed as if the most terrible moment in his memory was being reenacted.

"N-no. Huff..."

Kalterik gasped as he fell to his knees. Harenir, who had been chasing the succubus, also arrived at the scene and called out to him with a flustered face.

"...Sir."

"Kalterik!"

Just then, Mela also joined after clearing away the tree prison that had been blocking the center of the hall, and was shocked. As everyone froze, the succubus laughed loudly.

[Nobody move. Shall we see what happens to this one if you take even a single step?]

It was clearly a threat, but Harenir didn't readily move his feet. *Oh, is this the real attitude when a hostage is taken?*

He watched the scene curiously from behind. His figure seemed to be perfectly hidden in the shadows, unnoticed by the succubus. He highly appreciated the gloomy—no, stealth ability engraved in Isaph's body.

If it was a weapon that didn't move even a step, he happened to have one...

### Chapter 34

However, as he was hesitating due to a subtle lingering uneasiness about using necromancy in a sacred place, *whoosh!* The demonic energy surrounding Kalterik intensified. Dark red energy spread like a heat haze from the fingertips of the succubus reaching towards Kalterik's head.

The more he inhaled it, the more Kalterik seemed to be caught in a moment of memory, sobbing while kneeling.

"Ah, Dad. Mom..."

Kalterik cried like a child, choking himself. At first, he thought Kalterik was fumbling at his throat because he was having difficulty breathing from inhaling smoke, but that wasn't it. It seemed that the more he suffered from the succubus's nightmare, the more his consciousness blurred, making him move according to the demon's will.

The succubus burst into laughter.

[Yes! That's the expression! I love faces crushed by despair like this so much!]

"Huu, huff..."

[That's why you alone survived. Come here, baby...]

As if it had read some memory from Kalterik's trauma, the succubus mimicked someone's voice and taunted him. Kalterik's face contorted even more horribly.

*Hmm.* *Hostage taking, 1 out. Trauma stimulation, 2 out. Filial impiety, 3 out. Three strikes and you're out, I declare this invalid.*

"Drop it."

As black-purple energy spread from his outstretched hand, undead were summoned simultaneously. *The responsibility for using necromancy in a sacred place lies entirely with that holy knight. And with that demon over there, isn't the sacrilege greater on that side?* While making meaningless internal arguments, he sent the undead flying.

*Whoosh!* The succubus was suddenly pushed to the side, away from Kalterik. The demon, falling on its backside, shouted irritably.

[W-what is this now?!]

"I didn't move."

Raising both hands, he answered as if he were truly innocent. He wanted to pull Kalterik out from between the flames of demonic energy if possible, but that was impossible. Still, by dropping the succubus, that is, by diverting its concentration elsewhere, Kalterik's nightmare seemed to have faded somewhat...

The regrettable part was that the succubus's diverted concentration was now directed at him. At his nonchalant answer, the succubus's red eyes glinted with murderous intent.

[I'll kill you in the most painful way possible!]

The succubus cursed in a voice so sharp it seemed it might tear, and flew at him. *Whoosh!* The undead came in front of him and blocked the succubus.

[You think you can stop me with this?!]

*Probably not...*

For the first time, he used a skill without the status window. It seemed that once you moved according to the status window's instructions, you could absorb that skill. So he was able to summon undead just by vaguely tracing past memories.

But perhaps because his skill proficiency hadn't increased, the undead were much more blurry and unstable than those he had summoned in the Encroachment Zone. Though the nauseating revulsion that came with following the status window's instructions was less, his energy was depleted instantly. It felt like the clumsy frustration of manually operating after disabling auto-hunting mode.

However, he couldn't hope for help from others now. When the succubus flew at him, it came around in a wide arc, and at that time, its wings shattered a pillar, causing the ceiling to collapse as well.

*Rumble—!* The falling debris created another wall. The only humans trapped in this narrow space were him and Kalterik. Noi's voice calling their names from outside could be faintly heard.

The succubus seemed to be planning to kill him and then use Kalterik as a hostage again, and outside, they couldn't readily break through the debris. Not only could they not accurately determine Kalterik's position, but the vibrations in the floor were also ominous, as if monsters were gathering from outside as well.

Though Kalterik seemed to have escaped the nightmare, he was still struggling, sobbing while kneeling. He shook his head roughly repeatedly as if trying to shake off the scene from that day.

"Huff, hah, s-save me..."

*The one who really needs saving right now is me, damn it.*

*Whoosh! Whip! Bang, boom—!* Continuous loud noises erupted in front of him. The succubus threw away the undead blocking its path and charged at him, and he was barely managing to summon undead again to stop the demon's attacks. He was reaching his limit.

In fact, he had accidentally glimpsed Kalterik's trauma earlier.

He had just used the undead to try to separate the succubus from Kalterik, but at that time, the vision of the undead that had wedged between the two was shared with him. As the undead brushed against the dark red energy that the succubus was sending into Kalterik's head, a certain scene flashed before his eyes.

A house being devoured and destroyed by a massive fire, and the sound of a child sobbing as if about to lose breath in front of it. It was probably a memory from Kalterik's childhood. Given the huge footprints near the house, it was likely an attack by monsters.

It seemed Kalterik had lost his family before his eyes as his house burned down from a monster attack. The flames created by the succubus's demonic energy had evoked that memory and broken him.

*Yes,* he could understand. Originally, righteous hot-blooded characters are often given such sad backstories. Now that the game has progressed to some extent, it's revealing character side stories.

What should a player say in this situation? Should he pat his shoulder and offer a warm word of comfort? Death isn't a big deal. I know because I've died, your family has probably been reincarnated in another world? No, aside from the content being lame...

To begin with, Isaph wasn't the type to offer such empathy and comfort. If he spoke like that, wouldn't he look like he was possessed by an evil spirit?

So, for him, who needed to somehow wake Kalterik up right now.

"Sigh, Kalterik."

As he called his name while exhaling a long breath, the guy turned to look at him with a start. The shock therapy worked since he had never called him by name before. Perhaps he was angry that a death row inmate like Isaph dared to casually call the name of the vice-commander of the Holy Knight Order.

So he looked straight at him and said,

"If you die, I'm going to absorb your soul."

"W-what did you say?"

"I said I'll subjugate you as an undead and use you like a slave."

He deliberately chose his words and delivered them in the calmest declarative form possible. He didn't forget to glance at him as if to say, if you want to become my undead, just stay there.

At first, Kalterik just blinked blankly as if he didn't understand, but then gradually his face contorted with anger and.

"What nonsensical bullshit are you spouting, you gloomy bastard!"

*Whoosh!* Holy power erupted like an explosion at the end of his increasingly loud voice. Golden energy surged brilliantly like waves around Kalterik, engulfing the flames of demonic energy.

The memory that had dragged him into despair for the past few minutes, no, perhaps for many years, dissipated before his eyes.

It was quite a cool and dazzling scene, and he couldn't help but admire it, but the phenomenon didn't stop there. *Whoosh!* As if to completely stamp out even the embers, the holy power spread fiercely like waves, and... something rose between them.

His gaze was drawn to a pure white sphere floating in the air.

Not only him, but even the succubus who had discovered it stopped its actions. It had been charging at him so frighteningly until now, but it suddenly stopped and muttered while looking at the pure white sphere.

[Arux...]

The holy relic that his companions had been searching for so desperately, the small sun, had now risen.

A dazzling sun rising in a cramped space blocked on all sides by debris, where not even moonlight entered. Suddenly, he remembered the inscription they had found on the first emperor's tombstone.

[If you earnestly wish, the sun will always rise for you.

It will save you from the darkest despair.]

*Ah*, it didn't simply mean that the holy relic was hidden in the east where the sun rises. It meant that it would come when the one trapped in the darkest despair wished to rise, when they held that will.

Behind the holy relic, he could faintly see a soul. The old man wearing ordinary and even somewhat worn clothes had no ornaments, but an undeniable dignity could be felt.

It was the soul of the first emperor.

It seemed that until now, the emperor had been buried in the deepest part of this temple along with the small sun to protect it. As the soul's purpose was to hide the sun from unrighteous beings, it was quickly dissipating as soon as it rose now.

Nevertheless, as if happy to finally be able to give the sun to the right being, the emperor smiled without any lingering attachment and handed the holy relic to Kalterik.

"Your Majesty..."

Kalterik knelt on one knee with an overwhelmed face and received it with both hands outstretched. This scene was sacred enough to be preserved as a holy painting, but unfortunately, there was one fucking unrighteous being in this space.

[That, I will take it!]

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The succubus flew swiftly towards Kalterik, as if shot from a bow. This happened just before Kalterik could receive the holy relic.

*Whoosh!*

The holy relic rose high into the air as if trying to avoid the unrighteous energy. The succubus glared at the ceiling, its eyes bulging. An obsession bordering on compulsion rippled in the demon's red eyes.

[I must have it. I must take it!]

With only one wing remaining, the succubus couldn't fly high. But as if trying to reach the small sun somehow, it stretched out its hand and leaped up, stepping on the debris.

"Where do you think you're going!"

A collision occurred as Kalterik tried to stop the succubus. As the holy power emanating from his swung greatsword clashed with the succubus's demonic energy, *boom!* An explosion occurred. Even he, standing behind, was swept up in the aftermath and staggered. Dust spread thickly like fog.

That explosion led to an unexpected result.

"Sir Kalterik...!"

As the debris that had been trapping him and Kalterik like a hemisphere flew away in the explosion, they were reunited with their companions on the other side.

Noi called out Kalterik's name joyfully, Mela's eyes widened, and Harenir quickly scanned the space. Monster corpses were visible all around him. It seemed he had slaughtered all the monsters the succubus had summoned.

Harenir's gaze fell on the holy relic floating high in the ceiling. It had risen much higher than before the explosion, and though the emperor's soul had disappeared as if swept away by demonic energy, it seemed his last will had moved the holy relic.

"Commander, the holy relic has appeared!"

Kalterik reported loudly. Harenir slowly nodded, seeming to have inferred the situation from Kalterik's use of "appeared" rather than "found".

"Well done. Now then..."

The tip of the pure white holy sword pointed towards the succubus. The holy sword, which bore not a single bloodstain despite having cut down numerous monsters, inspired awe born of dissonance as much as it looked noble. While monsters had been miserably killed by being cut with the sword, the sword itself was shining purely white.

[Ha, haha, kyahahahaha!]

Suddenly, the succubus burst into mad laughter. Its pink hair swayed in the air as it bent over, holding its stomach and laughing.

Just as he was wondering if it had lost its mind in the face of impending death, the succubus raised its head. It glared straight at each of the companions and spat out as if grinding its teeth.

[Do you think I would die at the hands of mere humans?]

"Yes."

[Kyahahahaha! Our era hasn't come yet, that absolutely can't happen!]

It was a conversation where one didn't know whether to be surprised at Harenir's calm response in this situation, or to worry about the mental state of the succubus still cackling with laughter.

Anyway, thinking that they would take care of it now, he was about to relax. His energy had completely drained as the summoning of the undead had been cut off when the explosion occurred earlier. As he held his dizzy head, suddenly a wind blew.

A very chilly and sticky wind.

Gray mist began to spread around the succubus. This change started from the moment it raised both hands and chanted words he couldn't understand at all. It wasn't the imperial language, nor the divine language. Was it the demon language then? From the moment he heard it, he felt a surge of revulsion.

Kalterik, seeming to sense something was wrong, charged at the succubus. He leaped as if to strike down with his greatsword, but *bang!* He was repelled and crashed into the wall.

Through the mist, *tap, tap,* the succubus walked out. The leg that had been limping until just now was straightened, the wound on its shoulder disappeared, and even the torn wing was regrown. While all these changes were shocking, the most surprising part was...

[You, kihit, kik, know nothing.]

The third horn that had appeared in the center of the succubus's forehead.

Clearly, until just now, there had only been two horns on either side of its forehead, but suddenly an additional horn had grown. However, not only was it quite different in shape from the existing horns, but most importantly, its 'color' was different. The existing horns were dark red, but the horn in the center of the forehead was dark gray.

A horn that looked as if it had faded to a colorless state. It felt similar to what he had seen in the Encroachment Zone. A color that held no hue, no warmth.

*Flap!*

The succubus flapped its wings widely. A fierce gust of wind spread like a whirlwind, making it difficult to maintain balance. Now the color of the demonic energy flowing from the succubus was not dark red, but only pitch black like an abyss.

[I'll plunge you all into nightmares...]

*Bang!* Before the demon's gloomy declaration could properly end, a loud noise erupted.

"There's no need to go to such trouble. This is already enough."

Harenir approached the succubus, breaking through the fiercely blowing wind. With just a light swing of his sword, he split the storm-like demonic energy and reached right in front of the demon.

The succubus twisted its lips and attacked, *whoosh!* raising its claws. Ominous demonic energy scratched past Harenir's face. His left forehead was deeply cut, blood splattered on his golden hair and poured down, covering his blue eyes. The wound was deep.

*Gasp,* he inhaled in surprise, but when Harenir smoothly brushed his hair back with his hand, only a perfectly clean forehead was visible. The wound healed so quickly that it disappeared in the blink of an eye. Only the faint golden holy power swirling around seemed to indicate that a scar had existed.

Even though it had been a serious wound that soaked half his face in blood, there was not a single blemish on him. It was an amazing recovery ability no matter how many times he saw it. The bloodstain remaining on his cheek felt strange.

Harenir smiled, "Huh huh."

"You were avoiding the face until just now, have you gotten bored of it?"

[You, annoying human...!]

He swung the holy sword diagonally downward. The succubus hurriedly dodged backward, but was already deeply cut from the nape of its neck to its collarbone. Black blood poured out and the succubus screamed.

The succubus, hastily flying into the air, breathed roughly. It trembled with rage, and then finally spread its arms wide. *Whoosh,* black energy spread throughout the entire space.

[All shall fall into nightmares!]

This time too, Harenir tried to leap to block the demon's suspicious attack, but at that moment, Noi collapsed behind him.

"Ugh, urgh...!"

As if the demonic energy spread by the succubus had the power to plunge one into dreams, Noi suffered, clutching his head. Being a fairy, he seemed particularly vulnerable to demonic energy.

*Kekeke,* the succubus laughed and flapped its wings. Harenir, perceiving that it would take a hostage again like before, quickly moved to block in front of Noi, and in fact, he had expected the same, but...

The direction the succubus headed was right in front of him.

[First, you who toyed with me.]

It was quite a proactive succubus. Originally, dream demons were supposed to invade the dreams of sleeping humans, but this one was making people dream first.

He blankly watched the two hands approaching his face. If those hands grabbed his head, would he be trapped in trauma like Kalterik had been? Would he see Isaph's memories, or 'his' memories? While having detached questions, he suddenly came to a strange thought.

"Dreams..."

Somewhere, dreams are described as the realm of the spirit. That they are closely related to the soul, and thus dreams are interpreted as messages conveyed by the soul. The most common example is the experience of seeing memories of past lives in dreams.

If that concept were extended, perhaps the ability used by the succubus was similar in context to Isaph's necromancy. If so, could the ability of this being, which the empire condemned yet hadn't dared to capture until now, possibly...

Surpass this succubus?

He stretched out his hand towards the succubus. The answer to the question is obtained by trying it directly. Just before the succubus's hand could touch his head, he extended his hand towards its nape, spreading his fingers.

"Fall."

Black-purple energy spread rapidly. He deliberately aimed for the wound Harenir had inflicted. *Crackle!* The pitch-black demonic energy and his energy collided. Having already expended a lot of energy summoning undead earlier, the energy that had barely remained plummeted to the bottom.

Though his mind reeled, thankfully his guess leaned towards being correct. *Whizzz—* The succubus's soul shook as if about to be ejected, then barely returned to its body.

[You... you! How dare you do this to me!]

The succubus, which had been dazed for a moment, looked at him in shock. The demon immediately gathered demonic energy in both hands. *Rumble!* Vicious energy gathered in its hands enough to shake the ground. The succubus glared fiercely, as if to punish him for momentarily confusing it.

[I'll make you struggle in the most terrible nightmare!]

His body trembled with tension from the evil demonic energy. He blankly looked down at his trembling hands, clenching and unclenching them a couple of times.

[I'll very carefully...]

"Get lost."

He said, pressing his palm against the wound on the succubus's collarbone. He saw a possibility. If so, now it was time to make it possible.

He scraped the bottom of his already depleted energy and poured it all out. Black-purple energy burst out like spilled ink, and at some point, the purple color began to swirl more fiercely. His hair fluttered wildly in the wind blowing from the collision of energies.

The succubus's soul was repeatedly ejected and then returned to its body.

[Ah... kyaaa! ...aaaaargh!]

The demon's screams, breaking off, chillingly echoed through the space. Even in the midst of a headache that felt like his head might split, he gritted his teeth and endured. The succubus tried to resist, swinging its arms wildly, but... *thud,* finally its hands fell.

Almost simultaneously, his energy depleted and he staggered as he surveyed the situation. The succubus's bright red eyes rolled back.

*Did, did I defeat it?*

*...Wait, I shouldn't step on this flag.*

[Kyaaaaaaaaaaaaah!]

*Ugh, fuck.*

[I will surely curse you...!]

He almost let out a string of curses at the succubus's action of suddenly opening its eyes wide and screaming. He was so startled that he froze, unable to make a sound, when Harenir, who had approached just then, swung his sword upward with a *whoosh!*

*Thud, roll roll roll...*

The succubus's head, which had flown far, rolled on the floor, unable to even close its eyes.

### Chapter 36

Harenir supported him with his arm as he staggered and almost fell.

"...You."

Then he looked down at him with a very strange expression, and normally he would have rejected being held by him. But regrettably, *damn it,* he couldn't.

"Ah, it hurts."

The succubus's claws were embedded in his left arm. That vicious bastard had managed to thrust its hand into him in its final struggle. Even as the headless body of the succubus collapsed to the side, the claws stuck in his arm didn't come out. The succubus's arm dangled limply.

*Whoosh,* as Harenir removed it and rolled up the sleeve of his robe, he could see that his arm had rotted to a dark red color. As if he had been cursed.

After seeing that state with his own eyes, *urgh,* his stomach churned and terrible pain hit him. *Isn't it usually just bravado when villains shout about revenge or curses as they die? Then they die pathetically and nothing happens, that's the norm, right? Why is it only me who can't avoid the flag?*

With a sense of injustice, he grabbed Harenir one last time. He roughly swung his right hand and grasped what he assumed was Harenir's collar, and spoke. His vision was blurry.

"I, helped..."

Sadly, his plea for recognition of his help wasn't even completed before his consciousness cut off and his body collapsed. His vision flickered.

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He fell endlessly downward.

His whole body became damp like water-soaked cotton, unable to float up, and the more he tried to escape, the more his limbs were bound by seaweed. At some point, he was tormented by the sensation of floundering in the deep sea. The pressure of the deep sea constricted his body from all sides, and the seawater boiled bizarrely hot.

The heat was so intense that his body was beyond boiling and about to melt and crumble. *I have to avoid this. I have to escape.* As he struggled repeatedly with reflexive revulsion.

"Huff!"

He sat up abruptly, taking in a big breath. He touched his body while breathing roughly, still sitting up. He felt a strange sensation as if his entire body had melted and turned to liquid. Terrified, he hurriedly checked his body, then groaned painfully.

His left arm was still rotted black. Isn't it usually the rule in games that such things naturally disappear when you collapse and wake up? Shouldn't it be resolved with a potion, or glossed over with a description that days have passed and the body has recovered refreshingly when you wake up? At most, only a scar should remain like a medal.

He wanted to complain somewhere, but the throbbing pain spreading from his arm numbed his thoughts. He curled up, clutching his arm and groaning. He didn't even have the presence of mind to properly check which space the bed he was sitting on was in.

*Creak...*

Just then, the door opened and someone entered. The person seemed surprised to see him awake and hesitated at the doorway, but soon approached with large strides. A basin and towel were placed on the bedside table, which seemed out of place. As soon as the long, beautiful hand came into view, he recognized who it was.

Harenir. He reached out his hand to him and asked,

"How are you feeling?"

"Can't you tell by looking?"

He answered irritably. For some reason, he moved his body away as if fleeing from Harenir's hand, only showing his arm. His pale skin made the blackened, rotting wound even more noticeable. It wasn't Harenir's fault that he had been cursed, but he didn't know why he was reacting so sensitively.

He took a deep breath with his eyes tightly shut, and after calming down a bit, he asked. It must be because of the strange nightmare he had.

"...Don't you have a potion? The one I had at the historical hall was good."

"I've already given you several. But it just won't disappear with that."

"Ah..."

"It seems potions are effective in healing wounds and recovering energy, but they can't completely remove such an evil curse. It looks like it was limited to this extent because you were wearing the necklace..."

Harenir calmly explained the situation. Only then did he notice six or seven potion bottles on the bedside table. It seemed Harenir had been coming here continuously to feed him potions.

Next to them was a necklace that had lost its luster and turned black, which was the holy relic Harenir had given him when they first entered the Encroachment Zone. At that time, he had taken off the necklace he was wearing and handed it to him, and since he hadn't asked for it back, he had kept his mouth shut and continued to keep it.

His brazen stance was that since he had quietly accepted the collar around his neck, he should at least be given a good holy relic as a carrot. Thanks to that, the curse was partially blocked, but...

"It seems your body is too weak to push back the succubus's curse."

*Again, it's this weak body that's the problem?* He felt a surge of sorrow. He had secretly marveled at using the out-of-body skill just before, so this situation felt exactly like an equivalent exchange. He was amazed by Isaph's ability, but it became a minus because of that body. The balance was so well matched. It's exactly zero.

*Give me overtime pay plus hazard pay, damn it.* No, this should be treated as an industrial accident.

He fiddled with his arm while internally staging a pitiful protest. His thoughts had been jumping around wildly for a while now. Somehow, as if trying to compulsively avoid something, he kept trying to think of other things. His gaze wandered unsteadily around the space.

Harenir seemed to interpret this behavior as a question about the place, so he explained the room.

"You remember there were other buildings besides the temple on the sky island, right? Since it's a space that's been abandoned for about a thousand years, we found the most usable house and came in."

He nodded slowly, recalling the appearance of vines covering various places. Somehow the room was clean, it seemed his companions had found a decent house and tidied up the interior. The bed was very old, but there was even a blanket.

Still, were they taking care of him because he was injured, no, because he had dealt with the succubus? That must be why Harenir was kindly explaining things. He was someone who usually didn't properly answer questions he asked out loud.

And even now, after moving his lips a couple of times, he said,

"We received a lot of help this time. I also heard from Sir Kalterik..."

His tone was quite awkward, as if he hadn't expected to give such a greeting to him. Had his chanting about helping until the end influenced this greeting?

Clearly, Harenir's words were close to the hero's acknowledgment that he had so desperately wanted. Although he had a feeling that the quest couldn't possibly end in success already, knowing that three Encroachment Zones remained, right now, more than disappointment about that or anger at the vague form of the quest...

"Hah..."

He only wished for his terrible pain to disappear right now. His arm was throbbing and tingling. No, from there... was heat spreading?

*...Ah.*

"...Isaph?"

"Ah! So, be-bear, no, Kalterik, does he have any aftereffects from the nightmare?"

He asked incoherently. His instincts were warning him. That he shouldn't zone out even for a moment right now, that he needed to firmly fix his consciousness on something.

Harenir looked down at him with a very enigmatic expression. He tilted his head, either because his behavior seemed strange or because the content of his question was quite unexpected.

"Yes. He seems to be fine. ...Are you worried about him?"

"Not to that extent, hah, um, I mean, I accidentally glimpsed his trauma."

Again, words poured out without order. Just then, an oddly long sigh burst out in the middle, so he added more words to try to cover it up. It was just that the undead's vision was shared by chance, he didn't look on purpose. As he laid out his words like an excuse, Harenir shrugged.

"For a while after the human-demon war ended, neither demons nor monsters appeared. But after the Dium burned the continent, they started to show their faces again. Perhaps they perceived a gap had formed..."

"Ah..."

"So, the scene you probably saw was likely just before I met Sir Kalterik. I saved him when a monster hiding in the grass was about to pounce on him."

He ended up hearing about Harenir and Kalterik's first meeting by chance. It was when the Holy Knight Order had gone to rescue the villagers of a town devastated by monster attacks, and he had saved Kalterik, who was about to be killed by a monster, and even helped with his parents' funeral.

Was that why Kalterik blindly followed Harenir? The probability that he saw him in his holy knight uniform then and joined out of admiration... *Wait. Kalterik looks older than Harenir.*

"...To be active as a holy knight from such a young age, you must have had strong faith."

He knew that Harenir had become a holy knight at twelve, the youngest in history, but it seemed he hadn't just joined but had actually gone on rescue missions. Was someone destined to become a hero different from the start?

He seemed like a being who had lived purely and sacredly from childhood.

At his words, Harenir's eyes widened, then he smiled gently. He sometimes made such enigmatic smiles. It seemed there was a reason other than what he had guessed, but he didn't bother to correct it. The act of leaving a misunderstanding seemed like drawing a line, or perhaps he didn't care because he had lived under such views for a long time.

Still, perhaps considering his efforts this time, he answered in a soft tone.

"Yes. Both my parents were holy knights, so the environment I was exposed to from birth..."

For a while now, Harenir had been quite kindly receiving the conversation. It was an extremely rare moment where he was even telling stories about himself first, and not looking at him with disgust.

He really didn't have the slightest desire to break this good atmosphere.

"Ugh..."

Another strange sound escaped from his mouth. As soon as the sound close to a groan burst from his lips, he hurriedly covered his mouth with his hand.

### Chapter 37

He curled up as if hiding, startled.

"I'm, hah, having difficulty breathing right now."

He explained, burying his face in his raised knees. His pronunciation was slurred, so it probably sounded quite ridiculous. But he didn't have the presence of mind to care about such things. In fact, he had been painfully suppressing his body's abnormalities for a while now.

The heat that had spread from his arm, throbbing, now raced to the extremities of his body with a tingling sensation. Clearly, at first it had been just a pain like the spot where the claws had been embedded was aching, but at some point, it had begun to heat his body in a very strange way.

His breathing kept becoming irregular, and his body trembled. These changes caused his emotions to surge. The cause was obvious. He had been trying to ignore it, deliberately bringing up other topics to avoid it, but now he couldn't pretend not to know.

The succubus's curse.

Wasn't the future indicated by this combination of words obvious? After all, succubi are commonly used as symbols of lust. Since this succubus had been so unusual, he had tried to list other possibilities—maybe he would have nightmares, or suffer from trauma like Kalterik. In fact, he had desperately hoped for that. *Please, let it be nightmares, please.*

But inevitably his body gradually became strange, and he just wanted to cry. He couldn't even distinguish if he was crying out of anger or sobbing from suffering this strange sensation.

*Fuck, wasn't this game rated for 15-year-olds?*

As he internally protested that the game's age rating was in jeopardy, Harenir grabbed his shoulder and asked,

"Is the curse spreading? I had been suppressing it..."

"Don't touch me!"

*Whoosh!* He violently knocked away Harenir's hand. His nerves were on edge and he even shouted, but his action stopped abruptly.

He had clearly meant to shake off Harenir's hand. His body was so tense that it was sensitive even to minor contact, so he had tried to push him away, but paradoxically, at the moment he tried to knock the hand away, they made complete contact. When bare skin collided instead of touching through clothes, a completely different sensation came.

"Ah..."

It was probably close to a languid pleasure akin to relief.

Though he clearly hadn't wanted it, as soon as their hands touched, he liked it to the point of craving. He even became certain that this was the sensation he had been desperately longing for since the moment he woke up.

He barely held onto his reason and didn't commit the disgrace of seeking Harenir's hand again, but Harenir quietly looked down at him and reached out his hand first.

*Pat,* his hand touched his cheek.

"Haaah..."

A languid sigh escaped as he unknowingly buried his face in Harenir's hand as if yearning for it. He rubbed his cheek frantically against the large, firm hand and then... belatedly jerked back. Had he gone mad? No, he had gone mad. It was actually a proposition.

"I-I'm not doing this on purpose..."

"I know. You're seeking holy power."

"...Huh?"

While he spoke with his voice trembling in great confusion, Harenir remained calm. Come to think of it, he seemed to have said earlier that he had been 'suppressing the curse'.

"I was suppressing the demon's curse with holy power. It worked while you were unconscious, but now that you're awake, it's not working anymore. It seems the curse is awakening with you and spreading in earnest..."

He blinked at the calm tone, as if Harenir was studying the situation. While Harenir's attitude was bewildering, he also had a question.

"But why am I seeking holy power? Aren't they opposites..."

"The reason itself of being attracted because they're opposites, and the reason that your body is instinctively clinging to it because holy power can drive out demonic energy."

The action of showing his index and middle fingers while explaining was very kind. It seemed this body had become as weak as paper, but its survival instinct was unnecessarily strong and persisting.

That instinct was both ridiculous and tormenting because the object it sought was Harenir. What he had done with Harenir's hand just now was shameful even to think about again.

*Yes, so the solution now is...*

*Thud!*

"...Are you in your right mind?"

He had tried to slam his head against the wall, but Harenir quickly reached out his hand to stop him. The hand that covered his forehead hit the wall instead. Though it must have been quite painful, either because he didn't care since no wound would remain anyway, or because he was really bewildered by his action, Harenir just looked at him without showing any sign of pain.

But more than that, he was frustrated that Harenir's hand was now touching his forehead.

"Haaah... Aagh, get off! Don't touch me!"

Against his will, he rubbed his face against Harenir's palm again before jerking back and shouting. He must have looked like he was having a fit. This action clearly answered Harenir's earlier question with a 'No.'

There was no time for this kind of wrestling now. His breathing was already on the verge of panting, and the emotion that had been welling up for a while now was even making his eyes hot, as if trying to make him shed tears. His eyes were probably red too.

He glared at Harenir with the most ridiculous expression and said,

"You said, hah, the curse spreads in earnest when I'm awake. Then, sob, wouldn't it be fine if I collapse again? So, d-don't stop me."

He was determined to bring down this cursed body no matter what. As he tried to move again with this grave resolve, Harenir let out a sigh. Somehow, it sounded like a dry laugh.

"Are you going to sleep forever?"

"What? If I, I collapse, can't you, hah, suppress it again with your holy power?"

"How am I supposed to deal with something that's already started spreading throughout your body?"

"A hero, huu, can do it."

"Haha..."

Finally, Harenir laughed. It was a short, genuine laugh that burst out at a truly unexpected moment, and he covered his mouth with his hand as if trying to hide it. But when he met his eyes, which were demanding if he was laughing at his trust, it eventually spread into a smile. He buried his face in his hands and chuckled.

His shoulders shook slightly and even his golden hair swayed. *Is it funny? Is it funny, when someone is prepared to sleep forever and trying to slam their forehead against the wall?*

Only after laughing for a while did Harenir finally catch his breath and raise his head. He looked at him as if he had never imagined having such a conversation.

"I knew you talked a lot when you were flustered since we came here, but..."

"Hah, I'm not flustered, huu, I'm very serious right now."

"Well, we'll need your cooperation to get out of here anyway..."

Harenir muttered something while ignoring his protest. Somehow, it sounded like a plausible excuse for what he was about to do.

Soon, Harenir sat down heavily on the edge of the bed.

Startled by this action, he scrambled to the corner of the bed, curling up. *Damn it,* the ancient bed was so small that he couldn't move far away. Harenir just shrugged very nonchalantly and said,

"Let's deal with it quickly and get it over with. I'll help you."

"W-what are we dealing with?"

"The succubus's curse. To put it intuitively."

Harenir smiled, his eyes crinkling.

"You're in heat right now."

It was a word he could hardly believe came from the mouth of someone who had devoutly served as a holy knight from a young age, and who had been praised as a hero after ascending to the position of commander right after his coming-of-age ceremony.

So he gave him time to recover, denying that he had heard wrong, or guessing that it was a slip of the tongue, but the blue eyes staring at him remained calm.

He reached out his hand, fumbling.

"F-fall."

If he could detach Harenir's soul from his body, wouldn't the game end? Killing the hero, who was clearly the protagonist of this game, would go down in history as one of the greatest bad endings.

If he wrote about this on a community forum with the title "What's the worst ending you've seen in a game?", he'd probably get comments like "The writer of such a post is the worst", "Why did you call us?", "Close the shutters" and other criticisms.

"Do you think you can kill me?"

"W-we'll know if I try."

"Is that so... Then would you like to try?"

Harenir leaned forward as if he too was curious. His action of willingly offering his neck made him flustered instead. His fingertips were just about to touch Harenir's straight neck.

*Is he joking now?* *Is he confident that as the son loved by God, he won't be affected by this mere necromancy?* *Or has he judged that Isaph has weakened and is now groaning from the curse, so he's no match anyway?*

*Or else...* as if he was wishing for an end, even if it had to be like this.

Even in his dazed state, he could clearly judge that Harenir's behavior was strange. At first he had felt it was deception, but Harenir's expression was too enigmatic. On the other hand, feeling uncomfortable at the thought of touching Harenir, he quietly curled his fingertips, and Harenir smiled gently.

"Why? You said my soul was beautiful, have you lost interest now?"

"...I have no intention, hah, of taking your soul."

"I thought you coveted Sir Kalterik's soul, so your heart has changed, I see."

"You, you're talking, very strangely..."

### Chapter 38

He let out an exasperated sigh, and Harenir just shrugged.

"I'll still give you credit for your confidence. To make such a threat in this situation..."

"W-wait, don't touch me, sob."

"Is that the level of confidence needed to boldly use necromancy in the Holy Empire?"

*Thud,* Harenir's hand touched his face. He flinched and turned his head as soon as Harenir reached out, but his cheek was inevitably caught.

The touch that enveloped him to prevent further evasion wasn't particularly strong, but from the moment their bare skin made contact, a languid sensation spread. Even without Harenir actively pouring out holy power, his entire body seemed drawn to him.

As if attracted to the opposing energy, and instinctively seeking salvation.

Slowly, Harenir's hand traced down his jawline. At that leisurely touch, the heat he had barely been suppressing until now surged up as if rebounding. *Thump!* His heart beat heavily, and his breathing collapsed at once, threatening to let out a sob.

As he endured, biting his lip hard, Harenir gently caressed his neck. He should have grabbed that bastard's neck earlier, but having missed that chance, now his own neck was caught instead. His neck fit snugly between Harenir's thumb and index finger.

"Huff, huu, w-what are you doing?"

*Is he going to kill me now? Is he planning to execute me by strangling?* As he asked, panting, Harenir just moved his fingers. As if fascinated by how much thinner the neck was than he had thought.

Moreover, his gaze felt intense, as if concentrating. The touch that enveloped his nape and slowly stroked downward caused a ticklish heat to rise. *Clink, clink,* the collar on his neck occasionally shook, the sensation of it brushing against his skin was excessively stimulating.

Feeling like a toy, he struggled to break free, but he had already fled to the corner of the bed and had nowhere to escape. Slowly, Harenir's hand moved downward.

"Y-you, hah, ah, you're a holy knight, so why...!"

"Yes, I've been a holy knight for 15 years now, since I was twelve. Why?"

"If you're a holy knight, huu, shouldn't you be chaste?"

"This won't defile me."

Harenir's answer was calm. *What, is he saying he's so noble that this level won't contaminate him?* He shook his head, groaning. Though he knew nothing about the doctrine of their Order, surely all religions were more or less similar.

"To, to serve Solnium, you should stay away from, lust...!"

At the mention of God's name, Harenir abruptly stopped his actions. Just as he thought he had finally made a valid point and was about to feel relieved, Harenir just stared at him blankly.

There was no emotion in those azure eyes. No guilt, no embarrassment, not even heat.

"Did I say that I was in heat for you?"

"...Huh?"

"I only said I would help you."

He blinked at the very calm voice. Come to think of it, his clothes hadn't been removed at all until now, and not even one button of Harenir's shirt had been undone. The hand that Harenir had lowered below his neck had checked the condition of his left arm and then traced with his gaze the direction the curse was spreading...

"The holy relic has blocked it, so the curse isn't too severe. So if we just release the heat once, it should subside adequately..."

There was an action that could be inferred from the expression "release". He blankly stared at Harenir's hand, and Harenir nodded as if confirming the correct answer. Where Harenir's gaze then flicked downward was obvious. His crotch had been swollen for quite some time.

*Whoosh,* heat rose to his face. His ears burned with shame. Right, Harenir had only used the expression "help" from the beginning, and the only one he had referred to as being in heat was him. It was just that he, steeped in demonic energy, was instinctively drawn to a being full of holy power, so he was merely offering to lend a hand.

He was ashamed of his misunderstanding, but more than that, the form of help Harenir was offering was itself embarrassing.

"Isn't j-just touching enough?"

"The curse is already spreading throughout your body, and that won't be resolved just by me pouring holy power into you. You should know that much."

"So I'm saying there's no need for you to directly touch th-th-there...!"

He too knew the state of his body. He instinctively felt that it wasn't a problem that would naturally subside with time, and that being surrounded by Harenir's holy power alone, like at the historical hall, wouldn't be enough.

When Harenir had grabbed his neck earlier, even though he wasn't particularly being choked, he had panted, feeling a distorted sexual sensation. As much as he wanted to deny it, at that moment his lower region had become painfully swollen and even wet.

So he would admit that he needed to release the heat once, that is... he needed to ejaculate, but he felt averse to the idea that Harenir had to touch him directly. It was the last shred of dignity he had barely managed to grasp, but...

"Ah. You're saying you'll masturbate with my hand."

At Harenir's summary, he felt the blood drain from his face. Whether he felt insulted, or whether he had intuitively realized that was the future of his thread-thin dignity.

"N-no, if you just hold my arm..."

"You'll rub against it like before, right?"

"..."

As he bit his lower lip hard, Harenir calmly said,

"You have two choices. Either you use my hand as a tool to masturbate yourself, or I'll just release you while you keep your eyes closed."

He disliked both options. He wanted to argue that the choices themselves were wrong, but the one to complain to was already dead. He thought the first option might give him some agency, but it was clear that would create an even more ridiculous scene.

In fact, from the moment he asked Harenir to hold any part of his body, it meant he would masturbate in Harenir's presence. Telling him to close his eyes would be meaningless, wouldn't it?

Feeling indignant, he stubbornly kept his mouth shut. He was angry that strange breathing sounds were about to burst out even in this situation, and *damn it,* his shoulders were trembling. As he turned his head to the side and just stared at the wall, flinching, Harenir let out a small sigh.

"I know. I know this isn't a reaction because you're excited, but a phenomenon caused by the succubus's curse. So just think of this as treatment."

Speaking in the most calm voice, Harenir moved his hand. His touch heading straight for the waistband showed no hesitation. There was no foreplay, nor was it needed. His member was already fully erect and dripping fluid from the tip.

"Ah, sob...!"

His member sprang out as soon as Harenir slightly lowered his pants and just moved his underwear a bit. Harenir wrapped his hand around it without any change in expression. Though it was just barely grasped, an intense pleasure came. It was a stimulation of a completely different dimension from when his face or neck had been touched earlier.

The moment Harenir's hand touched the most heated part, his nape tingled and his vision turned white. He had only expected a languid sense of relief at most, but he groaned with sexual pleasure, his hips lifting. His curled toes repeatedly scratched at the bed.

The fragments of reason breaking in real-time screamed that he was crazy, but he couldn't escape. Even in this situation, he only thought that he didn't want to move away from that hand.

"Huu, ah, hah, wait..."

Barely managing to grab Harenir's hand as his state of pursuing only pleasure felt strange. It was meant to be an act of restraining him, but their bare skin touched again, and before he knew it, he was caressing the back of that hand. *Fuck,* his body was moving on its own. *Give me the fainting function.* While cursing internally, he hurriedly moved the position of his hand.

He barely managed to grasp Harenir's sleeve. Out of breath, *sob, huu,* as he struggled to regulate his breathing, Harenir spoke in a monotone voice.

"Wouldn't just staying still end this situation faster?"

Did he even know that his calm behavior was making him more ashamed? Not that he wanted him to react differently, but it was painful to be the only one panting in front while the other remained so composed. His desperate struggles probably looked like tantrums.

Finally, *plop,* a tear fell from his eye.

This absolutely wasn't crying from sadness, it was just that tears that had naturally welled up as his body heated flowed down. However, the situation being what it was made his frustration surge even more.

"I'm not crying because I'm upset."

He explained, knowing it was ridiculous. He had expected Harenir to sneer, but unexpectedly, he remained silent. After moving his lips a couple of times, Harenir said,

"...You helped in many ways on the sky island this time, and we need you to use your power for our return tomorrow. To do that, we need to eliminate this problem now."

"..."

"I told you it's treatment, didn't I?"

It was a voice that sounded, just a little, as if he was trying to soothe him. That this was being done solely for that purpose, that if he had to name it, it was a repayment for today and an effort for tomorrow. Harenir's voice always had the power to sound reasonable, naturally persuading as one listened.

So, as if relying on that, as if evading, he nodded in affirmation.

"Hah, ah..."

Only after confirming his response did Harenir begin to move his hand. He slowly stroked upward, as if caressing, what he had just been holding. The fluid oozing from the tip wet his fingers.

That sight was truly embarrassing and shameful, yet he was infuriated that it felt good. He wished his current feeling of pleasure was just an illusion, but that euphoria only grew stronger.

### Chapter 39

The touch of the firm palm enveloping and stroking the shaft felt good, and even the sensation of the thumb circling the glans was thrillingly electrifying. Exhausted from wrestling with all sorts of emotions, his body was swept more quickly into the swamp of sexual sensation.

The heat that had started from the wound on his left arm and spread throughout his body now converged to a single point. It felt as if all his nerve endings were twisted into that one handful of Harenir's hand. Before he knew it, he was responding to each of Harenir's touches, and the movement of those fingers was all he was conscious of.

The intense heat melted his brain. As the hand stroking his lower region sped up, his moans threatened to become more explicit. *Nng,* at the sound that was almost like crying, he hurriedly bit his lip.

"Sob, huu, mmph."

Blood flowed, but he didn't care. If he could just stop these sounds, he'd be fine even if he collapsed from excessive blood loss. *...Wouldn't that actually be beneficial?*

Thinking it was a very reasonable judgment, he bit down even harder. As his body heated up, it became more difficult to suppress his moans, but he persevered, digging his front teeth into his lower lip. He covered his mouth with both hands.

At some point, he was making groaning sounds inside his mouth. The moaning sounds were resonating in his throat, and around that time, Harenir let out a small sigh. It was close to an incredulous chuckle.

"Just make noise."

The words telling him to breathe comfortably, that he wouldn't mind, sounded quite merciful. As if he hadn't expected him to endure so stubbornly, Harenir looked him over and reached out his hand. While still caressing his lower region with his right hand, he used his left hand to tidy his disheveled hair. It was a mess, soaked with sweat.

His head had been shaking this way and that as he writhed from the stimulation, so his vision had been partially obscured by his black hair. When Harenir brushed it away with his hand, he felt aggrieved to see him clearly. He almost rubbed his cheek against Harenir's hand again without realizing it.

The tip of Harenir's index finger briefly brushed his eye. He seemed to have wiped away a tear.

"I think it's the first time I've seen color in your face."

Harenir muttered as if to himself. It was understandable that he found it interesting, as the face that had been so pale it could be mistaken for an evil spirit until now was completely flushed red. That made his emotions well up. Both Harenir's kindness and these merciful touches all made him feel miserable.

He shook his head vigorously, shaking off Harenir's hand, and said,

"This... let's pretend it never happened tomorrow..."

His voice trembled with a sob, coming out almost like a plea. But he didn't care whether his words sounded like an earnest request or if they sounded like he was desperately clinging to Harenir.

"I saved your subordinates, didn't I? This is, sob, beyond the Encroachment Zone search we initially agreed on, but I still helped, so don't remember what happened today. Huu, I won't ask for anything else..."

He struggled to continue speaking. In truth, he didn't think he had saved Kalterik or Noi, he had just acted according to the quest to help the hero, but he deliberately called it help. Moreover, even if Harenir said the sky island was part of the Encroachment Zone search, he stubbornly separated it.

At first, he had demanded recognition of his help for the quest's success, and if he aimed for more, he would have asked not only for a reduced sentence but also for additional compensation. But now, none of that mattered. If he could trade all his hardships so far for this one thing, he would agree without hesitation. No, he would even stake his future hardships.

*So please.*

"Let's pretend nothing happened between you and me."

"..."

"I'm going to act like I don't know anything, ugh..."

The packaging of this act as repayment or treatment was all meaningless. He just wanted to erase this memory itself. Like deleting play records in a game.

*Fuck...* He barely swallowed the curses that kept trying to burst out. It wasn't that he was holding back because he was nice, but if he spoke out loud, he felt like he would burst into tears out of anger. Even now, tears were probably hanging at the corners of his eyes. Fearing that Harenir might touch them again out of curiosity, he covered his face with both hands as if hiding it.

If Harenir's hand approached, he would probably pant and rub his face against it like an animal again.

"You said you're good at enduring terrible things, right? I'm also, hah, enduring something terrible right now. So... let's pretend nothing happened today, huu..."

It was a mutually beneficial agreement since they, no, both he and him were in a situation of endurance. Moreover, wasn't the reason he came here now simply because he couldn't ask his subordinate holy knights to do this, so he stepped up himself? He was quite certain, but for some reason, there was no answer from Harenir.

He became irritated at the lack of any sound or response. *Are you ignoring me now?* He removed his hands abruptly, only to immediately meet blue eyes. It was a gaze that seemed to have been staring at him all along.

"..."

Harenir seemed to find it strange that it was him making such statements first. Their gazes intertwined silently at close range, and then Harenir nodded.

"Alright."

It was a ready answer, as if there was no reason for him to refuse either.

As the tension dissipated with a thud and relief washed over him, Harenir moved his hand again. He stroked the shaft of the penis diagonally while moving it up and down. The sensation of the skin sliding seemed stronger than before.

"Huung, ah, wait, mmph."

A moan escaped at the intense stimulation. Embarrassed by the sound filled with nasality, even if brief, he quickly closed his mouth, furrowing his brow. As he bit his lower lip again, which was already torn and ragged from bleeding, Harenir stopped him.

Pressing down on his lip firmly with his thumb, Harenir said,

"It's going to disappear tomorrow anyway, is there any need to hurt yourself?"

"Huah, hand, nng, take your hand away..."

"We've used up all the potions, so we can't even treat it now."

The voice reciting the reason was quite calm. He wondered if it was just a minor lip injury, and if he was the only one uncomfortable, but Harenir's voice still had an unnecessary ability to mesmerize people. Struggling with sexual sensations, he couldn't make proper judgments and just ended up nodding.

At that compliance, Harenir smiled gently.

"That's right. It's something neither you nor I will remember."

"Nng, hut, ah, don't grip that so tightly..."

"It's nothing at all..."

Harenir's behavior of repeating the statements he had made was puzzling but also welcome. As he slowly nodded his head as if it was fine, chewing over each word, he felt a sense of satisfaction at having reached a very good agreement. So his resistance to this situation completely disappeared.

"Hah... Just a little more..."

He buried his face against Harenir's hand, which was still pressing down on his lower lip, as if yearning for it. It was an act done out of wanting to get a little closer, but unintentionally, he ended up swallowing Harenir's thumb. *No, not this.* He wanted a wider surface area.

As he groaned and spat out the thumb, shaking his head, Harenir chuckled and moved his hand. The moment his cheek touched the large palm, a welcome pleasure rushed in. As he acknowledged the hand he had been trying to avoid all along, and the chilling sexual sensation from that contact, the heat throughout his body boiled.

*Hah,* even as he rubbed his cheek against the palm as if burying himself in it, Harenir didn't say anything particular. He just quietly offered his hand to him, then slightly moved his index finger to caress the corner of his eye. Was it an impulse, or was he curious about the reddened eye area again?

"..."

What expression was he making now? He was curious, but with his vision blurred by tears, he couldn't look up at him accurately. In fact, more than that, all his concentration was now focused solely on rubbing his cheek against the palm.

It was a very straight, beautiful hand, but it was firm, probably from holding a sword. Moreover, it was so large that it seemed like it could encompass his entire face. As he fully indulged in feeling Harenir's palm, his lower region became even tighter, and he lowered his own hand.

The desire for climax had grown so strong that he forgot his shame and grabbed his own member, shaking it. He felt Harenir hesitate as their fingers intertwined with Harenir's hand already gripping it, but he had no room to mind him now. He just moaned, lifting his hips.

Probably, *no,* certainly, it was close to the sight of masturbating with his hand.

But this would all disappear. Reminding himself of only that, he blindly pursued pleasure. Before he knew it, he was letting out moans close to sobs, rubbing his face, hot with fever, against Harenir's firm hand.

"Huuut..."

Finally, he reached a thrilling climax. It was an ecstasy that seemed to go beyond making his head dizzy, completely bleaching it and turning him into an idiot. He had expected to feel terrible after ejaculating like this, but an overwhelming pleasure that prevented even such judgment struck his head.

He curled up tightly and trembled violently. *Splash, splash,* the ejaculation continued for a long time. Was it because of the succubus's curse, or because this body was originally so distant from such sexual sensations that it took a long time? He blankly lowered his gaze, then quickly turned his head away when he saw the white fluid trickling down their intertwined fingers.

He felt a gaze directed at him, but he just stared at the wall, panting. He decided not to judge whether the reason his head was spinning was because he had seen such an intensely erotic sight, or because he had newly recognized the owner of the hand overlapping his.

It was a night that would disappear tomorrow.

### Chapter 40

The next day.

He woke up to the sound of Noi actively running around the field from the morning. His laughter, bursting out like a child's, was incredibly bright. As he got up dazedly and unconsciously moved towards the sound, the bright scenery of the sky island came into view.

It was a completely different landscape from what he had seen in the deep night.

The verdant field boasted fresh vitality under the sunlight, and the wildflowers blooming here and there swayed in the gentle breeze, releasing a fresh fragrance. Occasionally, white butterflies fluttered by, and in the distance, the foam created by the falling waterfall sparkled like jewels.

Everywhere his gaze touched was dazzling. Was it so beautiful because it was a space created by nature after being abandoned for a thousand years, or was such an amazing view spread out because it had truly been touched by God's hand?

It was a space that received the sun's light first and fully. Even when he saw it last night, he thought it looked like heaven, but seeing it in the bright daylight reinforced that thought even more. It was enough to make even non-existent faith arise.

Noi was lightly jumping around, his ears fully exposed.

"Noi, at this rate, aren't you really going to grow wings?!"

"The fairy race lost their wings over a hundred or two hundred years ago. But... somehow, I feel like they might really grow if we stay here long enough!"

Noi answered Kalterik's shout innocently. At first, he pointed out the error as if Kalterik's words weren't reasonable at all, but then he nodded with a broad smile. Over there, Mela was also crouching down, observing the wildflowers.

It was such a peaceful scene that he stood in the shadow of a building, blankly watching. He was calming his mind and body while listening to the field ASMR.

Kalterik stood in the middle of the field with his arms spread wide, as if photosynthesizing.

"Ah, just being here feels like being purified..."

At that moment, his eyes met Kalterik's. Kalterik's shoulders flinched, perhaps because he looked like an evil spirit, stubbornly standing in the shadows even in this sun-filled space. *Ugh,* an exclamation almost escaped, but Kalterik quickly closed his mouth.

Somehow, he seemed embarrassed by his own reaction.

"Y-you're awake."

...Was that question directed at him? Since they had never exchanged morning greetings even once during their journey together, he pointed at himself quizzically with his index finger, and Kalterik reacted with a "Wah!"

"Yes! You slept so long I thought you were dead, so I was surprised to see you standing there and asked. Why!"

He had just been puzzled, but the response came back surprisingly long. It sounded like he was making excuses out of embarrassment for his greeting, but while he was bewildered by Kalterik's fuss, he was more curious about something else.

"...Did I sleep that long?"

"Yes. It's already midday now."

He was surprised by Noi's answer. He had naturally thought it was morning, but he had slept until midday? As he blinked in bewilderment, Noi spoke in a worried tone.

"I suppose it's because you received the succubus's curse at the end yesterday..."

"..."

"Are you feeling alright? Yesterday, Haren said he would take care of—"

"There's no need to worry about it."

He cut off Noi's words abruptly. It was surprising that Noi's attitude, which had been subtly wary of him until now, had become much more docile, and that even Kalterik had waited for him to wake up, but it wasn't the situation to react to that. His voice was very cold as he prevented any mention of 'yesterday's curse'.

It probably sounded like he was saying their concern wasn't necessary. Or it might have come across as if he was offended, implying he wouldn't succumb to such a thing.

Noi sighed with an "Ah..." but he turned his back completely.

"Now we can go down. I'll get ready."

It might seem unfriendly, but it couldn't be helped. He quickly moved his steps while inwardly resolving. He needed to get away from this cursed space quickly. His companions liked this place, and in fact, he had also been admiring its beauty until just now, but as soon as he came to his senses, he only thought about leaving as soon as possible.

Moreover, he felt determined to play an active role in figuring out how to get down from the sky island. Although the soul of the first emperor seemed to have disappeared yesterday, he needed to find a way, either by finding traces of it or by pouring out all his energy.

This might have been an unconscious resolve to stay true to last night's 'purpose'.

However...

[Kigik, kik. Noble guests, to go down... this way...]

[Follow, us, kiik...]

As soon as they entered the temple, the soldiers in white armor guided the way.

Noi had apparently pulled out the doll soldiers who had fallen into the pit yesterday. After he had dealt with the succubus, Noi had lowered tree trunks to pull out the soldiers, with Kalterik and Mela assisting. As if in return for that, the soldiers led them as if escorting them.

[Arux, kik, the being with the sun. The hero who will, brighten the world...]

Moreover, perhaps because they had taken the holy relic that the temple had been protecting, they seemed to be treating them even more reverently. Even Noi's eyes widened in amazement, as if he hadn't expected this.

"Wow, the problem of going down was solved so easily!"

*...Fuck.*

He hurriedly covered his mouth as a curse almost burst out unexpectedly. It was clearly a situation he should be happy about, but why did he feel this way?

At that moment, his eyes met Harenir's.

"..."

"..."

He hadn't looked at him once the entire way here, nor had he walked close to him. But the moment it was revealed that the way down was unexpectedly easy, he unconsciously looked at him, and it seemed Harenir was looking at him too, as their gazes met squarely in mid-air.

He quickly turned his head away. Although it wasn't helpful now, he had still worked hard until he collapsed yesterday, so it was a fair deal... *Damn it,* why was he making such calculations when nothing had happened yesterday?

*I didn't know. I didn't know anything.*

While endlessly repeating this to himself internally, he unconsciously touched his left arm. It no longer hurt.

[This, way, kigigik...]

The place the doll soldiers guided them to was a small room in the corner of the temple. It looked like an ordinary storage room, but when they lifted the carpet on the floor, a hidden magic circle was revealed underneath. Noi tried to observe it curiously, showing his investigative spirit, but he quickly stepped onto it and stood. He needed to leave this island as soon as possible.

He felt that he was acting like a mismatched puzzle piece among his companions today especially, but it couldn't be helped. He had never particularly tried to fit in anyway, so he just pulled his robe's hood down deeply.

*Whoosh...*

As all the companions stood on the magic circle, light spread from the floor, filling the room. By the time the bright light faded, *chirp chirp—* the sound of birds rang in their ears. The thick scent of grass tickled their noses, and the sound of leaves rustling in the wind was also heard.

It gave a completely different feeling, though similar to the scenery they had encountered on the sky island. He slowly checked his surroundings. This place was...

"It's the central forest of Rus! I heard the first emperor liked to look down at the scenery of Rus from here, so it must have been connected to this place!"

Noi exclaimed with sparkling eyes. He had been inwardly curious about where they would end up if they returned, and worried that they might suddenly appear in a crowded place and draw attention. But this forest seemed to be closed off for protection, as there was no one around.

They had finally left the sky island.

Just as he was about to exhale in relief as the tension dissipated, a familiar sound was heard from the distance. The sound echoing through the densely standing trees was the meow of a cat.

*–Meow.*

"...En?"

It was a very leisurely meow, as if it had been waiting here for a long time. The player had just gone through a lot of trouble, but the NPC had been taking a nap here? Just as anger was about to surge up, En got up from its spot and sauntered over to him.

Then it lightly rubbed its head against his leg, and behind the annoyance of trying to win him over with cuteness, relief spread. Though he thought he hadn't cared much, it seemed he had subtly felt the absence of the NPC.

He knelt down and hugged En to his chest. Unexpectedly, it didn't avoid him and obediently let itself be held, so he rested his forehead against the cat's small head with a tired gesture. Somehow, he felt like he might cry.

*NPC, I've been through a lot...*

*...No, fuck, nothing happened.*

His ego split in real-time, but he tried to regain his composure by stroking the cat's back. He heard Kalterik mutter "To treat a familiar like that..." from behind, but of course, he didn't pay any attention. And it seemed Kalterik stopped mid-sentence and sheepishly closed his mouth on his own.

"En. Why didn't you follow... No, it's good that you didn't come along."

As soon as resentment towards the NPC that hadn't accompanied them this time welled up, it quickly subsided. He had wanted to complain about whether the tutorial was already over, but thinking about what had happened on the sky island, he was just glad the NPC hadn't been there. If he had had to show such a sight to the NPC, it would have been truly shameful.

*...No, could it be that the NPC already knows everything?* Feeling a chill run down his nape from anxiety, he looked at En, and it met his gaze. Its purple eyes stared at him intently, as if reading everything about him.

*Ding—* A status window popped up in front of his eyes.

**—------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------**

**Don't show off.**

**—------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------**

**—------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------**

**\*Don't get involved.**

**—------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------**

**—------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------**

**Your body is close to garbage.**

**—------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------**

...Wait a minute, the status window was criticizing him. There was even a diss pretending to be a typo in the middle.

His mouth fell open as this was the first time he had received a message cautioning his behavior in this way. The shock took precedence over worrying whether the NPC had also seen yesterday's events.

*Whoosh,* before he could react, En escaped from his arms. He let out a dry laugh as he blankly watched its very graceful movement. Was this a method of covering shock with more shock? Thinking that it had worked quite well, he tilted his head back to look at the sky.

The day was unnecessarily nice.

### Chapter 41

**#Part 6. 26%**

He heard surprising news.

"What? Ten days have passed?"

They said that ten days had passed down below, even though it had been only a day, no, not even 24 hours since they had come down from the sky island. He was very surprised, but all his companions seemed to have expected it and remained calm.

Noi nodded and explained.

"Yes. Time flows differently in places with a lot of holy power. It's recorded in numerous sacred texts and history books, so we expected it. We didn't know it would be as much as ten days... but it means we visited a land full of Solnium's energy!"

He spoke with an excited face as if it was an extremely special event, making him the only one bewildered. Well, there were folk tales in his world too, about people watching celestial beings play Go and coming back to find decades had passed...

Perhaps there was no need to be surprised about time flowing faster after seeing a floating island in the sky. Though he understood it intellectually, he couldn't shake off the dazed feeling as he followed his companions, and they arrived at a truly unexpected place.

"...Why the temple? Do you want to get caught?"

They had said they needed to stop somewhere before going to the next Encroachment Zone, and they arrived in front of a magnificent temple. The temple in Rus was just as enormous as the one he had seen in the holy city.

*What,* had they left the Order but their faith was so deep that they needed to visit periodically to offer prayers? Had visiting the sky island made them feel Solnium's grace anew and overwhelmed them? But right now, the companions were all targets that the temple would be looking for with burning eyes.

Noi seemed to have heard his muttered question and shrugged.

"Few people know the temple as well as we do, so how would we get caught?"

"Ah..."

Well, with their disguised identities, the probability of getting caught should be zero. Even now, the companions were moving around the temple as if it were their own home.

"We came to the temple to get energy potions and find out various things. The third horn on the succubus is very unsettling, so we want to investigate if there have been cases of demons growing additional horns in history, and also check the atmosphere in the holy city..."

He had heard that the temple had a separate communication network and was the fastest place for news to spread in the empire. Also, since the Holy Knight Order of the Holy Empire had been at the forefront of the human-demon war, the temple supposedly had the most information about demons.

The succubus's third horn.

The sight he had seen on the sky island was still unforgettable. Even to him, who didn't know much about demons, that third horn had seemed abnormal. Since the probability of encountering demons in the future seemed high, it would be good to look into it.

"Anyway, if there's anyone who needs to be careful here, it's you. So don't wander too far away."

Noi warned him in a firm voice. Since he had been moving far apart from his companions all day since coming down from the sky island, he was warning him not to keep such a distance in the temple at least.

Then, where Noi gestured, a bulletin board with various official documents was visible, and unfortunately, his wanted poster was hanging there.

**—------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------**

**High-Risk Target: Isaph Dina**

**Charges: Murder, Prison Break, Theft, Sorcery...**

**—------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------**

Though he had expected it, seeing it for real was fascinating. Was that long amount written below the largest bounty in the empire's history?

He nodded obediently. He had no intention of getting caught up in unnecessary commotion either. Since Isaph had never been known to travel with anyone before, just being with companions should reduce suspicion.

So, next to the relatively comfortable Noi...

"Oh right. Only two people can enter the temple archives with mercenary silver badges. So Lady Mela and I will go..."

"Why."

"...Pardon?"

"No, I mean, why aren't you going with the commander."

"Ah, because Lady Mela knows a lot about demons."

Noi was taken aback when he asked with a stiff face, shocked by the news, but then shrugged as if it was obvious in response to his follow-up question. He was dismayed to read the intention that the decision would absolutely not be reversed.

If Noi and Mela disappeared now, his remaining choices were... only Kalterik and Harenir. He had to stay close to those two?

Though he was very displeased, Noi and Mela had already moved away down the opposite corridor. He followed the remaining two, inwardly heaving a deep sigh. The temple was so vast that it would be easy to get lost if one wasn't careful.

He'd been to temples a lot recently. He had seen one just hours ago on the sky island, and now he was in a temple again. Of course, that one had been a tomb in the form of a temple, and it had been covered in vines, so it was quite different from this place, but he felt an unnecessary aversion. It was probably because he was dissatisfied with having to walk close to his companions.

The place the two entered after walking for a while looked like some kind of shop.

"We've come to get potions."

Kalterik spoke in a very low voice, which was probably meant to hide his identity, but it sounded so artificial that the priest tilted his head. It must have sounded almost like a bear growling.

"Excuse me...?"

"Energy potions. One box."

Speaking again in that strange voice, Kalterik held out his mercenary badge. Though it didn't seem to be a situation where identity was an issue, the priest who checked the mercenary badge nodded dazedly and headed to the inner warehouse. It seemed he understood it as just another example of the many strange people among mercenaries.

Meanwhile, Kalterik, seemingly proud of having deceived the priest, confidently asked Harenir,

"Should we stock up on other items too? Considering the terrain of the western Encroachment Zone..."

"That's a good idea. I'll speak about that."

Harenir answered, curling the corners of his mouth. Was this the attitude of a superior covering for his subordinate's shortcomings? Inwardly chuckling, he looked around the space.

This place displayed items said to be blessed by priests, various books, and a variety of potions. While it was interesting to see a place that looked like an adventurer's shop inside a temple, it was also good for overhearing stories from other mercenaries who were numerous here.

"Hey, did you hear that rumor? They say the southern Encroachment Zone has disappeared..."

"What? Really?!"

He quietly listened to the conversation of nearby mercenaries. It seemed the misty forest they had visited last time had finally been completely purified. It was such surprising news that it seemed to be spreading quickly through word of mouth.

A mercenary wearing round glasses spoke in an excited tone.

"So there's talk that the hero might still be alive. He's secretly going around purifying Encroachment Zones!"

"Hmm. While I too hope for the hero's survival, how could he alone..."

However, the other mercenary holding a long rod showed an ambiguous reaction. Shaking his head, he said it was more likely that the Encroachment Zone had naturally disappeared after such a long time. He even added that the southern Encroachment Zone was said to be the smallest.

While saddened by the realization that the Encroachment Zones they would have to go to in the future would be much larger than that forest, he thought this was a rational response. He had expected that when news of an Encroachment Zone disappearing spread, voices hoping for the hero's survival would naturally arise, but the idea of him eliminating it alone was too unrealistic.

Even in a world that revered the hero, that would be hard to believe. *Well,* it wasn't one person but a party of five together...

However, the fanatic, no, the mercenary shook his head vigorously. He opened his mouth solemnly, as if his expectation was infused with certainty.

"The hero is 'His' son."

"...That's..."

"Even the calamity that seemed impossible to face was perfectly buried by 'Him', so now His son is following in His footsteps and eliminating the Encroachment Zones...!"

This seemed to be a different context from the modifier "son loved by God." At first, he was about to become indifferent, thinking it was another religious reason, but his eyes widened at the next part of the conversation.

Information quickly flashed through his mind.

[When it had been a year since the Dium ran rampant, the Holy Knight Commander of that era stepped forward and perfectly dealt with them.]

A passage he had found in the explanation about 'Dium' in the book he read at the historical hall. And...

'Both my parents were holy knights, so the environment I was exposed to from birth...'

As Harenir's words from the sky island came to mind as well, he almost burst into cheers. *Ah,* one of his parents must have been the Holy Knight Commander and that being had eliminated the Dium 20 years ago. So, just as the mercenary said, the hero might really be going around resolving Encroachment Zones, continuing his parent's will.

While feeling relieved, questions arose again. Why does everyone talking about the Dium insist they were 'perfectly' eliminated? Curious, he listened more closely to the mercenaries' conversation. Would any more clues drop?

"The hero has always tried to prove it. That he's different from 'that person'. So I can't believe this meaningless death either..."

*Whoosh!* Just then, his shoulder was grabbed.

"You bastard, where are you going so gloomily again? I told you not to act alone."

Kalterik was looking down at him with very suspicious eyes. Only then did he realize that he had followed the mercenaries and moved far away from his companions. If he had moved a little further, he would have left the shop.

Kalterik threw suspicious glances at him, saying he kept running off to strange places whenever he got the chance.

### Chapter 42

He couldn't possibly admit that he had been eavesdropping on the hero's backstory, so he turned his head to the side. Just then, his eyes fell on the display shelves full of potions.

"Just, there were so many potions, I was looking..."

Usually, Kalterik stuck close to Harenir, so why had he come over here? He felt disappointed that the interesting conversation between the mercenaries had been interrupted.

"Why aren't you by the commander's side?"

"The commander told me to look for any other necessary items. He entrusted me with an important task!"

*You were sent away because of your bad acting, you idiot.*

Guessing Harenir's true intentions, he looked for him with his eyes. He was entering some warehouse while talking with a priest on the other side, and he was newly surprised at how calm Harenir was even when alone with a temple priest. Would that priest even imagine that the being he was with was the hero?

*Sigh,* he consoled his disappointment with an internal sigh. Just as he had learned that Harenir was the son of the Holy Knight Commander, born with a diamond spoon in his mouth, he thought he might have been able to get other clues as well.

As he was inwardly cursing Kalterik for interrupting this flow, the guy suddenly opened his mouth.

"Ahem, well. Many types of potions are exclusively supplied by the temple, so it's understandable to be curious."

"...Exclusively?"

"Because the Order's status rose after resolving the Great Catastrophe. Energy replenishing potions and healing potions are only made at the temple and are of superior quality. Especially healing potions are quite difficult to obtain..."

It made sense that the temple's power would grow after the Holy Knight Commander dealt with the Dium, but to monopolize potions that seemed close to necessities? While understanding why his companions had risked detection to visit the temple, he was also quite bewildered.

Why was Kalterik explaining this to him...? He had never told him anything before. Sensing his puzzled gaze, Kalterik cleared his throat.

"Ahem, ahem!"

He looked somewhat embarrassed. Come to think of it, his behavior had been a bit strange since the sky island, perhaps... was he grateful for being pulled out of the succubus's nightmare? Even though he had threatened to subjugate him as an undead and use him like a slave if he didn't come to his senses?

Was something wrong with this guy's head? Or was he sick?

Just as he was suspecting this, Kalterik coughed loudly. The cough was so big that he stepped back with a grimace. Was he really sick?

As he moved far away, Kalterik spoke while continuing to cough.

"Cough, hack, this is, cough, just something in my throat, hack!"

"Get away. I don't want to catch your cold."

If this body caught a cold, who knows how much it would groan. Treating him like a germ carrier without even pretending to listen to Kalterik's explanation, Kalterik's face turned bright red. As if ashamed, his voice rose sharply.

"You bastard, really...!"

"You two seem to have become friends now."

The being who appeared, cutting off the shout, was Harenir. He hadn't even sensed his presence, not knowing when he had approached from behind. Kalterik seemed not to have noticed either, as he flinched in surprise before hurriedly shaking his head.

"What?! How could that be! Becoming friends?!"

For once, he agreed with Kalterik's opinion. It was a tremendous insult. He looked at Harenir with eyes full of that sentiment... but as soon as he met those blue eyes directly, he felt very uncomfortable. Why was the distance so close, of all things.

As he was trying to subtly take a step to the side, Harenir suddenly held out his hand. In his palm was a red potion. A healing potion.

"Wouldn't it be better to get rid of that quickly?"

Harenir smiled gently and tapped his own lips with his other hand. As he blankly watched the straight index finger touch those pale red lips, his whole body stiffened with belated realization. He maintained his picture-perfect smile and kindly added the reason.

"The wound on your lip is rather bothersome, after all."

It was the first time he was conversing with Harenir since last night. Though there was no mention of last night in his words, as soon as he heard the word "wound," the memory of that time threatened to surface. He barely stomped it down and took a deep breath.

To make it completely as if nothing happened, he was saying to erase the wound quickly too. The lip wound would be bothersome and noticeable in daily life, and visible to Harenir's eyes as well.

Not wanting to lose to his extremely calm voice, he answered as calmly as he could.

"...Alright."

It was just one word, but he didn't know how much effort it took to keep it from trembling. Anyway, long speeches didn't suit Isaph, and the longer he spoke, the higher the chance of sounding ridiculous.

He realized that the reason he had gone into the warehouse with the priest earlier was to obtain healing potions. And it seemed he had bought not just one for him, but in bulk. He looked curiously at the heavy pouch attached to Harenir's waist but then lost interest.

He probably bought them for his subordinates, not needing them himself. Though he had heard healing potions were difficult to obtain, he must have used his Grade 1 mercenary silver badge and skilled acting to persuade the priest.

"If you see anything you need for going to the western Encroachment Zone, stock up."

"...I don't have money."

"Well, I'll count it as compensation for your hard work."

Harenir chuckled and answered as if he had heard something unexpected. Though he meant he would pay for it, hearing the words "compensation for hard work" created an uncomfortable distance in his heart again. He didn't want to hear any thanks for his hard work from him for a while.

*Anyway, when we go to the Encroachment Zone, I'll only be summoning undead, so what other items would I need?* He turned his head abruptly and said,

"I don't particularly need anything."

\*\*\*

He needed a lot of things.

*Ah,* there was a reason why his companions had taken time to prepare before departing. He should have thought about why they visited the shop once more even though Noi had packed supplies when escaping from the holy city.

He blankly looked at the scene spread out before him.

"It's a desert..."

All he could see was a vast wilderness and huge rocks. They hadn't even arrived at the Encroachment Zone where life was said to be contaminated. The entire western region was just desert.

The information he had heard on the way here was ordinary. It was mostly information Noi had gathered from the temple, including that there had never been a case in history of demons growing additional horns, and that the frequency of monster appearances had increased recently across the country.

And the Order had decided to treat the hero as missing rather than dead, he said. It was presumed to be for the purpose of guarding against the notorious death row inmate Isaph, whose infamy had grown too great. Also, they had not taken a clear stance on the disappearance of the southern Encroachment Zone so far.

Noi had earnestly advised that everyone should be careful not to reveal their identities for a while, and finally added lightly,

'Well, it should be fine now since we're going to the western Encroachment Zone!'

He hadn't thought much of it at the time. Since the southern Encroachment Zone was said to be the smallest, he had only wondered how large the western one would be... but now faced with the truth, he felt at a loss.

Probably part of this area was encroached, but it seemed that crossing the desert would be more difficult than searching the Encroachment Zone. He blinked blankly. There had been no mention of a desert in any of the stories he had heard on the way here, so why?

But perhaps they thought that any citizen of the empire would naturally know that the entire western region was such a vast desert. As he was inwardly swallowing a dry laugh, Noi quietly asked Kalterik from behind.

"Isaph didn't prepare anything separately?"

"He said he didn't need anything. Well, he'll manage on his own. He was originally a wanderer without a settled place anyway."

Kalterik answered in a grumbling tone, as if still displeased about being treated like a germ carrier. He felt indignant at the look that seemed to see him as a stubborn concept-obsessed person who would move wearing only a black robe even when crossing a desert. *No, damn it.*

Shouldn't the NPC give prior notice for a map like this? He looked at the black cat with accusing eyes, but it only made a "Meow" sound. A blue window popped up in front of his eyes.

**—------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------**

**Supplies can be searched for using undead.**

**—------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------**

*No, really? Is this how Isaph usually traveled?* Could he go anywhere with just a black robe and a black cat?

While bewildered, he also felt quite uneasy about the mention of searching with undead. It meant that Isaph really did use undead like slaves, and most of the supplies found in the desert were likely to be abandoned or belongings of the dead. *Hmm, well,* they would be items that undead could find well...

### Chapter 43

He was worried about water and food, but he thought Noi would probably take care of that. Since he still had his navigation duties, he hoped they would provide employee welfare. He wasn't even expecting the four major insurances.

*Whoosh—*

The desert wind blew coolly. Though it was a rocky desert so his feet didn't sink into the ground, it was quite cold and difficult to walk. He swallowed a sigh and wrapped his robe tighter. Since he had told Harenir he didn't need any supplies, he decided to endure without saying he was cold now.

In his previous life, he had mostly stayed at home, but in this world, he was traveling to many places. The problem was that none of these were places he wanted to go...

"Be careful not to fall behind, it's over if you do!"

Noi took the lead in setting the direction. With his genius-level memory, he moved confidently as if he had memorized all the paths in this vast desert. He followed, envying Noi who had snugly wrapped a thick scarf in preparation for the wind.

They passed countless large trees and cacti. They encountered rocks so huge they had to tilt their heads back to see the top, and observed traces of weathering created over long years. It was a journey that would be hard to endure without distracting oneself somehow.

After walking for a few hours, an old signpost came into his view. Curious about the signpost that appeared in the middle of the desert, he fumbled to read it. Most of the letters were erased.

"Grimo... village...?"

"Ah, it's Grimodia Village. There used to be a big village here!"

Noi quickly answered. With his talkative nature, his eyes even sparkled as if he had been wanting to chat with someone. The holy knights were all focused on surveying their surroundings while crossing the desert, so he probably couldn't bring himself to disturb them.

For someone always hungry for information like him, Noi's story was only welcome. Noi subtly came to his side and started the conversation.

"Until about 20 years ago, before the Dium appeared, desert tribes lived here gathered together. They were ethnic minorities. But with the appearance of the Dium, they all died..."

"All of them?"

"Yes. Many countries and ethnic groups disappeared when the Dium appeared."

Noi shuddered as if it had truly been a terrible time. It was a period when countless people died, many countries and cultures were reduced to ashes, and the entire continent was devastated.

As they entered Grimodia Village, a desolate landscape came into view. Abandoned buildings, objects eroded by sand storms, and so on. The old cloth fluttering in what must have been a market alley long ago looked eerie. Though the sky island they had visited a few days ago had also been uninhabited for a long time, the atmosphere here was completely different.

"Then no one lives here now..."

"That's right. It's too barren to live in, isn't it?"

Noi's answer made him feel quite relieved. While the ruins looked lonely, the absence of residents meant there would be no zombies, that is, no missing persons to encounter in the Encroachment Zone.

"So we'll have less trouble with zombies in the western Encroachment Zone..."

"...Why do you sound disappointed?"

He was bewildered. He was curious about why Noi guessed there would be fewer zombies rather than none at all, but more than that, Noi's tone sounded strange. As he looked down at the back of Noi's head surveying the abandoned village without a single person in sight, unexpectedly, the answer came from behind.

Harenir spoke in a calm tone.

"Because it's difficult to find a way to get information about this Encroachment Zone."

"Ah."

"The Encroachment Zone is so vast, and now the probability of Dium existing there has increased, but we have no way to grasp recent changes. We have no choice but to stay here for a few days and observe directly."

The Encroachment Zone was visible where Harenir pointed with his index finger. At the end of the village, a huge rocky canyon visible from the top of a high hill had faded to black and white.

If it were just a wasteland, they could grasp the terrain from afar, but unfortunately, rocks stood like defensive walls in various places, and black fog was thickly spread. He had felt a sense of dissonance with the black and white land before, but looking down from above made it feel even more alien.

To use an analogy, it was like pasting a piece of black and white newspaper in a colorful magazine. Even the fact that just one area stood out, catching the eye, felt ominous. As he looked at that place anew, he belatedly found something even more ominous in Harenir's words.

"...Did you say we'd stay for a few days?"

"Yes. We should observe for at least five days."

So they even had to camp out?

*Ah,* he should have guessed why his companions had packed supplies once more. Swallowing a sigh while making his 43rd belated regret of the day, he felt overwhelmed. Though there were many abandoned buildings so they wouldn't have to stay in a completely open field, he felt at a loss.

His companions started preparing for the camp with familiarity. They bustled about, saying they needed to finish before sunset, and he was given the task of finding firewood, which he obediently set out to do. He desperately wanted a bonfire as he had been cold.

However, contrary to his expectation that he would find it quickly, firewood was not easily found. He had intended to just gather a few branches, but even those were nowhere to be seen. If he went back with just some cloth scraps, he'd only receive pitying looks. He moved his steps with a sense of futility.

Was it usually difficult to find firewood in a rocky desert, or...

"It's as if someone took everything..."

*–Meow*.

The cat's cry rang in his ears. When he turned his head, he saw En walking daintily on top of an old wall. As the cat usually didn't meow much, he was puzzled at first, but then he exclaimed, "Ah!" Could it be that the NPC was showing him the location of firewood?

Full of expectation, he followed En. Though he was moving away from his companions, he decided not to mind since they knew well that he wouldn't, or rather couldn't, run away anyway.

However, after moving for about 20 minutes, there was nothing visible at the place where En stopped.

"...What? Is this the right place?"

He followed En and lifted the old cloth covering the entrance of an abandoned stone house, but only an empty interior greeted him. Even when he took out his flashlight, his only possession brought from the sky island, and looked around, there was still nothing suitable. Only trash was piled up on the floor, and when he poked here and there with his toe, only dust rose hazily.

It ended up looking like he was drawn to a gloomy place again. *Don't be so faithful to the setting,* he thought. En had already gone back outside the building, so he followed with a deep sigh. This wasn't dog training, so why...

*Swish—*

"Entering this place, how brave. Did you come to get robbed voluntarily?"

As soon as he lifted the cloth at the entrance and came out, a knife was pressed to his neck. *What,* was there some kind of knife-attracting wave flowing from his neck? He dazedly checked his opponent. The long face of the man wearing a hood was full of scars, and tattoos were visible between the tears in his worn-out clothes.

It seemed he was developing a talent for reading faces, and this guy had the look of a thief.

"I was hungry because no one to rob had come for a while, but you came at the right time!"

"Hand over everything you have!"

Before he could react, two men jumped out from both sides, grabbed his arms, and kicked the back of his knees, forcing him to kneel. A group of thieves appeared en masse, having apparently been waiting outside while he was in the building.

So there were no residents in this abandoned village, but there were thieves. Perhaps they were targeting adventurers who searched for dangerous places on the continent.

"It's better if you cooperate. We're very sensitive because we're hungry."

The one who had first held a knife to his neck, probably the leader of the thieves, snarled menacingly. Watching with distaste as he licked the blade with his tongue, as if he was really hungry, he held out the white stick he had been holding.

"If you mean what I have, it's just this..."

"What? What is this?"

"It's an object from a truly beautiful and sacred place that everyone wants to go to..."

"Ohhh?"

"Press it and light comes out of the end."

"Are you mocking us, you bastard?!"

*Click,* he showed them how light came out when pressed, but the thieves were indignant. He had even done some storytelling, but perhaps his marketing skills were lacking. As he consoled himself for the disappointment, the leader pressed the knife to his neck again.

The blade grazed his neck precariously.

"You seem to think our threats are a joke, but we have no intention of playing with the likes of you...!"

"I have nothing, but my companions have a lot. Money, food, supplies, everything."

"...What?"

"Actually, I'm in a position of being dragged along like a slave by them. Look, there's even a collar on my neck. So... I'll tell you their location, just spare me."

The thieves hesitated when he lowered his robe's collar to show the collar. Then, following the leader's eye signal, the men who had forced him to kneel searched his body but only confirmed that he had no possessions.

The thieves exchanged glances, and those who had been hungry for a long time nodded, seemingly very tempted by the possessions of his companions. His statement that "there are only four of them" probably contributed to their decision.

A little while later.

Seeing him and the group of thieves arrive at the hill at the edge of the village, Harenir smiled gently. Though a group of over a dozen men had drawn their swords, his smile spread only serenely.

"You have quite a peculiar talent."

Though he knew it was closer to sarcasm than a positive meaning, he just shrugged. It was true that he kept getting tangled up in such incidents, and more than anything this time...

"I brought information. Guys who've been staying here for a long time."

### Chapter 44

The thieves treated him like prey they had found after a long time. And they had said they were hungry because no one to rob had come for a while, which meant they had been operating with this place as their base for quite some time.

In other words, they were valuable sources of information that could shorten his camping period.

"W-what?"

"What kind of conversation are you having?"

The thieves, belatedly sensing something was off, warily looked around. One of them, apparently deciding to take him hostage, rushed towards him.

*Oh,* what a useless action. How did they always manage to target the person with zero value as a hostage? As he was making this detached observation internally, a *thud!* sounded and the thief who had approached within arm's reach collapsed.

Harenir had thrown a small stone from far away, and despite the considerable distance, it had hit the thief's head precisely. He looked at him and said,

"Why don't you at least pretend to dodge?"

"Well, you can just pull me out like last time, can't you?"

"Your neck is so thin, I'm afraid it might break if I pull it again."

"..."

The muscles of his mouth, which had been answering indifferently, stiffened. Considering this paper-thin body, Harenir's expression about breaking wasn't an exaggeration but something that could actually happen... The moment he heard the comment about his thin neck, an unwelcome memory surfaced.

The sensation of large hands enveloping his neck, and the feeling of the collar rattling and brushing against his skin. It all vividly came back, and without realizing it, he covered his neck with his hand as if to protect it.

Meanwhile, Harenir calmly turned his gaze. He ordered his subordinates who had been on standby, having sensed the presence of the thieves even before they approached.

"Subdue them moderately. Enough so we can talk."

"Yes!"

"Understood."

From the moment Kalterik's resounding shout and Mela's calm response ended, it took less than 5 minutes for all the thieves to be subdued. It happened in an instant.

All except the leader of the thieves were knocked unconscious. Kalterik, finding them too noisy, had struck the back of their necks, saying it was annoying. They could get enough information from just one person anyway.

The leader, subjected to the punishment of being tied to a cactus, glared at him.

"You bastard, you tricked us...!"

"I didn't lie."

Even thinking back on it, he hadn't lied. He had just omitted the information that they wouldn't be able to subdue his companions. The hooded leader trembled as if indignant, but then was pricked by the cactus spines, making him even more frustrated. Of course, it wasn't something he needed to care about.

Kalterik asked curiously,

"You managed to bring such guys. How did you find them?"

"...En helped me."

Looking at the result, it was a special event triggered by following the NPC to meet the thieves, but while he was grateful for the information obtained through them, he couldn't be entirely thankful since a knife had been held to his neck for a moment. Well, if it had really become dangerous, would a status window telling him to summon undead have appeared?

*–Meow.*

Just then, En meowed nearby, and he chuckled as he reached out his hand. Right, these guys wouldn't be a match for Isaph, so that's why it had led him here. Interpreting it as positively as possible, he tried to pat the cat's head with a sense of gratitude, but it dodged swiftly!

He let out a dry laugh at the sight of it coldly distancing itself after making such a cute meow. *What,* it makes cat sounds but doesn't want to be treated like a pet cat? *Well,* in a way, even this was very cat-like.

After shrugging, he searched through the belongings of the collapsed thieves. He found a water bottle by feeling around their waist pouches, and also found biscuits and pieces of jerky. He heard Kalterik saying incredulously from behind, "So this is why you didn't prepare separately..." but he ignored it with familiarity.

Just then, a thick cloth was suddenly thrust in front of him.

"The desert nights are cold, so prepare properly."

It was a yellow cape that had been covering one of the thieves' shoulders, and the person offering it was Harenir. It was large enough to be used as a blanket.

He stiffened and slowly tilted his head up to look at him. He was originally sensitive to cold, and this weak body made the desert wind even more challenging... Had he noticed he was cold? Had he been watching him? As he stood there bewildered, Harenir smiled freshly.

"It would be a hindrance if you got sick."

...*Well,* he might have obviously anticipated his situation of not bringing any supplies while coming to this desert. This was probably the correct answer.

Just then, the leader stomped his feet. He glared, seemingly very upset at the scene of him rummaging through his subordinates' belongings and taking them. Having probably extorted other passersby through threats until now, he seemed genuinely indignant at being in the reverse position.

"We were starving because there have been strangely few travelers recently, so we were happy when you came alone...!"

"How much could you get from robbing adventurers anyway."

"It wasn't just adventurers, but also archaeologists and researchers who came!"

The leader responded in an agitated tone to his indifferent reaction. Since this place had been a village of desert tribes that had now disappeared, it made sense that scholars from various fields would come to investigate, but to him listening, it still felt like a "so what?" kind of statement.

*Ah,* was this perhaps why Noi had said there would be few zombies in the western Encroachment Zone rather than none at all? But since there had been no travelers recently, it was even more welcome news.

Noi showed interest in the leader's story.

"Has there really been no one coming here recently?"

"That's right! Usually, groups of researchers would come at least twice a month, but their visits suddenly stopped...!"

"Hmm, somehow we also had difficulty finding a carriage to come to this desert and had to take a roundabout route..."

He hadn't paid any attention to the travel arrangements, so he didn't know, but Noi said he had particularly struggled this time. All the most common entrances to the western desert were blocked, and carriage drivers refused strangely, so they had to pay extra to finally find another entry point.

Harenir smiled softly at this series of stories.

"It seems they're doing their job well."

"What? Could it be that you contacted them...?"

Even with the vague pronoun, Noi's eyes widened as if he had someone in mind. Harenir just patted Noi's shoulder as if to say he had worked hard, without answering.

A few days ago, when they arrived in Rus, Harenir had moved separately saying he had business to attend to... Had he contacted them then? To block the routes to the Encroachment Zone since it was confirmed that the Dium were alive? While thinking it was a good precautionary measure, he wondered who on earth a hero reported to be dead could contact. It wasn't like he could send messages from the afterlife.

As he was becoming puzzled, Harenir began the main interrogation.

"Has anything strange happened in the Encroachment Zone recently? Have you heard any sounds or seen anything?"

"Hmph! Why should I answer...!"

"You. You seem to really care for your subordinates."

The leader shouted irritably, but Harenir spoke gently without even showing annoyance. However, the content was so unexpected that the leader tilted his head.

"W-what? What's this all of a sudden..."

"The desert is a cold place, but your subordinate was wearing thicker clothes than you. Though it seems those were also stolen items, still, your subordinate had them."

The leader wore old and shabby clothes that exposed his upper body, while his subordinate had worn a thick cape. Although it was now in his hands, Harenir mentioned this point and praised him as if it was admirable.

"And when you heard there was a traveler with money and food here, you brought all your subordinates. If you had brought just a few people separately, you could have claimed more supplies for yourself, since there were only four opponents."

"W-we were all hungry..."

"You didn't prioritize just your own hunger, did you? You're a true leader. That's why no one ran away during the fight just now, but stayed with you, right?"

The leader's eyes trembled. He looked surprised, as if it was the first time someone had praised him and recognized the special bond of the group he led. Moreover, Harenir's gentle voice resonated so kindly that tears even welled up in his eyes as if he was moved.

Seeing this reaction, a smile spread across Harenir's lips.

"So, if you want to save your subordinates, answer."

*Swish,* right on cue, Kalterik pointed his sword at a subordinate who had collapsed right next to the leader.

### Chapter 45

All the praise given so far had been aimed at reminding him of his responsibility as a leader. Should this be considered a peaceful form of threat?

Tying him to a cactus wasn't exactly gentle to begin with, but it was still surprising, as he had expected bloodshed when the thief leader ignored Harenir's words earlier. Well, now blood was about to be spilled elsewhere.

The leader seemed to have realized Harenir's intention, as his eyes twitched. Fortunately, the earlier build-up had its effect, and after taking a long deep breath, he spoke.

"Every night, there were strange sounds. Like the sound of rocks moving?"

"The sound of rocks moving?"

"To be precise, should I say it was the sound of rocks being carved? After hearing that noise loudly, the next day the appearance of the Encroachment Zone seemed to have changed a bit... The shape of the canyon felt different, but, hey, it's true! I'm not lying!"

Guessing that the story of a huge canyon, a terrain that would have taken hundreds or thousands of years to form, changing in just a few days would sound preposterous, the leader hastily asserted his innocence. If it had been during the time when the Dium were rampant, it might have been believable, but now it had been over 20 years since they were reported to have disappeared.

But this group knew that the Dium were alive. They had only found some small fry in the southern Encroachment Zone, but they had anticipated encountering them again here, so everyone reacted calmly.

"And what else?"

"What? You believe me?"

"Let's hear everything first. Was there anything else unusual?"

The leader blinked at Harenir's calm question. He seemed surprised, as if he had expected to be completely dismissed as talking nonsense, and then continued haltingly.

"Well, it seemed like the range of the Encroachment Zone was expanding..."

The leader, either because of his simple nature or perhaps enchanted by Harenir's voice, tried his best to provide meaningful information. He poured out details about where the sound of moving rocks was mainly heard, what time it occurred, and so on.

Finally, in an uncertain tone, he mumbled,

"This wasn't me, but one of my subordinates who saw it, but sometimes a pitch-black energy rose from the Encroachment Zone?"

"...Do you mean the sky turned completely black?"

"Well, similar, but in his words, he said 'he thought the sky had been torn'. So everyone said he was talking nonsense, that he must have seen something strange while half-asleep..."

At this story, the expressions of the companions darkened. Even Mela, who was usually expressionless, stiffened her face and turned to Harenir, saying,

"Commander, that phenomenon..."

"...It's not good news."

It seemed there was some phenomenon that he didn't know about again. Perhaps it was a sight that everyone had feared during the Great Catastrophe in the past, or in game terms, a pattern that appeared when an enemy was preparing a fatal skill.

Noi also trembled with a pale face, and he inwardly swallowed a sigh. It was obvious that he wouldn't just be acting as a guide for the Encroachment Zone anymore. *Ah,* a flag was being raised.

After that, Harenir talked a bit more with the leader and then nodded.

"I think we've heard everything, so I'll let you go now. On the condition that you leave the desert completely."

At his signal, Mela swiftly swung her sword and cut the rope. Freed from the cactus, the leader touched his arms dazedly and looked at him. With a surprised expression as if he hadn't expected to be really set free, and also seeming quite uneasy about this conversation, he asked,

"...Surely you're not thinking of entering the Encroachment Zone?"

"What's it to you?"

"It's, it's creepy! That place is the land of death..."

"You're afraid of the Encroachment Zone, yet you managed to rob people here."

The leader was shocked by Harenir's nonchalant response.

"What did you hear from my story? I've seen adventurers occasionally who fell into the vain dream of conquering the Encroachment Zone, but the terrain really changed! The monsters might be alive, I'm telling you?!"

Now the scene unfolded where the leader was worrying about the very people who had been threatening him just moments ago. Was the Encroachment Zone a space that all of humanity should be cautious about, even for someone who would hold a knife to a traveler's throat? Of course, Harenir didn't even pretend to listen, so the leader finally played his trump card.

"Aren't you also a leader with subordinates? If you care for your subordinates, you shouldn't commit such a reckless act! It's not like you're all going to die together, what..."

"..."

"In a world where even the hero is said to be dead, who could stop..."

*Thud,* a small noise cut off the leader's words. It was the sound of gravel rolling on the ground as Harenir approached him, but even though he had only taken one step closer, the leader closed his mouth at the shadow that seemed to engulf his entire body. His face turned pale as if overwhelmed by the pressure.

Standing right in front of the man, Harenir tilted his head slightly. The edge of his deeply pulled hood rustled, brushing over the bridge of his nose.

"I don't understand why you're so concerned."

"I, I, well, since I told you the story..."

"Ah, are you afraid you might have sparked unnecessary curiosity and sent someone to their death?"

His pale red lips drew an elegant arc.

"That's quite a meager sense of responsibility."

Though he spoke with a beautiful smile, his voice resonated too coldly. Somehow, it had an edge to it. Was it because the leader had mentioned 'subordinates', had that touched some burden in Harenir's heart? As he watched the scene from a distance, he reflected on the leader's words.

Come to think of it, even thieves who commit crimes in the empire naturally think of the hero as the one who will stop the Dium.

"If you don't leave right now, I'll take it that you have no intention of leaving and tie you to the cactus again. Oh, did you perhaps enjoy being tied up?"

"Th-there's no way...!"

Realizing that Harenir's words weren't a simple threat, the leader moved with a grimace. He hurriedly woke up his subordinates and urged them that they needed to leave the desert, and as they supported each other while moving, he looked back one last time.

Suddenly, as if he had a very strange feeling, his face turned pale.

"W-wait. I think you were called 'Commander'... W-who are you?"

It was a strange question mixing informal and formal speech. As he asked very politely while trembling, Harenir shrugged and took out his mercenary badge from his bosom to show him.

The leader nodded blankly.

"Ah, the commander of a mercenary group... no, huh? Were silver badge mercenaries this strong?"

"Stop being a nuisance and get lost already!"

Kalterik shouted, "Wah!" Stomping his feet with his huge body and even raising his arms, the thieves inhaled sharply and retreated at the sight that looked almost like a bear attack.

The thieves probably had some experience fighting with mercenaries that scholars visiting this place had brought as escorts. While a Grade 1 silver badge wouldn't be easy to deal with, Harenir's casual subduing of one person with a small pebble and the unique atmosphere emanating from him seemed to have become elements of suspicion.

But Kalterik appropriately cut the atmosphere, and the thieves quickly disappeared. Harenir watched their retreating figures and finally spoke to Mela.

"Just in case, let's check the surroundings at night. It would be troublesome if they stayed."

"Yes."

It was Mela answering cleanly as always, but afterwards, as if something was bothering her, she moved her lips. She hesitantly said,

"...I hope you won't mind what the thief said earlier. I don't think it's reckless, and even if it's dangerous, if you go, Commander, I will follow you."

"That's right! Isn't where the Commander is where we should be?"

"Me too, me too!"

Following that, Kalterik and Noi quickly raised their hands and added their words. While he knew that those two would unconditionally follow Harenir, it was surprising that Mela had spoken up first like that. They were subordinates with truly amazing loyalty, no matter when he saw them.

Harenir's eyes widened. He blinked with a surprised expression as if he hadn't expected to hear such words, then smiled, relaxing the corners of his eyes.

"If you think it's too dangerous, I'd like you to run away, but..."

Behind the smile that seemed to say he couldn't help it, a kind promise was added.

"I'll protect you all so that no one gets hurt."

The subordinates' eyes sparkled at the sweetly resonating voice. It was understandable to be deeply moved when someone loved by God said they would protect you. Kalterik exclaimed with an overwhelmed face, "The safest place would be by the Commander's side, how could it be dangerous!" It wasn't simple flattery, but a voice full of trust.

In truth, he wanted to run away if it became dangerous, but he was tied down by the quest and couldn't leave... Perhaps hearing such a promise would be reassuring.

But he still couldn't imagine Harenir saying he would protect him, and feeling an incredible distance, he shuddered alone.

### Chapter 46

He tried to imagine that scene once in his mind but quickly discarded it. It even gave him goosebumps.

Still, as long as he was an efficient means, they probably wouldn't let him die. Even if he couldn't hear a kind promise from Harenir, he turned his gaze away, valuing survival based on usefulness as more meaningful.

The day was gradually fading.

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Although they had obtained information about the Encroachment Zone from the thieves, they decided to move after confirming it with their own eyes. The reason was that they couldn't fully trust the thieves' words, and moreover, given the suspicious situations observed, they needed to grasp the situation clearly and prepare.

"I'll take the night watch."

"But..."

"I want to see it with my own eyes."

Harenir volunteered to take the night watch for the camp. Mela and Kalterik insisted on doing it themselves, uncomfortable with their superior staying up all night, and Noi even suggested taking turns, but Harenir shook his head.

"It's fine. With Solnium's grace with me, how could I possibly collapse from mere fatigue?"

The smile he wore then was so perfect it could have been painted, and his subordinates couldn't find any more words to object. It seemed they judged that going against his will when it was so firm would be disrespectful, and also that worrying about him would be blasphemy. They might have thought that resting well themselves to be in perfect condition for tomorrow would be more beneficial for him.

Of course, he had already prepared his sleeping place in the building long ago, so he was far from things like night watch duty. It was a bit amusing but also natural that no one had glanced at him during this entire conversation. This body would collapse even if it slept and ate on time.

He envied the stamina of the hero who didn't even get injured because of God's love. He felt like he was losing stamina just by breathing quietly...

When he woke up in the middle of the deep night, he accidentally discovered Harenir.

"..."

Under the desert night sky studded with stars, Harenir's back view as he stood at the edge of the hill, quietly looking down at the Encroachment Zone, was serene. The only movement was his golden hair occasionally swaying in the predawn breeze, his hood removed. It was an extremely static scene.

Even though it was the middle of the night shrouded in darkness, the Encroachment Zone existed ominously, exuding a sense of dissonance, and Harenir calmly gazed at it. He could only see Harenir's back, but his appearance, completely unruffled even in this deep night, seemed very reliable and yet... suddenly, very suddenly, he thought Harenir looked like someone being chased.

It was a truly strange impression. To have such a feeling while looking at such a perfectly calm figure. He rubbed his eyes and chose to go back to sleep. He must be dazed from waking up in the middle of sleep.

When they had encountered such nights about twice, an anomaly was finally witnessed.

"There really is a sound of rocks being carved. The terrain is changing too."

It was exactly the same phenomenon that the thief leader had testified to earlier. This increased the probability that the story about "the sky being torn" wasn't a lie either.

In the deep night, Harenir ordered everyone.

"Let's depart."

They couldn't wait until morning as it would be easier to grasp the situation if they went when the commotion occurred. The companions immediately followed him, gathering the luggage they had prepared in advance. A solemn look settled on everyone's face.

Only he moved in a half-asleep state, having just woken up. He wasn't at all keen on entering the Encroachment Zone in the middle of the night, but he had an intuition that they needed to be seriously wary of 'that phenomenon' enough to enter even enduring this darkness.

*Whoosh—*

The wind blowing from the canyon carried an ominous sound. It echoed as if stagnating in the huge valley, sounding just like a scream. Though he had been worried when entering the forest that was the southern Encroachment Zone, because this place was a canyon with winding rocks, it felt like voluntarily entering a maze of death.

**—------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------**

**Look down at the ground.**

**—------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------**

But without fail, the blue status window that didn't care about his feelings at all appeared. He followed the instruction while inwardly swallowing a sigh. *Right,* when had this game ever gone according to his wishes?

As he looked down, the darkness at his feet wriggled. Even though it wasn't the deep night casting thick shadows, the darkness reacted as if the place where Isaph stood was his domain. *Ping—* As his vision shook, the expected but still unfamiliar dizziness came sharply.

As darkness spread around him, undead were summoned.

[Grrrr...]

The sight of them rising from the ground like zombies was still unsettling, but this time, his attention was drawn to something else rather than their movement. Oh, somehow...

"The number of undead has increased this time...?"

Noi spoke while he was uncertain. It must be certain since it was him with his genius-level memory who said it. He swallowed his surprise, trying not to show it outwardly. The number had really increased compared to before. Had his body condition improved so he could summon more undead? ...*Hmm,* that didn't seem to be it.

Then perhaps he was gradually adapting to the possessed state? Had he leveled up without realizing it? But whatever the reason, all the newly summoned undead still looked like ordinary humans and didn't seem particularly strong. They had a more intact appearance than the Klam victims who were mangled all over, but they didn't look very reliable.

*Did Isaph only absorb souls like this?*

He inwardly sighed and followed the next instruction from the status window, stretching his hand forward. *Whoosh—* As the undead entered the Encroachment Zone, his vision began to split into pieces. As the number of undead increased, so did the scenes he shared. He focused on the sight unfolding before his eyes while stubbornly enduring the headache.

However, perhaps because it was deep night, or because the pitch-black fog of the Encroachment Zone was thicker than before, the visibility was too blurry. The more he tried to forcibly look into it, the more a nauseating revulsion rose like vomit.

*Ugh,* as he staggered, leaning against the nearby rock, Harenir approached. He probably meant to support him, but he blocked him with his hand.

"Don't interfere."

He knew that stopping the hero with just a gesture and treating him as a nuisance would seem impudent. Indeed, Kalterik ground out "You..." in an angry voice but swallowed the rest of his words. He must have judged that it was right not to break his concentration, as they acknowledged his necromancy at least.

He painfully analyzed the undead's vision. It was ridiculous that he was searching so diligently while being in a position of being forcibly dragged here with a collar, but he had to prove his usefulness to be protected. Moreover, since it was a space he would have to enter, he wanted to check it properly if possible.

"Bleugh."

But it was too much after all, and finally his knees buckled as if he were a piece of paper being crumpled. Just before he fell to the ground, Harenir stretched out his arm to support him. He panted, almost dangling from Harenir's arm.

Harenir spoke in a somewhat stiffened tone.

"Don't exhaust yourself too much before even entering."

"This is, huff, why you brought me..."

What was this person saying, when he would send him back to prison if he couldn't do it properly? He surely wasn't worried about him. As he looked at him as if it was absurd, Harenir pressed his lips tightly.

After a strange silence, he slowly nodded, which seemed to mean 'that's true', making him feel annoyed, but he just sighed and moved away from him. He knew his staggering appearance would look ridiculous, but he disliked being close to him.

Leaning against the rock and regulating his breath, he spoke. The summoning of the undead had been cut off internally, but fortunately, he had managed to analyze.

"Phew, I only see three cores. I looked around more because it was unsettling that there were only three cores in such a widely contaminated space, but the center was completely covered in black fog, so I couldn't peek at all."

"The center... That's where the terrain changed."

Harenir calmly nodded and then took off the bracelet from his wrist and held it out to him. It must be a holy relic to slow down the rate of contamination in the Encroachment Zone.

He saw Noi gasp "Ah!" from behind, so he guessed this was also an extremely precious treasure. But everyone knew that the necklace he had been wearing before had broken at some point, so they didn't show any objection.

He tried not to recall the situation related to that reason and received the holy relic as calmly as possible. He was glad that the support was clean in proportion to his hardship.

By the way, Harenir seems to wear quite a lot of holy relics on his body. Is it natural since he was close to the temple from birth as the son of the Holy Knight Commander?

### Chapter 47

*Whoosh—*

*Woong— Wooong— Woooooong—*

The path into the Encroachment Zone was quite noisy. The wind trapped in the crevices of the winding valley echoed as if someone was crying, making his skin crawl. Even the moonlight couldn't illuminate every corner of the canyon.

Though it was generally difficult to distinguish colors in the deep night, the black and white of the Encroachment Zone was clearly alien. An unpleasant sense of dissonance swirled eerily through the space.

"Ha, haha. It's a bit scary because it's dark..."

Noi shrank back. Since there would be only them in this space anyway, everyone except him had removed their hoods, so Noi's pointed ears could be seen trembling. His attempt to appear calm was almost pitiful.

He rummaged in his bosom and took something out. As it happened, he had something quite useful for the current situation.

*Click—*

When he pressed the magic stone on the stick firmly, a soft light came from the end. Though it wasn't bright enough to fully illuminate their surroundings, just pushing back the darkness a little was enough to brighten Noi's expression. Noi exclaimed in surprise, "Wow, you had something like this?" and Kalterik was also intrigued, but then...

Suddenly, Kalterik turned to look at him with a very uneasy face.

"Wait a minute. Isn't that the thing from the sky island? I think I saw it there."

"...A souvenir."

"What did you say?!"

It was the first time he had shown this object to his companions since then. He had put it in his robe on the sky island and brought it along. With the battle against the demon that night, and various things happening in the night, and then focusing only on coming down from the island the next day, he had forgotten the fact that he had put the stick away.

*You guys came down with even a holy relic bearing the grand title of 'small sun', so why can't I bring this one thing?* Seeing Kalterik's shock, he ignored him, which made the guy shout, "Wah!"

But immediately after, a louder noise erupted, *clang~!* Harenir had destroyed the first core of the Encroachment Zone.

"I understand you two have become friendly, but let's focus on the mission for now."

"What? Commander, that's really a misunderstanding...!"

Regardless of Kalterik's indignant explanation, Harenir gestured to him. It was a look asking where the other two locations were, so he answered perceptively. The blue eyes were as calm as ever, but somehow they felt cold, so he lowered the flashlight slightly. Had he gained +1 hatred for stealing from a sacred place?

"One is between the narrow canyons in the 10 o'clock direction, and the other is in the gravel field in the 4 o'clock direction..."

The companions moved quickly following his words. Throughout the movement, Kalterik seemed to want to clear up Harenir's misunderstanding, but that was pushed to a lower priority when they arrived at the next core.

[Kihit, kihihit...]

[Uninvited guests have come.]

As if they had been waiting, a group of Dium was standing there. Over twenty one-horned ones, and even a two-horned Dium leading them.

Though they had expected to encounter Dium again in this Encroachment Zone, they hadn't anticipated facing the two-horned one, who had been the boss of the previous phase, right from the start. He anxiously looked around at his companions. Harenir had handled it well last time, but could the other knights really...

"Ha! You're disgustingly alive!"

"...I had guessed, but..."

Fortunately, Kalterik and Mela calmly drew their swords. Their auras were solemn, as if they had thoroughly prepared. It seemed that even the two-horned one was within a manageable range if they were well-prepared. Above all, there were no zombies here, that is, no missing persons whose return someone was hoping for, so the knights could swing their swords more easily.

*Bang, boom!*

*Swish!*

Kalterik pressured heavily with his greatsword, Mela thrust sharply with her rapier, and Harenir cleanly targeted the openings created. It was a much more systematic appearance than before. Had the vice-commanders been confused by the Dium's survival back then? Only Harenir had guessed at that time.

The two-horned Dium, instantly losing its subordinates and driven to a disadvantage, stretched out its hand.

[You, you...! How on earth did you get here...!]

"Time is precious."

*Swish!* Harenir didn't even bother to converse with it and cut it down with his sword. While he had asked the Dium various questions before, now he intuited that clues would be at the center of the Encroachment Zone and didn't waste time elsewhere.

Looking down at the head of the two-horned Dium that had fallen to the ground with a thud, Harenir spoke calmly.

"Let's move on to the next."

Though he seemed as composed as usual, the companions followed tensely, sensing a subtly sharpened atmosphere. As the commander was taking the situation seriously, everyone was on high alert, and even he had to increase his pace inadvertently.

*Slash!*

They destroyed the third core in an instant. This time too, a group of Dium blocked their way, but they were no match for the advance of the highly motivated holy knights.

However, even after destroying all the cores he had identified with the undead, the contaminated energy of the Encroachment Zone didn't decrease significantly. In the southern Encroachment Zone, the air had cleared dramatically when all the cores were eliminated, but now there was only an unsettling feeling as if telling them it wasn't over yet.

Harenir quietly looked up at the sky and exhaled slowly. His face, on which the moonlight fell obliquely, was infinitely calm.

"It seems purification won't work now."

"Then..."

"Let's go to the center of the Encroachment Zone."

Though it had been planned from the beginning, he felt ominous as he sensed the raid's difficulty increasing in real-time. He moved his steps, trying to stamp down his anxiety. As they went deeper into the Encroachment Zone, the night wind grew cooler, and he tightened the cape wrapped around his shoulders. His breath spread in a hazy mist.

When they finally arrived at the center where pitch-black fog was thickly spread, Noi exclaimed,

"There are letters engraved on the rock..."

It was a fact realized only after touching the wall. Just as he was getting tired of walking and leaned against the side, he felt something strangely concave, and when he shone the flashlight on it, he discovered letters densely filling the entire rock.

Unfamiliar letters were engraved on the entire canyon so large that one had to tilt their head back to see it all. It wasn't the imperial language. Noi spoke in astonishment, seeming to know what it was.

"It's the language used by the Dium."

"...The Dium use a separate language?"

"Yes. They say that in the early stages of the Great Catastrophe, they couldn't communicate with the Dium at all. Then about half a year later, they started using the imperial language..."

Noi nodded, seeming to gain more confidence as he felt along the wall.

"I've seen this before. After eliminating the Dium 20 years ago, most of the records about them were discarded, so it was difficult to find the language they used. So I only accidentally discovered a page or two, but I remember it clearly because I found it interesting that they used a different language from the old demon race."

It was unexpected that records about the Dium had been discarded. Was it because proper research couldn't be conducted during the time when the continent was being devastated, or did they want to erase even the records because they were such terrifying beings? Perhaps it was also because of the strong belief that they had been 'perfectly' dealt with.

Noi tilted his head as if finding that part strange too, but right now, there was something more important in front of them. The letters densely filling the canyon, and the fact that the terrain here had changed.

In other words, it meant that the Dium were not just barely surviving in hiding here, but were up to something.

"I hear some kind of sound from inside."

Mela, who had gone deeper into the canyon first, returned and reported in a stiff voice. Harenir immediately moved, and as he followed, he felt his whole body resonating with a *thump, thump*. Had his heartbeat quickened due to anxiety? No, this was...

It was the sound the Dium were making.

[Aah, we must reclaim our era. The day when the living beings of this land bow their heads to us, and our glory stains the earth like blood...]

In the wide open space at the center of the canyon, there was a huge 'altar' carved from stone. In front of the altar, which was crude but of a scale that could not be ignored, there were well over a hundred Dium. They were kneeling, repeatedly bowing their upper bodies as if offering prayers, and some individuals were beating stones like drums.

They looked as if they were performing some kind of ritual.

Moreover, standing in front of the group was a Dium with three horns. The horns protruding from the center of its forehead and on both sides were very sharp, and its body, clad in pitch-black uniform, was also extraordinary. It looked ten times larger than a human.

Noi gasped in astonishment, saying "Tri-horned...", but Harenir remained quiet. He seemed to have anticipated even this, but when the tri-horned Dium finally knelt before the altar and chanted something.

[All of this is for Dedium...]

Harenir's face stiffened sharply.

### Chapter 48

Given the circumstances, 'Dedium' was likely the leader of the Dium? If it was the being that the Dium gathered here were revering while performing rituals, and if it was something that made Harenir react like that, nothing else came to mind.

'Ultimately, the goal might be to check if 'that' is awakening.'

Just as he was recalling what Harenir had said before about why he wanted to explore the Encroachment Zone further, before he could continue his reasoning, a bizarre scene unfolded before his eyes.

*Thud!*

About thirty one-horned Dium came forward to the altar and pierced their own chests with their large hands. Then, without any hesitation, they pulled out their pitch-black hearts and offered them on the altar, which was a very shocking sight. *Plop, plop,* black blood poured out.

The Dium's hearts looked just like crystals made of darkness and appeared similar to the cores embedded in the Encroachment Zone. As soon as they offered them on the altar, the Dium collapsed as if they had fulfilled their duty.

In front of them, the tri-horned Dium spoke in a somber tone.

[I will remember your sacrifice. I will surely conquer this land and make your devotion glorious.]

Is it characteristic of that kind to be miserable while being intruders?

As he felt revulsion at the grotesque scene, a Dium wearing a robe standing in front of the altar stretched out both arms. It was one he hadn't paid attention to, his gaze caught by the tri-horned Dium and the shocking form of the offerings. The fact that its horns were hidden by the hood it wore was very unsettling.

The Dium's horns protruded sharply, so it shouldn't be able to cover them with a hood like that, did this one have a different shape? How many horns did it have? Its size was similar to a one-horned, but it didn't have the atmosphere of a one-horned at all.

His attention was drawn to the suspicious staff it was holding and its action of chanting something like a machine gun. Its behavior looked like that of a priest, but somehow...

[...]

He couldn't understand what it was saying. It wasn't because it was reciting quickly. It seemed to be using a different language, that is, the 'Dium language' they had seen earlier on the rocks.

*Zing—* The air resonated. In the wide open space surrounded by rocks, the wind blew clockwise, then suddenly reversed direction, and black light began to emanate from the letters densely engraved on the stones. No, perhaps it should be described as black fog flowing out.

The sight of it spreading looked very ominous, and moreover, the more the priest chanted in the Dium language, the more strangely familiar it felt. Had the succubus they encountered on the sky island made a similar sound?

*Whoosh!* The priest raised both hands high.

[We will surely break the wicked seal placed on Dedium. We will tear to shreds that vicious human who dares to bind our god...!]

*Ah,* he barely held back an exclamation that almost burst from his mouth. Now he understood why his companions, and indeed all the people of the empire, believed that the Dium had been 'perfectly' dealt with.

It seemed the previous Holy Knight Commander had become the seal itself to stop Dedium.

None other than Harenir's parent...

As he processed this astonishing realization, the priest's speech continued. The voice expressing anger towards the being that blocked Dedium's path was extremely fierce.

[In the land that human tried to protect, and before the eyes of the insects who revere that sacrifice as noble, we will tear the corpse to pieces and trample it. We will gouge out the eyes to see the earth stained with blood...!]

*Rumble!*

At that moment, the ground shook violently. He flinched at the earthquake that occurred right next to him and turned his head. Green energy swirled around Noi like a vortex.

The focus in his lime-green eyes was completely gone.

"How dare you... that person..."

The green fairy energy that had always sparkled peacefully was now swirling violently to a chilling degree. His light brown hair and robe fluttered wildly. The momentum grew increasingly fierce, and finally, *boom!* As another thunderous sound spread, the ground shattered.

"Don't insult Lady Evelyn!"

Dozens of thick tree trunks shot up, destroying the altar and collapsing the canyon with engraved letters. Though he had guessed that his companions would stop the suspicious ritual, he hadn't expected it to happen so violently. Moreover, he couldn't have imagined that the gentle Noi would take action.

Kalterik also looked at him with a very surprised face.

"N-Noi?"

But Noi was now in a state where proper communication was impossible. Harenir checked the energy swirling around him and shook his head. It seemed he had entered a berserk state and there was nothing they could do now.

*Crack, bang! Boom!* Amidst the continuous thunderous sounds, Kalterik gripped his greatsword and shouted loudly.

"Right! Since it's come to this, let's destroy everything!"

"Let's subdue the one conducting the ritual first."

"Understood."

Mela nodded at Harenir's words. Although some of the Dium had died after voluntarily digging out their hearts, many still remained. There were even several two-horned ones there. Yet Mela shot forward without hesitation, and finally, Harenir turned to him.

"I'll leave Noi to you."

*...To me?*

Setting aside the reason that it's difficult for him to take care of himself, entrusting a companion's safety to 'Isaph'? He pointed at himself in bewilderment, but Harenir just nodded slightly before leaving. He blinked in astonishment. What was this, did he trust the collar that much?

*Rumble!* However, seeing dozens of tree trunks violently swaying around Noi right after, he formed another hypothesis. Well, since Noi was in a berserk state now, he might have judged that Isaph wouldn't be a match for him anyway.

A group of Dium blocked the path of the knights rushing towards the priest.

[Kiiiieek!]

[How dare you interfere with the sacred ritual...!]

"What sacred, you unrighteous bastards!"

Kalterik shouted as if exasperated and swung his greatsword with a *whoosh!* The Dium, enraged at the scene of their carefully prepared ritual site being destroyed, rushed in recklessly. The two-horned Dium charged with a fierce momentum, but the knights were just as angry.

There were only three knights, but they didn't yield to dozens of Dium. Moreover, the tree trunks Noi was pulling out were breaking the Dium's formation, providing solid support. Even in his berserk state, Noi miraculously didn't attack the knights.

[How dare you.]

The tri-horned Dium turned to look this way. He flinched as it stared eerily at exactly where he and Noi were. It seemed to have figured out who was responsible for pulling out the tree trunks destroying the space.

[Kill that fairy hiding over there...]

*Swish!* But just before the Dium's order fell, Harenir slashed upwards with his sword. Even in the dark night, the pure white holy sword boasted a clear presence. *Whoosh*, the Dium barely retreated and looked at him.

Despite facing an enormously large being, Harenir remained calm. When the Dium wiped its jaw, black blood smeared. He had managed to leave a wound on it.

The tri-horned Dium twisted its lips in a smile.

[You, there were rumors you had died.]

"You hear such stories well for someone living in hiding."

The Dium seemed to have recognized his identity from the holy sword, and Harenir just shrugged. At his nonchalant response, the Dium chuckled.

[Indeed. I expected you wouldn't have died. Aren't you of that disgustingly tenacious human's bloodline? So I guessed you would surely come to interfere with us.]

"I expected it too. That you would be alive somehow. I was curious whether you had revived or never died in the first place, but seeing today's ritual, it seems you've been barely clinging to life. Quite disgustingly tenaciously."

[What?!]

"That's exactly how it looks, making your subordinates offer even their hearts to survive."

The Dium twisted its lips at Harenir's calmly retorting attitude.

[Ha! You wouldn't understand. To awaken the god, we need hearts imbued with this land's energy. So you can't even imagine how we feel watching our comrades who have been with us here for so long step forward to dig out their hearts and offer them. How noble the meaning of that act is!]

The Dium's tone was very somber and even filled with resentment, but Harenir silently tapped the ground lightly with his toe. He looked down for a moment, then his gaze towards the Dium became extremely dry. He tilted his head slightly and asked.

"Do I need to know that?"

The victims didn't need to know about the sad circumstances the monsters who had destroyed the continent were spouting. Then *crack!* Tree trunks shot up beneath Harenir. As if his tapping the ground earlier had been some kind of signal, he climbed high on the thick trunks and flew at the Dium.

*Swish!* The Dium tried to dodge him as he shot forward quickly. But the holy sword touched the Dium's shoulder, and that spot began to rot with a sizzle. Harenir skillfully moved along the tree trunks, attacking it.

Clicking its tongue, the Dium quickly circled the open space. It ran along the walls of the rock-enclosed space created for the ritual, almost as if flying. He was surprised at its speed, too fast to follow with the eyes, and then startled as *boom!* The wall collapsed.

Though Noi had already been destroying it with tree trunks, that had been more about erasing the letters on the wall, while the tri-horned Dium completely demolished the entire wall. *Rumble!* As the huge canyon collapsed, it crushed the tree trunks.

With their roots cut off, the tree trunks that had been stirring up the open space and assisting the knights could no longer exert force and went limp. Standing on top of the debris, the tri-horned Dium looked down at Harenir and sneered.

[Do you think you've become a god just because you received god's love?]

### Chapter 49

Just then, Harenir, who had leaped up there, remained silent at the Dium's mockery. *Whoosh—* As the cool night wind blew, his golden hair scattered and sparkled brilliantly under the moonlight.

At the highest point of the colorless Encroachment Zone, his figure holding the pure white holy sword under the bright moonlight was supremely sacred. However, for some reason, only those blue eyes had a worn-out look, as if he had walked a very long and arduous path.

*Rustle—* As Harenir tilted his head, his golden hair fell disheveled over his forehead.

"If I were really a god..."

He smiled silently. No, perhaps it was closer to self-mockery.

"..."

Harenir moved his lips a couple of times but ultimately said nothing. It was impossible to guess what words he had just swallowed. As his hair tilted diagonally, a shadow fell over one eye.

Something that was neither joy nor sorrow appeared in his blue eyes like an old stain and then disappeared. The corners of his mouth, still forming a smile, suddenly seemed to him like a taxidermied trace.

Finally, Harenir raised his sword.

"Let's not waste time unnecessarily."

Below, the two knights were still fighting dozens of Dium. Moreover, it had been well over an hour since they entered the Encroachment Zone, so there was no time to leisurely converse with the tri-horned Dium. They had to deal with it before becoming contaminated.

*Bang!* Harenir immediately charged at the Dium. But unexpectedly, the Dium flew off in the opposite direction. He was bewildered by its action that seemed almost like fleeing, as he had naturally expected a fierce battle to ensue.

Harenir also asked, as if puzzled,

"Are you tucking your tail and running from the start?"

[Kuk kuk, wouldn't it be a foolish choice to clash head-on with the great 'god'? And we need time...]

The Dium looked down ominously, chuckling. Below the canyon, two holy knights were fighting against one- and two-horned Dium. Just two. Those struggling below, believing Harenir would handle the tri-horned Dium.

[We have energy received from something that came while we were preparing the ritual. It said it was a good means to plunge humans into despair, so I should try using it.]

*Whoosh,* some kind of energy began to spread from the Dium. Watching from afar, he opened his eyes wide. The energy the Dium was emitting had a dark red color. It was surprising to see something with 'color' appear in the Encroachment Zone that was entirely colorless.

However, the reason it couldn't be seen as positive at all was because he had seen similar energy from a demon before. The succubus they had encountered on the sky island had used energy of exactly that ominous color.

*Whoosh!* As the dark red energy spread widely, it covered the moon in the sky and then poured down like rain. It was more powerful energy than the succubus's, and it looked almost like blood was falling.

As he was about to step back hurriedly at the very unsettling sight, Noi staggered in front of him.

"Ugh, urgh..."

He had already taken a hit earlier when the tree trunks were crushed. Though he had stubbornly endured and continued using his ability afterwards, he stumbled as soon as the rain touched him. Though where he and Noi were was far from the altar, the dark red rain fell even here.

*Thud,* Noi finally collapsed to the ground, clutching his head. He wanted to run away alone, but if he did that, the quest's success would become remote. If it were just him getting hit and collapsing, it might be different, but wasn't Noi Harenir's long-time acquaintance? Probably related to the previous Holy Knight Commander.

Resigned, he jumped into the rain to grab Noi. He needed to escape as quickly as possible, but with this pathetic body, it was difficult to move even Noi, who was smaller than him. Pulling his robe's hood down deeply, he panted as he dragged Noi along. Carrying him was out of the question.

"Huff, hah, let me put points into strength stat."

He barely moved away from the range of the falling rain and caught his breath. Though Noi's appearance was a mess from being dragged on the wet ground, well, he had still kept Harenir's words.

"Urgh, this is similar to that annoying bastard's energy!"

Kalterik shouted irritably from the other side. He groaned as he staggered from the pouring rain while in the midst of fighting a two-horned Dium. But after shaking his head vigorously a couple of times, he let out a "Hyaah!" and drew up his holy power. Golden energy rose like a wave.

"This mere, nightmare or whatever, doesn't work on me anymore...!"

...It seemed to be working a little, though.

He decided to ignore the cold sweat on Kalterik's forehead. Still, as someone experienced with nightmares, he was escaping it well. Just as he was feeling relieved that there was no need to worry about the holy knights, he witnessed a truly unexpected sight.

"...Ugh."

On the opposite side, Mela staggered and then collapsed with a thud.

It was a first. Mela had always existed flawlessly upright. The image of her he had seen so far was of her calmly surveying the situation with her cold navy blue eyes, her mysterious silver hair flowing. A loyal knight who followed Harenir's every word and quietly guarded his side.

Mela, who had never once faltered, was now kneeling on the ground, panting. The holy power trying to resist the rain imbued with nightmare energy flickered unsteadily around her.

"I, I, came out of that place..."

Mela fumbled to pull out a necklace from between her collar. She grasped the silver necklace engraved with Solnium's emblem and muttered something quickly, which sounded like verses from a sacred text.

Kalterik, realizing the situation, tried to hurriedly approach her, but a horde of Dium rushed in to block his advance. Kalterik looked frantic, trying to surround himself with holy power to block the nightmare rain while also fending off the Dium.

Finally, the tri-horned Dium shot an attack towards Mela. Its arm had somehow transformed into a bow. One arm was shaped like a bow, while the other had elongated its nails to form an arrow.

*Swish!* The arrow, aimed precisely at Mela, flew carrying black fog. Moreover, the arrow began to split the moment it was fired. From two to four, eight, and in an instant, sixteen.

"Mela!"

Kalterik shouted her name like a scream, but *thud!* A terrible sound erupted. The sound of flesh being pierced echoed chillingly and then...

As the thick fog cleared, the scene that appeared was Harenir standing in front of Mela. Originally, the two had been far apart, but he seemed to have moved instantly. He had deflected most of the arrows with his sword, but the arrows he couldn't block had pierced him.

One had gone through his shoulder, and another was lodged in his palm. He had caught with his hand the one shot at Mela. *Plop, plop,* bright red blood fell. Mela looked up at him with an astonished expression as blood poured out enough to form a puddle on the ground.

"C-Commander..."

Harenir exhaled softly, "Hoo—" Then he calmly pulled out the arrows from his shoulder and palm one by one, but because the arrowheads had a bizarre shape, holes were left behind. Blood gushed out.

His left hand trembled naturally in response to the physical reaction, but Harenir forcibly clenched and unclenched his fist repeatedly, about three or four times.

Finally, extending his left hand, now restored to its original form, to Mela, Harenir smiled gently. As he turned around then, he looked like the flawless hero as always.

"That's right, Mela. You came out of that place."

It was a shockingly impressive recovery ability once again. This time, the wounds had been deep enough to pierce his body completely, yet even those healed in an instant. Not just his palm, but his shoulder was the same. It was strange to see his shoulder, exposed through the torn uniform, fully healed. Though his flesh was covered in blood, there was no wound anywhere.

Was this why Harenir was revered as the manifestation of God? It was a quite understandable situation. While he was still marveling at this, Harenir gave an advice that was difficult to understand.

"Mela. Don't make dangerous choices."

"..."

"I don't want you to do things you dislike. You don't have to do that."

Harenir's tone was very kind, but it also sounded vaguely like a firm warning. It was an enigmatic content that seemed more than just trying to calm Mela who must have been surprised or telling her not to feel guilty about the current situation.

### Chapter 50

Mela's eyes trembled. Harenir grasped her hand with his left hand, helping her up as if to demonstrate, and once again drew a gentle smile.

"Do you trust me?"

"...Yes."

"Take a moment to catch your breath. I'll handle this."

Where he gestured, there was a space just right for one person to hide, where debris from the rocks had piled up to perfectly block the rain. Mela bit her lip as if hesitating, but when Harenir softly called her name, she finally bowed her head.

*Swish!* Just then, Harenir cut down a Dium that rushed at them. Though Kalterik and Mela had dealt with some Dium earlier, several dozen still remained. After dispatching one with a single strike, Harenir lightly rolled his shoulder.

There was no awkwardness at all in moving the shoulder that had bled profusely, and no sign of pain could be felt in his movements as he cut down the next Dium that rushed in. Looking at his actions alone, he seemed like someone who hadn't been injured at all. Only after confirming this did Mela hesitantly move her steps.

Kalterik shouted loudly,

"Commander, don't worry! I'll support you well!"

"That's reassuring."

Though it was a situation where only two of them had to face the enemies, there was no fear on their faces. Even though they should have been tired from dealing with many Dium on their way to the center of the Encroachment Zone, Kalterik had rather entered a state of alertness due to excitement, and Harenir was calm as always.

*Swish!*

The only problem, if any, would be that the tri-horned Dium, the leader of this place, was still alive. They had to prevent the Dium from the bottom of the canyon from reaching where Noi and Mela were, and since that role couldn't be left to Kalterik alone, Harenir joined in.

And the tri-horned Dium at the top of the canyon attacked, making full use of its advantageous position. The Dium endlessly split its four fingers and shot them as arrows.

They had to endure the dark red rain with holy power, and also block the Dium's arrows, which gradually created openings for Kalterik. Harenir naturally took on the Dium's attacks that targeted these moments.

*Thud!* However, because it was an absolutely disadvantageous situation, they couldn't avoid all attacks, and Harenir pulled out an arrow that had pierced his abdomen, telling the horrified Kalterik that it was alright. The sight of the wound that gushed blood healing smoothly was still marvelous. Kalterik's eyes shone with respect and adoration for the hero, as if he had witnessed a miracle.

The tri-horned Dium shouted as if disgusted,

[Ha! Aren't you disgustingly tenacious after all?!]

"You called me a god, wouldn't you be disappointed if I collapsed from just this?"

Harenir smiled kindly, his eyes crinkling. It seemed as if a verse about truly becoming a god because you called him one might faintly follow. The Dium twisted its lips at the response that could be either consideration or mockery.

[Fine. Then I'll pour it on without even giving you a chance to recover!]

*Whoosh!* Once again, the Dium spread its arms wide and emitted dark red energy. The rain intensified and wind began to blow. It felt like being in the middle of a storm.

"Ugh..."

He frowned as the rain lashed even where he was standing. He sighed deeply, feeling overwhelmed at the prospect of having to move Noi again. But knowing that the longer he delayed, the more troublesome it would become, he finally grabbed one of Noi's arms and started dragging him, when something appeared before his eyes.

He flinched, thinking it might be a Dium... but was even more surprised when he recognized who it was.

"...Isaph."

It was Mela. It was strange enough that she had come here in an instant from far away, but it was even more bewildering that she had come looking for 'him'. Did she have some business with him? Having never conversed with Mela before, he couldn't possibly guess her purpose.

On the other hand, he felt embarrassed about dragging Noi in such a mess and quietly grabbed him with both hands. It was a meaningless action since only the last step remained anyway, but he tried to make it look better.

But unexpectedly, Mela's gaze had been fixed only on him all this time.

"I have a favor to ask of you."

Hearing such a shocking phrase, he looked at Mela in bewilderment. *A favor?* He tilted his head as if he had misheard, but her words continued immediately.

"Your goal is to help the Commander and receive a reduced sentence in the future, right? If there's anything that becomes an obstacle to that path, you would eliminate it."

"...?"

"Your ability to handle souls itself is exceptional. I dare not even compare you to other necromancers. I only learned that even the souls of living beings could be detached through you."

It was a flow he couldn't understand at all. She suddenly mentioned his goal, then praised him, and then... even bowing her head.

"So if I lose control... stop me, like you did with the succubus."

"...What?"

"I'm telling you to detach my soul."

It was a request delivered in the most serious voice. At first, he thought Mela was joking, but setting aside the fact that he and she weren't close enough for that, the eyes that looked at him right after were too sincere. They even held a desperate energy.

"The thing I dislike most is burdening the Commander, even more than 'that'."

Slowly, Mela removed the silver necklace engraved with Solnium's emblem from her neck. Then, as if it were natural, she handed it to him, and he received it with one hand in bewilderment.

As if that meant he had accepted the request, Mela thanked him and bowed her head again. Without a chance to explain that it wasn't so, he barely held back a gasp at what followed.

Mela's eyes changed.

The white sclera turned pitch black, and her navy blue eyes, which had been like a cool deep sea, turned red as if filled with blood. He had seen these eyes a few days ago. From the succubus, that 'demon', on the sky island.

Then, as Mela tilted her head back slightly and exhaled slowly, *crack—* two horns sprouted from her forehead. The eyes alone had been shocking enough, but the sight of horns rising nearly made him faint for real.

Suddenly, things he had brushed past before came to mind.

'Mela is impossible. She doesn't have much holy power.'

[Why is your soul...]

[...What are you?]

'Lady Mela knows a lot about demons.'

Harenir's words, the confusion and slight wariness shown by the first emperor's aide summoned at the historical hall when he saw Mela, and the puzzled reaction of the succubus they encountered on the sky island. Even what Noi had said at the temple a few days ago.

'M-Mela. I thought you would hate that guy more! He's 'that' necromancer! The kind that conducts illegal experiments and research!'

As he recalled Kalterik's words as well, a hypothesis formed in his mind like a flash of lightning. Could it be that Mela had become a demon through illegal experiments? There was also the possibility of being a half-blood, but the hypothesis gained strength from the fact that the shape of the horns was distorted, and the area connected to her forehead was full of scars.

They say that when you see too shocking a sight, you freeze and can't react at all. As he stood frozen in silence, Mela calmly nodded.

[As expected, you seem to have anticipated this.]

*No, I didn't.*

He couldn't correct Mela, who had completely misunderstood his reaction. Her voice now resonated differently from before, and now *swish!* Dark red wings even sprouted from her back. He couldn't even gauge how much more he should be surprised.

[I'll try my best to return to being human... but if I fail, subdue me before I become a complete demon and lose my reason.]

"...If your soul is detached, you'll die."

In the past, he had detached the soul of Bart, the voice phishing criminal, and then returned it to his body. But that had been several times more difficult than out-of-body skill, and Bart had been human, while Mela was now a demon. Could he really control a demon's soul? He had barely managed to detach the succubus's soul.

Mela nodded at his words.

[Yes. My comrades won't be able to deal with me, and I don't want to burden the Commander unnecessarily.]

*...Hey, then what about me?*

Was she saying that Isaph was someone who wouldn't feel any burden at all even if he killed someone he had seen every day for a long time? *Ha, really...*

It's frustrating that he can't refute because it's such an accurate character analysis. *Why am I in this kind of body.* Truly bewildered, he finally let out a dry laugh and said one thing.

"...If I kill you, I don't think the hero will advocate for my sentence reduction, unless it's for immediate execution."

Mela's eyes widened at his words. She looked surprised, as if she hadn't expected this kind of reaction. Seeing the demon's eyes up close involuntarily reminded him of the succubus incident, making him tense reflexively, but the red eyes he faced now held a faintly finite light.

As those eyes curved... *oh, is she smiling now?*

[Hold onto that necklace well.]

### Chapter 51

Surprised by Mela's smile, which he was seeing for the first time, he didn't have a chance to ask about the meaning of her words. *Whoosh!* Spreading her dark red wings, Mela soared high into the sky.

*Swish!* Mela shot towards the tri-horned Dium at a speed much faster than when she was human. Pushing away the nightmare rain with her wing beats, she advanced and slashed her rapier diagonally upwards. A fierce sound erupted, loud enough to shatter the canyon.

The Dium's arm was cut by the completely unexpected surprise attack.

[You...]

"M-Mela! That state is...!"

"...Mela."

The knights who had been blocking the rain, arrows, and Dium below immediately noticed the anomaly. Kalterik was shocked, and Harenir looked up at her with a somber expression.

In the deep night, now darkened with even the moon obscured by dark red fog, Mela's silver hair swayed coolly. The Dium stared intently at her wings, red eyes, and finally her distorted horns, then nodded.

[Ah, I've heard about experimental subjects like you. Experiments conducted in the past with the purpose of opposing us. Kidnapping orphans and injecting them with demonic energy...]

Though the purpose was grand, in reality, it was a horrific experiment perpetrated by black magicians and necromancers who were fascinated by the power forbidden by the Holy Empire. The Dium looked Mela over with interested eyes.

[I heard that those who became half-human, half-demon through such experiments usually don't last even a few months before dying, but you've managed to survive until now.]

[You seem too interested in information about the human world.]

The Dium chuckled at Mela's dry response.

[Kuhaha, isn't it interesting? Humans call us a 'calamity', but the beings that bring the greatest calamity to the human world are themselves. It's quite amusing.]

[...]

[They commit terrible acts against their own kind without hesitation, yet someone else sacrifices themselves to protect everyone for the reason that they're the same species. Such a contradictory race...]

The Dium's attitude as it spoke at length was somehow friendly. At first, he thought it might be an illusion, but the Dium's arm actually smoothly returned from its bow shape to its original form. It was an implicit expression of having no intention to attack.

Though its large body and alien appearance still evoked intimidation, the action of extending one hand to Mela was clearly affectionate.

[You're a victim who was captured by humans and experimented on, yet you must have been persecuted by humans. Don't they consider that there's something impure in your heart that accepted demonic energy? I understand your sorrow. So why not join our cause instead?]

[...Nonsense.]

[Humans are currently in the position of predators in this land. But just because of that, they aren't given the right to act arrogantly as if they're the only standard in the world, yet didn't they label you as unrighteous and point fingers at you? So take my hand. Let's deal with those foolish holy knights together and move towards a true cause.]

Despite the Dium's whispers, Mela's expression remained cold. In fact, he, listening from below, was rather tempted and almost agreed that 'this is convincing enough', but Mela didn't even glance at the Dium's hand.

She just stared intently at the Dium's pitch-black horns, then slowly raised her sword and recited,

[Evil always approaches wearing a kind mask.]

[...What?]

[It will read your heart and approach wearing the appearance you most desire. Do not waver. The world was originally a dangerous place stained with darkness, and yet it's a space where life sprouted, imbued with Solnium's will to illuminate it. Your journey that seems only arduous is the path walking with Solnium...]

The sight of Mela calmly reciting verses from the sacred text with her eyes lowered was quite strange. Was it foolish for a being with a demon's appearance to follow God's will, or had she truly taken on the appearance of a believer by doing so?

Finally, Mela looked straight up at the sky. Her red eyes, looking up at the place where murky fog faintly covered the moon, held a strange light.

[At that end, light shall shine.]

*Whoosh,* golden holy power imbued Mela's sword. Though smaller in range than when she was human, the light that bloomed through contradiction shone even more dazzlingly. The moment the Dium let out an incredulous laugh at witnessing such a clear rejection, Mela charged.

*Boom, boom! Bang!* Thunderous sounds repeatedly struck the space noisily. The Dium faced Mela while freely changing the shape of its arms. Though the two-horned Dium could also elongate its fingers, the tri-horned one was much more skillful.

Its thick arms changed into a shield shape to block sword strikes, then transformed into a sharp spear to stab at the opponent, and even changed into a huge mace to swing around.

Despite the opponent's weapon changing in an instant, Mela responded calmly. As if focusing on the flow of air around her rather than visual cues, she calmly defended one by one and occasionally used her wings to appear in completely unexpected places to exploit openings.

Gradually, more wounds appeared on the Dium's body. Rather, the Dium began to retreat more frequently, and even had its shoulder and palm pierced in succession. It was almost like an attack returning the wounds Harenir had received earlier.

Noticing this, the Dium clutched its profusely bleeding shoulder and trembled.

[Why so foolishly...!]

[Your proposal was wrong from the start.]

Once again, Mela cut off the Dium's words in a cold voice. With icy eyes as if its proposal wasn't even worth reconsidering.

[From the moment you called those holy knights foolish, it was revealed that your eyes were misguided.]

[...]

[And 'he' is the noblest being in this world. Such a person extended his hand to me... There's no way I would take the hand of the likes of you.]

The action of looking the Dium up and down was close to mockery. Enraged by this, the Dium gathered dark red demonic energy. It was the nightmare energy that had caught Mela's ankle earlier, so it intended to use that power again.

But it was stopped by a single sword strike from Mela. *Swish!* She completely cut off the flow of energy gathering like a whirlpool. The current Mela could detect demonic energy better than anyone.

And...

[W-what is this!]

Instead, the Dium's ankle was caught by demonic energy rising from the ground. It wasn't only the Dium that could use demonic energy here. The Dium stomped its feet frantically. Saying it wouldn't be caught by such a thing, it now began to emit black energy.

The Dium's innate power quickly tore apart Mela's shackles. But before the Dium could regroup for another offensive, Mela rushed in. The fastest knight he had ever seen.

Even in the thick black fog that had spread, her silver hair remained uncovered. *Bang!* The Dium reflexively swung its arm wide to block Mela's charge, but just before that, she leaped high into the sky. Lightly jumping up, she soared several dozen meters.

Gracefully rotating in mid-air, cutting through the fog in the sky.

[He is not foolish.]

Finally finding the bright moonlight in the dark night.

[So, I too, whom he chose, must not be foolish.]

*Swish!* Mela, bathed in brilliant light, plunged down towards the Dium. The entire canyon collapsed and *boom!* The earth shook. It was enough to shake the ground even under his feet far away. Though staggering, he kept his gaze fixed.

As the dusty smoke that had spread thickly settled... He could finally see Mela who had plunged her sword into the Dium's abdomen. They had somehow come down to the bottom of the canyon. The battered Dium was motionless, and only after confirming its death did Mela slowly raise her head.

Just then, they had also completely wiped out the horde of Dium below.

[...Commander.]

Mela immediately found Harenir among the countless Dium corpses and looked at him cautiously. He was also quietly looking at her.

[You told me not to demonize, but I disobeyed your order. I'm sorry.]

"...I asked that because I didn't want you to recall terrible memories. It wasn't an order. And the longer you stay in that state, the more your soul will be contaminated..."

Mela smiled faintly at Harenir's kind concern as he shook his head. It was a smile born of relief, as if this was the only thing she had been concerned about all along, even though she had become quite battered from fighting the tri-horned Dium.

[I'm fine.]

It was a highly ambiguous expression. Did it mean she was fine because her soul wasn't very contaminated, or that she was fine because she had prepared a way to resolve it even if she became a demon? If it was the latter, it was sad that it would make him very not fine.

### Chapter 52

Harenir relaxed his eyes as if he couldn't help Mela's nonchalant response. But soon, as if he had sensed something, he turned abruptly to look in his direction.

"Wait. Don't tell me..."

Flustered by the blue eyes turning towards him, he quickly held up Mela's necklace. He had acted reflexively, guessing that some message must be contained in it since Mela had told him to keep it well, but belatedly realized its meaning.

*Ah,* this not only meant that Mela had asked him for a favor... but also that he had agreed to deal with Mela, right? He was holding a kind of life waiver. Was it absurd to boldly show such a thing?

"Hmm..."

He lowered the necklace slightly, then raised it again due to an uneasy feeling. His image was already at rock bottom anyway, so shouldn't he secure this kind of consent right? As he repeatedly raised and lowered his hand following his thoughts, a "Ha" sound was heard from the other side. It was unclear whether it was a sigh or a dry laugh.

But this respite didn't last long.

"C-Commander. The sky over there...!"

Kalterik shouted, pointing behind. *Crack*— A black fissure spread across the brightly moonlit night sky as if it had cracked. It was a shocking sight. It looked as if black lightning had struck.

*Thud, thud,* black smoke billowed around a Dium walking out from the crevice of the canyon. It was the priest that the knights had first tried to capture. But after disappearing among the Dium horde, it couldn't be found, and now it had appeared.

Suddenly, he recalled what the tri-horned Dium had said earlier.

[We need time...]

*Ah,* just when he thought the raid's second phase was over, the final\_final123.exe was about to proceed like this. He had sensed that a flag had been raised since hearing about this phenomenon from the thieves a few days ago, but there was no need to show everything like this. He stared at the scene in astonishment.

It had been over two hours since they entered the Encroachment Zone. Contamination was imminent.

"If we just deal with you, it's over...!"

Kalterik rushed at the priest, swinging his greatsword. But as soon as the priest lightly waved its staff once, Kalterik flew back and fell. *Thud!* He was violently buried in the debris of the canyon and groaned in pain.

The priest, whose face was half-hidden by its robe's hood, muttered ominously.

[Your struggles end here...]

*Swish!* Mela shot towards the priest. She rushed in incredibly fast, still in her demonized state, and having defeated even the tri-horned Dium, he hoped she could handle the priest too, but...

Just before getting close to the priest, Mela stopped.

[What is this...]

A translucent prison had suddenly appeared around Mela. The black fog emitted by the Dium had taken on a solid form. It was unbelievable that two people had been subdued in an instant.

The priest laughed lowly and pushed back its hood with its staff.

[Kuk, kukuk, foolish ones...]

What was revealed under the hood were two horns curled back like a goat's. At first, seeing their number, he wondered, 'Just two horns and it’s this strong?', but then he was surprised by the fellow's face. All the Dium he had encountered so far had two eyes, but...

A third eye was situated on the priest's forehead.

[I am the body in which Dedium dwelled.]

While the two eyes below the eyebrows were cloudy, only the eye on the forehead was clear. That alien appearance gave an unsettling sense of distance. The fellow rolled the eye on its forehead and looked around.

[I served Dedium closely since that day. Although He is now captured by vicious humans... if I rescue Him from the seal, I shall be bestowed glorious horns by Him.]

"..."

[Pay homage to me. Show reverence to our god, Dedium. Then I shall at least spare your lives.]

The Dium's voice sounded very strange. The voice, lower than that of other individuals, echoed in his ears several times as if resonating in a cave. If even he, who was quite far from it, felt tension, he couldn't imagine how the knights closer to it felt.

But Harenir just stared blankly at the priest and then...

"I waited to see what you would say, but it was a waste of time."

He leaped lightly and rushed in. The priest clicked its tongue and raised its staff. The staff that had subdued two knights in an instant had a rounded end and billowed black fog. *Swish!* As soon as the priest raised its staff in the direction Harenir was flying, another prison was created.

But Harenir gracefully avoided it and continued advancing. *Boom, bang, crash!* Black energy and golden energy collided several times. Harenir's holy power was too great to be blown away like Kalterik.

The priest twisted its lips in a smile.

[Yes. I knew you would be rebellious. Aren't you of that tenacious human's bloodline?]

"I've already had that conversation with another Dium, so it's boring..."

[But you are also of 'his' bloodline.]

Harenir's movement stopped abruptly. A crack-like fissure appeared on his smiling face, and gradually a chilling aura spread. It was probably, no, definitely hatred.

[The wise being who recognized the true new world, who felt the changes of the world and sought to follow its providence. I can't forget the sight of him coming to us and showing reverence so intelligently.]

"..."

[Ah, yes. You were there too back then. I remember seeing you as a child...]

The priest narrowed his third eye and recited in a distant tone. His voice was nostalgic, as if tracing a memory from long ago.

[You, who came holding 'his' hand, were so small and terrified. You must have been even more scared after seeing what happened to the foolish human who came out to save you... So, taking pity on you, if you swear to follow us even now, I shall admit you as a member of the new world.]

"..."

[What do you say? Will you follow your father's will and...]

"That, you shouldn't have mentioned."

It was a first. Always wearing a perfect smile and never changing that relaxed expression in any situation, now his face was contorted with anger. Terrible emotions swirled in his blue eyes, and his voice trembled as he ground out each syllable.

*Bang!* As Harenir immediately rushed in, the priest clicked its tongue.

[Humans are always so foolishly stubborn. I should give you some help to make your decision.]

The priest raised its staff high.

[Behold, our world.]

*Crack!* A thunderous sound, hundreds of times louder than what might be heard when porcelain cracks, struck the space. It was ear-splitting, and hearing that sound immediately raised goosebumps reflexively. An uneasiness rose as if cracks were spreading across every place he stood on.

He looked up blankly and witnessed countless Dium pouring out of the broken sky. An exclamation involuntarily escaped his parted lips.

"Ah."

So this was a monster wave pattern.

He understood why his companions had been wary when they heard the description of the sky breaking, and at the same time felt overwhelmed. Though the gap wasn't wide, probably because it was hastily opened, Dium were still squeezing through, and their numbers were by no means small. Although Mela and Kalterik had rejoined, they were already exhausted.

Harenir advanced at the forefront, breaking through the Dium horde himself. Even though most were one-horned, the sight of dozens of Dium rushing in would have made anyone hesitate, but he kept swinging his sword endlessly as he advanced. *Swish!* He would be wounded by the Dium's attacks, but then heal smoothly. He would be injured with one step, recover with the second, and then be wounded again with the next. This cycle repeated.

He didn't stop. The chilling anger evident on his face was so intense that the priest on the other side clicked its tongue as if frightened and swung its staff. The black fog began its interference.

It was chaos. He had no desire whatsoever to approach that place, and he thought that if he ran away now, even Harenir might not notice. Moreover, he had originally entered the Encroachment Zone as a guide, so wasn't his job done? But...

"Is this, *huff,* really the right place? You're not lying to get revenge on me, are you?"

Right now, he was summoning undead to search for the last core of the Encroachment Zone. Since he couldn't read the center when analyzing the Encroachment Zone earlier, he thought there might be a core here, and his prediction was correct.

He attached one undead to Noi and moved with the rest. Since he had expended his energy to the limit earlier, he could summon fewer undead and couldn't share their vision, so he had to follow where the undead guided him directly.

But that location happened to be close to the battlefield. If he took a slight detour and hid well, he probably wouldn't be detected by the Dium, but the path was extremely treacherous. It was almost at the level of having to crawl between cliffs.

He moved with difficulty, cursing inwardly. He really hated this. He truly didn't want to do it. Yet the reason he was searching for the core was... well, it wasn't empathy. The companions' anger, loyalty, or bonds were all distant from him. It wasn't because of Harenir's past that he had vaguely learned about from the priest's story earlier.

The fact that Harenir had seen Dium in his childhood probably connected to the story of him having entered an Encroachment Zone before, but there were still many unclear parts, and he didn't particularly want to find out about it either. He had always wanted to stay away from such complicated stories.

The reason he was moving now was simply because he felt uneasy about not finding the last core, which was part of his role as a guide. That was all. He had been released from prison on that condition, so shouldn't he do his part?

### Chapter 53

However, the more he looked at the steep cliff before him, the more he suspected that the undead might be showing him this path to take revenge for being subjugated by Isaph...

"Huff, hah, huuugh."

But with no other way to find a different path, he followed, groaning. The deeper he went, the more he felt the vibrations from the battlefield. *Boom, boom,* the ground shook, and the roars of the Dium and the sounds of them being slaughtered endlessly echoed in his ears.

*Anyway, terrible game, I'm leaving as soon as I clear it.*

After walking for a long time, panting, he finally discovered the black core. Its location, visible just by raising his head from the battlefield, made him uneasy. So there really was a core here. After letting out a sigh of relief, he spoke to the undead.

"Now break it."

[Grr...]

"...I said break it?"

[Urrrr...]

But for some reason, the undead didn't move. They just crowded around him, but none approached the core. This had never happened before, so he was flustered. Wondering if it might be an issue with his tone, he even tried asking politely, "Would you please break it?", but they remained unmoved.

"Now this terrible game won't even accept commands..."

*–Meow*.

At that moment, En, who had approached without him noticing, meowed beside him. Startled, he looked at it, and it tapped his wrist. As he blinked in confusion, it tapped four times, *tap tap tap tap!* The last one was so forceful that his wrist stung, and then something rattled.

*Ah,* there was a bracelet on his wrist.

It was the holy relic Harenir had given him before entering the Encroachment Zone, but why? He stared blankly at the bracelet and then sighed. Until now, all the cores had been broken by the holy knights' swords imbued with holy power. So, to eliminate the contaminated energy, holy power might be needed...

"I have to break it myself?"

*–Nyaa*.

"Just because you make cute meowing sounds doesn't mean the content becomes good."

Regardless of his bewilderment, En tapped the stones on the ground. Then it glanced at his wrist, and tapped the stones again. The meaning was conveyed, and he finally sighed and obediently followed its lead. He picked up a stone and gripped the bracelet firmly. He should trust the NPC, after all.

*Clang... clang... clang...*

The sound of him striking the core with the stone rang out pitifully. Having already used up all his energy climbing the cliff, he couldn't muster any strength with this paper-thin body. It was at the level of a damp wad of tissue. His hand tingled, and he really wanted to throw it away.

[Kieeek!]

"Huff, Commander...!"

But whenever he felt that way, all sorts of thunderous sounds were heard from below. The eerie cries of the Dium pouring down as if to engulf the three knights, and the sounds of them being cut down.

He didn't understand why they were so desperate. Why they got up even when battered, why they poured out their energy even while losing control and going berserk, and why they tried to fight even using the power they themselves found most horrifying...

And why 'he' kept advancing despite being so wounded.

Even knowing he was a human who would recover through God's love, strangely, the wounds caught his eye. Why was that? Was it because of the expression he had when swallowing his words while talking to the tri-horned Dium earlier?

Standing in the noblest position in the world, receiving everyone's respect, and even having loyal subordinates who believed in and followed him closest. Yet why did he sometimes wear such a worn-out expression?

While living the life he had wanted.

Though he didn't particularly want to understand, his gaze was caught. Even though he didn't want to care, his consciousness was ultimately drawn there. The anger born from this gradually added strength to his hand. He slammed down repeatedly until his entire arm ached, and finally... *crack—* he created a fissure in the core.

And as if they had been waiting for this moment, the undead moved en masse, pushing the surrounding rocks. As a pile of stones poured onto the cracked core, it finally shattered into pieces.

He felt indignant, thinking they could have helped earlier if this was possible, but then it occurred to him that perhaps only the first crack needed holy power. Of course, regardless of understanding, he still felt wronged. Don't give physical damage missions to this body.

He looked down, exhaling with difficulty.

"The air..."

Just then, Kalterik was looking around. As the core shattered, the air suddenly lightened, but being in such a bloody battlefield, he seemed unsure.

But Harenir, at least, looked up with certainty. It seemed he had heard the sound from above even in the midst of the chaotic uproar. As their blue eyes met exactly, he pointed to the pile of stones beside him. The pieces of the black core protruding through the gaps should convey the meaning.

And he wasn't the only one who noticed this anomaly. The priest, who had been swinging its staff to hinder the knights' advance, also raised its head abruptly. The third eye turning towards him filled him with an unsettling fear. Just as he was hoping that Harenir would finish him off, because if that bastard targeted him, death would be the only outcome.

The priest spoke in a trembling voice, as if struck by some great shock.

[You...?]

*Whoosh—* But the priest's words couldn't continue. Light of tremendous force spread as if swirling, and its source was the holy sword Harenir held vertically. It was the purification that began, taking advantage of the moment when the priest's attention was diverted.

Now that all the cores of the Encroachment Zone had been destroyed, purification was possible. And this time, as if intending to use not only purification but also another method, Harenir took something out from his bosom. The white sphere was Arux, the small sun they had brought from the sky island days ago.

The holy relic bestowed by God to the first emperor, the sun that the empire sought in every turbulent era. It slowly began to emit light in Harenir's hand, and then soared high into the sky. Light gradually accumulated in the sun.

The priest, belatedly realizing the scene, was shocked.

[That...! That stupid demon finally failed...!]

"Your news is slow. Ah, is it because the one to deliver the news is dead?"

Harenir answered calmly, shrugging his shoulders. By now his uniform was completely stained with blood, yet there was still no awkwardness in his movements.

[Kuk, fine. If I call enough that purification won't work...!]

The priest raised its staff high. *Crack—* The pitch-black crack in the sky spread wider, and the earth rumbled. Though no Dium were visible yet, the vibration alone was enough to feel how many were trying to cross over from the other side.

But even as the ground shook like that, Harenir remained calm.

"You view the sun's light too gently."

The tip of the holy sword he held upright and the sun floating in the sky were now perfectly aligned. And as the light contained in the sun became distinctly clearer, Harenir, confirming this, slowly lowered his eyes.

"Not knowing how beings exposed to light burn away."

As he muttered words that somehow sounded a little, just a little, like self-mockery.

Then, a voice reciting divine language calmly followed. As if not at all worried about the Dium pouring in like a calamity on the other side, standing at the point closest to the world's fissure, he conveyed some words to God without wavering. And at the end, once again, only the single word 'purification' pleasantly stuck in the ear.

*Whoosh...*

An amazing sight unfolded before his eyes. As before, pure white light gathered at the tip of his sword, but it seemed to be contained in Arux as well, and then the small sun began to spin and *swish!* started shooting out light like bars.

Light bars plunged into every space the light touched. The scene of hundreds of light bars flying was close to a massacre. Both the Dium that had remained here and those trying to cross over from the other side were all pierced by the light bars and died.

The number of falling bars gradually increased to match the number of enemies that needed to be annihilated, the number of unrighteous evils existing in the world. He couldn't help but marvel at the violent beams of light defeating evil. Well, the sun not only warmly illuminates the earth to sprout life but also, in extreme cases, scorches it like a desert.

There were so many beams of light pouring from the sky that it felt like it had become midday. Not only that, but as light settled on the fallen Dium, 'color' slowly began to spread in the Encroachment Zone. It was an awe-inspiring sight no matter how many times he saw it.

But for the priest, this scene seemed to come across completely differently. It trembled with rage as the kindred it had summoned all died, pierced by the sun's light beams without even a single resistance.

[T-this, this is impossible...!]

"You seemed to know a lot about the human world unnecessarily, but I guess you didn't know about this."

Harenir slowly approached the priest. Now, there was nothing left to block his path. Though the light beams pouring down like bars were ominous, Harenir walking between them remained intact. The sun's light only remained around him like a halo.

### Chapter 54

Seeing Harenir approaching with light at his back, the priest gritted its teeth and fled. Realizing it had no chance of winning, it tried to hide, but *swish!* A beam of light flew and pierced its leg. *Argh,* a painful scream erupted.

But even in that state, the priest crawled, stretching out its arm. The gesture of trying to grasp the staff it had just dropped on the ground was desperate. It was closer to an action of protecting a very precious treasure rather than simply attempting to counterattack.

Crunch, Harenir stepped on that hand and asked monotonously.

"What's in that staff?"

[As if I'd tell the likes of you... Aaaagh!]

The moment he tilted his head slightly, light beams poured down and pierced the priest. The priest was barely avoiding a fatal wound by being in Harenir's shadow. As if being penetrated by the opposing energy caused great pain, the priest writhed but kept its mouth tightly shut to the end.

At that resolute appearance, Harenir made a "Hmm" sound and shrugged.

"I guess quite a lot of power gathered to awaken Dedium is contained in it."

[Y-you! If you already knew...!]

"Of course I know, since I saw it. I just wanted to watch you struggle."

He had been closely observing the ritual. So he must have seen the hearts placed on the altar decomposing and being sucked into the crystal embedded in the center of the staff when the priest raised the round wooden staff high while chanting. It had passed too quickly to catch, but looking back, there had been such a scene.

Watching the priest desperately reaching for the staff, Harenir seemed to have gauged how much power had been gathered in it. If it could endure even while being pierced by light, then probably...

"If I just destroy that staff now, Dedium's revival will be greatly delayed."

The priest's third eye trembled, filled with shock and humiliation.

[Kuurgh, you won't dare touch that...!]

"Do I need to touch it myself?"

Harenir smiled. What approached the staff, from which black energy was seeping out, was the pure white sword. Piarus, the holy sword that exerted stronger power against unrighteous things.

*Sizzle—*

As the holy sword gently touched the staff, a burning sound was heard. It seemed to be absorbing quite a lot of Harenir's energy too, as he slightly furrowed his brow, while the priest screamed and struggled violently.

[It can't be, it can't! You, vicious bastard like your mother! I'll surely tear your mother to pieces and shove her in front of your eyes...!]

"Ah."

Harenir let out a short sigh and plunged the sword in. The veins that stood out on the back of his hand showed how much force he had exerted in an instant. *Crack!* The staff shattered completely. Instead of revealing his anger by raging like the priest, he smiled gently.

"Thank you for your help."

Harenir turned his back on the dazed priest. Instantly, five or six light bars pierced the priest's body. The struggling creature's movements gradually subsided.

The sight of Harenir walking steadily with the wasteland strewn with Dium corpses as a backdrop was truly worthy of being called a holy painting. The sun that had risen in the middle of the night shone brilliantly above him. As the corpses exposed to the purifying light slowly faded away, it looked as if unrighteous things disappeared with each of his steps.

Mela softly marveled at the awe-inspiring sight, and Kalterik burst into cheers. His voice was incredibly loud, as if he alone was trying to be Harenir's million-strong army of believers. All signs of fatigue from earlier were gone as he cheered wildly with an overwhelmed face.

At that noisy sound, Noi woke up.

"Huh...? W-what's going on...?"

At first, he was startled by the undead in front of him, but then as he looked around, his mouth slowly opened. Seeing the collapsed altar and the Dium corpses piled there, the crack in the sky, and the small sun floating in the air, his eyes widened as if he had pieced together the situation.

Fortunately, Noi didn't seem to care that he was covered in dirt, and immediately got up and ran to where the knights were. *Waaah!* A clear cheer followed excitedly.

Just then, Mela also returned to her human form. Her horns slowly shrank and disappeared, and her eyes returned to normal. Had her faith surged upon witnessing the sacred scene, or had her loyalty towards Harenir increased even more, giving her the will not to be a burden to him?

Whatever it was, he had been inwardly burdened by her state, so he swallowed a sigh of relief. Everything seemed to have been resolved well.

"The crack isn't disappearing..."

However, the black crack that had split the sky still remained. Would it close naturally as time passed? And for now, the cliff he had to descend was more daunting than that. It might be faster to just roll down.

As he was grumbling internally and moving, suddenly the ground rumbled. Because of that, he slipped on the ground and almost rolled. He didn't even have the presence of mind to curse the terrible game for listening to the user's opinion only at times like this. Because he instinctively felt where this vibration originated from.

It was a vibration from the crack in the sky.

The pitch-black crack slowly shrank, but that dark energy was flowing into the priest. As if trying to utilize the energy that had opened the crack one last time.

[We cannot, let you, go to our god...!]

The priest raised its head abruptly and stretched out its hand towards Harenir. Harenir reflexively raised his arm to block the black energy shooting towards him, but *swish!* The energy spread like ink.

In an instant, it spread along his arm, and then complex Dium language appeared on his skin. *Ugh,* as if it was accompanied by pain, Harenir slightly furrowed his brow. But when he took a long deep breath, golden light swirled around him and the letters disappeared.

"This kind of thing won't work..."

[Kuhehe... Is that so? That is a curse we carefully crafted for you... Didn't we say we knew you would interfere...]

The priest sneered, panting. As if determined to say this even as it was dying, it glared at Harenir with eyes lined with black blood vessels and snarled.

[Your arrogance, will, kill you...]

With those final words, *thud,* the priest's head hit the ground. As if it had used all its strength, it didn't move at all, and then its body itself began to fade away. Now, like the other Dium, its corpse was also purified and disappeared.

However, even after the priest's corpse had completely disappeared, the black markings that had appeared on Harenir's arm remained. They disappeared when he took a deep breath, but reappeared after just a few seconds.

"Why, why isn't it disappearing...?"

Kalterik asked with a worried face, while Mela and Noi closely examined Harenir's wound. Noi placed his hand on the arm, saying he would try to read the energy, and closed his eyes. Green light flickered around him. As he tried to use energy while already exhausted, cold sweat quickly beaded on his forehead.

However, as if shocked by the energy he gradually read, Noi was astonished. His voice trembled.

"I-I'm not sure exactly, but it seems to be accompanied by a curse of mental confusion. Since Haren's self-healing ability regenerates cells, it seems to make even this curse recognize itself as 'self'. So when Haren uses his regeneration ability, the curse seems to regenerate along with it..."

"What?! Can't it be removed?!"

"How could that be..."

It seemed the Dium had seriously guarded against the purification ability the hero was said to have been bestowed. To prepare such a delicate curse to stop the hero coming to eliminate the Encroachment Zone.

Kalterik and Mela were greatly shocked. Kalterik rambled incoherently, saying there couldn't be a curse the hero couldn't remove, and Mela sighed heavily in astonishment. He also looked at Harenir in bewilderment. He had thought he would never see him succumb to anything...

"It's alright."

Just then, Harenir shook his head. He loosened the robe he had fixed over his shoulder, naturally covering his arm.

"It will disappear with time. I'm just a little tired now, so I must have fallen for the confusion. There's no need to worry."

"But..."

"With God's grace with me, how could I possibly fall to the Dium's sorcery?"

Harenir smiled as if painted. His voice was very calm, and there was no awkwardness in his actions, so his companions were confused. Though the content of the curse seemed serious, the person in question was so nonchalant that they looked troubled. He spoke gently again.

"The curse is just a slight sting, so really, don't worry about it. Surely you don't distrust me?"

"N-no! Of course not!"

As soon as those words fell, his companions were startled. They shook their heads hurriedly as if nothing could be more impossible than distrusting the hero, and then exchanged glances. It was a look filled with the belief that he would be fine because he was the hero of the Holy Empire and the son loved by God.

Still inwardly uneasy, Noi urged, "If it hurts at all, you must tell us," and Kalterik and Mela quickly agreed. Harenir nodded, maintaining his beautiful smile.

"You've all worked hard, so let's go back now."

His final glance towards him was probably a greeting containing the 'acknowledgment' he had hoped for. He stared blankly at Harenir's back before shrugging. *Well, he's the protagonist, so he should be fine.*

\*\*\*

A few hours later.

They returned to the campsite and took time to settle in. They decided to leave when day broke tomorrow, so everyone agreed to tidy up their bodies that had been messed up by the battle and rest. They could wipe off blood and dust with cloth dampened by water skins that Noi had taken out of his magic bag and distributed.

In fact, he thought he might have suffered less than before since he hadn't directly confronted the Dium this time, but he was sufficiently tired from seeing many shocking scenes and doing unnecessary mountain climbing. As soon as he lay down on the floor, drowsiness came. The abandoned village had many empty stone houses, so it was relatively comfortable with everyone using separate spaces.

He looked up at the peacefully shining desert night sky through the window anew before slowly closing his eyes. Now that they had dealt with two Encroachment Zones, the quest progress was already 50%. If they kept going at this rate, would it be soon...

*–Meow. Meooow.*

Just as he was about to fall asleep, En meowed beside him. He had seen it going out the window a few minutes ago, but since it always moved as it pleased, he hadn't paid attention. But now En had come right next to him and meowed. It persisted even when he ignored it.

*Ugh,* what is it. As he lifted his heavy eyelids, he found the cat's paw right in front of his eyes. It was a paw that had stopped mid-air as if about to pounce on him. *Were you trying to hit me?* He was about to ask incredulously, but his gaze was drawn to what was floating in the air instead.

He didn't know how long it had been there, but a blue status window was emitting light.

**—------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------**

**Go to Harenir.**

**—------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------**

*...I don't want to.*

### Chapter 55

He blinked repeatedly, rubbed his eyes with the back of his hand, and then chose to squeeze them shut. He hadn't seen it. He had never seen such a status window.

Then suddenly, he felt indignant.

"Ha, this is ridiculous. It's not even an individual quest, and there's no separate reward, so why give an order?"

He grumbled but opened his eyes again. He felt resentful towards the status window that had appeared just as he was falling into a deep sleep, and he was uncomfortable with the person he was told to visit, but in truth, he was a little curious. It seemed to be the first time a status window had given such an unexpected mission...

Just then, another blue window caught his eye.

**—------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------**

**☆★Special mission to increase quest success rate★☆**

**—------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------**

"What is this?"

He let out a dry laugh in bewilderment. Was this an attempt to persuade him, since they couldn't give a separate reward? By the way, the sense of decorating the status window was really terrible. The window that no one would likely click on was ridiculous. Had the operators never played a game before?

Snickering, he finally got up. *Right,* in games, it's usually better to follow such spontaneous missions. Moreover, since even the NPC was urging him, there must be something to it.

The place where Harenir was staying was the building with the best view of the Encroachment Zone. Even though he had been watching the Encroachment Zone all along while volunteering for night watch, he had chosen such a location even for a brief rest. He shook his head, feeling disgusted.

Still, he had hung cloth over the window now, perhaps intending to rest since everything had been dealt with. Putting aside his questions, he knocked on the door and only moved after hearing the invitation to enter.

"What's the matter?"

Harenir was sitting in a round chair. His voice was incredibly calm as he asked while buttoning the cuffs of his black shirt. His voice was so composed that he forgot to answer and looked around first.

Why is the smell of blood so strong?

His bewildered gaze caught the uniform hanging on the wall. The white uniform stained with blood. It must be because of that. The lamplight brightly illuminated the room, clearly showing the state of the uniform. It was torn, pierced, and in a terrible state.

He was newly amazed at Harenir, who now had not a single wound. He looked curiously at Harenir's cleaner appearance after changing clothes, when suddenly his gaze was caught by something between the collar. Something pitch black was engraved there... *Wait, isn't that Dium script?*

"You, there are letters below your neck..."

"I asked why you came."

But Harenir cut off his question as he stood up. When he raised his eyes to check again, no letters were visible below Harenir's neck. Was it an illusion? The shirt was pitch black too, so he wasn't sure. And the Dium's curse had only appeared on his arm...

Meanwhile, Harenir's eyes had grown colder. Feeling an unspoken order to leave if he had no reason to be there, he awkwardly opened his mouth.

"Well, the reason I came is..."

*That's what I'm really curious about too.*

**—------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------**

**Connect.**

**—------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------**

Just then, a blue status window appeared before his eyes. He gladly checked the content but immediately became puzzled. *What am I supposed to connect?* As he stood there bewildered, a new window popped up.

**—------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------**

**Take Harenir's hand.**

**—------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------**

*Ugh, I don't want to do that.*

**—------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------**

**Do it.**

**—------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------**

*What?*

He was so surprised that he almost let out a sound. He barely bit his lip to swallow his shock. Suddenly the status window was speaking informally to him? There had been instances of what seemed like insults appearing before, but this kind of coercion was a first.

Just a moment ago, it had been decorating the status window and making suggestions, but had its patience reached its limit? Or was it ordering him because it knew he had no choice but to follow now that he had come this far? He was bewildered, but even more than that, he felt dazed.

If it was urging him to this extent, was it an important matter? Still, should a player always follow the status window's instructions? Reluctantly, he approached Harenir and grasped his hand. He only awkwardly held one hand, barely.

Unexpectedly, Harenir didn't avoid it and just looked at him as if puzzled. As he was unfamiliarly feeling the warmth of the large hand.

*Ping—* A headache struck and his vision shook greatly.

This dizziness that made him feel nauseous in an instant was a symptom that came when using a skill. As if taking Harenir's hand had been a start button, black-purple energy spread around him.

*Whoosh!*

It happened in an instant. The energy that burst out like an explosion swirled around, binding his and Harenir's hands, and then instantly enveloped both their bodies. A complex purple magic circle was quickly drawn. As the number of magic circles increased, he suffered from pain that felt like his head would split. His vision distorted wildly.

He had never felt such a severe headache before, and he even felt as if his soul had been pushed out of his body and was watching this situation in an out-of-body state.

*Whoosh!* Harenir shook off his hand.

"What is this."

At that moment, his energy had completely drained and he staggered. *Ugh,* he felt nauseous and covered his mouth with his robe sleeve, panting.

Breathing was so difficult. It felt just like borrowing someone else's body to breathe, and even his heartbeat felt unfamiliar. *Thump,* *thump, thump,* the off-beat overlapping heartbeats felt strange, as if two hearts were beating together...

"Huh...?"

For a moment, he saw 'himself'. The image of Isaph that Harenir would likely see entered his mind. *Oh, this*... it's similar to the feeling of sharing the vision of a subjugated undead...

*Click,* as his vision was cut off as if switched off, *bang!* A noise erupted.

"What did you just do to me?"

Harenir tried to grab him. Charitably, it looked like he was going for his collar, honestly, it seemed he was trying to grab his neck, but just before that, he reflexively raised his hand. He had merely shrunk back in surprise, but black-purple energy spread from his fingertips like a curtain, barely blocking the space between him and Harenir.

He was startled by the sound of the colliding energies, and on the other hand, he was bewildered that he had barely blocked Harenir with this curtain. Even to him, the barrier looked flimsy due to having expended so much energy, yet it was blocking the hero? Was this perhaps related to that 'connection', or had he somehow weakened...

*Bang!* Another loud noise erupted. Harenir tried to reach through the curtain. He flinched and stepped back, but Harenir strode after him, and soon his back hit the wall. The barrier covering his front was on the verge of breaking.

The intense blue anger in Harenir's eyes was so fierce that just facing it felt like his whole body was being slashed. He was clearly sensing the suspicious aspects of this situation now.

*One wrong move and I'll die.*

His instinct warned him. This was no joke; sincerely, his life or death would be determined by his answer now. Goosebumps rose and he hurriedly read the status window that had appeared. Suddenly, a large amount of information appeared, and he gathered it as if being chased.

Meanwhile, Harenir warned coldly, as if grinding out his words.

"You'd better remove this pathetic thing right now—"

"Y-you're not in pain anymore, right!"

"...?"

"You, I know the curse you received from the priest was getting worse. It's a curse engraved on your soul, so you can't heal it with your ability. So I connected my soul to yours to heal your soul...!"

Harenir paused at his rushed words. Thinking this was his only chance, he quickly composed himself. Believing that Harenir wouldn't kill him only if he believed his words now, he straightened his posture and spoke with an air of having not a shred of falsehood.

"Now that I've shared the curse with you, your pain should have decreased. Just because our souls are connected doesn't mean I can control you at will, I only connected them to suppress the curse..."

"..."

"Try checking your body. After that, how about removing this collar?"

For a while now, a red light had been flickering around his neck. It was flashing so brightly that even without lowering his head, he could sense that Harenir was about to burst his skull. A red collar floating in the air was being tightly pulled by Harenir's hand.

If the information provided by the status window was true, Harenir's reaction was understandable. After the curse had been worsening for hours without disappearing, someone had come and suddenly connected their soul to his, so it was reasonable for him to suspect that he had taken advantage of his vulnerability. Especially since it was 'that' Isaph who had done it.

Of course, he felt anger towards the status window for not informing him before he felt the ominous killing intent with his whole body, wondering if it would have hurt to tell him in advance... While inwardly cursing the terrible game, he tried his best to act outwardly calm, and slowly Harenir lowered his gaze.

"...The curse really isn't appearing anymore."

Harenir unbuttoned his sleeve to check the spot where he had been cursed, and then felt around his own collar. The letters he had seen between Harenir's collar earlier must not have been an illusion. It was clear that the curse had spread there in an instant, intensifying the pain.

### Chapter 56

After a moment of silence, the red collar slowly disappeared. Though it had been just for an instant, he had felt as if the collar was choking him, so he was relieved that breathing had become much easier.

Harenir's aura had subsided a little. But still seeming unable to fully trust his words, he looked him over with uneasy eyes.

"...Can necromancy do such things?"

"It's an ability related to souls. I can't resolve it immediately, but it should be possible if I take some time."

In truth, he was surprised too that Isaph was capable of such a thing. He was just speaking according to what the status window told him, but how could connecting souls alone undo a Dium's curse?

"I'll break the connection as soon as the curse is gone. I don't like this state either."

"..."

"I'll say it again, I can't control your soul at will. Even making this connection was barely possible."

He answered as calmly as possible, reading the questions in Harenir's eyes. If Harenir had been in a normal state, he probably couldn't have touched his soul, but it seemed he had managed to make the connection through the vulnerability created by the curse weakening him.

It felt a bit unfair that he was showing murderous intent and continuing to doubt someone who had tried to help him, but only a little. About 0.01. He thought it was natural wariness given what Isaph had done. Moreover, wasn't it quite absurd to suddenly hear that souls had been connected? It sounded almost like a vital point had been grasped.

Of course, it wasn't such a fatal context at all, but rather a situation closer to sharing status. Perhaps like party members sharing damage.

So he could roughly feel how intense the pain from the curse Harenir had suffered was. From the moment the souls were connected, energy had been swirling faintly inside his body, suppressing the curse, and if he peeked slightly, he immediately felt pain as if his whole body was being pierced by thousands of needles.

He was newly amazed at how Harenir had endured such pain and said he was fine. Just as he was admiring how well he could act, Harenir asked,

"...Why go this far? You only need to help with searching the Encroachment Zone."

That was something he was curious about too. Even Isaph, the villain of this world, trying to protect the hero? Was it because he was such a crucial existence in this world that helping the hero had appeared as a quest from the start? As he pondered, Harenir's gaze fixed on him, and he impulsively opened his mouth.

"I just..."

"...Just?"

"I need to get my sentence reduced later. It would be troublesome if you collapsed here."

However, once he started speaking, no particularly plausible answer came to mind, so he just blurted out any reason. But after saying it, it seemed like the most appropriate answer. Saying he wanted to help because Harenir would be in pain, or showing kindness to the hero, would be too strange for Isaph to say.

At his answer, Harenir let out a small "Ha." It sounded a bit like a dry laugh... Somehow, it felt strange. No, was this for a sensory reason?

His body kept hurting.

Was it because of the curse? But even though the energy inside his body was blocking that curse, there was still pain circling his entire body. His palms hurt, his shoulders, and his abdomen tingled. As if he had been pierced.

As he mulled over those areas, he soon reached a very unsettling conclusion. Considering how Harenir hadn't been able to break through the barrier he had put up earlier, and how his whole body now felt worn out...

He grasped Harenir's left hand.

"...?"

Harenir's gaze turned to him at the sudden action. He looked very puzzled, but strangely, he remained still this time too. He didn't shake off his hand but just stared blankly, and he slowly looked back and forth between their hands.

He rubbed the spot on Harenir's firm palm that corresponded to where he felt pain in his left hand, pressing down with his thumb as if wiping something away. Moving as if removing something, what appeared on his finger was...

"...Blood?"

Then, a gaping wound appeared on the left hand that had clearly been fine just before. It was half-healed, but blood was still seeping from it. It looked as if he had dispelled an illusion.

He remembered that wound. It was the wound from when he had taken the Dium's arrow in Mela's place, and he had definitely recovered perfectly and extended his intact hand to Mela...

*Whoosh,* Harenir stepped back. In an instant, he moved a couple of steps away and looked at him with a cold face. Fierce wariness rose in his glaring eyes.

"What did you just do?"

"...What did you do?"

He was dazed. He had just done it because his palm kept hurting, wondering if maybe... and blood really appeared. It was as if he had seen through to Harenir's essence when their souls connected.

So Harenir's state that he felt now was...

"...Why is your body such a wreck?"

Harenir was now beyond just being in tatters, close to being completely battered. He was bewildered that Harenir could even stand. While he himself boasted trash-level durability, if his durability was in the negatives to begin with, Harenir seemed like a shattered rock forcibly pieced back together.

*Why?* Wasn't he the hero who boasted perfect recovery thanks to God's love?

"Ha. So you approached to discern my weakness in this way."

While he was confused, Harenir twisted his lips. He sneered coldly, seeming to think that was the reason he had connected their souls. The atmosphere turned hostile, but rather than shrinking back, he just felt a subtle emotion.

Harenir's appearance looked just like someone who, for the first time, had their truth exposed to someone and was bristling with thorns in bewilderment.

"That's right. From the start, my recovery ability can't completely heal severe injuries. It can only make it 'appear' that way."

"..."

"What? Do you want to laugh now that you've seen my state? Do you want to mock me as a pathetic hero who acted so high and mighty? In such a state..."

"Why didn't you tell anyone?"

He cut off Harenir's words and asked. Recalling the attitudes of the companions he had seen so far, they firmly believed that the hero recovered perfectly, so he asked out of curiosity, and Harenir paused.

Looking at him intently with eyes that seemed not to have expected such a question...

"What would happen if I faltered? Everyone only believes in me."

"The ones following you now are your closest subordinates, aren't they? They're even willing to go along with faking the hero's death, so why..."

"If they're close enough to go along with such an absurd and dangerous plan, how much do you think they believe in me? What good would come from telling such people that my recovery ability has limits? Use your head and think about it."

His tone was fiercely sarcastic, but he didn't get riled up as usual. Even if he only recovered halfway, wasn't it still an amazing recovery ability? But he had seen the trust, respect, and adoration of many people towards him.

Eyes full of wonder, as if seeing the manifestation of God.

Even those who engaged in thievery thought of the hero in the face of calamity, didn't they? He himself hadn't worried about Harenir getting hurt, and in a way, that had made him feel at ease. The fact that there was someone in this group who would never break down had unconsciously been a solid support.

He couldn't imagine how long Harenir had been showing only a flawless, perfect appearance. He wouldn't be able to understand why he had tried to act that way. Just, the only impression he had now was...

"...You must have been lonely."

"Don't try to show unnecessary sympathy. It's pathetic."

"No, it's just... I was like that."

It was an impulsive statement that came out. He had always been alone. They say the loneliest time for someone who lives alone is when they're sick. Usually, he didn't mind being alone, but when sick, his heart would become weak too, and he'd feel needlessly lonely.

In the past, when he was suffering from a high fever, taking care of himself had been too hard. He had to get up with his sick body to feed himself and take medicine. Taking care of himself had been burdensome. Even on the day he finally shook off the cold, instead of just feeling relieved, the quiet afternoon air had felt heavier, and he had curled up in bed for a long time. As if hiding from certain emotions.

And sometimes it was lonely not having anyone to talk to about all these experiences. There were times when he had to watch emotions that suddenly surged up, unable to suppress them even though they were familiar, and that memory suddenly came to mind now.

"..."

Harenir's blue eyes looking at him were calm.

What day's silence were he and Harenir recalling now? Would that time bear even a slight resemblance?

"...I'll help with the treatment."

Perhaps because of that, another impulsive statement came out. He bit his lip, regretting it as soon as he said it. This was truly unnecessary meddling. But suddenly, those eyes as beautiful as the sky, those noble blue eyes, looked so worn and tattered.

After moving his lips a couple of times, he finally sighed and turned his gaze away. Since he couldn't take back words already spoken, he decided to just brazenly continue.

"It must be difficult to treat your shoulders or back alone."

It was also partly to apologize. Because he had exposed what Harenir had been hiding. Though it was a truth he didn't particularly want to know either, he had moved to check the blood on his hand, after all.

### Chapter 57

He now understood why Harenir carried so many holy relics. He had thought it was just to strengthen holy power, but in fact, it was to reduce the wounds of someone always at the forefront, and this was also why he had stocked up on healing potions at the temple.

He wasn't sorry... for only seeing Harenir as perfectly fine all this time. *Well,* wasn't that the gaze he wanted? It also meant he had acted well, *hmm*. Perhaps because this situation was embarrassing, his thoughts were jumping around wildly.

Feeling awkward, he surveyed the desk. Spotting a healing potion, he picked it up and said,

"Just drinking it won't heal everything, right?"

"...When consumed, it spreads throughout the body, so it can't focus on healing specific areas. It's better to apply it directly to treat specific wounds."

"Hmm, since the whole body is a mess, maybe just drinking it would be better."

"..."

"...I'm talking to myself."

Harenir looked at him with cold eyes, and he awkwardly fiddled with his nape. He had no talent for easing the atmosphere through conversation. Thinking it would be better to treat him quickly and leave, he urged Harenir to sit in the chair, and Harenir let out a small sigh.

Then, surprisingly, he really walked over and sat down. In fact, he had thought Harenir might ignore him, so this compliant response rather flustered him, and Harenir spoke in a resigned tone.

"...I'll go along with this absurd thing, so don't tell anyone about it."

Harenir seemed to have taken his sudden offer to treat him as half a threat. It made sense that he would think that way since he had learned the truth that Harenir considered his 'weakness'. It was unexpected that he would comply with something he perceived as a threat, but that truth must be that important to him.

However, what Harenir was worried about was quite amusing.

"Even if I said anything, who would believe me? I'd just be accused of slandering the hero."

"...Mela seems to trust you quite a bit."

"Well, some distrust can look like trust."

Mela had made that request to him because she was certain that Isaph had no humanity. He answered indifferently, and Harenir looked at him with strange eyes.

"That necklace was a gift from me. She's been wearing it ever since..."

Surprisingly, he knew that fact directly from Mela. As soon as the battle ended, Mela had come to him to retrieve the necklace, and after carefully examining it for any damage, she had said it was a gift from the Commander. She seemed to be in a good mood, relieved to have safely returned to human form, and had shared an old story with him.

Over 20 years ago, Mela had been captured as an experimental subject at a young age. Though the experiment was ostensibly conducted to stop the Dium, it continued even after Dedium was sealed, under the pretext that another calamity might come. From the start, it had been a horrific experiment perpetrated by those interested in misguided power.

Then, when Mela's power went berserk, the Holy Knight Order arrived. Everyone tried to kill Mela as she was about to sweep through the village, but Harenir stopped them. Then, even as he was wounded by the swirling demonic energy, he approached and calmed Mela.

Telling Mela that she had no mission to eliminate the Dium, that she wasn't such a weapon...

'Don't lose yourself because of those terrible humans.'

The hand that came through the storm of demonic energy saved Mela, and from then on, she dreamed of becoming a holy knight.

Through great effort, she even manifested holy power and succeeded in joining the order, but everyone shunned her as a half-human, half-demon. But then Harenir came to Mela. Though years had passed, he remembered her and welcomed her, taking off the necklace he was wearing and giving it to her.

At that time, Harenir was already slated to be the next commander, so when he acknowledged Mela as a comrade, the other knights could no longer dare to ignore her.

'I will be loyal to him for life.'

Recalling the look in Mela's eyes as she told that story, he began to understand a little why Harenir couldn't reveal his condition even to his closest knights.

As he mulled this over, Harenir was still staring at him intently, and he felt he should respond to Harenir's request. If it was an appropriate response for Isaph to give, then...

"Alright. If you obediently follow what I say now."

"..."

Since Harenir had taken his offer to treat him as half a threat earlier, he decided to push forward with the threat. Harenir's face showed a complex expression before he just sighed and moved his hands.

*Pop, pop,* he unbuttoned his shirt and took it off. He hesitated at the sight of the exposed upper body. He could infer from past experiences of being held that the body beneath that elegantly beautiful face was full of firm muscles, but facing his nakedness made him feel awkward.

However, after the impression that not only his face but also his body was like a sculpture, he almost let out a shocked exclamation. Wounds began to appear on the body that had seemed fine. It was covered with traces of cuts and stabs everywhere. What he had said earlier about being able to "appear fine" seemed to be a kind of mask concept. Perhaps it should be described as a state of wearing a covering of an unwounded appearance.

Somehow, even that seemed very much like Harenir. As he remained quietly silent, Harenir sneered.

"What? Didn't you offer to treat me so you could see with your own eyes how much of a wreck I am and laugh?"

That mouth of his.

The sentimental mood he had briefly tried to entertain cooled off instantly. Still, he hadn't been this openly sarcastic before; now that he had revealed his wounds, had he shed a layer of his personality too?

He swallowed a sigh and picked up a cloth from the desk. First, he wiped away the blood, then carefully pressed a new cloth soaked in potion onto the wounds.

It was his first time treating someone else, so it felt very unfamiliar, but he put in his best effort. Even though it should hurt when the wounds were touched, Harenir remained quiet. He only flinched slightly when his hand first made contact.

After that, he didn't move at all, and there was no particular conversation during the treatment. Feeling awkward in this silence, he focused more on the treatment.

"...Should I wrap bandages too?"

"...Do as you please."

It was frustrating to receive such a resigned response when he was offering to help, but if he said he wouldn't do it, he would only look foolish, so he busily searched for bandages.

Time passed quietly, and the treatment was finally complete.

Letting out a short breath, "Whew," he stepped back, and Harenir got up from his seat and put on his shirt. Just looking at those smooth movements, he seemed like someone not in pain at all, but...

He stared at Harenir's back and said,

"Don't get hurt. When you're in pain, I'm in pain too."

"...?"

*Swish,* Harenir turned to look at him. His eyes, doubting what he had just heard, were deeply tinged with a bitter energy. He knew his statement could come across as extremely creepy, but *damn it,* it was.

"It's not that my heart hurts, my body literally hurts. Damn it, connecting souls means I share your condition too, so my whole body aches."

"Ah."

"Huff, I thought I was going to die just standing there."

He collapsed into the chair, panting heavily. Now he sat where Harenir had been just moments ago, groaning like a patient. Throughout the treatment, his legs had been trembling so much he had barely managed not to fall face-first onto the floor.

The pain wasn't fully shared, but it felt like at least 50%. *Ah,* Harenir might endure it habitually with his solid body, but it was too much for his body. His hand trembled as if he had been pierced by arrows, and his shoulder hurt too.

Strangely, he could cover up the pain from the Dium's curse, but Harenir's physical wounds transmitted the pain to him intact. *Damn,* was it because this wasn't about the soul? Cold sweat broke out, and as he groaned, "Urgh," clutching his abdomen, Harenir asked,

"...Do you want to drink a potion?"

"Would my wounds disappear if I drank it?"

*The cause of the pain is still in your body.* He glared at him as if asking if he was mocking him, and Harenir's lips moved slightly before he finally pressed them shut and fell silent. He seemed a little, no, quite bewildered.

At first, when he had said he was helping by connecting souls to get his sentence reduced, Harenir still had his guard up. He seemed to suspect there was another purpose, but he looked surprised to hear that even the pain was shared. It meant that he was really stepping up to help him while enduring pain. Confusion filled his eyes as he confirmed the cold sweat on his forehead.

*Hah,* in truth, he hadn't known it would be this bad either... Was this why the status window hadn't informed him in advance? Anyway, it was weak. Clutching his throbbing head, he painfully urged,

"Take better care of your body from now on..."

"...I never thought I'd hear such words from you."

"Focus on recovery for a while..."

Harenir looked at him with a face of great confusion. He seemed to think that was also the reason he had treated him earlier, and ultimately, that might be correct. He staggered to his feet.

"I'm leaving now... I'm tired...?"

He stumbled past Harenir towards the door. Harenir still seemed unsure how to react to his behavior of leaving abruptly as soon as business was finished, but he no longer wanted to care about anything. He just wanted to leave this place quickly. He wanted to lie down right away.

Ah, somehow he hadn't suffered much in this Encroachment Zone, but in the end, he ended up sharing the fatigue of the person who had suffered the most in this way. *Terrible game. F\*\*\*ing terrible game.*

Freedom was urgently needed.

### Chapter 58

**#That Dawn**

Harenir von Luchete always had the same dream.

It was a dream that had followed him for a very long time. He had this dream on the day he joined the Holy Knight Order, on the day he was connected to the holy sword Piarus and designated as the next Holy Knight Commander, and on the day he received God's blessing at his coming-of-age ceremony and was called the hero of the empire. Though he didn't often dream normally, whenever he did dream, he always saw 'that time'.

It had been so long that he knew it as soon as he saw the first scene. But even when he recognized it, nothing changed in the dream.

Harenir could only watch.

'Haren, don't worry. Just trust and follow your father.'

The scene of the once-green forest gradually fading to monochrome, the back of 'him' tightly grasping his hand and leading him. It was sickeningly familiar.

Harenir was the son of Holy Knight Commander Evelyn and Vice Commander Hileon.

His childhood, born in the peaceful era that followed the end of the human-demon war, was very peaceful. His mother, who had risen to Holy Knight Commander with her excellent swordsmanship and pure holy power, and his father, who had risen to Vice Commander after receiving personal guidance from the Commander despite being an ordinary knight. The child born between them boasted powerful holy power and amazing recovery ability, receiving blessings from everyone.

Until he was eight years old, the child lived only happily. He was always with his family, and showing talent in swordsmanship, he dreamed of becoming a holy knight like his parents. So when he exclaimed that he wanted to become a great commander like his mother, she jokingly said, "You'll have to study a lot from now on," and his father just smiled and patted the child's head.

It was a time of pure joy and happiness.

That's why the sudden catastrophe hit even harder.

When the Dium appeared, the whole world burned and turned to ruins. The Holy Knight Order moved busily to stop them, and the smell of blood emanating from his returning parents grew stronger and stronger.

But his mother always said everything was fine. She only told the young child not to worry, that the holy knights would get rid of all the bad monsters, so he shouldn't be afraid. When she left for battle, she would hold out her pinky finger and give strange homework.

'Today you have to play with Noi and build a house out of wood. I'll check when I get back!'

It sounded quite absurd to be told to play while the entire continent was rotting black. The child was intelligent and had noticed all the ominous developments in the war. The agitated atmosphere in the temple, the gradually sinking morale of the Holy Knight Order, and the fact that the front lines were endlessly being pushed back.

But the child smiled and linked his pinky finger with his mother's. Judging that acting innocently was for his parents' sake, he nodded with a bright face. On the other hand, he also optimistically thought that if he kept following their words well, his parents might really resolve everything one day.

That day was when the Holy Knight Order set out to eliminate the Dium.

Upon news that Dium had appeared in a village on the outskirts of the holy city, the Holy Knight Commander led her subordinates out from early morning. But the Vice Commander rested, saying he wasn't feeling well, yet now he was walking perfectly fine in front of Harenir's eyes. Gripping his small hand so tightly it almost hurt.

'Father, my hand hurts...'

'Walk straight.'

The child couldn't understand his father at all. Why they were going deeper and deeper into the Encroachment Zone, why he gripped and led him more roughly even when he said it hurt, as if worried he might run away...

And finally, in front of the Dium they encountered, why he knelt and bowed.

'I offer this child as a sacrifice. He has a lot of holy power, so you will be satisfied.'

[Oh, truly a powerful soul.]

'Yes. So please happily eat this child, and accept me as a citizen of the new world.'

Harenir couldn't understand anything.

Was it because he had only seen his father's gradually darkening under-eyes as fatigue, or because he had ignored the 'new world' he sometimes muttered about? The child's mind was filled with nothing but questions, and he remained dazed even as the Dium grabbed him. The Dium was so huge that its hand could completely envelop his entire body.

*Five horns. So this is Dedium, the god of those called catastrophe...*

'No, Haren!'

He learned then that when you receive too great a shock, you can't take any action. So he could only watch blankly as his mother came to save him. The sight of his father pointing a sword at his mother, and finally, the scene of his mother cutting down his father.

Afterwards, Holy Knight Commander Evelyn made 'that' choice to stop Dedium from targeting the child. She decided to pour out all her holy power and even offer her soul to seal the catastrophe.

That moment was all captured in Harenir's eyes. His mother, with her blue eyes that had always shone so clearly now filled with tears, looking back at him one last time, and then facing Dedium directly, her back slowly fading away, all of it.

Even knowing it was meaningless because it was a dream, at this point Harenir always reached out his hand towards that place. He extended his hand as if wanting to be swept back to that time and grab her. He stretched out his arm desperately, but...

Inevitably, that situation unfolded.

The most terrible thing about this nightmare was that the scene repeated endlessly. Even knowing it was a dream, he couldn't escape and had to just watch that moment. With his hand ridiculously outstretched, feeling a suffocating powerlessness towards the back he could never reach in his lifetime.

The hand he extended to her in the dream started as the child's small hand and gradually changed. To a hand calloused from holding a sword, to a hand covered in wounds. Then, even though it was a dream, he unconsciously tried to make that hand look fine.

It was on 'that day' that Harenir learned there were limits to his recovery ability. Until then, he hadn't known this truth because he had never been injured that badly, but even after that day, he didn't tell anyone.

Because that way, everyone would think of his mother, not his father, when they looked at him. Wanting to leave behind only the name of the being who was noble to the end, not the terrible traitor who sided with the Dium, Harenir strove to exist as the most perfect Holy Knight Commander.

But strangely, in today's dream, his disguise kept coming undone. The Dium's curse repeatedly appeared on his hand, making him terribly anxious. The more he tried to return to a normal appearance, the more miserable he looked. His whole body even felt tightly constricted, as if grabbed by Dedium that day...

*Thud,* his shoulder was shaken.

"Stop..."

Harenir's eyes flew open as he grabbed the other person's hand. Someone had touched him.

It was shocking. He hadn't noticed at all that someone had entered this space, let alone approached him. This could never have happened normally.

He immediately raised his guard and glared at the other person, but then.

"Please, let's just sleep..."

Seeing Isaph standing there with an extremely tired face, he felt bewilderment beyond shock.

Only Isaph had that pitch-black hair that seemed to contain only darkness, grown long like a curtain hiding his face, and those purple eyes with an eerie energy faintly swirling in his pale face devoid of any blood color. A being with such faint vitality that one might doubt if he was alive.

But now Isaph's under-eyes were even darker than when he had last seen him, and the haggard energy was even more intense. Perhaps the reason he hadn't woken up immediately was because he was tired from the aftereffects of the curse, but Isaph, who had suddenly appeared, looked several times more fatigued than him.

Harenir looked at him quizzically... and soon succeeded in inferring a certain truth from the earlier words. As his face began to stiffen coldly, Isaph let out a deep sigh.

"When you have nightmares, it's hard for me too..."

"You can see my dreams too?"

"No, I can't see them. I just keep feeling like I'm being forcibly dragged along, hah... As if wearing a collar wasn't enough, to have to go through this too..."

Isaph grumbled irritably while touching his neck.

"Be mindful of your sleep from now on. Try not to have nightmares if possible, drink some good tea or hang something by your bedside, or hug a doll while sleeping..."

Harenir just blinked at these bewildering words that made him feel drained. He should be wary of someone visiting in the deep dawn, and even more cautious if it was 'that' Isaph... but he looked so genuinely tired that it didn't raise suspicion. Still, he lightly looked around, but there was nothing suspicious. Isaph had really just come to wake him up.

It felt unfamiliar to have someone wake him from a nightmare for the first time. Harenir looked at Isaph with dazed eyes, then realized he was still holding his hand.

A pale hand with blue veins visible, slender fingers. Though he had watched this small hand pour out ominous energy, a truly unexpected impression suddenly struck him.

"...Your hand is warm."

"Of course it is. I'm not a corpse or an evil spirit."

"I see..."

"Why do you sound so surprised? You seem not fully awake, why don't you let go of my hand now?"

### Chapter 59

Isaph looked at him with disgruntled eyes, as if he had seen all sorts of strange situations. Generally, he showed little change in expression, and the only things that could be read were fatigue and an uncomfortable sense of distance. Even now, he seemed very uncomfortable with his hand being held and tried to pull his arm away.

How long had he been holding it anyway? Though neither of them welcomed the contact, Harenir found it strangely irritating. Was it because the other person disliked it so much, or because he always saw him trying to distance himself?

...Judging these reasons to be not very valid, he let go of the hand with a thud. It seemed the aftereffects of the nightmare were still lingering. Harenir pressed his brow firmly and sat up.

"It's fine. I'm awake now, so you can go back..."

"No, you need to sleep. What did you hear me say? I told you to focus on recovery."

But Isaph quickly blocked his way. His threatening tone sounded almost like intimidation. As Harenir remained silent out of bewilderment, Isaph let out a deep sigh.

"Haah, alright. If you're worried about having nightmares again, I'll stay until I make sure you're in a deep sleep..."

Harenir let out a dry laugh at Isaph's behavior, speaking as if bestowing a favor by saying he would wake him if he had a nightmare. It was absurd enough that he had inferred the reason for his silence that way, but...

"You want me to sleep while you watch?"

"I don't want to either. If only there weren't factors turning my body into trash."

"..."

"You've never lived in a body like this, so you don't understand, but this is a very serious matter for me. You might be fine after staying up all night, but I'm not."

*Is that something to say so gravely...*

He knew that Isaph was usually quiet, and only occasionally spouted nonsense when greatly surprised. So now, was he feeling extreme irritation at being forcibly woken from sleep? He might have endured and endured before finally coming here to wake him up.

Moreover, since Isaph had always tried to keep his distance from him after 'that day' on the sky island, for him to approach first like this...

"The less exhausted I am, the faster I can remove the curse. Cooperate a bit."

At Isaph's repeated insistence, Harenir reluctantly sat back down on the bed. He could ignore him and drive him out, but since the pain from the curse had truly disappeared right after their souls were connected, he decided to cooperate a little. However, he had no intention of sleeping in front of Isaph, so he thought if he stayed quiet for a while, Isaph would leave on his own.

He was still puzzled about how Isaph could remove the curse.

He knew that necromancy was the ability to subjugate the souls of the dead, but he didn't know it could connect to the souls of the living too. Well, Isaph could even forcibly detach the souls of the living. He seemed to excel in handling souls beyond just necromancy.

Still, it should be difficult to remove a Dium's curse just by connecting souls, was Isaph's ability much stronger than he thought? ...With that body.

Suddenly, Harenir asked,

"You say you're affected by my condition, so why am I not affected by yours?"

"It's not like I've suffered external injuries right now."

"Ah, so your existing physical condition doesn't affect me."

"That's right... Wait, why is your question phrased like that?"

Isaph tilted his head as if he had heard something very strange. By now, he had retreated far away again and was sitting in a chair on the other side. In the dark space with no lights on, it was very like him to sit in the shadiest position. Only the purple of his eyes was occasionally visible.

For a moment, his eyes wandered as if searching for something in the air, then he spoke slowly.

"There's also the reason of the difference in soul quality. Your soul is much purer, so you can assume my condition won't affect you much. Unless it's something like being hit by a serious curse."

It meant that an ordinary human couldn't harm a soul blessed by God. Unless he was injured to the point of life-threatening danger, there would be no effect, and even that probably wouldn't be fatal.

Harenir's lips moved at this series of explanations. He still couldn't believe that Isaph was unilaterally enduring pain to help him.

"Well, if you concentrate really hard, you might be able to feel my condition..."

"How should I concentrate?"

"What's with the curiosity? Why, do you want to feel for yourself how trash-like my body is and laugh?"

Isaph chuckled.

"You don't know necromancy, so you can't. How could the noble hero use such a power?"

It was close to sarcasm, but Harenir remained silent. Surprised by Isaph's momentary laugh, he just stared at his face. But even with eyes accustomed to the darkness, Isaph's face was only faintly visible, and the smile had already disappeared without a trace.

"Anyway, how long does it usually take for wounds like this to heal?"

"...Normally it would be a week, but this time I used a lot of energy with both Grace and Arux, so it will take longer. Probably about two weeks."

"That's still amazing recovery..."

Isaph nodded slowly. He said that the body would steadily recover during those two weeks, so the quest could progress together, and if no additional problems arose, he thought he could break the connection within a month.

Then Isaph slightly furrowed his brow. Noticing that Harenir wasn't lying down on the bed even though their brief conversation had ended, indicating he had no intention of sleeping, he sighed.

After a strange silence, Isaph awkwardly asked a question.

"...I've been curious, when you use Grace, you recite divine language. What's the content?"

His attitude was very strange. Did he think the reason Harenir wasn't going back to sleep was because of nightmares, so he was going to wait until drowsiness came while talking about a completely different topic? Whatever it was, it was behavior Harenir found difficult to understand. It almost seemed like Isaph was being considerate.

Harenir slowly opened his mouth.

"...'I beseech Solnium who opened this land, bestow grace upon your first sword. Grant the power to drive out the unrighteous things of the earth and sprout life. To purify this place, inheriting your will...' Well, something like that."

"That's really grand..."

"Why were you curious about this?"

"Well, just... The word 'purification' sounded familiar."

"Did you learn divine language? While using abilities that deceive God's will."

"You don't seem particularly devout either, so why the criticism?"

Isaph retorted irritably, covering his mouth with his hand. He stiffened as if the words had come out impulsively, and Harenir looked him over with subtle eyes.

"Why did you think that?"

"...It was a mistake."

"Tell me."

Urged on, Isaph moved his lips for a while before answering.

"...Well, just, on the sky island, you were the only one who didn't pray to God. All the other knights were moved, but you didn't seem particularly pleased...?"

"..."

"It was the same when fighting the Dium this time, um... But in the end, you recited that grand divine language and used grace and even the small sun, so you must be very devout. It was a mistake after all."

Isaph shook his head. Harenir stared at him for a while, then leaned against the wall and tilted his head slightly. He repeatedly clenched and unclenched his hand slowly, as if trying to grasp the moonlight falling on his palm.

After a long silence, Harenir impulsively opened his mouth.

"...Sometimes I think that if God really existed, the world wouldn't have become like this."

This was truly something that could only be explained as an impulse. Words too close to a great sin for the First Sword of the Holy Empire, the Holy Knight Commander, to utter. Was he still confused from just waking up? Or was it just... because he was surprised by the first being to read disbelief in him?

"The numerous tragedies caused by the catasthrope, and the fact that one person had to embrace it all and disappear... Despite that, all the misfortunes that still exist today, it's all strange."

To doubt God's existence despite using so much holy power, and even receiving grace. Even as he voiced his disbelief, Harenir self-deprecatingly called it the complaints of the well-fed, and unconsciously thought that God couldn't look after everything in the world and that expecting that was wrong in itself.

But Isaph didn't say anything. The purple eyes looking at him were just calm, neither rejoicing that his guess was correct nor mocking him.

"Aren't you going to criticize me for being a hero yet a skeptic?"

"That's a strange question. As you said, don't I use abilities that deceive God?"

"..."

"I don't know why you're acting like you want to be scolded after revealing it yourself... What's the problem? It's not like you can't use holy power because you don't believe, you use it just fine, so there's no problem at all."

Isaph answered indifferently, taking a results-oriented approach. He even reacted as if that level of cynicism was natural to have, which in turn made Harenir fall silent this time.

### Chapter 60

Isaph had shown a similar attitude before.

'God's making one person suffer terribly.'

He had casually uttered words that no one in the Holy Empire would dare to say. And he had boldly said it in front of the holy knights.

But Isaph didn't seem to disbelieve in Solnium's existence or be indifferent to faith. If that had been the case, it would have shown in the temple or on the sky island, but he hadn't shown any such reaction.

Rather, Isaph was very detached.

Regardless of God's existence, he only looked at the path he wanted to take. It felt like he used necromancy not with the grand purpose of deceiving God, but simply because he needed that ability, and it just happened that the space was the Holy Empire. And he didn't care even if he was criticized for it being wrong.

In the past, when the cardinal had set out to capture Isaph, he had calmly listened to the cardinal's condemnation. Even when pointed at and asked if he knew how unrighteous and wrong the power he was using was, he just stared silently and then.

'So what.'

With just that one phrase, he subdued the cardinal with necromancy. Harenir recalled how the cardinal, who had returned in tatters that day, had raged in the temple, as he stared at Isaph.

For the past few years, as the Holy Knight Commander, he had often heard stories about Isaph. How many people had set out to capture him, and how they had been miserably defeated.

Harenir had never personally stepped up. The temple didn't give such a mission to the hero because it would mean the empire considered Isaph's existence that serious, so they didn't issue the order. Some high-ranking priests seemed to subtly hope he would step up, but he didn't feel the need.

In the past, to Harenir, Isaph was just a gloomy being using unrighteous power, nothing more, nothing less. To begin with, he had been busy looking into the Dium at that time.

He only found it peculiar that while other necromancers tried to form groups and show off their power, Isaph didn't do that at all. He even drove away those who said they would become his subordinates, calling them bothersome.

Then one day, as he was returning from inspecting the outer walls of the holy city, Isaph suddenly approached him.

'You, your soul is beautiful.'

It was a truly sudden approach. He had popped out as if he had been waiting for a very long time just to say that one sentence, and immediately after, he left abruptly. It was a bewildering first encounter.

The reason Harenir hadn't drawn his sword even though he had noticed the approaching presence was that he hadn't felt any hostility from the other person. In the holy city, there were often citizens who approached the hero expressing respect and goodwill, so he thought it was that kind of thing.

Considering that even then, there had been a warrant out for Isaph for using unrighteous sorcery, it was even more bewildering. For someone wanted by the Order to approach the symbol of the Order. Although the feeling now seemed a bit different from then... the point that he was an unpredictable being remained the same.

Even now, there was no hostility in Isaph's eyes as he looked at him.

Those accompanying him on this Encroachment Zone search didn't like Isaph, and especially Kalterik had strongly opposed at first. He said it was disgusting for a being using unrighteous power to be in the land protected by sacrifice.

Harenir had agreed to some extent, but Isaph remained calm despite these views. Sometimes he even reversed it, using the fact that they disliked him.

Perhaps because of such bewildering attitudes, Harenir gradually came to have no particular feelings towards him. It was close to mutual disinterest, as the other person didn't care about others. He knew Isaph's crimes and had brought him out, and they had to travel together for a long time, so there was no need to create conflict unnecessarily.

Isaph generally observed from a step away. He existed at a distance and provided definite help at unexpected moments. Though he seemed somewhat reluctant, his actions to protect the companions were surprising, and his attitude of asking for recognition for it was strange, but...

Always immersed in tired calmness, his abilities clearly trampled numerous problems.

So sometimes, Harenir thought Isaph was comfortable. He acted dryly, citing only interests as reasons, and his eyes looking at him were always indifferent. Those eyes held no admiration, respect, or belief towards the hero.

He just looked on dryly, and then suddenly approached at some unexpected moment. He tried to resolve the curse while enduring pain, yet still cited only future sentence reduction as the reason. He showed incomprehensible attitudes one after another, and then...

'...You must have been lonely.'

He was a strange being who even said such unexpected things.

A subtle question settled in Harenir's blue eyes. He had been puzzled both when he first heard those words and now as he mulled them over. The words Isaph and loneliness seemed so far apart, yet there had been quite a deep trace in his voice as he uttered those words.

Sometimes he thought that expressionless face was like a trace of emotions clumped together for a very long time. Traces so old that the emotions couldn't be distinguished, their very form all tangled and mashed together.

He just clung to dead beings, standing faintly in the place closest to death.

"You..."

Harenir's lips moved. Isaph was clearly a cruel person who had committed a massacre, so why did he feel this way? He had not the slightest intention of taking his side, thinking there must have been some reason. To begin with, Isaph didn't seem to want that, and moreover, he himself hadn't even made excuses for the massacre. Just recalling what he had babbled when caught was enough to show that.

Yet suddenly, he thought Isaph's undead seemed to cling to him instead. This too was probably just because Isaph had subjugated the victims as slaves, making them strangely loyal, but...

"Why do you start speaking and then stop?"

Isaph reacted indifferently. It had been a meaningless murmur that escaped while organizing his thoughts, but Harenir looked at him instead of shaking his head. He had suddenly become curious about something.

"After you get your sentence reduced later, what do you plan to do?"

Even after receiving a death sentence, he had quietly stayed in prison, and since coming out, he had acted as if sentence reduction was his only goal. Hadn't he directly said, even while sweating, that the reason he was helping was for sentence reduction? Though he didn't quite believe it, he was curious about his ultimate goal.

But Isaph hesitated at this question. He just blinked as if he had received an unexpected question, then slowly threw his gaze to a corner.

"...I'll have to leave, I guess."

"Leave?"

Isaph's silence was long. As if he didn't know how to answer, he moved his lips several times, and then even turned his head to the side. *Rustle,* his pitch-black hair covered his face, hiding his expression.

"No matter how much my sentence is reduced for helping the empire's hero, will people's perception of me change? So I'll just leave... and live quietly in a very distant place."

"Ah, are you going to pay for your massacre? Are you thinking of going to Klam Village to atone?"

"..."

It was close to sarcasm, but Isaph didn't say anything. For some reason, Harenir felt strangely uneasy. Even though he understood the reason for wanting to leave, he suddenly felt uncomfortable and sneered. He thought it was because it was absurd for someone who had committed a massacre to say they wanted to live quietly.

He was aware that his behavior of picking on this aspect was quite contradictory, given that he had originally offered the condition of reducing the sentence, and hadn't been particularly curious about his future until now. But still, he had become unpleasantly sarcastic, yet Isaph continued to remain silent.

"Why aren't you answering?"

"...What does it matter to you where I go or what I do?"

"What would happen to my position if a prisoner released due to my intervention for sentence reduction commits foolish acts again?"

He attached a plausible reason he had found. Harenir belatedly realized this and felt it was like an excuse, but since it was clearly correct content, he thought he had just been slow to recognize it because he was tired.

Isaph looked at him with bewildered eyes. "Is this probation or what?" His muttered voice was tinged with discontent, but he didn't seem wronged or hurt.

Just looking with those still unreadable, subtle eyes, and then.

"You don't need to worry. I won't talk about you anywhere else I go."

He spoke calmly, as if all the sarcasm until now had been because of this. The hero's half-baked recovery ability, disbelief in God, and minor things like having nightmares. The promise not to spread rumors about any of these didn't sound particularly like an affectionate promise to keep secrets.

It was dry, as if those truths and their current relationship held no weight for him at all. As if everything would end once this was over.

### Chapter 61

Isaph's action of relaxing his eyes was tinged with fatigue. Harenir thought this was connected to the detached attitude he had always seen in him.

A being always one step back from all commotion. He had thought that was comfortable, but suddenly he felt like that one step might never be closed. A contradictory discomfort followed.

"I just want to go somewhere where no one knows me and live..."

"There's no such place in the Holy Empire."

"Then I guess I'll have to leave the empire, well."

"Most of the continent is in ruins due to the aftermath of the Great Catastrophe, and even the remaining kingdoms all receive aid from the Holy Empire. There probably isn't a place that doesn't know you."

"You're practically praying for me to leave the continent entirely."

Isaph sighed with a "Huh," as if in disbelief.

"Fine, I'll stay on an uninhabited island. Is that good enough?"

Isaph grumbled that after saying he'd reduce his sentence, it was practically exile in the end. But after a moment of silence, he nodded, saying that was still a sentence reduction, making Harenir let out a dry laugh. Sometimes that being acted amusingly in unexpected ways.

That chuckle drained his energy, and he realized he had been needlessly interrogating Isaph and picking on details. They would have no business with each other once this cooperation ended, so he didn't know why he had tried so hard to find out where Isaph was going. Had seeing Isaph's power up close made him view him as more of a person of interest?

Just then, Isaph approached the bed and said,

"Anyway, lie down now. I'll watch you fall asleep before I go."

Harenir swallowed another dry laugh that was about to burst out at Isaph's gesture telling him to lie down. It was bewildering how Isaph treated him like a child throwing a sleep tantrum, but this time he shook his head instead of sneering.

"I'll sleep on my own, so go back."

"Don't make me go back only to come here again, just sleep, will you? It's cold outside."

Isaph grumbled as if annoyed. At his words asking if he knew how irritating it had been to walk here stumbling in the middle of the night, Harenir closed his mouth. Isaph seemed to be getting quite sensitive as he was getting sleepy.

Right after, Isaph let out a long breath and grabbed Harenir's hand. It was a sudden contact, but Harenir didn't shake him off. Considering the very strange things that had happened every time he had held his hand before, he should have refused, but he didn't feel like it.

Was it because all those actions had ultimately been for his sake, or... was it because it gave him a very strange feeling that this being who always avoided him was initiating contact first? Harenir stared blankly at the small hand intertwined with his fingers, and at some point, he felt the tension drain away with a thud.

His consciousness started to stretch out languidly as if he had taken a sleeping pill. When Harenir reflexively put up his guard, Isaph patted the back of his hand as if to soothe him.

"It's nothing. I'm just trying to help you sleep..."

"...Is this your ability too?"

"I guess so..."

It was quite a strange answer. Was he unwilling to talk, or was he joking? Then followed an explanation in a tired tone that he had just relaxed the tension in his soul, but it was odd from the start that such a thing was possible with necromancy.

Since necromancy was sorcery that subjugated the souls of the dead to follow the master's orders, should he understand it as basically an ability to handle souls? Harenir felt the strength leaving his fingertips as he asked,

"Didn't you say you couldn't control me even if our souls were connected?"

"I'm already getting dizzy just from this much intervention."

"..."

"Ugh, huff. I'm tired..."

Isaph, who had covered his mouth to stop from retching, staggered and then collapsed onto the floor with a thud. Harenir reflexively grabbed his arm, but he went limp as if he felt no need to stand up. Melting onto the floor like a puddle, he pointed at the bed.

"Lie down... please just sleep now..."

Harenir felt extremely bewildered. Did he have to exert himself to this extent? Why was he doing this? He felt like he could shake off this languid feeling anytime, but... in the end, he swallowed a sigh and lay down on the bed.

Except for when he was very young, it had been a long time since someone was by his side when he slept, and being urged to sleep by someone was actually a first. Even his parents hadn't done this. No, back then he had slept peacefully, so there was no need for it in the first place...

Meanwhile, Isaph moved sluggishly. As if truly intending to confirm he fell asleep before leaving, he curled up sitting next to the bedside and even carefully wrapped his cape around himself. With his pitch-black hair and dark clothes, the yellow cape on his shoulders looked extremely out of place.

It was the cape Harenir had taken from the thief and given to him a few days ago. The pattern was also flashy, making it even more unsuitable for Isaph, but that made it catch the eye more. He's still taking good care of it.

Isaph seemed quite weak to cold. Even though it was obvious, he had endured stubbornly without saying a word while walking through the desert. Was it because he had indifferently said he didn't need anything at the temple, or...

'Why didn't you tell anyone?'

'...You must have been lonely.'

'Just... I was like that.'

Having no experience of telling his inner thoughts to anyone, had he become accustomed to swallowing them?

Although he had immediately found and brought the thieves as soon as they arrived at Grimodia Village, well, thinking even of such aspects, he was still an unpredictable being. He hadn't asked others for help and had stubbornly found supplies on his own.

Harenir stared at Isaph's back while thinking of various things. A slender neck was visible through the messily grown black hair. And the collar fastened there. At first, he had fidgeted with it as if uncomfortable, but now he seemed to have grown accustomed to it.

As he was quietly looking at the snow-white neck, whoosh, Isaph turned his head. Their eyes met directly as he turned suddenly. Isaph's brow furrowed.

"I told you to sleep. How many times do I have to say it?"

"..."

"I'll stay by your side until you fall into a deep sleep, so just sleep comfortably..."

Did he not know that having someone next to him was uncomfortable in the first place, or did he not care? Also, it was quite amusing that he told him to fall into a deep sleep when he would probably wake up anyway when Isaph left, given how sensitive he was to presences.

But Harenir decided not to point that out. It was unfamiliar to have someone urging him to sleep, and hearing for the first time that someone would watch over him until he fell asleep, he curiously mulled over Isaph's voice in his mind.

A voice much more languid than usual, immersed in fatigue. As he recalled this, he even remembered the touch that had patted the back of his hand after relaxing the tension in his soul earlier. Had it been warmer and softer than expected...

As he was retracing the sensation, Isaph let out a deep sigh and turned his head. The small back of his head, showing a will to endure until he fell asleep as if he had taken this situation as a battle of wills, was amusing. So, truly impulsively.

*Thud,* Harenir's fingertips tangled in the pitch-black hair.

"...?!"

He had just lightly touched the hair covering the back of his neck, but Isaph startled violently. His purple eyes, filled with shock as if asking what on earth he was doing, widened greatly. He even covered his neck with both hands as if disgusted by the fact that a hand had brushed his neck.

After blankly watching even that reaction, Harenir closed his eyes with a final, quite strange thought.

'...Cat.'

It was truly a strange dawn.

**#Part 7. 34%**

*Blink, blink, blink...*

Consciousness returned slowly. The morning after expending a lot of energy was much more difficult to wake up than usual. It felt as if his soul was being fitted back into his body. He slowly blinked his eyes, wiping away the hazy vision.

An old stone house, a desolate interior, a white uniform stained with blood, and... golden hair shimmering in the bright sunlight. Wait, why were there blue eyes now?

"I didn't know that saying I'd stay by your side meant you'd sleep together too."

"...!"

"When I saw you fall asleep first, I suspected you might be pretending to lower your guard..."

Startled by the calmly continuing voice, he sat up abruptly, staggering. Harenir standing opposite him boasted a perfectly beautiful face even in the morning, but he was only suffering from terrible shock looking at him. He had gone mad.

To come to Harenir's room in the deep dawn and then fall asleep there.

Moreover, according to Harenir's words, it seemed he had fallen asleep first. *Ah, how frustrating.* It was because he had become more tired after using energy to remove the tension built up in Harenir's soul.

Furthermore, though he had clearly been sitting at the bedside, he must have toppled over sideways, as he had slept curled up on the floor. Wanting to deny this ridiculous reality, he buried his face in his hands and sighed.

*Swish,* then something slid down beside his arm.

"..."

This seems to be the blanket Harenir had been using, but why was it on top of him...

After staring at it dazedly, he finally buried his head in his hands again. It was uncomfortable to see Harenir as soon as he woke up. Partly because he was embarrassed at having ended up sleeping here, but...

In fact, he had seen all of Harenir's nightmares.

### Chapter 62

Though he had told him he couldn't see anything, unfortunately, he had fully shared the dream. He had seen everything, from the image of his father leading the young Harenir, to what had happened to his mother who had come to save him.

At first, he thought it was a mistake, but as it went on, the dream became clearer, and even intensified, so he eventually moved to wake Harenir up. The darkness of dawn had made it easy to hide his expression, and he could lie using his tired state as an excuse, but facing him in the bright light made him feel very uneasy.

*Hah,* it's not like he had wanted to peek into the other's past in this way...

He had always wished to stay away from complicated matters, but now he had come to know the truth like this. This alone was enough to give him a headache, but to have fallen asleep here of all places. As he grabbed his hair with both hands as if about to tear it out, a small "Pft" sound was heard from the other side.

*...Did he just laugh?*

He raised his head abruptly to look at Harenir. As if he had been interestedly watching the scene of him writhing in embarrassment as soon as he woke up, a faint trace of a smile remained on his face. The chuckle seemed to have escaped without him realizing it. He covered his mouth with his hand and then turned his head away.

"Come out when you're ready."

Somehow, even his voice seemed tinged with amusement.

*Is he laughing at me?* He felt indignant, but in truth, he found himself ridiculous too, so he couldn't argue. After saying several times that he would wake him if he had nightmares so he could sleep comfortably, he had sprawled out sleeping until the other woke up.

After confirming that Harenir had left, he slapped the innocent floor hard with his palm. If he didn't do at least this much, he felt like he might start shouting and thrashing about.

"...But it seems you did sleep."

In the dawn, he had suffered from a feeling of his whole body being constricted as if grabbed by Dedium, even breaking out in a cold sweat, but now he was fine. There was an aching sensation due to the injuries, but his overall condition wasn't bad.

The feeling of being connected to another person was still unfamiliar, so he rubbed his arm several times. He was newly amazed at Harenir who moved nonchalantly with a body in twice as much pain, but that again made him ashamed of his behavior of falling asleep first in front of that patient. Harenir's laughter echoed in his ears.

Only after barely calming himself did he step outside. The companions were all gathered at the edge of the hill.

"It seems the purification is happening faster this time, perhaps because we used the small sun too!"

Noi said in an excited tone, looking at the Encroachment Zone. The changes in the Encroachment Zone were clear under the clear sky. Until yesterday, the canyon that had faded to monochrome had looked eerie, but now the sight of it slowly regaining color from the center was mysterious.

Just then, the morning sunlight poured brightly onto that place, making it look as if sunlight had pooled in the canyon. It was a sight worthy of being counted among the world's landmarks.

Moreover, knowing that this change was a miracle brought about by the hero's grace, the companions' faces were very moved. They offered prayers to Solnium, and then warmly welcomed Harenir as he approached.

"Commander, are you alright?!"

"Of course. Thank you for your concern."

Harenir responded to Kalterik's loud question with a picture-perfect smile.

The subordinates' faces showed concern about the curse Harenir had received last night, but seeing his truly fine condition, their eyes shone. He was the image of a perfectly intact hero without a trace of illness, so the glances they exchanged were filled with joyful exclamations of "As expected!"

He sadly decided to ignore the "As expected..." glances that were also exchanged at the sight of him walking up tiredly behind. *I'm in this state because of that hero who's the subject of their acting,* he inwardly protested, but then gave up, realizing that he wouldn't have been in a fine state even if it weren't for him.

"We might purify this place even faster than the southern Encroachment Zone!"

"Oh, it's going to be quite a commotion again, isn't it?"

Noi and Kalterik conversed proudly. They said that even though the Encroachment Zone in the western desert was much larger than the southern forest, the purification was progressing faster due to the great assistance of the holy relic. Mela also muttered with a slightly flushed face.

"In the past, half the continent was contaminated, but now only two Encroachment Zones remain..."

It seemed that before Dedium was sealed, this land had helplessly lost its color in the face of the Great Catastrophe. But since the previous Holy Knight Commander, Harenir's mother, had sealed the leader and the world had returned to normal with all the Dium disappearing, it was certainly believable that everyone had thought it was 'perfectly' dealt with until now.

Even if parts of Encroachment Zones remained in the east, west, south, and north of the empire, it was such a small area compared to the past that they probably considered it just a trace of the Great Catastrophe. Recalling yesterday's events, he also asked a question.

"So, are we returning to the holy city now?"

He had been told that the purpose of searching the Encroachment Zone was to confirm the Dium's survival, and ultimately to grasp any signs of Dedium's revival. So having witnessed even the Dium's ritual, he thought they might return to the Order, but at his question, Harenir turned to him with a gentle smile.

"Why? Are you eager to go to the uninhabited island?"

"...?"

*What's with that unpleasant tone?* Behind the indignation that his question had been such an absurd content, he felt a bewildered doubt towards Harenir whose thoughts had leapt so far. The other companions also reacted with confusion, saying "Uninhabited island?"

Not wanting to reveal the conversation from dawn, he spoke before their curiosity could become more specific.

"You're going to drag me to the remaining two Encroachment Zones anyway, right? I just asked because I thought the Order might need to respond now. It's certain that they're trying to revive Dedium..."

He had sensed that the quest wouldn't end until all the Encroachment Zones were resolved, from the moment he learned the truth of the quest. Even if they returned to the holy city and joined other holy knights, the usefulness of surveying the Encroachment Zones with necromancy would remain, so it was obvious he would still be held by Harenir's collar then.

He didn't know why he had to explain this in detail, but only then did Harenir make an "Ah" sound. His muttering of "Two..." somehow felt more like he was considering the number of remaining journeys together rather than the reason he had given, but in the end, he shook his head.

"No. For now, since we've bought time by destroying the priest's staff, I thought we might investigate Dedium's revival in more detail."

"What? Shouldn't you report with the time you've gained?"

"I'm wondering if there might be a traitor in the Order."

At the word he said with a gentle smile, the companions drew in their breath. Their faces were shocked at the suspicion towards the most devout group, and though they seemed to inwardly think 'Surely that can't be', they couldn't bring themselves to say it in front of Harenir.

Everyone must know that Harenir's father was a traitor who had sided with the Dium. He felt somewhat uneasy as he was newly reminded of the slip of the tongue he had made to him in the past.

Harenir calmly said while quietly looking down at the Encroachment Zone.

"The more I think about it, the more questions I have. How the Dium managed to hide and survive for the past 20 years..."

He was doubting whether it was possible for them to hide only in that place for such a long time, even though ordinary humans couldn't approach the Encroachment Zone. Also, despite reports of recent strange movements in the Encroachment Zones, the temple had not allowed Harenir to go out and search.

Though there were complex reasons behind this, including consideration of the hero's influence, it made him feel even more that Harenir wouldn't return now. He must have faked his death on purpose in consideration of that aspect. Moreover, having raided the prison and brought out the death row inmate Isaph, he probably wouldn't be satisfied with just examining half.

Although there seemed to be some reckless aspect to Harenir that couldn't be understood by this alone... this might be a worry arising from knowing that his recovery ability wasn't complete.

*...Worry?*

He shuddered, retracing his own thoughts. The idea that he was worrying about Harenir seemed like such an absurd sentence that he felt wronged, but he tried hard to attach a plausible reason internally. *Doesn't it hurt me too if he gets hurt?* Yes, believing it was because of that, he asked,

"So are you thinking of going straight to the next Encroachment Zone now?"

"No, I'm planning to rest for a while before going."

He heard a word he hadn't expected at all. After moving without rest until now, rest? It didn't seem like he would call just resting for a day or two as rest. In fact, these knights would likely think that such rest could be sufficiently had during the time spent in the carriage while moving.

Looking at him with a surprised face, Harenir shrugged.

"Since this battle was quite big, I'm thinking of resting for at least ten days before going. Everyone used a lot of energy, and although Mela safely returned to human form, we should be careful for a while. It's the Holy Festival season anyway..."

He felt strange about the quite long period of ten days. Could this be... because he had told him to focus on recovery? He had thought he wouldn't listen at all.

### Chapter 63

Of course, it was probably a decision considering various factors, as they had been constantly moving and everyone had suffered to the point of being battered in this Encroachment Zone, but it was surprising to hear the word 'rest' from his mouth.

"Wow, that's great! Let's all go enjoy the Holy Festival together!"

Noi especially welcomed this news enthusiastically. His eyes immediately filled with life and sparkled, and his cheeks flushed red. Words poured out quickly about what foods could be eaten at the festival, what night events were anticipated, and so on. Expectation gradually rose on the faces of the other knights as well.

While he too was glad for the rest, 'Holy Festival'...

Seeing that there was even a festival, it seemed to be a very significant day in the Holy Empire, but from the name alone, an aura flowed strongly suggesting that Isaph would not fit in at all. Considering this initial sense of distance as a needless misconception, he slowly tilted his head back.

The sky was clear blue.

\*\*\*

They moved to a city.

There were several small villages adjacent to the desert, but Noi, perhaps wanting to fully enjoy this precious rest, set their destination as a city. Through his very excited state, information about the Holy Festival could be gathered.

The Holy Festival was said to be the day Solnium opened this land.

It was the day of creation when Solnium thrust a pure white spear like a beam of light into the land covered in darkness, and light and vitality finally spread. He vaguely remembered seeing such content in a book he had read at the historical hall before. He had grimaced at the "primordial darkness" stuff and immediately turned to the next page...

Anyway, it was a different holiday from the Founding Day when the empire was established, but it was said to be the national holiday that the temple considered most important. The festival continued for several days, and since the timing was also around the end of winter, it also had the meaning of welcoming the coming spring. It was a festival welcoming spring to come quickly.

Having spent considerable time moving, by the time they arrived at their destination, the festival was already in full swing.

"Wow! This is it, the festival atmosphere!"

"Huh, it's been a while since I've seen so many people."

"It's lively..."

As soon as they got off the luggage cart, Noi jumped up and down, and Kalterik and Mela also looked around with quite welcoming faces. Though they had seen many people in Rus, the empire's first capital, it was incomparable to today's festival.

Temporary shops densely filling the streets, colorful garlands hung between the street trees, and flowers filling the roadsides. Though it was said to be a festival to joyfully welcome the coming spring, looking at this scenery, it already seemed like spring. Large flags engraved with the emblems of the Holy Empire and Solnium were also noticeable.

Most passersby wore bright and colorful clothes, and children ran around bursting into laughter. Singing, dancing, and even small performances were happening here and there. The smell of various foods wafted deliciously, and the fresh scent of fruit filled the streets.

*Oh...* He was amazed to see such a full-fledged festival scene, not expecting to witness this. If it was this lively in the early morning, how much more would it be in the evening? Not only was this the first festival he had seen in this world, but in fact, the event of a festival itself was unfamiliar to him.

In his previous life, he had no experience of seeing festivals as he had stayed cooped up at home. The only thing that came to mind was the school festival from his middle and high school days, but even then, because everyone avoided him and felt uncomfortable, he hadn't participated, not wanting to be someone who ruined the atmosphere.

So the scene before his eyes now was very fascinating and new. Though it was burdensome because of the many people, his head turned busily following his curiosity. A wooden sign caught his eye.

"Give, flowers, to the holy knights...?"

As he read the letters haltingly, Noi quickly responded beside him.

"The Holy Festival is also a day to express gratitude to the holy knights. Because they're beings who defeat the darkness of the world, continuing Solnium's will! So, as much as it's a festival welcoming spring, they give flowers containing that spring to the holy knights."

"Ah..."

"Ahem, well. So, when we were in the holy city, the knight order building used to be filled with flowers."

Kalterik added, clearing his throat. There was a subtle boastful energy, so he glanced at him briefly before turning his head away. Kalterik reacted with "Why are you ignoring me?!" but he didn't bother to answer. Something more puzzling had caught his eye.

There was a reason this phrase had caught his attention from the start.

"But there's even a banner next to it saying they're waiting for the hero."

A banner with heartfelt content hoping for the true hero of Solares to return was hung on some building, and a sign board saying to pray together was also set up in front. People attached cards to white or yellow flowers and put them in a box prepared inside the building, and flowers were already piled up like a mountain. It seemed too large in scale to be just a small event organized by an individual.

Noi sighed "Hmm" after confirming where his finger was pointing.

"I guess since the Order didn't declare the hero dead but left him as missing, they're holding events like this."

From the beginning, the empire's citizens had been half-believing, half-doubting the hero's death, but with the Order outright denying his death, a scene of everyone hoping for the hero's return had unfolded. There would also be a purpose to calm the troubled public sentiment of the empire's citizens even in this way.

In a way, it was a very impressive and amusing situation. The hero Harenir had really come to a place where [Waiting for the Hero...] was written in large letters. Was this a successful case of bilocation? *Ah,* he wasn't dead, so it's a bit different.

As he glanced alternately between that place and Harenir, Harenir shrugged. He didn't seem particularly surprised, as if he had expected this from the moment he heard the Order's news at the temple they had visited earlier.

"I have a place to contact, so I'll be back shortly."

"Ah, to that person? Yes, have a safe trip!"

"Have a good trip, sir!"

Noi and Kalterik answered loudly, and Mela also bowed her head. He had heard that last time in Rus, he had contacted someone to block the way to the Encroachment Zone, but who could 'that person' be? A high-ranking person in the temple? Did he have another comrade despite distrusting the Order?

He moved along with the companions, becoming accustomed to a situation where everyone except him knew what was going on. Noi chose a flower shop as the first order of enjoying the festival.

"I'll give these to you, sirs!"

Somehow, Noi had been anxiously checking the time while considering the route to move to the city, and it seemed this was the reason. Large yellow flowers sparkled beautifully under the morning sunlight.

Glancing around, he saw people not wearing holy knight uniforms also receiving flowers as gifts. Perhaps initially they were only given to holy knights, but it might have gradually become a custom to give flowers to all knights, or just to anyone they were grateful to.

So now, the two disguised as mercenaries were probably gladly accepting the flowers and thanking him. The sight of their special bond that could always be read was truly fascinating...

*Clang, clatter,* a commotion spread, breaking the warm atmosphere.

It was a commotion caused by a flower pot on the ground being kicked as he stepped back. Fortunately it was an empty pot, but perhaps because of that, it rolled noisily. Kalterik frowned at his action of moving far away from the three.

"I wasn't expecting to receive anything from you anyway!"

It might have looked like he was revealing distance by trying to move away from the scene that had warmed up with Noi giving flower gifts. In fact, he too had the unpleasant thought of 'Surely I don't have to give one too...?' when he saw that scene. It didn't seem like it would be enjoyable for either the person receiving the gift or the person giving it.

But his stepping back wasn't because of such concerns. He hurriedly covered his mouth with his hand and turned his head. As he inhaled sharply and staggered, Mela said in a slightly surprised voice,

"You, your face is pale."

"Oh my, it really is...?"

Then Noi also checked his complexion and looked around dazedly. It was a gaze checking if he might have a flower allergy. He answered without being able to properly look at where they were.

"I'm not feeling well... I need to go to the inn first."

He could feel the three of them being flustered by his sudden words. He didn't want to be like this from the start either, but he had no choice.

There were too many ghosts in front of his eyes.

It was a really strange thing. This hadn't happened since entering Isaph's body, and it seemed like he could control the spirit vision according to this body's will, but why couldn't he control it now?

Of all places, this was the middle of the festival street, so more ghosts were visible. Originally, places with many people have many ghosts, and they like festivals too. So far only minor spirits were visible, so it didn't seem like Isaph would be overwhelmed by such beings, but an instinctive aversion surged.

Moreover, a dizzying vertigo came, making him feel ominous. Though it was originally a weak body, it hadn't been this bad, so why? At the end of the chain of questions, an uncomfortable conjecture formed.

Could it be because he had shared Harenir's curse? Since their souls were connected, did he become unstable when far from him?

### Chapter 64

It might be that this problem was caused because all his energy was focused on Harenir to remove the Dium's curse. In other words, by concentrating his power on one side, the other side became vulnerable.

*Hah,* he sighed involuntarily. He didn't feel like chasing after Harenir, who had already gone far away. He had been keeping his distance again because of what he had done that night, and it was embarrassing to get closer for this reason. Moreover, after acting so confidently as if he could solve everything...

As if it wasn't enough that he was forcibly feeling physical pain together, now he was suffering from mental fatigue too. The fact that even necromancy, which he had been good at, was in jeopardy made him even more frustrated.

This had happened sometimes in his previous life too. On particularly tiring days, he would see more ghosts than usual. They would keenly sense that he had weakened and persistently torment him. No matter how much he tried to avoid them, it would only end after he got hurt, and as those memories surfaced, he felt even more stifled.

The only thing he had been happy about after entering this body was that he was no longer tormented by ghosts.

[Uh, uhh...]

"Get lost."

Just then, a minor spirit suddenly popped out beside him and tried to grab him. Without even removing the hand that was half-covering his face, he glared at it and told it to get lost, and fortunately, it shrank back and retreated quickly, but...

Behind the relief that he could still fend them off with Isaph's ability, he sighed at the strange looks his companions were giving him.

"W-what...?"

It was understandable that they would be flustered when he suddenly cursed at thin air. It was familiar. In his previous life too, people would give him unpleasant looks every time this happened, so he didn't want to see their faces and turned his head away abruptly.

He spoke quickly. After all, the only reason they were keeping him with them now was to monitor a high-profile criminal.

"I'm not running away. I'm just tired and want to rest, and I have this collar on anyway..."

"..."

"...I'll really just stay in the lodgings. This time I won't wander around alone doing foolish things."

He quickly added words, feeling like he knew why they were silent. Every time he had been alone, he had caused too many incidents. Still, he hoped they would believe him, as they had seen how pathetic this body was many times, but there was still no answer, so he raised his head, feeling discouraged.

To think his credibility was this low.

...Well, it deserved to be this low.

However, there were no negative emotions on the faces of the three he met. There was no sense that they thought he was pretending to be weak or treating his claim as nonsense. Rather, they looked very slightly... worried.

But then Kalterik shook his head vigorously.

"Remember that no matter how much you try to run away, you're in the palm of the Commander's hand!"

There wasn't a speck of worry on his face as he warned him fiercely. *I guess I saw wrong after all.* Thinking that he was seeing all sorts of things he shouldn't because he wasn't feeling well, he nodded. The red collar really did appear in Harenir's palm, so it was an accurate expression both figuratively and literally.

He turned away, thinking it was fortunate that he could be alone for that reason.

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*Thud, thud, thud.*

"..."

*Thud, thud thud, thud thud thud.*

"..."

*Creeeeeak―*

"Please stop it and go away..."

At his tired voice, there was a rustling sound of retreat from beyond the door. *Hah,* he sighed involuntarily. What he was doing now was engaging in an endless battle of wills with ghosts.

He had thought he'd found peace after coming to the inn, but the ghosts had followed him here too. They persistently knocked on the door from outside, grating on his nerves. It seemed like they were waiting for him to tire out. He could hear dozens of overlapping "Kihit, kihihit" laughing sounds, not knowing how many had gathered outside the door.

It seemed like he could sweep them away with Isaph's ability. The thought that he wouldn't be overwhelmed by those things naturally settled in his mind. The problem was, he felt he couldn't control the ability.

In other words, he had a terrifying intuition that if he tried to get rid of them, he might turn this whole area into a wasteland. It was an incredibly absurd self-confidence. Here he was, hiding in an inn to avoid minor spirits, yet hesitating to act for fear of harming all souls in the area, including the living.

But right now, he felt like some kind of error had occurred and only the ultimate skill remained. It felt like he would become a character launching a meteor to kill small fry.

'Always be careful not to draw unnecessary attention.'

Harenir's past warning also weighed on his mind, and moreover, this was the middle of a city where countless people had gathered to enjoy the Holy Festival. It was truly sad how perfectly located this inn was. Shouldn't they have stayed somewhere more secluded since they needed to hide?

It was already late at night.

They say festivals shine brighter as it gets darker. Just from the cheers and laughter of people coming from outside the window, he could tell how many people were enjoying the festival in the streets now.

Were Noi, Kalterik, and Mela also having fun out there? Maybe Harenir had joined them by now too. Curled up on the bed, quietly listening to those sounds, he felt like he was part of the festival one moment, and infinitely distant from it the next.

From the moment he heard the name of the festival, he had a feeling he wouldn't belong, but to be exiled like this... He chuckled dryly and pulled the blanket up over his shoulders.

*–Meow.*

Just then, he heard a cat's meow from outside the window. He jumped up from his seat and looked over to see the black cat, En. *The player is suffering from a strange bug and the NPC only comes now!*

Feeling indignant, he roughly opened the window and grabbed the cat.

"Hey, quickly chase away the ghosts outside."

–...

"This happened because you showed that weird mission to go to the hero in the middle of the night last time. You forcibly connected me to the hero without my consent!"

He poured out words while shaking the cat's body. *This evil NPC, only exploiting without giving proper rewards!*

"Why do I have to suffer from ghosts even here! I've already suffered enough in the past. This is really sickening...!"

*–Meow.*

En placed its front paw on his hand. It was probably just trying to stop his action, but perhaps because of the careful contact that didn't use its claws, he felt drained. It felt like a movement to soothe him.

Despite being grabbed and shaken by him for a while, there was no hostility in the purple eyes looking at him. Rather, the action of calmly facing him and slowly blinking its eyes only made him laugh dryly in the end.

"What am I doing, grabbing a cat..."

Since there had been little communication with the NPC to begin with, his action became meaningless, and the small size of the cat in his hands also calmed his anger. *Maybe placing its front paw was a surprise jelly attack?* Now making even silly thoughts, he brought En into the room.

He sat crouched on the bed and hugged the cat. Surprisingly, En curled up quietly in his arms, and he could feel its small warmth fully. Now it really seemed to be comforting him, so he poked it gently while asking,

"En. Are you an NPC, or an operator? Ah, are you a guide inhabited by an operator?"

*–Meow.*

"I know you understand what I'm saying, you know? Quickly compensate me for this bug situation."

*...Swish,* En buried its head in his chest. It was like performing a cat headbutt on him. Somehow it felt reluctant, but was this possibly meant to be compensation? He laughed dryly, feeling dumbfounded, and grabbed En's front paws.

"Go and defeat the ghosts. One-two, one-two."

He alternately extended the cat's paws as if it were boxing. Even without checking in a mirror, he could tell his face had completely relaxed. It couldn't be helped. He liked cats, and among them, he had a special affection for black cats.

In his previous life, only black cats had been by his side when he was always alone. When he couldn't get along with the children at the orphanage and was alone in the backyard, a cat would come, and he often met cats at school too. When everyone was uncomfortable with him and avoided him, only cats would approach him and rub their heads against his hand.

So he wondered if perhaps he could get along with animals even if he wasn't welcomed by people. He approached other animals with hope, but they all moved away, having seizures. The sight of them running away as if they had seen an evil spirit was a bit hurtful.

Among cats, only black cats approached him. Naturally, he opened up and shared various stories with the only being that shared warmth by his side. After becoming an adult, the frequency of encounters decreased sharply, but whenever he was troubled by difficult customers at his part-time job or feeling upset after being suddenly fired, he always encountered a cat.

Appearing as if it knew his state and comforting him, black cats were just like family to him. Even though the NPC now was probably just a familiar subjugated to Isaph, old memories surfaced needlessly. It was one of the few precious memories from his previous life.

Come to think of it... what color were the eyes of the black cats he met in the past?

### Chapter 65

Suddenly, his head felt distant. He couldn't remember well, but since most black cats have yellow eyes, that cat probably did too? If it had purple eyes, he would have remembered because it was unusual.

Just then, a "Waaah—!" sound was heard from outside. It seemed a winner had emerged from a contest with a big prize held at a nearby tavern. The enthusiastic cheers seemed to encapsulate the joyful atmosphere of the festival.

He quietly stroked the cat's back and asked,

"Who won outside? It was some arm wrestling contest, right?"

*–Nyaa.*

"...Don't tell me it's Kalterik."

He wondered if the NPC had telepathically given him the answer as the terrifying presence suddenly came to mind. He was surprised at how plausible the inference was, but soon shook his head with a dry laugh. He could probably confirm the answer if he opened the window and leaned out far, but he didn't particularly want to do that.

He didn't want to feel the festival atmosphere any closer.

Just hearing the sounds of the joyful festival he couldn't be part of from inside the room was enough. Well, he had never attended a festival in his previous life either, so it was the same here. It wasn't anything new.

Moreover, today there was considerable antipathy towards beings wearing black robes. People looked at them unfavorably, asking if they wanted to engage in 'such play' even on this holy day. Wouldn't hostility towards Isaph be high on a day when events earnestly longing for the hero were being held? So it was right to stay quietly hidden today.

He felt foolish for thinking he could see the festival if he was with his companions for a while. Even if they weren't in a relationship to 'enjoy' together, having companions would draw less suspicion. That's why he had been quite curiously looking around until they headed to the flower shop...

"Wait a minute. Is this possibly a bug to hide because they didn't set up the festival map properly?"

*-...nyaa.*

What, why does this sound like 'right?'

Shaking his head and dismissing it as a misconception, he grabbed En's two paws. As he was about to playfully act out a scene from an investigation drama, telling it to answer truthfully, suddenly a dizziness struck him and he got goosebumps. In an instant, his nerves were drawn outward and his instincts gave a chilling warning.

Something was coming.

The commotion that had been coming from outside the window suddenly stopped, and even the scenery turned pitch black. He felt a chill as if only the room he was in had been dropped and thrown into darkness.

*–Grrrr.*

Suddenly, En leapt out of his arms. Then it stood in front of the door, its tail fully raised, snarling fiercely. Seeing its back posture as if guarding against the being approaching now, an ominous feeling surged that this wasn't a situation to be easily overcome if even the NPC was taking action.

But apart from that judgment...

"What does this tiny cat think it's doing!"

Feeling dumbfounded, he hurriedly ran and hugged En. En struggled as if trying to escape, but he held on tightly with his arms. Although he had shouted at it earlier to solve this problem, seeing the small cat actually step forward to try to protect him made him feel like the worst trash.

*Thud, boom, thud...*

The ground shook with each approach of something. No, perhaps his heart was beating so hard that he felt the whole space shaking. Cold sweat poured like rain.

Before he knew it, 'it' was right beyond the door.

"G-go away."

He tried to speak as calmly as possible, but his voice trembled. The cat struggled again in his arms, so he hugged it more tightly. Usually, ghosts would tuck their tails and run away with just one word from this body, so he commanded again with more force.

"I said go away."

[Why?]

"...What?"

[You said you were sick of it anyway. Wouldn't it be easier to just end it all?]

It was a bewildering response. But more than that, goosebumps rose at the fact that it was 'communicating' with him. Moreover, that statement was one of the things he had irritably blurted out to En earlier, had it heard that?

Had it become more widely known that he was in a vulnerable state during the brief moment the window was open? Generally, ghosts have a desire to find someone who can recognize them, and this ranges from simply wanting to communicate with the living to evil intentions of coveting life force. And evil spirits corresponded to the extreme, most negative case.

Evil spirits even deliberately seek out strong opponents sometimes. Although a clash would occur, if they could ultimately devour the opponent, they could obtain a powerful body.

[Open the door.]

*Scratch, scratch, scraaatch.* A sharp noise like long nails scratching a blackboard poured out continuously. He stepped back hesitantly at the involuntary disgust that rose.

Fear followed behind the vague belief that Isaph wouldn't fall to that thing. He had suffered too many experiences in his previous life to just trust this world's settings. Moreover, wasn't Isaph in a weakened state now? His head was filled with confusion, and as if to amplify it, the scratch scratch— sound continued endlessly.

Then suddenly, a very clear and gentle voice was heard.

[Isaph, are you there?]

...Harenir?

Unconsciously drawn to the owner of that voice, he approached the door. Thinking that he had returned, the moment he grabbed the doorknob, En in his arms let out a loud "Meow!" As he stopped in surprise, laughter was heard from the other side.

*Kihihi,* that sound seemed to come from right beside him.

[Is this the voice you feel relieved by?]

*...Ah,* the door had opened slightly.

Only now realizing the situation, he sighed. The evil spirit had imitated Harenir's voice to induce him to open the door. Had it read his memories? How on earth? While surprised, anger also welled up.

*Why would I feel relieved hearing Harenir's voice?*

It was truly nonsensical, but the more he denied it, the more ridiculous his action of approaching the door in response to that voice became. There was no way Harenir would come here in the first place, he would be happily enjoying the festival with his subordinates, so why had he reacted?

As he was self-deprecating, *whoosh,* black energy spread before his eyes. The door had only opened very slightly, but the pitch-black fog squeezed through the gap. *Bang!* The door flung open completely.

An overwhelming fear surged as the approaching evil spirit's form looked grotesque, as if dozens of humans were clumped together. *Ah,* it looked even more horrifying than the evil spirits he had seen in his previous life. Moreover, dozens of other ghosts followed behind it. It seemed like the room would be filled with ghosts. He stepped back hesitantly before falling on his backside.

The cat struggled again in his arms, but he was just caught in the fear of the past, suffering from the sorrow of why he still had to be chased by ghosts even here. This was really sickening.

"Please, just leave me alone...!"

At the moment he curled up hugging the cat, *whoosh—* golden light flooded his vision. It was just a very faint sunlight. It was small like a piece of sunlight falling through leaves, but because of that, it created a gap on the shaded floor all the more clearly. As the light spread in an instant, his vision cleared abruptly.

A gentle spring breeze softly ruffled his hair. He blinked blankly and looked at the being that had appeared here now.

"...Why are you like this?"

Harenir was in front of him.

Just by drawing his holy sword, the ghosts that had filled the space disappeared in an instant. He hadn't even exerted force to cut them down. They were beings that would vanish with just a single ray of sunlight.

Even the largest evil spirit that had deceived him flew into a corner and crashed. As it wriggled as if preparing to counterattack, En, which had finally escaped from him, hit it with a thud. As soon as it struck down with its front paw, the thing died.

–...

En turned to look at him with very contemptuous eyes. It was something that could be ended with one cat punch, had he voluntarily eaten a sweet potato?

Perhaps the NPC had come to assist, knowing that he couldn't properly use necromancy now. As Isaph's familiar, it would make sense for it to have that much power. In other words, he had hugged the simplest solution and solemnly vowed to protect the cat.

It seems he had been caught in the fear of the past and magnified the size of the evil spirit, but along with the deflating realization, extreme shame washed over him.

"...Isaph, is there really a problem?"

The cause was none other than Harenir. If he had been afraid of ghosts alone and En had resolved it, he could have just awkwardly moved on, but to show such a sight to him.

### Chapter 66

Moreover, to be afraid of evil spirits after possessing a character who had maxed out the necromancy class in this game? This was breaking character. The story's plausibility was strange. *Cut! Let's reshoot this scene*. He mentally called "cut" several times, but nothing happened to return to before the door opened.

*Hah,* if this were a game, there should be a replay function. He covered his face with his hands and spoke as if blaming Harenir's visit.

"Why did you come here? You should be with your subordinates..."

"I came to check because I heard your condition wasn't good."

Harenir must have just finished his business and joined his companions. He must have asked about his whereabouts since he wasn't there... Should he be grateful for the kindness of coming to check after hearing the answer? Since when did he care this much? It wasn't anything new for this body to be sick.

"Are you perhaps suffering from evil spirits?"

"..."

"It seems you've become like this from sharing my curse, is that right? Like having problems with your abilities when the soul-connected partner is far away..."

He ignored the question that was too embarrassing to answer, but Harenir instantly deduced the reason. As he maintained silence, Harenir approached him. He felt his presence come closer as if he had lowered his body beside him, and he quickly turned his head to the opposite side.

It was even more shameful that he was in the state of having fallen ungracefully on the floor.

"It's not something for you to worry about."

"..."

"I was just careless because fatigue overlapped. It won't happen again, so go back."

"If it won't happen again, then you can go out to see the festival too, right?"

"There are too many of those things at the festival, it's tiring. I'm not interested anyway..."

"It seems you saw many evil spirits. So you retreated to the inn because of that."

He had answered casually to the sudden question, but it seemed to have become a clue for Harenir. He was too skilled at inferring hidden truths through conversation.

"Originally, you could ignore the evil spirits on the street, right? But now you can't do that, so you're being tormented by them..."

He hesitated, as it was the first time someone else understood his being chased by ghosts. Was this a natural reaction because this was a fantasy world? No, isn't it more ridiculous for a necromancer to avoid evil spirits? Moreover, this body had even gained notoriety for causing a massacre to gather undead.

He removed the hand covering his face and faced Harenir. He was even more bewildered because there was no trace of mockery anywhere on his face.

"Why aren't you laughing at me?"

"You became like this while trying to help me, and also... you didn't laugh at me either, so why should I?"

As he blinked in surprise at the unexpected answer, suddenly Harenir grabbed his arm.

"Let's go outside. I'll get rid of any evil spirits that might bother you."

"...What are you saying? Why should I go out?"

He was dazedly pulled up by the hand that raised him, but as soon as he heard those words, he stood firm. In reality, he probably couldn't resist Harenir's strength, but Harenir had grabbed him very weakly to begin with. As if handling a very careful opponent.

So he vaguely inferred the reason for Harenir's bewildering attitude now.

"Just in case, let me say this, don't have any strange sense of responsibility. I did it of my own accord when I tried to undo your curse in the first place."

He shook his head firmly. It wasn't as if he had acted after receiving a request for help from Harenir; he had gone and connected their souls without warning. Moreover, he had said then that it was only for future sentence reduction. The transaction ended with that.

As he tried to pull his arm away, saying it wasn't necessary, Harenir spoke calmly.

"You probably haven't eaten properly, and as the one who brought you along as a companion, I should at least make sure you're fed. You would have received food regularly even in prison, right?"

"That's..."

"And, your condition needs to be alright to resolve the curse quickly."

Harenir stared at him intently, saying it was only for that purpose. Although it probably meant to quickly resolve the problem so they wouldn't get more tired of forcibly learning circumstances they didn't want to know by connecting souls, for a moment, his gaze was caught by those blue eyes.

Sometimes, he had the talent of suppressing the other person's opinion just by staring straight into their eyes. Those sky-like eyes seemed to be imbued with a sense of pressure.

Nevertheless, the touch of the hand holding his arm remained gentle.

"...So you should cooperate a bit too."

He laughed dryly at the unexpected words. That phrase was what he had said when he went to Harenir who had a nightmare, urging him to sleep properly again. He had nagged that if Harenir managed his condition well, he would be comfortable too, but he hadn't expected to have it returned like this.

As if taking advantage of that moment, Harenir pulled his arm, and he was led along, no longer able to shake him off. Was it because he was really hungry from not eating all day, or was there still a bit of desire to see the festival?

As he walked, looking strangely at Harenir's back, he soon became puzzled at where they arrived.

"...Where are the others?"

They had come to a night market. Were they supposed to find the companions now? He looked around in confusion, but they were nowhere to be seen.

"They'll manage well on their own."

"...?"

"Choose the food you want to eat yourself."

He became confused by Harenir's nonchalant response as he shrugged his shoulders. If he said that, wouldn't it mean he was someone who couldn't manage on his own? ...*Well,* that was true.

He had naturally expected to join the companions and eat the food Harenir ordered, and since they had always resolved meals that way until now, he hadn't known he would be given a choice. So the current situation was quite bewildering, but inevitably, his gaze moved here and there following his curiosity.

Though he seemed to have become somewhat accustomed to this world's food, it had always been close to just getting by, so festival food was also a first. The excited heat of the festival, felt much closer than at the inn, was unfamiliar.

"..."

After looking around, he moved hesitantly. Most of the street food was light, snack-like fare that was easy to eat while walking. Common sights included skewers of whole grilled meat, fruit sprinkled with spices, drinks decorated with early spring flowers, and bread shaped like Solnium's emblem.

Harenir really seemed to mean for him to choose as he wished, even giving him money so he could comfortably taste one of each. When he stared at unfamiliar foods, the merchants kindly explained and even gave out small samples. Was everyone so kind because it was the Holy Festival?

As his stomach gradually filled, his mood lifted. The foods generally suited his taste, making him even more curious. Was this the joy of eating? His steps, which had been slow, gradually picked up speed, and his head moved busily.

Suddenly, Harenir spoke to him.

"You seem to like sweet foods."

"...Me?"

"You were smiling when you ate those foods."

*I was smiling?* Thinking back on the foods he had eaten so far, it did seem like that was his taste... *No, wait, why are you looking at my face?*

There was a faint interest in Harenir's eyes. A curiosity as if getting to know a being he had never known before. Somehow, it felt like the reason he had given him a choice in the first place was to figure out his taste, and feeling embarrassed, he quietly covered his mouth.

Moreover, he seemed to have realized something else while watching him.

"By the way, is this your first festival? It's as if you're not from the empire..."

"Y-yes, it's my first. I've never seen one before."

He even stammered in his surprise. He was a person from not just outside the empire, but from an entirely different dimension. In fact, even if festival foods varied by region, they would mostly be similar, so his behavior of finding everything unfamiliar might have seemed strange.

A peculiar light settled in Harenir's eyes as he looked at him. Was he connecting the story of having to go to the inn to avoid the evil spirits on the street earlier with the current situation? He couldn't explain, and it was a correct guess in some context, so he remained silent, and eventually, Harenir grabbed his arm and moved.

The more he was led along, the more diverse scenery he saw. There were many people dancing and singing, and splendid performances were held everywhere. It was much more full-scale than what he had seen in the morning, and now even the flowers hanging between the street lamps sparkled. It looked as if flowers were falling from the night sky.

This seemed to be the heart of the festival.

"Why..."

Even without continuing the question, he could figure out the answer. Could it be that when he said it was his first festival, Harenir had deliberately tried to show him this sight?

Somehow, he felt a churning inside. The colorful lights dyeing the square were fascinating, and it was also new to him that no ghosts were visible even though he had entered among so many people. Had he become able to control his spirit vision again by being close to Harenir?

*Thud,* it felt like something had fallen.

Something that didn't sparkle like the festival streets, something that wouldn't bloom beautifully like a flower, rolled around inside. It rummaged through every corner, making him feel queasy, and finally tried to make him lose his balance and stagger.

"..."

He stubbornly stood firm and looked straight ahead.

This was just the mercy of the hero, kind and gentle as the rumors said. A light favor given like a reward for all the hardship until now, though it had never been directed at a prisoner before. A trivial piece of affection offered by a being praised as loving enough to be called kind.

He, and this body, had never received such a thing, so even this one piece was heavy enough to make him stagger. Suffering from the anxiety of feeling like he would keep tilting somewhere.

### Chapter 67

As he stood still, Harenir asked,

"Are you seeing evil spirits again? You don't look well..."

His action of looking around for evil spirits made him feel queasy again. It was because he had even had the impression that his voice sounded unnecessarily gentle.

Yes, perhaps he really wasn't feeling well after being tormented by ghosts for the past few hours. No, it wasn't a guess, but clearly because of that, he was being swept up in these confused emotions even more, he concluded as he shook his head.

"No, I don't see them anymore."

He answered as calmly as possible and moved his feet. Feeling he needed to distance himself from Harenir, he moved quickly, following his instinctive warning. *Crash!* Taking advantage of the moment Harenir's attention was diverted by the commotion of someone breaking a glass nearby, he quickly hid among the crowd.

Then, spotting a new stall, he boldly approached it alone.

"It's very delicious, please try... Eek!"

But the owner, who was about to greet him cheerfully, was startled upon seeing him. He seemed surprised by the gloomy atmosphere emanating from the deep black robe he was wearing. Though there was no black cat, he was probably exuding an even darker aura due to his low condition.

As he was about to retreat awkwardly, looking around as if searching for the guard, Harenir approached from the side. Making his earlier distancing meaningless, he had found him instantly. However, even though Harenir was also wearing a dark blue robe and was much larger, the owner seemed relieved at his approach.

"Aah..."

His eyes welled up as if moved, and it seemed not just that he was relieved to see a companion, but that Harenir's very presence spread a good aura around.

*Ah,* could it be that the kindness shown by the merchants earlier was all because of Harenir? Was it that the empire's citizens instinctively felt affection for a being blessed by Solnium, or what? As he was feeling deflated in front of this newly realized truth, Harenir quietly warned,

"Be careful not to arouse unnecessary suspicion."

"...I was just looking at the stall. And it's because of you that I've become such an object of avoidance."

Feeling needlessly embarrassed and indignant, he retorted. The thought he had always harbored squeezed out through the gap of his fatigue. Though it was an absurd statement that should have been met with derision, Harenir only widened his eyes. He looked amused.

"It can't be helped. We'll have to stay close together..."

"Ha, at this rate I really should look into that uninhabited island..."

They spoke simultaneously. It was just a coincidence, and as he saw people's avoidant reactions, he was saddened by how clear his future exile destination was becoming, but belatedly mulling over Harenir's words, he was bewildered. So he looked at him with incredulous eyes and... flinched.

*What, why is he smiling like that?*

Though Harenir generally had a smiling face, somehow that smile looked as if his mood had twisted. He felt a slight chill. But no matter how much he thought about it, he couldn't understand the reason, and since he was equally troubled, he cut off his interest.

But right after that, Harenir's eccentric behavior began.

"You won't be able to eat this on an uninhabited island, so why not eat a lot now?"

He made strange comments when choosing new food...

"This would be useful on an uninhabited island too, shall we get it?"

As they passed by shops selling all sorts of miscellaneous goods, he picked up items himself and showed them to him...

"Why are you watching the cooking process so intently? Planning to replicate it on the uninhabited island?"

*This is so annoying...*

He glared at him as if about to stab him with the leftover skewer from his food, but then turned his head away abruptly, realizing he was someone who would never be overcome. *Right,* in times like these, ignoring is better. Then he would stop on his own...

"Are you practicing not speaking in advance since you won't have anyone to talk to on the uninhabited island?"

"Ah!"

How could the other ignore his ignoring?

*What on earth is the problem, what!* He barely held back the urge to shout loudly in frustration. He shouldn't raise his voice in such a crowded place. Any thought that the hero was kind and gentle was discarded. Even if he were, it wouldn't be directed at him.

He looked at him while taking a deep breath calmly.

"If you have a problem with me, say it straight instead of being sarcastic."

"A problem? Why would I have such a thing with you?"

"You keep picking strange fights. So just speak honestly instead."

"When did I pick a fight..."

"Ah! You keep getting irritated as if you're unhappy about me leaving!"

His voice burst out not even seconds after he had resolved not to. For him, tired and with a lowered threshold of patience, it was difficult to endure the frustration of this roundabout argument.

That night, Harenir had been sarcastic even before he said he would go to an uninhabited island, and looking for that moment, he found the answer. From the moment he said he would leave after receiving a reduced sentence, Harenir had seemed displeased.

Did he want him to die being stoned in the holy city? After saying he would reduce his sentence, was he saying to just take him out of prison and have him receive public execution outside? He glared at Harenir in disbelief, and Harenir closed his mouth, hesitating.

"..."

He stared at him, frozen as if he had received an unexpected point. His blue eyes reflected a clarity as if he had realized something, but also confusion stemming from it. Even the coexistence of these two things was very like him. It was a strange thing to say.

As a chilling silence settled between him and Harenir, someone approached from the side.

"On such a good day as today, why are you brothers fighting?"

He turned his head abruptly at the clear question. Three passersby neatly dressed in white ceremonial robes had suddenly spoken to them. *What?* Though bewildered, he felt a strange sense of déjà vu at their attire, and their clear eyes were also familiar. Like those he had seen in fanatics who stopped people on the street for surveys...

"Your troubles seem deep."

*Ha,* he sneered indifferently at words not far from his expectation... then was startled. *Wait,* *now I know why their clothes look familiar.* He saw them at the 'event' he discovered this morning.

So that event was...

"It must be that confusion has spread in our hearts because the hero has left his place. Ah, his absence is so great."

"So why don't we calm our hearts together while praying for the hero's return?"

"Solnium must also wish for us to gather with one heart."

*Thud,* his and Harenir's arms were seized by the believers. They gripped their arms firmly as if arresting them, and they were dragged along unable to resist. They were believers with quite strong grips while smiling gently.

It made sense that he was dragged along because he was weak, but Harenir seemed unable to shake them off because they were believers. Coincidentally, one person was attached to him, and two to the larger Harenir. Perhaps the believers had been going around the festival removing elements of disturbance in this way.

They ended up entering the event venue he had seen in the morning.

"..."

"..."

An amusing silence settled between him and Harenir. It was so different from the silence that had fallen after he shouted on the street earlier that he ended up laughing dryly.

What on earth was this ridiculous situation?

"The believers' prayers must be powerful."

The hero had really come to the place longing for the hero. A few hours ago he had passed by the front, but this time he had really entered. Should he marvel at how powerful Solnium's power was, or that the believers had proactively brought the hero?

Glancing at Harenir, he noticed his lips were set firmly. He had pulled his hood down deeper as soon as they entered this place.

Though the night was deep, the venue was full of people. It seemed they came to offer prayers for the hero's return on their way back from seeing the festival, or even while enjoying it. The space was filled with the scent of flowers.

A large portrait of Harenir was even hung on the wall.

"Oh..."

The image of him holding the holy sword, Piarus, and gazing down intently looked like a saint overlooking the earth. The faint smile on his lips added to the benevolence of a holy person. The pure white uniform was much more splendid than what he had seen, making him wonder if this was the commander's formal dress worn in the holy city.

People standing in front of it marveled, as if just looking at the portrait washed away the impurities in their hearts and purified them. Had they come to pray, or to admire the hero's face? Looking at their sparkling eyes, it seemed more like the latter...

The portrait had certainly been produced like a beautiful holy painting. Aren't portraits usually said to look better than the real person? Yet he suddenly felt that the real person was better.

"Here, I'll give you flowers and paper, so please write a letter to the hero, attach it to the flower, and hand it in."

Just then, the believer who had brought him here approached and handed him a bright yellow flower and stationery. While other people's papers were small card-sized, his stationery was so large, it really seemed like the purpose was to remove elements of disturbance. Was this stationery a kind of reflection paper?

They said that when the hero safely returned later, they would gather these flowers and letters and send them to him. After the believer left, he looked at Harenir. Waving the paper, he asked,

"How does it feel to write a letter to your future self?"

It was words he would have normally swallowed, but it was revenge for the uninhabited island talk.

### Chapter 68

Since they had been dragged here anyway, there was no choice but to write the letter and leave. The believers who had brought him and Harenir were standing by the door, watching as if guarding.

"Hah..."

Harenir seemed to have made the same judgment, as he just let out a small sigh and moved. His interest waned at the sight of him obediently looking for a pen. It was no fun since he hadn't responded at all since entering this place. Perhaps he was being cautious in case there were believers who knew the hero's voice...

Still, with lingering resentment, he deliberately headed towards the inner part of the venue. Since he had entered such an elaborately decorated space, he thought he might as well look around.

This place was like an exhibition hall.

Various objects were on display with a guide saying "Things touched by Harenir, the Empire's fifth hero." He skimmed over items like the wooden sword he used as a child and books he reportedly enjoyed reading, but his mouth fell open at the parchment displayed in the center.

**—------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------**

**Wishing for the peace of Nadael, another heart of Solares.**

**–Harenir von Luchete**

**—------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------**

The handwritten letter with an elegantly written greeting revealed that Harenir had come to this city during last year's Holy Festival. His action of walking around this place so nonchalantly was so brave it was bewildering.

Next to the parchment were displayed the quill and ink he had used at the time, and even the tableware he had used for meals at the temple here that day. *Oh,* this was a bit... He involuntarily grimaced, but it made him keenly feel the empire citizens' intense passion for the hero.

On the wall next to the exhibition, pieces of writing wishing for the hero's return were densely written. It seemed people shared their longing not only through submitted letters but also here. There were heartfelt letters saying how grateful they were for help received from the hero in the past, and also words saying they prayed for him every day.

**—------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------**

**Please return quickly so that Solares does not waver.**

**—------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------**

He became puzzled seeing an old man writing this next to him. If the empire would waver due to the hero's absence, wasn't that dependence too severe? Above all, wasn't there a separate emperor? Unable to contain his curiosity, he asked,

"Wouldn't the imperial palace dislike it if you write like that?"

The old man who turned to look at him flinched. He was instinctively wary of his appearance, but after looking around the space, he let out a sigh of relief. It was obvious what thought process had followed. Being in this venue, he would naturally believe he wasn't Isaph. Moreover, he had carefully chosen a polite tone.

The old man shook his head and answered,

"What does it matter! It's well known that the relationship between the imperial palace and the temple isn't good anyway!"

"...That's the first I've heard of it."

"Young man, you might not know, but until about 20 years ago, the conflict was very intense. Even during the Human-Demon War, how those two groups were at odds, tsk tsk..."

He remembered that the first emperor had been a hero blessed by God. *So at first, the leaders of the imperial palace and the temple were one, but problems arose as they gradually split?* Thankfully, the old man seemed to have a great passion for teaching young people about the empire's history, and he went on at length.

"You must at least know the story of how the imperial family and the temple fought over moving the empire's capital in the past? The temple argued that Rus should be kept as the center of the empire since God's hand had touched it and the emperor's tomb had risen, but the imperial family pushed for relocation, saying it was difficult to utilize a place with a huge hole in the ground."

He didn't know, but he nodded calmly. In the end, they decided to respect Rus as a holy place instead of just moving the capital, but the temple must have already been offended. Now he understood why his companions knew the streets of that city so well, as he heard that the temple had been blatantly sending priests and holy knights on pilgrimages to Rus every year.

"From then on, they engaged in psychological warfare at every turn, saying things like 'I achieved more in the Human-Demon War' or 'I was more amazing.' They say they joined forces in the final battle, but it's no exaggeration to say they waged an underground war after peace came. Then when the Great Catastrophe occurred... true peace arrived with the noble sacrifice of the previous Holy Knight Commander!"

"Ah, and after that, with the appearance of a new hero for the first time in hundreds of years, it was completely settled."

"That's right!"

The old man, who had succeeded in giving a crash course, exclaimed proudly. So with the appearance of a being blessed by God from the temple, the long-standing power struggle had ended in a complete victory for one side.

Suddenly, he recalled a conversation he had heard in the village near the southern Encroachment Zone.

'What if the hero disappears? Not just other countries, but perhaps even the empire's imperial family immediately...'

He had dismissed it at the time, but now it suddenly connected as evidence. While all people of the Holy Empire would believe in Solnium, it seemed conflicts due to interest groups existed even among the same believers. It wasn't surprising, as he had frequently encountered groups within the same religion fighting each other on Earth.

He just felt that the empire was relying on the hero for quite a lot.

It seemed Harenir existed not just as a hero, but also as a symbol suppressing conflicts and clashes between factions within the empire. He understood more clearly why the temple had insisted on treating the hero as missing.

"The hero must return safely soon... Of course, there couldn't be any problem for the hero, the son of 'that person' and beloved by Solnium! There are even absurd rumors circulating that that evil trash, Isaph Dina, harmed the hero, but I think it's completely nonsense! How could such a lowlife possibly harm the hero?"

"...Hmm."

"And since they say the temple has sent holy knights to start searching, won't good news come soon?"

The old man, who had burst out in anger, judged that he too was a young person longing for the hero since he had come to the venue, and spoke gently as if to comfort him. He didn't answer and just lowered his head, trying to naturally retreat, but the old man called out one last time.

"By the way, young man, why don't you take off that dark robe? On a day like today, to be so covered up, tsk tsk. I'm saying this for your sake!"

"Ah, yes..."

*I'm not taking it off for your sake*. Though he thought this indifferently, influenced by growing up in a Confucian culture country, he bowed his head once more in greeting. It had been a long time since he heard someone say they were speaking for his sake.

When he returned to the entrance of the venue, he could quickly find Harenir. He seemed to have known which direction he had moved in, but unable to follow him inside, he was standing still against the wall. Even though he was deeply covered by his robe, glances kept darting towards him.

As soon as he approached, Harenir quietly urged,

"What on earth were you doing? We need to leave this place quickly..."

"Investigating your background."

"...?"

"And now I'm going to do some foreground investigation."

This was an action close to impulse. From the moment they entered this place, Harenir's strangely stiffened expression suddenly looked different, or perhaps he had unexpectedly felt that Harenir's back view as he walked around villages in the guise of a mercenary looked comfortable.

Harenir gave a look saying to just leave the flower and get out quickly, but he had a question he wanted to resolve here. He quietly asked him,

"Did you deliberately make your death disguise sloppy?"

It was something he had always found strange. 'That' Harenir couldn't have been unaware of the empire's obsession with him. If he knew the attention focused on him, it would have been insufficient even if he had disguised his death more meticulously, yet he had only gone as far as his subordinates' false testimony and temporarily severing the connection with the holy sword.

Moreover, afterwards, not only the holy sword and the testifying subordinates, but even the aide known to be closest to him had disappeared from the holy city, so he had been practically inviting suspicion. Although he planned to return someday, it had been too sloppy from the start, and so even the temple's search had been welcomed. No one believed in his death. Was there really a need to do this?

At his question, Harenir tilted his head. After remaining silent as if it was a topic he had never considered, he answered slowly,

"Hmm... Yes. I didn't want to cause too much confusion in the empire."

"Why on earth?"

"Because that's how I was taught."

He pressed his lips shut at the calm answer. The subject Harenir would say he "learned" from, that is, the being who could give him teachings, was only one person.

...He had thought the hero would have a grand cause.

Isn't that usually the image given by the word hero? A being who sets out to save the world in danger, carrying a great mission.

Although Harenir's personality couldn't be considered good, that would be limited only to those he disliked, so setting that aside. Anyway, he had thought that the kind and merciful hero was striving to protect all the empire's citizens from the threat of the Dium. That he was rolling through difficult battlefields for the peace and happiness of humanity.

But looking at it now, it seemed Harenir was just stepping up because he didn't want to make his mother's sacrifice worthless. With just the heart that couldn't let the land that being had protected turn to ruins again, he worked for the Holy Empire while being cynical towards God.

'The hero always tried to prove it, didn't he? That he was different from 'that human'.'

Perhaps he was doing this to cut off all elements that could remind others of that traitor in himself. So for him, who wanted to exist as a perfect hero and leave only the name of the previous Holy Knight Commander, wounds that hadn't fully healed and old nightmares were things that shouldn't be known to the outside.

"Have you finished writing your reflection, no, letter now?"

Just then, a believer approached from the side and smiled brightly. The believer was holding a box as if to put the flower in, and the flowers already piled up there were emitting a thick fragrance. The scent filling the large venue felt heavy.

As he was gauging the weight of that suffocating scent...

"Move."

*Thud,* he threw the flower and letter on the floor. The pure white paper that he hadn't written a single letter on rolled on the ground. He stepped on it and walked past the bewildered believer towards the outside of the venue.

### Chapter 69

At his sudden action, other believers blocked the door with their arms and shouted.

"What is this in a sacred space...!"

"Stop!"

Their eyes towards him were filled with intense condemnation. It was a rebuke for causing a disturbance at an event held on the meaningful day of the Holy Festival, and in a place where everyone was longing for the hero with earnest hearts.

Well, it's not like he came here voluntarily; he was dragged here forcibly. He indifferently nodded his head and tried to slip away to the side, but another believer came and blocked that way too. All exits were sealed off.

"Go back and apologize to the believer...!"

"I said move."

He stared at the man blocking his way and spoke. The man flinched at his low tone but shook his head vigorously as if he couldn't yield to a being wearing a black robe in this sacred space. It was quite a solemn gesture.

He had endured twice even in his tired state, and finally, when the man reached out his hand towards him.

"If you don't comply, I'll call security...!"

*Whoosh,* black-purple energy spread like mist. The energy that flowed to the walls extinguished the lanterns with a hiss, and as the interior darkened, people screamed.

"Kyaaaaaah!"

"Th-there's a suspicious person here...!"

"G-guards! Call the guards!"

People cried out in shock, and some rushed to escape the space. In the process, even the items in the venue shook, making it even more chaotic, and the confusion was further amplified as people pushed past the believers blocking the entrance to get out.

In the space that had instantly turned into pandemonium, his arm was suddenly grabbed.

"Are you in your right mind?"

Harenir, who had quickly approached, led him towards the outside. He burrowed through the gaps between people to escape the venue and moved swiftly to avoid the guards who were soon rushing in.

As if he knew all the complex alleyways, Harenir set the direction without a moment's hesitation. *Whoosh, whoosh, whoosh,* the scenery changed dizzily.

Only after several minutes, when he confirmed there were no signs of pursuit, did Harenir release his arm with a *thud.* The gesture of throwing it away was quite fierce. In the dark alley where no one was around, he rebuked in a coldly subdued voice.

"To try to use necromancy in a place where people are gathered, you're really crazy."

"I didn't summon any undead though...?"

"How many beings in the Holy Empire use such a wicked energy? Rumors will spread in an instant now. Did you want to be discovered? To be caught by the guards–"

"You'll need me for the next Encroachment Zone anyway."

It was close to a non sequitur, but Harenir seemed to grasp the meaning as he furrowed his brow.

In a situation where Harenir had clearly realized the usefulness of his necromancy, he wouldn't abandon him, so he had committed this act believing that Harenir wouldn't let him be caught by the guards. It was trust based on his ability as collateral. Fortunately, he seemed to know all the streets of this city too, and luckily, that guess had been correct.

And to explain, he wasn't able to summon undead anyway. He had only released energy due to lack of strength, and that alone had caused a big commotion in the venue. Well, it probably became more chaotic because it occurred in a space believed to be absolutely peaceful.

There was also an optimistic aspect that he wouldn't be immediately suspected of being Isaph since he hadn't summoned undead, but in fact, it wouldn't matter even if they found out. They would soon leave this city, and as long as he was with Harenir, he wouldn't be discovered. Even if he had left grounds for pursuit, well, even the hero had sloppily faked his death.

"Hoo..."

He felt dizzy just from using this much power. As he was swallowing back nausea with his sleeve covering his mouth, Harenir stared at him intently. He examined various parts of his face with eyes that couldn't understand at all.

"Why on earth did you do such a thing?"

"...I just didn't want to write it. What letter should I write to the hero."

He answered indifferently. In that place, they had treated him like a social misfit just for wearing a black robe, and now for just not writing a letter. Somehow, he didn't want to meet Harenir's blue eyes directly and avoided his gaze here and there.

He pressed again in a much calmer voice.

"There was no need to cause such a commotion."

"Well, maybe I felt wronged because everyone was venerating the hero. I became a notorious criminal who stole the holy sword because of that hero and even got a top-class warrant."

"..."

"And then hearing people cursing me as trash there, I got upset..."

After attaching various reasons, he finally found himself ridiculous and closed his mouth. A subtle silence fell in the alley.

*Right, that's correct.* Even if he didn't want to write the letter, if he had just scribbled anything and left, no, if he had left a curse and folded it neatly, the believers wouldn't have bothered to check. Seeing that they mentioned a reflection paper, they might have opened it, but there were plenty of other ways to leave quietly.

Yet he had deliberately caused a commotion. He had openly created problems in front of Harenir, even though he had warned him to behave. Even if he had trusted in his collateral as an efficient means, it was quite a reckless action. To begin with, wasn't it a relationship where trust was difficult to establish?

He didn't know why he had done it either. It had nothing to do with him whether Isaph was cursed or not, but had he gotten upset? He had become this assimilated with the character. So had he imitated the guy who used necromancy freely even while being pointed at as unrighteous in the Holy Empire?

Unable to find a suitable answer, he raised his head and his gaze directly entangled with Harenir's. He was still staring at him intently.

"..."

He had no desire to know Harenir.

From his previous life, he had always wanted to stay away from complicated circumstances, and he was too overwhelmed with taking care of himself to care about others. So to him, Harenir should have remained just a being like the protagonist of a game.

But was it because this terrible game was unnecessarily realistic, or because he had ended up peeking at Harenir's nightmares even though he didn't want to know? Was it because he had learned that he was a being with only half-baked recovery ability...

...*No,* he couldn't blame that anymore. What excuse could he find after directly investigating him?

So he, just.

"...You didn't seem particularly eager to return to the holy city either."

As soon as he blurted out the words, he moved his gaze as if fleeing. Was it perhaps an expression of apology for once shallowly envying this hero, saying he enjoyed everything he wanted and that the whole world revolved around him? Although it seemed to have made his head hurt even more by taking the form of causing a scene at the venue...

After saying it, he felt extremely embarrassed, as if he had meddled needlessly. As he stubbornly stared at the wall beside him, he heard a small laugh. *Ha,* it sounded like it was exhaled like a sigh, but the trembling breath that followed was clearly laughter.

Startled, he turned to see Harenir burying his face in his hands. He had tried to swallow his laughter, but as if he couldn't hold it back in the end, he chuckled. He watched in bewilderment as Harenir's shoulders shook.

Why, why was he laughing?

He thought he might be laughing at his meddling, but he was confused because Harenir's laughter sounded too joyful. As he looked around suspiciously, wondering if it was an evil spirit acting like at the inn, Harenir raised his head.

His blue eyes, full of mirth, sparkled clearly under the moonlight.

"If I don't return to the holy city, you won't be able to go to the uninhabited island."

"...?"

"Ah, was that perhaps why you caused a commotion at the venue? You actually didn't want to go to the uninhabited island? After all, an uninhabited island would be inconvenient to live on, so you tried to reduce the power of prayers even a little by ruining the event wishing for the hero's return."

"This is really absurd."

It was his turn to let out an exasperated sigh at the sudden words. *Why are you suddenly returning to the uninhabited island talk?* Come to think of it, wasn't this the reason they were dragged to the venue?

Was this perhaps a strategy of responding to nonsense with nonsense?

*Right,* he quickly felt regret for doing such a needless thing. There was no way the hero would feel burdened by such flower scents, and he was just destined to do hard labor tied to a collar and then be exiled to an uninhabited island in the end...

Feeling extremely tired suddenly, he let out a long sigh. It was probably a sigh filled with frustration. He shook his head and said in a tired voice,

"Alright. For now, I'd like to go to the lodgings instead of the uninhabited island..."

He had come out curious about the festival and ended up experiencing all sorts of things. As he reflected that he shouldn't have unnecessary curiosity in the future, he turned his gaze away from Harenir's face, which was somehow smiling even more joyfully at his words.

It had been a festival night where too many things had happened.

### Chapter 70

**#Part 8. 37%**

The city was in an uproar.

The aftermath of last night's disturbance was bigger than expected. The commotion that occurred at the venue longing for the hero spread widely in just a few hours, eventually reaching a level where the entire city's security became stringent. The streets were packed with guards, and there was even talk that the city might be closed off.

He had anticipated that the repercussions wouldn't be small, but he was taken aback by how big and fast the reaction was. In this situation, he thought it would be understandable even if Harenir got angry or temporarily tightened the collar on his neck, but unexpectedly, he didn't say anything to him.

He just looked down at the street scene through the window and shrugged his shoulders, until finally Kalterik and Noi couldn't hold back and asked. In fact, at first, Kalterik glared at him with eyes that said 'You caused another disturbance!', but belatedly remembering who had been with him last night, his face became bewildered.

"What happened last night...?"

"There was a commotion at the venue, and they say there were even casualties..."

Noi, his pointed ears twitching, was busily collecting rumors circulating in the streets. Even though he hadn't summoned any undead, it seemed that the suspicious being who appeared at the venue last night had been established as Isaph, and it was spreading as a terrible tragedy with multiple casualties.

Occasionally, there were voices saying 'it's not certain if it was Isaph', but at this point, as everyone thought of Isaph as the being most opposite to the hero, he seemed to have naturally solidified as the culprit.

Harenir answered calmly.

"There were no casualties. Some people might have gotten minor injuries from falling while trying to leave in a hurry, but..."

"What? Then did that guy really...!"

"It was just a commotion caused by Isaph's poor physical condition yesterday. I was with him, so I saw it clearly. We escaped quickly, cutting off pursuit, but the city's response is faster than I thought."

He was surprised by the smoothness of the lie. What was this? He had expected him to tell the companions everything truthfully and intensify their watchful gaze towards him, so he was puzzled.

And the companions wouldn't generously understand that it was a problem caused by his poor condition. If anything, they might reproach him for not taking proper care of his body.

However, contrary to his prediction, Mela slowly nodded.

"He did look really tired yesterday..."

"Ah, that's right. He looked so pale, like he might collapse..."

"Ahem, hem!"

Even Noi agreed, and Kalterik suddenly burst into a fake cough. He glanced around as if he felt sorry for momentarily suspecting him of causing the disturbance, but he kept his mouth shut because he really was the cause. Although he had been tired from being tormented by evil spirits during the day, it was clearly a disturbance he had caused of his own volition.

He didn't know whether to be surprised by the companions' understanding attitude that he had been sick, or to feel guilty at the conclusion that 'he wouldn't have caused such a commotion in his right mind'.

"To think such rumors spread so badly over just that. There's even talk that some believers collapsed, but that must be a lie too..."

Even Noi looked at him as if worried about the malicious rumors, making him even more speechless. A believer close to him really did collapse... He vaguely remembered seeing the man who tried to grab his arm sink down in shock.

Afterwards, Kalterik, as if wanting to change the subject, asked, "But why did you go to that venue?", but Harenir dismissed it simply by answering that he had some business. It was amusing that the most ridiculous part was being buried like this. But perhaps he should keep his mouth shut in return for Harenir keeping the cause of the disturbance a secret.

Harenir stroked his chin thoughtfully and said,

"Since it was an event jointly organized by the city and the Order, there might be some scrutiny, but I sense the lord is reacting somewhat excessively. To mention a city lockdown order in just one day."

"He must be a noble who wants to look good to the temple. If he catches Isaph by any chance, it would be a great achievement..."

Noi answered. There would be nothing that could raise a lord's reputation more than capturing Isaph at a time when the empire's antipathy towards him was at its peak. Harenir glanced at the guards outside the window again and concluded.

"It would be dangerous to leave the city unnecessarily now. Let's stay here quietly for a few days."

"...What? Wouldn't it be better to get out quickly before a lockdown order is issued?"

"You've always quickly left places where you were sighted. Since you didn't choose to stay in those places, the security on the roads leaving the city is probably tighter now."

"Ah, that's right. There were no conflicts as long as we didn't actively chase."

Harenir and Noi answered in turn to his puzzled question. He had heard that all pursuit teams trying to catch Isaph had failed, so did that mean that despite being so strong, he didn't go out of his way to fight?

It was interesting, but he inwardly felt uneasy about everyone being tied down here. Even though Harenir had said they would rest for a few days anyway...

Just then, his eyes met Harenir's.

"If the city is closed off, returning to the holy city will definitely be delayed, so we won't be able to go to the uninhabited island either."

"...You really..."

Was he trying to become a living cultural asset with his uninhabited island talk?

The momentary thought that his not pointing out yesterday's disturbance was consideration was instantly crushed. He looked at Harenir with disgusted eyes, and Harenir laughed out loud. Though he was said to habitually smile, it was rare for him to laugh audibly like this, but since last night, it seemed like his threshold for laughter had lowered.

...*Wait,* could this possibly be a new form of punishment for causing the disturbance? Goosebumps rose at this very plausible inference. He looked at him with an expression that said 'Surely not', and Harenir met his gaze with smiling eyes.

*Whoosh!* He turned his head away without realizing it. It was really incomprehensible, but facing his smiling face made him feel strange for some reason. It had been a problem since after seeing the night market.

Thinking that this was just because that smile grated on his nerves, he tried hard to ignore it.

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For several days, the companions quietly moved around only near the inn.

Having secured lodgings in the center of the city turned out to be a great advantage. Most daily necessities could be obtained nearby, and it was also suitable for gathering information about the situation. The companions expected that the city's emergency alert would naturally subside as time passed.

However, something completely unexpected occurred.

"They say monsters attacked the city?!"

"Part of the northern city wall has collapsed, and they're forming a subjugation team."

Noi returned startled as soon as he obtained the information, and Mela also reported the situation with a grim face. The damage from the attack was somewhat less because guards were stationed throughout the city, and the monsters' rank itself wasn't high, so it wasn't a dangerous situation, but it seemed they needed to be cautious about the monsters moving in groups.

To the north of the city, a vast forest spread out, and it seemed the monsters had made a 'nest' in the swamps there. It seemed to be a term referring to the monsters' base, and the purpose of the subjugation team was to destroy it before it was fully established.

"Where demonic energy thickens, demons often accompany..."

"Perhaps the monsters are also being affected by the movements to revive Dedium."

Mela spoke seriously, and Harenir also nodded slowly, analyzing the situation. Kalterik even tore off the official notice posted on the square's bulletin board and shouted,

"So now the lord is seeking mercenaries to join in subjugating the monsters!"

Everyone's attention shifted from 'the suspicious being that appeared on the Holy Festival' to 'monsters'. It was somewhat fortunate, but he was bewildered as the companions' interest also seemed to have shifted.

As expected, Kalterik exclaimed with shining eyes,

"Shall we lend a hand lightly?!"

He just blinked from afar. *Right,* the Holy Knight Order was a group that professionally subjugated monsters, and Kalterik had experience of being attacked by monsters in the past, so he would want to help even more. And the others, as devout believers, wouldn't be able to ignore a city in danger.

Their sense of duty was truly great and admirable, but...

Wasn't this supposed to be a rest period?

He had felt somewhat sorry for everyone being tied down here because of him, but seeing their reactions now, it seemed they would have returned immediately even if they had gone far away upon hearing this news.

Moreover, Mela muttered, "Compared to the Dium, monsters are...", making him even more bewildered. They would be fighting Dium again in the next Encroachment Zone anyway, so why were they treating facing monsters before that like some kind of warm-up exercise?

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However, not just for these reasons, but because he couldn't understand their decision at all, he asked,

"If they're forming a subjugation team, it won't be just one or two mercenaries gathering, so you're going there? How will you hide your swords or abilities? Moreover, they say even the temple is sending search parties to find the hero, wouldn't it be better to stay quietly hidden? Or escape during this opportunity?"

It was 50% true that he was asking out of a desire to rest, but he thought his words weren't wrong. It seemed the best option would be to escape while the city's forces were focused on subjugating the monsters.

However, despite his point, Noi answered as if it were obvious.

"Since the search has begun, we should hide among the gathered mercenaries. We need to move covertly, so we can't use regular routes, and the search will likely focus on side paths. But if we complete a request stamped with the lord's seal, the mercenary group's credibility will increase, making it much easier to move around! If we achieve great merit, we might even receive warp passes!"

"But this is too dangerous..."

"And the lord of this city is desperate to form a close relationship with the temple. It was burdensome when we visited with Haren last year, but anyway, even if monsters have appeared, he won't completely give up on tracking you. In fact, the city's entry and exit security is still stringent."

In other words, since they were tied to the city anyway, it was better to blend in with the mercenaries. And incidentally obtain a certificate to make future covert movements easier.

Considering the items he had seen on display at the venue last time, he could sympathize with Noi's judgment about the lord's obsession, but he was a person who shuddered at just the word 'demon'. He absolutely didn't want to get close to a place where they might appear...

However Noi interpreted his complex expression, he clapped his hands cheerfully.

"But I agree that we need to hide well. So, let's all prepare!"

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Noi's 'preparation' meant full-fledged disguise.

Everyone equipped themselves with more ordinary combat gear rather than uniforms, and even bought new, unremarkable swords. Since they absolutely couldn't draw the holy sword in crowded places, while Harenir was getting a spare sword, the other knights also prepared new ones.

Noi said he planned to disguise himself as a mage and even bought a staff diligently. Saying he would do it properly since they were at it, he memorized how to draw magic circles and all sorts of strange incantations. It was surprising how enthusiastically he wanted to help with the monster subjugation.

Thinking it was quite interesting, he casually asked Noi,

"What about me? I won't be able to use necromancy there either."

He had said his energy was a wicked power rare in the Holy Empire. So he couldn't disguise himself as a mage either, could he? Since the city's vigilance against suspicious beings had increased anyway, wouldn't it be better to quietly stay behind?

Half wanting to get closer to rest, half wanting to distance himself from demons, he asked, and Noi smiled brightly.

"Although they're gathering mercenaries on a large scale to join the monster subjugation, we won't all move together in the forest. It's a vast forest, so we'll naturally scatter."

"...Huh?"

"It means there's a low chance of being discovered if you summon just a few undead when we're away from other mercenaries. Demonic energy will be spread throughout the forest anyway!"

He just blinked at Noi's exclamation. But he couldn't summon just a few undead? He had given up before because he didn't know how to control his ability, fearing he might summon them in hordes...

Suddenly, a blue window appeared before his eyes.

**—------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------**

**Now possible.**

**—------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------**

*What is this?*

While he was bewildered by the suddenly given information, he was puzzled by the word 'now'. As he turned his head, he saw En following, making a "Meow" sound. Did it mean it was impossible before due to low skill proficiency, but now it was possible?

Meanwhile, Noi's explanation continued.

"Or you could assist by detaching souls like you did to the succubus before! That doesn't even look like regular necromancy..."

"Well, or you could just rest if you want."

As Noi was enthusiastically encouraging his labor, no, participation, Harenir suddenly interjected.

"We're not aiming to make a big impact here, just to help moderately. There's no need for you to step forward and invite unnecessary suspicion."

It was a very nonchalant continuation, but the content was quite surprising. It sounded like a warning to behave from now on, saying the previous disturbance was enough, but if that was the intention, wasn't it unnecessary to mention 'rest' first?

Moreover, the blue eyes now scanning him were tinged with an energy that seemed almost worried.

"And you're not feeling well right now..."

"...?"

"Shouldn't you recover well before we reach the next Encroachment Zone?"

Just as he was surprised, wondering if he was really worried, Harenir said with a gentle smile. *Ah,* he meant to focus only on resolving the curse now, since he would have to struggle plenty in the next Encroachment Zone anyway, even if he didn't suffer here.

Harenir's wounds had almost all healed now, and only the curse remained.

It was shocking that he would participate in monster subjugation at this point when he wasn't fully healed, but it seemed he didn't plan to take a major role, so that was somewhat fortunate.

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The northern ramparts were full of people.

They weren't departing right away today; first, they would assess the personnel, then form a strategy together and enter the forest tomorrow morning. The lord's castle had one main castle in the city center, and an annex here, and everyone had gathered in the backyard of the annex.

The monster subjugation pay was said to be high, so there were a great many mercenaries gathered. The lord's servants directly checked the mercenary badges and guided them to the yard.

"Yes, members of the Hero's Light mercenary group. Thank you for joining the subjugation. Please come this way."

He, who had only now properly heard the mercenary group's name, was disgusted, but for some reason, the companions' faces were filled with excitement. Kalterik, looking around at the mercenaries gathered in the yard, whispered in a tone that couldn't hide his excitement,

"This is kind of fun, isn't it? We'll get a chance to see how other mercenaries hunt, and we can hang back and then swoop in to help when things get dangerous!"

*Ah,* it seemed he was hoping for a moment to show off.

Well, for holy knights who had been professionally subjugating monsters, the current situation might feel like a dungeon for beginners. Holy knights usually dealt with 1st to 2nd rank monsters, but the monsters sighted in the city now were said to be 3rd to 4th rank. These four had swept away over a hundred monsters on the sky island.

Having moved with just five people until now, they seemed to find the situation of fighting covertly among numerous combatants novel. Noi also said in a joyful voice,

"Ooh, we're already getting competitive looks!"

"Hahaha, as expected, they must sense an aura that can't be hidden no matter how we try!"

*That's probably because you're as big as a bear...*

He looked incredulously at Kalterik's back, who seemed to have already forgotten they needed to hide their identities, and then checked his surroundings. Since there had been an announcement that additional pay would be given according to achievements in monster subjugation, there was indeed competition in the backyard.

"The monster I took down in the last request was as big as a house–"

"Ha! I fought an acid-spitting one and got a scar on this arm–"

Even the words they casually threw out as if boasting to each other were like that. Noi and Kalterik also seemed to want to participate, asking "What story should we tell?!", and Mela, who seemed to be quiet, subtly suggested, "Say we swept away a hundred monsters."

Harenir didn't impose any particular restrictions. Perhaps he thought that participating in this ridiculous show of force might make them look more like ordinary mercenaries.

However, he wanted to distance himself greatly from this game and took a few steps back. If he could just retreat a couple of steps to not look like part of the group...

*Thud,* he collided with someone's shoulder and fell forward.

"What the–"

His paper doll-like body couldn't withstand the strong collision and fell as if almost flying. Did he really just float in the air? It felt like he was in the air for a moment; how far would this body continue to surprise him?

As he lay crumpled on the ground, clutching the grass in shame, he heard a mocking laugh from above.

"Ha, how can you hope to face monsters if you're this weak?"

It would be proper to apologize after knocking someone down, but the other person didn't. Instead, they even dusted off their arms as if they had touched something very unpleasant.

"Tsk, to think a mere street mercenary would block the path of the noble Sidon."

### Chapter 72

"This is why uneducated ones are..."

What kind of rock bottom of humanity was this?

As he raised his head in bewilderment, he saw a group of people behind the man in a white uniform.

Numbering about ten, they had arrived later than the assembly time but were quite brazenly complaining to the servant, saying, "Is this where you're guiding us?" They seemed uncomfortable with the idea of precious beings like themselves waiting with ordinary mercenaries.

All of them were dressed in uniforms, looking more like knights than ordinary mercenaries. They must have been quite famous, as the servants were flustered before them, and the atmosphere in the backyard was greatly stirred.

"What? Did Sidon really come?"

"I heard the lord was serious about this subjugation, but...!"

Sidon. Somehow that name felt familiar, and as the memory flashed in his mind like lightning, he barely held back his shock. He had completely forgotten it since hearing it so long ago, but it was definitely...

'The Commander of the Holy Order of Sidon, which protects the Holy Empire of Solares, and the First Sword of the Order.'

It was in the introduction when he first met Harenir. In other words, Sidon was the name of the Holy Knight Order.

*Gasp,* he hurriedly pulled his robe's hood down deeper. Just then, as Harenir approached, thinking it was a warning that he should quickly distance himself from them, he quickly stood up. However, only after standing did he realize a hand had been extended in front of him.

...Had he been trying to help him up? As he looked down at the hand awkwardly, the holy knight who had collided with him sneered.

"Such touching camaraderie."

"A black robe, are you perhaps trying to imitate 'that guy' in front of us?"

Not just him, but those standing behind also threw out comments as if his presence bothered them. In fact, if they were only mocking him, he would have been immune to it and wouldn't have cared, but it seemed they were about to mention an incredibly significant being, making him break out in a cold sweat.

*S-stop!* He sent an urgent message inwardly, but the deed was inevitably done.

"These nobodies always cover themselves in robes and get drunk on their own atmosphere, tsk."

"The guy next to him is carrying two swords? Usually, those who can't even use one sword properly go around like that."

At the scene of these outrageous remarks, Kalterik quietly ground out "The discipline of these bastards..." from the other side, and tension could be seen in Mela's jaw. Noi trembled all over as if shocked.

And Harenir... he just smiled gently.

He felt a chill at the sight of the light red lips curving into a smile under the hood. *Ah,* was it the lives of those holy knights he should have been worried about, not the possibility of his companions being discovered?

He just rolled his eyes. He had thought all holy knights were kind and righteous, but was that not always the case? Of course, thinking of the three holy knights with him, he would have to reconsider the adjective 'kind', but at least they wouldn't pick fights with random people they bumped into on the street.

No matter how much he was wearing a black robe, the holy knights' attitude seemed closer to bullying an easy target rather than 'antipathy towards Isaph'. Moreover, hadn't they been displeased earlier, saying how dare they place precious talents like themselves in the same place as mercenaries?

No one among those gathered in the backyard could stop them. Considering the sacrifice of the previous Holy Knight Commander and the title given to the current Holy Knight Commander, Sidon's authority must be sky-high, which might be why they were so arrogant.

Although they were misbehaving in front of the very being who had established that authority, Harenir just shrugged his shoulders once and was about to retreat, perhaps exercising the hero's mercy. He gestured with his eyes for him to go back too.

But unfortunately, the holy knights threw out their last lifeline.

"Are you ignoring us now?"

"How dare mere mercenaries..."

*Whoosh!* One tried to grab Harenir's arm, and another approached him threateningly. Harenir murmured quietly, "It would be better not to cause unnecessary commotion..." His tone was rather regretful.

Of course, these holy knights' approach was not allowed in the slightest.

"Hand."

"These guys..."

Mela tightly twisted the holy knight's wrist, and Kalterik stepped in front of the other holy knight, blocking him. Though he just stood in front of him, the intimidation from the difference in size made the other flinch. The one caught by Mela tried to pull his hand away, but unable to escape at all, his wrist gradually turned blue.

They had approached instantly from a distance, and confusion settled on the holy knights' faces as if they hadn't even sensed them approaching. Noi, also quite surprised by this situation, shouted loudly.

"W-why are you doing this! Holy knights should maintain their dignity..."

It was an exclamation full of shock at the fact that they had tried to touch Harenir, and bewilderment towards them flaunting the authority of holy knights in a space where many people were gathered.

The tension in the space instantly became taut.

Everyone in the backyard was looking this way. The holy knights were indignant, as if unable to believe they had been subdued by mere mercenaries, and thinking they shouldn't be pushed back in front of so many gazes, they slowly moved their hands to their sword hilts.

And Kalterik and Mela, united in their loyalty to Harenir, seemed like they absolutely wouldn't let this insubordination slide. It was a situation on the brink of a fight breaking out at any moment.

Just then, one holy knight suddenly tilted his head.

"Wait, that small one's voice sounds somehow familiar..."

The outburst Noi had impulsively let out earlier seemed to sound familiar to the knights. His voice was particularly clear, making it hard to forget once heard.

At this, Kalterik inhaled sharply and covered his mouth with one hand. He was probably worried they might have recognized his voice too, but that action ended up drawing attention instead. He was always a bear clumsy at acting.

He inwardly sighed at the situation taking a strange turn. He didn't know what the hierarchy in the Holy Knight Order was like, but there was nothing good about them clashing among themselves and drawing attention. Harenir must have judged the same and tried to let it go, but now it was too late to quietly retreat.

After wracking his brains, he closed his eyes tightly at the solution he came up with. He really didn't want to do it, but this was the only way.

"Stop it."

He stepped forward one step, speaking as calmly as possible.

"Don't worry. The seal on my arm won't break from a mere clash like this."

"...?"

"That dark and dangerous guy won't rampage, so everyone, lower your guard now."

He deliberately raised his left arm and shook it slightly. There was no need to even intend it. In fact, just spouting such words was so shameful that his whole body trembled. He gripped that arm with his right hand and even let out an "Ugh" sound.

His companions all turned to look at him with puzzled faces. It was a gaze that said 'What strange act is this all of a sudden?', and Noi asked dazedly.

"Isa-, no, Saiph? What are you talking about..."

"I said stop. This body is fine."

His mind wasn't fine, but fortunately, the act shone. It was a great help that Noi had called him by his alias 'Saiph'.

In an instant, the holy knights' faces changed to disgruntled looks.

"Ah..."

"So they were that kind of guys..."

"Saiph, huh, I've heard there are guys who take that kind of play seriously."

They had already been mocked for imitating 'that guy' just by their attire, but now that he was actually displaying that he was drunk on that sentiment, their reaction was one of disgust. No matter how much they might mock the darkness of darkness, the black dragon of the left arm, they lose even the energy to respond in front of the 「real thing」!

And along with it, he lost his dignity.

"..."

The holy knights left, avoiding his vicinity by a wide margin. They moved away as if not wanting to touch him, and all the gazes of the mercenaries that had been focused here scattered.

But sadly, all his companions were just staring at him. He had tried to smooth things over since he had bumped into them while stepping back, but he felt miserable that this was all his brain could come up with as a solution. Unfortunately, it was a method proven effective since he had silenced his companions with such sentiment-drunk answers before.

Harenir spoke as if sighing.

"Really... I can't figure you out."

Kalterik was still letting out strange "Huh, huh" breaths as if the shock from earlier hadn't faded, Mela sighed in a subtle way, and Noi was scratching his arm vigorously. He tried to make the best defense he could.

"...They wouldn't know my voice, right?"

### Chapter 73

It was Isaph's voice, unknown even to the Isaph follower group. Originally, he had only kept familiars with him, and after his arrest, he hadn't resisted at all, with his only public statement being his testimony about the reason for the massacre in the courtroom.

Even Harenir had said he 'heard it secondhand', so those who knew Isaph's voice in the empire must be extremely rare. Though this entire party was said to be people who shouldn't be discovered, in the situation just now, he had stepped forward because he was relatively the least risky. He hadn't wanted to do it either.

–...*nyaa*.

It was even more shameful as En was shooting a look of contempt from far away. Why did that meow sound like "Are you crazy?"

As he quietly lowered his head, Harenir laughed dryly.

"Right. I was just wondering how to get past this, so thanks to you, it's been resolved."

He was surprised to hear what sounded like an acknowledgment of his help. He had thought he would be scolded for doing something strange. Perhaps the standard had been raised due to the commotion he caused at the festival last time. Of course, this wasn't a positive standard, but a 'foolish act standard'. In other words, compared to what happened at the venue, this might seem trivial now.

Moreover, at Harenir's statement that he had been pondering, the companions' focus turned elsewhere. Kalterik flinched and explained his earlier behavior.

"T-those guys were being so disrespectful that I couldn't stand it..."

"I know. I'm not trying to point out that you were rash."

Harenir shook his head. Saying he understood their feelings, he quietly looked in the direction the holy knights had moved. He muttered in a slightly lowered voice.

"Is this because I've been away...?"

"What? Absolutely not!"

"No, it isn't!"

Not just Kalterik, but even Mela, rarely, raised her voice to deny it immediately. They hurriedly exclaimed that if they were to point out a problem with the vacancy, it should rather be the absence of the two vice commanders, and Noi quickly added his opinion.

"They're not even from the headquarters where you are, Commander! They must be knights from the Nadael branch..."

As the Holy Empire was very large, the Holy Knight Order seemed to be divided into several units. Though Harenir was said to be the overall commander, he couldn't know everyone, and it was natural for there to be crazy people in large groups. No matter how devout a group the holy knights were, it would be difficult to escape the law of crazy person preservation.

Noi said, biting his lips,

"I've heard sometimes that holy knights dispatched from other branches cause problems, but I believed it was a misunderstanding. Even for cases where complaints were actually filed, I heard they were concluded as simple mistakes because the investigations found no problems, so I never thought such things were really happening..."

Though discipline might be maintained in the holy city where Harenir could be encountered right in front of them, other branches seemed to have various problems. Moreover, since the Order's power had strengthened after sealing Dedium, reports of holy knights' misconduct probably weren't properly handled.

The three looked at Harenir's expression. They seemed to be reflecting on whether the commander was disheartened by the recent incident, or if they had missed clues of misconduct all this time. Kalterik quietly grumbled that he should have taken down the leader of that group.

Harenir shook his head slightly again.

"No, we can't do anything about them now. Holy knights are important personnel for monster subjugation."

"But..."

"So, names."

"...Pardon?"

"Just bring me their names."

It was an order delivered in such a gentle tone with a smile, but the three's faces turned pale. They all flinched, their shoulders shaking, then immediately bowed their heads and scattered.

He inwardly prayed for those holy knights' souls.

\*\*\*

Information on the holy knights invited to this subjugation team was all reported to Harenir in less than half a day. Not just the names of all ten members, but when they joined, where they trained, which unit of which branch they belonged to, and even who their superiors were, were all reported.

Though Harenir had clearly said to just bring their names, Kalterik and Mela had busily gathered information, which professional aide Noi had compiled and submitted in report form. Harenir praised everyone for their hard work.

The lord had given each mercenary group a large room, so they could check comfortably there. After looking through the report, Harenir tapped the very top part with his index finger. The name of the holy knight who had first collided with him was written there.

"Sir Samuel, is it..."

Though he just recited it calmly, somehow it sent chills down his spine. He tapped that name particularly often with his index finger, probably marking it as the starting point of the incident.

Kalterik, Mela, and Noi discussed how to discipline those guys after returning to the holy city. Noi said they should properly review all the reported cases again, Kalterik said they should first gather them at the training ground, and Mela polished her rapier more carefully than usual.

As it was a scene he wanted to distance himself from, he sat quietly in the corner of the room, when suddenly he heard a small sound in his ear. "It's a cat!" It was a shout from outside the window, so he glanced over and was startled.

In the dusky evening, mercenaries had gathered in a circle in the backyard, and En was in the center. Though he was usually good at running away, now he was pressed against the wall, perhaps because too many people had surrounded him. The mercenaries showed curiosity towards the cat, each waving strings at him.

En's ears were slightly tilted back as if very annoyed. Thinking that only he could bother that cat, he stood up. On the other hand, he also wondered if there was some problem, as En wasn't the type to stay so docile.

He quietly slipped out of the room and headed straight for the wall.

"Excuse me, just a moment..."

He looked for a gap to squeeze through among the gathered mercenaries. However, without him needing to make much effort, as soon as someone spotted him, they shouted "Oh!"

"It's that Saiph!"

Why was there a 'that' modifier?

It was very embarrassing as all the mercenaries turned to look at him. He had hoped the incident from earlier would be forgotten as a funny anecdote, but it seemed to have left a strong impression on everyone as they whispered, "Oh, it's really that guy."

*Whoosh,* just then, En leaped towards him. As he reflexively caught him in his arms, the mercenaries' reactions intensified.

"Wow, even a black cat. He must be serious..."

"It must be hard to go around like that these days, this level of dedication is really admirable."

*Don't admire it.*

It became increasingly difficult to manage his expression, so he pressed his hood down deeper with one hand. Should he be grateful that due to his ridiculous behavior earlier, the equation 'black robe + black cat = Isaph' wasn't established? Because Isaph would absolutely never act like that. It was a guarantee obtained by selling his dignity.

Most retreated reluctantly, saying that cat belonged to that guy, following the wise principle that they shouldn't associate with someone imitating him, but unfortunately, some showed interest in him.

As he was trying to quietly step back, the gray-haired man who had first called out "that Saiph" approached him.

"My name is Jade. Wow, I really wanted to talk to you!"

Of course, he tried to pretend he hadn't heard and turn back. Given that he had already become famous, he considered firmly sticking to the concept and ignoring him with an attitude of 'How dare you speak to me', but unexpectedly, his gaze was caught by the man's face. Large eyes, round and gentle eye shape. Somehow that impression was familiar.

After pondering, he answered.

"...For what reason?"

"My younger brother plays just like you! Ah, is it rude to say 'play'? Umm, that's right! My brother also habitually says he has hidden power, so hearing your words made me so happy."

It was a voice full of pure curiosity, not a mocking tone at all. Gradually, the face of a certain being he had seen in the past overlapped with Jade's face.

"My brother's name is Sile, and he's living with our parents in Rus now. Since I'm active as a mercenary, I can't see him often, so I miss him..."

He barely held back a sigh. Sile, it was the name of the boy who had dragged him to the Isaph follower meeting. The bewildering being who had grabbed him after bumping into him in an alley, mistaking him for one of their kind and asking him to join the meeting together.

And the Jade in front of him now seemed to be his older brother. He resembled Sai, but his impression was more affable, with the sociability gained from mercenary life.

"He wears a black robe like you and hangs out with similar friends..."

"Jade, Jade! It's rude to suddenly block someone's path and pour out words like this!"

"Ow! That hurts, Serena!"

A mercenary carrying a bow hurriedly approached and hit Jade's back. They seemed to be from the same mercenary group. Jade groaned and tried to avoid her, but Serena quickly grabbed his ear and whispered,

"That person might really have 'something'. Did you see the size of those mercenaries? They all stopped at his word..."

Though she spoke in a hushed voice, unfortunately, he heard it all. He tried his best to manage his expression as her deductions continued: the two robed mercenaries who stepped forward were so fast they couldn't even be seen with the eyes, but they all quietly retreated at Saiph's words, and it seemed the reason they had stepped forward in the first place was for his sake.

He was used to disgusted reactions when he acted like the 「real thing」, but this was the first time he was taken so seriously, and it was bewildering. Neither was welcome.

### Chapter 74

"I just thought if I talked with Saiph, I might be able to communicate better with my brother later..."

"I told you not to approach him so easily! Look, he even has a suspicious collar on his neck. It could be sealing his real power!"

As Jade mumbled, Serena panicked and tried to stop him again. Appreciating Serena's imagination, he asked abruptly,

"...Why. You don't seem to communicate well with your brother?"

The Sile he had met in Rus seemed very talkative and sociable, but Jade's attitude was like a sorrowful older brother who hadn't talked with his sibling in a long time. He played well in the Isaph follower meeting.

Jade's eyes immediately lit up.

"Yes, that's right! Even when I want to talk, he always pushes me away saying I don't understand. I thought we might be able to talk if we read the books he reads together, so I secretly entered his room, but he got really angry. I tried to explain that I just wanted to understand, but when I asked what on earth the Secret Society of Darkness was keeping secret, we ended up fighting even more..."

*He asked cruel questions of an otaku as a normal person...*

He listened to the words pouring out like a lament with a troubled feeling. Jade's parents were worried about Sile, so he had tried to intervene a few times, but it always went wrong, and on days when he visited home after a long time, his brother would slam the door shut.

He didn't know how he ended up giving family counseling, but at least he could tell that Jade sincerely cared for his brother. It was just that his method was burdensome to his brother.

"...Just leave him alone."

"What? What if we grow even further apart?"

"The more you forcefully approach, the more your brother will distance himself. So don't interfere too much, and just stop him if it seems like he's going to dangerous places with the friends he hangs out with..."

Just then, remembering the voice phishing incident, he added some advice, and Jade's eyes widened.

"How did you know?! In a recent letter from my parents, it said Sile got caught up in some scammer's commotion with his friends. They said he almost got seriously hurt, so I was thinking of scolding him when I return after this request—"

"Don't scold him."

He shook his head firmly.

"The scammers are trash, your brother didn't do anything wrong."

"But he almost got hurt, so I need to warn him sternly..."

"If you want to warn him, you can do it in a worried way. He must have been scared too. Rather than scolding him saying it happened because he was doing strange things and playing around, comfort him saying he must have been scared. ...He's your brother."

"Brother..."

"If you show that you're always on his side like that, one day your brother will talk to you too."

Sile's age seemed to be late teens to early twenties, so he thought it might be late puberty, but anyway, he packaged his words to say it would resolve itself once that time passed. If he scolded him harshly now, they might become estranged forever.

He ended up speaking longer than he expected. Perhaps he was inwardly bothered by the story that Sile, who had smiled innocently and got along well with others even in the quite absurd place of the Isaph follower meeting, was actually drifting apart within his family. He, who didn't even have a family, found the sight of the struggling older brother strangely catching his eye. Maybe he felt a strange sense of responsibility as the cause of that commotion.

He heard mercenaries muttering from the other side, "What? He's saying more normal things than expected?" As it seemed they were viewing his earlier behavior as an act, he hurriedly added one more thing.

"...The journey to find one's power is originally lonely. Be the place he can return to."

He tried hard to say something random, but gradually Jade's eyes widened. As if deeply moved, he kept nodding.

"That's right, whenever I return home after finishing mercenary work, I always feel secure and comfortable like I'm returning to my place! I should become such an existence for Sile!"

Jade miraculously interpreted it well. Beside him, Serena's eyes shone as she said, "As expected, do people who embrace dangerous missions gain higher insight?" He was starting to wonder how these two were in the same mercenary group.

"You're a really kind and good guy! I should tell Sile about you!"

"...Hmm."

"Come to think of it, Sile said he doesn't go out late at night anymore after that incident. He said he received help from a very great and cool person there, so he'll follow that person from now on. What was the name again? Isa...Saiph?"

"Keh, kuh, cough!"

He choked at the completely unexpected words. That day, Kalterik had almost shouted his real name but barely managed to cover it up, resulting in his name being called strangely, and Sile had taken it at face value? *No,* anyway, he had just gotten him to stop following Isaph, so why was he following someone else again?

As he kept coughing, someone beside him held out a water flask.

"..."

It was a person wearing a robe with a deep gold background embroidered with silver thread. Though their face couldn't be seen due to the deeply pulled hood, the slender chin and small build visible beneath the hood suggested it was a woman.

Though her clothes were quite splendid, he hadn't realized someone was beside him until she handed over the water flask. Somehow, it felt like she had been watching him all along. As he looked at her dazedly, she extended her hand in front of him again.

She was probably giving it to him thinking his throat must be sore from coughing so much, but he hesitated to trust a complete stranger. When he couldn't bring himself to take the water flask, she shrugged and withdrew her hand.

Then she asked a very unexpected question instead.

"Does that cat have a name?"

He was surprised by her low voice resonating in his ears, incredibly refined yet powerful. It was the first time since Harenir that he had felt someone wasn't ordinary just from their voice. A voice that commanded attention in an instant.

When he remained silent, the being lightly gestured with her chin. It was probably pointing at En in his arms, but somehow it also seemed like naturally urging an answer. Like someone used to such behavior.

"...En."

"What a cute name. Carefully attaching a lavender ribbon, and holding him so preciously even now... You must cherish him very much."

"...What kind of conversation do you want to have?"

His voice naturally lowered as wariness crept in. As he stepped back one step, sensing the other person wasn't ordinary, the lips beneath the golden hood curved into a smile.

"No, it's not bad."

"...?"

"It seems... a cuter combination than I thought."

*...Huh?* Was she saying the combination of the cat and ribbon was cute? But somehow she seemed to be looking back and forth between him and the cat. En, uncharacteristically docile, remained in his arms with his back turned to her.

Just then, Jade exclaimed "Ah!"

"That's right! I was originally going to ask you how you tamed the cat!"

"...Suddenly?"

"Yeah, my brother was looking for a black cat for a while. So I was going to learn how to tame cats from you and tell him. I thought we might be able to talk if I did that."

He burst into a dry laugh at the sight of Jade's eyes shining, saying it was a good plan. His wariness dissolved at the sudden words, and a chuckle spread. He really didn't understand the mind of an otaku, but this was a kind normal person who wanted to be together somehow.

"Wow, when you smile, it feels like the atmosphere changes."

And at this reaction of his, Jade's eyes widened. His eyes sparkled as if he had seen a rare sight, making him cover his mouth in embarrassment. Why did it seem like people around him had been reacting more to his smiling lately? They were surprised as if dealing with someone who never smiled at all. Harenir too.

"Can't you smile one more time? Take off your hood while you're at it!"

"Don't say strange things."

"Aw, I want to see your face properly."

"...What are you saying."

He answered dryly and stepped back slightly. Without realizing it, he had been caught up in conversation with Jade. He thought he should go back now, but Jade quickly followed, saying not to run away. The brothers were very alike in this pushy aspect.

As he stepped away again, and Jade followed, continuing this subtle chase, something solid touched his back. He unconsciously recognized who it was without turning around, from the warm scent like sunlight that tickled his nose.

"Shouldn't you go in now to properly manage that dangerous seal?"

Harenir was suddenly behind him.

Moreover, he appeared saying something outrageous, and as he was about to exclaim in disgust, Harenir wrapped his arm around his shoulder from behind. It was a natural action that blocked Jade's approach.

### Chapter 75

He understood the intention was to prevent his identity from being discovered, but the arm that came close enough to touch his body made him very uncomfortable.

Just then, someone slipped away from the other side. The person wearing the splendid golden robe instantly turned around the corner of the building and disappeared from view. As he looked at that retreating figure quizzically, he decided to get out of this position first and tapped Harenir's arm with his index finger.

"Hey, your arm..."

But he didn't react at all and just stared at Jade. Interpreting this scene of communication breakdown, Serena said, turning pale,

"I told you many times. That person might be someone who has sealed 'real' power...! Look at how they came to find him!"

"Oh, so is that mercenary behind him guarding Saiph?"

"That's right! No, that entire mercenary group is protecting that person!"

"Ooh, is this the secret society feeling my brother likes!"

*No...*

Listening to Serena's delusions made him feel drained. Of this pair, one was cruelly trying to understand sincerely, while the other truly believed and tormented him. He'd rather they just be disgusted.

As he pressed his brow, his head aching, Jade shouted,

"Then we'll be going now, Saiph! Manage your seal well!"

"Yeah..."

"Oh, right. Be careful because they say those holy knights will be in charge of leading the subjugation team tomorrow! What if there's another clash!"

"Thanks, Jade..."

"See you again tomorrow!"

"Uh-huh..."

He wanted to answer halfheartedly and end it, feeling tired. As Jade waved his arms vigorously in greeting, he lazily waved back, and the guy grinned and moved away. In reality, he was being dragged away by Serena.

Only after Jade had completely disappeared from view did Harenir remove his arm. And as that arm withdrew, En slipped out of his arms and quickly moved away. *What,* was the business over now?

As he watched En's retreating figure in bewilderment, he felt a gaze fixed intently on his face. Guessing why Harenir was looking at him, he spoke first.

"I was about to go back too. I just came down to rescue En because he was surrounded by mercenaries, but Jade caught me saying he wanted to talk..."

He had thought he could return quickly, but he ended up spending more time than expected. Thinking the gaze was pointing out that he had acted alone in a crowded place, he explained, but Harenir didn't say anything.

He just looked at him silently for a while, then said something out of the blue.

"You get friendly with other mercenaries quickly."

"...What are you saying?"

"Laughing while talking, calling names familiarly."

He was saying they had become friendly after hearing that parade of nonsense they had spouted? He was so dumbfounded that he didn't even answer, when suddenly Harenir's lips moved. As if one word from what he had just said had caught on something, he blurted it out again.

"...Name."

As if he had realized something, he looked at him with surprised eyes.

"You've never called me by name. Even just now, you called me 'hey'."

Why did the topic suddenly jump there? *No,* and had he ignored everything else he had said after hearing it all? He looked him up and down, bewildered.

Anyway, when he said "Commander" to his companions, they knew who he was referring to, and when talking to him, he just gestured with his eyes, so there was no need to call his name. Sometimes when he had to call him from afar, well, he really did only use expressions like 'hey', 'there', 'you.'

"You don't happen to not know my name, do you? You could have used my alias."

"I know. I know, but..."

It was an absurd interrogation. He had memorized his long real name, and of course he knew his alias as a mercenary. Haren. He remembered the aliases of the other companions too. Kalterik was Derik, Mela was Mel, and Noi was just Noi because it was common. Just before registering for this subjugation team, Noi had warned him again to memorize them thoroughly.

But even without that reason, the name Haren was very familiar. He had heard it was a name commonly used as an alias by those who wanted to imitate the hero, and he also knew it was Harenir's actual nickname. Noi always used it affectionately, and in his dream, his mother had called him that too.

So there was an enormous sense of distance for him to call that name. Feeling somehow uncomfortable, he fiddled with his nape and turned his gaze away.

"There's no need to call you by name specifically."

"...Yet you call the mercenary you just met, and even your familiar, so affectionately."

Though his voice muttering as if to himself was very quiet, its content was too strange to ignore. By mercenary, did he mean Jade? But why did the familiar suddenly come up? Moreover, his tone was somewhat disgruntled, which made it even more confusing.

Soon, Harenir looked at him directly and said,

"Call me by name from now on."

"What?"

"It would be good to make it a habit. Many mercenaries have gathered for this subjugation, so we don't know what variables might occur, and not only do we need to be especially careful because of the holy knights, but also because you might have a tail following you due to the commotion you caused at the festival venue last time."

He just blinked at the fluently continuing words. He agreed that Harenir's argument was reasonable, and it was hard to refute since he had pointed out the commotion at the venue at the end... But really? Must he? His hesitation must have shown outwardly, as Harenir immediately tried to drive the point home.

"Let's practice right now."

"..."

"Come on."

As the urging fell like an order, he reluctantly opened his lips.

"...Haren."

*Thud,* not wanting to pronounce it awkwardly, he blurted it out at once. In a way, it was just a name, and it might seem strange to avoid it saying he didn't like it, so he blurted it out, not wanting to appear conscious of him.

But after actually saying it, he felt a very strange feeling. As he tried to mull it over inwardly, his mouth tingled, and he ended up saying his name once more. Haren.

"...Your name, it comes out very softly."

Though it was a name he had heard many times, it felt very new when he said it himself. As if he was encountering this name for the first time, he repeated it over and over, as if enchanted by its sound. He tried pronouncing Harenir, the seven letters, then returned to Haren, repeating this. He preferred the five letters.

Haren, Haren, Haren...

As he muttered that name, he only realized he was doing something incredible when he heard a subtle sigh from right in front of him.

"...I didn't expect you to practice so passionately."

"Ah."

He was startled. He had forgotten the other person was right in front of him and had become absorbed in calling his name. He seemed to have called it well over thirty times.

Wasn't this a terrifying thing from the listener's perspective? A gloomy person suddenly muttering a name dozens of times might seem crazy. It might even have looked like an act of defiance.

"You always do things that exceed my expectations."

"I, I was just practicing to get used to it..."

"Still, well, it wasn't bad."

He stopped mid-explanation, embarrassed that he had just been practicing as told, when he heard this evaluation. Not simply because of its content, but... because the smile he encountered right in front of him caught his gaze.

Harenir, no, Haren smiled and said,

"Keep practicing hard from now on."

His soft voice, falling as if encouraging him, even held a hint of playfulness. Moreover, Haren had been in a strangely subdued mood all day after encountering the holy knights' misconduct earlier, but now he seemed quite cheerful.

As he looked at the blue eyes sparkling with joy, something stirred inside him again. Since when had Haren started smiling so well in front of him, and even acting as if he was joking?

"..."

And why did he keep suffering from this churning sensation when he looked at him?

Though he hadn't seen ghosts since visiting the night market, dizziness kept coming suddenly. Vertigo was a very familiar symptom to him, but this dizzying loss of balance was worrying because it seemed to tilt in one direction.

Perhaps this was a phenomenon caused by sharing Dedium's curse. No, it must be that. He shook his head, trying hard to shake off these strange sensations.

It seemed he should quickly break the soul connection as the curse was resolved.

### Chapter 76

The monster subjugation was set to depart the morning after everyone had gathered.

The companions were bustling about from early morning. Though they had said they would only provide light assistance, the intensity with which they were warming up in the room was quite serious. Perhaps they felt a sense of mission to completely sweep away the monsters in this subjugation to eliminate the residents' anxiety, given how startled they had been by the monster attack.

As he watched them, so energetic from the morning, as if they were a different species, a strange visitor came to the room.

*Knock knock–*

At the sound of someone knocking on the door, Noi stepped forward. Guessing it was probably the lord's servant coming to deliver instructions about the subjugation, he went out, but as soon as he opened the door, he jumped. Puzzled by such a large reaction, he turned to look and was surprised himself.

The being wearing the splendid golden robe he had seen yesterday.

"It's been a while."

That being now stood in front of the door and greeted them.

Though the hood was pulled down deeply, Noi's eyes bulged as if he knew the person, and he shouted "Eeeeh?!" before hurriedly ushering her inside. Only after carefully closing the door did he utter truly shocking words.

"Your Highness?! How are you here, Your Highness?!"

*Swish,* as the hood was removed, a small oval face was revealed. Deep golden hair flowed down softly to her chest, and the eyes within her deep, clear gaze boasted an intense aura of orange-tinged gold. They were eyes that seemed to contain the sun. Though her build was petite, the innate elegant dignity she exuded never made her presence seem small.

He dazedly mulled over the word used to address her. *Your Highness?* Did that mean she was a member of the Holy Empire's imperial family? Why would such a person come here?

Even in this surprising situation, Haren asked in a calm tone,

"How did you know we were here?"

"Huhu, once I knew you were in Nadael. And given your and your subordinates' nature, I expected you would absolutely not ignore the monster attack that occurred in the city."

The one presumed to be the imperial princess curled up the corners of her mouth and smiled confidently. Seeing her attitude as if her deduction was perfect, he could grasp several things.

That Haren and the imperial princess were quite close, and perhaps, no, certainly, she was the person he had contacted every time he visited the city. The only being who knew the truth about the hero's death besides the current companions, and the person in power who had blocked the path to the Encroachment Zone as Haren had requested.

As an imperial princess, she would naturally have that level of power, but...

"...?"

Weren't the imperial palace and the temple on bad terms?

It would be natural for the empire's hero and a member of the imperial family to know each other, but they seemed to go beyond mere acquaintances to being very close, which was puzzling. Moreover, if they had been in contact all this time, it meant she even knew that the hero had been searching Encroachment Zones, right?

Before he knew it, all the companions except him were bowing their heads to greet the imperial princess. It was just a simple, polite greeting, but from that sight, he could guess that the companions were also well acquainted with her.

While he alone was plunged into confusion, the conversation between Haren and the imperial princess continued naturally.

"You could have contacted us in advance."

"I was curious about how you were moving around. The combination of a hero faking his death, the vice commanders and aide who joined that plan, and 'that' death row inmate. Of course it would pique my interest, right? So I secretly infiltrated this subjugation team as a mercenary and observed you first, and thanks to that, I got to see a very interesting scene."

"Cough."

A cough suddenly burst out. He felt goosebumps all over his body as he seemed to know all too well what that 'interesting scene' referred to. It was chicken skin raised from shame.

The imperial princess chuckled as if just recalling that moment made her laugh.

"I really didn't expect it. To see you escape that crisis in such a way, and also to see all of you getting caught up with that guy."

Saying that if she had told them in advance, she would never have seen such a scene, and that secretly observing had been a wise choice, the imperial princess wiped the tears from the corners of her eyes. Kalterik mumbled awkwardly, "We weren't exactly caught up..."

Suddenly, the imperial princess's gaze turned towards him. The aura with which she walked towards him, step by step, was very confident. As if nothing dared to block her path, and as if it were only natural, she approached boldly and grabbed his chin, lifting it up.

Until then, he had been sitting in a chair, and he met the imperial princess's gaze with his upper body half-raised awkwardly. Her eyes, intense like the sun, looked down at him intently.

"You're an amusing fellow, Isaph Dina."

"..."

"I've always been curious about you. What kind of guy would dare use necromancy in the Holy Empire, and how the guy who had evaded all pursuit until now would look being dragged along with a collar around his neck by the hero..."

Her voice, tinged with laughter, continued quite joyfully.

"It was interesting. I thought you would be obeying while secretly harboring a dark knife inside, but the atmosphere wasn't like that at all. You spouted more amusing remarks than I expected, and even acted kindly towards strangers you met for the first time. It was completely different from my expectations."

She seemed to be referring to his conversation with Jade yesterday. He had only reluctantly given family counseling because he was the brother of the boy he had been entangled with in Rus, but it seemed to have appeared as a very unexpected action to the imperial princess who had witnessed that scene.

"Even the familiar you're said to go around with was fascinating when I saw it with my own eyes. Usually, familiars should have traces of being hypnotized, but there was none of that. Rather than an ordinary cat... it was more like a lump of soul had coalesced."

"...?"

"Well, other mercenaries soon gathered around, so I couldn't look closely. It's quite a clever familiar. If it had run away far, I would have caught it to research, but as if sensing my intention, it stayed among the mercenaries."

*Ah,* so the reason En had stayed quietly surrounded by mercenaries yesterday was because of the imperial princess. Coincidentally, the moment En had moved away from him was also after the imperial princess had left. By the way, what did she mean by a lump of soul? Was it because it was an NPC?

As he was dazedly recalling yesterday's events, the imperial princess tilted her head.

"This is unexpected. Why aren't you bristling? Since you even gave a name to your familiar and hold it preciously, I thought you would at least bristle at the fact that I tried to research it."

"Not particularly..."

Somehow it felt like he was being treated like an animal along with En, but it was a natural reaction for him. Though he had a special affection for black cats and might unconsciously find En cute at times, he clearly knew it was an NPC in this terrible game. An NPC wouldn't be harmed by a character appearing in the game, right?

Rather, he found it strange that the imperial princess showed curiosity towards En. Sometimes in games, characters with high intelligence stats would grasp the essence of the world, was this that kind of meta-awareness? As he just blinked blankly, the imperial princess grabbed his chin forcefully.

"Is it confidence that your familiar wouldn't be harmed by the likes of me, or have you become docile from being tied with a collar? It's amusing to see that mass murderer become so obedient when a knife is at his own throat..."

"Ugh."

"Hmm, this face isn't bad either. It might be fine if tamed well."

As he winced at the stinging pain, her face drew closer. Her golden eyes, looking down at him intently from a distance close enough for their noses to touch, were persistent as if thoroughly rummaging through a person, and for a moment, a strange possessiveness flickered in them. It was absolutely not an emotion directed at a person, but closer to a feeling towards a pet.

*Swish,* just then, Haren approached and grabbed the imperial princess's arm.

"Beatrice."

"Biche."

"...Right, Biche. Let's stop the strange hobby now."

As Haren restrained the imperial princess, whose name was Beatrice and nickname was 'Biche', she shrugged her shoulders.

"What's strange about it? I'm just enjoying seeing interesting things up close. And I never forcibly drag anyone away, you know?"

"They would naturally choose the latter if asked whether to go to the underground prison or the imperial palace's greenhouse. Usually, that's expressed as being forcibly taken away."

"Hmm, how amusing to see trash who committed acts deserving of execution clinging to my feet saying they don't want to die. They should at least become my experimental subjects to be of use to the world..."

"Stop."

As Haren cut off her words, Beatrice glared at him with dissatisfied eyes. By now, he had also naturally removed her hand that had been holding his face.

However, Beatrice instantly changed her expression and turned to him elegantly.

"Ah, I said unnecessary things in front of you. I quite like you, so I have no intention of treating you harshly. So after you receive your reduced sentence later, it'll be hard to find a place to go anyway, so why don't you come to my castle? I'll give you a specially good room, separate from the greenhouse."

Beatrice's gaze turned to the collar on his neck. He felt a chill at her eyes that sparkled as if wanting to change the owner. He slowly moved behind Haren, away from that gaze that made going to an uninhabited island feel like a happy ending, and being stoned in the holy city feel like a normal ending.

He quickly shook his head at Haren who turned to look at him. *No, don't.* He was afraid Haren might hand over the collar to her due to his friendship with the imperial princess.

A faint smile appeared on Haren's lips. *You're smiling?* *I'm trembling at the sudden appearance of a bad ending route, and you're smiling? Is it funny?*

### Chapter 77

Soon, Haren lightly shook his head and invited Beatrice to take a seat. As she moved towards the seat he had been sitting in earlier, he retreated even further. Her sun-like eyes followed him as he slowly backed away against the wall, sparkling with interest.

"So, did you come all this way just to see us?"

Thankfully, Haren stood in front of Beatrice, blocking her line of sight. She made a "Hmm" sound while resting her chin on her hand.

"'Just'? How rare an opportunity is it to see the missing hero? And do you know how surprised I was when I first received your contact? I never believed the story that you had died in the first place, but I didn't expect to hear that you were suddenly searching Encroachment Zones."

Beatrice let out a dry laugh as if recalling that day's memory. It seemed she hadn't known Haren's plan from the beginning but had grasped the situation only after receiving his contact in Rus. Her eyes flew to Haren with a reproachful look, asking if he knew how chaotic the holy city had been until then.

"So, you said your purpose in going to Rus was the sky island, right? How did that turn out? Did you really enter the first emperor's tomb? Seeing that you've been to the western Encroachment Zone since then, I think you must have obtained the small sun."

"We succeeded in figuring out how to enter the tomb using Isaph's ability. We summoned the soul of the aide who had served the first emperor."

"Oho, that's tempting indeed."

Beatrice's gaze turned to him again. It seemed that Isaph's necromancy, pointed at as unrighteous in the Holy Empire, had unfortunately piqued the imperial princess's interest.

"How could I stay in the boring imperial palace when there are so many interesting things happening here? But every time you contact me, you just tell the main point and cut off, do you know how crazy with curiosity I've been?"

Beatrice pounded on the desk, saying Haren bore a large responsibility for her coming here. At this, Noi muttered quietly from behind.

"But to come alone again, leaving your guards behind, Sir Asil must be panicking..."

"...Again? Has she often gone out alone like this before?"

"Yes, since Her Highness the Imperial Princess is a mage, it's advantageous for covert movements. A master of disguise! Sir Asil often grabs the back of his neck because she uses her amazing magic skills to secretly leave the castle, but she's a great mage."

Noi nodded and answered his question. Was it because of magic that he hadn't noticed her presence right next to him last night until she offered the water flask? Perhaps her magical skills had also helped her enter the city easily despite the heightened security.

The "research" Beatrice had mentioned earlier now seemed even more terrifying, and the distance in his heart grew larger. It seemed both En and he should stay far away from her.

Just then, a document appeared in Beatrice's hand. He was startled to see a rolled-up paper appear with just a light wave of her hand. It was amazing enough when Noi occasionally took things out of his magic bag, but for objects to appear out of thin air like this...

"I came to talk about this too, while I was at it."

Beatrice handed the document to Haren. He sat down opposite her, checked the contents, and tilted his head with a strange expression.

"The number of missing persons hasn't decreased."

"Right, even though we've blocked most of the entry points to the Encroachment Zones, people are still going missing. When we investigated in detail, it turns out the number has actually increased compared to before."

It was an unexpected topic. One of the initial reasons for searching the Encroachment Zones was the increase in missing persons. So after confirming the Dium's survival in the southern Encroachment Zone, Haren must have contacted the imperial princess out of concern for potential additional missing persons, and now that they had blocked the paths to other Encroachment Zones, the number of people going missing due to being captured by Dium should have decreased.

"We blocked the paths, and you've purified and eliminated two Encroachment Zones, so naturally, the number of missing persons should have decreased..."

"Perhaps the Dium in other Encroachment Zones, feeling their territories shrinking, have started hunting in earnest?"

"Well, if that were the case, there should be at least some eyewitness accounts, but there are none so far."

Beatrice shook her head at Haren's speculation.

"When Dedium was alive, its subordinate Dium could roam freely even outside the contaminated areas, but after it disappeared, they couldn't do that anymore. That's why we were able to easily eliminate the Dium. They can't even use their powers properly when they leave their territory..."

It seemed to be information revealed when the previous Holy Knight Commander sealed Dedium in the past. He had thought Dium could only move around within Encroachment Zones, but it seemed the range restriction was lifted when Dedium awoke. He could understand why they had tried to resurrect their god even by offering their hearts.

Until now, it had been assumed that the missing people had been captured by Dium after accidentally approaching Encroachment Zones. That they were caught by hidden Dium as soon as they took a step or two inside. Could it be that people blinded by curiosity had somehow found ways to enter the Encroachment Zones again? But...

"It's strange. We didn't find any missing persons in the western Encroachment Zone... We might have missed some due to the complex canyon, but even the thieves we encountered nearby said no one had come recently."

The southern one had been purified, and they had directly confirmed there were no missing persons in the western one. Yet the fact that the number of missing persons hadn't decreased but rather increased was quite puzzling, and Haren seemed to be caught on that point too as he tapped the desk with his index finger and said,

"We'll have to search more thoroughly for missing persons in the next Encroachment Zone."

He could guess what the glance directed at him meant. Now he would probably be instructed to search not only for the core but also for corpses more thoroughly inside the Encroachment Zone. *Ah,* the Encroachment Zones were getting larger, and the quest was becoming more demanding along with it. He nodded his head dejectedly.

Mela, Kalterik, and Noi also discussed searching the nearby villages in detail and moving next time. As the future response direction was naturally being set at the scene, Beatrice suddenly roared.

"Yes, this is how it should be!"

"...?"

"When missing persons occur, of course this is how we should respond! Those snake-like old men just say they'll look into it but don't move!"

*Bang!* Her eyes flickered with anger as she slammed her fist on the table. The sun seemed to be blazing fiercely.

"When there's a vacancy in the hero's position, huh?! They should be seizing this opportunity to raise the imperial palace's power, but they're all just playing around! Supporting the Holy Festival events saying we should continue to build friendly relations with the temple! It's not even friendly, but the pathetic appearance of a servant!"

The power struggle between the imperial palace and the temple had ended with the temple's overwhelming victory after the Great Catastrophe. It was thanks to the previous Holy Knight Commander's sacrifice and the grace received by the current Holy Knight Commander. So the empire's citizens were worried that the hero's absence might cause another power conflict, but it seemed the imperial palace had settled for the tilted balance.

So he could understand why the imperial princess was angry, but... was it okay to say that in front of the symbol of the temple? He looked at her dryly.

"That stupid guy took the crown prince position over me, so he should at least do his job properly! Someday in the future, the Dium's survival will be revealed, and at that time, shouldn't the imperial palace say they had already noticed suspicious points and were investigating to avoid looking foolish! But that guy just laughs heheheh!"

Had a different imperial descendant become the successor instead of Beatrice? Just looking at this imperial princess's aura, she seemed fit to be a general, no, an emperor. Moreover, she was saying she had made such calculations in her head as soon as she received Haren's contact. She had magical skills and a sharp mind...

To this, Haren reacted calmly.

"I see you told the imperial palace about the missing persons first."

"Of course. Though I'm working with you, that's just because I joined hands with you out of frustration with those old men, I have no intention of bowing my head to the temple."

"Well, that's welcome news."

Though it was a rather sharp statement, Haren smiled, and in response, Beatrice said, "You strange fellow," but still curled up the corners of her mouth in a smile.

He couldn't understand at all how the relationship between those two was established. They weren't rivals following the conflict between the temple and the imperial palace, nor did they seem to be purely cooperative allies on each other's side.

Perhaps that was why Haren had contacted Beatrice. For him, who suspected traitors within the temple, a being who wanted to strengthen the imperial palace's power might be preferable.

Beatrice swept her hair back and let out a sigh.

"Well, so I came to participate in the subjugation to vent the frustration built up in the imperial palace too."

It seemed she had come to strike the monsters here since she couldn't strike the old men in the imperial palace.

### Chapter 78

However, that anger gauge looked precarious, and he wondered if someday it might be directed at them. Just as he was thinking that he'd be curious to see that scene, Beatrice looked around the room.

Her eyes sparkled as she checked the robes the companions were wearing.

"By the way, holy knights have come to this subjugation team too, what are you going to do? No matter how firmly you fix the hood of the robe, it could come off while moving, and they seemed to recognize your voices yesterday..."

"What are you trying to say?"

Haren immediately asked for the main point, as if he had grasped that there was another purpose from her question. Beatrice smiled as if it was just out of goodwill.

"Shall I cast a disguise spell on you?"

"What? Really?!"

Noi reacted with great enthusiasm. Already worried about the news that holy knights would be in charge of leading this subjugation team, his eyes immediately sparkled brightly, and Beatrice nodded her head with a benevolent smile.

"Of course. I'll change your faces and voices too. I'll connect you so that you can recognize each other without being disguised. Ah, and I can also make your auras partially blurred. Like fog spreading around you."

If she did just that, the companions would be able to use holy power much more comfortably, and Noi wouldn't have to go through the trouble of drawing magic circles or chanting spells. Although it wasn't entirely welcome news for him, who had planned to stay out under the pretext of having to hide his wicked energy, it was certainly going to be more convenient.

However, Beatrice's next words instantly made him uncomfortable.

"In exchange, let me join your mercenary group."

She smiled confidently and wiggled her fingers. Probably, no, certainly it was a gesture made towards him as if calling an animal.

"Surely you won't reject this good offer?"

\*\*\*

Beatrice joined the Hero's Light mercenary group.

Fortunately, it was only a temporary joining for this monster subjugation. She said she couldn't be away from her position for long since she had only briefly slipped out of the imperial palace.

He had been afraid he might have to accompany her from now on, so that news was very welcome. As soon as he clenched his fists tightly, Beatrice looked at him, and he quietly pretended not to notice.

The servant who came to the room didn't notice anything strange even though a person had suddenly been added to the mercenary group. Even though there were so many mercenaries that they couldn't remember each face and voice individually, it was strange that they didn't find it odd that the number of people on paper had increased.

Noi explained that this was a kind of mental magic.

"It's slightly manipulating the mind to make them accept it as natural!"

"That could become a terribly scary ability depending on how it's used..."

"Nah, Her Highness is only harsh to death row inmates."

"..."

"...Oh."

They headed towards the forest, having this sad conversation. Unfortunately, the sky was gloomy today too.

The holy knights in charge of leading the monster subjugation gave instructions at the entrance of the northern forest. Samuel climbed onto a platform and recited the strategy. The total force participating in this subjugation was about 200 people, and they would start the search by spreading out as widely as possible.

He warned that since the northern forest of the city became swampier towards the center, they should scout from the edges as if surrounding it, and when encountering monsters, they shouldn't rush in recklessly but should guide them outwards, and also to be cautious as there was a high probability that the monsters' nest had been made in the center of the swamp.

"Following Sidon's instructions should be your top priority."

"Don't become a burden to us, and don't cause harm either! We came to subjugate monsters, not to be volunteers protecting you. Be especially careful, as those drunk on their own power often fall pathetically."

The intention behind his words as he spoke last, looking towards where he was, was obvious. *Kuk kuk,* laughter erupted here and there. Mercenaries standing close to the holy knights mocked loudly, saying it was amazing he hadn't tucked his tail and run away today.

Seeing this scene, Beatrice tilted her head.

"They're sucking up to the holy knights."

Considering Sidon's prestige, it was understandable that some would want to get close to them, but it was quite thick-skinned of them to do so right after looking down on mercenaries yesterday.

He saw Jade trying to stop the mercenaries around him. As he shouted, "Saiph is a good friend, even if we can't understand him completely!" and tried to restrain them, well, that guy was definitely not on his side. As the mockery intensified, he turned his head, pretending not to see Jade greeting him.

Beatrice made a "Hmm" sound and laughed at his reaction.

"You don't even pretend to hear such criticism. Is it because you're used to it and ignore it, or is it because you really are a being hiding your power? Hmm, it must be the latter. Since you've actually sealed a dangerous and ominous power, you must be able to immerse yourself in the act better."

*That's not it.*

As he looked at her with disgust, Beatrice chuckled. With her golden eyes full of amusement, she took a big step forward.

"Ah, there probably isn't another pair of eyes that look at the empire's imperial princess like this."

Was this game an *otome* game? *Is this how you unlock the 'You're the first one to treat me like this' route?* He couldn't even ask the NPC as it had been nowhere to be found since last night.

He slowly moved away from Beatrice towards Haren's side. Originally, he had always avoided being near him because it was uncomfortable, but now he was the only being who could block the imperial princess. His large build was also suitable for hiding behind.

Haren muttered quietly.

"...Cat."

"What did you say?"

"Ah, I mean, your familiar. Where is your familiar?"

He asked again because he couldn't hear properly due to the low voice, but somehow Haren seemed startled. As if it had been an impulsive statement that came out without him realizing it, he looked very flustered, and he scrutinized him with strange eyes. *Why are you suddenly looking for the familiar? Hadn't you never shown interest until now?*

"I don't know. It seems to have run far away."

An NPC that ran away leaving only the player behind. Vowing to torment it thoroughly when it returned, he stood a little closer to Haren. There was something he had wanted to urge him about.

Looking at the backs of the mercenaries who had just started marching, he whispered quietly to him.

"Don't get hurt. You know there can't be any problems with you, right?"

After working hard to recover his body during the rest period and finally getting closer to resolving the curse, he was still going out for the subjugation. Even if the danger level was much lower than the monsters he usually faced, he couldn't be completely at ease.

"If you get hurt unnecessarily, it will delay breaking the soul connection too, so be as careful as possible, no, absolutely careful."

"..."

"If you're in pain, I'm in pain too."

The last reason was absolutely not the real purpose.

Haren's eyes widened at his words. He had an unfamiliar look, as if he had never heard someone urge him not to get hurt before. Was it because he was known publicly as a hero with perfect recovery ability that he had never received such concern?

Of course, he wasn't worried about Haren either. He was only worried about himself.

"...Yes, I'll be careful."

Haren answered slowly. He smiled as if this situation was amusing, which made him completely incomprehensible, but since he had never really understood him anyway, he lost interest.

*Wheeee–*

As they entered deeper into the forest, a damp wind blew. The swampy area's unique humid and stuffy energy filled the air, making even breathing difficult. Tension gradually filled the faces of the mercenaries who had been boasting about their exploits with high spirits until they had just entered.

He felt like he could tell just by smelling from afar now, having encountered it a few times. Monsters were coming. Finally, the ground shook, kugugugung.

[Hyaaaak!]

[Kieeek!]

Monsters covered in slimy mud sprang out. True to the swamp setting, there were many reptilian-type monsters like venomous snakes. The sight of them quickly approaching by slithering, *sasa-sat,* involuntarily caused revulsion.

"Be careful not to fall into the swamp!"

A holy knight at the front shouted and drew his sword. The mercenaries also gripped their weapons and faced the monsters, shouting "Huaap!" with fighting spirit. A solemn heat spread everywhere, signaling that the subjugation had officially begun.

In contrast, the knights around him were very calm.

"Hmm. These are just big jelly-like things."

"Derik! If you handle them too easily, it might raise suspicion!"

"Oops, is that so? Then... Oh, oh my! My sword won't come out! This one's not easy!"

One slash from Kalterik cut a monster in two. When Noi cautioned that they should be careful, he belatedly put on a clumsy act.

He suddenly felt indignant about being the only one receiving strange looks among these guys. Should he accept it as retribution for yesterday? Still, he should take comfort in the fact that he didn't have to do much since they were handling things well.

### Chapter 79

Mela lightly swung her sword to deal with the approaching monster. Though it looked like she was simply pushing it away, its head flew off with a swish and rolled. It seemed she didn't even need to use holy power.

Noi assisted by slightly moving the trunks of the densely grown trees in the forest. Though he was covered in disguise magic, he seemed to be using existing trees to minimize drawing attention.

And Beatrice...

"Haha, this is fun!"

She was facing the monsters while swinging her staff. That is, she was really using it like a club to beat the monsters. He had jokingly thought she came to strike monsters since she couldn't hit the old men in the imperial palace, but was this really how she fought? Magic (physical)?

He looked at her dazedly and distanced himself a bit more in his heart. It was best not to get too close to someone who was beyond his imagination in every way.

However, this leisure of just watching his companions was gradually becoming precarious. As they went deeper into the forest, the number of monsters appearing doubled, and the demonic energy thickened. Even...

*Weeeng– Weeeng–*

Monsters in the form of venomous insects appeared. That is, creatures with 'wings' had shown up. He had thought it was the sound of wind, but when he turned around because the sound was louder than expected, he was startled. Black wasp-like creatures came flying with a loud buzzing sound. Their bodies were as big as adult men.

"G-go away!"

"Uwaah!"

The appearance of flying monsters caused confusion. Mercenaries ran around screaming, and naturally, the formation crumbled. Some even fell because the forest floor was generally muddy even where it wasn't swampy.

The holy knights raised their voices in the chaotic situation.

"Don't provoke the monsters unnecessarily!"

"This is why stupid mercenary rabble..."

Samuel shouted with a frown, and other holy knights also clicked their tongues and blamed the panicked mercenaries. But when an insect-type monster flew towards them with a vicious buzzing, Samuel also flinched and stepped aside.

*Swish!* He tried to subdue it by swinging his sword, but because he missed the vital point, the monster became greatly excited. It charged even more fiercely, and Samuel repeatedly stepped back until he collided with a mercenary behind him. He had been so focused on the monster in front that he hadn't watched his rear.

"Ugh...!"

"Don't get in the way!"

The mercenary staggered and fell because of Samuel, but he got angry instead. He shouted that the mercenary should have dodged, that if he couldn't help, he shouldn't hinder, and then hurriedly gripped his sword again. In that moment, he had lost sight of the venomous insect.

*Bzzzzt!*

The monster quickly exploited the opening. Just before the stinger was about to shoot into Samuel, *whoosh–* Haren appeared instantly at his side and blocked it. He stopped the monster's attack with the flat of his blade, and then pushed the sword to fling it far away. It was a naturally flowing series of movements.

Haren turned to Samuel and smiled gently.

"Shouldn't a commander have prepared in advance for variables that could occur during subjugation?"

"W-what...?"

"You were even given a whole day for strategy, was the plan you came up with during that time just a warning to be careful of the swamp and scolding not to be a burden? Is it right to try to take only the rights of a knight without properly fulfilling the duties?"

Samuel flinched at the softly continuing voice. Haren, covered in disguise magic, would appear to others as a man with brown hair and navy blue eyes, with a relatively blurry impression.

He had said he only tweaked it a little, as completely changing his appearance might seem more strange. But even though he had lowered the overall color scheme to adjust it to be ordinary, Haren's beautiful face didn't die down, so Beatrice had added manipulation magic to make others perceive him hazily. His voice had also become lower.

However, perhaps because of the pressure emanating from his tone and behavior, Samuel froze. He couldn't even open his mouth, and only belatedly wrinkled his brow fiercely. As if in reaction to having shrunk back for a moment, Samuel shouted angrily.

"What would a mere mercenary know! Dealing with flying monsters is such a tricky task...!"

*Bzzt!* Just then, the venomous insect flew in, and Haren swung his sword without even looking at it. With an extremely clean and concise movement, he cut off the monster's wings, making it crash.

"Uh..."

Samuel blankly looked down at the monster convulsing on the ground. Its wings had been cut off very cleanly.

Afterwards, he scrutinized with eyes suspicious of whether Haren might have used a magic-imbued sword, but that sword was an ordinary one bought from the market. A sword far inferior in quality to Samuel's.

Haren smiled gently and soothed him.

"Even a mere mercenary handled it, so a holy knight should do better, right? I believe you were just flustered now."

He watched the scene from afar and shuddered. He got goosebumps. Was this encouragement because they were both holy knights, or was it high-level sarcasm? At least from Samuel's expression, he could tell his pride had been thoroughly shattered.

Samuel, his face completely red, grumbled for a while before whirling around and rejoining the other holy knights. Judging from their whispering among themselves and glancing at Haren, there was a 99.9% chance they were cursing about 'a mere mercenary trying to teach holy knights'.

*Oh my,* the more they act like this, the more laps they'll have to run on the future stone training ground. Unfortunately, the holy knights didn't stop at backbiting but started to engage in absurd antics.

"Ha! Mere mercenaries couldn't even attempt swordsmanship like this!"

"Only Sidon is capable of such intricate swordsmanship!"

They shouted as if for Haren to hear while defeating monsters with unnecessarily flashy swordsmanship, even those that could be dealt with simply. *Stop it, please. It's becoming embarrassing now*. He was certain that they looked far more ridiculous now than he had yesterday. Haren just shrugged his shoulders.

Should he say it was fortunate that the holy knights were now tackling the subjugation more enthusiastically than before? He wondered if even this might have been Haren's intention... but it felt a bit ominous. It was often those with pride far exceeding their skills who caused accidents.

"Only devout holy knights can use holy power like this!"

Samuel shouted proudly while enveloping his sword in golden holy power. Other mercenaries marveled with "Wow!" as if seeing holy power for the first time, but he barely held back an "Eugh" sound.

The golden energy was too faint. For him, who had only seen bright light filling his entire vision and radiance pouring down like daylight even in the middle of the night, it was a very trivial sight.

Did this holy knight know in front of whom he was showing off? As he was clicking his tongue inwardly, *tsk tsk,* Samuel made a big arm movement. He swung his sword with a whoosh as if sending holy power towards the center of the forest and boasted. He was bragging about how strong people could spread energy like this, but Haren sighed strangely.

Kalterik also grumbled quietly from behind.

"That bastard is spreading energy in a forest he hasn't even fully scouted?"

It seemed like a very rash mistake to make in a place where a monster's nest might have formed. Kalterik clicked his tongue, asking how the Nadael branch managed their knights, and Noi also shook his head.

Mela was just walking with an indifferent face when suddenly she turned her head sharply.

"...!"

As her eyes widened, the air rang with a *zzzzt–*. His skin tingled and an instinctive wariness rose.

[Has a holy knight come.]

The voice coming from the dark part of the forest was very low. It fell ominously as if echoing in a cave and even reverberated strangely. He knew from experience what kind of being could evoke such an unpleasant tension.

A demon.

'Where demonic energy thickens, demons often accompany...'

He had felt an ominous flag from the moment the word 'demon' came up when his companions were talking about participating in the subjugation, but to actually encounter a demon.

But then an even newer, high and sharp voice followed.

[What, a holy knight? A holy knight?!]

The shout full of hostility was clearly the voice of a different individual. *Ah,* this time there were two demons? While he was endlessly cursing inwardly, something finally flew across the forest swamp.

*Bzzt!* A demon that had flown in instantly, flapping its dark red wings, looked around with bright red eyes. It covered its face with hands boasting long nails and screamed "Aaah–"

[I'll tear all holy knights to death. I must avenge Lily. The one who harmed Lily must have been a holy knight!]

The appearance of the male demon letting out shrill cries somehow looked familiar. The sharp two horns, blue skin, and red eyes with pitch-black sclera might be characteristics of the demon race, but... the curly pink hair stood out.

That hair color seemed exactly the same as the succubus he had seen on the sky island...

[Ah, Lily. My twin. You appear in my dreams every day asking me to kill 'that guy', so I've come to this land to avenge you.]

*...I think I need to run.*

### Chapter 80

If it was a male dream demon, was it an incubus? If this incubus was really the twin of the succubus he had fought on the sky island, there was a high probability that 'that guy' Lily was crying out for in dreams was him. No, it definitely was him.

He already had an aversion to dream demons due to a certain incident, and now he was getting tangled in this revenge plot. He slowly stepped backward.

He had only watched his companions hunt throughout the subjugation anyway, and there were other holy knights too, so couldn't he slip away? Even if he could hide with disguise magic, it would be better to use his abilities as little as possible. Judging it to be a wise choice for everyone, he quickly turned around.

*Saaaa–*

But then, as dark energy ominously spread from behind, it instantly enveloped the entire area. It was pitch-black demonic energy surrounding them like a prison. Not just him, but some other mercenaries must have tried to escape too, as they stopped in front of the wall of demonic energy. *Thump thump,* no matter how much they pounded, the prison didn't disappear.

[Hmm, since that is his will, everyone must stay here.]

[Yes! Don't think about escaping. The holy knights will die torn apart by my hands here, and the rest of you rabble must become hostages to lure other holy knights. Kyahahahaha!]

At the incubus's chilling declaration, the mercenaries shrank their shoulders and looked at each other. The holy knights flinched but soon ground out "How dare mere demons..." nervously, while only his companions turned to look at him with strange faces. They must know that he was the person the incubus was looking for.

However, he was suddenly bewildered by something unexpected. The situation of having escape routes blocked was alarming, but more than that, the black energy enveloping this space in a hemisphere shape was strangely familiar. Though it was clearly demonic energy, why?

*Clank, clank, clank...*

Another demon emerged through the darkness of the forest. The sound of iron armor rattling was particularly loud because the being wearing that armor was a skeleton. Its body was extremely large with two horns protruding from its head, and a dark red light flickered in its hollow eyes. Energy wavered like flames through the gaps in its bones visible between the armor.

Mela exclaimed in shock.

"Death Knight...?"

A type of undead demon called the knight of death. It must be a demon created either by calling back the soul of its master into an already dead body, or by injecting a new powerful soul. It was also called a necromancer knight, and he realized why this demon's energy felt familiar. Though Death Knights manipulated demonic energy, they still used the same necromancy.

While he was comprehending the cause of this sense of kinship, Mela urgently approached Haren and spoke.

"Commander, we must be careful of that demon. It's not an ordinary one."

Haren nodded. As if he had sensed it even before receiving her report, he watched the Death Knight with increasingly sharp eyes, and Kalterik also gripped his sword firmly while clicking his tongue.

Noi had turned quite pale, seeming to struggle since the moment they were trapped in the demonic prison. He muttered tremblingly that they couldn't even request reinforcements from the city. Judging by the holy knights on the other side panicking with their communication artifacts, it seemed they really couldn't communicate with the outside.

Beatrice's eyes also changed as if she sensed the situation was turning serious. When killing intent frosted over her sun-like eyes that had been filled only with interest until now, she looked like a beast.

"What do you think? Can we resolve this with just the holy knights here?"

"Yes."

"...What? How can you be so sure?"

Though it was quite a serious question, Haren answered very breezily. Hadn't Samuel's holy power been too faint earlier? How could those who had struggled even against flying monsters handle an incubus and Death Knight?

He looked at Haren with questioning eyes along with Beatrice, but he spoke with a smile on his lips as if it were obvious.

"The ones in white uniforms aren't the only holy knights in this forest, right?"

Even Kalterik and Mela nodded in agreement. Though the Death Knight was a dangerous demon, their behavior was imbued with confidence that the three of them wouldn't be overwhelmed. The commander trusted his two vice commanders, and they trusted the hero.

Beatrice let out a "Ha!" dry laugh. She seemed to like this wordplay as she curled up the corners of her mouth.

"Right, then as a member of this mercenary group, I should help too."

As she lightly swung her staff, an orange twilight-like glow spread faintly and surrounded the three knights. Their auras seemed to become even hazier. Had their concealment been strengthened?

Noi explained admiringly that while we could recognize the three knights as we were in the same mercenary group, others would have to concentrate very hard to perceive them. Beatrice's magic specialized in this kind of mental manipulation rather than attacks, which was quite scary to hear, but at least welcome right now.

Just then, the incubus burst into a sharp laugh.

[Kyahahahaha! There's no need to keep the hostages completely intact. So everyone, fall into nightmares!]

Dream demons usually entered humans' dreams after they fell asleep, but this twin was unnecessarily active. The succubus he had encountered on the sky island had been like this too. While he was clicking his tongue inwardly, the dark red energy instantly spread widely throughout the entire forest.

"Ugh, urgh..."

"Huk!"

The mercenaries clutched their heads in pain and some even collapsed to the ground. Beatrice swung her staff again to create a narrow shield encompassing just her surroundings, which included Noi and him. Using multiple spells simultaneously seemed to limit her range.

The holy knights in white uniforms on the other side staggered but barely managed to hold onto trees. They squeezed their eyes shut and recited scripture verses as if trying to draw forth holy power.

[Holy knights. I'll kill all the holy knights first!]

Hearing those words, the incubus flew towards them with fierce eyes. As his cries rapidly continued—that he would dye the holy knights' uniforms with bright red blood, that he would slaughter them, that he would destroy them in the most pathetic state—the energy spread more thickly. It was a nightmare containing curses.

Then Haren, Kalterik, and Mela moved. They advanced across the forest trees to catch the incubus hovering above the swamp. Though the tree trunks were uneven and difficult to balance on, the three moved very skillfully and quickly, and then...

*Swish!*

"I'm sick of nightmares now!"

Kalterik attacked while cutting through the dark red nightmare energy that had spread like fog. It was a very skillful response, having encountered this energy twice before. Was this why experienced workers were preferred?

Though the sword Kalterik had newly acquired from the market wasn't as large as his previous greatsword, its impact sound still rang terrifyingly. As he cleared away the dark red fog, Mela charged swiftly at the demon.

[Kya, kyaaak...!]

The incubus barely dodged, but Haren was waiting there. *Bang!* With a loud noise, the demon crashed into a tree. Its left wing was slightly torn.

Haren made a "Hmm" sound and twirled his sword a couple of times, seeming to gauge how much force the sword could withstand. If he had used the holy sword, the demon's wing might have been completely severed. Since disguise magic didn't work on holy objects, the holy sword was quietly stored in his other scabbard.

[Aaaack! What, what are you guys? Why are you so strong when you're not even holy knights...!]

The incubus tried to flee urgently. But then with a creak, Noi moved the trees to block the demon's path. Everyone acted quite boldly, taking advantage of the moment when all were fallen into nightmares, and the three knights didn't miss the opening created by the flustered demon.

*Thwack! Thud!* Since all three attacked without using holy power just in case, it sounded like they were beating with swords. He could understand that because demons had high physical resistance, meaning their outer skin was tough, they needed to strike that hard to cause harm without holy power, but... as sounds that should come from beating someone kept ringing out, he started to feel sorry for the guy.

[Wait, ugh, kyaaaa, kuk, uwaak!]

[...What's happening?]

The incubus, who had been getting hit from all sides while surrounded by the three, barely escaped with the Death Knight's help. The Death Knight shot black energy to push away the three knights.

In just two minutes, the incubus had been completely battered. His wings were torn, he limped on one leg, and both hands were completely crushed. It was thanks to the three concentrating their attacks to prevent him from releasing nightmare energy again. The incubus who had fled to the Death Knight's side cried out whimpering.

[There are strange guys here! Crazy guys with no holy power but incredible strength...!]

[Strong without holy power?]

While their conversation continued, people began to wake up one by one. As the nightmare energy spread by the incubus thinned, those who regained consciousness looked around the space in bewilderment when suddenly Kalterik staggered.

"Oh, oops. I'm dizzy! My head feels like it's going to split, kuaak!"

"...Ugh."

Even Mela groaned while clutching her forehead. Haren just watched his subordinates' performance with a face that seemed about to smile. Since they weren't visible to others' eyes anyway, they didn't really need to act.

### Chapter 81

Though it was an amusing scene, relief welled up inside. Though he had been wary when two demons appeared, fortunately, thanks to the experience of fighting the succubus, it seemed they could handle the incubus without much trouble. If that one disappeared, the uneasy anxiety in his heart would dissipate.

Then the problem now was the Death Knight...

[I'll leave Lily's revenge to you!]

[Hmm, though I don't know how to keep humans alive.]

[That's fine! I was going to use them as hostages to call other holy knights, but it can't be helped. But if everyone who came to the forest dies, won't the holy knights launch a major expedition?!]

At the incubus's cry, the Death Knight slowly nodded.

[Yes, it's time for humans to know. That our era is soon to come...]

With clanking friction sounds, the Death Knight stepped forward. Drawing a sword that looked like an animal's spine with a *shing–,* the Death Knight held it vertically in front of his face and ground out ominously.

[Now all that remains before humans is excruciating pain and miserable doom...]

Beatrice dropped a comment to him.

"That guy seems like he'd get along well with you."

*I really hate that.*

As he looked at Beatrice with disgust, she burst into giggles. She was clearly enjoying his gaze, saying it was amusing, but it was a reason he didn't want to know at all. Though he tried to move away because it was uncomfortable, Haren was far away, and if he moved away from her, he would leave the shield's range.

However, this leisure lasted only briefly. *Whoosh,* as darkness rippled from where the Death Knight stood, it soon spread like a wave across the area. This phenomenon was familiar to him.

[Uh, uuh...]

[Uuh, aaah...]

Things that looked like ghouls crawled out of the blackened ground, pressing their hands down *thud, thud.* He recognized them as undead from their translucent bodies. The Death Knight had summoned subordinate evil spirits, and there seemed to be about a hundred of them.

The subjugation team members were startled by the considerable number, but fortunately, the commander stepped forward to fulfill his role again.

"I-if it's undead, we won't lose to them! Everyone, form ranks!"

Though they didn't know how the incubus had been dealt with, they seemed to think responding to the evil spirits that had appeared now was the priority. It was a wise judgment.

"There shouldn't be any fools in Solares who would lose to undead! Everyone, get your wits about you!"

"Yes!"

As it was a time when antipathy towards necromancers was at its peak in the Holy Empire, the holy knights commanded while stimulating that, and the mercenaries shouted with fighting spirit and steadied their postures.

He looked around strangely at the scene where morale had truly risen. He should consider this fortunate, right, yes...

Loud noises erupted everywhere. The holy knights struck down monsters solemnly as if they absolutely couldn't lose to undead, and the mercenaries each swung their weapons vigorously. He deliberately pretended not to hear the occasional shouts of "That bastard Isaph!" coming from various places.

Taking advantage of everyone responding well, Haren, Kalterik, and Mela approached the Death Knight. That demon was unfortunately in the exact center of the swamp that spread out like an open field, making it difficult to approach through the trees.

*Creak–* Noi quietly looked around and moved tree trunks. Whenever the subjugation team made loud noises while facing monsters, he created paths by moving trees, and Kalterik gave him a thumbs up. He continued in spectator mode, cheering for them to resolve things well.

The Death Knight seemed completely unaware of the three approaching from behind as it only looked forward. They rushed at the demon simultaneously and struck down with their swords, *bang!* They attacked so hard that the ground shook.

But by the time those vibrations subsided, he had no choice but to drop his imaginary popcorn.

"...It disappeared?"

The Death Knight had moved to a completely different location. *What,* did it have some kind of teleportation skill? Beatrice also sighed quietly.

"Is it so fast because it's a soul, or is it because this prison is its domain?"

Its movement was completely invisible, and this seemed to be the case for the three knights as well. Haren's eyes narrowed strangely. Rather, only the incubus who had been beside the Death Knight was unexpectedly slammed into the ground.

[Kyaaak, what is thiiiis!]

[Yes, as you said, there really are strange ones here.]

An eerie muttering fell. While the incubus, who had barely escaped from the swamp with his half-remaining wing, squawked asking if it hadn't believed his words, the Death Knight held its sword vertically.

[I know humans' dull nature. To bind the feet of those suspicious ones...]

Then the Death Knight muttered something to its sword, but he couldn't understand the content of those words. It was a completely unfamiliar language. But, no, because of that, he seemed to know what language it was using. He had had this experience in the western Encroachment Zone before.

The demon was reciting the Dium's language. He had seen this on the sky island too, and then... it was when the third horn had appeared on the succubus.

*Whoosh!*

Finally, a black horn rose from the center of the Death Knight's forehead too. Simultaneously, an ominously sticky wind swept through the entire wetland, and energy as dark as an abyss spread out. The subjugation team hesitated at the black fog obscuring their vision, and the holy knights also urgently looked around.

But they had no time to create countermeasures.

[Guuuurgh...!]

Evil spirits were summoned from the swamp, and their number was several hundred. After barely dealing with a hundred earlier, now evil spirits numbering five or six times that sprang out. Everyone was shocked.

Moreover, these evil spirits didn't simply harm humans but grabbed them and dragged them into the swamp. Without time to resist, everyone was caught and pulled in.

"Aaaack!"

"H-help!"

It was pandemonium. Now the sounds coming from everywhere were not of striking down monsters, but the screams of humans struggling in the swamp. No matter how much the holy knights shouted to stay calm, people panic when their feet sink into sticky mud.

Moreover, even some holy knights were sucked into the swamp. They lay on the ground and struggled wildly trying to escape, but the evil spirits dragged them to deeper places.

Though Noi moved tree trunks to help while looking around nervously, and Beatrice also clicked her tongue while sending protective magic to other places, it wasn't easy to save all these people. As an evil spirit approached right next to him, he shrank further into the shield in disgust. *Go away. Shoo, shoo.*

From the other side, Haren commanded with a hardened face.

"We need to get the people out first. Mel, find and break through the weak points in the prison, and Derik, clear the evil spirits to make a path for people to escape through there. I'll keep the Death Knight tied down here."

"Yes."

"Understood!"

Mela and Kalterik quickly obeyed the command. The strategy seemed to be that Mela, being half-demon, would read the demonic energy well to identify where the prison was weak and create cracks, then evacuate people through there. After that, the three would probably fight more comfortably.

Meanwhile, the Death Knight remained still in the center of the swamp. After confirming no one was around, Haren ran quietly across the tree trunks, and finally, as he swung his sword.

[Haha, didn't I say humans have a dull nature.]

As the Death Knight burst into laughter, *whoosh!* Demonic energy rose from the ground. It was a trap.

[When their companions are caught, they try to save them first. And in that process, they inevitably make foolish choices. For instance, three who were together scatter, and only one comes to me.]

Haren quickly retreated to avoid the demonic energy that pounced like vines. It was a natural reflex, but it seemed the trap hadn't aimed for him in the first place. What the black demonic energy grabbed was another sword tied at his waist, the holy sword Piarus.

The Death Knight's eyes flickered as it looked at the ordinary scabbard hiding the holy sword.

[Yes, I kept being drawn to this. Whispers endlessly rang in my head like revelations. To steal it, this...]

As the black flames seemed to surge in the hollow eyes of the skull, finally splat! The holy sword was thrown into the swamp.

[To eliminate it from this land.]

Right after, the Death Knight rushed at Haren. It poured out attacks as if to prevent him from retrieving the holy sword from the swamp, and Haren calmly faced the creature. *Kwabang, bang!* Chilling loud noises rang out between them several times.

Fortunately, Haren wasn't pushed back by the demon. No, rather he seemed to be gaining the upper hand and even managed to cut off the demon's left arm by exploiting an opening.

However, this demon happened to be undead.

[Kuk, kuhaha, hahahahaha!]

The Death Knight approached Haren laughing madly as if it felt no pain even with its arm flying off. Though the crazed approach created openings, it didn't retreat even as half its face was blown away.

With dark red energy ominously flickering over half its face, the demon ground out. As if it had finally figured something out in this brutal brawl.

[Unknown being, you avoid properly crossing swords.]

The Death Knight held its sword vertically and attacked Haren. He tried to deflect the attack, but this seemed to have provided a clue to the demon as it had been repeated several times in their previous exchanges. The demon pressed even harder with its sword, and finally.

*Crack–!*

The sword Haren was holding shattered.

"..."

And in his head, watching from afar, something also seemed to break, snapping.

### Chapter 82

He muttered blankly.

"...You said you were good at disguise magic."

"What? Did you just address me as 'you'?"

At this moment, he was probably, no, definitely not in his right mind. He just spoke while feeling the stinging pain on his cheek from the wound made by the broken sword fragments on Haren's face, sensing that faint pain more sharply than anything else.

"I just need a moment."

Beatrice seemed to be shouting something, but it didn't reach his ears. He walked with his gaze fixed on only one place.

All sorts of thoughts poured through his mind in a torrent. Even while throwing questions at himself—what could he possibly do here, a realistic doubt; criticism about approaching a demon, calling himself crazy; mockery that this was no different from suicide—he couldn't stop his feet.

Yes, this was clearly reckless and dangerous. With no NPC around, maybe the player should just quietly watch. Even now, wasn't Haren somehow picking up weapons scattered on the ground to face the demon again? Waiting while buying time like this until Kalterik and Mela could get everyone out would be the wisest course of action.

[Hahaha! How long do you think you can keep dodging!]

However, until then, Haren would have to keep getting hurt. The Death Knight didn't miss the openings created in the knight who had lost his sword, and gradually more small wounds accumulated on Haren's body. Though he was trying to avoid direct confrontation as much as possible, since he couldn't show the hero's recovery ability to either the demon or the mercenaries here, even that was difficult in the swamp.

Perhaps he was angry now. He had warned him so much to be careful because he didn't want to feel pain, yet he still ended up getting hurt. From the start, the idea of trying to tie down the demon alone had been far from safe, and all his nerves were on edge with anger at why he had naturally made that choice.

As the Death Knight's sword plunged down towards him, he screamed out that name.

"Haren!"

[...How did you come here?]

A solution flashed like lightning in his mind. Though it was an ability he had never used before, and no separate action key appeared on the status window, he strangely felt like he could definitely do it. It was a bizarre certainty.

The Death Knight, who had been pressing Haren hard, turned to look at him who had suddenly appeared. It seemed to find it strange that he hadn't been caught by the evil spirits on his way here, but they hadn't been able to properly approach him in the first place.

Would detaching the Death Knight's soul now solve all problems? No, he needed an even more definitive method. To eliminate the fundamental cause of this commotion...

He reached out his hand towards the Death Knight, towards the necromancer knight, towards that 'soul'.

"Stay still."

Purple energy burst like an explosion. Through the energy swirling like a whirlpool, he heard someone exclaim from afar, "That crazy bastard."

A twilight-colored magic circle flew urgently to cover him. Since it couldn't hide everything completely, his energy changed to black as if trying to make it look like demonic energy. To others, it might look like a scene of two people being swept up in the demonic energy released by the Death Knight. Though it would only be disguised for about two minutes, that was enough.

His energy transformed into ropes and bound the Death Knight's entire body. As the sword pointed at Haren stopped, its arm trembled. Though only dark red flames flickered in its hollow eyes, it looked as if shocked. The scene of losing its own will and submitting to another's command.

The Death Knight had become subjugated to him.

[Ku, kuaaak! This is impossible!]

The demon let out a horrible scream and *whoosh–* retreated far away. Barely resisting the subjugation, it moved far away. Fleeing to the center of the swamp, it quickly cut down nearby trees to block all paths approaching it.

But the Death Knight still had ropes around it. It frantically tried to tear them off with its one remaining arm, but before it could remove them all, he gestured.

"Come here."

Since he couldn't go to the swamp, he had to call the Death Knight here. Though nausea welled up from pouring out so much energy, he barely suppressed it while summoning his undead too. It was an unavoidable choice to drag over the creature that was resisting and holding out.

He hoped his undead would blend in since it was already a space full of hundreds of evil spirits. Still, he made them rise only their heads from the swamp, not their full bodies, to grab the Death Knight. While the subjugation team members screamed as they were dragged into the swamp, the Death Knight let out horrible screams as it was dragged out.

Though his weak undead were destroyed by the Death Knight's fierce resistance, they still ultimately obeyed his command and brought the demon. They were beings loyal beyond measure whenever he saw them.

[A-attack this guy, all of you! Kill him, I say!]

The demon hurriedly commanded its evil spirits. It was quite chilling to have hundreds of evil spirits spread throughout the forest turn to look at him simultaneously, but this made him even more confident in his current method. If he could subjugate this Death Knight even for a moment.

[There's no way I would fall to the likes of you...!]

"Shut up and kneel."

He might be able to control even its subordinate evil spirits. Based on that judgment, he scraped up energy to his limit and poured it out. He stood stubbornly even through the dizzying vertigo.

The Death Knight was incomparable to the ordinary citizen-like undead that Isaph had controlled until now. Moreover, with this body he had panted heavily just from summoning a few dozen, so he didn't know what confidence made him step up to try to subjugate this demon.

Was it an absurd confidence that he might not lose when it came to necromancy, or was it fury at the situation where he could no longer treat 'his' wounds as someone else's problem? Or... because the image of that being alone in a space full of the smell of blood was particularly deeply embedded in his mind.

The feeling that he absolutely couldn't see that sight again finally took the form of anger.

[Ku, aak! Aaak, kuaa...! Ah, aah...]

Finally thud, the Death Knight knelt before him. As purple light spread momentarily through the dark red flames, its body went limp. The demon collapsed in a gesture that looked like making a bow of submission.

Just then, his strength completely drained and he staggered with relief.

"It's over... hup."

*Don't raise a flag.* As he hurriedly covered his mouth, the Death Knight's flames flared up *whoosh!* It raised its upper body and reached out towards him.

[You...!]

*Ugh,* was even the 0.5 flag activating?

But just before that hand could touch his leg, *swish!* A pure white sword cut it off. Haren. He had retrieved the holy sword from the swamp and blown away the demon's arm. Though he usually swung it gently and lightly, this time it was an attack that even gave a violent feeling.

It was surprising enough that he used holy power with the holy sword, but Haren even tried to thrust down his sword as if to completely kill the demon. He hurriedly stopped him.

"Ah, don't kill it yet."

Right now he had subjugated the Death Knight and was controlling even its hundreds of subordinate evil spirits. Though it would only last a few minutes, they were using this to rescue the subjugation team members who had fallen into the swamp, so if the Death Knight was killed, those undead would disappear too.

The subjugation team members were dazedly pulled out of the swamp by the evil spirits, and his companions looked at him with surprised faces, having noticed the truth of this situation. Only Beatrice repeatedly made strange exclamations of "That, that, that!" while pointing fingers. Now she even grabbed the back of her neck.

He knew that when Haren drew his holy sword, she had panicked and manipulated the area so sunlight spread throughout the forest. Everyone's vision would have temporarily turned white. Beatrice leaned exhaustedly on her staff and lamented that she had joined the wrong mercenary group, and he sympathized with the feeling of being deceived about employment.

Still, because it had been so chaotic, the subjugation team members didn't seem to have seen his necromancy and Haren's holy sword. Of course, Beatrice's magic had played a big part, and to the mercenaries' eyes, it would have looked like the forest had been full of black demonic energy before suddenly being filled with bright white sunlight as the situation ended, so some even gave thanks to God with moved faces.

At this amusing scene, his strength drained completely and his body collapsed. Haren supported him with his arm as he fell.

"That was reckless."

"You used the holy sword too..."

Weren't they both equally reckless? Of course, the part Haren was pointing out would be trying to subjugate the Death Knight, but he deliberately changed the subject.

Moreover, by that logic, he had more to question. Trying to tie down the demon alone in a situation where he couldn't properly use holy power. It was miraculous that he had ended up with just a few light wounds. Though those weren't visible on him now, he now knew what was hidden under the perfect mask.

*Swish,* he reached out to Haren.

It was an action committed in a quite dazed state. He traced where he had felt the pain on his own cheek, and the reason would only be to check if he was hiding his wounds while pretending to be fine again. That must certainly be it. Otherwise, there would be no way to explain why he had suddenly touched Haren's face.

"..."

Even at this bewildering action, Haren didn't push his hand away but quietly looked at him. Their gazes tangled in the air silently before he belatedly startled. Why wasn't he avoiding it?

### Chapter 83

He also just realized he was in Haren's arms and quickly got up. It was shocking that he had relaxed for even a moment, finding his embrace cozy.

He moved far away from him as if fleeing from the discomfort and embarrassment. Moving quickly while dizzy made his vertigo worse, so he leaned against a tree and took deep breaths.

Meanwhile, Mela had broken the prison to let the mercenaries out, and Kalterik pretended to hurry them while secretly hitting the holy knights' backs hard. The holy knights left for the outside, tilting their heads in bewilderment as if this situation was completely confusing.

"What on earth happened...?"

"Did Solnium's grace really save us..."

Having no countermeasures for variables and only being cautious of the swamp, they hadn't been able to observe their surroundings from the moment the demons appeared. Moreover, they themselves had been struggling in the swamp. Though he had once clicked his tongue at their inadequacy, now it was truly fortunate.

*Haah,* he had sincerely not wanted to participate in the monster subjugation, and he sighed at his complicated feelings in many ways. Well, it had been resolved well anyway.

By the way, it felt like he kept forgetting something...

[It was you.]

Just then, something ground out in a shocked tone nearby. The moment he heard that high voice, the back of his neck went cold and he got goosebumps.

*Ah,* the incubus was still here.

[The purple energy I saw in dreams, it was you. It was definitely you! You're the one who killed Lily!]

It happened in an instant. The incubus who had been hiding somewhere in the swamp flew at him immediately. Though both its hands were crushed, it didn't seem to be a problem for it. As it reached out its blackened rotting hands towards his face, it shouted.

With eyes bulging as if about to pop out, filled with terrifying hatred.

[I've been creating a curse for revenge since that day. To tear you apart horribly...!]

*Bang!* Mela, who had shot over, kicked the incubus away. Then Kalterik hit it with his sword as if to smash its head in, and after that, trees rose from the swamp to bind the incubus tightly and pull it back. They acted boldly even though they hadn't finished evacuating all the subjugation team members yet.

Though it was surprising that the three who had been busy with other things had rushed to save him...

"..."

He blankly touched his forehead. Just now, his forehead had definitely touched the incubus's. Though it was just a tiny collision, the moment he recalled it, *thump!* His heart beat loudly. Though his unconscious warned that he should push it away, he had already used up all his body's energy and had none left.

A terrible pain came that felt like his head was being split and his breath was being choked off. *Huk,* as he clutched his chest and inhaled, he heard a strange sound from behind.

"Ah."

It was Haren's sigh. A somewhat startled breath. As if chased by an ominous premonition, he turned to look at him and saw that he too was clutching his chest. Their eyes met directly in the air.

A conversation they had shared one dawn struck his mind like lightning.

'You can assume my condition won't affect you much since your soul is much purer. Unless it's something like being hit by a serious curse.'

*Shit.*

Was that the flag he should have been careful of?

With that curse as his last words, his consciousness flew away.

\*\*\*

He kept wandering in pitch darkness.

In a space where he couldn't distinguish front from back or up from down, he was endlessly chased by something. Whether he was looking for an exit, or just fleeing pressed down by fear. Following an eerie premonition that he would die if caught, he ran without even knowing what was coming from where.

But taking one step, he fell off a cliff. With the next step he plunged into a boiling volcano, then into a freezing polar sea, and even felt the sensation of being trapped in a space full of venomous snakes. Various forms of death crawled over his body.

It felt like dying in dozens, hundreds of ways.

There was nothing he could do against this terrible pain. He could only flee in fear of something even more painful chasing him. Though he ran until he was out of breath, contradictorily his whole body gradually grew cold, and finally, just as even his breath was freezing and about to shatter.

"You need to wake up, Isaph."

At the voice falling by his ear, his eyes flew open. That clear voice pulled him up from the dark abyss in an instant. It was such a shocking sensation that he stiffened while gasping "huk", and someone beside him raised him up. He recognized who it was from the firm touch.

Haren.

However, before he could properly look at him, Haren fed him something. He received and ate what came to his mouth without being able to resist. Whether it was because he was too surprised, or because he unconsciously thought Haren wouldn't feed him anything strange. Only after swallowing it all did he realize he had eaten a healing potion.

"You seemed to be having nightmares, and your energy kept dropping, so I had to wake you."

*Ah,* so the darkness he had wandered in was a nightmare. It had felt so real that he still had goosebumps. He looked around while completely exhausted, covered in cold sweat. It was a large, splendid room. The room given to the mercenary group hadn't been this big and luxurious.

"Where is this...?"

"It's a reward given to the mercenary group that distinguished itself in this subjugation. Many mercenaries saw you dealing with the incubus at the end. You acted too grandly for even Beatrice's magic to cover it up."

The following explanation was simple. The lord had expected to need several subjugation attempts to eliminate the monsters, but they had cleared them all in the first attempt, and even dealt with demons, so he was very pleased. Therefore, he would hold a party tomorrow and give a big reward to the mercenary group that had achieved the greatest merit, and this room was part of that.

Seeing that the other companions weren't around, perhaps they had stepped out to let him rest comfortably. Just then, there was a knock from outside and Haren moved. He seemed to have requested warm water and towels from the annex's servant beforehand, as he received a tray while exchanging some words.

The room was so large that the distance from the bed to the door was quite far. Looking at his back, he moved as quickly as possible. However, having rushed too much with a body that had just woken up, he fell with a *crash!* Returning, Haren made a very subtle expression looking at him.

"...Why are you tying yourself up?"

"D-don't come closer and leave."

Right now, he was facing the corner of the room, tying his ankles to a table leg, and had even summoned undead to bind his wrists. Only here did he confirm that he could now summon them one at a time. Though the undead soon disappeared as he didn't have the energy to maintain the summon for long, and he knew this would look quite ridiculous, he had no choice.

Red alerts kept ringing endlessly in his head. His body had been feverish since he woke up, and *damn it,* this heat was similar to 'that day' on the sky island. Even if he tried to treat that day as if it never happened, it was a memory he absolutely couldn't forget.

Why did the dream demon twins have to be identical even in this?

But he was chased by an even stranger sensation than back then, and that was... the shocking intuition that he might pounce on Haren with one wrong move. Was he being instinctively drawn to a being full of holy power in this space, or what?

As even his consciousness started to blur while he struggled to hold on, Haren asked,

"Do you have a fever?"

"D-don't ask, just leave!"

"If so, that's rather fortunate."

Though he shouted fiercely, somehow the answer that came back was strange. What's fortunate about this? He was in danger of losing his humanity right now! When he glared at Haren, he approached with a quiet sigh, bringing the cloth that had been on the side table and spreading it out in front of him.

The cloth that must have been pure white was completely stained with dark red blotches. Only when he smelled the sharp metallic scent at his nose did he recognize it as blood.

"This is the blood you vomited earlier."

"What?"

"Your body kept getting colder from the moment you collapsed in the forest. The curse you were hit with this time is different from what you suffered from the succubus on the sky island. It seems to be a curse that kills by trapping you in nightmares and draining your energy..."

Though he hadn't been completely trapped in the nightmare since he was hit when the incubus's hands were useless, he said the curse was fatal because his body was weak. He blinked blankly. Come to think of it, Haren had said something similar when he woke him up too.

"If you fall asleep again, you might be trapped in nightmares forever. So if your body is feverish now, that's your final survival instinct. Because a dream demon's curse can be eliminated by resolving sexual desire."

Haren's explanation continued very calmly. Though he said it was the body instinctively burning up trying to live while on the brink of death, it wasn't entirely welcome news.

In dreams he suffered from the fear that nightmares would devour him, and in reality he was in danger of devouring others.

However, even in this absurd situation, there was one thing he was curious about.

"You... aren't you in pain?"

He had definitely seen Haren clutch his chest when he was hit by the curse in the forest. Moreover, given how serious the curse's content seemed, there was a high probability it had been shared, yet he looked quite fine now.

### Chapter 84

At his question, Haren moved his lips a couple of times before slowly nodding. He looked as if he hadn't expected this question to come first in a situation where they had been hit by a dangerous curse.

"Yes. I can feel the curse, but I can endure it."

"That's good... Then I'll manage on my own, haa, I'll try to stay awake, so you should leave quickly."

Was it because his holy soul wasn't greatly affected by a demon's curse, or was his mental strength that strong? Thinking how envious that was, he again ordered him to leave. Though he understood why sexual desire was boiling up, if he just didn't fall asleep again, he wouldn't be trapped in nightmares, right?

So he hoped Haren would quickly disappear from his sight, but he didn't leave.

"How long do you think you can endure in that state? Are you planning to never sleep for the rest of your life?"

"That's, huh, not something for you to worry about."

"...Then you shouldn't have worried either."

It was a very strange response. But he had no leisure to question it again, and moreover, his mind went blank as he saw Haren approaching him.

He shook his head urgently and shouted.

"Don't come closer...!"

"How do you intend to handle all that demonic energy with that weak body? The pain tearing your body will only get worse as time passes, and you'll vomit blood again. So it's better to resolve it quickly and end it."

Haren answered with utmost calmness as he bent down in front of him. Though he shouted at him not to come, he kept fidgeting as if wanting to touch the being imbued with holy power, causing his wrists and ankles to become red and swollen from rubbing against the ropes. Haren seemed bothered by this and carefully untied the ropes.

Yes, his actions might have been the compassion of a merciful hero. It was just a ridiculous situation where he had meddled and gotten hit by a demon's curse, yet he was taking care of even this. Perhaps he had resolved himself relatively easily since they had already done it once on the sky island, but...

*Shit,* there was a reason he was telling him not to come...!

"...Ah."

Crash, as soon as the ropes binding him were untied, a loud noise rang through the room. This noise occurred between him and Haren, because his body had lost control and suddenly rushed into his arms.

Haren received him in his arms as he sat down, almost falling backward. Though his unconscious kindness ingrained in his body was admirable, it was a very regrettable thing for him. Straddling his legs, he recklessly brought his face close...

"Huk. Why, why aren't you avoiding..."

Just before their lips collided, he barely grasped his reason.

They had almost touched dangerously. With the feeling of barely holding back the reins of a charging horse, he lowered his head. Even then, Haren didn't move at all and just looked at him, making him feel suddenly indignant.

More than him, no, he was someone with reflexes incomparably better than him, so why wasn't he avoiding? He could have thrown him aside, or at least covered his mouth. There were so many ways to subdue him!

For a moment, Haren's eyes seemed to waver, but he had no leisure to pay attention to that. He pleaded urgently.

"Quickly, tie me up again."

"..."

"Huu, please, I'm not in my right mind..."

Already his body out of control had started rubbing against Haren. Though he had lowered his head unable to face him, his forehead pressed against Haren's nape of its own accord, and even his lower body tried to move. Though he barely held that back, he didn't know when he might commit a crazy act.

From the moment he touched Haren, he couldn't separate from him by his own will. So the only way was for Haren to tie him up, and he urged desperately, but the answer came very late.

"...If you're in this state, just ask for help."

"No, no. I don't need help. So hurry... Huk!"

Haren reached out his hand. A high-pitched sound escaped as he felt a sensation burrowing into his waistband. Perhaps thinking that the heat would subside if he relieved him once with his hand like before, he gently wrapped around his fully erect member.

"Huut...!"

And as soon as Haren's hand touched him, splurt, white fluid burst out from the tip of his member. His mind went dizzy as he reached climax in an instant, and though this situation was truly shameful, the damn pleasure was so intense that he tightly hugged Haren and trembled all over.

Even after ejaculating once, his member didn't die down but rather swelled even more stiffly. From the moment Haren had reached out his hand, he had sensed this method wouldn't be possible, and now he too must know that his condition was far more abnormal than last time.

"This, hic, won't work. So hurry and tie me up, huu, or just knock me out. I'll just be trapped in nightmares, okay?"

"...Being trapped in nightmares means you might never wake up."

"It's fine. I won't die, right?"

He blurted out incoherently. Since the failure penalty for the quest to help the hero was death, wouldn't he not die in this situation? This was a situation where he got cursed while helping. No, then would he die for not helping properly in the end? Because he was trying to devour the hero? *Shit,* his head was too dizzy to judge.

He wanted to find the NPC and argue, but then the urgent judgment that it shouldn't be here now followed. These scattered thoughts pouring out were definitely not normal.

Sensing the precarious limit, he begged Haren almost sobbing.

"You hate me, don't you? This situation must be horrible for you. So please..."

"...I don't, hate you that much."

The belated answer contained incredibly unexpected content. It was such a puzzling and bewildering statement that he raised his head to look at the other, wondering if he had heard wrong.

Of course, enough reason remained to judge that not hating didn't mean liking. However, he was suddenly surprised to find no disgust in the blue eyes he now faced. At first there had been a faint disgust as if dealing with a necessary evil, but it seemed to have disappeared at some point.

When was that? When he came to wake him from the nightmare? Or before that? As he vaguely traced his memories, Haren spoke calmly.

"If you're not in your right mind, we should be more careful. Tying you up won't make the curse disappear, and if you lose your reason and go wild, it would be a big problem. Also, knocking you out now won't solve the problem either..."

"But there's no other way, huu, so we have to gamble."

"Why isn't there another way?"

"...What?"

The conversation seemed to be going off track. No, was he unconsciously rejecting Haren's words? As he blinked blankly, Haren reached out to his face. Seeing transparent liquid on his fingertips that had lightly brushed his eyes, he realized then that tears had formed at the corners of his eyes.

He must look unsightly with his face all red from the heat and even shedding tears. He wanted to hide from embarrassment, but from the moment Haren's hand, that is, bare skin, touched him, his body lost control again. Even this small contact was enough to make his body burn.

He let out a moan as he tilted his face to follow the hand, almost as if drawn by a magnet. It was difficult to hold back this dog-like body with the handful of reason remaining. Before he really became a dog...!

"I told you I can feel the curse too."

Just then, Haren's low voice rang in his ear. Before he could judge what it meant, the hand that had almost touched his face finally cupped his cheek, and then their lips met. Haren had tilted his head and kissed him first.

Was the act of lowering the shield that had been blocking the curse mercy, or impulse?

"...!"

The moment the warm, soft flesh overlapped, all thought stopped. He was surprised by the sensation of their lips meeting, then shocked by the breath he felt between their lips... His reason completely evaporated. From that moment on, he pounced on Haren like a madman.

He hugged Haren's neck and kissed him frantically. He couldn't even tell if he had inserted his tongue first or not. He just clung desperately to the breath the saint was giving as if it were the elixir of life, and though they were already close, he moved his body wanting to go deeper, never satisfied.

This feeling was a first. The sensation of hot, moist flesh tangling and rubbing together, and the sensation of lips crushing against each other were so shocking. Was the saint's breath sweeter because he was imbued with holy power, or was he just so aroused that even a kiss excited him this much?

Each stimulus felt like it was smashing his head. The wet sounds spreading in his mouth echoed loudly in his head, and heavy breaths kept falling between their lips.

"Just a moment, mm...?"

Haren withdrew from the overheating kiss, but he could hardly bear even a moment's gap. He pounced on him again and kissed him, growling as he bit his lip as if reproaching the previous action. It was an irritated sound rumbling in his throat.

Finally, Haren grabbed his shoulders firmly and pulled him away.

"Breathe properly. If you don't breathe at all while doing this—"

Haren's voice didn't properly enter his head. Whether some admonition followed or not, he just felt sad. His body was firmly held by both hands so he couldn't rush forward like before.

"Again, do it again quickly. Kiss me right now."

Already addicted to Haren's breath, being separated even for a moment now was too painful. It was an even greater pain than what he had felt in the nightmare. Resentment even welled up that if he was going to separate him like this, he shouldn't have shared that breath in the first place.

As he glared at him with wide eyes, urging him to kiss again, Haren let out a dry laugh. He seemed surprised by the changed attitude of the being who had been shouting at him to get away until just moments ago.

### Chapter 85

He could sense from Haren's reaction that his reason was still intact, and he also knew that his behavior must look ridiculous to him, but he couldn't help it. He was just frustrated at not being able to kiss him.

As if the other had taken something away from him, he glared at him as if he were the bad person, then fumblingly wrapped his hands around his neck. Suddenly, his throat felt like it was being torn apart.

"Huk..."

His throat felt like it was cracking like a desert from excessive thirst. When he suddenly clutched his throat in pain, Haren seemed flustered and checked his condition.

He moved his hand from his shoulder to cup his face, calling "Isaph?", but he didn't miss this opportunity. He immediately pounced on him and crashed their lips together again. In fact, this was closer to a collision of lips rather than a kiss.

A dry laugh sounded inside their connected mouths, but he kissed as if to swallow even that. Desperately, he also tightly hugged his neck, fearing Haren might pull away again. As their upper bodies pressed together without a gap, heat boiled in his stomach.

He moved his lower body without even knowing exactly what it was. He just moaned, constantly rubbing against him following his instinct, and as his already exposed member brushed against Haren's clothes, an intense pleasure welled up.

In his mind, only the desire to touch Haren more, to savor his energy in a deeper place, arose. Even just hugging him and intertwining their tongues made clear liquid flow continuously from the tip of his member, so what would happen if an even more intimate place touched?

Dominated by sexual desire, he clung to Haren endlessly. The sensation of brushing against his tongue felt so good that he wanted to push his entire body into him. The more he kissed, the happier he felt, but he also grew more distressed. He needed a greater stimulus.

"Kissing alone isn't enough..."

Around that time, Haren seemed to notice his condition and muttered. Had he expected it to subside somewhat if he shared his breath? But it only brought about the opposite result, and now he was really on the verge of going crazy with impatience. No, he was already crazy.

"Quickly, huu, quickly."

Without even knowing what he was urging, he moved his body following his instinct. No longer satisfied with just kissing, he leaned his head on Haren's nape and groaned, but the body scent he felt there was so addictive that he buried his lips in it. Wanting to breathe it in more deeply, he kept moving his mouth and also moved his hands to stroke his skin.

Wanting to touch an even wider area, he unbuttoned the buttons filled to the neck. He wanted to rip off all the buttons or tear the shirt completely away, but shit, his hands had no strength. This was unfair. Moreover, because he was in a hurry, the buttons wouldn't even unfasten properly, and he had to fumble several times.

Haren sighed at the sight of him struggling to undress him. No, was it a laugh? Whatever it was, Haren's breath falling on his ear was so stimulating that he shuddered all over, and finally irritably ordered him.

"Why are there so many buttons, huu. Take it off quickly."

"You're the only one who orders me around, and the only one who tells me to do such things."

"What am I supposed to do... Even the imperial princess is annoying like that..."

Haren's words, muttered like a sigh, held no weight for him at all. He just grumbled as someone who had shown a similar reaction suddenly came to mind, and for some reason, a faint smile spread on Haren's lips. Was his reaction amusing, or was he pleased by the statement that seemed to dislike the imperial princess?

...*But my words meant that you're strange too for acting just like the imperial princess, so why are you smiling?* Maybe the curse was affecting his head too. Various thoughts arose and evaporated repeatedly in a jumble.

Just *thud, thud,* as Haren unbuttoned his shirt, he pounced on him like a madman, pushed the clothes aside and kissed him. His body scent was addictive. Though it was a body he had touched before while healing, the sensation touching his fingertips now brought a very different stimulus from then.

He couldn't prioritize what he wanted to do now. He kissed Haren's lips as if intoxicated by his body scent, swallowing the fragrance, then fumblingly touched his upper body wanting to savor everything with his hands, and buried and rubbed his body against him as if wanting to be held in his firm embrace. He wanted to touch closely in any way possible.

Haren moved his hand at his urgent actions. He probably meant to pat his shoulder to calm him down for not breathing properly again, but as he was in the middle of rubbing his body, his neck touched unexpectedly. *Clank–* the collar rattled.

And as if that sensation had ignited some interest, his hand slowly moved. Like before, he wrapped around his neck, but this time not just with his thumb and index finger, but his entire palm enveloped and stroked it.

"A handful..."

Muttering these strange words, Haren lowered his head and kissed his nape. He licked his neckline with his tongue, then opened his mouth as if gauging the thickness of his neck, and finally bit down hard. As if he had wanted to do this for a very long time, he bit his neck.

"Ah...!"

Haren hesitated at the high-pitched cry that burst from his mouth. He stiffened as if he had done it impulsively, but he was frustrated by this gap that had been created. With a burning impatience, he urged him.

"Continue, continue. Okay?"

He poured out his plea in a commanding tone. The moment Haren's lips touched his neck, pleasure rose tinglingly to its limit and his mind went blank. Wanting to feel that sensation again, he urged him to bite quickly, and Haren stared at him intently. Was it amusing to see the person who used to recoil even at the slightest touch now clinging to him like this?

For a moment his blue eyes seemed to flicker deeply, and then he buried his lips in his neck again. He sucked much more deeply than before, biting hard and persistently tormenting his nape. A sound like kissing rang out. The friction sound of the collar rattling also mixed in.

As he kept fidgeting, Haren wrapped his arms around his waist to hold him, and even that firm touch excited him. His head tingled as Haren's fingers accidentally dug into the gap between his slightly rolled-up clothes.

*Huut,* finally he trembled all over while hugging Haren's neck. White fluid gushed out between their touching lower abdomens. When he had touched and clung to Haren, he had only felt the precursor to ejaculation and felt frustrated, but he reached climax just from Haren kissing his neck. His whole body shuddered.

From that moment on, his mind flew away. Though he hadn't been in his right mind for a while, from that point on he started committing even crazier acts. Addicted to the tingling pleasure, he took off his own top and pounced on Haren. He only thought it was fortunate there were no buttons.

When their bare skin touched, a pleasure beyond imagination rushed in and a "Huu" crying sound escaped. Haren also seemed to be gradually swept up in the curse, as he kissed various parts of his body with increasingly hazy eyes. While grasping his waist as if caressing it, he pressed his lips firmly onto his exposed ribs.

"I knew you were weak, but to this extent..."

His tone was as if surprised that his body was much thinner and frailer than he had thought, but he just focused on the ticklish sensation of Haren's hair brushing against his chest and moved his whole body. He moaned while hugging his head.

Because his reason had completely flown away, he rather clearly realized what he wanted. His instinct pointed to the answer. All this time he had been urging something he didn't even know, but now he knew what the desire to touch deeply meant. He rubbed his lower body and pleaded almost sobbing.

"Haa, I want to touch more. I want to connect, I need to put it inside, I want to swallow..."

It felt like the fire boiling inside would only subside if he received his energy in the deepest, most intimate place. He didn't even have the mind to choose what words were more appropriate to express this, so he just blurted out whatever came to mind. They were probably words that almost teased the other person.

As he kept whispering against his ear, Haren answered slowly.

"Not yet. I said we should do it slowly, carefully at first..."

His tone seemed somewhat perplexed. It sounded as if he too was unfamiliar with the situation of doing for the first time what he had only learned academically, but there was no way his careful persuasion would reach his ears.

"I don't care. Quickly, huh, please do it quickly."

"Just calm down a little..."

"What do you mean calm down, hic, don't be annoying."

Perhaps crazy, no, clearly having gone mad, he reached for Haren's waistband first. He rushed to perform the task of stripping off his clothes and connecting with him.

### Chapter 86

*Crash,* but the other was too strong to be knocked down by his charge. He struggled with both wrists caught and finally fell back noisily. It looked like he was throwing a fit, unable to control himself.

Though Haren's reason had blurred compared to before, he could still feel its presence, and he knew his actions must look like a tremendous outburst to such a person, but he was just angry. No, he was beyond frustrated to an extent that couldn't be fully explained by the word indignant.

The heat in his body boiled more the more he touched him, burning fiercely as if it would melt his entire body, yet Haren was bad for still not dousing it with water. He was the one who chose this method, and he was the one who first offered to help!

"Why, why won't you put it in!"

"Haah..."

Haren let out a long sigh. For a moment, a torrent of various emotions seemed to flash across his face, then he hugged him as he rolled around on the floor throwing a fit. He lifted him lightly and walked somewhere, and just this contact was enough to flip his mood.

He hugged Haren's neck, buried his face in his chest, rubbing against it and growling. Pleasure spread tinglingly. Fumblingly, he moved his hands to caress his back under the loosened shirt. He could feel firm muscles rippling with each step.

When Haren tried to put him down again, he clung tightly, not wanting to separate, but Haren stroked his shoulder soothingly. Only when something soft touched his waist did he realize he had been laid on a bed.

He could sense what was about to happen in this new location.

"Just wait a moment..."

So when Haren tried to leave him, seemingly to look for something, he urgently grabbed his arm. Following an instinctive judgment, he abruptly put that hand in his mouth. The straight fingers were too long and large to swallow completely, so he just put the index and middle fingers in. Even that filled his mouth, and heavy breaths burst out.

*Huk,* when he forcibly pushed them in, his surprised body tried to spit them out, but his lust was greater. Even as this body suffered, it wanted to touch Haren more deeply, so it tightened its throat and sucked on his hand. *Chup, tsup,* wet sounds rang out continuously.

"..."

Haren stiffened at his sudden action. The emotion in his eyes as he looked down at him was probably bewilderment, but gradually his eyes too became hazy, as if covered by a misty fog.

"Huup, huk."

At some point, Haren seemed to move his hand directly. He rubbed his tongue, tormented under his tongue slickly, then suddenly pushed his fingers into his throat and stirred, making him wrap around Haren's wrist and sob. Whether he wanted to stop him or was urging him pleadingly.

At least one thing was certain now - neither of them was in their right mind anymore. They just moved following their peripheral desire to touch each other more. Haren, who had withdrawn his hand, kissed him, and he clung to him, moving his lower body. Their bodies tangled stickily.

His pants were quickly removed, and Haren's wet hand fumblingly found the hole and dug in.

"Hu, ah...!"

It was a foreign sensation he had never experienced in his life. He had never thought something would enter there, so a reflexive aversion arose, but an even greater pleasure crushed all resistance. From the moment their lips met, from when his tongue entered his body, a joyful elation came that he had wanted this.

Heat spread through his body again. Flames much hotter than before burned his entire body. It spread blazingly, incinerating his reason and rushing to every extremity - fingertips, toes. Clear liquid flowed continuously from the tip of his member.

He sobbed as he tilted his head back. The fingers that had entered him from behind had increased to two, gradually widening his inner walls, gently rubbing in circles as if soothing the tightly tensed inside, and sometimes lightly scratching. It felt like his inner walls were tightening as if wary of the unfamiliar intruder, but also clinging as if welcoming it.

The stimulation that had been simmering from his lower back rose sharply up his spine when the third finger entered and touched a certain point. *Splurt,* semen gushed out from his rigidly erect member into the air. He didn't know how many times he had ejaculated already.

He couldn't come to his senses. No, it had been quite a while since he had even tried to. He just moved his lower body and pleaded with Haren.

"Quickly, hic, put it in now. Hurry..."

"Don't, be impatient. To avoid getting hurt, we need to be, as careful as possible..."

Haren's voice sounded hoarsely cracked. A voice barely holding onto patience. Wanting to pull him down from where he stood on crumbling reason, he grabbed his neck and pulled.

"I don't care if it hurts. Just hurry..."

"Isaph."

Suddenly Haren's voice became coldly firm. Even in his dizziness, realizing he had chosen the wrong answer, he hurriedly searched for another. Shaking his head as if it had just been a mistake, he whispered with his forehead buried in Haren's nape.

"I want to touch you..."

"..."

"Okay? Haren, please..."

He struggled to turn his mind to find moments when Haren had seemed pleased. Probably when he had called his name, his nickname, so he kept that name on his lips constantly.

*Ha,* a short breath sounded by his ear. That suppressed sigh sounded like something snapping. Sensing the goal was in sight, he kept rubbing his head to urge him on, and then something seemed to move below.

*Kuuuk,* something huge pushed into his inner walls. A sensation incomparably greater than what he had felt with fingers rushed in all at once. His body, intoxicated with sexual pleasure, trembled with joy that they had finally touched, finally connected, and sank into ecstasy, but...

"Huk."

That stimulus struck the back of his head, and his mind returned as if startled. His reason, which had melted into formlessness in the heat, suddenly rose like a final survival instinct.

*Shit,* what just pierced my body?

Until now, all reflexive aversion stemming from physiological pain had been crushed by pleasure, but this time a shocking extreme pain beyond that level came. His whole body felt like it was being split in half, pierced by something so thick and huge. His hole felt like it was tearing, and his stomach like it would burst. He didn't even have the courage to look down and check.

He inhaled and finally let out something close to dry heaving.

"Uurk, wait, wait a moment. This doesn't seem right, uuuk."

Haren hesitated as he kept retching while pushing at his shoulders. Seeing how genuinely distressed he looked, Haren stopped all movement and... slowly withdrew. Though it should have been a welcome situation, incredibly, a spasmodic anger rose as Haren moved away.

A revulsion as if watching all the sexual pleasure he had carefully built up suddenly collapse and be ruined. So he was in a state where he was more frustrated by Haren moving away from him than the pain of his body splitting. Sobbing with welling frustration, he pulled Haren's shoulders again.

"Ah, no. Don't leave. Damn it, just a moment..."

"...Isaph?"

Noticing that his mind had returned a little, Haren tried to initiate conversation. But not having the courage to face him, he let his consciousness slip away as if fleeing. He voluntarily fell back into a state of sexual madness.

"I'll, hic, I'll put it in."

He pushed Haren to sit and climbed on top of him. He chose this thinking it might be less painful if he inserted it himself, but when he actually tried to put it in, he became afraid.

He glanced down and discovered the tremendous weapon, then closed his eyes. Had that thing as big as his forearm entered his body? It was unbelievable, but just the situation of having the member out for a moment made heat boil angrily throughout his body, so he had to put it back in quickly. *Huu,* damn body.

Cursing inwardly repeatedly, he first kissed Haren's lips to completely let go of his consciousness. It was an instinctive action. The more he swallowed his breath, the hazier his reason became, so he mixed their tongues, seeking it like an anesthetic.

Slowly his mind began to be bleached white again.

"Haa, eut, hu, uk...!"

Seizing that moment, he lowered his body. Only now did he realize that inserting the member in this position was more difficult and painful, but doing it while kissing made his reason fly away, leaving only reckless courage intoxicated by sexual pleasure. Rather, Haren held him to stop him from sitting down abruptly. He firmly grasped his waist and whispered between his lips to go slowly.

The terrifying sensation of his internal organs being pushed aside somehow transformed into a thrilling stimulus. His flat stomach swelled as if about to burst, and that swollen shape clearly revealed what it had swallowed. He sobbed as he fumblingly grasped his stomach.

"Here, hic, it's in up to here..."

Was this even possible with a human body? It was shocking that he still hadn't fully inserted it, and yet his body had reached its limit. As soon as it hit somewhere in his inner walls with a thud, his head went dizzy and he stopped, sobbing in fear. If it went in any further, he felt he would really tear.

For some reason, he felt Haren's hands gripping his waist tighten slightly. He took a deep breath as if holding something back, and his hot breath touching his body made him tense all over.

### Chapter 87

Trembling with fear, he asked.

"W-what if my stomach really gets pierced?"

"...The human body isn't that weak."

"Really? Huu, even this paper trash-like body won't get pierced?"

Haren muttered "Paper trash" as if he had heard a very strange analogy. But afterwards, as if he thought his words were quite plausible, he sighed strangely. He tilted his head, moving his fingers as if gauging the thickness of the waist he was holding.

"Maybe..."

Was he really considering the possibility, since he had been surprised by how weak his body was before? He hurriedly guided Haren's hand to his stomach. It was an act committed following the judgment that he would know about bodies well, given how often he was injured.

"F-feel it. Hic, how is it? If it gets pierced or bursts, huu, what should we do. I don't have good recovery like you."

He sobbed, blurting out incoherently. Could it be healed with a healing potion? If not, was this how he would be executed? No, since he put it in himself, was it suicide? Shit, his mind was in chaos.

Haren hesitated, as if he hadn't expected to actually touch his stomach. His hand trembled slightly, then slowly moved to caress the bulging area, and that touch unnecessarily excited his body. The anger at why a hero who was supposed to save people had such a weapon on his body instantly changed to pleasure, making him shudder.

Without realizing it, his body blindly chased the sexual pleasure, moving his lower body. As the long, thick thing slid out and then entered again, brutally widening his inner walls, sparks flew before his eyes. One hand was still covering Haren's on his stomach, so the movement was fully transmitted to his palm.

The physiological fear and revulsion of something strange crawling inside his body turned into tears intoxicated with pleasure. He sobbed, his mood changing almost like Janus, getting angry then feeling good.

"Uk, huu, if I, become strange..."

"...I'll take responsibility."

Haren muttered. His voice somehow rang like a promise, but he felt puzzled and then suddenly irritated. He should have said such a thing wouldn't happen at all, saying he'd take responsibility here just made him feel ominous.

"What, ugh, what will you..."

He wanted to argue, but then Haren kissed his nape. As if leaving a bite mark on his neck as proof of the promise, the moment that breath touched him, his reason melted away and he couldn't refute anything. Overcome with excitement, he kept trembling and moaning, which probably looked like he was nodding.

It felt like he was sinking into a swamp. The more he struggled to escape, the deeper and hotter he was sucked in, and he clung to Haren as if he were the only lifeline, pleading. Before he knew it, he was moving his lower body again on his own, sobbing at the breathtaking pleasure.

"Huuk, ah...!"

Then when it struck somewhere inside with a thud, his whole body trembled as if electrocuted. It had been shocking when fingers touched there earlier, but when pressed by an even larger volume, his vision flickered. As he shuddered, clutching Haren's shoulders, Haren spoke softly.

"Your whole body is red now...?"

His murmur that even his nape had turned red was between admiration and a sigh. As if fascinated by the color appearing on a person who was always pale, often mistaken for an evil spirit due to his ghastly pallor, Haren caressed his body.

That touch rose to his face. He stroked his eyes, which must have been wet with tears from sexual pleasure, while staring at him intently. His eyes seemed to have turned bright red too, as if curious, but that gaze was too embarrassing.

*Thud,* he placed his palm over Haren's eyes and said.

"Don't look..."

"Why?"

"Huu, don't look when I say don't look. You shouldn't look."

He knew it was ridiculous to act like this while their bodies were still connected. But he wanted to hide, feeling too embarrassed by the fact that Haren was observing him. Beneath his palm, Haren's lips briefly curved into a round shape.

Now Haren started to move. He grasped his waist and pulled him down in time with his own thrusts, making them connect even deeper. In an instant, a tingling ecstasy came and his mind went blank. Moreover, he persistently targeted the spot that had made him pass out earlier.

"Ng, huuk, n-no...!"

His whole body trembled as he fell into pleasure, then belatedly realizing his hand had come down, he hurriedly covered Haren's eyes again. With his vision completely blurred by tears, he fumbled to find the position, touching his face. The high bridge of his nose, the deeply set eyes above it. Haren laughed softly at his desperate touch.

He wanted to argue out of frustration, but he still reacted to even a single breath from him. He shuddered at the ticklish breath touching his nape, and the insertion became even more intense. As it scraped his inner walls going in and out, he tilted his head back and groaned.

"Hua, ah, there feels good."

Moreover, words saying it felt good escaped without him realizing. Before he could recover, Haren pressed his body even deeper and asked. His voice had sunk huskily.

"Here...?"

"Nng, hik, ah, aah."

Even a nasal sound burst out. Startled by the blatant moan, he bit his lower lip hard, then collapsed as if crushed when his insides were struck deeply again. As if knowing he had bitten his lip again, Haren kissed him as if to stop him. Unfiltered moans fell between their connected lips.

Soon Haren stood up while holding him. Huk, he got goosebumps as his position suddenly changed. In his panic of feeling like he would fall, he hurriedly clung to Haren's back, naturally unable to cover his eyes anymore.

How had he endured until now! He complained almost sobbing, feeling wronged.

"Aue, hic, why, whyy..."

"Because you looked like you were suffering from the heat. Huu, wouldn't it be better to resolve this quickly?"

Haren's low voice rang in his ear. Somehow his tone was even tinged with urgency, but his words always had a strange power to sound reasonable, so he just accepted it. While nodding in acceptance, he attached a condition.

"Still, huu, don't look..."

"Haha..."

"Answer me, hic."

"Yes, alright. I'll keep my eyes closed."

Though he should have been annoyed at the soothing tone, when Haren pressed his lips to his ear to answer, his whole body tensed. As he kept twitching, Haren lightly bit his earlobe and then trailed down his neckline, nuzzling. His reason evaporated steadily.

Fumblingly, he wrapped his arms around Haren's neck and his legs around his waist. It was a reflexive action out of fear of falling. Haren seemed to hesitate for a moment, but then thrust upwards fiercely. He sank his teeth into his nape while plunging his member in as if stabbing.

An overwhelming pleasure that felt like it would pierce his entire body poured over him chillingly. It was so intense that he couldn't even breathe properly, and his disordered breathing fell like the cries of a beast overcome with pleasure.

"Hung, ah, hic...!"

His softened inner walls repeatedly welcomed him, tightening and then clinging as if holding on when he withdrew. With repeated insertions, heat spread fiercely at their point of connection, and squelching sounds rang endlessly. Moreover, the increasingly wet, lewd sounds echoed even in his head.

Sounds that absolutely could not, should not exist in a space where he and Haren were together pooled between their connected bodies. A strange sense of blasphemy kept surfacing over his hazy mind. Sometimes when he tried to move his upper body away as if avoiding it, Haren would lift him deeper, and he had to hurriedly cling to him again. He seemed to greatly dislike any action of him trying to distance himself.

There was no mind to examine the reason for that in detail. Thud thud, his head shattered and his member endlessly brushed against Haren's firm abs, lifting him onto some orbit. In this position, he could no longer avoid Haren's embrace, nor could he hold back his moans or cover his eyes.

Repeatedly collapsing into Haren's arms, he panted and finally reached a shattering climax. His head tilted sharply backwards.

"Hua, ah, aah...!"

A pleasure incomparably more shocking than anything so far struck his entire body. It was an ecstasy that spread as if completely destroying and burning the existing sensations to reshape them anew. He trembled all over, spilling whitish fluid that had become thin from ejaculating so many times before.

Unable to control his trembling, he just clung tightly to Haren and endured. Around that time, hot breaths touched his ear too. Something gurgled and leaked out of the hole, dripping onto the floor with plop, plop sounds. His mind blanched white once more.

The elation of receiving the energy he had so desperately wanted in his deepest, most intimate place was dizzyingly thrilling. Having suppressed the curse with holy power, it was now time for reason to awaken a little.

"..."

But as if no one here wanted that, their unfocused eyes met. Both were still in a state of disordered breathing.

He blankly looked up at him while clinging to his embrace, then soon, without being able to distinguish who moved first, they kissed simultaneously and sank into ecstasy again.

It was a hot night.

### Chapter 88

**#Part 9. 58%**

His eyes flew open.

"..."

A ceiling engraved with elaborate patterns, a canopy surrounding a huge bed, a sparkling chandelier. All these unfamiliar things existed clearly in his field of vision. He regarded all this scenery awkwardly as if seeing it for the first time, then froze at the slowly approaching sense of déjà vu.

His slack facial muscles stiffened. As if startled by some shock, he sprang up from the bed.

*Ugh!* But a groan burst out involuntarily from the pain in his waist. It went beyond mere stiffness, feeling almost as if it had been shattered to pieces. Moreover, this wasn't just his waist, but an extreme pain coming from his entire body. He couldn't even leave the bed and just groaned.

At that moment, someone rose beside him. They seemed to have naturally woken up at his movement, and he couldn't bring himself to turn and look at that presence.

"Is..."

"It was an accident."

The moment he sensed that he, Haren, was about to call his name, he hurriedly spoke. His throat was completely hoarse and cracked. It was even more distressing that just from his voice, one could tell what had happened last night. Though he should have lost his reason from the curse and not remember, sadly it was too vivid.

Suppressing memories he couldn't bear to recall in his right mind, he buried his face in one hand.

"...Let's pretend it never happened."

It was almost like a sigh. Looking at just the content of his words, it wouldn't be appropriate as a first greeting to someone he had spent the night with, no, it was almost a trash-like statement... but considering the situation and the other person, there were no wiser words than this.

He cleared his throat with a cough and added one more thing.

"...Sorry."

It was an apology added because there had been no words from Haren until now. Had he gotten a hangover as soon as he woke up? Honestly, he felt wronged that he had to apologize when he was the one pierced by a weapon, but then he remembered his conscience since he had pounced on him.

But Haren was still silent. By now an answer should have come, so why? He looked at him quizzically. Of course, he didn't have the confidence to face him properly, so he just glanced, but he saw his hand first.

A hand that seemed as if it had been about to reach out to him was suspended in the air.

"..."

The weight of the subtle silence was heavy. Feeling as if it was even pressing on his breath, he hurriedly added words as if being chased. He couldn't bear the awkward energy mixing into this silence.

"It's just that my body is such trash that it was more vulnerable to the incubus's curse, and unfortunately because our souls were connected, you got swept up too. This was an accident, and it's not your responsibility. So... let's pretend it never happened."

"..."

"If we have to blame someone, it's my fault, um, so blame me and..."

"Let's pretend, it never happened."

Though he tried his best to speak calmly, the voice that came back was very cold. Sharp ice shards seemed to fall as if he had plunged into a polar sea.

He turned to look at Haren, dumbfounded. Why did he sound angry? And indeed, his face was stiffly frozen. Though his blue eyes were so cold it made him want to shrink away, puzzlement took precedence.

"...Yeah. Isn't it good for you too to pretend it never happened?"

He couldn't understand his reaction at all. He had thought he would naturally welcome his suggestion. Weren't holy knights who followed God supposed to be pure? Though holy knights could marry and Haren himself was born from such a union, so there probably wasn't an absolute rule of celibacy, but perhaps such acts were only possible in married relationships.

Though he didn't know much about religion, surely a debauched night life was far removed from devout believers who cultivated pure conduct. And above all else.

"You're the hero of the Holy Empire, so doing such a thing with someone like me is an unpleasant stigma. I use unholy necromancy and have committed terrible crimes, I'm a death row inmate..."

He deliberately mentioned those words as if to remind him. A necromancer pointed at by all the empire's citizens, one who used an unholy power that went against God's will. And even before gaining notoriety for stealing the holy sword, this body was a death row inmate. For the terrible crime of killing all the residents of Klam Village.

No matter how cynical Haren was towards God, wouldn't he want to forget spending a night with such a person? Moreover, it seemed to have been his first time... Though that part was the same for him too, but anyway, no, that's why this agreement was necessary.

"Let's pretend it never happened at all. I'll pretend I don't know, no, I'll completely forget it."

"...It's not that you find it unpleasant and want to forget?"

However, for some reason, Haren's face sank even more coldly. He was bewildered, as if his words had angered him, and was even more flustered by the question he received in return.

*Wasn't it me who wanted to forget?*

*Well... of course.*

He absolutely couldn't revisit last night's events in his right mind. Ordering him to kiss him, making him take off his clothes himself, then bursting out in frustration asking why he wouldn't put it in. Afterwards, he cried that his stomach would burst while spouting all sorts of nonsense.

Even as he kept leaking something that had become so thin it was almost like water towards the end, he still clung to him somehow with his limp, strengthless body. He couldn't even bear it when he tried to move away to give him water to drink, and clung to him, endlessly entangling while drinking from his mouth. One couldn't go crazier than this even if they tried.

But if asked whether last night was unpleasant... that didn't seem to be the case either. Rather, he had cried because every moment felt too good, *um,* no. This wasn't the context. He hurriedly rubbed his face with his hands.

He let out a short sigh and organized his thoughts. Unable to face Haren, he turned his gaze to the side as he pondered, then spoke.

"Is that not okay?"

"..."

"I only ended up like that because I was affected by the curse too."

Unable to find a suitable answer, he just turned the question back. He felt even more wronged as Haren pressed him as if interrogating him, even though he had already summarized that it was just an accident, and if they had to blame someone, it was his fault.

Hadn't they pretended not to know about what happened on the sky island before, so couldn't they do the same this time? Did he have to take responsibility because he had pounced on him? So saying he would forget now was his way of trying to take responsibility...

"You also chose that method because you had no choice, right? Am I wrong?"

He was silent for a moment, but still no answer came. He barely held back a sneer that was about to escape. Though he had thought Haren wouldn't deny this statement, it was ridiculous that he seemed to have waited for a different answer.

"You helped me... yes, thank you. So I'll pretend it never happened and forget it."

His voice sank. Though it might sound like his mood had suddenly soured, his tone had just lowered because he was sad about his position of having to thank him for that situation. He uncomfortably massaged his nape, then stopped at the stinging pain he felt.

Even without checking in a mirror, he could guess it would be full of red marks. Haren had been particularly persistent in biting that spot last night.

"..."

Though Haren had voluntarily sunk into the curse, he knew his excitement wasn't intentional. He could distinguish this. He had just stepped up to help because someone was vomiting blood and growing cold before his eyes. A kind of mercy, or pity.

If not for the incubus's curse, Haren would never have kissed him, nor endlessly bitten his nape while holding him.

"...Alright, let's do as you say. Because such a thing would never have been possible if not for the curse."

Just then, Haren answered. His tone was similar to when he had accepted the proposal on the sky island before, yet different. It was lower and drier than then, and even tinged with a hint of mockery.

Saying that 'such' a thing wouldn't have happened in their right minds.

Though his words contained such an obvious content, they stung somewhere. He felt strange even though he had suggested it first. This was all because his throat hurt. There were no marks anywhere else on his body, but his neck was so swollen, and it stung more as the collar rattled and brushed against his skin.

And as he examined his body, he realized that Haren seemed to have washed him after he had completely collapsed from exhaustion last night. He felt somewhat regretful that those memories were the haziest. As he fiddled with the new clothes, trying to recall that moment, he suddenly sprang up from his seat as if startled. Why was he feeling regretful?

He shouldn't stay by Haren's side any longer.

"I'll make sure to erase the marks on my neck cleanly myself."

Since the wound on his lips had healed instantly with the healing potion last time, his nape should clean up quickly too. Fortunately, he saw a potion on the bedside table and took it. It was the leftover potion Haren had fed him when he had just woken from the nightmare.

He headed to the bathroom with relief, and didn't look back until the end.

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A party was held at the lord's castle.

The lord of Nadael, excited by the success of this subjugation, declared he would host a banquet for all who had participated in the subjugation team. At a time when everyone could have died if things had gone wrong, an intense sunlight had shone down and resolved all problems, so he rejoiced, thinking God's hand had touched the city.

'It was as if Solnium had sent down light.'

The mercenaries' testimony made the lord very happy. The only thing that could explain the strange phenomenon that occurred in the moment of confusion when everyone was sinking into the swamp was God's care. He also viewed the Death Knight's evil spirits suddenly changing and pulling people out as simply being moved by God.

The party was held in the spacious hall of the annex, and all sorts of delicacies were served on numerous tables. Most of the conversations passing between the jubilantly dining subjugation team members were about yesterday's miracle, so Beatrice, hearing this, burst into loud laughter and approached him.

"Ahaha! Don't you feel like you've become a god?"

### Chapter 89

Though she had lamented joining this mercenary group right after the subjugation ended, Beatrice was now going around the banquet hall, actively introducing herself as a member of Hero's Light.

Currently, the Hero's Light mercenary group was naturally receiving the most attention in the banquet hall.

Though the Death Knight had knelt under God's touch, many had witnessed how the incubus was dealt with. It had happened while those pulled out from the swamp were dazedly looking around.

Moreover, the background for this mercenary group's achievements drawing attention included the commotion that occurred on the first gathering day. While they had acted like people drunk on strange settings, spouting bizarre words during the clash with the holy knights, they had actually eliminated demons during the subjugation.

Of course, the holy knights expressed this as mere luck. They said the mercenaries had easily dealt with the incubus because all demons were weakened when 'Solnium's light' burst forth. Though this hypothesis received quite a lot of agreement, people still whispered everywhere that it was an amazing event for one mercenary group to take down demons.

"He really was hiding his power...!"

"Ooooh!"

Mercenaries gathered and talked over there. He regretfully noted that the figure at the center of that group happened to be familiar to him.

"But that guy in the black robe didn't really step forward much, did he? He even collapsed at the end. He just seemed to brush against the demon and fell flat."

"T-that may be true! But it proves that all those protecting that Saiph are strong! And he's come to the banquet looking perfectly fine now, so he must have overcome it with hidden power!"

That figure was none other than Serena. She, who had seriously believed his setting, was still enthusiastically writing fiction, and there was evidence for this.

When everyone was suffering from the nightmare energy spread by the incubus, Kalterik had let out a loud groan right after beating it. His clumsy acting had rather drawn attention, so the story spread that they had been trying to eliminate the demons from the start.

It was fortunate that it hadn't been revealed that he had been cursed by the incubus, that is, that he had been the target of the demon's revenge... but hearing even the fiction that the black-robed Saiph had stayed in the back to command his subordinates made him very troubled.

Beatrice must have heard this too, as she burst into chuckles.

"That mercenary would have liked it more if he had seen your true form."

He immediately looked at her with disgust. When he questioned her with eyes that asked what nonsense she was talking about, she laughed loudly again and drank her wine. After checking the alcohol served at the banquet, she had been satisfied that the lord had spent quite a bit of money, and had already emptied one bottle.

"Now you finally look at me."

"If you're drunk, why don't you just go to your room?"

"Haha! Why would I leave such an amusing space?"

Beatrice shook her head as if that was absurd. Though she had been horrified yesterday about possibly being discovered, she seemed very pleased now that only ridiculous admiration and exaggerated rumors remained. Since demons weren't commonly seen beings, great confusion had been created, which rather helped hide the truth.

Swirling the wine glass in her hand, Beatrice shrugged her shoulders.

"Yes. Everything has been resolved well, and the banquet hall is full of such amusing stories... but why is your atmosphere like this?"

"..."

"..."

That one statement lowered the atmosphere even further at the round table where six people were seated. He had deliberately avoided sitting next to Haren, but after sitting down, it turned out to be a seat facing him. So he kept his hood pulled down deep and absolutely did not look forward.

He hadn't exchanged a single word with Haren since their morning conversation. Thinking it would be uncomfortable for both of them if they saw each other's faces, he had avoided him all day until the evening banquet. It was common for him to stay quietly in a corner without saying anything among the companions anyway.

So while his silence wasn't strange, now Haren was silent too.

His subordinates all watched carefully at his behavior, as if he had entered a vow of silence. Though he still gave faint smiles habitually when making direct eye contact with companions, everyone felt that his overall atmosphere was unusual.

"Perhaps because the holy knights showed such inadequate behavior yesterday..."

"Once we return to the holy city, we need to properly discipline them..."

Noi and Kalterik conversed quietly. Though it was convenient that other mercenaries who approached out of curiosity retreated in surprise at the sub-zero temperature thanks to the sunken atmosphere, even the companions' breathing was frozen.

Beatrice looked between him and Haren questioningly and asked.

"Seeing how fine you look, it seems the demon's curse was resolved well too, but is there some problem? Those three said the Commander resolved it on the sky island too, and that we just needed to trust the Commander, so I was going to ask what method it was."

It was a very unfortunate question that didn't help the cold atmosphere at all. A brief awkward silence fell over the table, and he could guess that the other companions were also secretly curious. Though they attributed the cause of the Commander's low mood to the holy knights' poor showing during the subjugation, they seemed concerned that there might have been some problem last night.

Their attitude was newly amusing. Even though he had been hit by a demon's curse, and an incubus's at that, they didn't suspect at all that anything indecent had occurred. Of course, this time it really was a curse that would kill by trapping in nightmares, and they had just chosen an alternative to break the dream demon's ability, but...

The fact that no one suspected anything even though they had spent a night alone together made him more certain that his decision had been wise. He shrugged his shoulders and answered nonchalantly.

"Who knows. I don't remember anything, I just woke up and was fine."

"Hooh, is the hero who received the grace of purification different in everything? You really don't remember anything?"

"Yeah. Seems like nothing happened."

Rather, he was bewildered by Haren's behavior. Why was he acting like this when he had accepted the proposal too? His tone became even more indifferent, and Noi laughed awkwardly. As if not wanting to lose the flow of conversation that had finally started at the table, he quickly followed up.

"Ha, haha. It's really fortunate that nothing was discovered despite everything that happened. Since we successfully completed the monster subjugation, we'll be able to move around comfortably with the request confirmation stamped with the lord's seal, and the lord said he would give us a separate reward too! If we receive warp passes with that, we can go east in one go!"

His outpouring words revealed his desperation. Since the warp connecting the entire empire could only be used after passing very strict screening, if the lord of the major city Nadael vouched for them, they could cross the empire horizontally without problems.

Especially since they said the western and eastern parts of the empire were far apart, reducing time with warps would also reduce the period they needed to cooperate in the Encroachment Zone, so it was welcome news for him too.

Just then, Beatrice also seemed interested in that part and asked. Since she had cast a sound-blocking spell around the table, they could discuss the Encroachment Zone more comfortably.

"East? You're going east before north?"

"Yes. Actually, since the northern Encroachment Zone is closer from here, we had that in mind, but right now the entire north is very wary of outsiders, so..."

For some reason, Noi trailed off and glanced at him. There was a feeling as if it was an uncomfortable topic. *What is it? Why suddenly look at me?*

However, before he could express any question, Noi changed the subject.

"Anyway, it's good to go to farther places first when we can get warp passes! And the eastern Encroachment Zone is also suitable to visit in this season!"

"Though it will take considerable time since the city with the eastern warp gate is quite far from the Encroachment Zone, hmm, considering even that point, going east would be better now."

Are there Encroachment Zones that match seasons? Since it was spring now, was it full of flowers, or did spring water flow? After imagining various things, he quickly dropped the thought. He shouldn't expect Encroachment Zones to be comfortable in the first place, and moreover, there was no way to enjoy nature in a space losing life force. There was no point in imagining good things, he would just get blindsided again. With the difficulty cubed.

*Haah,* he was already feeling overwhelmed about the next search. While he swallowed a sigh inwardly, Beatrice spoke.

"It's such a shame that I can't go there with you. To think I have to leave such an amusing mercenary group."

"..."

"Wait, why did your face brighten? Is that an expression wanting to quickly go to the Encroachment Zone to get rid of me?"

Unfortunately, since Beatrice was sitting next to him, his reaction was completely exposed. To think she could read his inner thoughts this thoroughly. Did she have some strange insight because she was such a unique imperial princess that he could sense something odd about this NPC?

### Chapter 90

Just then, someone approached the table.

"Oho! So you are them! The heroes of this subjugation team!"

His clothes, engraved with elaborate patterns, were adorned with abundant frills. He was a man whose hair was styled with as much volume as his thickly puffed clothes. The number of ornaments dangling from his neck, arms, wrists, ears, and hair seemed to exceed forty easily. His entire body sparkled.

The man who gave the impression of a peacock was none other than the lord of this city. He learned this when Noi jumped up from his seat exclaiming "Lord!" He had specially made time to come from the main castle in the city center to the northern annex.

The long-nosed peacock, no, the lord, fiddled with his necklace and spoke.

"I heard in detail through my aide about the achievements you've made. That you all worked together to take down the evil incubus!"

They had figured out the technique while dealing with the twin succubus on the sky island earlier, and this incubus had two horns, making it relatively easier to handle than the succubus. Their stats had also steadily increased while traveling through Encroachment Zones.

Still, since the general belief that only holy knights could face demons was strong, this incident seemed even more surprising. The lord asked with a face full of curiosity.

"Are you... the commander of this mercenary group? The one named 'Haren'?"

Haren greeted him with an appropriate smile worn like a mask, and the lord offered a handshake as if to commend him. Usually, if a mere mercenary shook hands with someone who was clearly a noble and the owner of the city, they would typically bow and scrape. As if just the touch of hands was an immense honor.

But naturally, Haren shook hands with a concise attitude and withdrew his hand, which rather surprised the lord. He stared at Haren and exclaimed in admiration.

"Hooh, as one who took his name out of respect for the hero, you even try to emulate his dignity..."

Beside them, Beatrice let out a "pfft" laugh. He almost burst out laughing too and barely held it back by biting his lower lip. Though Haren currently appeared with a different appearance to others, it seemed an aura he couldn't hide still emanated from him.

While he had been the only one receiving looks of 'someone imitating Isaph' until now, it was amusing that Haren was also receiving such misunderstandings. Of course, there was a difference in that he received looks saying he was drunk on darkness of darkness, while Haren received looks saying he was a true knight trying to follow the hero's will... *hmm,* this difference was unfairly large.

The lord burst into hearty laughter.

"Then you probably know this, but as it happens, the hero visited this city last year. I think such a miracle came because it's a city for which he wished peace!"

The real hero had come and directly brought peace. Direct delivery of miracles.

The lord kept marveling as if finding it fascinating that a mercenary named 'Haren' had appeared, then glanced over the companions too. As he carefully examined Kalterik, Mela, and Noi, he muttered "Somehow even the members have a similar atmosphere to his closest aides..."

Though he seemed to think they had matched even the members to be similar after imitating the hero, when he finally checked him, he nodded "Hmm!" He seemed to have found evidence to the contrary, and it was obvious what thoughts had formed in his head.

Upon seeing the being in black robes, the lord spoke as if remembering something.

"Ah! Then you must also be very interested in the commotion that occurred during this Holy Festival. Because a suspicious being dared to cause trouble at the venue longing for the hero. It was truly terrible. After all the effort I put into preparing that event! They say someone was with him beside the one in black robes, perhaps a follower of that death row inmate or something."

"Hmm."

Though it seemed he had picked a common topic they would likely be interested in, unfortunately, the lord's statement ended up making the hero into a death row inmate's follower.

Though Haren showed no particular change in expression, beside him Kalterik let out a loud "Kuluk kuluk!" cough. Noi hurriedly whispered to him that he needed to be quiet, and Mela patted his back. *Thud thud,* that sound was quite loud.

Meanwhile, the lord's story had steadily heated up.

"We will surely catch and execute that fellow, so don't worry. We will offer his head on the day the hero returns!"

It seemed he wanted to offer the death row inmate's head instead of flowers from the venue. As he talked about strengthening the city's security further, Haren responded with appropriate smiles before changing the subject first.

"I heard you said you would give us a reward, is that right?"

"Ah, yes. Since you achieved great merit in this subjugation, I naturally plan to give a reward. Is there something you want? You can ask for anything! Money, mansion, jewels, whatever you like, speak freely."

"We would like warp passes. For warps that can take us directly to Arent, the eastern city."

"Hmm? Well, that's not difficult, but..."

The lord seemed to feel he had received a very unexpected request. When the owner of a city called the empire's second heart, that is, a major city, offered a reward, one would normally ask for something greater, but suddenly they asked for warp passes. Though those passes were expensive too, it seemed far below what the lord had expected.

But in reality, this was equivalent to asking for a booster to escape the surveillance network right under their noses.

"I'll have them prepared by tomorrow morning."

The lord, unaware of the truth, promised readily, and relieved smiles spread across the companions' faces.

After briefly exchanging some simple conversation, the lord left the table. The weight of having the city's lord come personally to commend them seemed quite significant, as looks of envy and jealousy flew from all around the banquet hall.

The latter came from the holy knights. Though they seemed to manage their expressions, unable to openly show irritation in the lord's presence, they put on bright smiles towards the lord who came to them next. As they threw looks this way full of pride about being such important figures, he had a very random thought while watching their amusing behavior.

"Is that necklace the most expensive one? He keeps touching it..."

Throughout the conversation, the lord had kept stroking one particular necklace. He had done so since first greeting them, touching just one out of five or six necklaces. The reason this action caught his eye was not only because he touched it so repeatedly, but because it looked the simplest compared to the other necklaces.

A necklace with a small golden ball pendant.

As the lord of a major city, it would be real gold rather than plating, so while not cheap, the jewels on the other necklaces looked far more splendid. Was the engraved sign some kind of special mark? At his muttered wondering, Beatrice answered in an indifferent tone.

"It's a necklace given only to those who are well-regarded by the temple. Since it's a gift bestowed directly by the Pope, nobles line up wanting to receive it."

"They've been giving them since after the Great Catastrophe, and at first it started as a way to express gratitude to people who greatly contributed to stabilizing the chaotic continent! Now they also give them to those who achieve various merits at temple events and holy days..."

Noi quickly added an explanation, perhaps worried there might be room for misunderstanding in the imperial princess's statement. He seemed to be clarifying in case it might be misinterpreted as inducing donations, but he nodded slowly. He hadn't thought from the start that the Holy Empire's Order would try to extort sponsorship money because they lacked funds.

He just felt admiration for how subtly strategic the temple's method of raising authority was. Both the potion monopoly and these necklaces. Wasn't this a kind of mark showing one was in the Pope's line? Moreover, a limited edition directly bestowed by the Pope? No wonder everyone would go crazy for it. Made by Pope. The empire's it item.

So the lord had kept stroking his necklace to show it off. Seeing how extremely pleased he looked when the holy knights over there recognized the necklace, perhaps he had felt a bit disappointed that no one here had shown interest.

Though he should have turned away now that he understood the background, his gaze kept getting caught. Why? He kept getting a subtle sense of déjà vu. Had he... seen that necklace somewhere before?

As he was puzzling over his memories, Beatrice suddenly tilted her head.

"Do you covet that fellow's necklace? Shall I gift you something far more splendid than that?"

"...?"

When he looked at her strangely at her sudden statement, she smiled elegantly. Her golden eyes sparkled as if she had discovered a new approach strategy.

"Won't you come to my castle? I'll shower you with all sorts of treasures. Thinking of your adorable actions in this subjugation, I'm really tempted."

### Chapter 91

A disgusted expression formed involuntarily. She still hadn't given up? However, at his revulsion, Beatrice shook her head. As if knowing all his concerns, she spoke wearing an exceptionally gentle smile.

"I absolutely won't cast mental magic on you. I'm just curious about your ability and want to observe you up close. Especially since those who use such fascinating abilities can't even display half their original capacity when their minds are damaged."

"..."

"Even if you avoid execution by cooperating with the hero, the views toward necromancers still won't be kind. You remember the hostility the mercenaries showed in this subjugation, right? So how about coming to my castle and living comfortably? No one would dare throw stones at the First Imperial Princess's castle."

Though there was a very frightening expression in the middle, he was surprised to hear about the stoning in the holy city that he had been worried about come from Beatrice's mouth. Was it obvious even to the imperial princess that he wouldn't be able to live comfortably in the future?

He was a little tempted. If Beatrice really didn't do anything strange, would the imperial palace be better? Though he had never been there, surely an imperial palace would be very spacious and comfortable. There wouldn't be any shortage of food and it wouldn't be cold. Rather than living while being conscious of others outside, should he keep the imperial palace route open as insurance?

Noticing his wavering, Beatrice smiled brightly and reached out her hand.

"I'll get you a more splendid collar too..."

"No, I don't want it, don't."

He struck away her hand as it was about to touch his neck. Just when he thought she was making strangely good offers, it wasn't that at all. Would decorating a collar make it not a collar? Moreover, a ♡♥collar♥♡ looked more dangerous than just a regular collar.

"Heek."

Beside him, Noi flinched in surprise. His face even turned pale, belatedly realizing that the owner of the hand he had struck away was none other than the empire's first imperial heir. Had he made a mistake?

*Ahahahah!* But then Beatrice burst into loud laughter, bending at the waist, and his worry instantly cooled. He had thought this since their first meeting, but she was really a strange person. She laughed so hard tears formed at the corners of her eyes, then suddenly grabbed his face.

His face was painfully pulled by that rough touch.

"Ah, it was amusing from when you called me 'you' yesterday. Does one need to ignore even an imperial princess to boldly use necromancy in the Holy Empire?"

"Ugh."

"It's a shame I won't be able to see this face for a while..."

"That's enough, Beatrice."

Just then, Haren's voice fell calmly. At his call stopping Beatrice's actions, not just her but all the companions looked at him. Since it was the first time today that the commander who had been maintaining silence except when talking to the lord earlier had opened his mouth.

Beatrice seemed quite surprised as she didn't catch his words telling her to call him 'Biche' as usual, and taking advantage of her loosened grip, he quickly withdrew his head. The tips of their noses had almost touched.

In fact, he was also dazed as he hadn't expected Haren to stop Beatrice now. As soon as he unconsciously looked at Haren, their eyes met.

"..."

Ice-blue eyes full of uncomfortable energy without a trace of smile. Though he reflexively smiled when making eye contact with other companions, he didn't even do that with him. Startled by the emotions shown by someone skilled at hiding expressions, he avoided his gaze.

Though he had never been someone who gave him positive smiles originally, this was the first time he had so openly shown such discomfort. Even though his face had been coldly sunken in the morning, it hadn't been this unpleasant. His heart sank.

Beatrice shrugged her shoulders.

"Hmm, well, it seems I couldn't forcibly confine you anyway. I could tell from watching this subjugation. How you've been able to evade all pursuit until now. Since you managed to subjugate even that powerful Death Knight with three horns that Noi mentioned..."

She said he would have no problem even if pursued since he could use abilities of that level even with a weakened body. Though it was regrettable that her tone seemed very disappointed, Mela, who had apparently wanted to talk about yesterday's achievements, slipped in a comment.

"To think you could resolve the Death Knight like that..."

"That's right, it was really amazing. Using necromancy to subjugate it by exploiting the fact that demons are soul forms! When you subdued the leader, all its subordinate evil spirits came to follow you too. Even though it was temporary, it was so fascinating."

Even Noi spoke while nodding his head vigorously. He seemed to have wanted to express gratitude to him since yesterday. Even Kalterik cleared his throat and added.

"Ahem, I thought you were just a weak guy who kept collapsing until now, but you really surprised me this time. Thanks to you, we safely rescued those who had fallen into the swamp..."

Though the prefix wasn't welcome at all, and his voice became almost inaudibly quiet like a mosquito towards the end, the intention was roughly conveyed.

This was the first time his companions had acknowledged his efforts like this while traveling together. Since using necromancy itself was an act of deceiving God in the Holy Empire, and his ability would be even more detestable to them who belonged to the Order.

Though he had felt their sharp hostility gradually decreasing as they went through major battles, perhaps the space of the battlefield built some kind of inevitable bond. Maybe this time they viewed him more favorably especially because he had helped their respected commander.

Feeling awkward for no reason, he blurted out words similar to what he had said to Kalterik before.

"...I don't particularly need your acknowledgment."

"This guy always has to, even when given kind words!"

As expected, Kalterik burst out with a "Wak!", instantly dispersing the atmosphere that had almost become ticklish. He deliberately turned his head away more indifferently.

Actually, he too found it fascinating that he had managed to subjugate the Death Knight this time. Originally, he could only use skills after following the action keys provided by the status window and mastering them, after which he could use them without the status window, but this time he had used a new skill from the start without any help. He even had confidence bordering on recklessness that he could control the demon's subordinate evil spirits.

Since the basics of necromancy was subjugating souls, it was like being surprised that he could do basic arithmetic while solving calculus...

He looked down at his palm with a strange feeling. Though it was a really random impression, his body seemed to have gotten a bit better. He had always felt a floating sensation as if detached from his physical body, but now the connection felt more stable. Was it because he had become familiar with this body's abilities?

Just then, mercenaries flocked to their table.

"Your skill in dealing with demons was quite something..."

"Where did you train? Do you have some special training method?"

"And where did you buy your weapons? Actually, I felt you weren't ordinary from the first time I saw you!"

When conversation started flowing at the table that had been frozen with sub-zero atmosphere until just tens of minutes ago, the mercenaries seized this opportunity to approach. They were ones who had wanted to speak all this time but had held back out of consideration.

And their interest was an especially welcome kind for Kalterik, who had been pursuing a concept of hidden strength. His face instantly brightened and he even let out a hearty laugh.

"Haha, I start my training every morning by moving rocks!"

Though that answer drew looks saying 'Still faithful to the setting, this friend', some still marveled, perhaps thinking his words weren't just empty boasts since they had really dealt with the incubus. In fact, he really was a bear who trained like that. The holy knights hadn't neglected their training even while traveling.

And two people approached him too.

"Saiph! You collapsed yesterday, are you feeling better?"

"Watch what you say, Jade! He just exhausted himself trying to control dangerous power!"

It was Jade and Serena. Though hearing Serena's fiction still made him want to distance himself, he welcomed them and stood up from his seat. It had been uncomfortable being at this table anyway, so he wanted to use conversation with them as an excuse to slip away.

It was just because the previous warm atmosphere had become awkward, and to get away from the obsessive imprisonment route that kept trying to open right beside him. It absolutely wasn't because of Haren.

He headed for a corner of the banquet hall while making unnecessary explanations inwardly. Jade covered his mouth with both hands as if moved by the welcome from him who had ignored him until yesterday. Though it pricked his conscience a bit that Jade believed he just hadn't seen his greeting then, he calmly nodded.

### Chapter 92

Suddenly Jade tilted his head as if puzzled.

"Huh, somehow your face seems different from when I first saw you...?"

Why did he remember such details? Even though he had never seen his face properly since he wore his robe's hood pulled down deep then too, Jade's sharp eyes caught it.

Though he hadn't bothered changing his voice since few people knew it anyway, his face was under disguise magic. When he had checked in the mirror, his hair had changed to ash gray and his eyes to light pink, but since those colors seemed to show the mage's intention, he insisted on covering them with his hood.

Otherwise, only his gaunt and haggard look had decreased, but even that seemed to have changed his impression considerably. They had only disguised a little since changing too much with magic would make inconsistencies stand out, but he had noticed even this.

As he was making a rather contradictory excuse that his face was just puffy from not sleeping properly, Serena whispered beside him.

"Maybe his face changes in the process of sealing his power. Or perhaps he periodically changes his appearance to hide from the evil forces pursuing him!"

At this rate, shouldn't Serena become a novelist rather than a mercenary? He looked at her with eyes of respect. With such a novelist as a companion, why couldn't Jade get close to his brother? Were companions and siblings different? Rather, Serena and Sile would probably get along best...

Jade just nodded while giving a good-natured "Ahaha" laugh. Wondering if that was a gesture of letting it slide, he brought up yesterday's story.

"By the way, yesterday's subjugation was really amazing. For bright light to suddenly burst forth in the pitch-dark forest! Though I think the Death Knight's evil spirits pulled me out of the swamp before that..."

"Ahem."

"I'll never forget that light. Like the hero had come, no, would it be like that if the legendary Arux rose?"

Jade had strangely good intuition. Though that light was fake sunlight created by Beatrice's magic, it was meant to hide the holy sword Haren had drawn. As it happened, that hero also possessed Arux, the small sun holy relic. They said it was famous as a holy relic sought in times of chaos, perhaps the mercenaries in danger yesterday had desperately wished for that miracle too.

However, Serena firmly denied Jade's incredible intuition.

"No, it was more like Isolatedies than Arux."

"...Isola-what?"

"Isolatedies!"

What was that unnecessarily fancy name? When he reacted dryly, Serena's eyes lit up. As soon as she realized he didn't know, she seemed very excited to tell him about it.

She lowered her voice and whispered to him.

"It's one of the lesser-known holy relics said to be sleeping on the sky island, it's the spear used by Solnium. The spear thrust down to bring light to the land stained with darkness in the beginning! The first ray of light! Containing God's will to balance the world, unholy things can't even stand against it and perish! Its power is far stronger than Arux!"

He half-tuned out from the moment talk of primordial darkness started. Though he thought the novelist's disposition had activated again, the final added words especially came across as boasting.

Stronger than Arux? Could such a thing exist in the world? Having seen Arux's power directly before his eyes, it sounded even more preposterous.

And above all...

"If it's that strong, why isn't it well-known? All the adventurers searching the sky island only want Arux."

When they had visited the sky island, his companions' goal was only Arux. If there was something better than Arux, his companions would have searched for that too, but they hadn't at all, and neither Haren nor Noi had even mentioned the Isola-whatever holy relic.

If Noi, famous as a genius aide, hadn't mentioned it, there was a high chance that holy relic didn't exist at all. Maybe it was just a holy relic from fantasy? Like some kind of Excalibur.

At his indifferent attitude, Serena shook her head repeatedly.

"No. It's just not well-known because it can't spread light over a wide area like Arux, but anything hit by Isolatedies definitely dies! Only after the spear like a single ray of light was thrust down did the small sun shine on the world, so the spear is a better holy relic than Arux!"

*Hmm,* though he could agree that a guaranteed kill was better than an area-of-effect amplification buff skill, it lacked credibility. And even now, the hero's grace combined with the small sun's sacred realm was producing effects close to 100% kills.

"Is there any historical record of someone using it?"

"W-well, there isn't..."

A dry laugh escaped. Then how could she guarantee a definite kill? Well, the story itself did have an interesting legendary form...

Usually when humans hear there's a strongest holy relic, they tend to imagine something even stronger. Like how S-rank is followed by SS-rank, SSS-rank, and EX-rank. Perhaps following this characteristic, someone had started saying 'Though people seek Arux in times of chaos, there's actually an even more amazing holy relic!'

As he nodded indifferently, having deduced even the background of how the story spread, Serena burst out. Seeming to sense from his reaction that he didn't believe it at all, she exclaimed.

"I heard this from 'Lara Workshop'! That makes it credible, right?!"

"...?"

"You don't know Nadael's Lara Workshop? The workshop owner is a famous alchemist!"

It would be faster to count what he knew than what he didn't know. It wouldn't even amount to much. How could he know about Lara Workshop when he had only learned this city's name a few days ago?

However, even Jade was surprised at his reaction.

"You really don't know? It's a name every mercenary has heard at least once."

"...I-I think I might remember. Someone skilled in crafting..."

"Right! Though healing potions are exclusively sold by the temple and hard to get elsewhere in the market, Lara makes something almost identical! And not just potions, she even crafts magical tools comparable to holy relics so many people come from far away. She also repairs various weapons."

Since the workshop owner was an alchemist, she would be skilled at crafting, so he had vaguely played along and fortunately it worked. While inwardly breathing a sigh of relief, he listened attentively to Jade's story.

She had quite some nerve doing business the temple would dislike in the Holy Empire where the temple's power was so high. It seemed her customers blocked the temple's pressure because she was so popular among mercenaries. Even the head of the Mercenary Association was a regular customer.

Noticing his interest, Jade suggested,

"It's nearby, want to go together? The workshop is spacious and there's lots to see!"

*Whoosh,* his gaze turned to the table. Though they were just a bit apart within the banquet hall now, they probably wouldn't look kindly on completely leaving the annex. Since it would be individual action.

Still, the magical tools said to be comparable to holy relics drew his interest. Every time they entered an Encroachment Zone, Haren had given him holy relics for protection, but he had broken them all and hesitated to ask for more. Though there had been unavoidable circumstances each time, for now he wanted to avoid even speaking to him.

...Afraid of receiving that uncomfortable gaze again.

"Not for long, just briefly."

Since he was wearing the collar, wouldn't it be fine to leave briefly? And now it seemed the companions trusted him a little too... Though it wasn't favorable trust but just the kind thinking he wouldn't do anything rash with necromancy, but that was better than nothing.

He impulsively followed Jade and Serena. Though he felt slightly uneasy while walking, his mind changed as soon as they left the annex.

*–Meow*.

He met the black cat, En. His eyes widened as they immediately encountered each other as if it had been waiting outside the annex. Regardless of Jade saying "Oh, isn't that your cat?" beside him, he immediately ran to En and grabbed its body.

"You...!"

Perhaps if the NPC had been there then, could he have avoided the incubus's curse? Though anger welled up, he couldn't question past events now, and moreover, not wanting to even mention that incident, he poured out other questions first.

"When can you break the soul connection you set up? Shouldn't it be resolved soon now? I want to break it quickly."

Words burst out urgently. Previously the status window had informed that the Dium's curse could be resolved within a month. It was information given after forcing the connection first. Though the curse had progressed slowly then because Haren had been badly injured in the Encroachment Zone, it was said the speed would naturally increase once he recovered.

Since Haren had barely been injured additionally after that, it should be time for the curse to resolve soon. He wanted to somehow break the soul connection before entering the next Encroachment Zone. Moreover, in this state he couldn't even stay too far from him.

### Chapter 93

However, the answer was completely different from his desperate wish.

**—------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------**

**Still a long way to go.**

**—------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------**

"What? Why! How come!"

**—------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------**

**Your soul was injured because you got hit by a curse while acting up.**

**—------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------**

**—------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------**

**\*while meddling.**

**—------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------**

*Stop cursing while pretending it's a typo.*

After getting angry at the first message, he was dumbfounded when the status window corrected him. He looked at the cat with eyes that said he couldn't believe this, but the creature was staring at him even more intently.

They were eyes that looked extremely angry, as if about to bite him right away. Its ears were completely flattened to the sides, making him unconsciously loosen his grip and hold the cat's body more respectfully. If he mishandled a cat with such Mazinger-like ears, his hands would get holes in them.

Though he had reacted reflexively, he felt wronged again. *Hey, are you in any position to glare at me? Throwing the player alone into a hard mode dungeon! Though admittedly the NPC had rarely helped directly before either...! Still! Still, after what happened to me!*

"I, I just, that..."

His words tangled as all sorts of emotions surged. He had never particularly looked for the NPC before, so why was he like this now? Perhaps because the NPC was like proof that this was inside a game, he felt sad as he regained his sense of reality looking at the cat. Because only En knew he was the only outsider.

Or maybe he had become too immersed in this game. Though it was just a game, he had started pouring his emotions into it, and it felt ridiculous and unfair that he was running away startled by just one look.

*Terrible game, f\*cking terrible game.*

"When will you give me freedom..."

Speaking in an almost crying tone, he slumped down on his knees. If it was a game, it should at least show quest progress, but it was frustratingly sad how it only gave vague guidance. The UI was crude, the status window was shoddy. Making it like this just made him keep forgetting it was a game.

Was the freedom promised for completing the quest certain? That freedom should be logging out. He didn't want the uninhabited island ending, the holy city stoning ending, or the imperial princess's palace imprisonment ending. Just let him get out of this game completely.

*-...Myaa.*

The cat's soft paw touched his head. *Pat pat.* The action continued hesitantly as if trying to comfort him.

**—------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------**

**Congratulations on figuring out how to subjugate souls on your own.**

**—------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------**

**—------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------**

**(Con)Skill Unlocked(grats)**

**—------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------**

*What kind of game gives status windows like this? Is it a banner?* Though dumbfounded, he couldn't help but let out a dry laugh. He had always been weak to black cats after all.

"S-Saiph!"

"Are you not feeling well? Can you walk?"

Just then, Serena and Jade approached in panic. They seemed very startled as he had suddenly grabbed the cat, started muttering to himself, and then collapsed. Worried it might be an aftereffect of his collapse yesterday, he shook his head and stood up.

"No, my legs just gave out for a moment."

"Of course sealing dangerous power must use up a lot of energy...!"

While habitually letting Serena's fiction slide, he started walking again. He urged them to hurry, saying they shouldn't spend too much time outside.

Following the two, he quietly questioned En. He naturally held the cat in his arms, preventing it from escaping.

"Hey, En. I did get cursed by the demon, but that disappeared somehow. Still, was my soul badly injured? Enough to delay the curse resolution significantly?"

**—------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------**

**Since your body is close to trash, the impact was severe.**

**—------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------**

Even after patting him comfortingly, its words were still harsh. He looked down at the cat dully. Was it like how scars remain even after wounds heal? Besides, it's not like he wanted to enter this paper trash-like body, so why scold him?

Moreover, knowing how shoddy it was yet still connecting his soul with the hero's and making them share pain. Though he felt wronged, he had no time to argue. Because the cat's eyes gradually lost strength and started blinking. It looked quite tired.

Perhaps it had gotten exhausted avoiding the mad scientist imperial princess outside. Since Beatrice had kept looking around asking where his familiar was since joining the mercenary group, maybe that really was the reason.

After walking for a few minutes carrying the sleeping creature in his arms, he saw a uniquely shaped wooden sign.

[Lara Workshop]

The three-story wooden building was extraordinary from its exterior. Each floor looked different as if separate spaces, the window shapes were unusual, and even the various decorations hanging on the walls glowed mysteriously, drawing admiration. Was this what a witch's house imagined from fairy tales would feel like?

As his companions entered the building familiarly, he quickly followed. *Ding-* the bell sound wrapped sweetly around his ears. Somehow it felt like entering a completely new space, yet also gave him a sense of déjà vu as if stepping into a very familiar place.

Was this too one of the workshop's tricks? As soon as the door opened, a completely different scene from outside unfolded, and the scent filling the space was unique. Items were displayed abundantly not just on the walls but in every space where one could step.

"Welcomeee."

A staff member wearing a black pointed hat greeted them at the counter. The staff member with long hair tied in two braids reaching down to their legs had apparently been busy organizing items, but responded to Serena's shout.

"Susu!"

"Woww, it's Serenaa!"

Serena seemed to be a regular here. The two exchanged greetings and caught up for a while, then belatedly Serena let out an "Ah!" exclamation and asked.

"Right, Susu. You told me about Isolatedies before, remember? That was definitely true, right?!"

"Isola-what?"

"...Isolatedies."

"Ah, did I tell such a story?"

This proved that the Isola-whatever legend Serena had presented was fiction. Well, though he had expected it, her frozen expression as if a rock had hit her head was a bit pitiful. He reluctantly added a comment.

"They said it was a legend about God's spear."

"Aah, I think I might remembeer? The workshop owner told me..."

"That's right. I told you. My friend was looking for it quite intensely."

Just then, someone popped out from behind the counter. Her short hair, a mysterious mix of pink and sky blue like a sunset seen from the sea, particularly caught his eye. Her round eyes were also light pink, making them look like flower petals.

Just her appearance gave an extraordinary impression that was strangely similar to the workshop's first impression. And as if proving his intuition right, the staff member Susu exclaimed.

"Ah, Workshop Ownerr!"

The workshop owner, wearing a cape of brilliant colors on her shoulders, curled up the corners of her mouth in a smile. The smile that creased her eyes mischievously and created a dimple on one side particularly suited her. An impression overflowing with composure and playfulness.

Beside him, Jade murmured in admiration.

"Wow, it's my first time seeing Lara directly. I heard she rarely comes out of her research lab."

"...The workshop owner's name is Lara?"

The staff member was named Susu, and the workshop owner was Lara? Perhaps the condition for hiring staff at this workshop was their names. While having this frivolous thought, the workshop owner spoke.

"A treasure hidden on the sky island, the spear that was God's first ray of light, that's what they needed. My friend knows many interesting legends."

"...An archaeologist?"

"No, far from it. Just information gathered while wandering here and there! Since they're always roaming around."

With even the workshop owner appearing, the expectation stock that had risen with 'maybe?' instantly crashed to the lower limit. Whether or not major shareholder Serena was sad about the delisting news, he completely lost interest in the legend. After all, his purpose for coming here wasn't to verify legends but to obtain magical tools.

*Click click,* the workshop owner approached. Her low-heeled loafers hitting the wooden floor rang like a sweet melody.

"My, what a cute cat."

The workshop owner showed interest in En in his arms. From his position knowing the creature's identity, he couldn't completely agree, but he did concur with the black cat's cuteness. His feelings were split half and half, you could say. When he nodded, the workshop owner's smile deepened.

*Chararing–* As the sound of her dangling earrings shaking rang out, her face came close enough for their noses to almost touch. First the imperial princess, now the workshop owner, why was everyone he met recently like this? As he tried to hide his startled look, she said with interest.

"This is my first customer with eye color similar to mine."

Though he had worn his hood deep to cover them, they would be visible at this close distance. Moreover, the workshop owner had deliberately approached from below as if climbing up, fully exposing his eyes. As Jade and Serena exclaimed "Saiph's eyes are pink?" beside him in wonder, he hurriedly stepped back.

### Chapter 94

Though he thought it was good he had disguised himself considering this situation, he felt oddly embarrassed that his eyes appeared pink. He didn't particularly dislike the color itself, but the workshop owner was smiling too happily, making him feel uneasy.

The workshop owner greeted him while wiggling her fingers.

"Feel free to look around."

After examining the workshop owner with mixed feelings, he quickly moved on. He needed to just find protective magical tools and leave.

Serena and Jade's eyes also sparkled, saying they should look around since it had been a while since they'd visited Lara Workshop. However, they were looking for potions, so they were on a different floor from him. Since potions were on the first floor and magical tools on the second, he went up alone.

As each floor had looked different from the outside, the interior scenes also varied. While the first floor had wood-based maximalist interior design, the second floor was urban and clean with a stone-like feel. It felt like visiting different countries one by one. With such different interiors, he wondered if it got boring from a worker's perspective.

Though it was visually easier with things organized more orderly than downstairs, there was still a problem.

"There are too many display cases..."

"What are you looking for?"

Just as he was feeling overwhelmed by the items densely filling the space, someone suddenly spoke beside him. The workshop owner Lara was right next to him without warning. As he flinched in surprise, not having sensed her presence at all, she smiled brightly and tilted her head.

Taking it as a salesperson's goodwill since the gesture suggested she wanted to help, he decided to accept.

"I'm looking for something that can protect people..."

"Aha, something like this?"

The workshop owner lifted a nearby shield with one hand. Though it was a large shield big enough to cover the whole body, she lifted it as lightly as a feather. *Had she manipulated its weight?* Perhaps alchemists were like modern materials engineering graduates.

Though the shield engraved with elaborate red patterns was interesting, it wasn't the type he needed. He shook his head.

"No, do you have any protective gear that can be used in very dangerous places where you need holy power to wrap around your body? Like wearing a holy relic to block unholy energy..."

"Aah, if that's what you want, follow me."

The workshop owner cheerfully led him. Though he felt uneasy as they went up to the third floor, he decided to trust and follow her since she was said to be famous.

The third floor had a more pastoral scene. The tables were full of various materials, perhaps a space the workshop owner used as a laboratory. She rummaged through a table drawer for a while before pulling something out with a "ta-da". It was a ring that looked like twisted leaves.

"Here! A ring that protects the wearer from unholy energy! A shield operates constantly, and just wearing it lets you feel the surroundings become more pleasant, now let's try..."

Before he could react, the workshop owner slipped the ring onto his index finger. Though its diameter was wider than his finger, it smoothly adjusted its size automatically, and then he was surprised to feel the air around him actually become clearer as she had said.

*Is this... a portable air purifier?*

As he looked around with wide eyes, the workshop owner smiled brightly. Her face was full of pride, as if knowing he was very satisfied even though he hadn't said anything out loud. She emphasized the ring's performance again.

"How is it, good right? Actually this ring even has stealth capabilities, so it's good for hiding in dangerous situations!"

"Oh, it's really a good item..."

"This should be safe enough even when exploring Encroachment Zones!"

He froze. Though her mix of formal and informal speech was odd enough, the word "Encroachment Zone" came across as very unexpected.

Was "Encroachment Zone" used as a representative term for dangerous places in this world? Like "this weapon is effective even in Encroachment Zones" or "this fruit maintains its vitality even in Encroachment Zones" and so on. *Hmm,* though it didn't seem entirely impossible, a strange uneasiness raised its head. The empire's citizens were all said to fear the Great Catastrophe, so could they casually mention Encroachment Zones, which were traces of it?

Though uncertain, there was still much he didn't know about the empire. He had been acting based on carefully observing his companions' reactions until now, but he was alone now. Finally, he just slowly nodded and answered.

"...It's a good item. I'll buy—ah."

He froze mid-sentence. Wait, he had no money? Until now his companions had paid whenever buying anything, and his only experience paying directly had been at the night market, first and last. The experience of trying various foods when Haren had given him money.

Could he borrow from Jade and Serena? Say he'd pay them back after returning to the annex? As he tried to quietly remove the ring thinking he should take it off first, it wouldn't budge at all. As he panicked with it stuck tightly to his finger, the workshop owner smiled brightly.

"94 gold."

"No, this won't come off."

"Once worn, it won't come off until its power runs out. 94 gold."

*You knew that and still put it on me without warning? This is forced selling!* Though he didn't know this world's prices well, from his night market experience, he was certain that 94 gold was very expensive. None of the food he ate there had cost even 1 gold, and most of the very fancy jewelry he had seen by chance at a street jewelry shop was around 50 gold or less.

He looked between the ring and the workshop owner in shock. At this price he couldn't borrow from Jade or Serena either, and it would be difficult to ask his companions to pay for him after putting it on credit.

Though he was tempted by the item's capabilities, he absolutely couldn't buy it. Moreover, being forced to buy it made him even more resistant, and he looked at the workshop owner dully. *Isn't this completely like a tourist trap scam?*

"You put it on me before I even said I'd buy it."

"But you said you'd buy it before even asking the price? So it must be something you need."

"...That may be true, but you put it on suddenly before I said I'd buy it. Don't twist the order."

"Hmm, then shall I put it on credit? In exchange for leaving an item as collateral."

*Whoosh,* the workshop owner's gaze turned to his chest. He panicked as the black cat was curled up sleeping there. So that's why she had found the cat cute, was this her purpose from the start?

As he was about to question the workshop owner's character, something suddenly occurred to him. He carefully moved one hand to take out an item from his chest. The only item he possessed.

"Would this be enough?"

The flashlight, no, the thing that had been on the hand of Solnium's statue at the center of the sky island. An item with a long thousand-year history that had sparkled holding sunlight and moonlight for ages in a sacred space, the only one of its kind in the world!

Though he attached brilliant modifiers in his mind, he couldn't say anything. He couldn't mention the sky island to begin with, and he had just confirmed his terrible marketing skills from the bandits' reaction in the desert. *Hmm,* but still, packaging it a bit better than then...

"It was discovered at the place where the empire's history began, and it's an item that received the world's light first for many long years..."

"Th-this item?!"

Suddenly the workshop owner's eyes grew huge. She immediately took the flashlight from him, jumping up in surprise. She pressed the center of the rod very carefully to check if light came out, and kept looking it over while exclaiming in admiration.

*Wh-what? Is this really a precious item? Does it look different to a famous alchemist?* Just as expectation was creeping up, she looked at him. With her pink eyes sparkling brightly.

"Where on earth did you get something like this?!"

"From a place everyone wants to go but no one has stepped foot in until now..."

"How could you bring such a worthless thing?!"

*Hey.*

Was she putting on a show to mock him? He glared at her in disbelief, but this time the workshop owner narrowed her eyes instead. With an atmosphere that suddenly turned sharp, she sneered.

"You readily take a very expensive 94 gold ring, then offer this kind of item? To the owner of Lara Workshop? Do you know how many mercenary friends I have?"

"No, I didn't take this ring in the first place, you put it..."

"Well, if the customer answers my question honestly, I'll accept this ridiculous trade."

The workshop owner's mood kept changing rapidly. Just before she had been pressuring him, but suddenly changed to smile brightly. Though it was overwhelming to keep up with and quite absurd, could he get the ring just by having a conversation? But in this game, whenever something seemed easy it was definitely difficult...

As he was considering uneasily, the workshop owner smiled as if she had already determined he had accepted her proposal, or as if she knew he had no choice, and asked.

"Why did you cause that commotion?"

"...Commotion?"

"You overturned the event held in the plaza during the Holy Festival. I heard you caused chaos at an event longing for the hero and everyone ran away, I really couldn't understand it. I wondered why someone who's usually quiet unless provoked would do such a thing."

His face slowly froze. That question, surely not.

The light pink eyes staring at him as he stiffened glinted eerily.

"Why did you do it, Isaph?"

### Chapter 95

His breath caught. How did she know he was Isaph? The black cat still had its lavender ribbon, and his eye color had changed, as well as his overall impression. Had she seen through the disguise magic as an alchemist with strange abilities?

However, there was something odd about the workshop owner's statement. First, there was no hostility at all in her voice, and also...

"Why aren't you answering? How surprised and curious I was when I heard about that commotion!"

"...Why?"

"You don't hate the hero, do you?"

Her eyes held even a hint of familiarity.

"You even asked me before if there was a way to become friends with the hero! So I laughed that you were asking for something quite difficult but advised you to at least try saying something nice, though I don't know what words you actually said to the hero..."

"..."

"How is it, Isaph? Have you gotten closer to the hero while being together?"

She had figured out not only his identity but also that he was traveling with Haren. What kind of relationship did she have with Isaph? Just as he was so shocked by this startling information that he couldn't even breathe, a blue window appeared before his eyes. Somehow its appearance seemed much more urgent than usual.

**—------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------**

**Isaph's acquaintance. Laria Eunice.**

**—------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------**

*Why tell such important information only now?* If he had known earlier, he wouldn't have entered the workshop, no, he would have at least avoided being alone with her! Though anger surged, a random thought also occurred to him.

'That' Isaph had a friend? He had thought he wouldn't have any friends.

**—------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------**

**Friend X, acquaintance.**

**—------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------**

*Don't be quick to correct only this after being so negligent until now.*

He looked down at the cat in his arms with dumbfounded eyes. The cat had finally opened its eyes. Was the status window unable to function when the cat was asleep, or what? What kind of game convenience was this?

Meanwhile, the workshop owner, Laria's words continued to flow.

"I see you're disguised as a mercenary called Saiph, and you seem really immersed in the acting. Treating even a friend you haven't seen in a long time like a complete stranger."

*The status window says you're not a friend...*

"I was so surprised when you really acted like you were seeing me for the first time."

Though he flinched, he tried hard to manage his expression. Fortunately, this body was good at acting expressionless, or more precisely, exhausted from lack of energy. *Well, it might not be acting but real.*

"...There were other mercenaries nearby too. Since Lara Workshop is famous, it would be troublesome to show we're close."

"That's true, but hmmmm."

Laria tilted her head with a subtle expression. As she looked him over, he barely maintained his composure, and then she shrugged her shoulders.

"So, your answer to my question?"

"...The commotion at the venue was just because I wasn't feeling well and some energy leaked out. Only the lamp's light went out, but the rumors were exaggerated."

He gratefully referenced the lie Haren had told before. Fortunately, Laria seemed familiar with the notion of exaggerated rumors and sighed "Ah." Though he wondered if she might sympathize as a friend, she nodded and spoke indifferently.

"Well, you should have behaved better usually."

"..."

"Always wearing that dark robe, going around with no companions except a cat. Look at you now, living just to serve the cat."

*What is with this nagging?* He was still confused about how to react, finding it difficult to understand Laria. Did this way of speaking mean they were really close friends? Though the status window said they weren't, the overall atmosphere was friendly.

To have this attitude even while knowing he was a necromancer.

Was a necromancer not someone to avoid since she did business that went against the temple's wishes? But even so, wouldn't she cut ties with someone who had committed mass murder? Why was she happy to see him? He couldn't figure out this relationship at all.

The word "Encroachment Zone" earlier hadn't seemed random either, and it was strange that she seemed to know he was with the hero now. She gave the impression of knowing exactly what had happened after Isaph's prison break.

*How?* Had she figured out the hero's survival from the disappearing Encroachment Zones, and connected it with necromancy's usefulness knowing him well? Because she knew the original Isaph didn't hate the hero, did she think he would cooperate? Wasn't that too much of a leap?

Though he had many questions, he couldn't ask any of them. Any of these questions would give Laria cause for suspicion, and he didn't even have the leisure to question the status window. Laria pressed him.

"Why aren't you answering whether you've become friends with the hero?"

"...Not really."

That question cut through all his thoughts. His complicated mind instantly cooled, and only one being came to mind.

*Me, friends with the hero? How could that be possible? Just today I came here running away after receiving that uncomfortable gaze.*

...His mood suddenly plummeted to rock bottom. He just kept his mouth shut tight, not even thinking about being cautious of Laria.

At his answer, Laria narrowed her eyes.

"Well, that noble hero of the Holy Empire wouldn't keep you close. You're different in every way. You've been going around doing things that completely go against doctrine, so he must really hate you."

"..."

Hearing her voice speak as if it were natural, his mood fell even further. Why did he feel this way while agreeing with Laria's words? In reality, Haren hadn't particularly kept him close until now.

"By the way, I have many questions for you..."

"Saiph? Where are you, Saiph?!"

Just as Laria's questions were about to continue, Jade called for him from the second floor. He quickly turned around. Staying here longer would only increase the chances of raising suspicious clues.

"I need to go back now."

"Hmm, that's too bad but it can't be helped. That collar doesn't seem ordinary, so I should let you go for the sake of protecting my friend's neck, right?"

Unexpectedly, Laria backed off easily. Though she had seemed like she would persistently question him, she just shrugged her shoulders and even took a step back. Then waving the white rod she was holding, she said,

"Contact me when you get money. I'll keep this item until then."

*...She won't give it free even to a friend?*

Though he still felt wronged about being forced to buy the ring, and also regretted losing the flashlight he had been using quite usefully, there was no other way. He would have to believe the ring would be useful. When he reluctantly nodded, Laria smiled brightly and said goodbye.

"See you next time. Then we can talk about childhood memories after so long."

*What? It said they were just acquaintances, but they are people who had been together since childhood? I don't have any memories to share with that person.* Though flustered, escaping was the urgent priority so he answered vaguely. He needed to end the conversation quickly.

"...Yeah, see you next time."

Laria's smile deepened. She waved her fingers goodbye like when they first met, and he turned and quickly went down the stairs. For some reason En squirmed in his arms, but he had no attention to spare for the creature.

Much time had already passed.

What was meant to be a brief outing had taken too long, and at this rate his companions would notice his absence and start getting suspicious. They might think he was causing trouble just when they had started to trust him.

He quickened his pace while just showing his hand to Jade and Serena who asked what he had bought. Their talk about how fun it was to look around the workshop after so long barely reached his ears. After all, he had only experienced nearly having his heart stop.

*–Meow.*

As the annex building came into view, En suddenly jumped out of his arms. *Is it avoiding the imperial princess again?* Since he had no intention of showing the NPC to the mad scientist, he let it go willingly, but the creature turned to look at him while leaving. That gaze was very subtle.

Eyes that seemed to say there was much to say but wouldn't.

*...Wait, does it also have a look of contempt mixed in?* But before he could ask, the cat had moved away. After staring dumbfoundedly at its retreating figure, he continued walking. He was anxious to return quickly.

"Oh, isn't that your commander over there?"

But as soon as he entered the annex's main entrance, he encountered Haren. He flinched in surprise at Jade's words. The entrance and banquet hall were quite far apart, so why was he here?

"..."

Across the way, Haren also stopped as if spotting him. He had been quickly crossing the corridor until just now, and somehow seemed like he had come out looking for him. The instant their gazes met in the air felt very long.

### Chapter 96

Just as he couldn't breathe, Jade patted his shoulder. Beside them, Serena rambled about her delusion that "He must have come looking to manage the seal...!", but Jade seemed to think the commander had come to get him because he wasn't feeling well. His thinking was consistently healthy.

Jade smiled brightly and said goodbye.

"Since your commander's here, we'll be going now. It was fun going to the workshop together!"

"Uh, yeah..."

"And that ring you bought today, it seems to suit you well. Let's meet again when we get the chance!"

It was a farewell delivered while gently touching the ring on his index finger. Looking like leaves, it was something that made you want to touch it subtly. You might wonder if it had real leaves attached. He awkwardly waved to him.

After the two disappeared in an instant, only silence remained in the corridor.

"..."

Haren hadn't moved a single step from where he had stopped earlier. Just standing there silently looking at him, but he didn't have the courage to meet his eyes again and let his gaze wander.

If others also thought Haren had come looking for him, it probably wasn't a misunderstanding. Perhaps he had come out because he had been away from his seat for too long. He could have summoned the collar's leash to pull him back. Maybe he had moved personally to avoid drawing attention since there were so many people.

After moving his lips, he spoke with difficulty.

"I thought I'd need protective gear for the next, schedule. So I went to the famous workshop in this city."

"..."

"It felt awkward to keep receiving holy relics from you, so I got something separately, um, it happens to have stealth capabilities too so it's good for hiding..."

"Ah."

Just as he was adding unnecessary details awkwardly, a subtle sigh fell. Like cutting off his words, abruptly. He flinched and looked at Haren to see him covering his mouth with his hand.

Haren was touching his stiffly frozen lips. Rolling his eyes to the side without even meeting his gaze, he spoke in a dry voice.

"...You don't need to go to the trouble of explaining. You know better than anyone that you can't run away as long as the collar is on."

"..."

"It's good that you got a decent magical tool. I hope you won't get hit by unnecessary curses anymore."

As soon as he finished those words, *whoosh,* Haren turned his back. He blankly watched his retreating figure, as if even standing face to face was uncomfortable.

Wait, no, not even wait. For quite a long time, he had seen very deep discomfort floating in his eyes. It was noticeable even though this time he hadn't looked him directly in the eyes. His brow was also furrowed, and even his voice had a strangely sharp edge.

An attitude mixing frustration, displeasure, and irritation.

Though he was flustered by how unfamiliar it was to see him showing emotion like this, he also felt a surge of emotion. *Is talking to me that irritating? ...Well, I haven't done anything good either!*

*Moreover, why bring up curses at the end? I just said I got protective gear because of the Encroachment Zone, so why does the conversation flow to accidents and curses?* *Was it that detestable to receive the aftereffects of my curse because our souls were connected? I hated it too!*

As he was protesting inwardly, he froze at a suddenly remembered fact.

"...Ah, they said it would take a long time before the connection could be broken."

He felt the blood drain from his face. On one hand, indignation rose that he wasn't the only one suffering since he also shared Haren's Dium curse, but he could suppress that pain. Strangely, only that had an on/off switch for pain, so his situation was different from Haren's. After all, yesterday Haren had endured the forcibly shared incubus curse with mental strength.

*Haah,* a sigh escaped involuntarily. Though he had told Haren before that he would eliminate the curse within a month and break the soul connection as soon as it was resolved, how should he tell him now that the situation had become complicated?

Haren would also know that time was approaching...

He dropped his head heavily in a hopeless mood, then saw the ring on his hand and became even more depressed. Resentment welled up that this conversation had happened because he had stayed away too long trying to get a magical tool. *Your performance had better be certain.*

He glared at the ring and let out another sigh.

A very long sigh.

\*\*\*

From that day on, he began to pine away.

This was an illness stemming entirely from the worry of 'how to tell Haren the truth.' How could he tell someone who found the connected state uncomfortable that the curse resolution was still far away? Moreover, it was related to something he had called an act that would never happen in one's right mind.

Though he pondered, he couldn't find an answer at all, and because of this, even looking at Haren became uncomfortable. He avoided him, feeling guilty in advance that if their eyes met by chance, he might ask when the curse would be resolved.

Even when receiving the warp passes from Nadael's lord the next morning, and when Beatrice left as planned, only that thought occupied his mind.

"If you ever want to come to the imperial palace later, just say so anytime."

He deliberately pretended not to hear Beatrice's words trying to open the imprisonment route until the end. No, they didn't even enter his head in the first place. Though Noi was again restless at his behavior that seemed to ignore the imperial princess, this time too Beatrice just burst into "Hahaha!" laughter and said he was still tempting. Of course, he ignored this too.

The longer his worrying continued, the more uncomfortable every situation became.

Since they traveled together, they naturally ate together too, but now he avoided even those occasions as they felt awkward. He couldn't eat much anyway since he had no appetite. It was a problem he couldn't seek advice about from the NPC, and coincidentally the cat had strangely become very sleepy.

The cat had only returned to his side after Beatrice left, but it kept dozing endlessly. It felt oddly like seeing himself from the beginning. Though he wondered if it might be sick, it was just sleeping. He couldn't even pretend to play with the cat, so he just felt pointless resentment.

Though he had originally tended to stay apart from his companions, this time the journey's atmosphere was a bit strange, perhaps because he was trying to distance himself compulsively. And as it happened, Haren's attitude also fanned this atmosphere.

Just as he avoided Haren, Haren avoided him too.

Once when he was repeatedly stroking the sleeping cat while lost in thought, someone's presence approached his side. Since Noi had been worriedly asking about the cat's condition from time to time, he thought it was him again and said "En is just sleeping." However, there was no answer, and when he turned around, it was just Haren passing by.

"Uh..."

He just glanced at him frozen stiff without a word and continued moving. He went far around to avoid where he was. Unfortunately, everyone saw the uncomfortable light that appeared on his face then.

Because of this, even the other companions realized there was a problem between Haren and him. Though things had been subtle since the annex in Nadael, this was the first time such an atmosphere had been shown so openly.

And only then did they realize that Haren hadn't spoken to him once during this entire journey. Though they had never been close conversational partners before either, he used to stop Kalterik whenever he picked fights with him, but now he wouldn't even look at him.

So instead Kalterik became flustered and looked after him. Usually he would have shouted "Stop acting like an evil spirit!" at his behavior of quietly appearing in corners, but now he only said "Ugh" and stopped. Just a strange excuse about not wanting to disturb the Commander's mood was muttered.

This strange atmosphere continued for a long time.

It was like this the entire time as they departed from the city with the eastern warp gate and headed towards the village near the Encroachment Zone, gathering information about missing persons in every village they stopped at along the way. Not only did he have to be careful since Beatrice's disguise magic had ended, but he had never participated in gathering information about missing persons anyway, so he stayed back this time too, and occasionally Noi would summarize and relay the information to him.

Though there were missing persons, most had disappeared long ago, and even the most recent news was from last winter. Though it was news that perhaps the old missing persons might have gathered in the Encroachment Zone to form a zombie army, rather than worrying about that, his immediate concerns were greater, so he just nodded vaguely.

After passing such time, they arrived at the eastern Encroachment Zone.

Noi said that this time they had learned the route into the Encroachment Zone from Beatrice in advance, so it was fortunate they had come straight here without wandering like last time. Though he was chattering enthusiastically as if wanting to draw conversation among the companions, his attention wasn't directed there.

"...You said it was suitable to look around in this season."

After quietly looking at the Encroachment Zone's appearance, he spoke for the first time in a while. Having not spoken for days, his voice had sunk even more gloomily, perfectly representing his state of mind.

He clearly remembered Noi and Beatrice talking earlier about how the eastern Encroachment Zone was good to look around in spring and summer. Though he had imagined resort scenery in his mind then, only to discard it thinking an Encroachment Zone couldn't be like that... Could you really describe this as a good place to look around?

Before them rose a steep snow-covered mountain.

### Chapter 97

He was so dumbfounded he almost burst into a dry laugh. Sure, it might be better than the cold season, but wasn't this level of forced positivity like juice being squeezed out?

The snow-covered mountain soaring dizzyingly high was majestically beautiful, and the rocks occasionally visible between the perpetual snow-like white covering also created a spectacular view, but... he just felt overwhelmed. Did he have to mountain climb with this body?

The center of the snow-white mountain was faded to gray like ink spilled on white paper, but it felt somewhat different from previous Encroachment Zones. Though the mountain terrain was terrible, was the range relatively small? It looked smaller than even the southern Encroachment Zone they had visited first.

He narrowed his eyes to assess its location.

"Is that... cave the Encroachment Zone?"

"Yes, that's right! It's an enormously large cave, almost encompassing the entire mountain. They say many people used to visit it as a famous attraction long ago. We even have an interior map."

Noi immediately answered loudly, as if happy to be having a conversation with him. Though he was discouraged by how incredibly vast the cave's interior was said to be, he brightened at the information added at the end. A map? In that case...

"Do you remember it?"

"Of course! I drew it in advance on the way here!"

So that's what he had been busily sketching while spreading out paper in the carriage. Since he had been worried that searching with undead would be overwhelming if the cave's paths were more complex, this was very welcome news.

With this map, couldn't he just look around the interior with undead and mark where the cores were located? Though he would still have to go in together, even that alone was much less burdensome. After all, he had been quietly struggling while finding directions directly until now.

However, separate from the good news, the disadvantages of the snow-covered mountain terrain were too great.

"Huk, heuk..."

First of all, the path up to the cave entrance located in the center of the snow-covered mountain was extremely treacherous. Since human traffic had naturally ceased after the Encroachment Zone formed here, the mountain path had become rough from lack of maintenance, and with snow piled up thickly, feet sank deeply. Moreover, it was extremely slippery.

Though the trained knights of course, and even the fairy, walked gracefully as if specialized for natural terrain, it was completely arduous for him. As he climbed with difficulty, *whoosh,* his body finally tilted to the side and tried to roll down the slope.

Just as he was screaming "Aak!" inwardly, *whoosh!* His body was caught. Someone firmly wrapped their arm around his waist to support him. He stiffened. Usually in situations like this, the person who caught him was Haren, could it be...

"...Be careful."

However, the person who helped him was Mela. Embarrassment suddenly rushed in as she held him in a pose often seen in dramas, where the protagonist catches someone about to fall backwards on stairs. Her silver hair fluttering against the backdrop of the snow-covered mountain somehow appeared in slow motion.

With Mela's help, he properly planted his feet on the ground and awkwardly nodded.

"Uh, yeah, thanks..."

"...Want to hold on while walking?"

"No, I'm fine."

He declined when Mela offered her hand. However, she didn't withdraw and just stared at him, then held out her arm as if in substitution and walked pretending not to see.

But Mela strangely persistently kept her arm extended while following close behind him. What, why was she doing this? It wasn't uncomfortable because of gender, but he wasn't used to contact with anyone to begin with, and being looked after was also unfamiliar.

Moreover, it was disconcerting how Mela seemed ready to carry him on her back if he stumbled just once more. Since he wanted to avoid that situation at all costs, he stubbornly endured trying his hardest not to fall, and thanks to that, they safely reached the cave.

"Phew..."

It was the first time he felt relief upon arriving at an Encroachment Zone. He let out a long sigh, and only then did Mela step back. The reason was that she shouldn't interfere from nearby now that he needed to search the interior with undead.

*Swoosh–*

Purple energy swirled and spread from the boundary of the gray-faded cave in the center of the snow-white mountain. Shadows suddenly expanded from where he stood, then undead rose up en masse from the ground.

[Aaah...]

They were summoned much faster than before, and their rising movement was also smoother. Not only that, but their numbers had increased surprisingly this time.

"Almost double compared to the last Encroachment Zone..."

As Noi said, about a hundred undead rippled around him. He had heard before that Isaph had gained notoriety for controlling hundreds of undead, but he had been disappointed when he could only summon about thirty in the first Encroachment Zone. Yet now they had increased this much.

Was the feeling of his body stabilizing earlier really because his character play proficiency had increased? Even the dizziness that came with each skill use seemed to have decreased. He looked down at his palm dazedly. Though his physical strength was still poor and the undead all still looked like ordinary citizens...

Putting aside his thoughts, he sent the undead into the cave. They smoothly entered following his intentions with just hand gestures. Numerous scenes began flooding into his mind.

Thanks to checking Noi's map in advance, organizing the information was much easier. He calmly marked the cores' locations one by one on that map.

"Ugh..."

Though the familiar dizziness came by the end, fortunately he didn't collapse unsightly like before. He steadied his breathing while leaning against the wall, then held out the map.

"I identified eight cores this time. It's quite a lot, but there weren't any inaccessible places like where the altar was last time, though instead I saw a strange scene in this corner. Should I say there was a heat haze, no, a mass of light that interfered with visibility?"

It was a different phenomenon from last time. Above all, there shouldn't be light in an Encroachment Zone, especially inside a cave, yet he had seen light spreading. Was it like reflection in a prism, or should he say it was like light scattering in all directions as if shining through a diamond? It was hard to find an exact comparison.

Kalterik took the map. In the past, Haren had usually stood beside him asking various questions and talking, but this time he didn't move, so Kalterik hesitantly stepped forward.

"Th-that, were there any missing persons?"

"Doesn't seem like it."

He deliberately shrugged more nonchalantly at Kalterik's awkward question. He wasn't certain since he had never sensed any movement while looking around Encroachment Zones with undead before. Even the Dium they always encountered hadn't been sensed beforehand. Though there was a chance he hadn't seen anything because the undead moved too quickly...

"This time was... strangely quiet."

He was rather puzzled by how extremely calm it was except for the mass of light discovered in the corner. The gray cave just gaped open like the maw of a huge beast.

The companions memorized the locations marked on the map while preparing to enter. Noi took out and put on a purification filter mask from his bag, and the holy knights wrapped holy power around their bodies.

As he just stood there blankly, Kalterik kept glancing at him and spoke.

"C-Commander. Won't that guy get contaminated right away if he enters the Encroachment Zone without a holy relic? Should I quickly go down and get something...?"

"No, it's fine. He said he took care of it."

Since Haren had always handed him holy relics before but wouldn't even look at him this time, it seemed Kalterik was being considerate instead. As even Noi and Mela glanced at him, he showed them his index finger.

"A magical tool from Lara Workshop."

"Ah, I've heard about that place. They boast performance comparable to holy relics..."

Relief washed over him as Noi nodded and spoke. If he knew about it, it meant Lara Workshop's skills weren't false. As he preciously held the ring, Noi suddenly tilted his head.

"But I heard such items are extremely expensive, how did you buy it? You shouldn't have money. Ah, perhaps the mercenaries you became close with there bought it? Or lent it?"

"...Let's go in."

Ignoring Noi's various speculations, he moved into the cave first. He didn't even want to recall the memory of being forced to buy it. At least as he walked into the Encroachment Zone, he felt the ring's effectiveness, which reduced his resentment a little. There was no difficulty breathing at all.

Though it was midday, the cave was naturally dark.

"The things Her Highness gave us are so helpful!"

Noi exclaimed brightly. Before leaving, Beatrice had gifted them several artifacts, including a badge that emitted light. It was a kind of attachable lantern that lit up the front when pinned to clothes. Since his flashlight had just been taken by Laria, he had gratefully received it.

With the darkness blocking their path resolved and having a map too, they moved more easily than in other Encroachment Zones. The entry was smooth, and finding and destroying the first core, then dealing with the next core was also easy. Though he had worried since this Encroachment Zone had many cores, they cleared them very quickly.

So... it was too easy, to an unsettling degree.

After instantly destroying the fourth core, Haren quietly looked down at the remains. Though even very small sounds tended to echo loudly in the cave, as if realizing something from that, he spoke softly.

"There's no presence at all in this cave except for us."

"What? You mean..."

"It seems there isn't even a Dium."

It was clearly news to be welcomed. But because of the ominousness pervading this space, he absolutely couldn't feel that way. The reason was intuitive. They had now come deep into the cave, which meant...

"...If the cave collapses, we'll all die."

### Chapter 98

Though it was a mutter to himself, the sound echoed and everyone looked at him. Though he felt sorry seeing the shocked expression on Noi's face, it was unsettling that the cores' locations were also deep inside.

Perhaps they were giving up one Encroachment Zone to kill the hero who would be an obstacle to Dedium's revival. Though only two Encroachment Zones remained in the empire, the number remaining wouldn't matter if they could ultimately revive Dedium. It was a strategy of giving up one thing to gain something bigger.

Soon Haren spoke with a serious face.

"Let's check the place with the mass of light first."

"Yes!"

The companions, having grasped that the situation was unusual, also became sharply focused. They had already come deep into the cave, and moreover, the paths inside were twisted like a maze. It would take a long time to return to the single entrance, and if it collapsed while they were going anyway, that would be the end.

So they decided to investigate the suspicious location instead. Everyone rushed forward following the hypothesis that the Dium might be where the mass of light had rippled. Even he, who had been tired from climbing the snow-covered mountain, could move quickly from tension.

But when they arrived at the corner of the cave, everyone froze. Something was piled up high enough to reach the tall ceiling, and instead of them who had stopped abruptly and couldn't say a word in front of it, he muttered.

"...People?"

It was very different from the missing persons who had become zombies that they had encountered in the first Encroachment Zone. That is, they were... piled like a mountain. The number seemed to easily exceed several hundred, no, a thousand, and they were stacked densely mixed together regardless of age or gender.

It was a mountain of colorless, faded corpses.

"Uuk, uweeek. Kuuuk, huuk...!"

Noi knelt while dry heaving, then soon let out sobs like wailing. His whole body trembled as if shocked by the too terrible scene. Kalterik also dry heaved while leaning against the wall, and Mela covered her mouth with her hand. Only Haren and he remained standing still here.

"..."

But Haren was absolutely not composed. Rather, he was frozen completely stiff, staring more persistently at the horrifyingly repulsive sight. He seemed to be looking for anyone matching the appearances of missing persons they had collected over the past few days among the corpses piled like a mountain.

Meanwhile, he was in a daze. Though he was certainly shocked too, they say when you encounter too shocking a sight, you rather lose your sense of reality. A very strange sense of alienation and déjà vu mixed together as a *zing-* headache came. His head hurt stingingly.

Instead of staggering and collapsing, he moved forward while slowly taking deep breaths. Though he didn't know what mindset drove him, he moved following a compulsion that he had to approach, and placed his hand on a corpse. Behind him, Kalterik was shocked.

"You, don't tell me you're trying to subjugate them as undead...!"

"...There are no souls."

He murmured softly. Though it had been uncertain from the outside, he could be sure upon touching them. Though they say you can't find traces of souls in those who died very long ago, these didn't look like old corpses at all. No, they just looked peacefully asleep as if it wouldn't be strange for them to open their eyes right away. But their bodies were chillingly cold, proving their death.

However, there was a contradiction even in that aspect. According to Noi, the most recently disappeared person had gone missing in winter. That was at least several months ago. Yet why were these corpses in such an intact state? Was it because they hadn't decayed in the cold cave, or was something different because it was an Encroachment Zone?

Except for being faded to colorless, no wounds could be found on the corpses.

"The zombies we saw in the southern Encroachment Zone were covered in wounds..."

They said those killed by Dium became zombies. They should have been wounded in the process of resisting, but these bodies were completely clean. Then had they all come into the Encroachment Zone out of curiosity and died from contamination? And so the Dium had brought them and stacked them neatly? Something was strange.

They looked as if they had come here in neat attire as if having purified themselves, and only their souls had left and they had died.

"They hardly match the appearances of the missing persons we've collected so far."

Just then, Haren spoke in a sunken voice, as if he too had finished comparing. *Thud thud,* he approached as if wanting to check from closer up anyway.

"Wait, Isaph."

*Whoosh,* suddenly Haren grabbed his arm and pulled. He was dragged along dazedly at the sudden touch. Though he was surprised at the first contact since that day, there was no time to pay attention to that. He too was shocked when he checked where Haren was looking with a stiffly frozen face.

There was a pitch-black wall behind the mountain of corpses.

No, perhaps it was a cavity?

Though it was clearly a blocked part on the map and should have a wall as the end of the cave, that place existed like a pitch-black cavity. The entire wall surface was black as an abyss, and even the artifact Beatrice had given couldn't illuminate it. No, it seemed like no light could be contained there at all.

It brought an eerie revulsion similar to but greater than an Encroachment Zone core. This almost looked like... some kind of 'boundary'.

*You'll die if you cross it.*

Intuition warned of that. Without even knowing what might be beyond it, or whether it was even a space where the concept of crossing applied, he instinctively stepped back hesitantly. It felt like they shouldn't even touch it.

"What in the world is this..."

The companions also sighed seeing that strange wall. This Encroachment Zone was too bizarre. Just as they were about to exchange opinions looking at each other, *kigigigigik*- a chilling sound rang out.

It was a noise like what might occur when an enormous spring unwound. The clicking sound like something being fitted together echoed through the entire cave loud enough to hurt their ears. Not just him but all the companions covered their ears in pain, and finally *kugugugung*! even the ground shook.

Could they really be planning to collapse the cave and kill them all? Though it was chilling, he couldn't properly look around. His whole body shook excessively, and in his swaying vision, he confirmed an even more shocking phenomenon.

"...The space is, changing?"

At some point, no, perhaps from the moment the vibrations began, strange light burst forth from the black wall. Just as the scattering light seemed to dye their vision, finally the ground collapsed. Not the ceiling, but the floor split in all directions.

*Whoosh–* Haren pushed him forcefully.

What kind of intuition had driven that action? He staggered as he was pushed and landed on his bottom. *Kwagwagwagwang!* A new wall rose up before his fallen eyes. No, perhaps this view appeared because where he sat had plunged straight down.

Crazy, the map suddenly rotated randomly.

Though they had clearly been in a snow mountain cave, suddenly the space changed to a cave filled with blue crystals. Moreover, the anomaly didn't stop at once.

Suddenly lava stalactites like those seen in volcanic caves appeared, then suddenly the sound of water splashing came from over there, and the colors of minerals changed wildly. All these changes proceeded in time with the *kigigik*– spring sound.

When all the commotion subsided, he was startled to find himself face-to-face with a mirror-like transparent crystal. *Ugh,* it felt like seeing his face reflected in a black screen when a game suddenly turns off.

His white face looked more dumbfounded than pale. After staring blankly at the purple eyes reflected in the crystal that somehow looked unfamiliar, he belatedly turned to look around.

*What is this, a cave theme dungeon?*

*Are they showing all types - snow mountain cave, volcanic cave, coastal cave, mine cave, etc.? This isn't even a complete set, you crazy bastards.* *After cursing this terrible game every day, are they explaining 'We prepared this many maps'? The player needs to be able to enjoy it, just showing off data like this only makes me think 'what are you trying to do'.*

As he was getting up while spewing curses, he suddenly clutched his stomach and groaned.

"Ack...!"

The degree of pain was severe. Wondering if he had hit or been stabbed by something while the map was changing extensively, he hurriedly checked his stomach. It was extreme pain as if his stomach had been pierced and all his internal organs had burst. His back tingled too and cold sweat poured like rain.

But when he checked, his stomach was fine. Since there wasn't even the smallest scratch, he blinked blankly. His thoughts were slow. His body had no wounds at all yet it hurt this much? Then, this...

"...Haren."

Haren, he was the one who was injured.

### Chapter 99

Suddenly his mind grew distant. Perhaps because it hurt so much, because it was painful enough that his whole body was damp with cold sweat. Or perhaps because even though he only felt half the pain of the person his soul was connected to, it made him gauge how much pain he must be experiencing.

"Wh-where is he? I need to find him..."

He started looking for Haren while muttering like a madman. He moved driven by fear that he just had to check his condition. Though he couldn't track location through the collar like Haren could, he headed towards him relying on a vague sense.

Though he seemed to walk frantically, he felt certain he was getting closer to him. His instinct knew where the person connected to his soul was. He walked following his intuition as if tied by a rope.

"Urgh, shit..."

Though he had to stop occasionally because his stomach hurt too much, he wiped away cold sweat and trudged forward stubbornly. He moved even faster than before, as if out of spite.

And finally, he found Haren.

"Ugh..."

Haren was leaning against the cave wall, clutching his abdomen and groaning. His white shirt was soaked with blood and his face had turned pale white. However, as soon as he heard footsteps approaching around the corner, he reflexively straightened his posture and stood up.

He quickly covered and tidied his clothes with his robe, and composed his expression to even form a faint smile.

"This Encroachment Zone is really strange..."

Haren perfectly acted to keep even his tone from trembling as he checked who it was, and their eyes met directly. Various emotions churned in his blue eyes before what finally arose was... relief.

Staggering, Haren leaned against the wall as if collapsing.

"Ah, it's you..."

As soon as he confirmed it was him, that is, as soon as he realized it was someone he couldn't hide his injury from, he smiled as if tension had drained away.

In fact, until just before, he had harbored a strange anger towards Haren. Even while frantically searching for him out of worry, he wanted to question him for the very absurd reason of why he got hurt. Even though he had warned him to be careful, and even though he knew their souls were connected and he would share the pain, why did he get hurt so badly.

But as soon as he saw Haren here, all those thoughts cut off.

He had known for a while that Haren tried to show only a perfect appearance. After all, he had pretended to be fine even when pierced in several places by the Dium's arrows in the western Encroachment Zone. He had even felt disgusted admiration that his acting deserved an award.

But was he receiving a different kind of shock because it was his first time directly witnessing the moment Haren put on his mask? No, perhaps more than that...

"Haha, showing such a pathetic sight..."

The sight of Haren relaxing with relief upon seeing him created a very strange churning feeling. The fact that he who showed only a perfect mask to everyone else revealed his true self in front of him made him dizzy.

What was this? As his heart suddenly started hurting too, he fumbled before belatedly gathering his wits. The abdominal pain must have broken his head too. He quickly shook his head and approached Haren.

"Potion, where's a potion quickly."

"There isn't any. Haah, used almost all of them last time, and the last one just broke..."

"What? Last time means..."

As he was trying to guess when Haren might have recently used potions, he was shocked to recall when he had vomited blood from the incubus's curse. He hurriedly felt inside his robe.

Actually, he had secretly swiped some potions on his way out of Lara Workshop. Since he had already been forced to buy and incur debt anyway, he had taken a few potions too, and it had been a really good choice. Feeling repeatedly relieved, he started treatment.

After making Haren sit leaning against the wall, some strength surged from somewhere and he spread open his shirt as if tearing it to check the wound. As the pain he had felt indicated, his stomach was completely pierced through. Around the wound that was almost the size of a hand, golden light flickered and died repeatedly.

The hero's self-healing ability was said to be able to heal half of even fatal wounds if not completely. But he seemed unable to concentrate, probably because he was too dazed. They say when you're seriously injured enough, your mind temporarily blanks out.

It would be a big problem if he fainted. He carefully poured the potion on the wound while speaking.

"Concentrate quickly. You acted well just now."

"I saved some mental strength in case someone came..."

"You don't need to hide from me, so just focus on recovery quickly."

His chest grew cold as it was the first time he had heard Haren's tone so powerless. Could this already be after healing? Like this was after recovering half? Fear struck him and even his body started trembling.

His head spun, chased by irrational fear. Haren closed his eyes as if tired, and the golden light flickering around the wound gradually weakened.

"You, you can't die here. Ugh, Haren, please..."

He trembled, bending his upper body as if collapsing. Was it anger that the standard for quest success that he had worked so hard for couldn't go like this, or sadness that the hero couldn't die so meaninglessly in a place like this, or...

Had that emotion he hadn't even named yet, that thing that endlessly rolled inside him making him stagger, finally made him fall? Not even knowing where he was falling to, he just buried his face in Haren's chest and shook as if crying. He clutched his shirt like a lifeline and sobbed.

"..."

*Pat pat,* a very careful touch reached his shoulder. Gentle and tender, as if soothing him who had been swept up in a torrent. Only then did he startle and raise his head.

Haren's wound had already almost healed.

Looking closely, it had healed about halfway with his holy power, and the potion had also taken effect, covering it thinly as if coating it with skin. Though this still wasn't a good condition, it was surprising to see his stomach that had been gaping open as if it would never heal now closed up. Was Lara Workshop's potion this effective, or...

"...It wasn't, enough to die from."

Haren's quiet murmur brought him to his senses as if hit with cold water. Still clutching his shirt, now probably more like grabbing his collar, he questioned him.

"What? You were dying just before. Your voice was really strange too!"

"I was dizzy from losing a lot of blood. I was going to rest a bit and then recover..."

His voice was supremely calm and composed. Though he briefly suspected that Haren might be acting deliberately because he had been too startled, an even greater embarrassment washed over him like a tidal wave. Even if it was acting, didn't that mean his reaction had seemed quite excessive to warrant such acting?

Come to think of it, if it had been a serious wound enough to die immediately, he probably couldn't have pretended to be fine earlier. Since he said he had deliberately saved some mental strength, it meant the injury was at a level where such judgment was possible. From his perspective, that is.

The embarrassment that suddenly rushed in turned to indignation and made him glare at Haren. At that gaze, Haren subtly rolled his eyes to the side and spoke.

"...I guess I just relaxed from relief at seeing you."

His tone had a somewhat subtle quality. It was full of awkwardness as if this experience was a first for him too, and he remained silent, infected by that atmosphere. The churning he had felt upon seeing Haren smile as soon as he saw him returned again.

A very subtle silence settled.

They had avoided each other and not exchanged a single word all day until now, and this had continued even until entering the Encroachment Zone. After acting in a way that even their companions noticed they were uncomfortable with each other, they had just shot a melodrama scene as if they were the closest of companions.

Tremendous awkwardness washed over him as he recalled why he had distanced himself from Haren during that time. Just as he was sheepishly releasing his collar, no, his shirt collar and about to withdraw his hand, Haren spoke.

"...You must have been very startled by the sudden pain."

It was a strange statement. Setting aside how it felt like he had blurted out any topic as if chased by the awkward atmosphere, it was odd that he was concerned about him being startled when he was the injured one. As he stood there bewildered, Haren even added that he hadn't had time to dodge the falling pile of rocks then.

"Since you're not used to pain, no, I was trying to be careful not to get hurt until the Dium's curse was resolved..."

*Blink blink,* after just blankly opening and closing his eyes, he soon burst out with an "Ah!" The answer miraculously came to the worry that had occupied his mind for days.

"Right! If you get hurt like this, the curse resolution gets delayed too! We have to stay soul-connected for much longer! Because of you!"

### Chapter 100

He was so excited that he even pointed his finger at Haren while shouting. Just as he was enthusiastically blaming others after finding someone to transfer responsibility to...

Soon his arm dropped with a thud.

"Heaaah..."

What was he doing to an injured person...

A time of intense self-reflection came as he felt like a terrible piece of trash. Moreover, Haren remained quiet without any protest to his harsh criticism, which moved him even further into the waste disposal facility. After staying silent with both arms hanging limply to the floor, he finally confessed the truth in a depressed tone.

The time for confession came after reflection.

"...Actually it's because of me. Because I got hit by the incubus's curse, my already poor condition got even worse, so I couldn't break the connection."

"..."

"I kept worrying about how to tell you that your curse resolution would take much longer... I'm sorry."

The deadline had already passed on the way to the eastern Encroachment Zone, and Haren surely knew this too. Yet he had completely shut his mouth and avoided him while pretending not to know, so Haren must have been bewildered. He should be grateful that Haren hadn't forcibly caught and questioned him, yet here he was blaming others.

Though Haren probably hadn't asked because meeting him was uncomfortable too, wasn't he the one who had provided the cause for that in reality? He was about to suggest they call it even since it was a problem that arose while trying to resolve each other's curses, but closed his mouth when he heard the word "trash" shouting in his head.

It was ridiculous how he who had so confidently connected their souls saying he would resolve his problem now had delayed the curse resolution because he got hurt. He kept his head down and just looked at the floor. He couldn't bring himself to face Haren.

"...Perhaps, was that why you kept avoiding me all this time?"

"Yeah. Because I had nothing to say if you asked whether it was time to break it..."

After staying silent for a long time, Haren asked just that one thing. He answered in an almost inaudible voice while fumblingly adding excuses. He was going to tell him, but couldn't find the right timing and worried about it, and hadn't he been busy collecting information about missing persons anyway, and so on.

As he continued making excuses that were crude to the point of being vulgar, he heard a "ha" laugh. Though he thought Haren was finally mocking him, when he reconsidered, it was different from derision.

When he dazedly raised his head, what he met was Haren's bright smile.

"Haha, ah, hahaha..."

Haren laughed like someone who had a screw come loose somewhere. He laughed while shaking his whole body as he sat leaning against the wall, and he was truly bewildered. There was no trace of displeasure or irritation anywhere on his face.

Rather, the only emotion he found was relieved ease.

As if a problem that had troubled him for a very long time had been resolved, Haren laughed comfortably before soon clutching his abdomen and groaning. It seemed he had laughed so much that pain came. As he too felt pain in response and frowned, he asked.

"Why are you laughing?"

"I thought, you were avoiding me because you hated me."

*...Isn't that what I wanted to say? Isn't that not something that should be said by someone who had been looking at me with uncomfortable eyes and walking far away all this time?*

Haren spoke while dropping his gaze to the floor with his head tilted diagonally.

"That day... I mean, the day you came back from that workshop."

It was an uncharacteristically rambling opening. Whether because pain made it hard to organize his thoughts, or because the emotions from that day were still unsettled, disorganized words continued. Actually, when the words "that day" came out, he had flinched thinking it meant the day he was hit by the incubus's curse, but Haren brought up the next story.

"I'm sure we said there would be problems if soul-connected partners got too far apart, and I heard there were many evil spirits on the roads... But still you went separately."

"..."

"So I wondered if being near me was more uncomfortable than suffering from evil spirits. You didn't even exchange a single word with me at the banquet..."

Though several days had already passed, Haren spoke as if he remembered everything from that day clearly. He listened in bewilderment as it was a completely unexpected topic.

Yes, though he had known there would be problems if he got far from Haren that day, he had met the cat right after leaving the annex. Remembering how one punch from the cat had killed an evil spirit before, he had deliberately held it tightly in his arms while moving, and the way back from Lara Workshop had indeed been quiet.

...Perhaps that was why Haren had come out looking for him that day. Suddenly his stomach churned. No, by now he had churned so much beside Haren that he could no longer call it sudden. He felt like he might get motion sickness.

"And you even got something separately as if uncomfortable with the holy relics I give..."

"That's because I kept breaking them so it felt shameless to receive more..."

"...While you talked just fine with that mercenary. Even laughing."

His muttered voice was so small that he thought he had misheard. Setting aside how jumbled the sentences were, what nonsense was this? If it was the mercenary beside him then, it would have been Jade and Serena, but he had no memory of laughing.

Ah, perhaps he had let out a dry laugh when Serena talked about sealing dangerous power or something while he was tense from encountering Haren. His memory was hazy. Because at the time, all his attention had been focused only on Haren.

He was about to catch the tail end of his words out of bewilderment but ended up shaking his head. More than things related to others, what he wanted to talk about now was...

"...I don't hate you."

He wanted to correct that misunderstanding first. After all, he had even heard that the original Isaph hadn't hated the hero and had wanted to become friends with him. Though the realization that it was similar to what Haren had said to him before only came after he said it, he couldn't take it back.

Somehow it felt strange. Haren's words sounded as if he had deliberately distanced himself all this time because he hated him too much. Didn't it seem like this was also the reason for that irritated expression he had seen in the annex corridor?

While confused, anger also welled up. If it was like this, he had something to say too.

"Rather, you're the one who looked at me with uncomfortable eyes from the banquet. Even getting irritated."

The atmosphere hadn't been good from the banquet before, so it was hard to accept that just going out with another person was the reason for the awkward conflict that had built up. He clearly remembered Haren maintaining his vow of silence there.

"Th-that, we agreed to treat that as if it never happened, so why are you bringing it up. You've been acting strange since then, making even all the other companions walk on eggshells."

"That's..."

The eyes that had been directed at him when he answered that he didn't hate him earlier rolled to the side again smoothly. A bit of awkwardness tinged them as if he hadn't expected to be asked directly. Was he unable to act because of the pain? Unlike usual, he felt like he was seeing quite a lot of emotion from him.

Thinking this was his chance, he pressed persistently. Though he had held back before because he was at fault, now that everything was exposed, he decided to see it through to the end. Perhaps he was being more reckless because he had felt the fear that they might really die in this Encroachment Zone. He needed to know the reason before dying.

*You could have treated it like it never happened just like on the sky island, so why!*

"...I don't know."

But the shape of the answer that came after his earnest questioning was quite unsatisfactory, and afterwards Haren even covered his mouth with his hand. As if trying to hide his expression.

"Everything you said that morning was right, that it wouldn't have happened without the incubus's curse and that it should be treated as if it never happened - rationally I agree with all of it..."

"..."

"But still why..."

Haren fell silent again for a long time, and somehow he couldn't carelessly break that stillness. Did he feel strange at hearing that his suggestion was all correct and agreed with, or...

Finally Haren spoke.

"It's not that you're uncomfortable. Well, it's true that I'm uncomfortable because of you."

"...Are you mocking me now?"

Even apart from his heart sinking as he admitted that he was uncomfortable, anger surged. *What's the difference between those two sentences? Are you playing with me?*

He seriously began to regret trying to have a conversation. He had needlessly pried only to hear that he was indeed uncomfortable, what was this? Though he had guessed it, hearing it directly was different. It felt like being double-tapped.

"Fine. Don't say any more. I'm uncomfortable with you too."

"...Isaph, that's not it."

"I said don't speak."

His voice trembled needlessly. Though he was clearly angry, it sounded as if he was upset. No, perhaps he was upset. Even though he was so used to people being uncomfortable with him, why was he feeling this way?

Not wanting to stay beside Haren anymore, he stood up. However, his hand was suddenly grabbed and he sat back down. *Thud,* he fell forward almost like collapsing. Haren looked at him dazedly, as if he hadn't expected him to be pulled so easily though there was also the reason that he had pulled urgently without controlling his strength.

*This damn piece of paper.*

Though he glared at Haren while trembling with shame, he still didn't release his hold. After moving his lips several times, Haren finally blurted out as if on impulse.

"...Don't go to Beatrice's imperial palace."

"What nonsense is this out of nowhere."

"You were tempted when she said she would make you comfortable if you entered her castle."

Whether by chance or intention, their fingers intertwined smoothly.

"...Because I can give you a better space than Beatrice."

### Chapter 101

Their eyes met directly. The sky-blue beautiful eyes no longer held any uncomfortable energy, making it feel as if not just their hands but their gazes were firmly intertwined too.

Sometimes he felt powerless whenever he met these eyes. Was it the hero's pressure, or was it because he ended up just staring regardless of his will? Something in his chest tickled. His whole body was about to tilt again.

Thinking this was just because he had staggered and sat down earlier, he quickly pulled his hand away. The sudden mention of Beatrice was so absurd he almost burst into a dry laugh.

"You sometimes say I'm strange, but I think you're stranger. No, you're definitely strange."

Back then Beatrice had rambled about decorating his collar beautifully, did he really think he had been tempted? Moreover, did he not even remember how he had rejected her with a triple combo and even struck away the imperial princess's hand?

Was this perhaps saying he would put him under protective observation? House arrest? Did it mean he would provide good conditions but keep him under constant surveillance to prevent any mischief? After going on about an uninhabited island for so long, had he now changed course to protective custody?

However, Haren spoke while maintaining direct eye contact despite his sarcasm. Like someone who had judged this was the way to eliminate the discomfort troubling him, he proposed again.

"I can give you a place more comfortable than the imperial palace, and where you'll be safe."

"Haah..."

"Why aren't you answering..."

"Hey, shouldn't we get out of this Encroachment Zone first? You're talking like this while we're trapped here."

Just minutes ago he had been staggering from excessive blood loss, but now he was talking about what would happen after leaving the Encroachment Zone when all problems were resolved. Usually imagining the future in such a dangerous situation was an ominous flag, but he was imagining such an absurd future that even the flag would probably back away thinking 'this is too much.'

Moreover, it seemed like he had even specifically pictured a place for protective custody in the holy city in his head. Had he perhaps hit his head while the terrain was changing?

*…I might log out and leave this place entirely.*

Suddenly his chest felt cold. Though it was the logout he had desperately wished for, why did he feel a moment of regret? Was he perhaps drawn to the form of what appeared to be a relatively pleasant ending that had finally appeared?

"Then will you accept my proposal after we leave here?"

However, at Haren's question that poured out as if cutting off his thoughts, he looked at him with disgusted eyes. He was quite similar to Beatrice in how strangely persistent he was once he fixated on something. This was how he came to understand why they were close.

He let out a dry laugh and shook his head.

"That means we should resolve the immediate problem before talking about later or not, I never said I'd accept..."

"Why are you trying to slip away like that again..."

"Wait."

In the middle of shaking his head, he was startled by something that came into his view and firmly covered Haren's mouth with his hand to stop him. Though it was an impulsive action, surprisingly he stayed still.

This cave was a mine cave with transparent crystals embedded throughout. Though crystals were rarer than where he had fallen, he saw something very strange. The tip of a crystal embedded in the black wall... held a pale green light.

"...There's color?"

Though an Encroachment Zone was clearly a space faded to colorless, there was 'color' here. Moreover, though he had always had to fight against the feeling of being contaminated, that is, losing life force while walking through Encroachment Zones, now it wasn't like that at all and breathing was easy.

As if it wasn't land occupied by Dium.

"...It really isn't contaminated at all."

Haren too looked around with surprised eyes as if he had just realized. They hadn't properly examined the space, dazed from their injury pain. It was one thing for him, but even Haren had only noticed belatedly.

Come to think of it, though Encroachment Zones naturally shouldn't have color, he had seen minerals of various colors while the terrain changed multiple times. It couldn't be that inorganic materials didn't lose their color, since the rocks and canyons in previous Encroachment Zones had all faded to colorless.

"Ha, at least that's fortunate..."

He had been worried when the map rotated randomly, but thanks to this they didn't have to worry about contamination. They had always had to move quickly in Encroachment Zones as if doing a time attack, so just having that burden reduced brought relief.

By the way, if this wasn't an Encroachment Zone, where was this place?

"First we should find and regroup with our companions. Then we can assess the situation."

Finally Haren had returned to his normal commander mindset. It was truly welcome news. He quickly stood up, thinking if they stayed here any longer, a new song about house arrest would be released following the uninhabited island song.

He said the communication artifacts that holy knights usually had for emergencies had broken during the terrain changes. As he started walking quickly at the words that they would have to move and search directly, he turned back. For some reason, Haren wasn't following.

Behind him, Haren was slightly furrowing his brow while leaning against the wall. The cold sweat beading on his forehead caught his eye.

"...Is it hard to walk?"

"No, I'm fine. I just need time to adjust..."

"Doesn't that mean you're not fine..."

Though it had healed a lot after treatment, it was natural that walking was difficult after receiving a fatal wound that had pierced through his stomach. Still, he looked with subtle eyes at Haren who said he would adjust after just a brief wait. He was probably at least revealing this much since he knew he couldn't hide it from him.

He shook his head. A solution had occurred to him, and he felt they had been about to struggle needlessly when there was an easier way.

"Forget it. There's no need to move. I can summon undead to find and call our companions."

"No. Since it might be dangerous to rashly summon undead in an unexamined space, we should be as careful as possible..."

"That's an uncertain future, but your pain right now is certain. And if we're wary of this space, isn't walking around directly more dangerous?"

He hadn't expected words to flow so smoothly. Following only the thought that he shouldn't let Haren move right now, words he had never even consciously considered poured out naturally, and Haren closed his mouth as if unable to refute. But since he still seemed to be worrying, he suddenly summoned undead.

*Swoosh–*

Three undead rose from the floor. Regardless of whether Haren let out a dry laugh behind him, he briefly explained their companions' appearances to them and ordered them to find and bring them back. It was extremely convenient being able to summon just a few and give specific orders.

His necromancy proficiency had definitely increased... As he was looking down at his palm with a newly strange feeling, Haren suddenly spoke.

"...You."

"What, why. This is the most efficient method–"

"Your soul is strange. It's like... something very strange is inside that body."

His words cut off abruptly. Suddenly he felt the blood drain from his face. He was too shocked to give any answer, and couldn't even breathe.

*...How?*

How did Haren know the state of his soul? Though their souls being connected meant sharing conditions, that had been a one-sided form where only he felt Haren's pain. The status window had informed him that because Haren's soul was much purer, his condition would rarely affect him.

Though it had said Haren could sense his condition if he concentrated very hard, he had assumed he couldn't since sensing souls itself was related to necromancy. But could he sense it if he wanted to know about him even without knowing necromancy? But why was he suddenly focusing on him?

His heart churned slightly, but right now the shock was greater. Did soul connection and sensing conditions mean feeling not just physical condition but the soul itself? Though it seemed plausible, it was extremely confusing.

Could his possession be discovered like this?

Would he find out that 'he' was actually a being from another dimension who had entered Isaph's body? But wasn't it an implicit rule in possession stories that people didn't notice such things?

As various thoughts whirled like a typhoon, Haren spoke again. He had narrowed his eyes as if concentrating on the sensation. He was so tense that Haren's lip movements registered very slowly.

"It feels like there are two souls..."

What? Could it be that this body's original soul was also sleeping...?!

"No, maybe three?"

"...Huh?"

He became bewildered at the nonsensical number that came out in the middle of things getting serious. Was there an Isaph One, Two, and Three in this body or something?

"It's strange. I'm not sure if I'm sensing the soul as broken into pieces, or if something else is mixed in. At least it's definitely not a normal state..."

### Chapter 102

Though Haren spoke carefully, his strength drained and he only let out a sigh close to a dry laugh. *Ah,* since he had died being hit by a truck, he must have been broken. Two had been chilling, but three was so absurd it was just funny.

*Right,* how could a holy knight far removed from necromancy sense the state of souls in the first place? Judging it was clearly a wild guess, he shook his head. The tension disappeared anticlimactically.

While this was happening, Haren was still seriously looking at him, which suddenly made mischief well up.

"I'll tell only you, actually..."

"...Actually?"

"My soul broke from using forbidden power."

"..."

"I received God's punishment for using unholy necromancy in the Holy Empire."

Haren looked at him with bewildered eyes. Though he had deliberately lowered his voice to create a heavy atmosphere, he seemed to notice it was a joke since he giggled as it went on, unable to hold back his laughter.

"Be careful not to break too."

When he gestured with his chin as if what Haren was doing was also a form of necromancy, Haren's face froze completely. It was an expression that concluded he had been stupid for almost taking it seriously for a moment.

Watching him shake his head afterwards, he felt inwardly relieved. Though it was regrettable that he seemed to think he was acting unpredictably strange again, at least this should stop him from trying to sense his soul again.

*Ugh,* he hadn't expected a surprise event to open like this in a possession story.

"Hey man, I was so startled when undead suddenly fell from the sky!"

"I-it was really scary..."

"...Next time, I'd like you to call us normally."

Just then, Kalterik, Noi, and Mela appeared. They seemed to have been together, as they arrived noisily as a group.

Since the undead didn't need to walk, they had probably flown quickly and dive-bombed upon finding them. From their complaints, it seemed the three had been seriously discussing the changed space when undead suddenly dropped from the sky, startling them, and their faces were somewhat pale.

Of course, their condition wasn't his concern so he just shrugged his shoulders. Wasn't it fine as long as communication succeeded? He turned to look at Haren with a proud face.

"See. This is much more efficient."

"...So it is."

Even Haren, who had tried to stop his actions, nodded as if he could no longer deny it. A faint dry smile spread across his face.

"Ehhh...?"

"C-Commander was here together..."

That sight seemed to strike the three as an unexpected scene. It was surprising enough that he and Haren were together, but above all they seemed very shocked to see the two who hadn't exchanged a single word and had emanated an uncomfortable atmosphere for the past few days now conversing naturally.

*Hmm,* though he had known the companions had been walking on eggshells around this absurd conflict, it was embarrassing when they reacted so strongly. But hadn't his relationship with Haren never been close to begin with?

Around then, Haren stepped forward with a bright smile.

"I'm glad we met quickly. Is everyone alright? Did anyone get hurt while the space was changing?"

He had somehow approached with a much neater appearance to look after his subordinates. Though just before he had been leaning against the wall covered in cold sweat, now he looked completely fine. His gait didn't falter and his blood-soaked shirt was hidden by his robe. It was amazing acting skill no matter when you saw it. SBS Drama Awards Winner.

While he was holding an awards ceremony inwardly, the three nodded vigorously as if moved by the hero's gentle voice.

"Yes! Fortunately we fell into a wide open space. Except for when the terrain first collapsed, it seems only the scenery changed. Though that was dangerous too..."

Noi seemed to have somewhat memorized the changing scenery even amid the confusion. Moreover, the three said they had quickly noticed that there was 'color' here, meaning it wasn't a contaminated space like an Encroachment Zone.

"Where on earth did we come to? I thought I knew most terrains but I can't get a sense of this. It's harder to figure out since we're inside a cave, and I can't even be sure if this is Solares..."

"I checked the surroundings in advance but couldn't detect any demonic energy."

Mela spoke seriously. She said she had checked whether the Dium might be using demon abilities like in the western Encroachment Zone, or if all this scenery might have been created by illusion magic, but it wasn't like that at all.

Haren nodded at the three's words.

"Then let's start searching in earnest now. First, from the right path..."

"Is that necessary?"

*Thud,* he cut off Haren's words. Though everyone looked at him at this action that could be considered quite rude, he just shrugged his shoulders nonchalantly. The reason he could act like this now was...

[Aah, uuh...]

Just then, dozens of undead flew around him. They came pouring out of the right path Haren had pointed to and circled around him.

"Since there was no problem bringing the three back, I just ordered them to look around the entire space. And the exploration is done."

He spoke triumphantly. While the four were having an intense conversation, he had secretly slipped back and summoned dozens more undead to check the cave, and had steadily gathered the shared visual information. Necromancy seemed best when it came to investigating large spaces.

While Noi's eyes sparkled with "Wow" in admiration, Kalterik spoke quietly beside him.

"Ahem, you, you're really u-using your ability properly. Hem, it's really helpful..."

What was with this expression of using it properly? When he looked at him with strange eyes, his fake coughing grew louder. The very embarrassed look vaguely reminded him of a possible reason.

Perhaps he felt sorry for suspecting he was trying to absorb the corpses piled in the Encroachment Zone as undead when he touched them? Since it was such a natural suspicion given Isaph's record that he didn't even feel wronged, Kalterik's reaction was just amusing.

So was this the guy who had shouted he would never acknowledge his help now saying with his own mouth that he was helpful? Though he smirked with a dry laugh, it made him even more confident as he looked at Haren.

However, somehow the face he met was just cold.

"I told you to be careful since we don't know what's here."

"Everything was fine until finding the three, so..."

"Isaph."

"Ah, there's no one here anyway. So it's fine."

He became sullen at the words pointing out his reckless behavior. Though he had actually thought he was lucky too, being called out directly like that was unpleasant. He had thought he would be praised.

...No, not praise, but acknowledgment. *Right,* he had thought he would be acknowledged.

He quickly corrected the error in his head and whirled his head away. *You make a fuss even when I work after being brought to search the Encroachment Zone. Though this isn't contaminated land, isn't it still a space derived from an Encroachment Zone?*

The three were looking between him and Haren with dazed expressions. Feeling their emotions directly, he cleared his throat a couple times and spoke.

"Anyway, this place is completely different from the eastern Encroachment Zone, but there's one thing in common."

"A thing in common...?"

"That strange wall. The pitch-black wall is here too."

He had confirmed through the undead's vision that suspicious light was spreading from the wall again. It was truly puzzling. A completely different cave sharing the black wall, wasn't it like spaces connected through it? Perhaps all the other caves they had briefly passed through had that wall too.

At his answer, Noi's face turned white. As if just recalling the shocking event in front of the black wall made his whole body tremble, he crossed his arms and grabbed his shoulders. Kalterik and Mela's faces hardened too.

And as it happened, there was one more peculiarity about this cave...

"Ah, and this cave has no exit."

"What?!"

Kalterik exclaimed. Whether it was a cave buried somewhere undiscovered from the outside, or whether it had been blocked from the outside. Whatever the background, there was only one conclusion.

Haren seemed to guess this too as he spoke in a low, sunken voice.

"...It seems we have no choice but to go to that wall."

Though everyone looked like they didn't want to get closer to the wall, they had no choice. Since they had entered the eastern Encroachment Zone, they had to somehow face this problem to understand the cause of the phenomenon.

### Chapter 103

They all moved in the direction he had indicated. Though this place wasn't as complex as the eastern Encroachment Zone, they still decided to walk while being wary of their surroundings just in case.

*Swoosh,* suddenly Mela approached his side.

"Isaph."

Though he thought she had just happened to come closer while searching, Mela actually addressed him. As it happened, he had trauma related to having quiet one-on-one conversations with her.

*Why, what, what business?* Could it be that since this Encroachment Zone seemed dangerous, she would transform into a demon again? Was she going to entrust her necklace to him like last time? As he quickly hid both hands behind his back, Mela spoke quietly. She lowered her voice to almost a whisper as she informed him.

"When climbing the snow mountain, actually the Commander told me to stay by your side."

"...What?"

"He said to watch over you from nearby since the path was dangerous."

*Blink blink,* he blankly opened and closed his eyes. It took time to understand since it was very different from the topic he had expected. No, perhaps he was just lost because this truth was so surprising.

He felt embarrassed thinking about how much he must have staggered while climbing the snow mountain for Haren to assign a subordinate to him out of concern, and on the other hand, the fact that Haren had looked after him despite being uncomfortable made his heart stir strangely. Now his heart was churning even though Haren wasn't right beside him.

As he tried hard to settle his motion sickness, Mela's eyes narrowed slightly. He now knew that small change was her smile.

"I don't know what problem you had with the Commander, but I'm glad you seem to have made up well."

"No, not really a reconciliation... or anything..."

Her tone seemed pleased, which brought tremendous embarrassment. And if she had felt there was a problem between him and Haren, shouldn't she naturally take the Commander's side, why had she wanted them to reconcile?

At his bewildered look, Mela shrugged her shoulders and left. He barely managed to settle his churning insides at her retreating figure that withdrew lightly as if delivering that message had been her only purpose. Why was he like this when the cave wasn't even shaking?

Soon they reached the black wall.

"It seems exactly the same as the wall we saw in the Encroachment Zone..."

"Though the area is relatively small because the cave's shape is different, that ominous feeling is certain."

Kalterik and Noi spoke in turn. As they turned the corner, everyone braced themselves in case there was another mountain of corpses piled up like before, but that horrific scene didn't appear again. There was just a black wall existing like a cavity among the crystal mine.

It was similar to yet different from the torn sky they had seen in the western Encroachment Zone. Though it had been shocking then to see the Dium appear through the black gap that appeared when the sky cracked, this time there was a slightly more fundamental and incomprehensible revulsion.

Come to think of it, light seemed to have burst forth from here before the map changed, what phenomenon was that? And why had that spring sound been heard?

While he traced each memory, his companions were also having an intense discussion.

"It seems we can't figure anything out just by looking..."

"Should we try an experiment?"

Kalterik spoke while smashing *bang!* the mineral attached to the wall. Since it was an unsettling space to touch directly, it was his will to check with objects, and as soon as Haren nodded, he threw the mineral. *Whoosh-* the mineral that flew in an arc surprisingly went over the wall.

"W-wasn't it a wall?"

Kalterik spoke dazedly. Though they had expected the mineral to hit and fall, it passed through there and even the sound cut off abruptly. Beyond not hearing it fall to the ground, even the sound of it flying disappeared midway.

Noi also opened his eyes wide and threw several more stones from the ground. This time too it was silent beyond the wall, and then Mela alternately shot holy power and demonic energy. It remained quiet as expected.

"Could it be connected to somewhere...?"

"That seems closer to a 'boundary' than a wall, but it's strange that we can't hear any sound. It's as if there's nothing at all on the other side..."

Haren spoke in a sunken voice. Though they had wondered what reaction there might be if they used holy power too, nothing happened, and moreover, the longer they looked carefully, the more they felt an unpleasant sensation as if facing a space of nothingness.

The feeling from when they first encountered it remained.

They might die if they crossed over.

Though no one said it aloud, he could tell everyone shared that impression. At this point it wasn't just simple worry but a warning given by instinct.

**—------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------**

**Cross over.**

**—------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------**

Just then a blue window appeared before his eyes.

*...Well, it must have appeared by mistake?* He turned his head pretending not to see it, but a blue window appeared again in that direction.

**—------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------**

**Cross over the boundary of □!#&.**

**—------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------**

*Huh?*

Though at first he had ignored it out of antipathy towards the terrible game pushing him to die, he was surprised when broken text appeared next. This had never appeared like this before.

Actually, even if the status window urged him, he had planned to stubbornly resist since it would probably just threaten "Cross over" again. But when it appeared like this...

*Ah,* he couldn't resist this.

The biggest element that stimulates players in games is curiosity. If something seems hidden, you want to check it out once, and you want to mess with it for no reason. It's player psychology to think "A secret chest? Ah, I have to open it. A forbidden area? Ah, I have to go in."

Of course, such curiosity would be backed by the certainty that 'I' won't die no matter what. Since you can replay even if the character dies. In that sense, though he probably should be extremely careful, still...

*This game wouldn't let the hero die, right?*

Though he would have felt uneasy if he had to cross alone, now it was a situation where they had to move as a group. The quest from the NPC was to help the hero, and until now the status window had very faithfully followed that purpose. Just reviewing how it had connected their souls regardless of the player's pain showed that.

*–Meow.*

*Swoosh,* just then the black cat approached his side. Though he had seen it once nearby while walking through the eastern Encroachment Zone, he hadn't seen it since the map changed. *You got swept up too?* He finally welcomed the NPC accompanying the player. He had needed a suitable excuse anyway.

While picking up the cat, he spoke to his companions.

"We need to cross that boundary. It's information confirmed through En."

"W-w-what? Walk into there?!"

Though Kalterik was immediately shocked, he nodded even more nonchalantly. He even stroked En's head with a gesture of approval. Though En glared at him with very displeased eyes, it stayed still as if guessing his intention.

"Yeah, they say if we cross there we'll arrive at the eastern Encroachment Zone."

They didn't know necromancy well anyway. Since they had just seen Haren make an absurd wild guess, he acted with confidence. Though they might have dictionary knowledge about necromancy, they wouldn't know everything, and moreover, Isaph often did things that exceeded their expectations.

At his confident attitude, Noi muttered.

"Her Highness did say that familiar wasn't ordinary..."

But though they acknowledged his ability, everyone hesitated as if reluctant to approach the boundary. Also, it would be hard to completely trust Isaph's words. Like maybe there actually was an exit from the cave, and he would push everyone into the dangerous boundary to deal with them and escape alone. It was very plausible.

*Hmm,* while wondering how he could guide them, he opened his mouth.

"Then I'll go first..."

"Let's cross together."

He spoke almost simultaneously with Haren. He had thought they would only believe if he acted first, but Haren spoke calmly while looking around at his companions.

"Don't worry. I'll protect everyone somehow."

"Haren..."

"No, we absolutely don't worry! How could there be worry on a path with the hero!"

"We resolved to follow no matter what happens, so this much..."

Noi, Kalterik, and Mela answered in emotion-filled tones. Then they each started preparing solemnly, and though it was surprising how Haren's one statement had reversed the atmosphere...

*With that body?*

'Protect your own body.'

When he glared at Haren and mouthed the words silently, Haren let out a "pft" laugh. He seemed amused by his behavior of fuming alone among companions packed with loyalty, which made him even angrier.

### Chapter 104

Finding it strange how his companions showed joy at receiving a promise from Haren to protect them from injury, he had once imagined what it would feel like if he too became one of those subjects. He had wondered if it would feel very reassuring to have a being said to receive God's love promise to protect him...

Though he still wouldn't be the subject of that promise, no, rather if he had been included in those subjects, he probably would have been even more angry. He glared at Haren before whirling his head away.

**—------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------**

**Hold onto the hero and cross over.**

**—------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------**

**—------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------**

**You might lose your way.**

**—------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------**

Just then a window with strange content appeared. What was this? It didn't seem to mean everyone should hold onto the hero, nor did it appear to mean he should be careful because his soul was connected with Haren.

'You' might lose your way...

Perhaps because he wasn't a soul of this world?

While he was looking at the status window quizzically, his companions were about to cross over so he moved reluctantly. As he quietly approached Haren's side and grabbed his clothes, Haren looked at him.

"...?"

He deliberately threw his gaze elsewhere. Having just boldly said he would cross first, now grabbing clothes must have seemed quite bewildering. Didn't it seem like he was scared now that it came to actually crossing? ...Well, honestly he was a little scared too.

So as he even more stubbornly played dumb, Haren laughed softly. Before he could check if he was being mocked, Haren stepped forward.

The moment they crossed the black boundary, his hand was naturally held.

The action of being wrapped in a firm hand felt briefly tender, bringing that churning feeling again. And right after... real motion sickness hit. As soon as he took one step into the boundary, the whole world shook and nausea surged.

He couldn't tell if he was stepping on ground or falling through empty space. Just as he moved one foot, his whole body was sucked in, his vision filled with darkness, and then he was swept away randomly.

There wasn't even time to scream. When everything was pitch black and he couldn't see anything, he felt the hand holding him grow stronger. Though he shook back and forth unable to find his bearings, Haren moved forward naturally as if he knew the 'path'.

And it seemed this wasn't just true for Haren.

"We really came back to the eastern Encroachment Zone..."

"Huh, what in the world is this."

Everyone safely arrived at the eastern Encroachment Zone. Though it felt like eons had passed while crossing the boundary for him, his companions looked around energetically as if they had crossed in just one or two steps. Kalterik muttered that it was the first time being glad to see the colorless faded Encroachment Zone.

Though everyone found the movement fascinating, he didn't even have the mind for such impressions.

"...Isaph, are you alright?"

"This is, urk, does this look, uweeek."

He collapsed to the ground while dry heaving. No, this time actual stomach acid came up. The dizziness was too severe. To describe it honestly, it felt like being put through a blender. His body had been helplessly pulled somewhere like being swept away in rapids, and it seemed that direction had been completely different from where Haren had led.

He had the chilling intuition that if Haren hadn't firmly held his hand, he wouldn't have arrived here. Even the cat that had crossed over in his arms didn't seem fine as it staggered in a corner.

While retching with his hands on the ground, he suddenly realized something peculiar.

"The floor, urgh, the floor is intact...?"

Though the entire cave had collapsed before the map changed, the interior was now completely whole. It was quiet as if there had never been any commotion, and there wasn't a single trace of damage on the floor. Even the mountain of corpses was still there.

His companions also looked around in bewilderment. Though it had been an unusual Encroachment Zone from the start, it became more confusing with each experience.

At times like this, it was best to stay faithful to the initial objective.

"Anyway, since we made it back safely, shall we destroy all the cores first?!"

"Yes, it would be better to purify quickly."

Haren nodded at Kalterik's shout. Since they had eliminated half before the map changed, they just needed to break the remaining half to finish. Concluding they should purify first and then come back to investigate the corpses since they didn't know when another transformation might occur, they moved.

However, just as they turned the corner to leave, they sensed multiple presences.

"...!"

There was no way presences sensed in an Encroachment Zone could be positive. Everyone quickly hid their bodies in gaps in the wall. Still not recovered from the aftereffects of dizziness, he moved staggeringly as Haren led him. He watched the situation while practically held in Haren's arms.

*Thud thud...*

[When I sensed traces of intruders and checked, the cores really were half destroyed.]

[Tsk, seems some rats got in.]

Diums were walking from over there. Though their numbers didn't reach several hundred like those they had faced in the western Encroachment Zone, and were fewer than in the first Encroachment Zone... they brought a more shocking impact than all previous experiences combined.

Three Diums with three horns were visible.

Moreover, about twenty two-horned Diums followed behind them. Though they definitely hadn't been here until a few hours ago, could they cross the boundary freely?

He swallowed a sigh inwardly. While Mela had needed to transform into a demon to deal with one three-horned Dium in the western Encroachment Zone, this time there were three of them. Moreover, this being inside a cave wasn't even a good environment for fighting.

[Is it the one who ruined the ritual in the west...]

[We shouldn't have left everything to that one, tsk. We'll have no face when God awakens.]

The three-horned Diums walked while talking, and behind them the two-horned Diums lowered their heads as if watching for cues. Their army-like movement brought up a strange revulsion. Though he had known they grew stronger as their number of horns increased, he became uncomfortable as it strongly hit him anew that they too formed a 'society'.

The catastrophe from 20 years ago that had destroyed the continent, that had been terrible enough to erase almost all kingdoms except the Holy Empire in just one year. It was unsettling that they weren't simply monsters but beings who could think and even had the goal of awakening their god.

And above all, his gaze fixed on the small being walking in front of the three-horned Diums. Though it hadn't been visible at first, hidden by the three-horns' bulk, once he noticed it by chance all his attention focused on it.

Not even as big as a one-horn, no, almost human-sized.

Though its hood covered its horns making their number impossible to determine, its clothes were extremely splendid. Similar to what Imperial Princess Beatrice wore, no, even more brilliant robes. Though colorless, they seemed to sparkle and shine.

[Hmm, looking at their route, I thought they would go north next...]

It was quite a gentle voice. Different from the rough tones of Diums they had met until now, it was fascinating, while on the other hand its content was surprising. To even guess their route. Actually, if they hadn't received warp passes for achieving merit in the demon subjugation, there was a high chance they would have gone to the northern Encroachment Zone.

The Dium in splendid robes spoke while moving with even graceful steps.

[When I sensed presences here and came over thinking 'they' had come again, laughing at how the greed of such dull beings knows no end...]

The place where the Dium stopped was in front of the mountain of corpses before the black boundary. Though only its back was visible, he could tell it was lowering its head.

The Dium quietly looked down at the floor, that is... where Noi had knelt and wailed. After staring blankly as if seeing traces of hands that had clutched the ground, it soon giggled.

[It seems someone shed tears here without even knowing the truth. Ah, how can the humans of this land be so ignorant as to make me sad...]

*Thud,* the Dium touched the mountain of corpses. Though it was a very light gesture, rumble, the corpses collapsed and fell over the black boundary. It was a dry movement like throwing away trash.

"Huh, huk...!"

"That...!"

Noi, hidden in the gap over there, was shocked, and Kalterik also raged. It was a natural reaction since they would have wanted to return the corpses to their families' arms later. Though everyone suppressed their voices as much as possible, conscious of being in hiding, unfortunately the robed Dium's ears seemed to catch them.

As if it had deliberately thrown away the corpses to provoke a reaction, *whoosh,* the Dium turned to look exactly where they were. As its hood fell away with the quick movement, its horns became visible.

[Do you amuse me.]

The Dium with four horns smiled until its mouth split. Not metaphorically, but its mouth actually split up to its cheekbones. Before they could even be disgusted by the eerie sight, *bang!* The wall shattered.

### Chapter 105

The Dium's fingers broke into short pieces and flew like shells. Moreover, it didn't stop at once but fired continuously, making Haren jump while wrapping his left arm around his abdomen. *Ugh,* despite being a physical damage character, it was using skills like magic.

*Bang! Kwagwagwang! Kwang!* Only after several thunderous sounds did the attack stop. The Dium seemed to have aimed to draw them all out, as it made a "Hooh-" sound while scanning the people.

While everyone faced the Dium solemnly, unfortunately he was collapsed behind Haren dry heaving. Having flown through the air while the aftereffects of crossing the black boundary hadn't subsided yet, he felt like he was dying.

Noi exclaimed in shock.

"F-four horns. Even during the Great Catastrophe, they said only two four-horns were discovered..."

Though he had thought it wasn't ordinary, was it nearly sub-boss level? Then with Dedium sealed now, wasn't this the boss monster? He had known the game difficulty was increasing exponentially, but was this really made to be cleared? Had the developers actually played this themselves?

By the way, until now Diums' bodies had grown larger with their number of horns, so why was the four-horned Dium smaller than even a one-horn? When it stood among the three-horned Diums, he had thought it looked relatively smaller because the comparison targets were so big, but the four-horned Dium really was human-sized. Almost the same size as Mela.

Moreover, while normal Diums had abnormally large hands and feet, even those parts of the four-horned Dium were similar to humans. Its horns were only palm-sized, it wore no helmet, and its pitch-black hair fell long to its waist.

[Ahaha, so 'that' hero really came here. How very pitiful.]

Of course, by game story rules, ones with such small builds were the most dangerous. And rather, its appearance similar to a human male brought an even more unpleasant sense of dissonance. With its colorless human form, eyes completely black including the whites, and four fingers wrapping its face looking like arthropod exoskeletons.

Still, his companions prepared for battle calmly.

"The hero is not one to receive your pity!"

"To treat the empire's citizens so brutally..."

Kalterik and Mela each showed angry reactions. Having witnessed the scene of corpses being thrown away just before seemed to prevent them from shrinking back even before the four-horned Dium.

Though the three-horned and two-horned Diums tried to rampage excitedly upon encountering the intruders, unexpectedly, the four-horned Dium stopped them. When it extended its arm, *flap-* its splendid robe fluttered.

[Hero of this land, it seems you too have something you want to say to me.]

The Dium's gaze went straight to Haren. Though he hadn't even drawn his holy sword yet, it seemed to know the hero well enough to recognize him just by appearance.

Haren stepped forward several paces. As if he really had wanted to talk with the Dium, he stood quietly facing it and opened his mouth calmly.

"Those corpses were, sacrifices, weren't they?"

He almost let out a sigh. He had heard such words before when he had shared Haren's nightmare. When Haren's father had forcibly led young Haren to an Encroachment Zone and bowed before Dedium declaring:

'I offer this child as a sacrifice. He has much holy power, so you will be satisfied.'

Perhaps Haren had guessed they were sacrifices upon seeing the corpses piled here, their bodies without a single wound. After all, they hadn't matched the information about missing persons collected while coming to the eastern Encroachment Zone.

"But Dedium hasn't even been released from the seal yet, so why? Could it be that traitors are offering sacrifices in advance for when Dedium revives later? Have you been surviving here by consuming those humans?"

Quite an urgent energy filled his rapid questions. Since it would be impossible for Diums who had difficulty operating outside Encroachment Zones to hunt this many people, there must be someone supplying them from outside. That is, this situation proved the existence of traitors. The other three companions also realized this point and turned pale.

However, even in this serious atmosphere, the Dium just lightly shrugged its shoulders.

[Hmm, 'traitor'. I see you call your father who had insight a traitor. Though he was a wise human who recognized the new world.]

"..."

[I have yet to see a human as clever as your father. Except for him, all those I have seen until now are just dull pigs and dogs...]

He was startled to hear such remarkably human expressions. Though Diums knew human society well even while hiding in Encroachment Zones, had they mastered the language too?

Haren's brow furrowed slightly. There was no way he would be pleased to hear the Dium praise his father, and moreover, that statement meant they had maintained continuous contact with humans. Haren asked as if testing:

"Then... why are these foolish ones who can't even recognize the true new world hiding and keeping you alive? When you are clearly catastrophes."

[Haha, ha! Hahahaha! Why are they keeping us alive, you ask? Hahaha! What an amusing thing to say.]

Suddenly the Dium burst into loud laughter. After holding its stomach and bending at the waist with great laughter, it lightly extended one foot. Just one step. Though it seemed to move only that much, in an instant the Dium stood before Haren.

"...!"

His companions were shocked and even Haren's face hardened. Though they had clearly been quite far apart, the Dium approached in a flash and Haren couldn't respond. As he gripped his sword handle, the Dium placed its hand on his arm.

As if stopping him from drawing his sword, gently yet firmly.

[Yes, hero of this land. Son like God's pathetic resistance. Because of your mother, our plans suffered great setbacks... So we had to hide our bodies in this narrow land and live. Yes, as you say, bowing our heads to those who keep us alive...]

"..."

[But you see. All living beings fall to 'desire'.]

The four-horned Dium, smaller in build than Haren, tilted its head up to look at him. Its long hair poured down like a black waterfall.

[And I know your desire too.]

The Dium's pitch-black eyes glinted ominously as it smiled with creased eyes.

[What would you do if I brought your mother back to life?]

"What are you saying? Mother clearly..."

[That human sacrificed herself sealing Dedium. But can you assert that sacrifice was death? Isn't it possible she's alive in a sealed state?]

The Dium brought its face very close to Haren so his expression couldn't be seen, but behind them Noi's shoulders trembled. Noi muttered "Could it be..." in a quivering voice.

[Your mother's name was... Evelyn, wasn't it? Yes, I will revive Evelyn and safely bring her before you. Then would you feel like cooperating with us? Think carefully. In this land Evelyn sacrificed herself to protect, there are pigs and dogs keeping us alive as if forgetting that noble will... Doesn't it make you angry?]

"..."

[So how about leaving far away to live with your mother instead?]

At some point, Haren had stopped speaking entirely. The Dium slowly moved its head as if looking him up and down, and whispered in a very pitying tone.

[I truly feel sorry for you. Isn't the god of this land pushing all responsibility onto you while pretending it's love? Our god is very merciful. So if you follow our will, we won't hold Evelyn accountable even later.]

It was an extremely gentle voice. As if truly moved to tears by all Haren's hardships, the Dium dabbed at its eye corners with its hand and proposed to him again. Sweet words were added that it would spare his subordinates too if he just accepted.

[So now take our hand...]

*Swoosh!* The Dium's hands flew off and rolled on the ground.

Not just one, but both sides were cut, and this happened in an instant as Haren drew his holy sword and swung. Though he had clearly seemed unable to draw his sword with his arm held by the Dium, it seemed he had just been listening to hear what kind of things it would say.

Haren spoke in a calm voice.

"Because Mother was someone who made such a choice even before my eyes."

The previous Holy Knight Commander had restored peace to this land by sealing Dedium, but on the other hand, it was also disappearing before her young son's eyes. Though it was to protect her child, the reason she didn't stop even while looking back at him with tear-filled eyes at the end was, that is...

"It's obvious why she learned that complex sealing technique in advance, so what do you think she would say if brought back to life? I have no desire to be scolded at this age."

Haren smiled while shrugging his shoulders. The Dium's offer to bring her back to life seemed to have failed to cause even a slight wavering in him from the start.

"You act like you've mastered desire, but your bluff is too much."

### Chapter 106

[Ha, haha, ahaha... Well this...]

Facing that beautifully smiling face, the Dium let out a dry laugh as if dumbfounded. Seizing that opening, Haren immediately took something out from his chest and threw it. *Whoosh,* orange mist spread like a smoke screen.

The color of the mist was familiar, allowing him to guess who had provided this artifact. It was probably one of the magical tools Beatrice had given. And as expected, while the Diums looked around in confusion as if fallen into mental disorder in the mist, his companions could see each other clearly.

After returning to rejoin his companions, Haren spoke.

"Everyone could have escaped safely, but I kicked away that chance."

"What?! No, that's absolutely not true!"

Just before, the Dium had offered to let his subordinates leave safely if he took its hand. But Haren had answered by cutting off its hands, which meant they would have to fight the Diums inside the cave. There could have been a way to play along while looking for an opportunity, but now a battle several times more difficult and harder than last time was set.

But none of his subordinates expressed complaints, and rather, Noi even shouted fiercely while choking up.

"If you had accepted that offer, I would rather not have been with Haren! I would have pretended not to know for life!"

Something sparkled around his face as he shook his head wildly. Perhaps tears were being scattered. Haren smiled faintly and jokingly replied that was quite a frightening thing to say.

They couldn't talk for long. They had to quickly form a strategy, and how far had that discussion progressed? *Bang!* A thunderous sound rang out.

[So you dare stand against me after all.]

The four-horned Dium shot its fingers like shells again. It was a powerful attack that cratered the ground, and then black energy swept through the area, clearing away the smoke screen's fog. Though its body was small like a human's, its power was terrifying.

The Dium's hands had completely recovered by now. From the cleanly cut wrists, *swoosh,* they regrew and it swept back its hair with its restored hands.

[Do you really believe these humans you protect are worth such devotion?]

The Dium asked as if it truly couldn't understand. Even after seeing the mountain of corpses here and learning there were traitors who had brought them directly, why would they choose to fight such a dangerous battle?

This would be a common hero's dilemma where such contradictory situations cause confusion in values. But because Haren had already guessed the existence of traitors, he remained calm, and because what moved him wasn't some grand cause, he didn't fall for the Dium's manipulation.

Because what he protected was just the value of his mother's sacrifice. So having confirmed the existence of humans who would damage that, he would be even less likely to back down.

"It's clear that taking your hand would be even more worthless, isn't it?"

Haren answered with a bright smile. As he finished speaking, he rushed at the four-horned Dium and the real battle began, with his companions quickly dispersing.

The strategy was simple. While Haren kept the four-horned Dium occupied, the rest would go destroy the cores. Considering there were three three-horned Diums in the cave, it was an extremely tricky task, but fortunately they had special magical tools.

[Doppelgangers?]

[Tsk. Using strange tricks.]

Among the artifacts Beatrice had left was a kind of doppelganger magic that created illusions of the user. There were only two, so Kalterik and Mela shared them, and now there were ten copies of each in the cave. Though limited by only being able to imitate half the original's abilities and disappearing after one hit, it was enough to confuse the Diums.

And another means of stopping the Diums' attacks was in Noi's hands. He held a small glass bottle full of plants. It was a terrarium. It was something prepared to use his ability even in places like this cave where life force was hard to find and spatial constraints were great.

*Creeeeak–* Plant stems rose up over the glass bottle and gradually thickened. The vines that instantly grew huge caught the Diums' feet.

[Kuaak, get rid of the fairy first!]

"Where do you think you're going!"

"You won't touch Noi!"

"Huaaaap!"

When a three-horned Dium thrashed and ordered, Kalterik blocked it. The copies seemed to have perfectly replicated even the original's personality as they were all equally noisy. *Ugh,* ten Kalteriks. He looked around the cave where their shouts echoed with disgust.

Though everyone was fighting hard, unfortunately he was excluded due to his poor condition. Since his role had originally been to identify and inform about the cores' locations in the Encroachment Zone, he had done his part, and his companions didn't particularly assign him any other roles either.

So he was now quietly tucked away in a corner. Fortunately, the ring he had been forced to buy at Lara Workshop had a stealth effect, which was very welcome. A three-horned Dium passed right in front of him without noticing.

*Phew,* he caught his breath while crouching. His consciousness kept trying to flicker and fade. To be in this state just from crossing the boundary once, if the map changed again he might never return. Why was he the only one like this when all his companions were fine?

"Those corpses were all sacrifices..."

He muttered quietly, if only to hold onto his sanity. Actually just before, when the four-horned Dium had thrown the corpses beyond the boundary, his companions had been angry but he had only been puzzled. Wondering why they wouldn't use those corpses as zombies. Rather than throwing them away, if they had raised them as zombies, his companions would have had a much harder time.

And he had heard that those killed by Diums became zombies, so why hadn't they become zombies? Because their souls had disappeared, used in rituals to revive Dedium? Something felt unsettling but he couldn't think clearly. Getting increasingly dizzy, he finally gave up trying to reason and just leaned his head diagonally against the wall.

Just then, the sound of the four-horned Dium's laughter rang out from over there.

[Hahaha, I look forward to telling our god about you. How pathetic was the end of those who stepped forward claiming to carry on that foolish human's will!]

"Do you believe Dedium can revive? The energy gathered by the western ritual master is gone too, and now only one Encroachment Zone will remain."

Haren responded very calmly. He naturally spoke assuming cases where they would destroy each other. One corner of the Dium's mouth rose crookedly.

[Of course. Though you pitifully wouldn't know, our god is already preparing to awaken. Though the wicked seal still interferes, eyes will open soon, and once we find 'that', our god will finally become whole.]

"...That?"

[Haha, what use is there in you knowing? It would be better for you to beautifully close your eyes knowing nothing. This is the only consideration I can give you!]

*Kwagwagwang!* As the Dium waved its hands, its fingers flew and exploded as if scattered. Haren calmly jumped around the cave, skillfully avoiding the attacks. Though shells exploded enough to fill the entire floor, he lightly leaped high into the air.

Though this repeated pattern from before didn't come across as threatening to him at all, it seemed the Dium's original purpose had been to get Haren airborne to create an opening.

[And you, you seem to be injured right now.]

The Dium's newly regrown fingers suddenly lengthened and aimed at Haren's abdomen. His mind went blank at the fingers shooting sharply as if to pierce through him.

*Swoosh–!* Though his vision was dizzy from vertigo, the attack aimed at Haren appeared all too clearly, and thinking he had to block it, he immediately summoned and sent undead. It was an act following the judgment that Haren would have difficulty avoiding the attack while in mid-air.

Stagger, the Dium was pushed back half a step by the suddenly appearing undead. Though he felt relieved at the attack barely missing Haren, then the Dium turned to look exactly where he was and sighed. Their eyes met directly.

*Ah,* his stealth had been seen through.

*Crack,* the ring split as if its power was spent. Just as he was regretting acting too rashly, the Dium's whole body trembled. It seemed an overreaction to just that small interference.

[You.]

Its completely black eyes with no distinction of whites grew as if about to pop out. The Dium shouted, filled with rage, no, perhaps ecstasy.

[You've come back!]

### Chapter 107

*...What?*

He was coming here for the first time, so what did it mean he had 'come back'? Could it be that it had met this body's original owner? Was he acquainted with that Dium?

*Shit, that's not me though.*

Whether he felt wronged inwardly or not, the Dium started approaching him like a madman. Whether it got wounded by Haren's attacks or not, it stared persistently only at him, even growing its body as it charged.

*Kugugugung!*

The Dium's body, which had been similar to a human's, grew monstrously. Really, there was no other way to describe its transformation without that modifier. It filled the entire cave.

"Uh, uwaak! What is this!"

"Noi! Dodge!"

The ground shook, sweeping up Kalterik, Mela, and Noi who had been confronting the Diums while advancing toward the cores. Moreover, this didn't just stop at losing balance.

"Th-the cave is collapsing...!"

Noi's scream rang distantly in his ears. This cave couldn't handle the four-horn's bulk, and as he fled urgently, he witnessed the ceiling collapsing.

Right above him.

"Isaph!"

Haren's shout was heard from behind. Though he tried to run to him, the ceiling debris fell faster. *Rumble-* his vision was dyed black. He sat down heavily on the floor and squeezed his eyes shut.

Though he braced for extreme pain, no pain came.

"...?"

He opened one eye slightly to check the situation. A large hand that gleamed like arthropod shell spread widely above him. It was the hand that the four-horned Dium had extended.

The four-horned Dium that had charged as if to kill him had saved him.

[You don't know how much I wanted to see you again.]

He was bewildered as it even spoke in an extremely gentle tone. Behind the startling impression that the being you saw wasn't him, memories from the previous Encroachment Zone suddenly surfaced.

Come to think of it, back then the ritual master had muttered in shock upon seeing him.

[You...?]

As soon as their eyes met, it had reacted as if it knew him, shocked. Just as he was dazedly recalling that time, *swoosh–* the Dium tilted its head. Just the huge being bringing its face close filled his entire field of vision.

Over there Haren tried to approach but the three-horned Diums blocked him. It felt as if only he and the four-horned Dium were isolated here. Behind him was the collapsed cave, in front was the Dium's face.

[I believed you would come back. Ah, that much at least was certain. Now you will be strongly drawn to our world...]

"...?"

[You, why that expression? Your condition seems strange.]

The Dium spoke as he looked around in confusion. After pausing briefly, it smiled brightly while slowly nodding as if having noticed something from his reaction. Seeing its mouth split up to its cheekbones up close was even more shocking.

[Well, after doing such a thing, you couldn't be fine. Then...]

"Huk."

[Human. Let's make a deal.]

*Plop,* something touched his face. Something cool and hard yet somehow soft wrapped gently around his entire head. The Dium's hands had lengthened like ropes and grabbed him. Their undulating appearance brought reflexive revulsion.

*Crazy, shit, suddenly this turns into a tentacle scene?*

[I will grant your desire.]

He struggled in shock. The scene before his eyes seemed to distort, then his vision flipped over and over. From the cave scene, to views of villages seen on the way here, and even to the city they had crossed through the warp.

It felt like the Dium was rummaging through his mind, that is, his 'memories'.

It headed quickly to the past as if uninterested in recent memories. The sounds, smells, and tactile sensations accompanying those memories all surfaced, making his mind chaotic. An overwhelming amount of information he couldn't handle rushed in at once.

Memories of facing monsters in Nadael city, walking through the desert in the western Encroachment Zone, scenes from the sky island, the ancient streets seen in Rus, the empire's first capital, the foggy forest in the south, and the prison...

*Screeeech–*

Finally even to that moment long ago when he was hit by a truck.

[Kuuk! Th-this is...?!]

The truck's headlight beam that had filled his vision brightly and the brake sound that had torn through the road struck his ears. At the same time, the Dium staggered as it threw him away as if shaking him off. It stumbled while complaining of a headache and he crawled on the ground, thrashing.

He kept vomiting as if his memories had refluxed.

[You, what in the world, what did you do...]

"Uweeek, kuk, kuluk! Uuuk."

[Ha! Haha, ahahahaha! Really, I've never seen someone like you before. You...!]

Though the Dium rambled something behind him, he couldn't properly hear any of it. His head was spinning badly and it was killing him as the already huge being's laughter made the whole cave echo. A mere fragment of game data daring to read a player's memories.

*Whoosh!* His whole body was grabbed.

[Yes, I think I can make a deal with you now.]

"Sh-shut, up, urk, shit. My head's really ringing so just, pause for a moment..."

He muttered incoherently while looking around blankly. He really didn't seem to be in his right mind. He just desperately wanted to rest for a moment and play again because he was so dizzy, when suddenly the Dium's face came close.

[You, don't you want to return to where you were before?]

"...What?"

[To the world different from here, where you were.]

*...What, is it, saying to me right now?*

They say when people receive a huge shock, they lose their sense of reality. They suddenly become detached from the situation and enter a state of observing it as if watching from far away. They said it was the shocked brain temporarily slowing down cognition because it couldn't handle the impact.

So he just blankly listened to what the Dium said next. Its pitch-black eyes gleamed with interest, and sharp teeth clacked between its split lips.

[It seems you came here after being hit by something huge and shining in the previous world. I will send you back there.]

*...Is the Dium talking about the truck? But I died, so how could it send me back? Could it be, I didn't die? Isn't that one of the possession story clichés? When you thought you died but actually your body on Earth is still alive.*

*Like waking up in a hospital and facing a white ceiling, that kind of...*

[Yes, you can return there. I see the white ceiling...]

The Dium spoke as if reading the scene unfolding in his mind. Only then did he flinch and strike away the tentacle, no, finger that had somehow attached to his head. The Dium smiled and withdrew its hand compliantly.

*Swoosh,* the Dium's size decreased. Returning to a human-sized body like when first seen, it became much less repulsive. Perhaps the reason the four-horned Dium had deliberately maintained a small size was to reduce humans' instinctive aversion.

[I will send you back to your original world, so give that body to me.]

"What does that..."

[Isn't it a very satisfying deal? You seem to want to leave this place anyway.]

The Dium approached with a very friendly attitude as he froze. Step by step. Even as the distance closed, he couldn't think to step back. He just stared blankly, lost in confusion about how mere game data could read the outside world.

Finally the Dium extended its hand. With an attitude full of certainty that this was clearly his desire.

[Come, take my hand...]

*-Meeow!*

Just then, the black cat approached and cried sharply. It stared straight at him while panting as if having barely broken through the fierce battle unfolding behind. The NPC En's purple eyes flickered with strange light.

**—------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------**

**!EMERGENCY! !DANGER! !IMPORTANT!**

**—------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------**

**—------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------**

**Player must not be enchanted by unholy whisp–**

**—------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------**

The last letters of the urgently appearing status window broke. The status window that seemed to be warning to awaken the player's mind, with several caution marks attached, shook as if shattering, and this... happened as *thud!* the Dium struck the black cat aside.

[What, how annoying.]

The Dium muttered in an irritated tone. *Swoosh,* En, who had been thrown and slammed into the wall, fell limply to the floor. Though there had been a sound like something terrible bursting just before, though he hoped it was his imagination, the black cat sprawled on the stone floor didn't move at all.

"..."

All thought stopped.

### Chapter 108

The Dium extended its hand to him again. Though it seemed to be saying something, nothing reached his ears. His gaze was fixed only on the cat. Perhaps from some point, he had been panting, and a *piiii-* ringing sounded in his ears.

Was it just shock at an NPC being hurt by a game character, or was he feeling contextually inappropriate anger at that small cat being harmed? An emotion that couldn't be explained even by combining all of that welled up inside him.

That is, he was now suffering from grief as if a very precious family member had collapsed before his eyes. Tears poured down as if his tear ducts were broken.

"Huu, hic, urk, n-no..."

Why was he like this when he didn't even have family? Was it because of memories of treating a black cat like family in a past life? He staggered toward the cat. He was seized by a compulsion that he had to properly check its condition.

His vision twisted wildly. In his mind that had been messed up by the Dium rummaging through his memories, some scene surfaced like an illusion.

Hugging a black cat with hands covered in wounds,

'You're still staying by my side?'

His sobbing voice rang in his ears like an auditory hallucination.

"No, urk, I never, uweek, did this, shit..."

He had no such experience. No, did he really not? Did it overlap with experiences he had on Earth? Why was his head like this? Had his mind really broken when the Dium's tentacle touched him? Though he kept dry heaving, he approached the cat. It felt like his body was moving on its own.

[Instead of worrying about such useless things...]

But then the Dium tried to swing its arm again. At the gesture trying to remove the cat that was interfering with their intimate conversation, he finally let out a scream. He felt like blood vessels were bursting in his eyes.

"Don't touch it!"

*Whoosh!* Something burst forth from his body. Though he had already used up all his energy, energy poured out as if not just scraping the bottom but opening up a completely different place entirely. For an instant his vision spun and his whole body staggered.

And suddenly the Dium staggered like him too.

[You, how, why, how can you have that power...!]

Shock filled its widened eyes. Repeatedly shaking its head, the Dium's face filled with shock and denial, and finally rage.

[Aaaaaaah! I should have killed you then!]

*Kwagwagwang!* The Dium's body grew again. Now grown huge enough to almost break through the cave, it started rampaging as if unable to control its anger.

As the cave collapsed, *rumble-* debris poured down, harming not only his companions but the other Diums too. It was natural that Diums larger than humans had more difficulty dodging. Dium screams were heard everywhere.

It was a truly strange situation. The four-horned Dium, the one who should be the leader here, was destroying the space itself and killing off its subordinate Diums. It was bewildering no matter how enraged it was.

"Isaph!"

Just then, Haren's voice was heard. Even the three-horned Diums that had been blocking him until now were all struggling under debris, and as it happened, the four-horned Dium's excited state rather created an opening. Taking advantage of that gap, Haren approached quickly.

Until then, he had just been holding the cat and crying. Fortunately En's breath hadn't stopped, but it was very faint. He desperately kept stroking the cat while gripped by irrational fear. Haren urgently grabbed and pulled him, saying he needed to escape.

Only when Haren's hand firmly read his fingers did his mind return. The familiarity of the body temperature felt from him was 'his' sensation, and he raised his head with a start.

The tears he was shedding now were not his emotions.

He had never cared for this cat this much. Though he had found it cute at times, there was no valid reason he should suffer such world-shattering despair. Though he could be startled by an NPC collapsing, crying like this made no sense.

His head was spinning. Perhaps these were emotions engraved in this body? Though he tried to distinguish that what he was feeling now was neither his emotions nor his memories, tears continued to pour frustratingly. *Shit,* how far was this terrible game going to infect him?

"Huk! C-Commander! The cave is collapsing!"

"We destroyed one core, but the path to the rest has completely collapsed!"

"Wh-what should we do now? I only have one seed left..."

Kalterik, Mela, and Noi joined and each reported the situation. They all looked terrible as if they had struggled hard with the Diums. Though they were all panting, they glanced at him repeatedly, seeming shocked at his tear-stained appearance. He must have looked like someone not in their right mind.

"...Let's try clearing the rocks to make a path first. The Diums are in confusion right now, so we can deal with them too."

Haren commanded calmly. Though it was bad news that the cave's collapse had blocked the path to the cores, it was good news that over half the Diums were trapped under that debris too. His companions quickly obeyed his orders.

But before their movements could even gain momentum, a very chilling sound rang through the space.

*Kigik, kigigik–*

Everyone's movements stopped as soon as they heard the noise like a huge spring winding. They all remembered this sound. It was like a harbinger of that shocking event just hours ago when the cave had collapsed and the space had changed.

[It seems I'll have to chase you far away from here...]

The four-horned Dium opened its 'mouth'. When its entire face split vertically like a Venus flytrap, something was visible inside. Between the densely packed sharp teeth, that pitch-black thing had a shape similar to a spring key.

The Dium began approaching the boundary with its mouth open. His companions' faces hardened. They all instinctively knew the space would flip over the moment that key touched the boundary. The cave the Dium had destroyed earlier rather blocked its path, so it advanced while clearing away debris.

Haren gripped his holy sword more firmly and looked around at the knights, who nodded as they understood his intention just from his gaze. It must have meant to stop the Dium together.

"W-wait."

Just then, he spoke. As he stepped forward, cutting through the tension like a stretched rubber band snapping, everyone turned to look at him quizzically. A solution had occurred to him. Though he couldn't be certain it would work, it was clear there were problems with other methods.

First, it was obvious that if the map changed again, the probability of safely returning here would be low. Even if they found another black boundary in the new space and came back, it wouldn't be a favorable situation for fighting. There was also a chance the Dium would be waiting right in front of them, and above all, he felt he wouldn't be able to cross that wall again. He had a chilling intuition that he would be swept away to a completely different place.

But fighting the four-horned Dium here also looked dangerous. Yes, they might win if everyone cooperated to stop the Dium. Though it looked incredibly strong, he didn't think it was completely unbeatable.

However, time was the issue. After defeating it, would they have leisure to search for cores while navigating the collapsed paths? Time was always important in Encroachment Zones.

But even after pointing out the problems with these two different approaches, he couldn't be confident his solution was the answer. And more important than the probability of success...

"...Do you trust me?"

A necromancer pointed at by the Holy Empire, and a death row inmate who had committed terrible crimes. His question was foolish since he was a figure who could gain no trust at all. He shook his head and spoke.

"No, trust your commander's judgment who would burst my throat if I try anything funny. The great hero's eyes will quickly see through any strange tricks of mine anyway. So... just move according to my plan once."

It was the first time. Until now while traveling with his companions, he had never requested cooperation, and he had always acted separately. But right now, he needed their help.

However, he had no way of knowing if they would follow his words. Should he tell them to make Haren's collar glow red? As he was about to anxiously look at him, unexpectedly, answers burst out from elsewhere first.

"Hah, fine! Let's hear what kind of plan you've come up with!"

"I-if that method doesn't work, we'll immediately use another plan!"

"...Tell us."

Kalterik, Noi, and Mela spoke almost simultaneously. After speaking, they looked at each other dazedly, and even Haren looked at them with quite intrigued eyes.

Could it be that his still continuously crying appearance had aroused even a bit of sympathy? Though it was just his body malfunctioning and tears pouring out on their own, it was fortunate to be useful even like this.

### Chapter 109

There wasn't time for long conversation.

He briefly explained the strategy, and though his companions were shocked, they eventually nodded. However, even as everyone dispersed to their positions, only Haren remained still.

Though he would know best that every moment counted, he just quietly looked at him. Come to think of it, his expression had seemed strange earlier too when pulling him from the corner of the cave.

"...Isaph. I heard the Dium say you had 'come back'."

He flinched at Haren's murmured words. Though the other companions wouldn't have heard since they had all gone far away to destroy cores at the time, Haren, who had been directly confronting the four-horned Dium, must have heard those words. Moreover, he had even had a private conversation with the Dium in the corner afterward.

"I, I, I'm coming here for the first time."

His words tangled from panic. Though he answered immediately thinking he should explain, it wasn't at all convincing. But no other answer seemed appropriate. Wouldn't it just sound ridiculous to say the Dium had mistaken him for someone else, that it was confused?

*...And this body might really have come here before.*

His breath caught under Haren's steady gaze. As he just chewed his lips with the intuition he had chosen the wrong answer, Haren calmly asked.

"Did the Dium read your desire?"

Given his earlier conversation with the Dium, it was a natural suspicion. But the content had been so absurd that a dry laugh escaped involuntarily.

"No, not at all. Definitely not that."

"...I see. Perhaps the Dium said those things deliberately to cause confusion in our group. It seemed to know a lot about human society."

Though he denied it, he wasn't confident whether Haren would believe his words. However, he nodded, and rather, that response surprised him. *You believe this? Are you just letting it slide because there's no time, or is it because of the collar?*

And despite it being something that could be quite suspicious, Haren hadn't shared that information in front of the other companions. Even though they were now moving according to his plan.

As he looked at him dazedly, Haren spoke.

"I'll watch for now, so manage your neck well."

Finally *thud,* his finger brushed his eye. It felt like a touch soothing him not to cry. He fumbled at the warmth left on his face before quickly shaking his head. This wasn't the time for this.

*Kung, kuung, kugung...!*

The Dium had already reached the black boundary. Though it seemed to be trying to flip the space again, they could guess it wasn't easy from how the spring sound lasted longer than before. Perhaps it was a power difficult to use multiple times in a short period.

He took a deep breath and approached the Dium. His objective, and the plan he had made, was very simple. And just as much, very reckless.

[Kuk, kihit, kuhihik, you think you can stop me alone.]

The Dium snickered seeing him approach alone. It was an extremely bizarre sight. While trying to insert the key hidden inside its vertically split face into the wall, the other lips of its split face moved as it spoke.

[I'll separate you from them and throw you away somewhere very far. After a long time passes and I find you, your mind will have changed too.]

He got goosebumps at the Dium's ominous declaration. Meanwhile the spring sound rang endlessly as if the space would flip at any moment, and the ground shook greatly. It was a situation where it could collapse again like hours ago at any time.

In fact, just standing here was difficult for him. Enduring on ground shaking like an earthquake was quite arduous and his vision swayed. The vibrations felt even more intense in front of the black boundary, but he looked at the Dium as steadily as possible.

"I'm not trying to stop you right now."

His goal from the start wasn't to prevent the Dium from changing the space. The moment the spring key hidden in its mouth came out to touch the boundary, and right when light spread from the black wall as if scattering.

*Kigigigigik–*

The instant the spring-winding sound rang as if tearing, purple energy burst from his hand. One suddenly emerging undead quickly rushed into the Dium's mouth. Heading for that place that no human hand could reach.

"Got it...!"

He had succeeded in stealing the spring key.

As soon as the black key entered his hand, relief came and *whoosh,* dizziness struck. His vision faded dizzyingly just from summoning one undead. It felt like he had poured out his life force to call it. He barely endured trying not to fall while holding the cat.

When the space first changed, the snow mountain cave had definitely collapsed. But when they returned after going elsewhere, the cave was intact. From this, he had guessed that when the map changed, the existing space collapsed but was soon restored to its original state. He thought such strange phenomena occurred because it was a space containing that bizarre boundary.

Though this must be a place for contacting traitors, he thought the reason the four-horned Dium unhesitatingly destroyed the cave was because it was confident it could restore everything anyway. Noi had quite agreed this made sense.

So he had expected that if they pulled out the key the moment the map changed, they wouldn't be sucked into another space and the cave would return to normal.

Though he wasn't sure if the subordinate Diums who had died from its rampage would revive too, it would be good enough just to restore the collapsed cave intact. Because that was the moment his companions were supposed to rush to destroy the remaining three cores.

*But...*

"...Why isn't it returning?"

The ground still shook as if about to collapse, and light kept spreading from the black boundary. His companions waiting to quickly rush to where the cores were behind there screamed.

"What, is this really working?!"

"Aaaack! D-dizzy!"

He looked back in confusion at them staggering on the crumbling ground. What, was this not the right timing? Would it only return after the map completely changed? He looked down at the key in his hand in panic, and even tried holding it to the boundary just in case. But still the space's vibrations didn't stop.

The Dium sneered at his dumbfounded appearance.

[Hahaha! Was this all the plan you came up with!]

"Why, why won't it stop..."

[Did you even know what this was when you acted? Haha, ahaha! And 'current' you wouldn't even know exactly how to use the key, this is the first time I've seen such stupidity! Ahahahaha!]

Its mocking laughter rang thunderously in his ears. His head felt like it would split from the already huge being's laughter. He blankly looked at the key in his hand, the boundary, and the Dium. The space was about to collapse.

[Ah, you really are an amusing one. Just what did you do in that other world...]

"..."

[Yes, it's been a while since I had such an enjoyable experience, so I'll give you another chance. Will you accept my deal now? If you agree now, I'll safely send at least you back to your world.]

The Dium proposed with utmost gentleness as if bestowing final mercy. It even tilted its head affectionately as if trying to resume the conversation that had been cut off earlier by the cat.

With a confident attitude that this was clearly his desire.

[I know you were surprised as soon as you heard my story. That must be proof that my offer is your desire. You can be honest about your desire now. So I'll send you to that place you imagined, where you can see that white ceil—]

"No, you crazy bastard! How is that my desire!"

He burst out cursing at the huge face approaching right in front of him. His answer to Haren that the Dium hadn't read his desire was absolutely not a lie. He truly hadn't been enchanted by the Dium's words, and the reason was.

"Wake up in the hospital? Would my body hit by a truck be fine, shit! What about hospital bills? And I got fired from my part-time job that day too? After several days, no, months, I'd be behind on rent and loan interest. Wow, who would want to go back to a place like that! No money here or there, and I'd be in debt too!"

[Wh-what, what.]

The Dium was flustered by his rapid-fire words. At first he had just frozen in surprise that game data was mentioning another world, but the more he thought about it, its offer was complete nonsense. He had no family or friends and even received uncomfortable looks there just like here!

Here or there was the same. If so, he should at least try to get the reward offered in this game.

### Chapter 110

"That's not my desire. I, that is, what I want is..!"

In his past life, no, on Earth where he might still be alive, he had spent days without rewards or clear goals. Though his life was becoming uncertain in this world too, what he ultimately wanted was just.

"...Only freedom."

After pouring everything out, he muttered in an exhausted tone. Even in a very philosophical sense, there could hardly be a more fitting purpose than this. Freedom from money worries, from having to worry about uncomfortable gazes. And freedom from... suffering from strange emotions and memories like now.

He wanted to be free from all these hardships and adversities.

[Ha, haha. You really are insane. I'll just send you far away too. If I lock you away in a corner for a while, later you'll end up begging and clinging to me...]

So now there was only one thing he could do.

He quietly glared at the Dium letting out a dry laugh. Thanks to that useless desire analysis, rather his nerves sharpened and his mind worked quickly.

Yes, that's right. He had acted without knowing exactly what this boundary was, and moved without understanding how to use the key. It had been arrogance and misjudgment from the start. Because of him, his companions were now in a situation where they would inevitably be moved to another map.

So what could he do now?

"...You, you said something strange to me earlier."

There was one thing he had learned coming to this world, this world with such poor game convenience. One of the abilities he had desperately learned trying to survive under the unfriendly status window.

Mastering skills after using them once.

The instructions that appeared on the status window had always been vague. Just telling him to rush forward, look down, reach out his hand. Following such things, he had always suffered from strange sensations like being pushed out of his body and dizziness, and cursed that he would never follow the status window again.

Yet eventually the time came when he had to use that power, and usually in those moments it was too urgent to even read the status window so he instinctively followed the ability. The memory remaining in his body allowed him to use that power. Then he no longer felt the sensation of being pushed out of his body, so gradually he came to use skills directly.

Though at first he couldn't exert the same power as when following the status window, he became more familiar with use. In this merciless self-study encouraging game, he gradually achieved development in applying abilities. Perhaps the skill embodiment stat was set high in the game character information.

For him like this, the Dium's words from earlier were a clue.

[You, how, why, how can you have that power...!]

When the Dium tried to kill the cat, he had screamed not to touch it. Though it had just been a cry of shock, something had burst open and forth from his body, and the Dium had been shocked at that.

If it hadn't reacted much, he might have just passed over that incident. Even now he still didn't know what 'that power' was.

*Could it be a hidden skill?*

Though the status window hadn't appeared since the NPC collapsed, perhaps the ability the player desperately wanted was finally being given. Was it a trump card given only when the NPC was in danger, was that the acquisition route?

With optimism, or reckless bravado, he reached out his hand.

He tried his best to follow that sensation from before. He traced back the memory. The desperation to stop the Dium from killing En, the rage that its horrible hands must not touch the cat. That eventually developed into an obsession that he must make the Dium submit.

"Return, this cave, to normal."

As soon as he spoke each word with force, something surged up inside him. Suddenly it felt like his internal organs were not just tangling messily but being thinly sliced. He wanted to scream.

*Kigigik-* But even at this moment the spring sound continued endlessly, mixed with the muffled booming of the shaking cave. They say your head goes strange when exposed to too much loud noise for long, and that seemed to be happening to him now. Beyond just feeling dizzy, his vision flipped over and over. Splitting, breaking.

However, even in his churning vision, the Dium's reaction looking back at him helped him hold onto his sanity. Was it working? Did it work? Please.

[You, now, what...]

"I said, return, the space, back."

Since he didn't know the method, he had to order the Dium. He gambled everything on that one hope that his earlier cry had really made its hand stop.

Was this power he was using necromancy? Like how he had made the Death Knight submit before, could he now control not just spiritual bodies but the souls of the living too? Maybe he had finally been given an overpowered skill.

...No, he instinctively knew this wasn't necromancy.

Though he was optimistically avoiding it, he instinctively felt this was very different from the abilities he had used until now. Because he had experience subjugating the Death Knight, he rather recognized the difference more clearly. Though similar in terms of making something submit, it was completely different.

This chilling feeling that grew stronger the more he gave orders was definitely not necromancy, and moreover... it didn't feel like 'his' power. Even when first using it he had felt tremendous dissonance, and this was close to an instinctive revulsion as if drawing out power that shouldn't be used. It was a horrible feeling.

As if he had become one with the Dium.

[No, this is impossible. Such a thing...!]

"Return it."

But the Dium's reaction allowed him to endure willingly in that disgusting sensation. If he could just make this thing submit to his words, he would bear that sensation as much as needed.

*Urk,* this time what surged up from his stomach burst through his throat all at once. He thought it was stomach acid, but the fishy smell that followed made him realize its identity.

He was vomiting blood now.

It was killing him to push himself while even spitting blood with this shoddy body. No, he was literally standing at the crossroads of life and death right now. It felt like he might cross over with one wrong move, and standing on that edge he blankly looked at the Dium. No, was he looking down at it now?

For an instant, his reflection in the Dium's pitch-black eyes seemed to fade to gray.

"Return it."

Though it was probably just his consciousness blurring from dizziness, goosebumps rose all over his body. However, following another intuition telling him this was his chance, he ordered again. The moment he spoke those words while endlessly spitting blood from his mouth.

*Kugugugung...*

Finally the cave's debris began to rise. The rocks scattered messily on the floor seemed to float suspended in the air for a moment before *rumble-* returning to their original places.

*Kwang, kung, kuung!* The huge debris attached to their proper places, and even the sand grains that had crumbled into pieces filled in the gaps to restore their original form. The collapsed ceiling rose again, walls stood up as if rising, and even the shattered floor joined back together.

The scene was like watching an overturned puzzle restore its original form, as if time was running backwards, and looked truly miraculous. It was wondrous enough to draw admiration even in his distant consciousness.

*Oh, is this an effect borrowed from another game by the same developer? A special appearance by some restorer?*

Just as he was marveling at how incredibly high quality it was despite seeing such a scene for the first time, light suddenly burst through between the debris floating up to find their places. The sight of brilliant golden light spreading dazzlingly gave the impression of a sun rising in the cave.

*...Wait, sun?*

When he raised his head wondering if it could be, he really discovered Arux, a small sun floating in the air. In the previous Encroachment Zone, Haren had used the holy relic after starting purification, but this time he had raised the sun first before all the cores were destroyed.

Still, thanks to that perhaps, the Dium staggered with a groan and its resistance weakened considerably. The power of submission penetrated the mind of the being startled by the sudden burst of strong holy power, and the cave restored to its original state more quickly.

"Now!"

*Wudududuk-* the sound of trees growing rang from over there. Noi had sprouted his last seed. Life forms bathed in the sun's light grew faster and stronger, instantly extending long stems, and the holy knights climbed up on them.

Now that the path was made, it was time to destroy the cores.

Though it might collapse again when the Dium regained its senses, that was all the more reason they had to seize this opportunity. It was possible because everyone had believed in his plan and waited.

### Chapter 111

Thankfully, the genius aide remembered the cave's paths perfectly and quickly extended tree branches into the space that was just returning to normal. *Kwagwagwang*- whether the cave was collapsing or returning to normal was unclear in the noise, but the three holy knights headed in without hesitation.

Three cores remained in the Encroachment Zone now.

And a few minutes, no, perhaps not even one minute after the holy knights departed, the sound was heard. Though they had to jump directly when Noi's tree branches could no longer grow midway, it was instantaneous.

Noi's long ears perked up.

"Th-they must have destroyed them all!"

Even amid the chaos of mixed thunderous sounds, Noi focused on and identified the sound of cores breaking. As if confirming his cry, the Encroachment Zone's air became lighter.

Though it was an extremely joyful situation, unfortunately the Dium recognized it too.

[N-no. This, kuk! No!]

The Dium shook its head spasmodically. Breaking free from its strange state of submission, it immediately reached out its hand toward him.

*Bang*! Though its black hand poured down as if to crush where he was standing, Haren barely saved him. Having returned here in an instant, he lifted him in both arms and quickly leaped away to dodge.

The air right in front of his face tingled. Though chilling fear struck that he could have died with one wrong move, an even more urgent feeling welled up.

"Pu-purify it. Quickly...!"

As the four-horned Dium regained its senses, the cave was collapsing again. They needed to purify the space quickly before the map changed. Since previously in the first Encroachment Zone, the cornered Dium had burst contaminated energy as if about to create cores in the space again, if something like that happened, all their hard work until now would be for nothing.

"Just, kuluk, put me in a corner somewhere, quickly...!"

"No. Right now that Dium is only looking at you."

Haren firmly cut off his urging. Only then did he flinch and check behind him to find the Dium really was chasing him. Without even trying to change the map again, it ran reaching out its hands toward him.

[You, you, must not go. You, to that person...!]

Its eyes bulged as if about to pop out as it spouted incoherent words. *Wh-what?* Hadn't it regained its senses thinking it had to protect the Encroachment Zone?

As he was bewildered, *wujijik*! Tree branches approached to block the Dium's path. Then Kalterik and Mela, who had quickly returned, also stood blocking it.

"Has this bastard gone crazy? Get back!"

He deeply agreed with Kalterik's shout. The Dium tried to approach him while tearing apart Noi's tree branches with its hands and violently throwing aside the two holy knights. It showed abnormal obsession even while taking injuries to its body.

Though blocking such a Dium must have been very difficult, the three didn't back down. Even without Haren's orders, everyone acted as if it were natural, and he watched them with surprised eyes. They were all protecting him.

Only after completely distancing from the Dium did Haren set him down and begin purification.

Though this place wasn't outdoors like the previous Encroachment Zones, light gathered in the holy sword. Not just the light emitted by the small sun he had floated in the cave's air earlier, but light seeping from various places in the ground collected at the sword's tip.

Though those particles of light were small and faint, what finally gathered in the pure white sword was dazzling enough to be brilliant. Whether it was God's grace piercing even through the cave, or whether light that had permeated this land originally touched by God's hand was helping the hero even though it was now faded to gray.

"[Purify.]"

The word 'purify' in the divine language Haren chanted after a long time again pleasantly struck his ears. Somehow this time it even brought shivers. Was it because he now vaguely knew the content of the divine language he chanted, had he been moved by it? Though he couldn't understand at all, every time he heard that word he felt deep joy.

*...Could this too be emotion from memories remaining in this body?*

Just as he felt a sense of dissonance, *paaaaaah* the light burst explosively, cutting off his thoughts. *Ah, right*. It would be strange not to be excited just seeing this light. The sight of color returning as the colorless space faded away was wondrous no matter how many times he saw it.

However, something still existing pitch black was visible even in the brightening space.

"Why, why doesn't that boundary disappear at all...?"

Though Haren had clearly purified the Encroachment Zone, there was no change in just the black wall in the corner. Though holy power was spreading at a very fast speed even riding the small sun's power, the fact that it neither disappeared nor even decreased looked somehow eerie. Even the intensely bursting light couldn't illuminate inside it.

However, there was no time to examine it more closely.

"Uh, uwaak! Commander! This thing really seems to have gone mad...!"

Finally the Dium shook off the three and ran toward him again. Even though the Encroachment Zone was being purified, that is, even though their territory was disappearing, it only looked at him. Haren lifted him in one arm and fled.

At such high speed, he held the cat in his arms even tighter. *Hey NPC, what was that hidden skill I used that caused this mess? Please wake up already.*

*Pishik*! *Puk*! Rays of sunlight pouring from the small sun pierced into the Dium like prison bars. Though dozens of light rays were stabbing down into the being huge enough to fill the cave, it was persistent. The Dium drove its battered body forward relentlessly.

Was it so angry about being forcibly made to submit earlier, did it want to kill at least him because of that?But somehow the Dium's actions reaching out toward him didn't seem that way.

[No, it must not be. Don't go, you must not leave.]

Rather, it even felt desperate.

[You must stay with me...!]

*What's this, earlier it had shouted it should have killed him but why was it suddenly acting like this? Had another hidden ending route suddenly opened or something?*

Just as he was about to meet the Dium's eyes in bewilderment, *whoosh*! Haren swung his sword. The Dium's hand that had been about to touch him flew and slammed into the wall.

"Everyone get out of the cave!"

Haren shouted. Though until now everything had been resolved just by purifying, this time the four-horned Dium endured even taking the light of purification. Though it didn't look fine, an abnormal obsession seemed to be moving it.

Everyone followed the commander's order. They ran quickly through the collapsing cave's complex paths, with the Dium chasing right behind. Though its hands slowly regenerated from its cut wrists, this time its fingers transformed to become long and aimed at him. Fingers flew like ropes.

"L-light, I see light! Commander, the exit is close!"

Faint light brushed his eyes. Though they had clearly climbed the snow mountain during the day, moonlight poured down softly as if deep night had fallen somehow. Haren gauged the remaining distance to the exit and swung his sword widely. That attack that slashed up the cave wall so violently that it was excessive led to, *kwagwagwagwang*! collapse.

Haren had destroyed the cave entrance.

No, he had collapsed the entire mountain.

An avalanche occurring on the dizzyingly tall snow mountain struck the cave. His companions all jumped high to barely escape, and behind them burst the Dium's monstrous cry as it failed to exit the cave.

[You... are fated... to return... to us again anyway...]

The throat-tearing wail faded as it was buried in debris. Though it stirred as if trying to rise, when the avalanche crushed over it too, it finally grew quiet. Even the hand desperately reaching outside was covered in pure white snow.

Though its actions had been very desperate, from the perspective of watching it was just bewildering and frustrating. Not only was speaking like that at the end an extremely ominous flag, but wouldn't it cause misunderstandings that he had been special to that Dium?

*Just what had this body been doing?*

"...Isaph."

"I, I really saw that bastard for the first time today."

He claimed ridiculous innocence while being held in Haren's arms. Thinking this must be why Haren had called him, he blurted it out thoughtlessly. *Kuluk*, his throat even hurt from how much sincerity he had put into his words.

"I really, never came here be... fore..."

Though he wanted to say more, his vision blurred. He had thought it was aftereffects from the scenery flipping over and over, but at some point his focus seemed to have gone. Strength slowly drained from his body, and something endlessly flowed from his mouth. Though Haren seemed to be saying something, even his ears had gone bad now and he couldn't hear properly.

Still, he focused all his nerves on moving his lips. Though it seemed he wouldn't be believed, he just wanted to say it.

That he, 'he' at least, had never come here.

He didn't know why he wanted to insist this so desperately to Haren. Was he more afraid of Haren suspecting him than his fading consciousness right now?

As he tried to repeatedly proclaim his innocence, something kept boiling in his mouth and muffled his voice. As he grew frustrated, he belatedly recognized the fishy blood scent. *Ah,* he was vomiting blood right now.

*Wow, speaking like this would really look like last words.*

*...Wait, these wouldn't actually become last words, would they?*

With that chilling worry, his consciousness cut off abruptly.

### Chapter 112

#Part 10. 75%

He was walking somewhere.

Cool air heavily pressed down on his whole body and wind that occasionally blew past harshly brushed his face as if cutting it. The wind sound that sounded like screams and his footsteps echoed through the space. This place where no one was seemed like a cave.

He staggered forward while grasping the cold wall with hands covered in wounds. His knees kept buckling, and he struggled to raise and move his collapsing body. All his vision was colorless, and even his hands touching the ground to get up were gray.

It was like watching a black and white silent film.

After turning his head this way and that to get his bearings, he finally stopped in complete pitch-black darkness. At some point everything had become dark as if ink had been suddenly spilled. There he muttered something. Though no sound could be heard, he felt his mouth moving.

'...hide.'

Though he was clearly acting in 'his' body, he was watching detachedly as if viewing a film when suddenly he became curious. What words was he muttering now? From the moment he wondered, sound gradually began to be added.

Alone in the completely dark place, staggering, he...

'Must hide.'

Just as he felt it was his voice yet sounded completely unfamiliar, his vision suddenly flipped. As if suddenly thrown from his body, he came to face himself as if looking in a mirror. The sight of himself seen right in front was awkward. His body faded to gray brought an eeriness as if contaminated...

Then, as purple gradually settled in the gray eyes.

'―in a very distant ― that cannot be found.'

Finally 'he' with complete color declared. At the same time, his vision distorted wildly as if caught in a whirlpool, and his body was dragged somewhere mercilessly. Reflexive fear came that he would never see 'himself' again. *Where are you trying to send me?*

*I, why am I, how.*

As he struggled wanting to escape the vortex, something grabbed his hand. *Whoosh*! As he gripped it fiercely like a lifeline, his eyes flew open.

"Huk!"

He took a deep breath. A shock like what would come from suddenly pulling a body submerged in the freezing deep sea struck his entire body. As air that felt like it was piercing his lungs entered unfamiliarly, he coughed like someone who had forgotten how to breathe.

Still, following an obsession that he must not let go of what he was holding now, he put more strength into his grip while barely looking around. *This place is... an inn room?*

Traveling around the empire, he had unintentionally become very familiar with inn layouts. The familiar plain and simple arrangement, wooden ceiling. He was sitting on a bed now, and what he was gripping was...

"...Are you conscious now?"

*Haren's collar*.

"Ah."

As soon as he realized this, he let go in startled panic. Though it had taken considerable time for him to realize he had woken from a strange dream, he was very flustered by Haren's behavior of quietly allowing his collar to be held that whole time. *Why, why had he let it be held?*

Though dazed, he first felt his body with an unfamiliar sensation. Somehow the feeling of moving his body with his own will felt strange.

*So I'm still alive.*

Having been genuinely scared he might end up dying after leaving last words, he was glad his body was moving fine now. Moreover, the colors were normal too. In the dream his whole body had looked faded to gray. It seemed he had had such a strange dream because he had particularly struggled in this Encroachment Zone.

*Phew*, letting out a long sigh of relief, he muttered.

"Fortunately I didn't die..."

"Seeing you say that, seems you didn't want to die."

"That's obvious. Who would want to die?"

"For someone saying that, you confronted the Dium quite recklessly."

He turned his head quizzically at Haren's pointed words. His voice was strangely sharp. He was sitting in a chair beside the bed opening the bedside table drawer, and those movements looked familiar. As if he had spent quite a long time here.

"Drink this."

What he took from the drawer was a potion. He took it as if swept along, while barely tracing back his memories with his still creaking thoughts. Though dazed from just waking up, he felt the need to somehow organize the situation. The strange dream had tangled his earlier memories.

He had gone to the cave alone, no, together. He had tried to stop the Dium trying to change the map again in front of the black wall, and then... ah.

The memory of the Dium acting extremely suspiciously at the end struck like lightning. It had chased him while spouting words that could make him sufficiently suspected of being a traitor. Remembering that finally Haren had looked at him very subtly too, he hesitantly fiddled with the potion bottle.

"Um, about what happened in the Encroachment Zone..."

"Never mind. I don't plan to interrogate a patient who woke up after a week."

But before he could organize what he should say, Haren shook his head. As he just blinked his eyes, Haren took the potion from his hand, opened the cap himself and gave it back. It felt like being treated as someone who didn't even have the strength to open a cap.

"When you spoke while vomiting blood like that, I couldn't even suspect..."

"...Huh?"

"Anyway, drink quickly. It's just the time I was going to feed you."

As he stayed dazed, surprised by both the news that he had woken after a week and Haren's strange attitude, Haren even tried to tilt the bottle to feed him directly. Only then did he embarrassedly drink the potion, but even after emptying the bottle, Haren didn't ask anything.

He should have been curious about the Dium's suspicious behavior shown in the eastern Encroachment Zone or the method of restoring the collapsing cave. Though he had said he would steal the key with undead, when Haren came to save him the key had been rolling on the ground, so he should have noticed it hadn't been effective.

But Haren pointed out a completely different aspect.

"In the first place, the reason I called you then was just to say you acted too recklessly. You confronted the Dium thoughtlessly when you weren't even well."

"That..."

"There was no need to step forward while spitting blood like that."

His steady gaze looking at him was quiet. Until now he had always stepped back when dealing with Diums but this time he had stepped forward alone saying he would hold back one with four horns no less. Then he had ended up vomiting blood massively and collapsing...

"Whether you subjugated the Dium's soul or suppressed it by some other means, I can clearly see you can't handle that ability. It seems problems arose because of that when you first talked alone with the Dium too..."

Haren seemed to have gone through some reasoning while he was unconscious. But rather than probing the empty parts of his reasoning in detail, he pointed out his actions. His voice was quite hard.

"Don't step forward with abilities you can't control yourself. And if that excited the Dium, you should have been even more careful - if I had been just a little late then, you would have been caught by the Dium. Don't act like that ever again."

"...Grr, no matter if my role is just searching Encroachment Zones, I still get caught up in it when things get dangerous. And then it seemed like everyone would fall to different places instead of just the terrain changing. Then it would have been hard to be confident about returning to the original location..."

"Isaph."

"Ah, it all worked out fine in the end so what's the problem. You weren't well then either."

As his awkward explanation was still met with coldness from Haren, he suddenly felt wronged. Why was he only pointing out that he had acted recklessly?

"Then how were you planning to stop the Dium with your abdomen pierced? Did you think you could win together with your subordinates? That bastard had clearly noticed you were injured already. Moreover, when the terrain changed, the one obsessed with wanting to kill the hero would chase you first, so who knows what would have happened. What if you got hurt more there."

"..."

"I just, didn't want you to be in pain alone again."

It was an impulsive statement. Words that burst out without him knowing while pouring everything out in a surge of emotion. Only after saying it aloud did the realization come that this was why he had stepped forward so recklessly then. The true feelings in his unconscious that even he hadn't properly recognized.

Though he had thought he had acted out of anger at the cat being touched, or optimism at discovering a hidden skill, or because the desire the Dium claimed to have read was absurd...

"I wasn't in a state to cross that boundary again then. Then I wouldn't have been able to go find you."

Perhaps because he had just regained consciousness, or because he had suffered from the cold of the chilly cave in his dream until just before, he kept responding emotionally. His voice trembled.

"So instead of getting angry, can't you just praise me? ...No, acknowledge. Acknowledge that I helped."

### Chapter 113

He had ended up making a slip of the tongue. He had thought it wrong in his head before too, but now it had even burst out of his mouth. Moreover, why had he added not to get angry? Embarrassment rushed in like a flood and he covered his mouth with his hand.

Just then Haren let out a dry laugh. Though it was a very faint sound, he definitely heard it. Thinking he might be mocking him, he glared, but discovered that Haren had already lowered his head and was shaking with suppressed laughter.

"Ah, this is the first time someone has treated me as someone who needs to be protected like this."

Haren shook his head as if it was truly an answer he had never imagined. If it had been others, they would have said things like they were fine because they were with the hero, or that they believed he would protect them, but he had blurted out something completely unexpected.

But having witnessed Haren trying to act fine despite receiving fatal wounds when the map changed, he couldn't help it. He had shared his pain continuously afterwards too, so he knew in what condition he had fought the Dium.

Only after touching his lips for a while as if trying to calm his laughter did Haren speak.

"I'm not angry. Just... this is the first time you've been unconscious for a whole week."

Though he often fainted, he had never been down for such a long time. Usually he regained consciousness in a few hours, and once before he had woken after three days. That had been in the first Encroachment Zone...

Suddenly he thought about how Haren's reaction now was completely different from then. Though the period of unconsciousness was twice as long, explaining he wasn't angry while mentioning such a reason... didn't it interpret like he had watched over him worriedly for a week?

"Your breathing was too shallow, and your temperature stayed low without returning..."

Moreover, as he murmured words that only someone who had nursed someone for a long time would say, something deep in his chest shook. Though he should just think that Haren had checked on his condition since he had decided to take him as a companion, why. Just then he discovered the blue eyes meeting his directly trembled slightly.

As if having him open his eyes and meet his gaze was unfamiliar.

"..."

Suddenly a strange silence settled.

After pouring out words as if having an argument until just before, now they both closed their mouths in silence. *Ah, something similar had happened in the Encroachment Zone too.*

From some point, he had often lost his composure before Haren, and this seemed to be the same for him too. Their conversations often followed an uneven flow. Though he had thought he alone suffered from churning feelings, seeing similar reactions from Haren confused him.

Would it have been better if he had suspected him? Though he should have been interested in the ability that had made the four-horned Dium kneel, his behavior of only caring about him spitting blood, his reaction acting as if only that mattered, made him even more motion sick.

"Urk."

So, he really dry heaved.

Dizziness surged from using his head too much right after waking up. It was a truly frustratingly shoddy body. As he suffered from nausea, Haren reached out his hand supportively under his chin asking if he was okay, making him dizzier. The hand stroking his back was problematically gentle too.

After a bout of dry heaving, he sat back against the bed exhausted. Though fortunately he hadn't actually vomited anything, just showing such a state itself was extremely embarrassing. He covered his eyes with one arm while needlessly blaming him.

"Ha, this happened because you scolded me right after I woke up."

"I wasn't scolding..."

Haren answered in a subtle tone then slowly nodded. As if finally finding an answer to something he had been deeply considering, he spoke.

"Since you really aren't well, I'll have to look for a place suitable for recuperation for you to stay later. Somewhere with good air where you can rest comfortably, paying attention to nutrition in meals too, and..."

He looked at Haren in bewilderment at the continuing words. *What was this about now? It seemed like a nursing home was being set up out of nowhere?* Though he had thought their conversations rode rapids, when the topic jumped this much it was hard to follow.

A dry laugh escaped involuntarily.

"I never said I would stay in a space you give me."

"This is additional compensation besides sentence reduction. You insisted so much on having your help acknowledged, right? In reality, you've achieved great merit in many aspects, not just searching Encroachment Zones."

"Ah, is that what this is? That's kind of okay then."

After grimacing at what seemed like more protective custody talk, his eyes lit up immediately at hearing about additional compensation. *Come to think of it, after working this hard, wouldn't it be unfair to just get sentence reduction? Since this body had lived as a wanderer, he probably didn't have a house?*

So this was how he would receive the industrial accident insurance money he had been insisting on.

"If possible, I'd like to see water - sea, river, pond, anything. It should have high ceilings and spacious rooms too."

He chattered excitedly. Since in his past life he had stayed in a small one-room apartment where only the opposite building's exterior wall could be seen through the window, he ended up dreaming of the opposite kind of space. Just as he was thinking about realizing his dream of having his own home here... belatedly the realization came that this might be giving with one hand and taking with the other.

By then Haren was already laughing with his hand covering his mouth. Seeing him chuckling while completely muffling the sound, he had definitely been watching his reaction. He glared at him sullenly.

"Are you making fun of me?"

"Of course not. I was just going over the requirements to remember them."

"Never mind, if you're giving additional compensation just give me money. I'll build a house on an uninhabited island myself."

"That won't do. You might waste the money somewhere else?"

"Ha..."

Dizziness threatened to come again. This was quite a different kind from the vertigo felt earlier. He turned his head away, completely ignoring whether Haren was making plans about creating a pond at the mansion or not.

As his energy drained from the absurd topic, he could finally think of other things. He looked around the room searching for something that had just occurred to him, but 'it' wasn't there.

"By the way, where's the cat?"

Since what happened in this Encroachment Zone was too strange, he felt the need to gather information through the NPC. Though it was a creature that didn't answer well, this time he had to interrogate it somehow.

As he looked around for the black cat, for some reason Haren fell silent. Even the talk about the protective custody mansion cut off abruptly.

"..."

Though he looked around the room again completely, the cat was nowhere to be seen, and until then Haren kept his lips closed. At his reaction that seemed to hesitate to answer, he just blinked blankly before... *whoosh*! jumping up from his seat.

No way.

*Bang*! He went outside throwing open the door. Though he heard Haren calling his name from behind, right now he could only think about finding the cat. He forcibly moved his body that could barely function after waking up after a week.

His heart started growing cold. The cat had collapsed from the Dium's attack then, and though he had confirmed it was breathing, it had been very faint. When he recalled the small body of the cat he had held last, anxiety surged.

"Oh, Isaph! You're awake! How are you feeling?"

"En. Where is En."

The room he had been in was connected to a common space. When he opened the door and went out, Noi, Kalterik, and Mela all turned to look at him. Whether Noi greeted him with surprised eyes or not, when he asked about the cat first, his face colored with bewilderment.

"That cat..."

Even Mela's face gradually hardened as she hesitated moving her lips. *Why is everyone watching my reaction? Could something have happened to the cat? Why...!*

Just then, Noi spoke hesitantly.

"It had been sleeping continuously, but suddenly woke up last night and went out through the window..."

"...There wasn't even time to catch it. Though we immediately followed after it, it wasn't visible, and even after searching around for a long time there wasn't even a trace."

Mela added in a low voice. He just blinked blankly at their story of searching for hours but coming up empty-handed. After going over it several times not understanding... finally he covered his face with both hands.

"Ah."

*F\*ck, this bastard had run away.*

An anger of indescribable size rushed in. Though it was a creature that always appeared and disappeared at will, this time its action's purpose felt too clear.

It had definitely run away deliberately.

*After making him suffer terribly in the eastern Encroachment Zone, it disappears like this? Shouldn't it at least tell him what this body had been doing!*

### Chapter 114

Moreover, everyone had seen the Dium desperately chasing him at the end. As if they had been particularly close, it had even spouted strange words saying he would surely return to it.

Leaving him in a situation perfect for being suspected and the NPC just running away. Though he had thought it was a game with terrible player welfare originally, he hadn't known it would be this awful. His hand covering his face trembled with anger at having worried about it even briefly. No, his whole body was shaking.

Then beside him, Kalterik spoke in a very flustered voice.

"D-d-don't cry."

"...?"

"Th-the cat's condition, wasn't bad? Its wounds healed well..."

The words he strung together were extremely strange. What was he saying out of nowhere? When he removed his hands in bewilderment and turned around, he discovered faint worry on Kalterik's face. Moreover, this was an emotion that could be read not just from him but from everyone else too. As if they were concerned he might burst into tears.

Had his appearance crying endlessly while holding the cat in the cave been that shocking? Though it was just his body malfunctioning in that moment, their reactions made him dazed.

Well, it would be surprising if someone who always wandered around gloomily like an evil spirit without speaking suddenly cried with a crazed appearance. Perhaps that was why his companions had all readily followed his absurd plan then too.

He embarrassedly scratched his nape.

"...I'm not crying."

Though the misunderstanding was bewildering, their behavior of seeming to care about his condition felt unfamiliar. *Moreover, they even knew about the cat's wounds - had they been looking after it in his place?* He had thought no one would care since it was Isaph's familiar.

He hesitated before speaking very quietly. Though the runaway NPC was vexing, he felt the need to thank them.

"...Thanks for taking care of En."

"No, well, it wasn't really taking care. Ahem, hem!"

Kalterik kept clearing his throat while adding the explanation that they had no choice but to look after it since he had been desperately holding the cat even while collapsing vomiting blood. He was someone who talked more when embarrassed.

His body shuddered as the atmosphere unnecessarily became ticklish. Due to tension draining away, he staggered, his knees buckling, and Haren immediately caught him.

"Don't force yourself to stand too much."

The after effects of suddenly running out with a body that had just woken after a week were now appearing. He was led by Haren's hand to sit on the sofa, and afterwards his companions efficiently arranged the table.

Saying it was just meal time, they busily prepared the table and ordered potato stew that would be easy to swallow for his portion. For some reason, it felt very strange having everyone nurse him. Though he had often collapsed dry heaving before, perhaps it had been impressive this time since he had also vomited blood.

And not just Haren but the other companions didn't ask anything about 'that day' either. *Was it thanks to the cat, or had Haren issued some kind of gag order?* Though slight questions could be read on the three's faces, no one spoke them aloud.

The meal began in a strange atmosphere.

His companions seemed to have already had many conversations while he was unconscious. Noi briefly summarized what they had discussed and told him their next destination.

"We saw many unidentified corpses in the eastern Encroachment Zone this time. To find clues, we're planning to go to the Jerab Special District on the eastern outskirts."

"...Is it an area where many people went missing?"

They had collected information about missing persons in every region they visited on the way to the Encroachment Zone, and he wondered if there were other places too. Perhaps it was a region from the documents Imperial Princess Beatrice had handed over saying they were missing persons information. Special district - it sounded ominous from the term itself.

"No, it's not an investigated place. It's a border city far from the eastern Encroachment Zone."

But contrary to his guess, Noi shook his head.

"The east was particularly heavily hit by the Great Catastrophe in the past, and several neighboring kingdoms were destroyed. Among them, countries that only had parts of their territory remaining hoped to be annexed while offering their land to Solares. When the Order accepted, they combined all those territories and named it the Special District."

It meant that seeing no hope of rebuilding the ruined kingdoms, they had rather offered their land to the empire requesting protection. The story continued that after the Order accepted, those who had survived the Great Catastrophe gradually gathered in Jerab.

*Oh, so that's how the empire's territory expanded and the Order's authority rose?* Though it was interesting...

"But why wasn't that place investigated?"

"Well, since multiple ethnic groups from destroyed kingdoms live together, it's difficult for the empire to control."

"To put it raw, it's practically a lawless zone."

Kalterik added. He said it was the city farthest from the holy city and had been left alone for a long time since even the empire couldn't handle it. Of course, they could manage it if they focused on it, but managing the empire's mainland was more important than putting effort into gaining benefits from there.

Noi spoke while tearing a grain bread in half and putting cheese on it.

"So, we're planning to visit the slave market there."

"...There are slave markets in the empire?"

"No. Though the empire strictly forbids it, it commonly occurs in places beyond the reach of law."

Somehow Noi's tone sounded as if he were familiar with the scenery of that place. Though he had trembled in shock at the laxity committed by the holy knights of the Nadael branch before, he was extremely calm about the serious matter of slave markets.

"There's no way to easily obtain hundreds of people. That would only be possible at slave markets. So we're going there to look for evidence of sending sacrifices to the Dium. There's also a high chance of finding traces of traitors..."

The Dium in the eastern Encroachment Zone had spoken as if it had just recently received sacrifices. So it seemed they planned to search for evidence of human trafficking in the border city, that is, clues to catch traitors. Hmm, though he agreed with the analysis that slave markets were likely to exist in shadows beyond the law's reach...

Swoosh, when he looked around at the other companions, they all had strange expressions. Though they must have had several conversations about their next destination already, Kalterik still seemed somewhat uncomfortable when that word came from Noi's mouth.

Kalterik cleared his throat *hem hem*! and asked.

"N-Noi. Maybe there might not be slave markets? Since the previous Holy Knight Commander completely cleared them out..."

"No, they definitely exist."

Noi firmly shook his head. But right after, he turned to Haren with an "Ah" sigh.

"It's not that I don't trust Lady Evelyn. Just, I know how cruel people can become."

"...I understand what you mean."

Haren calmly answered Noi who was explaining in surprise. His action of reaching out to pat his shoulder somehow seemed careful.

Watching this, he organized the information in his head. It seemed Haren's mother had moved to abolish slave markets, but had Noi been involved in that incident? Suddenly his gaze turned to Noi's pointed ears.

The rare fairy race said to be few in this era.

*Perhaps he...*

Just as one hypothesis was forming, Noi turned to him.

"Ah, though I told you our next destination, that absolutely doesn't mean we have to move quickly! Don't feel any pressure at all! We can go after your condition is better..."

A flood of words telling him not to worry and rest fully followed. As the other companions nodded in agreement too, he just moved his lips dazedly.

*Wh-what? Why do they keep treating me like a patient?*

No, though this body had always groaned like a patient and they had all seen him as weak, their behavior of taking care of him like this was bewildering.

*That is... aren't they treating me like a 'companion'?*

It was an extremely subtle feeling. Was it uncomfortable because the unfamiliar worry he had never experienced before was strange, was it awkward? Since he had never received such attention even in his past life. The more he quietly pondered it, somewhere in his chest kept trying to tickle, so he shook his head hard.

"No, we can go right away."

Since they said he had already been unconscious for a week, they couldn't waste more time. It would be better to move quickly to chase the traitors' traces.

### Chapter 115

Though it usually took considerable time for an Encroachment Zone to be fully purified and quite a while for rumors to spread, this time they might have already spread widely since they had completely collapsed the snow mountain. The traitors would hurriedly try to hide.

Moreover, since that place seemed to have been a meeting place for Diums and traitors, they would have noticed even more quickly. They needed to catch their tail before they completely went into hiding.

"But..."

"I know my condition best. I've slept enough so I can move now."

When Noi hesitated, he answered firmly. Feeling Haren's gaze on him, he deliberately ate the stew more enthusiastically. He acted as if showing he was fine.

Yes, with the end approaching, he couldn't be lazy.

Only one Encroachment Zone remained in the empire now. If they just caught the traitors, variables in the last Encroachment Zone would decrease too, so the goal was in sight. He moved his utensils busily while strengthening his resolve.

He was definitely fine.

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...No, he had thought he was fine.

"...Isaph, undead are popping out again."

"What are you doing...?"

Undead kept sprouting from his shadow as if malfunctioning. It was happening on its own though he hadn't consciously tried to summon at all.

Mela and Kalterik spoke in turn and looked back quizzically, and he hurriedly waved both hands to scatter the undead. Though usually they would disappear with just a light wave of one hand, now he had to put in effort at the level of flapping both arms. Only after confirming the undead had completely disappeared did he say awkwardly.

"W-well, at least it's down to one from several..."

At first five or six undead had been summoned, but now it was down to just one at least. But of course this wasn't a good situation even so. Though they had departed right away because he had insisted he was fine, he hadn't known problems would occur like this. Was it a side effect of the hidden skill used in the Encroachment Zone? It was completely difficult to control necromancy with his will.

Moreover, the reason this problem was serious was that the trouble had started just when they had arrived at the Jerab Special District and finished all preparations.

If it had been like this from when they left the inn, they would have gone straight back to rest, but the problem occurred only after several days. Though he had heard that accident aftereffects sometimes strike suddenly after several days, he hadn't known it would be him.

Noi looked back at him with very troubled eyes.

"Isaph, if you're like this when everything is prepared..."

This 'preparation' meant meeting with someone connected to the slave market, and to discuss this, the story goes back to several days ago.

Several days ago, they had safely entered the Jerab Special District.

Since it was such a free-spirited city, visiting wasn't difficult at all. And the city scenery they encountered there was completely different from the empire's streets they had seen until now. Everything was different from the building styles to people's clothing, down to the small detail of food sold on the streets.

That different feeling wasn't consistent but rather various things were mixed together, making it feel like they had come to a trading city. As they said many kingdoms' people had gathered, though their countries had been destroyed, they maintained their own traditions, boasting diverse scenery.

While he kept looking around curiously, Noi moved naturally as if having already decided their destination. The building he headed to was the city's tallest and most splendid...

A gambling house.

It was surprising enough that Noi, who looked so innocent, entered a gambling house, but he even joined a table where games were in full swing while looking around the space very calmly.

"I'll join too."

He was even speaking informally while receiving and checking cards, and his actions like playing hands looked extremely familiar, making his mouth drop open. Noi showed off his genius memory and instantly made large profits, and these actions were enough to draw the attention of the gambling house managers.

It was instant until they entered the VIP room.

Though people easily suspect that establishments like gambling houses have deep connections with illegal events, Noi's actions seemed based on 'certainty' beyond simple conjecture. Also, the person Noi wanted to meet seemed to be the person in charge at the top rather than just a manager.

In this city, his companions disguised themselves no longer as a mercenary group but with the concept of 'four guards serving a noble young master'. Since there were many people with diverse personalities in the city, everyone wearing robes wasn't even strange. Moreover, pretending to be a noble's child who had snuck out to play gained legitimacy for needing to hide their identity.

Noi spent money lavishly without hesitation. He seemed to be pouring out huge amounts of money since not just Kalterik but even Mela was surprised.

They stayed in the VIP room for several more days. After practically living in the gambling house long enough to memorize even the staff's faces, he too developed some interest in the games. So he tried a few times but...

"You have absolutely no talent for this sort of thing. It must not be easy to lose everything like this either."

All failed. Beside him staring blankly at the miserable results, Haren shook his head.

"At this rate, if I give you cash as compensation for your efforts later, you'll lose it all. Cash really isn't an appropriate reward."

"No, why is the conversation jumping there? How well are you doing...!"

When he turned around bristling, Haren's table was piled with chips. Though he seemed to have just sat down, how? He won almost at the level of getting 777 continuously in every game he lightly tried.

*Since this is empire territory too, do beings blessed by God get buffs here? Like maxed luck stat?* After spending several days feeling deprived alone, Noi finally succeeded in getting invited to an even more secret room than the VIP room.

A manager who seemed to hold an even higher position than the staff they had talked to before approached and guided them. While introducing the new room, they said something about enjoying special culture, but in his head he simply named it the VVIP room.

Only when receiving that invitation did Noi speak.

"I'm getting a bit bored of gambling now. I came because I heard I could buy special items here."

The manager denied it with a surprised face saying 'we don't sell items here', but at Noi's reaction of just staying silent, they moved their lips. After long consideration as if thinking about the money the mysterious noble young master had poured into the gambling house so far... they finally gave a welcome answer.

"...I will bring the CEO."

This had happened just 30 minutes ago.

They had all entered the VVIP room and were waiting for the CEO who was said to be coming soon, but during the wait his undead kept popping out on their own. Moreover, when five or six were first summoned, it was just as a staff member had entered to introduce the interior, and his companions had barely prevented disaster by diverting the staff's attention.

Though he had passed it off then saying it was just a mistake, the anomaly kept repeating afterwards. The meeting they had worked on for days was now in danger of falling through because of him.

"Isaph..."

As Noi looked back at him with very complicated eyes, he lowered his head feeling like a criminal. He just embarrassedly blurted out useless explanations that he wasn't doing this on purpose. A character bug had appeared and he desperately needed a patch but the NPC had run away making it hopeless.

Though it had decreased from five or six to one, if that one popped out when meeting the CEO it would be over. Even if he wasn't immediately suspected as Isaph, having undead appear while having an intimate conversation was not good in itself. It would be reasonable for it to be taken as a threat and develop into a fight.

Moreover, this space was perfectly enclosed without even one window, and several large bodyguards were waiting outside the door.

"Should you just knock me out...?"

As he mumbled hesitantly, Haren shook his head.

"It seems you'd better wait outside. I'll go with you."

"What? No, but you..."

He was surprised at Haren's words. Wouldn't it be better to have him by Noi's side since meeting the gambling house CEO was important and dangerous? Since he was the being Noi trusted and followed most.

So he said never mind, he would go out alone, but Haren's decision didn't change. Even Noi agreed with him.

"Yes. You should go out with Sir Haren. The gambling house building is dangerous to wander alone, and Jerab itself doesn't have good public safety either."

"Though undead are being summoned on their own, I still won't be taken down by anyone..."

"No, there are many people here who make 'bounty hunting' their profession."

Though he had been optimistic thinking it would be fine since Isaph had never been caught by pursuit before, he flinched at hearing quite a terrifying word.

"Moreover, it seems bounty hunters who judged you would be hiding here where the empire's surveillance relatively doesn't reach have gathered in droves."

### Chapter 116

In other words, he had really come to a space crawling with bounty hunters desperate to catch Isaph. And as it happened, the bounty on Isaph was the largest amount in imperial history. While he recalled the long figure from the wanted poster he had seen at the temple before, Noi delivered the final nail.

"I heard talk about you in the gambling house too. They were saying how catching Isaph would earn them enough money for a big score, so stay safely with Sir Haren."

It seemed he had diligently collected information even amid the noisy space. In the end, he could only awkwardly answer that he understood, and Noi gave final words saying he would contact them when finished. His attitude had been very calm, making him feel even more embarrassed as he went outside with Haren.

To prepare for any possibility, they decided to wait completely outside the building, in an alley behind it. As he walked following Haren while just fiddling with his nape, Haren asked.

"Why are you being uncharacteristically mindful?"

"...What kind of expression is that."

"When you've acted boldly even after causing all sorts of incidents."

When he looked at him bewilderedly for expressing the word 'mindful' as if it were completely disconnected from him, an even stronger response came back. Just going by those words, wouldn't it make him someone who usually went around causing trouble shamelessly?

...Somehow he couldn't deny it.

*Hah,* he let out a short dry laugh but in the end just moved his lips a couple times.

"...No, well, I thought Noi might be from the slave market."

Though it was something he had guessed from the moment he first heard the reason for going to the Jerab Special District, after arriving here and seeing Noi's behavior, he became even more certain. Probably, no, almost certainly, it seemed he had been caught in a slave market connected to the gambling house.

Haren looked at him with strange eyes. Since there were too many clues from the previous situation to ask why he thought that, he slowly nodded as if it was sufficiently deducible.

"That's right, he grew up in a slave market when young."

"What? Not just briefly kidnapped but actually grew up there?"

"Yes, I heard he was born there. Mother brought him when she rescued him while he was working captured by managers during her raid on the slave market. It was spring when he was seven, so we've been together since then."

*If he was born in a slave market... had a fairy race member been kidnapped while pregnant and given birth in a cage, and though the owner had planned to raise and sell the child, they kept him after being surprised by his extraordinary memory?*

He had been curious how Noi and Haren's connection began, and this was the background. He instantly understood why Noi showed such special respect to Haren's mother and also followed Haren so diligently.

'She asked me to get along well with Sir Haren too.'

As he recalled Noi's words from long ago, Haren shrugged his shoulders.

"Actually, that's why I think Noi deliberately sent me out using you as an excuse."

"What? Why?"

"It's just a guess, but he probably has appearances he doesn't want to show."

Come to think of it, during their days at the gambling house, Noi had subtly avoided meeting Haren's eyes. Though they had entered together with the purpose of finding clues about the slave market, it was as if he didn't want to show him his familiarity with such places.

He had thought that since Noi had connections to the slave market, it would be better to have Haren by his side in the current situation of meeting with someone involved. But Haren seemed to have grasped another aspect he hadn't noticed.

Well, if that was the case...

"Then we can just wait comfortably outside."

He nodded with a somewhat lighter feeling. Since they had even taken care of lodging in buildings connected to the gambling house until now, coming outside felt very refreshing. He had also secretly wanted to look around the city. He had felt regretful entering the gambling house as soon as they arrived in the city, but now this opportunity had come.

Perhaps noticing his subtle interest in sightseeing, Haren narrowed his eyes. Was he going to point out that they hadn't come for such purposes and he should restrain himself? Just as he was composing his expression feeling preemptively guilty, Haren lightly shrugged his shoulders.

"This is my first time directly visiting this city too. I'd only heard about it until now..."

"...Really? Then shall we look around a bit? We need to scout the roads in case something happens too."

He quickly attached a plausible reason. Though their main activities would likely be at the gambling house or slave market building, wouldn't it be good to understand the city's roads in advance? This wasn't simple tourism but meaningful preliminary investigation.

Haren answered his assertion by tilting his head toward the main street, and he inwardly cheered. As they were leaving the alley, Haren covered his mouth with his hand, but he dismissed as imagination how the corners of his mouth seemed to rise slightly.

"Hmm, there really are many side streets not on the map we reviewed beforehand."

And fortunately, the usefulness of the tourism, no, preliminary investigation was quickly proven. Though everyone had briefly grasped the geography before coming to this city, there seemed to be quite a few alleys different from the records. With Haren carefully examining the streets beside him, he enthusiastically looked at the shops along the main road.

Strange foods could be seen through the glass windows. Especially a fruit covered in chocolate that looked like a type he had never seen before aroused his curiosity. Just as he was about to move quickly, Haren suddenly whirled his head.

Almost simultaneously, screams burst out from behind.

"What, could that be undead?"

"Undead in the street...!"

Again without him knowing, undead had suddenly popped out from his shadow. *Not even keyring undead, is this a joke?* Though at least only one was summoned, the accident happened when they were in the plaza, that is, a street full of people, so there were too many witnesses. The street instantly became chaotic.

"We need to hide for now."

Haren urgently grabbed his arm and moved. They immediately put to use the alleys they had examined on the way from the gambling house to the plaza.

"They went that way!"

"Catch them!"

Though normally people would flee in terror at seeing undead, the people here chased after him frantically. They had said there were many bounty hunters, but was every resident in the city in that profession? There was no need for flags to operate this diligently.

With feelings half indignant and half dejected, he followed where Haren led. *Whoosh whoosh*, his vision changed wildly. Though only one undead had appeared, that is, far fewer than the number of undead Isaph was known to control, the pursuit was persistent. He was out of breath.

"Huk, a dead end..."

Moreover, the end of the alley they had turned into following Haren was blocked. Just as he was sighing, Haren bent down and suddenly lifted him up, easily jumping over the wall. It was a moment of experiencing that if there was no path, they could fly.

As they were landing, voices of pursuers arriving behind the wall could be heard.

"Huk, heuk! Wh-what, I was sure they went this way?! Could they have crossed the wall?"

"Nonsense, how could they cross such a high wall. And on that side..."

A man with a gruff voice snorted.

"It's full of wild dogs, if they had crossed over it would have gotten noisy already."

...As the man said, the alley they had crossed over to in Haren's arms was indeed full of wild dogs. There were many large fierce dogs as if it was their habitat, but surprisingly the surroundings were quiet.

The reason was naturally because of Haren.

-*Huff huff.*

Until just after they crossed the wall, the wild dogs had bared their teeth in response to their presence. Though he had worried they might charge right after landing, when Haren actually set foot on the ground, they all became docile. They all lowered their bodies and even wagged their tails.

He confirmed the hero's buff of receiving God's love again like this. Even at the night market before, merchants had been extremely kind to Haren - *are all living beings in this land just favorable to him?* Even fierce wild dogs were moved before the hero.

Then he should be able to get down from Haren's arms now, but the problem was...

-*Grrrr*!

The wild dogs bared their teeth whenever they met his eyes. Then they would grow quiet when Haren looked around, and show their fangs again when he looked.

Perhaps having noticed this difference, Haren spoke in a very strange tone.

"The dogs seem to really hate you..."

"Animals have kind of, hated me since before."

In his past life too, all animals except black cats had hated him. They had fled in terror as if seeing an evil spirit, and it was the same here.

Though feeling wronged, he had no choice but to curl up in Haren's arms as if burrowing in. They couldn't let chaos spread beyond the wall.

### Chapter 117

When he buried his head in Haren's chest, Haren flinched briefly, but soon held him more tightly. Rather than moving in this position, it seemed better to stay quietly still in preparation for any possible commotion. As if trapped in his arms, he listened to the hunters' conversation from over there.

The hunter with the gruff voice let out a long "Ah-" sigh and spoke.

"If we could just catch that bastard, we could turn our lives around!"

"Could that one we saw be that Isaph? Though he summoned undead, it was just one, far fewer than the number they say he usually controls, isn't it?"

"Tsk, that's true, but all necromancers have been laying low lately, right? Yet amid that, he boldly summoned undead in the plaza, so he's not normal. High chance it's Isaph."

*Hey, why is that your reasoning?*

Though the man added evidence saying he was wearing a black robe too, it was bewildering that the form of the initial reasoning was 'person who commits abnormal acts = Isaph'. While he was silently bristling, the conversation continued.

The young hunter, probably estimated to be a junior, agreed with his senior's reasoning.

"Ah, I heard about that. Bounty hunters across the country see any necromancer and just throw black robes on them and report them to the Order. Thanks to that, they say the holy city's prisons are full of necromancers..."

"That's right. They say necromancers used to revere Isaph before, but now they curse him for causing them trouble? Really ridiculous guys."

It was a story of cases of fabrication by those tempted by the bounty running rampant. Since necromancy itself was forbidden in the Holy Empire, they received at least some reward money. So now even necromancers hated Isaph and rather hoped he would be caught quickly, even reporting directly themselves...

He had only just learned that they had revered Isaph in the first place, and though he wouldn't have been happy even if he had known beforehand, their attitude changing like flipping a palm was dumbfounding. Suddenly the thought struck him that now Isaph probably had no allies left in the empire.

"Be careful."

Just then Haren's voice rang in his ear. While focusing on the conversation, his tension had loosened and a wild dog tried to bite his lowered leg. Just before his foot could be bitten, Haren lifted him higher.

He almost cried out in surprise at both the wild dog's approach and Haren suddenly lifting him. After briefly losing his balance and struggling, he ended up tightly wrapping his arms around Haren's neck.

*Thump thump thump thump,* his heart beat wildly. Was it because he had almost been bitten by the wild dog, or because Haren had embraced and protected him just when he was thinking he had no allies at all? ...No, since he was the main culprit who had raised his infamy in the first place, this was a nonsensical thought.

Just as he was quickly shaking his head to discard the speculations in his mind, new conversation was heard from over there.

"But you know. I heard this by chance too... Is it true that Isaph used to stay in this city before? They say that's why everyone's gathered here."

*...What?*

"Plus wasn't his name not originally 'Isaph Dina', didn't he have a hidden middle name..."

"Ah, that? Nothing's certain. It's just a rumor that spread from speculation that since he suddenly went around using necromancy in the Holy Empire, he's likely from a destroyed kingdom. Also people who escape Jerab to operate in the empire proper usually change their names."

"There were some witness accounts of seeing a guy in a black robe wandering alone here before Isaph became famous like now? They said they thought he was crazy because he just walked around in the rain holding only a black cat..."

"I heard about it too, but Jerab's not short on crazy people. Well, seems the newly arrived hunters are talking about how he might return to his hometown since he's being chased hard now, hmm. Though it would be good if that's true... who knows."

The senior hunter answered in an indifferent tone. Suddenly he recalled hearing a similar story from the Isaph followers' gathering before too.

'He appeared suddenly one day and went around overturning the empire, and no one could find out anything about him...!'

While he was blankly recalling memories, the hunters' conversation concluded.

"Anyway, rumors of a necromancer suspected to be Isaph appearing have probably spread everywhere by now, so let's catch him before others get him."

"Yes! I'll tell the others to prepare thoroughly too!"

Though it wasn't a positive conclusion at all, at least their presence retreating was welcome. Only after their footsteps had receded far down the alley did Haren move too.

Though he couldn't be put down right away since the wild dogs followed for a while, he was able to touch the ground before 10 minutes had passed. *Phew*, he sighed while arranging his clothes. Since the incident had really occurred because of him, he felt needlessly embarrassed.

"...It would be better to just wait quietly somewhere with no people."

He had almost caused big trouble by going out to the plaza. As he spoke awkwardly, Haren quietly looked at him. As if more interested in something else than the roundabout apology he was offering, he stared fixedly at his face before asking.

"Did you really come from another country?"

"...Suddenly, why that?"

"Hearing those rumors just now made me curious too. You actually often looked at the empire's streets unfamiliarly, and reacted like everything was new even with common festival foods..."

It seemed his actions until now had acted as some kind of clues to the perceptive Haren. He became troubled at Haren's gaze speculating that he wasn't born in the Holy Empire. The reason he had found all the empire's scenery unfamiliar was because he was someone from a completely different dimension who had possessed this body...

He didn't know what answer to give. Though combining the story heard from the Isaph followers' gathering and the bounty hunters' words just now suggested high probability of being from another country, wasn't Haren's current speculation based on 'his' actions?

Would it be okay to just agree with the speculation? But then he would ask which country he came from, and what should he answer then? What if he even asked about his real name.

After moving his lips several times, he finally avoided Haren's gaze.

"...I don't know either."

"Hm? How can 'I don't know' be an answer to this question?"

Though Haren looked at him bewilderedly, there was nothing he could do. Normally at times like this the status window should tell him, but without the NPC the status window wouldn't appear. He turned his head away, feeling needlessly uncomfortable.

Somehow his chest felt suddenly stifled.

Not being able to give Haren any answers without the status window made his mood plummet strangely. Why? It felt like he was becoming depressed specifically because he couldn't tell him about 'himself'. Though he had acted well pretending to be Isaph until now, and even considered character traits in his reactions, it was ridiculous that he was like this now.

"What does it matter whether I'm born in the empire or came from another country? I'm here now anyway."

"...Am I not allowed to ask?"

"You never showed interest until now, why needlessly now."

His voice grew sharper with each word. Though his mind shouted not to react so sensitively, that acting more sensitive would only make him look stranger, his mouth escaped its owner's control. He even ended up sneering harshly at the end, making Haren look at him with strange eyes.

"Then if I say I'm interested now, would you answer?"

"...No. Just keep not being interested."

Heavy silence fell at his words drawing a line. Why had he ended up in this situation when it really shouldn't have come to this? He just wanted to avoid the instantly uncomfortable atmosphere. He had absolutely no immunity to this kind of conflict.

After he turned and took a few steps away like that, Haren, who had stayed quietly behind without following, spoke softly.

"...You know too much about me, but I still don't know much about you. That's why I asked."

Indeed, Haren had rarely asked him personal questions. Compared to mostly only asking about abilities, he knew several pieces of information about Haren, and even parts he would never reveal to others.

The hero's half-working recovery ability, his distrust toward God, and he had even directly looked into his past through dreams. He would be the only one who had treated him and woken him from nightmares.

He stopped abruptly and turned to look at Haren. The blue eyes that met his gaze directly somehow even looked anxious, but...

"...It's not like I learned those things because I wanted to know."

He just blurted out what came to mind following the thought that he needed to cut off interest, but after speaking he was surprised himself at how cold the response was. He bit his lower lip hard.

The alley's silence grew even heavier, and he moved his feet as if fleeing.

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A little while later.

After receiving contact from their companions, they reunited at the lodgings. The three were feeling proud saying they had safely finished meeting with the gambling house director, but fell silent seeing him and Haren enter the room.

Mela approached him separately and quietly asked.

"Why did you fight again."

"...'Again'? We didn't fight."

"You did fight."

"I said we didn't."

### Chapter 118

He looked at Mela while letting out a bewildered sigh. However, meeting her knowing gaze somehow made him feel like a tremendous troublemaker, so he had to look away first.

Being able to convey the message 'make up' with just a look was also a skill. It was even in an imperious style. *No, and if we really had fought, you should take your commander's side.*

"I'm the same as usual. The problem is just your commander emanating cold air."

"I know that's because of you."

"It's prejudiced to assume that when two people go out, one side's problem definitely originates from the other side."

"You were playing together just yesterday, why."

"We never played together? He just made fun of me for not having talent in making money...!"

At some point he got caught up in Mela's way of speaking and answered continuously before finally covering his face with both hands. Now even Kalterik approached and spoke.

"The streets are in chaos, did you summon undead outside too? So the Commander got angry about that, and that's what you fought about?!"

"Why do you think we fought too..."

Kalterik's face was very confident, believing in his own deduction. Indeed, in less than an hour the city was now buzzing with rumors that 'Isaph had appeared'. Every alley was crowded with bounty hunters and guards, and the commotion could be seen even through the lodging's windows.

So Kalterik saw conflict arising because he had caused a disturbance, and Mela tried to start a proper discussion saying that reason alone seemed insufficient.

No, the premise of the expression 'fought' was wrong to begin with. For that to apply, they would have had to be close before, which they weren't. Just as he was about to voice this thought, he swallowed it, feeling it would really ignite the discussion.

"...Fine. I should have stayed quietly in the alley but needlessly went to the plaza. Undead were summoned there causing a commotion. It was my fault."

So he just agreed with Kalterik's deduction. Wasn't that the starting point anyway? Unable to properly control his ability yet heading to the plaza caused trouble, and while being chased by bounty hunters he had heard rumors about Isaph. If he had just waited quietly in a corner, such things wouldn't have happened.

As time passed, he strongly felt he had needlessly overreacted. He could have just avoided Haren's questions moderately. Say he would tell him later, or spout nonsense about it being a secret.

Yet in that moment he had grown strangely sensitive and shown his teeth. Perhaps his anger at the NPC who had run away leaving the player, frustrated at being unable to give any answers without the status window, had been deflected toward Haren.

'I still don't know much about you.'

No, perhaps because his words had sounded like wanting to know 'him'. But maybe he had disliked that he could only tell information about Isaph. It was a truly bewildering emotion. After all, he was just a player progressing through the game possessing Isaph.

A being who might leave when this game ends.

As he pressed his brow hard, tired from dwelling on that time, Kalterik became flustered. As if he hadn't expected him to answer so readily, he moved his lips several times before speaking.

"W-w-well, though you did wrong you don't need to be so mindful..."

"...I wasn't being mindful."

"Sh-should I tell the Commander you're reflecting? Well, instead of apologizing..."

"What are you saying."

"The Commander is merciful and doesn't dislike people for making one mistake. So you don't need to be so discouraged..."

A dry laugh escaped at the rambling words. The content was absurd but on the other hand it was fascinating that Kalterik would say such things to him. Wasn't he the one who had shouted 'of course' when asked if he hated Isaph before?

"Never mind. What does it matter whether he hates me or not."

He answered listlessly while turning his gaze away. Though his mood became strange suddenly recalling how Haren had told him he didn't hate him, he shook his head hard to dismiss the thoughts.

Actually, he was just puzzled now. Though his attitude in the alley hadn't been good, he hadn't known Haren's mood would sink this much. Rather than him, he had seemed more troubled, and it felt somewhat different from his previous displeasure or discomfort.

"..."

Glancing at Haren's very dark face, he touched his nape with complicated feelings.

*Clap clap*-

Just then Noi clapped his hands in the living room. He had briefly left his seat earlier to respond to a gambling house staff member who had visited the room. Noi waved a paper received from the staff member.

"I got an invitation."

The silver ticket had a very simple design. It only had a geometric pattern engraved in the center with a signature below, and since he called it an 'invitation', it was likely the slave market owner's signature.

Also when Noi opened another box received from the staff member, five pure white masks were visible. They were the type covering from forehead to nose, and the staff member had emphasized that wearing masks was mandatory for entry.

"So there really is a slave market..."

The suspicious ticket and masks were practically proof of the slave market's existence. Noi nodded and told them about his meeting with the Director in the VVIP room.

At first the Director had denied any connection between the slave market and gambling house, he said. Just that they had a place they contacted to 'handle' customers who had become troublesome from staying too long at the gambling house, that is, those who caused riots after losing all their assets and even going into debt.

"Though normally such mentally unstable people wouldn't seem to sell well due to low demand, anyway they said there was a place they sent people to. Since they claimed it was officially a shop selling foreign goods, I asked for an introduction, and though they kept denying until then, as soon as I held out the jewel they quickly got an invitation."

Noi's tone was quite cynical. He had received the invitation and masks only after holding something out to the staff member just now, apparently that had been a jewel. Kalterik spoke in a concerned tone.

"It was a very precious jewel, is that okay?"

"What's precious about jewels? Though I ended up using emergency funds since that person's mouth was heavier than expected, it was obvious they were pretending not to know expecting such payment."

Noi shrugged his shoulders. Though he had won a lot of money at the gambling house, considering that winning continuously could raise suspicion, he had deliberately taken big losses a few times. Then he had maintained his funds by recovering afterwards, but it seemed he had been completely fleeced in the final stage.

Still, as if it was a good deal, Noi touched the silver ticket.

"As it happens, they said the 'market' opens tonight. Since the next one is a month later, it's really fortunate we didn't miss this opportunity."

Though they wouldn't be able to scout the interior in advance since the invitation only allowed entry at opening time, Noi made plans as if familiar with the place's circumstances.

"There will definitely be a 'ledger' the owner manages. A transaction record documenting who bought what. Such people always prepare ways to protect their lives. So finding and obtaining the ledger is the first goal, and second is..."

"Should we free the slaves bound to the market?"

*Thud*, when he spoke Noi looked at him. He blinked with wide eyes as if not expecting him to bring up such a thing first.

Actually, from the moment he heard they were heading to the slave market, he had expected they would free the slaves too. Though it might require as much effort as finding clues about the traitors, no, perhaps even more, wasn't it an obvious flow in episodes with this kind of theme? It was a kind of underworld cleanup.

Looking around just then, Kalterik was nodding too. Though he had denied the slave market's existence all along, he seemed to think they should naturally help the slaves if it really existed. Mela appeared to feel the same way, and Haren... though he didn't look at him, would probably have a similar opinion anyway.

"..."

Noi's lime-green eyes wavered. As if everyone's stance on rescuing the slaves too struck him as novel, he bit his lower lip hard before slowly nodding.

"...Yes. If possible, it would be good if we could free all the slaves too."

### Chapter 119

"What do you mean 'if'? We have to make it possible no matter what!"

"Kalterik is right."

"...Since the previous Holy Knight Commander abolished slave markets in Solares, we should carry on that will."

Haren belatedly added his opinion. It was words encouraging his subordinates to draw their swords, and naturally the vice commanders responded resoundingly. Noi's eyes wavered, growing more tearful.

He watched the four from a step away. Though it was a situation of just five people infiltrating an unexamined building, that is, a space with numerous enemies, it didn't feel dangerous at all and he felt no worry. Because those knights couldn't possibly lose.

Rather, what he needed to pay attention to was his own condition. If undead were summoned even by mistake, everything would be ruined. Since he wouldn't be fighting there anyway, wouldn't it be best to just stay quietly tucked away in a corner?

Thinking his rest was preparation, he went into the room alone.

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The Special District's commotion grew bigger than expected.

"'That' 20,000 gold, no, Isaph is here?!"

"Heya, look at all the bounty hunters rushing in to catch him first."

"The guards are everywhere too? Though they never cared about city security before, tsk tsk. Whether it's to achieve merit or if they're tempted by the bounty too..."

Though the night was deep, the streets' fervor showed no signs of dying down. Now he was being called '20,000 gold' rather than the criminal Isaph, and fights often broke out as bounty hunters checked each other saying they would catch the 20,000 gold first. They would rush at any black robe seen in the streets.

Moreover, the guards were equipped with special magical tools. Something like electric ropes would fly out swoosh and instantly subdue, shock, and even knock out the target. He got goosebumps seeing them arrest innocent people with those magical tools. The guards felt even more brutal than the bounty hunters.

Seeing this scene, Noi's face grew serious. Then saying they should prevent unnecessary commotion on the way to the slave market, he requested that he wear a different colored robe.

"I won't ask you to take off the black robe. Could you just wear a bright one over it?"

What, why do you see my identity as the black robe?

Though bewildered, he put on a gold robe over his existing clothes. It absolutely wasn't stubbornness but because he was cold. Really. It was a new robe obtained by requesting it from the lodging staff, but it was very splendid as if considering the typical taste of a wealthy young master, making him uncomfortable.

*Swoooosh*-

Rain was falling in the city. Looking sourly at the fervor for the 20,000 gold that wouldn't cool even in the downpour, they headed to the slave market.

The place the gambling house Director had told them about was a vast two-story building.

Though buildings in the Jerab Special District generally had unique appearances, this one particularly caught the eye looking like a brilliant exhibition hall. Though they outwardly claimed to be a shop selling foreign goods, it showed surprising boldness for an illegal market selling slaves.

"Hmm. Though I heard from him about finding new customers, you really came?"

When they held out their tickets at the entrance, a man presumably the manager came out. The burly man wore thick rings on every finger that glinted even in the gloomy weather.

Among people he had seen until now, Kalterik had been the biggest, but this manager was similar in size. The difference was that while Kalterik was full of muscle, the manager was fat. As he kept touching his round chin while looking Noi up and down, Kalterik stepped forward.

"Show respect to the young master!"

Currently the group had the concept of four guards serving a young noble master. So Kalterik was faithful to his role, and at this the manager raised both hands and smiled. His voice belatedly bowing and scraping sounded quite crafty.

"Oh my, I had no intention of insulting the young master. It's just that young customers rarely come to places like this. Especially since I heard you spoke as if very familiar with this place, I couldn't help being curious."

"Don't show needless interest! How dare you be curious about someone who—"

"...Enough, how long do you plan to keep us outside?"

Young master Noi spoke, stopping Kalterik who was about to get too immersed with a hand gesture. Though his voice was usually clear and bright, when he controlled his tone it rang quite elegantly.

The manager opened his eyes round as if surprised.

"Ah, yes yes! I'll escort you inside. Since this is your first visit, I'd like to guide you to the trading hall personally, how would that be?"

It was an unexpected windfall. They needed to understand the building's interior anyway, so the manager volunteering was welcome. Noi responded with a chin gesture and the manager smiled brightly. His attitude was more friendly than expected - had he perhaps heard news of a 'wealthy young master' from the gambling house owner?

The inside of the building was far more splendid than the outside. No, luxurious would be the right expression. The corridors were filled with all sorts of antiques and paintings displayed like an art museum.

The trading hall at the end of the first floor was decorated like a banquet hall, and even the clothes worn by the masked guests glinted considerably. Though they mostly wore robes, they were still covered in elaborate patterns or dangling jewels as if wanting to show off wealth.

They look like they're enjoying a masquerade ball while coming to buy slaves. As he was bewildered, the manager struck up conversation.

"What kind of goods are you looking for, young master?"

"...Why do you ask?"

"Oh my, I want to apologize for my earlier rudeness! I want to set aside items matching your taste."

Since it was a slave market, people would naturally be traded, but calling them 'goods' felt newly unsettling. The manager spoke while rubbing his hands together.

"Haha, actually since this is quite a delicate business, we don't usually accept sudden visit requests. But recently some spots opened up... Ah, no! Just today by chance one spot opened up! So thinking it must have been fate to receive the young master, that's why I asked."

An awkward laugh followed. The slave market having fewer customers recently - could it be traitors being cautious after news of the eastern Encroachment Zone's collapse spreading? Noi exchanged quick glances with the holy knights before answering.

"Well, I want to see the condition of the goods before choosing."

"A most reasonable statement. It's wise to purchase after careful consideration! You definitely won't be disappointed."

As the manager laughed confidently with a *ho-ho*, Noi's head turned to the side. *Bang* *clatter*- a small noise came from a temporary warehouse connected to the building.

"What kind of space is that?"

Though it was a very faint sound, Noi's ears seemed to have caught it sharply. At his question, the manager went "Ah" and shrugged his shoulders.

"It's a warehouse used by staff, haha, not a place the young master should be interested in."

*Must be interested*.

"Please absolutely do not go near there!"

*Must definitely go there.*

The manager's words automatically translated in his head. Though it was natural for a shabby warehouse connected to this brilliant building to look suspicious, he hadn't known the manager would so eagerly plant flags like this.

Just as he was expressing regret inwardly, a secretary approached the manager and whispered something.

"Oh my, I forgot I had an urgent matter. Would you enter the trading hall first? It's just time to begin anyway."

Noi in his chic young master concept answered with a nod. And watching the manager's back as he quickly headed somewhere with the secretary, he exchanged glances with his companions. Though not speaking aloud, everyone had the same thought.

They naturally followed the manager.

The second floor seemed to be staff-only space as no masked guests were visible here. Finding the Director's office among the complexly arranged rooms was quick. After watching the manager come out from there and confirming no one was inside, they entered.

"Haha! This is really easy?!"

Kalterik, who had successfully entered the Director's office, shouted proudly. For the max stealth and search team, getting here while avoiding the corridor guards wasn't even close to being difficult.

The Director's office was vast and splendid. It was tiresome to even explain anymore - just every space in this building was decorated as splendid1, splendid2, splendid3... Though it should be a personal room, the huge chandelier hanging from the ceiling sparkled dazzlingly to the point of being sickening.

"The ledger."

While they looked around the room, Noi quickly approached the desk. As if the manager had just been examining it, a file was wide open, and there indeed were transaction records attached in abundance just as Noi had predicted.

"Though most are aliases, we should be able to track them based on these transaction dates. We should take it as evidence."

Noi's tone was excited. He seemed thrilled at smoothly infiltrating the Director's office and immediately obtaining clues, and the other companions felt the same. Kalterik clicked his tongue while looking at the transaction records.

He stood at the doorway blankly watching them before slowly pointing beside him.

"Then, are all these ledgers too?"

The bookshelf was also full of files exactly like the one Noi was holding. The bookshelf was extremely huge and seemed to hold well over a thousand files. Considering each file had about a hundred transaction records attached, *this was*...

Haren murmured in a coldly sunken voice.

"...It seems this was happening on a far larger scale than expected."

### Chapter 120

This level of transactions was absolutely beyond what an individual could commit. Going beyond even the level of several people conspiring together, there was likely someone backing it. And from a very high position at that.

Noi's eyes wavered. As if his clever mind had instantly finished calculating, he hurriedly covered his mouth, barely swallowing a scream.

The mountain of corpses in the eastern Encroachment Zone had been about a thousand bodies.

Though they had thought it was a mountain created by accumulating sacrifices offered multiple times by traitors, perhaps that mountain had been created in just one time. Kalterik and Mela's faces twisted horribly.

Though he too was shocked, on the other hand he became curious about how they had managed to trade so many people. Wouldn't this many be difficult to manage?

"Ugh! There's a barrier on the bookshelf!"

Kalterik groaned as he reached for the bookshelf. Crackle- sparks flew, blocking access. Perhaps one of the many rings the manager wore was the key.

But this group was specialized even in breaking through barriers. Following Haren's direction, when Mela slashed down with her sword swoosh, the barrier split creating a gap. Now looking at it, it seemed the sword strike mixing holy power and demonic energy temporarily confused the barrier system causing it to malfunction.

However, since it was a layered barrier, they couldn't widen the gap further. As they slowly took out ledgers one by one, Noi fidgeted with both hands unsteadily before speaking.

"...Could we perhaps check the warehouse first?"

What he carefully showed was a small key labeled [Warehouse] that he said he had found under the ledger. It was obvious what kind of key it would be used for.

"The sound from the warehouse is bothering me..."

Since they had said the market would open soon, Noi seemed anxious that those trapped in the warehouse would be sold. Though he seemed worried that wanting to free the slaves before securing all the ledgers might seem hasty, Kalterik readily answered.

"Of course that's fine! Actually examining and analyzing documents doesn't suit my temperament at all, so I'd rather just destroy everything!"

"...We can get clues from the hostages too."

Mela nodded too. Actually, at their current slow speed of removing ledgers, it would take at least three or four hours. Perhaps it would be better to free the slaves first and then obtain additional ledgers taking advantage of the ensuing chaos.

However, he felt a strange uneasiness. Being anxious when things seemed to flow too easily was a habit of players tackling hard mode games. Though they had fought monsters like Diums and demons until now, would dealing with humans really be easier?

"..."

While looking around the room worrying, his eyes met Haren's directly. He too seemed to have been examining the space suspiciously, but as soon as their gazes met in the air, both their faces hardened. All previous thoughts cut off as he quickly turned his head away first.

Afterwards, his companions roughly organized the Director's office and headed to the warehouse together while checking their surroundings. Going out the building's back door, there was another door leading into the warehouse.

*Pitter-patter,* breaking through the heavily pouring rain, he muttered.

"I thought the warehouse would be underground..."

"Actually, I found that strange too."

Noi agreed with his muttering. It was odd enough that the slave market was a two-story building, but it was strange that even the space holding slaves existed above ground.

"Usually slaves are confined underground to prevent escape, or occasionally they're imprisoned at the top of very tall buildings when kept above ground. But that warehouse just stands alone, and the building itself doesn't look very sturdy, and there aren't even guards at the entrance. Hmm, perhaps special shackles were used? Like control devices attached to ankles or heads."

Noi muttered that perhaps similar magic to the bookshelf's barrier had been used on the warehouse too. His smoothly continuing explanations of slave management methods made even him, just listening, feel uncomfortable. He seemed to have been examining the surveillance around the warehouse since first discovering it.

And these questions were resolved the moment they entered the warehouse.

"Wh-what is this..."

Kalterik stumbled over his words. His face, which had been happy saying things were going well until they opened the door with the key from the Director's office, turned pale white.

Hundreds of people were in the vast warehouse.

But there were no shackles binding their bodies, no gags. Yet the people made no sound and stood without moving. That is... they all stood stiffly with blank faces, like dolls in a laboratory. They were even all neatly dressed.

The eyes of the people standing in neat rows and columns were all clouded. They seemed completely unaware that anyone had entered. Though they were breathing, they looked impossible to consider alive.

And he had seen a similar scene in the previous Encroachment Zone. The mountain of corpses piled in the corner of the snow mountain cave. The thousand corpses had all lain as if sleeping, looking clean as if having purified themselves.

*Could it be that they were in this state from the beginning when distributed?*

The eerily quiet space despite hundreds of people being present gave him goosebumps. His companions were too shocked to say anything. Just as an uncanny valley-like eeriness began rising, Haren pointed somewhere.

"Someone over there is awake."

Though it was a very small movement, his eyes had caught it. Noi immediately ran over there to check. The young boy weakly wiggling his fingertips looked similar in size to Noi.

"Are you somewhat conscious?!"

"Urk, uweeek..."

When Noi carefully wrapped his shoulders, the boy suddenly vomited something up. Something completely crushed that seemed to have been forcibly stuffed in his mouth and swallowed poured out. Noi's eyes widened seeing it drop plop onto the floor.

Though he thought he was just surprised by the situation, then Noi collapsed heavily. When Kalterik and Mela approached Noi who was trembling all over asking if he was okay, he pointed at the light green flower the boy had vomited while speaking as if being strangled.

"Th-this is a flower that only the fairy race can bloom."

"What?"

"Anesia. Also called fairy flower, it emits energy that calms others but becomes dangerous if consumed raw. If you swallow concentrated fairy energy at once... you become blank like that."

Everyone's gaze turned to the people standing like dolls. Kalterik ground out a curse and Mela sighed in shock. Earlier they had wondered how so many hostages were managed when seeing the thick ledgers, and this was how.

And Haren deduced an even more horrible truth from this story.

"To feed flowers to this many people, perhaps there are fairy race members here too..."

"...Yes, they must be imprisoned somewhere. Anesia is a flower that must be bloomed by offering life force, and to produce hundreds or thousands of them..."

At some point Noi had started crying. Large teardrops fell plop from his eyes. He had worried they might see fairy race members being traded at the slave market, but reality was grotesque in a way that exceeded that.

Here, fairy race members were not trade goods but captured like drug cultivation workers.

"Pl-please save me... Don't want to, lose consciousness, again..."

The boy sobbed. Perhaps the noise from the warehouse earlier had occurred in the process of trying to feed fairy flowers again to the boy who had accidentally awakened. The boy pleaded as if afraid of the feeling of his consciousness flying away flickeringly, and Kalterik urgently asked Noi.

"Is-is there an antidote method? We need to wake those people up."

"There isn't. Because Anesia isn't a poison. We can only hope they naturally wake up as time passes, and though healing potions would help, even those won't have immediate effect."

Noi shook his head while panting. His state of endlessly shedding tears looked quite unstable. Meanwhile Haren and Mela quickly examined the space. They identified a point almost simultaneously, and Mela spoke while tapping the floor with her toe.

"The floor is strange only here. Perhaps it could be a door leading underground."

It was now taken for granted that fairy race members would be imprisoned in the slave market too. Since they hadn't found any suspicious spaces in the splendid two-story main building, perhaps this entire warehouse was likely a prison.

### Chapter 121

Noi staggered to his feet. Though his face was pained by the horrible reality, he tried to gather his wits and form the next plan.

"Then, now..."

But before he could even calm his panting, *bang!* The iron door opened roughly. Also *kurung-* with a sound like lightning striking, a transparent wall fell from the ceiling too, confining the slaves. It was like a prison wall that fell separating their team from them.

"Freeze─ right─ there─"

The person entering the warehouse while stretching out word endings as if singing was the manager who had guided us. Despite outside people being in the warehouse, he showed no sign of surprise. Rather, all that appeared on his face was mockery.

"My my. I thought 'surely not' since you approached so textbook-like, but to think it was true. Though it was strange from how young you were... tsk tsk. Those intoxicated by worthless justice always cause such troublesome acts."

Staff members poured in behind the manager shaking his head. From his words and actions, he could understand the cause of the strange uneasiness he had felt since entering the Director's office.

*Ah.* He should have found it suspicious that someone who thoroughly maintained security with barrier magic around the bookshelf had blatantly left a ledger open on the table and even the warehouse key underneath. The manager had suspected the young master's visit from the start and deliberately laid bait.

Noi's eyes widened before he pulled out the ledger from his chest.

"I'll report this to the guards! The empire strictly forbids slave markets-!"

"Haha, you think the guards will come here if you report it?"

However, Noi's bold cry was no threat to the manager at all. He giggled as if hearing something very amusing, even cutting off his words.

"No one comes to this building. Didn't you notice that much? Given what you did at the gambling house, I don't think you're such an innocent young master who doesn't know the ways of the world."

The numerous ledgers found in the Director's office proved the number of transactions made here, and at that scale, even the guards might have already identified this building's true nature. No matter how docile the slaves were made like dolls by feeding them fairy flowers, they would have to guess with so many people coming and going here.

But it had never been stopped, and the building had even grown more and more splendid...

The manager sighed as if pitying Noi's trembling reaction.

"Though I don't know which family's young master you are, you'd better wake up from your dream. Hmm? Even if you're from a powerful family in the east, no, from any family, this place won't fall. There are many places in the world where your justice doesn't work."

His tone as if soothing a child was clear mockery. Did he look down on Noi thinking he was really a young master, or was it confidence that it didn't matter who stepped forward?

Finally the manager chuckled.

"Talk of reporting is funny too. Shouldn't you first think about whether you can leave here?"

As his vile laughter fell, whoosh light burst from Noi's pocket. The invitation was in there. The silver ticket with strange patterns engraved that had been needed to enter this building. Even that seemed to have been the manager's safety device.

Finally, as the light bursting from the invitation transformed into a net about to fall on Noi.

*Wujijijik!*

*Kwagwagwang!*

His vision suddenly flipped over. His companions had reflexively gathered near Noi to protect him, currently the most unstable, when the manager entered the warehouse. Though he alone had been several steps away, everyone including him suddenly flew.

As soon as he realized Noi was caught in a trap, he had used his ability to at least prevent his companions from being caught. Seeds in his chest instantly grew into thick tree trunks that even broke through the warehouse wall.

And beside the warehouse was the trading hall.

"Uh, uwaak!"

"What!"

The guests gathered in the trading hall screamed. It was shocking enough to have tree trunks suddenly pouring in as the wall broke.

*Bang clatter-* he looked around with difficulty while rolling on the floor. The holy knights had landed safely over there and immediately looked at Noi after checking each other. He was tightly bound by silver ropes.

Noi's intention was clear. He had deliberately broken the wall to cause chaos, using the fact that the warehouse and trading hall were connected. Since all the trading hall's customers wore masks and robes to hide their identities, his purpose was to hide his companions in this confusion.

The manager gaped and sighed.

"What's with these tree trunks out of nowhere..."

"Si-sir Director! Th-that, that fairy!"

"What? Did a fairy race member come for revenge for their kind?!"

"No, I've seen that fairy at the temple!"

The staff member spoke incoherently. Though Noi was now stuck in place bound by ropes, his mask and hood had come off in the wind when the trap activated. As if recognizing the revealed face, the staff member kept pointing at him with his index finger.

"That is, that, he's the hero's aide!"

The hero's aide seemed as widely known as the hero himself. Not only had they been together since childhood but were bound by a special connection, and he was also one of the few fairy race members in this era.

The space stirred. Especially the guests gathered in the trading hall were greatly flustered, and Noi didn't miss this opening as he shouted. If his identity was revealed anyway, he seemed to intend to make full use of it.

"I remember everything in the ledger. And the people who came here too! Voice, gait, even small behavioral habits, I remember them all! The Order will step forward to investigate this matter!"

His genius memory would be part of why Noi was famous. So he targeted that aspect, and also created a solemn atmosphere of stepping forward as a member of the Order, since slave trading was something the previous Holy Knight Commander had personally forbidden in the Holy Empire.

And as it happened, him being fairy race also lent legitimacy to infiltrating the slave market.

"What, didn't they say the aide resigned after the hero went missing?"

"Did he come all the way here while wandering after leaving the holy city? Maybe the fairies underground sent a distress signal without us knowing..."

The manager and staff whispered. Fortunately suspicion didn't spread as they seemed to view the four companions with Noi as just guards temporarily hired by the aide. They just looked very troubled that the noble young master they had looked down on turned out to be the hero's aide.

Finally the manager cried "Ack!" while nervously ruffling his hair.

"Could he have hidden magical tools? Has this place's location already been exposed?"

"I heard that aide is close with the First Imperial Princess too..."

"What?!"

The manager startled at the staff member's careful words. Indeed, no matter how strong their backing, perhaps they couldn't act bold before imperial blood.

"Close with that crazy princess?! Wow, this is insane."

*Ah,* that was the reason.

While feeling bewildered yet inwardly agreeing, the space's chaos steadily grew. Some people tried to flee the trading hall, some froze tucked in corners afraid Noi might remember their behavioral traits, and some shouted at the manager asking what he would do.

Amid various commotions, the manager finally clasped his hands in front of Noi and spoke.

"Ah, haha. Hahaha. Honorable aide? You came to save your kind underground, right? We'll hand over all the fairies, so couldn't you just let us go...? We'll never do this again."

His actions of even bowing deeply at the waist looked quite desperate. Though at first his intention to quietly dispose of a young master here had been clearly felt, now his attitude was completely different.

The hero's connections seemed to hold more power than he had thought. Even the slave market staff seemed careful when referring to the 'hero' - perhaps they too respected at least the hero? Like how even the bandits encountered in the desert had believed in the hero.

Though he had been very flustered when Noi's identity was revealed, he hadn't known things would resolve this way. Even without Haren stepping forward, his prestige had exerted such power. He could see Kalterik and Mela looking proud over there.

### Chapter 122

Noi slowly nodded.

"In exchange, free those people who ate the fairy flowers too."

"Oh my, of course!"

The manager kept nodding as if it was a most reasonable request. He even said he would remove the transparent wall confining the hostages in the warehouse as soon as they left, and since the aide had worked with the hero in the past, it was natural he would pursue justice - did this guy even know what he was saying? Was he just spewing flattery however it came out?

The manager shouted to his staff.

"Hey, quickly gather the ledgers and valuables! Prepare to leave!"

His attitude had flipped like a palm, though just minutes ago he had boasted that this place would never fall. The staff followed his orders while whispering.

"But weren't there guards who came with that aide...?"

"Three or four of them. What could they do with just that many? And seeing how they haven't stepped forward until now, seems they've backed off in surprise? If needed we can just subdue them and run."

The staff currently numbered fifty, and there were also guards accompanying the trading hall's guests. All together they would be nearly a hundred. So they seemed to think they couldn't be handled by just four people, but...

Haren, Kalterik, and Mela were already quietly exchanging glances. Kalterik would stay here to assist Noi in rescuing the slaves and fairies underground, while Mela and Haren would go outside to deal with the manager and take the ledgers. Though they would have to face about a hundred people between the two of them, it wouldn't be difficult for them at all.

Before entering this building, the holy knights had already grasped the surrounding geography. So they just needed to take advantage of the opening when the manager and staff tried to escape. Not only was this place inappropriate for a melee right now, but the slaves were also held hostage over there.

Just as he thought things were resolving quite smoothly, a completely unexpected problem arose.

"Si-sir Director! The road is blocked!"

"People are gathering here...?"

"What? But guards don't even come to this district?"

The staff who were just preparing to leave reported the outside situation in surprise, and the manager was bewildered. As he tilted his head in confusion wondering who would come here, he sighed at the following report.

"They seem to be bounty hunters. They rushed over thinking 'that 20,000 gold' might be here because of the loud noise earlier!"

"There's talk of seeing undead appear in the sky over here...!"

"What nonsense is that!"

The manager was shocked, but he could only flinch and look outside. Could undead have popped out when he was thrown flying by Noi's tree trunks earlier? Though he had been careful to prevent undead from being summoned inside the building the whole time, had they come out outside because of that?

*Really*, thinking back, he vaguely recalled seeing undead briefly when flying toward the trading hall. Just one had popped out in the air for a moment before quickly disappearing, but it seemed to have been spotted by the hyenas searching for him outside.

Ah, what was this, not even a character effect but a joke.

Meanwhile, the shouts calling for the 20,000 gold grew louder outside. It meant the bounty hunters were getting closer and even guard whistles mixed in as they seemed to be running over too. Though they turned a blind eye to the slave market, they chased after Isaph.

Finally the manager clicked his tongue and took something out from his chest.

"Sigh, can't be helped. Since the most important documents are elsewhere anyway, we'll have to give up the ledgers and just run. Haah, my precious antiques..."

What he held while sniffling regretfully was a rolled-up paper. *A scroll?* Though he wondered, he heard Kalterik, who was closest to him, sigh. He was genuinely shocked.

"A teleport scroll...? Even one for multiple people?"

Since magic was a rare ability in the empire, and even warps crossing the continent were used restrictively, personal teleports would be difficult too. Yet now that tool, even one for multiple people, had come from the manager.

When the manager explained "Invitation holders will move too," Kalterik's face hardened. Though they had planned to take advantage of the opening when they fled outside, if they escaped through magic they couldn't be caught. Noi's eyes widened as he urgently shouted.

"You have to free the slaves and fairy race before leaving...!"

"Ah, about that."

The manager turned back with an "Ah." With a very kind and fresh smile as if he would really open the way right away, he suddenly clapped his hands. Along with the cheerful clapping sound, his ring flashed and...

*Whoosh!*

Fire rose in the warehouse. It was a huge blaze that seemed it would burn the entire warehouse including the space confining the hostages, and flames also rose from the Director's office on the second floor of the main building. It seemed he intended to destroy all evidence before leaving. All the numerous rings he wore appeared to be magical tools.

Before the shocked Noi, the manager shrugged his shoulders.

"I hesitated to touch the aide because I respect the hero sooo much, but it seems our aide has come to know too many things."

"Ah, no! The fairy race members are trapped underground...!"

"Yes yes, so how about going together? At least leave with your kind!"

It was absurd nonsense. But the manager spread both arms wide with a distinctly dramatic attitude as if this was sincere consideration.

"The fairy race members were mostly drained of life force and about time to dispose of anyway, and well, though the slaves are a bit of a waste, it can't be helped..."

He realized the regrettable truth from that attitude. The manager had never intended to free the slaves and fairies from the start. Since they might leak information, he had deliberately acted subservient to Noi to create an 'opening' to eliminate them all here. He would have set fire to the warehouse as soon as they went outside.

And from how he was now subtly scanning the trading hall, he could feel him being wary of the companions who had been Noi's guards. Perhaps guessing that guards hired by the hero's aide wouldn't be ordinary, he had deliberately caused this commotion. The guards would all have their feet tied trying to save Noi.

*Aaaak-* faint screams were heard from below the warehouse. The fairy race members screamed as flames seemed to rise from underground too, and though Noi thrashed wildly in shock, the ropes binding him didn't budge at all.

Kalterik ground out a curse while gripping his robe's hood.

"I should just step forward too...!"

He seemed to think he should step forward too now that Noi's identity was exposed. His face was completely twisted as if the fire rising in the building had triggered his trauma too. He let out a short breath.

"...No, you're useless."

"What?!"

Whether Kalterik bristled or not, he stepped forward while untying his gold robe. What he was about to do now could only be described as truly insane. But since things had gone wrong because bounty hunters had gotten involved because of him, shouldn't he take responsibility?

Perhaps the manager had planned to flee with the teleport scroll from the start but... anyway, there was only one way to stop him now.

"Take it."

Along with the quiet command, dozens of undead summoned as if bursting from the floor flew forth. And they rushed exactly where he wanted, that is, toward the scroll the manager was holding. It happened the moment his gold robe flowed down from his shoulders revealing the black robe underneath.

The manager, who had been about to recite the teleport scroll's activation words, froze stiff. *Whoosh!* The scroll was thrown into the flames, and though his only means of escape had instantly vanished from his hands, he couldn't bring himself to look around.

"Th-this, this is, wh-what."

The manager's whole body trembled as he saw the pitch-black undead floating upside down before his eyes. Not just him but the nearby staff, and even the trading hall's guests all froze. Some even collapsed as their legs gave out.

Shock and terror settled on all their faces as they looked toward the direction the undead had flown from.

"I came all the way here hearing you could buy hundreds of slaves if you had money..."

"Hii, hiiiiek!"

"You shouldn't damage my goods like this."

As he walked forward step by step while taking off his mask and murmuring, Kalterik looked at him in confusion. Since he had deliberately moved from his original position and changed clothes, no one could connect him with Kalterik as companions.

Though Kalterik's face was full of confusion as if wondering what he was doing, it was unavoidable. He had to stop the attempt to escape with the teleport scroll right away and also...

For guys like these, fists were far more threatening than the law.

"I'm in quite a difficult situation lately, so I need to make lots of undead."

Would anything change if they saw Kalterik, when they not only had very strong backing but even tried to kill the hero's aide? Though they might be surprised, as long as they held the slaves' and fairy race's leashes, it could only be disadvantageous.

Even if the hero appeared, no, especially if it was the hero, they would try to escape somehow and the traitors would surely hide as soon as they heard the news, making them hard to find again. To properly fasten the first button of the search, they needed to catch the slave market's manager here now.

"I-Isaph Dina..."

The manager ridiculously collapsed and trembled at the legion of pitch-black undead rippling around him. Though he gestured at his staff to stop him quickly, no one approached. They were all terrified, likely reminded of the Klam Massacre by his words.

Isaph's endlessly rising infamy in the empire shone, no, cast darkness in this way.

"If you don't want to become my undead, how about putting out the fire in the warehouse."

### Chapter 123

The manager startled at his approach, step by step. People around shouted at him to quickly put out the fire. They urged him to comply with what was wanted quickly, or else Isaph, the empire's terrible villain, would come closer.

Soon the manager fumbled with his bracelet, and *whoosh-* the flames subsided.

"Remove the wall and open the underground door too. There's more below."

"Y-yes, yes! I'll open it!"

At the calm order, the manager hurriedly fumbled with his ring while even using honorifics. Though his words meant he would kill the fairy race and absorb them as undead too, there was no resistance at all.

The location Haren and Mela had found suspicious minutes ago shook *clunk!* and opened as if spreading to both sides. Oh, Isaph's infamy was more useful than expected.

As he turned to look there in admiration, *swoosh*- the ropes binding Noi disappeared.

"A-aide! Arrest that guy!"

*Aha*. No wonder he had been too compliant, this was his purpose. Did he think the hero's aide would naturally arrest the villain who stole the holy sword first? When he silently turned to look at the manager, he, no, not just him but everyone gathered around him shouted.

As if for the bounty hunters rushing in from outside to hear.

"Isaph! Isaph Dina is here!"

"Save us! Aaaaaaah!"

Their actions of screaming wildly looked even desperate. It was a ridiculous scene. After abusing so many people, they couldn't even endure this much threat and were making a fuss begging to be saved. Though he had worried he might have to fight the staff here, it seemed the sudden appearance of Isaph had shocked them so much they didn't even have the mind to resist.

Amid the chaos of people rushing to escape, Noi, freed from the ropes, looked at him with a confused face.

"Isaph..."

He too looked full of confusion and shock. Though he would have guessed why he had stepped forward from putting out the fire and even opening the way underground...

*Hmm,* he had acted thinking Noi would return to the holy city since he had used up all his funds to enter the slave market, but was that wrong? Even if he was caught, he would meet his companions in the holy city so they would do something. The belated realization came that he could have requested funds from the imperial princess, but he ended up shaking his head.

The deed was already done, and his actions were decided.

"I think I've taken responsibility for my mistake with this much."

"W-wait...!"

"Handle the rest yourself."

He turned and headed outside the trading hall. Though the bounty hunters' shouts now rang from right nearby and he didn't know how far he could run, he decided to try getting away for now.

"Urk..."

As soon as he came out, dizziness surged. Having summoned dozens of undead when he was already unwell, he dry heaved. He leaned against the wall staggering and covered his mouth with his hand, when his index finger suddenly felt wet. It was a nosebleed. *Phew*, good thing he hadn't shown such a ridiculous sight inside.

Just as he roughly wiped it with his sleeve and tried to keep walking, *whoosh!* his arm was grabbed. He hadn't even left the building yet, and among the people here, there was only one who would try to catch Isaph.

"What are you—"

"It was an insane thing to do, I know."

He spoke without even looking at him, at Haren.

"You think I did that in my right mind? I just felt I had to take responsibility since the situation got messed up because of me, and this was the only solution that came to mind. I managed to create an 'opening' somehow anyway, so you hurry and save the slaves, secure the ledgers. Subdue that manager first since you don't know what tricks he might pull."

Words poured out. Was it because the situation was urgent, or was he bewildered by his action of coming here when he would be busy cleaning up the mess? After all the effort he had made to draw attention.

Suddenly Kalterik's words from hours ago came to mind.

'The Commander is merciful and doesn't dislike people for making one mistake.'

"Maybe he'll come to dislike me now."

Since it wasn't a mistake but clearly intentional, was Haren angry at him? Was he fed up with him causing trouble recklessly without consideration as always? Still, the red leash hadn't appeared on his shackles yet, so perhaps he was taking the purpose of the commotion into account.

"I'll escape on my own so you quickly—"

"No, get caught quietly."

"...What?"

"Don't fight the bounty hunters needlessly, don't resist, just let yourself be caught. Go to a narrow alley instead of the plaza to encounter fewer people."

Saying the main gate would soon be paralyzed with people, Haren drew his sword and *bang*! broke the wall to create a new escape route. Surprised by the completely unexpected words, he looked at him dazedly.

It was the first time their gazes met directly in hours.

"Aren't you seeing me as too weak? You think I'll be caught right away no matter how I try to escape with this body."

"Yes, that's right. So I mean don't get into physical fights and get hurt needlessly."

There was no anger or irritation or other negative emotions in the blue eyes he met. Rather, all he found there was... worry. His gaze was sunken as he checked his sleeve as if knowing he had had a nosebleed earlier.

"Don't get caught by the city guards. They'll definitely treat you roughly. Rather, bounty hunters will protect you to keep the bounty and take you to the holy city..."

The continuing instructions were surprising. When he just blinked his eyes, Haren murmured softly.

"I could step forward now and say I arrested you, but..."

"That won't do. Then all the traitors will go into hiding."

There were many traitors to track through the ledgers. The hero's influence was too great, and rumors would spread instantly the moment he showed his face. It was obvious the traitors would all try to destroy evidence at news of Haren coming to Jerab.

In fact, the decrease in customers visiting the slave market after the eastern Encroachment Zone collapsed was proof of that. The traitors were on high alert, and all the guests who came here today probably weren't the 'core'. They would be small fry who hadn't heard the rumors.

They needed to catch those who had backed this market to flourish in Jerab, and who had enough power to provide all sorts of magical tools and even teleport scrolls.

'Since the most important documents are elsewhere anyway...'

They also needed to secure the documents the manager had hidden. It was bewildering that Haren had considered revealing his identity now when the situation was so critical. As someone who knew better than anyone the ripples he would cause.

In truth, he too had expected to be caught quickly by bounty hunters. He had been prepared for it since summoning undead had already made him unstable. He was just optimistic they would keep him alive to take him for the 20,000 gold. Since there were so many false reports, wouldn't they want to offer the living Isaph to the temple?

He would definitely be imprisoned in the holy city dungeon, and he had committed this act expecting his companions would return to the holy city anyway. Haren seemed to have guessed that too and understood all the reasons he had stepped forward, but.

"I'll contact Beatrice and somehow delay the execution, so stay quietly in prison. I'll come as quickly as possible...?"

He just blinked blankly at his still sunken tone. He had expected anger, so this reaction was truly unexpected. He seemed frustrated at not being able to follow due to having much to clean up here. Moreover, there was even worry in his eyes looking down at him.

Haren unpinned the brooch fastening his robe collar. It was an accessory with a small crystal attached, which he gripped tightly, infusing it with holy power before pinning it to his robe.

"This should keep evil spirits away for a few days."

...*Ah*.

Could it be Haren was concerned he would suffer from evil spirits if imprisoned, that is, separated from him? Even he hadn't thought that far.

Though just minutes ago everyone in the trading hall had trembled in fear looking at him, his gesture of withdrawing from him now was only careful. *Murmur murmur*- commotion was heard from behind. The bounty hunters seemed to have surrounded the building already, and he needed to leave quickly.

Standing before the path Haren had made, he murmured while touching the collar of his robe. Though he knew it was quite out of the blue.

"...You know, you know me the most."

"..."

"You said you don't know me well, but to me... only you know 'me'."

As soon as he blurted it out, he headed outside as if fleeing from embarrassment.

*Swoosh*- rain poured down fiercely. Whether because he had just been inside a burning building, or because he had taken off the gold robe he had worn over his clothes, the chill of the downpour felt even cooler. Feeling needlessly empty, he pulled his collar closed and ran gripping the warm pin.

Though there was commotion all around, he suddenly recalled a conversation from hours ago. No, perhaps he had been dwelling on that moment all along.

'I still don't know much about you.'

Though he had felt frustrated that the only information he could reveal was about Isaph, being plagued by evil spirits was only 'his' issue. That Isaph wouldn't be chased by evil spirits. This difference was needlessly welcome, and Haren's actions of remembering it even brought an unexpected dry laugh.

Running along the path Haren had shown, he finally reached a dead end and stopped. The narrow alley barely wide enough for one or two people somehow became amusing.

"Huk, senior! It really is Isaph!"

"Huuk, huuuk! All our hard work since daytime..."

He greeted the bounty hunters with familiar voices chasing from behind welcomingly

### Chapter 124

**#Miracle of the Holy City**

The heart of Solares, the holy city of Hesron, was in an uproar.

The necromancer infamous throughout the empire and the mass murderer who brutally killed the villagers of Klam. The fugitive who broke out of the tower the day before his execution and fled with the hero's holy sword Piarus stored in the temple, with the largest bounty in imperial history.

Isaph Dina had been caught.

He was captured by bounty hunters in the Jerab Special District and instantly transported to the holy city. During this process, Isaph reportedly offered no resistance, and rather the hunters anxiously hid him as if concealing gold. Even after putting on all sorts of mana-blocking devices, they treated him carefully so as not to provoke him, fearing 'that' Isaph might somehow use necromancy.

At the news of Isaph being put in prison, the holy city's subjects cheered and simultaneously feared. Just being in the same city as that criminal terrified them, and they shouted for him to be executed quickly.

But the Order couldn't kill Isaph right away.

"Where did you hide Piarus?"

They had to recover the hero's sword, Piarus, which disappeared the day Isaph escaped. As a holy relic that had been with the empire since its beginning and symbolized the hero, they absolutely had to find out where it was hidden. However, despite persistent interrogation, Isaph said nothing.

The interrogation was entirely overseen by the cardinal who had been greatly humiliated when trying to arrest Isaph in the past. Torture devices were even prepared under the pretext of it being a critical matter, but his intention to avenge his past disgrace was obvious.

But just before those were used, the empire's First Imperial Princess stepped forward.

"Your Eminence's hands cannot be stained with blood. I will do it."

Though the guards tried to stop her, the princess forcefully entered the prison. Even if the temple's authority was currently higher than the imperial palace in the empire, they couldn't forcibly expel the First Imperial Princess, and moreover, her magical skills were famous.

The cardinal looked displeased, but reluctantly agreed to the princess's persistent requests. This was the result of the princess coming every time the cardinal tried to interrogate Isaph over several days.

*Tap*-.

Beatrice sat in a chair, crossing her legs as she looked at Isaph inside the iron bars. Having finally managed to create time alone with him after days, she sighed and brushed back her hair. Her golden hair shone brilliantly even in the dark prison.

"Ha. I was planning to bring you to my castle when you got out of prison, but now I've ended up coming into your prison."

Though it was a light opening, Isaph inside the iron bars showed no reaction. Thick shackles blocking his abilities were fastened on both his hands as he sat leaning against the wall, and heavy iron balls were attached to his ankles. Getting any closer to him was impossible for safety reasons.

Isaph Dina was still treated as the worst, most terrible criminal in history, but to Beatrice's eyes now, he just looked tired. His half-lidded eyes were full of fatigue, as if worn out by the temple's persistent questioning.

Beatrice stared at his pale face and asked.

"Are you eating properly?"

"...You didn't make this time just to ask that."

"Oh, surprisingly, that is indeed the purpose."

Beatrice shrugged her shoulders. Since she had already heard the general situation through Harenir's contact, there was no need to ask how Isaph had been caught or why he had come here separately.

Isaph was now a kind of smoke screen.

He was drawing all the empire's attention so that the hero and his companions' underground investigation wouldn't be exposed. Though surprised by the news at first, Harenir had only briefly and concisely informed her about that, and rather pointed out other aspects.

"That guy was asking if you're eating, if you're sleeping, if the prison environment isn't too harsh, etc.? Since the temple will surely interrogate persistently, interfere as much as possible, and absolutely prevent any possible torture."

He had even told her to check if the guards weren't using violence. In fact, the guard who had been in charge of Isaph in the past had been severely questioned for letting him escape and now held a grudge against him. Because of this, Beatrice had to come to the prison every day without fail.

"It's almost like he's acting like an owner who had to leave their pet behind due to unavoidable circumstances."

"Don't treat people like animals..."

Isaph reacted with a bewildered look. Beatrice giggled and opened the bag beside her chair. It contained food carefully prepared by the imperial palace's chef. She picked up meat with a fork and held it out to Isaph with an elegant gesture.

"Here, aah-."

"..."

Isaph furrowed his brow at the gesture distinctly like feeding an animal.

"Since shackles are on your wrists, isn't this me showing kindness? Hurry and eat?"

"...Forget it. I have no appetite."

*Whoosh*, Isaph turned his head away. Beatrice narrowed her eyes as she looked him over. Though she had deliberately induced a disgusted reaction, his condition looked too poor to simply enjoy it playfully.

His face was deathly pale without a hint of blood, his eyes were sunken, and his lips were chapped. He seemed to have trouble sleeping, and even now he sat curled up exhaustedly, just breathing heavily with difficulty.

Isaph glanced at a corner of the prison before dropping his head and muttering. His hand touching his collar trembled slightly.

"Seems someone died from being beaten here too. Ah, I guess that's normal for a prison..."

His very small voice was full of tired energy. Beatrice worried whether forceful interrogation had taken place during times she couldn't come to the prison. She had transferred the former guard elsewhere, and tried to intervene whenever the cardinal interrogated, but there were limits.

She wanted to take him to the imperial palace, but in reality she had barely managed to create time for them to talk alone. Moreover, the imperial palace was very flustered by the First Imperial Princess's actions and kept sending apologies to the Order for the rudeness. It was a cowardly sight that could only be sneered at.

And even now.

"Your Highness. You must return to the imperial palace now."

"Huh? It shouldn't be time yet."

"His Majesty the Emperor has contacted us to return quickly. He says this is a critical matter for the Order to handle, so the princess should not interfere and promptly follow orders..."

"So he's finally issuing an imperial command."

Beatrice twisted her lips at the words conveyed by the guard knight Asil who had carefully approached. As she cynically considered whether they would really drag her away if she pretended not to hear, Isaph spoke.

"Get out quickly."

Still sitting weakly leaning against the wall, he issued an order to leave in an utterly indifferent tone.

"It's more uncomfortable with you here, so just go."

"Oh, hearing you say that makes me want to stay more."

"There's no need to trouble yourself to care..."

*Flick,* his final glance at Beatrice was dry. Though it would be quite outrageous for him to signal the imperial princess to leave with just a look, she only let out a dry laugh.

Did he even know that his attitude of not needing to go to the trouble for him rather made her more concerned? Even his cold voice now sounded like drawing a line telling her not to feel burdened.

Though his calm reaction to all sorts of contempt could seem brazen, on the other hand that detached attitude, those eyes as if used to always enduring alone, caught her gaze.

As the guard knight carefully called her again, Beatrice finally stood up and said.

"I'll bring new snacks next time. My, what picky tastes."

"Don't subtly treat me like an animal again..."

As she giggled at Isaph's bewildered reaction, he turned his body away completely. Beatrice looked at his back with a regretful feeling before moving her feet outside.

The old prison had been rebuilt after half of it was blown away in the explosion on the day Isaph escaped. Perhaps seeing the tall tower collapse was viewed as the Order's authority being broken, so this time they built it very solidly. Moreover, they even densely embedded mana-blocking artifacts in the walls so that no tricks would work. Thanks to that, it was suffocating just to walk.

Beatrice let out a long sigh with a stifled feeling.

"Just when is he planning to return..."

Gradually, some were starting to say they should execute Isaph first and then find the holy sword. The longer the interrogation took, the more it was like giving him a chance to counterattack, and claims were even arising that if they killed and offered the prisoner who stole the hero's sword to the altar, God might show the way to the holy sword.

Every day in the holy city, extreme opinions poured out that he should be hanged in the plaza, burned at the stake, and so on. All the anger of the imperial citizens who had lost their hero was directed at Isaph.

"Maybe I should just break Isaph out of prison and run away."

"Your Highness."

Asil was shocked at Beatrice's words. He looked at the princess in alarm, and finally asked with a face that showed he really couldn't understand. It was a question he had held back for days but ultimately couldn't swallow.

"...You seem to be paying too much attention to that prisoner. Why on earth are you doing this?"

Even Asil, the guard knight closest to the princess, still didn't know the truth about the hero. So she couldn't tell him about Harenir's contact, no, his instructions that were almost like urging...

In fact, that wasn't even the primary reason for Beatrice's actions from the start. There was only one clear reason why she was going to such trouble.

"Didn't you see it too? That guy ordering me to leave."

"Yes, it was truly insolent and arrogant..."

"When I imagine that guy being held by my leash and purring in submission, it's so delightful. It's truly unimaginable, which makes it even more fun."

Asil looked at Beatrice, who kept nodding her head, with very confused eyes. Though he had served closely for years, she was still a mistress difficult to understand.

### Chapter 125

Beatrice giggled at Asil's face, which clearly showed that thought. But even while laughing like this, she still felt stifled inside.

The situation where even the empire's First Imperial Princess had to return unable to do anything, that is, the reality of the temple's authority being so high, was created by the hero, yet he wasn't returning. Though he had to act cautiously knowing his own influence... still, it was equally unsatisfying.

As Beatrice was heading towards the imperial palace, soothing her regretful feelings.

"Monsters have appeared on the outskirts of the holy city! Please evacuate to a safe place immediately!"

The city guards controlling the plaza streets shouted. The signs of monsters had been ominous since before the hero disappeared, but recently their frequency had become very high. All major cities were suffering from monster appearances, and the holy city was no exception.

The Order expressed this as God's anger at losing his beloved son. So they said all imperial citizens should gather with one heart and earnestly pray for the hero's return, attaching meaning to all sorts of aspects quite well. Thanks to this, the temple was flourishing with people coming to pray.

*Kugugugung─*! Especially this time, the scale of the attacking monster horde seemed large, as tremors were felt even in the holy city's plaza far from the outskirts. Beatrice came out of her carriage to assess the situation.

The sky was already full of dark clouds.

As flying monsters appeared among the gloomy clouds, screams instantly rang out across the plaza and chaos ensued. Everyone was terrified at the sight of monsters flying with huge flapping wings.

A few months ago, the temple storing the hero's holy sword had been attacked by monsters. Though the barrier surrounding the holy city had been strengthened since then so that even most demons couldn't enter, just seeing huge monsters in view plunged everyone into fear.

*Thud, thud!* The more the wyverns crashed into the barrier, the louder the screams grew. Monsters poured down like lightning and the city walls shook unsteadily. Even without seeing, one could feel countless monsters rushing from over there. The ground kept shaking.

The Holy Knight Order quickly dispatched, and the city guards ran around busily shouting for people to evacuate. Beatrice clicked her tongue and looked for her rod. Perhaps the public would say this attack was because of Isaph, that it happened because an evil being was brought into the holy city. No, it wasn't speculation but certainty.

"Your Highness! You must not go there!"

"What nonsense. As the imperial princess, shouldn't I naturally step forward?"

It was absurd to say she should hide in a safe place as a precious imperial descendant even after seeing such a scene. The first emperor was revered as the empire's ruler for fighting monsters at the forefront, and the imperial family was treated preciously for carrying on the blood of the first hero. The moment they abandoned the background that made them noble, they would become vulgar.

Also, she needed to achieve some merit now to have justification to keep visiting the prison later. Beatrice clicked her tongue and stepped forward. Just as she wondered if that prickly guy would even know her efforts.

*Paaaaaah*-

The sun rose from the dark clouds. The golden sun that soared through the monsters rushing in as if to cover the sky brought an awesome shock just by its existence. Then as it slowly circled, shooting dazzling beams of light in all directions.

[Kieeeeek!]

[Hyaaak-]

Monsters pierced by the light rays fell miserably. The scene of dozens, hundreds of light beams annihilating evil was violently brilliant and holy.

It was truly an awe-inspiring sight. That moment was captured in the eyes of all the imperial citizens who were looking up at the sky in terror, searching for God.

The sun appearing, parting the dark clouds.

It was exactly the same as the legend of the holy relic said to have been used by the first emperor and first hero of the Holy Empire of Solares.

"Arux..."

The holy relic the empire sought in times of turmoil, the small sun. God's gift said to shine only in the hands of a true hero, the sun said to be buried on the sky island waiting for its rightful owner, now rose in the holy city's sky.

There was only one being the imperial citizens would think of to describe its owner.

"The hero has returned!"

The knights' shouts bursting from the city walls instantly spread from mouth to mouth to the plaza, and all the people in the streets cheered. It didn't even take a few seconds. The imperial citizens hugged each other and cried, and some even knelt and bowed to God.

Beatrice sighed belatedly at this sight.

"...Huh."

Though she already knew 'he' had the small sun, seeing it with her own eyes was so different. She couldn't even breathe for a moment, overwhelmed by the great shock, before barely letting out a dry laugh. *Is she angry at feeling awe for an instant too, or does she just feel dejected?*

Beatrice dropped fragments of laughter, *ha, haha,* before finally bending over laughing loudly. Though it was an incomparably holy radiance, strangely it looked hasty to her eyes.

It was the hero's return.

**#Part 11. 78%**

The prison was in an uproar.

He sat leaning against the wall and buried his head between his knees, tired of the chaotic atmosphere shaking the space. His ears were deafened by the noisy clamor.

"Haah..."

Had the cardinal come again, perhaps having made full preparations saying he would finish the interrogation this time? He wasn't scared of anything at all, just annoyed. In fact, the cardinal's threats never even reached his ears from the start.

[Kihihihihi...]

[He's weakened. He's weakened...]

[Hurry and give up that body-.]

Only the whispers of evil spirits filling the space endlessly rang in his ears. They even repeated for 24 hours straight. He had barely managed to converse with Beatrice who had visited just before.

Though he had expected to suffer from evil spirits when separated from Haren, it was far more serious than he had prepared for. The effect of the accessory Haren had given didn't last long, and perhaps because mana-blocking shackles were on his wrists, now they wouldn't even retreat when he glared or told them to get lost. As if knowing his weakened state, the evil spirits persistently circled around.

He couldn't sleep due to the chilling intuition that his body would be taken if he fell asleep. Now he suffered from headaches that made his head ring at even small noises, and body aches that made even the sensation of clothes brushing his skin feel painful.

The prison's commotion only grew louder. No, was it the evil spirits' whispers? As he listened exhaustedly, the cardinal's flustered voice mixed in briefly.

"His Holiness the Pope is waiting..."

"The prisoner's punishment can be done later..."

*Murmur murmur,* the voices pouring confusedly from afar were full of bewilderment. Though the cardinals kept claiming 'next time', 'for now first...' while chasing someone, he never stopped once, and rather approached more quickly with big strides and.

*Clank*.

He instantly opened the thick door of this floor and even the door of the prison cell he was confined in. Until then, he had just been leaning his head limply on his knees with his eyes closed. It had been too noisy to endure... At some point the noise suddenly cut off.

"..."

He looked around blankly. The evil spirits that had filled everywhere until just before had all disappeared, and even in his distant mental state, he raised his head thinking something was strange.

*Sky-blue eyes.*

Eyes that gave the impression of the sky first even in this dark prison, even though the sky couldn't possibly be seen in this poor space without even windows. As he stared up blankly at those lofty blue eyes that had suddenly become unfamiliar, whoosh! He swung his sword.

As the pure white sword slashed down, the people around were shocked. The cardinals nervously waiting outside the prison were astonished thinking he was carrying out the sentence, but all that was cut were the shackles on his wrists and ankles. The thick iron chains fell cleanly cut into pieces.

Slowly he, Haren, lowered himself before him.

"I've come to keep my promise."

Haren's voice rang unfamiliarly in his ears. Though it was a beautiful voice as always, suddenly it felt very careful, and even momentarily tender.

"You said you'd come quickly..."

In truth, he didn't even know how many days had passed so he couldn't complain about lateness. Yet he just wanted to blame him for being bad.

This was all because the relief and gladness he felt upon seeing Haren were so great it felt unfair. Though he just wanted to think it was only because the evil spirits that had tormented him for days had disappeared, if that was all, wasn't it strange to be so intoxicated with happiness that his heart was pounding?

Even Haren's touch wrapping around his wrists felt gentle now, and he fell into an inexplicable, resentful sense of unfairness. Though he wanted to keep complaining, thud- as the tension drained, his whole body tilted as if collapsing.

"...!"

Reflexively, Haren embraced him. As if worried he might fall elsewhere, he wrapped his whole body and drew him into his arms. Feeling the familiar comfort from the sun-like warmth emanating from those firm arms, he closed his eyes resentfully.

It was his first sound sleep in days.

### Chapter 126

*Blink, blink.*

He slowly opened and closed his eyelids, blankly staring at the ceiling. His thoughts were very slow to start working again in his dazed state. He expanded his vision as if turning a heavily rusted spring with creaks.

First, it wasn't the crude ceiling of the prison. A subtle pattern engraved on white wallpaper. It seemed familiar from somewhere, and as he traced his hazy memories, he looked around a bit more. There was a desk and bookshelf over there, a wardrobe was visible, and it was a simple yet neat space with just one bed.

Just then, with a *creak*- the door opened and someone came in.

"Oh! You're awake?!"

The owner of the clear voice was Noi. With documents in his arms, he had just poked his head in as if dropping by briefly to check, but was startled to see him moving. Then after shouting "Just a moment!" and causing a commotion outside for a while, he finally approached his side.

"Are you alright? No, you can't be alright, so drink this potion first! I've ordered a simple meal too, so it'll be here soon. If you're cold, I can get a thicker blanket too..."

As the chatter continued rapidly, he sat up as if swept along. Somehow it felt like he drank a potion every time he woke up recently.

"Where is this...?"

"Ah, this is Sir Haren's room."

"Kuluk, kuk, kek!"

He spat out the potion. He choked and coughed heavily, and Noi patted his back in surprise. Only after his additional explanation could he finally calm down.

This was indeed Haren's room, but more precisely, it was a personal resting room connected to the commander's office in the Holy Knight Order building. Though Haren had hardly used it, it was closest to the commander's office, so it was convenient for Noi to check on him too. The reason the wallpaper pattern looked familiar was probably because it was the Sidon emblem.

"Since Sir Haren is so busy now, he hasn't had time to return to the mansion..."

Though he could rest in the spacious mansion in the holy city, this was an unavoidable choice to check on his condition from time to time. In fact, there were so many people looking for Haren now that even he only managed to catch brief naps in his office.

He just touched his nape sourly at Noi's story that flowed so naturally. Couldn't they just not check on his condition every hour in the first place? Why bother directly...

"I just contacted Sir Haren, so he'll be here soon. He's at the temple for a moment now!"

An explanation was added that it would be quick since the Holy Knight Order building and central temple were adjacent. Afterwards, he heard a brief account of the empire's situation from Noi.

Currently, the holy city was bustling with the hero's return.

Just as monsters were attacking the outskirts of the holy city, the hero appeared with brilliant light at his back, annihilating all evil with the small sun. That moment must have vividly imprinted the hero's presence on the imperial citizens once again.

Even before, there had been a faction that viewed the gradual disappearance of Encroachment Zones as 'naturally disappearing after a long time', and others who claimed 'the hero who didn't actually die has been going around purifying Encroachment Zones'. Now with this return proving the latter correct, everyone was excited.

The holy city, which until just days ago had been anxious about being in the same city as the terrible criminal Isaph, fell into a festive mood. The death row inmate who had existed as the hero's antithesis was caught, and now the hero had returned too, so they were simply rejoicing and...

"As soon as Sir Haren returned, he went straight to the prison and took you out. Then he publicly stated that you had cooperated in purifying the Encroachment Zones, which surprised everyone."

He revealed that it was he who had broken the prison tower and taken out the death row inmate in the past, and also taken the sword. He even said that Isaph's necromancy had allowed them to easily survey the Encroachment Zones for purification and that his contributions were very great.

He just blinked his eyes at the news that this had stirred up the holy city. Though he had guessed these aspects would be revealed once he returned to the holy city, he hadn't known he would express his help so greatly. He had thought perhaps it would only be disclosed to high-ranking officials and not made public.

Feeling somehow embarrassed, he fiddled with his nape, when *clank*- the shackles rattled. Though the chains binding his wrists and ankles in prison had been cut off, the shackles worn on his neck still remained.

"Ah, those shackles..."

Noi sighed softly.

"I heard they found them suspicious in prison over the past few days too. Since they couldn't be forcibly removed, they suspected they might be strange tools hiding some trick..."

"...Was that so?"

The prison had been so noisy with evil spirits that he hadn't properly heard much. With dozens, hundreds of evil spirits circling around him whispering, how could he have heard the guards' voices? As he just shrugged his shoulders without much thought, somehow Noi looked uncomfortable.

"It must be uncomfortable, but, umm, there are still many imperial citizens who distrust you. They worry that you've only become docile because the hero has you on a leash, and that you'll seek revenge the moment the shackles are removed. So it seems you'll have to keep wearing them until all the Encroachment Zones are gone..."

He was bewildered by the hesitant explanation. Putting aside the fact that he had been wearing shackles since entering this world and was now almost used to them like a part of his body, he knew the schedule wasn't over yet anyway. Originally the condition for sentence reduction was 'cooperation in searching Encroachment Zones', and with one Encroachment Zone left, the deal was still ongoing.

He fully understood that he would have to wear shackles for a while to show the image of a death row inmate submitting to the hero, but why did Noi look so uncomfortable? It sounded almost like... he trusted him now but felt sorry for keeping him bound with a leash.

"Oh! He really woke up?!"

"...Isaph. How are you feeling?"

Just then, Kalterik and Mela entered. It seemed Noi had busily gone around outside earlier to inform them of his news too.

He looked at the two curiously. Their appearance in Holy Knight Order vice commander uniforms was unfamiliar. Though they had generally worn neat clothes during the months together, their white uniforms with gold emblems looked very strange.

"You look just like different people..."

"Haha! You're saying that, but you still look like an evil spirit even after days!"

"...Kalterik."

As Kalterik burst into laughter at his muttered words, Mela's elbow jabbed his waist. A reproachful gaze flew, asking if he didn't obviously know why Isaph was tired.

He just blinked his eyes, surprised at both Kalterik's playful attitude and Mela's actions. The reactions of both, no, all three including Noi, were just unfamiliar. Was it because he was seeing them after days? As if...

They were acting happily like reuniting with very close comrades.

"By the way, what happened to the slave market ledgers?"

Feeling awkward and ticklish at this atmosphere, he abruptly asked. Seeing the three talking with such relaxed faces now, it seemed they had rescued all the slaves and fairies from the warehouse, but had they managed to secure all the ledgers from the CEO's office too? Since the manager had tried to destroy evidence by setting fire there too.

The three looked at him simultaneously at his question. Then after briefly exchanging glances with each other, they soon grinned and.

"Huhu, you'll find out soon!"

"We worked really hard! It'll be soon!"

"Since you created the opportunity..."

Kalterik, Noi, and Mela spoke in turn. Their faces looked very confident, so he could only nod dazedly, as if overwhelmed by their momentum.

It seemed they were preparing something, so he would have to quietly wait for 'soon'.

\*\*\*

That night.

According to Noi, Haren had left briefly for business at the temple but would return soon. Since they had also contacted him about him waking up, he would surely come back even faster. At first, he had thought there was no need to contact him, surely he wouldn't return early because of him, but...

Haren hadn't come even as the night grew deep.

Since he had woken up in the afternoon, it meant almost half a day had passed without Haren returning to the Order. It was natural for the hero to be busy, and he had been cynical from the start so he shouldn't care, but.

"...Ah, I looked at the clock again."

After sitting quietly in the room, he stood up suddenly in anger. *No, am I waiting for Haren now? Why!*

### Chapter127

Though it was none of his business whether Haren came or not, his attention kept turning to the door. Thinking he should move around as it was stiff to just stay in bed, he would walk but soon find himself lingering in front of the door.

Currently, Noi, Kalterik, and Mela all looked busy.

Noi had become the hero's aide again and was tackling mountains of paperwork, while Kalterik and Mela, as vice commanders of the Holy Knight Order, seemed to have plenty to do after being away from their positions for so long. Perhaps they were all busy for the moment they had called 'soon'.

So as if concerned about him being alone in the room, Noi would occasionally say "Are you bored?" and bring in various books. Considering that he had woken up two days after leaving prison, he recommended quiet activities.

Though reading didn't particularly appeal to him, he wasn't sleepy and had nothing else to do, so he ended up looking at books but... his gaze would flit to the clock. He would read almost a page and glance, then look at the next paragraph and check the door.

Lying blankly on the bed was boring too. Thinking it was just for that reason, he moved his feet outside. It absolutely wasn't because he was frustrated at being conscious of sounds, as if waiting for Haren.

After briefly scanning Haren's office connected to the resting room with his eyes, he headed straight outdoors. The night breeze swept coolly over his body.

"Ah..."

A satisfied exclamation burst out.

For him, it was the first outside air he had felt in days. Since he had no memory of coming here from prison, he had been confined indoors the whole time and finally came outside. A refreshing feeling of finally encountering freedom rushed in.

*Ah, was this why people needed to go out sometimes?* His thoughts disappeared and he moved his feet very lightly. Though it was his first time seeing the Order building, he decided to just walk along the corridor.

The cloister was very classical. As if symbolizing the history that began with the Holy Empire, thick pillars rose high, and the marble floor was neatly maintained. The garden visible to the side was pristine as if pursuing an aesthetic of restraint. It felt like training here would be asceticism and spiritual cultivation.

As he walked looking around curiously, other holy knights gradually appeared.

"Wait."

"Why is that guy here..."

They recognized him first. At first they sharply put up their guard, but soon seemed to recall recent news and exchanged sour glances with each other. Their eyes were tinged with a strange discomfort, as if conscious of the facts officially revealed by the Holy Knight Commander two days ago.

Moreover, all matters concerning the prisoner were now handled by the hero. According to Noi, Haren had said he would take full responsibility for managing him and the empire had accepted. It was the hero's authority, higher than the empire's judicial power.

Though the holy knights looked displeased, they seemed unable to go against the commander's will and finally withdrew their gazes from him. He was impressed by their behavior of pretending not to see him. The holy knights in Nadael had been quite strange, but discipline seemed well maintained in the holy city.

In the past he had felt wronged at being held on Haren's leash, but now the situation was rather more comfortable because of it. Since everyone believed in the hero, they thought he wouldn't do anything wicked if he held his lifeline.

However, that absolutely didn't mean they viewed him favorably.

"To think such an unholy guy is in this sacred and solemn place..."

Those who seemed to be the building's caretakers whispered at the far end of the corridor. The signs of them glancing at him with very displeased faces were quite ominous.

His sketchy radar was activating.

*Hmm.* Looking at him with those eyes, then busily moving elsewhere when their gazes met, then slyly checking which direction he was going. Judging from this, soon...

*Splash–!*

The moment he turned the corner of the corridor, water poured down fiercely. They were all properly holding cleaning tools, as if to make the excuse that they had just been cleaning the floor. Everyone made artificially surprised sounds.

"Oops! We didn't know someone would pass by... uh..."

"Oh no, you're all wet..."

But their acting couldn't properly finish. Because from the start, it wasn't him who got hit by the water but the undead. The water that passed through its transparent body poured down to the floor with a splash.

He wasn't even surprised since he had experienced this several times in his past life too. This is what it meant to be experienced.

"It's fine. I have a habit of checking corners with undead when turning corridors."

He adopted the concept of tapping even stone bridges with undead before crossing. Perhaps they couldn't distinguish between him and undead since everyone mistook Isaph for an evil spirit to that extent. To him who had been hit with various things like water from wrung mops and old rotten milk during his school days, this level was child's play.

"Uh, uhh..."

The servants gaped as if encountering undead right before their eyes was very shocking, then their faces turned pale and they hurriedly ran away. *Bang clatter,* someone even slipped on the water spilled in the corridor while running away in panic.

He shrugged indifferently. As the saying goes, those who have experience bullying others do it well, the staff working in the Holy Knight Order building probably had never bullied others in their daily lives and rarely witnessed such scenes. It was just funny since even the water seemed very clean as if freshly drawn.

*Could it be holy water? Maybe they sprinkled it with the meaning of me getting hit and repenting.*

"...Ha."

As he seriously looked down at the floor, a dry laugh was heard beside him. Though it was a very small sigh, his head turned instinctively at the familiar sound. Haren was standing over there, looking as if he had just returned to the Holy Knight Order.

Haren seemed to have seen the entire previous situation. Judging by how his body was leaning forward, perhaps he had tried to rush over quickly, but he looked bewildered that he had avoided it on his own and even resolved the situation before he could react.

Soon Haren shook his head and approached.

"I guess I should have informed everyone in advance that you would be here. This was my oversight. I'll be careful to prevent such incidents in the future..."

Though the fact that the hero had taken over the death row inmate's disposition was known, it seemed the news that he was staying here right now hadn't been separately conveyed. His tone was apologetic, saying people had shown antipathy upon seeing him for the first time today because of this...

*The fact that I stayed in your room would be more shocking though.*

Even if it was called a resting room, wasn't it still Haren's personal space? He shook his head saying it was fine while subtly looking Haren up and down. Though Kalterik and Mela's attire had been unfamiliar, the Holy Knight Commander's uniform gave him an even greater sense of distance.

Though the white base with gold emblems was the same, the commander's formal uniform was indeed elegant down to the smallest details. The restrained beauty suited him well. Though it was a knight's pure uniform, it felt like seeing the most splendid being in this land.

Just as he was newly appreciating his beauty, Haren spoke.

"Let's go into the office and talk for now. You'll be needlessly uncomfortable otherwise."

"Ah, right. Everyone does seem uncomfortable..."

He nodded with a start as their eyes met while he was intently examining his face. As he readily followed that opinion and agreed, Haren paused. He stared at him with subtle eyes before correcting.

"I suggested moving because I was worried you would be uncomfortable."

He blinked dazedly. He had naturally thought he meant to go in to prevent unnecessary commotion since the Order's people would be uncomfortable seeing him. But Haren seemed quite displeased that he had thought that way.

*No, but that's so familiar and natural to me...*

Feeling very uncomfortable at the ticklish sensation somewhere in his chest, he turned his head abruptly. At some point it had become difficult to maintain an expressionless state in front of Haren.

"You came too late for that though."

"...Hm?"

He covered his mouth with his hand. It was an impulsive statement. Putting aside the clearly out-of-context flow, didn't this sound like he was advertising that he had been waiting for him?

He hurriedly added.

"No, I mean, do you not care anymore whether I see evil spirits or not..."

However, even the words he blurted out trying to cover up were strange. Wasn't he the one who had told Haren not to mind that aspect in the first place? Moreover, if he complained about this, wouldn't it mean arguing that he should stay by his side constantly from now on?

As it became more ridiculous the more he spoke, he even held his breath, but Haren seriously examined his complexion.

"Did you see evil spirits again? They shouldn't be able to enter here..."

### Chapter 128

An explanation followed that holy energy flowed through the Holy Knight Order building, preventing unholy things from approaching recklessly. It seemed his feeling of being purified just by walking around here earlier wasn't a mere illusion. Moreover, this place was even connected to the temple.

The temple and Holy Knight Order building would be the safest spaces in the holy city. Yet Haren began looking around with a serious expression, and he gradually moved past embarrassment to shame.

"Forget it. Let's go inside for now."

Feeling the need to change the subject, he quickly turned his body. Just as he was about to retrace his steps saying they should hurry to the office, Haren said that wasn't the right direction, so he swiftly turned the opposite way. He ignored the dry laugh heard from behind.

*Why did I end up showing particularly ridiculous behavior only in front of Haren?*

As soon as they arrived at the office, Haren said to wait a moment and examined the documents on his desk. The papers that had piled up neatly while he was out formed a mountain range. He sat on the soft sofa and blankly watched the scene.

Over the past few months, everyone except him among the five had been busy. Though he had rather become more leisurely after returning to the holy city, the rest were the opposite, and Haren in particular seemed even more hectic. It was understandable why he had said he hadn't even had time to go to the mansion for the past few days.

"Somehow you look more tired than when we were camping to survey Encroachment Zones..."

Sharp fatigue was evident in Haren's eyes. While he would become haggard and worn out after a few days without sleep, Haren seemed to grow keenly sharp. Perhaps he was enduring with willpower.

Just then, Haren finished handling urgent documents and sat down on the opposite sofa, saying:

"The price of being away for months is greater than expected. I suppose it's unavoidable since the commander, vice commanders, and aide of the Holy Knight Order were all vacant..."

"Wasn't there an interim commander during that time?"

"No. It seems everyone found it burdensome."

Well, in an empire where the Holy Knight Commander had been equated with the hero for years, how could anyone step forward to take on the title of commander? Even if the higher-ups tried to appoint someone, they would have declined saying it was too much pressure. And if any incidents occurred in the Order after the hero left, they would face all sorts of criticism.

Haren pressed his brow hard.

"So I need to supplement the Order's condition, and make various preparations too. We'll all have to go to the northern Encroachment Zone..."

"Will the entire Holy Knight Order be dispatched?"

"All the empire's holy knights will have to mobilize. Though we haven't announced that the Dium is still alive yet, anyway there's a high chance the Dedium is hiding in the north."

Having purified three of the four Encroachment Zones existing in the empire's cardinal directions but not yet discovering the Dedium, it was natural that it would be in the last remaining northern one. From his words about the entire Holy Knight Order being dispatched in preparation for the great battle to unfold there, he realized they had planned to return to the holy city after looking around the Jerab Special District.

Though he found it interesting that the northern Encroachment Zone subjugation would proceed in earnest...

"You haven't revealed the Dium's survival yet? I thought that would have spread along with the news that the hero had been purifying Encroachment Zones."

At his bewildered reaction, Haren shrugged his shoulders.

"The empire is too busy for now. We plan to announce it at an appropriate time."

The empire was in as much turmoil as it was excited by the hero's return. And with the unexpected truth revealed that even the death row inmate Isaph had actually cooperated with the hero, everyone would be confused. So Haren seemed to be waiting for the moment when the commotion settled down somewhat, and perhaps that moment coincided with the 'soon' mentioned earlier by Noi and the vice commanders.

It really seemed they were preparing something, but well, one way or another, he would have to accompany them to the northern Encroachment Zone. Feeling slightly detached, he just nodded blankly.

Just then, Haren moved his lips a couple times before speaking.

"So... thanks to you enduring various hardships this time, we didn't lose the thread of the traitors."

The story continued carefully. He said that as all attention focused on the news that the infamous death row inmate had finally been captured, the commotion at the slave market was buried.

Fortunately, Noi's visit, whose identity was revealed first, was misunderstood as being unrelated to the hero and for saving his own kind, but in reality, just the hero's aide coming was a big deal. If it weren't for him, the market's customers would have grasped the problem that occurred there more quickly...

The words Haren was calmly conveying now were clearly an expression of gratitude.

"No, well, it wasn't really hardship..."

And he was completely unaccustomed to such thanks. Though he had sung a round song asking for recognition of his help to succeed in the quest, having the atmosphere set so seriously to say this made goosebumps rise all over his body.

Anyway, the bounty hunters who had caught him were afraid to even touch him. Perhaps feeling his docile capture was rather suspicious, they avoided contact with him, and even carefully provided meals with looks as if afraid they would die if they offended him. Though he couldn't eat well with his wrists bound...

In any case, after being imprisoned, he had thought the execution might be carried out immediately, but unexpectedly he lived because the whereabouts of the holy sword Piarus depended on him. Though persistent interrogation followed, he couldn't hear it because of the evil spirits.

He mumbled awkwardly.

"The imperial princess blocked it well so there wasn't really any torture..."

"...You don't know what you looked like in prison, do you."

Haren spoke in a low, sunken voice. At first he had tried to nitpick, saying of course he wouldn't know since there were no mirrors in prison, feeling needlessly embarrassed, but he stopped in surprise at Haren's reaction.

His jaw tensed as if just recalling that time made him feel stifled.

"Though I moved as quickly as possible, I felt I should have returned earlier."

His touch cradling his cheek was infinitely careful. His hand tracing as if searching for warmth on his pale face was so gentle, he looked at Haren with an unfamiliar feeling. Their gazes met in the air and they stared at each other silently for a long time.

Suddenly, the image of Haren he had faced when first dragged out of prison months ago, and his appearance when he came to the prison saying he had come to keep his promise this time, came to mind simultaneously. Just what kind of time had existed between him and Haren during that period?

The time he thought had just flowed by had piled up in some form.

"...Well, um, there were a lot of evil spirits in prison, but it wasn't enough to die... I guess in a way it was where I was supposed to be originally. Anyway, I got out fine so it's okay...!"

He blurted out incoherently as the air suddenly became so ticklish it was suffocating. He felt like he had to spill out something to break this atmosphere.

"Ah, right. Even though I suffered from evil spirits, that doesn't mean the work of removing the curse on your soul didn't progress at all. That kept going..."

As he urgently searched for a new topic, the cause of being plagued by evil spirits came to mind. In the western Encroachment Zone, Haren had been cursed by the Dium, and to resolve it, he had connected their souls. Since then, he had problems with his abilities when separated from him.

So for a while they had forced rest on each other, saying if they each managed their condition well, wouldn't the curse be resolved faster, and perhaps Haren's actions now were in that context too. No, they definitely should be. If not, he couldn't explain that strange atmosphere just before.

Though brief, hadn't they looked at each other as if very affectionate? It even seemed their faces had gotten closer and closer.

"Ah, um... Yes. It would be good if everything is resolved before going to the northern Encroachment Zone."

Only then did Haren awkwardly remove his hand from him. As if realizing he had acted excessively himself, he lowered his arm slightly, and he too cleared his throat and pulled his head back. He didn't know why he had stayed still with his cheek cradled. They hadn't even had such contact normally.

They spoke with their heads turned in opposite directions.

"Right. We don't know what will happen in the north, so we should eliminate problems in advance. They might exploit that Dium's curse."

"That's true. And sharing pain is troublesome in many ways too..."

As they continued a very beneficial conversation, exchanging perfectly rational and reasonable talk.

*Thud*-

A small noise was heard from the window. He reflexively shifted his gaze and stood up in shock. His eyes widened greatly.

"En?"

The black cat, the NPC, had returned.

It was a reunion after about a month since he hadn't met it since the eastern Encroachment Zone. The inn where En had last stayed and the holy city would be quite far apart, yet it had managed to find its way here alone. Did it know the player's location because it was an NPC after all?

With various emotions mixed - surprise, gladness, resentment - he hurriedly opened the window. Just as he was about to grab the cat right away, having too many things he wanted to ask it, a blue window appeared before his eyes.

**—----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------**

**The resolution has finally ended.**

**—-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------**

**—-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------**

**You will soon be able to sever the connection with the hero.**

**—-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------**

### Chapter 129

He was reading the status window with interest as it had been a while, when he suddenly froze.

"...Soon?"

As he unconsciously muttered that word, an additional status window appeared. It was a very kind explanation, as if it had interpreted his words as a question.

**—------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------**

**As the souls have been connected longer than planned, time is needed to weaken the binding force.**

**—-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------**

**—-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------**

**We emphasize the player's special caution to prevent other problems during this period, as we alone anticipate.**

**—------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------**

It seemed that because the souls had been connected for so long, carelessly separating them could cause damage. Especially in the last status window that appeared, the word 'emphasize' was particularly bold, perhaps pointing out the accidents he had caused so far.

Though embarrassed, he felt somewhat strange. He quietly looked down at his two hands that had been reaching out to grab the cat. It was clearly good news, but...

Haren approached him as he stood quietly by the window.

"Is there a problem?"

"...No, I just felt the resolution had ended right now. I was surprised for a moment...?"

He spoke as if making an excuse that he had just found the phenomenon he felt interesting while discussing it. He added that time was needed to safely sever the connection as the status window had instructed, and it would be over after a few days alone.

After moving his lips a couple times, Haren responded belatedly.

"Ah... I see. Well, that's good. There won't be any more shared pain in the future."

"...Right."

He agreed, nodding slowly. Yes, Haren was right. Since he had suffered from forcibly sharing the pain of injuries due to their connected souls, it was really fortunate they could resolve it before going to the northern Encroachment Zone where a great battle was expected. Hadn't they repeatedly said just before that quickly severing the soul connection would be good for both of them?

*But why...*

*Did it just feel regrettable?*

As it was a highly irrational emotion, he turned his head to the side abruptly. Just as an inexplicable silence had fallen subtly between Haren and him again, he thought he might as well catch the NPC first.

But the window was empty.

"Ah."

*This bastard ran away again.*

It had disappeared after only conveying the news that the resolution was complete. He let out a dry laugh in bewilderment but wasn't angry. Perhaps because a long time had passed since leaving the eastern Encroachment Zone. Though he clearly had many questions for the NPC... now he was just confused by the surging emotions.

Was he feeling bittersweet about severing the connection? No, shouldn't he not feel bitter about it in the first place? He just stared out the window, taking deep breaths to try to calm the contradictory emotions.

The night deepened peacefully.

\*\*\*

The status window emphasized four days of stability for him.

In past terms, it would have been a roundabout instruction to 'not act up'. But anyway, the holy city was surrounded by a barrier, and he happened to be staying in the safest place there.

That is, he continued to stay in Haren's room.

They decided he would stay in his personal resting room like a kind of safe house until the soul connection was severed, in case of any unforeseen situations. Haren had proposed this first, and though he was glad since he had nowhere else to go anyway, he felt bewildered.

"Isn't this originally your resting place? If you don't have time to go to the mansion, you should sleep here."

"It's fine. Just catching brief naps on the office sofa is enough."

"If you push yourself like that, fatigue will be shared with me needlessly and delay the resolution..."

He was nagging Haren out of habit that he should manage his condition well, when he trailed off awkwardly. It was a truly absurd scolding at a point when the resolution was already complete.

Now he no longer had any excuse to urge Haren about anything.

"...Right, the resolution is all over now."

He covered up his words awkwardly. It felt like he wouldn't be able to say anything to Haren once even the soul connection was severed. Wouldn't everything become meddling? Demanding he not get hurt, and also going to treat him when he was injured.

"...Well, do as you like."

He ended the conversation, thinking he just felt flustered for no reason. It was ridiculous for him to worry about the hero's physical condition in the first place. Even now, if they were compared, he would probably look more tired. It was the passive attribute engraved on this shoddy body.

Time flowed peacefully.

From his perspective, the days were very leisurely. With nothing to do, he spent most of the day lying in bed. Reading books and sleeping, eating and sleeping.

Haren gave him a very subtle look as he didn't budge from the room. Though he said he would accompany him for a walk if he was conscious of the previous commotion, he didn't welcome going out in the first place, nor did he want to take up a busy person's time.

He was just satisfied with coming out to the office to look outside through the large window since the resting room had small windows, and perhaps due to having traveled to so many places recently, he sometimes felt bored. It was truly a spoiled complaint. He had been in danger of his life then, yet now that he was safe, he had such thoughts.

On the other hand, his companions except him were extremely busy. They seemed increasingly hectic, and the three besides Haren gradually developed dark circles. Noi had a stamina potion in his mouth every time he saw him, which made him flinch as it was a visual commonly seen in goshiwons in his past life.

But on the fourth day, today, the space was noisy from the morning.

Just as he was wondering about the usually quiet Holy Knight Order building being in a commotion, a visitor came. That visitor barged into Haren's office very boldly and.

"Hah, truly ridiculous fellow. After taking him away from prison that day, you don't even show him to me! How much trouble did I go through taking care of that guy! Chasing away those trying to harass him, diligently providing snacks! Shouldn't you at least send regards to someone who temporarily protected him!"

"Why do you keep subtly treating people like animals."

The person who burst out with outrageous words as soon as the door opened was Beatrice. Just as he was sitting on the sofa looking out the window, he turned to the doorway in bewilderment, and she brightened up as if she hadn't expected to see him right away.

"Hooh, his face has brightened up now—"

"You must be busy too, do you have time to come here?"

Haren stood in front of Beatrice as she quickly tried to approach him. She looked up at him blankly as she had been moving with charging momentum.

"Hah, I wrapped things up roughly."

"'Roughly' shouldn't be involved in this matter."

"Geez, fine! I prepared perfectly, and just before coming here I gave materials to Noi too. Is that enough?"

Beatrice shouted in displeasure. Though he didn't know what she said she had prepared, perhaps it was the same reason his companions had been so busy recently. As he just sat on the sofa listening, she glanced at him and asked Haren.

"So, are you taking that guy with you in the evening?"

"Evening? What's happening then?"

When he reacted in confusion as he was suddenly brought up, Beatrice was surprised. She looked back and forth between him and Haren.

"What? You didn't know anything? You didn't tell him either?"

"...I was busy. I was going to talk about it soon, but depending on Isaph's will—"

"Ridiculous. Were you not going to take him if that guy said he didn't want to go? Though in the past you took him out of prison and dragged him to Encroachment Zones without warning, this time you're asking his opinion?"

Beatrice sneered as if it was funny and looked Haren up and down. She seemed to be mocking him for respecting the will of a mere prisoner, and also teasing his changed attitude.

But soon Beatrice smiled brightly. As if she had found a gap.

"But if you don't take him, won't that guy be left waiting here lonely without an owner?"

"Treating me like an animal again."

"And I think having him there together will increase the credibility of the things you've prepared... I'll take care of him. You'll be busy there anyway!"

What? He stood up in shock, but Haren remained silent even then. As if unable to find anything to deny in Beatrice's words, he quietly looked at her and him in turn.

"...Alright. That place will probably be noisy anyway."

Haren nodded very slowly. Though it was somewhat reluctant agreement, he seemed to have judged that it would be better to have the imperial princess by his side since many things were planned for the evening. A small mutter followed that evil spirits wouldn't gather at the imperial palace since it was surrounded by a barrier anyway.

But whatever judgment had been made in his mind, it was just shocking to him. *He is handing me over to the imperial princess like this? To that mad scientist?!*

"Haha, let's go!"

He was filled with a sense of betrayal the whole time Beatrice grabbed his arm and dragged him away. Though they said the hero held the prisoner's right of disposition so he had to quietly follow whatever he ordered, he had thought he wouldn't hand him over to the imperial princess at least.

*No, and when did you tell me not to go to Beatrice's castle!*

### Chapter 130

He had said he could give him a better place than the imperial princess, and whatnot. Was he just sending him away at a stage where he couldn't get his sentence reduced because cooperation wasn't over yet?

Anger stemming from these thoughts consumed him. Becoming completely low-pressured, he couldn't hear anything Beatrice was saying to him. No, from the start she only spoke nonsense so he had to let it go in one ear and out the other.

"How about dressing like this?"

"Hooh, a ribbon decoration in the hair would be nice too."

"The shackles are plain, so might as well make them more splendid..."

The words pouring out smoothly were terrifying. As soon as Beatrice brought him into her castle, she excitedly brought various items herself and put them on him. Dresses, shoes, necklaces, rings, and so on. Her golden eyes flashing as she thrust all sorts of accessories at him, but her actions were completely incomprehensible and just made him uncomfortable.

He blocked the purple lace ribbon thrust in front of him with his hand and refused.

"Why should I do this? I don't want to."

"You...!"

The guard knight behind Beatrice was alarmed. Though he looked ready to draw his sword immediately, the imperial princess raised her hand to stop him, and chuckled while touching her chin. As if finding his sullen reactions since leaving the Holy Knight Order building amusing, she looked him over and said:

"Are you perhaps covering your hands?"

"What nonsense are you talking about?"

Again the guard knight was shocked at his word choice, but Beatrice just laughed loudly. After guffawing until tears almost formed at the corners of her eyes, she slowly nodded.

"Alright, alright. Let's do as you like. Since you're refusing so strongly that you don't want to dress up like this, I can't force you."

*What have you been doing until now?* He looked at Beatrice with bewildered eyes, then finally turned his head away abruptly. This was probably her being patient by her standards. If he provoked her needlessly, it was obvious the purple lace in her hands would end up around his neck.

Just why was she trying to dress him up? Though he couldn't understand at all, he decided not to go to the trouble of trying to understand that strange imperial princess. His mood was down from the start so his thoughts didn't go that far.

And the answer to this question was realized at the place they arrived in the evening.

"...A banquet hall?"

The chandeliers hanging in the vast, majestic hall sparkled dazzlingly. Flags embroidered with the Holy Empire's crest hung on the pillars and walls, and everyone entering this place was dressed in splendid dresses and tailcoats.

"Yes, a banquet welcoming the hero's return is being held today."

Beatrice calmly explained beside him. The imperial palace had gladly provided the space for this meaningful event, and all the empire's nobles and dignitaries were gathered. She said even those living in the farthest places from the holy city were hurriedly coming to greet the hero they had desperately longed for.

He blankly looked down from the second floor. Though in the past, the lord in Nadael had also held a banquet to commemorate successfully subjugating monsters, that was just a feast for mercenaries. So while this textbook party scene was fascinating on one hand...

*Wow, I came to a place like this gloomily in a pitch-black robe.*

"Oh, Your Highness! It's an honor to see you again!"

Just then Kalterik approached and greeted her. As if he had been walking around the second floor, he stopped upon seeing Beatrice, and Mela accompanying him also bowed to the imperial princess first. They seemed to be meeting the imperial princess for the first time since returning to the holy city.

Then Kalterik quickly looked him up and down and.

"You're still the same even at a banquet like this..."

He shot him a look as if seeing a terrible concept-obsessed person. Even Mela sighed "Hmm." and nodded silently, but damn it, don't react like you're respecting my tastes.

Kalterik and Mela were also in very neat formal attire. Kalterik wore a red uniform, and Mela a navy uniform, both with the Holy Knight Order's emblem on their chests. He felt awkward since even the knights had dressed up, but soon shook his head to dismiss it.

Even if he had known about the welcome party in advance, he wouldn't have dressed up anyway. Wouldn't it be funny for a death row inmate to appear here all dressed up?

"Wooow..."

"Oh my..."

Just then the entrance to the banquet hall became noisy in an instant. As people rushed over exclaiming in admiration one after another, he instinctively thought 'he' had come. There was only one person who could draw such a reaction at this banquet.

As expected, he, Haren, appeared among the people.

The formal attire blending white and gold raised restrained elegance to the extreme. Different from his usual uniform, it seemed to be the commander's formal uniform worn for major events. The clothes likely custom-made for him fell with graceful angles, and a white cape followed behind him like a halo.

He even thought it looked like sunlight was pouring down only around Haren. If the sun god were molded into a human, would he look like that? He understood anew from another aspect why he was called God's manifestation.

It was similar to the hero's attire in the portrait he had seen by chance at the event he was dragged into during the past Holy Day festival. Even then he had said the real person was better than the painting, but now he even thought how could they have painted Haren in this uniform only like that?

Even he was this impressed seeing from afar, so the people encountering him up close burst into exclamations with faces moved as if receiving a god. Some even clasped their hands together and prayed.

"Ahem!"

Noi walking beside Haren looked extremely proud. If the superior he served received such awed gazes, it was understandable for an aide to be overflowing with pride. Kalterik and Mela looked pleased too.

Though he hadn't thought he was particularly close to Haren originally, today even the expression 'distant' felt rude. He and Haren seemed like people from completely different worlds. ...Well, that was true in some context.

"That guy's face is really amazing too. How much God must love him."

Beatrice muttered. Even to the imperial princess with high aesthetic sense from seeing only splendid things since birth, Haren's beauty seemed to be something that had to be acknowledged. Just now he had neatly swept back half his bangs, revealing his sculpture-like face even more clearly.

As he was going down to the first floor following the imperial princess and vice commanders, Haren approached this way too. After exchanging silent conversation through eye contact with the vice commanders, he looked at him, but judging by Noi muttering "Still the black robe..." beside him, he was probably thinking the same thing.

He hid the oncoming embarrassment under a deliberately brazen expression. And since he was still upset that Haren had handed him over to the imperial princess, he turned his head to the side abruptly. As he was ignoring him without even meeting his eyes, Beatrice said beside him:

"Hmm, looks like he's upset with you."

"He's not."

"He might be looking for a new owner."

"I said he's not."

He turned to Beatrice in disgust. Even as he glared at her in bewilderment for spouting the outrageous words that she should aim for the position of new owner, Haren murmured softly.

"...You two have gotten close already."

Now even Haren was talking nonsense. This looks like we've gotten close? *Is something wrong with your eyes?* He sighed at the very strange content and looked up at him, their gazes meeting exactly.

For some reason, a deeply displeased energy was wavering in his blue eyes.

"..."

For an instant their gazes tangled firmly. As he stared at him as if demanding something, there was no room for any conversation to continue. *Rumble*- people rushed around Haren.

"It's a true honor to meet you again."

"You don't know how desperately we longed for the hero's return."

"I saw the coffin procession up close that day, but even then I believed without doubt that the hero was alive. It felt just like Solnium was whispering that to me!"

"To be personally invited to such a meaningful banquet, we will pass down that invitation as a family heirloom for generations!"

The nobles poured out greetings competitively. The fervor was intense enough to seem aggressive, and he stepped back a few steps in disgust. One wrong move and he felt he might be swept up in the crowd.

Even Beatrice had to step aside, and she giggled in amusement.

"Yes, yes. The hero was usually hard to see up close, so they don't want to miss this chance now."

"...Were there not many banquets like this?"

"He usually refused or proceeded with minimized scale."

It seemed opportunities to see the hero's face in the holy city were extremely rare originally. Though the Order always wanted to put the hero forward, he only appeared at important public events. But since Haren who had been like that personally invited the nobles and held a large banquet, everyone was desperate not to miss the chance to talk with the hero.

It was a scene like the embodiment of the empire's longing for the hero. Conversations poured out from everywhere, wanting to exchange even one word with the hero, to receive even one ray of his gaze.

Haren maintaining a perfect smile as if painted amid that gap was fascinating.

### Chapter 131

If it were him, he wouldn't have been able to endure even for a moment there and would have run away. Just as he was newly surprised, glances came this way too.

"That death row inmate really..."

"Why on earth does the hero..."

At first he thought it was because of the imperial princess, but the cause was him. No matter how much his cooperation had been made known, the perception towards him hadn't been reversed. He was still a person who used necromancy against doctrine, and a death row inmate who had committed mass murder. Rather, they seemed to pity the hero for having to be with such an ominous guy to purify the Encroachment Zones.

In other words, he was seen as an unavoidable necessary evil used by the hero to solve the problem of Encroachment Zones. Even the praise was just for the hero's great insight. Rather, he should be grateful for being able to help the hero.

Of course, he wasn't grateful at all, so he ignored it.

As he didn't even give a glance to the whispering people, their reactions gradually grew. Though he had thought they wouldn't openly show antipathy since he was once an infamous figure in the empire, now that they knew the hero held his leash, they seemed to be picking fights thinking he wouldn't dare rebel.

"Hmm, needlessly noisy."

But one word from Beatrice suppressed that atmosphere. As she looked around and murmured, people flinched and stepped back. The imperial princess's personality seemed quite famous too.

*Ah,* could this be why Haren handed him over to Beatrice?

Surprised by the sudden thought, he looked at Haren, but turned his gaze away sneering that it was excessive self-consciousness. If anything, it would be more correct that the purpose was to prevent him from causing strange sudden actions, from suddenly summoning undead like in the Order.

"His Holiness the Pope is entering!"

Just then a guard at the banquet hall entrance shouted loudly. The noisy space instantly became quiet as everyone bowed their heads towards the entrance. Even the imperial princess clicked her tongue silently and gave a silent bow.

The Pope of the Holy Empire, currently the empire's most powerful figure. As the old man with a long white beard walked in, the crowd parted like the Red Sea to make a path. Even the royal family members sitting in the VIP seats stood up and paid their respects.

The Pope who climbed up to the high podium prepared in the banquet hall looked down at everyone. His white hair showed his advanced age, but he looked very healthy.

As Haren approached and gave a short silent bow, the Pope looked at him with satisfaction.

"Our First Sword, the hero of Solares has returned."

A benevolent smile spread on the Pope's face. He looked very pleased with the situation where the empire's dignitaries were in full attendance to celebrate the return of the Holy Knight Commander, that is, the symbol of the temple. This banquet was practically an event to once again solidify the temple's authority.

"Yes. You insisted on going to the Encroachment Zones I had dissuaded you from, and came back after purifying those unholy lands."

Perhaps because of this, the Pope's tone was very affectionate. He had heard that in the past, the Pope had opposed the hero's attempt to search the Encroachment Zones, so it was unexpected to see him quite pleased with the current news. Had he really just been cautious in case the hero's rash actions would stir up the empire?

"It was a dangerous course, but I respect your will that you had to go there nonetheless. You deceived us in a very surprising way, but what's the use of arguing about it now? The hero has returned to our embrace one way or another."

The Pope nodded while speaking gently. His attitude was generous, as if forgiving a young child's rashness.

"Those who left together must have had their own confusions, but in the end they believed in and followed the hero. How could we punish that trust? The aide, the two vice commanders, and..."

As if praising the courage of those who entered such a dangerous place, he sent commending gazes to those who had achieved great feats accompanying the hero, and then.

"Ahem."

As soon as his eyes met his, he cleared his throat. Then he quickly turned his head away as if just looking was ominous. Just now, in a space where everyone was wearing splendid formal attire, he alone was wearing a pitch-black robe, so the gloomy atmosphere stood out even more due to the contrast.

The Pope spoke pretending not to see him.

"I must offer a prayer of thanks to Solnium for watching over my children."

"Father..."

Kalterik's eyes wavered with emotion, seemingly overwhelmed by the Pope's praise. The Pope seemed to be like a father figure in the Order, and Mela and Noi also bowed their waists as if this moment was glorious and joyful.

Only Haren gave a silent bow with a monotonous attitude.

"Thank you, Your Holiness."

It was a very dry voice. The distance of someone who didn't want to use the title 'Father' was evident. Considering what his real father had done, it was understandable to have an aversion to that word itself.

Afterwards, the Pope gave brief welcoming greetings to the distinguished guests and said to Haren.

"Yes, you said you had something you wanted to say. Speak to those who have waited for the hero. Everyone will listen gladly."

The temple's support may have played a part in this welcome party growing so large. As he looked anew at the huge flags hanging on the walls and pillars, Haren climbed the stairs. There was a place that rose like a special seat in a theater, where one could overlook the hall clearly from half a floor up.

Haren quickly scanned the hall and smiled.

"First, I would like to express my gratitude to those who have come here. Though great confusion was caused in the empire due to me over the past few months, you welcome me so warmly, and I feel deep emotion and responsibility together."

The nobles sighed in admiration at the eloquently begun greeting. As if they were being purified just by hearing his voice, they clasped their hands together in rapture, and some shouted competitively that they knew the miracle the hero had performed. They were covering for him, saying they understood why he had faked his death so he didn't need to apologize.

*Hmm,* at this rate it was almost like the hero's fan meeting. The atmosphere was such that it wouldn't be strange if slogans like [PROTECT THE HERO ABSOLUTELY] appeared somewhere. As he looked around sourly, Haren's story continued smoothly.

"Yes, I went undercover with the purpose of purifying and eliminating the unholy lands remaining in Solares. I headed to the Encroachment Zones to erase the traces of the Great Catastrophe..."

Voices praising the hero endlessly filled the hall, and just as the atmosphere was steadily rising.

"There, I confirmed the truth that the Dium is alive."

That one sentence brought silence as if cold water had been poured. Chilling shock and fear poured over everyone's faces. While everyone froze, Haren's words calmly continued.

"I encountered hundreds of Diums in three Encroachment Zones - south, west, and east - and also witnessed them preparing to resurrect their leader, the Dedium. I observed the ritual site, and phenomena like the 'rift' recorded in the past also occurred-."

"Wh-what are you saying! Didn't you say you never saw Diums in the Encroachment Zones?"

The Pope stood up abruptly and asked. Not only the temple personnel but also members of the imperial family all stood up and looked up at Haren with shocked faces, rather surprising him. Was this announcement being made suddenly without prior discussion with the Order?

Haren smiled beautifully.

"I judged it was a matter that should be revealed in front of everyone, with precise evidence."

Then Kalterik and Mela pushed a large cart rumbling towards the center of the banquet hall. The people gathered in the hall stepped back hesitantly. A black cloth covered the cart, and the two removed it at Haren's eye signal.

The moment the cloth was removed, everyone was shocked.

"This is the Dium encountered in the eastern Encroachment Zone."

What was in the cart was the head of a Dium with four horns protruding. Though its form was crushed, the large head made of only black and white clearly announced its heterogeneity. Those who confirmed it muttered "Ca-catastrophe..." and trembled all over.

Originally when Haren brought purifying energy to Encroachment Zones, even the Diums' corpses disappeared. But in the last eastern Encroachment Zone, the four-horned Dium alone didn't vanish even to that energy, or to the light beams that became several times stronger using even Arux.

Haren must have collected the Dium's head from the collapsed snow mountain after he fainted. There could be no more perfect evidence than this. As he was surprised, Beatrice also stepped forward.

### Chapter 132

*Whoosh,* as she waved her hand, two more 'heads' appeared in the air. This time there were two, and one of them was familiar. It was the head of the Death Knight seen in Nadael. The other one, judging by its blue skin, was also a demon race.

"Everyone must know that monsters have been appearing frequently throughout the empire recently. Demon races stronger than during the Human-Demon War are emerging, and their common feature is that they have a 'third horn'. And after careful investigation, we found that it is identical to the Dium's horn."

Beatrice spoke while slowly looking around at the shocked scene.

"It seems the old demon race and new demon race have formed an alliance. The purpose is estimated to be a ploy to divert attention so that the resurrection of the Dedium isn't noticed."

He swallowed an exclamation inwardly. No wonder Beatrice had shown particular interest in the Death Knight's third horn when disguised as mercenaries to subjugate monsters in Nadael.

There were clues about this collusion in the western Encroachment Zone too.

[There is energy received from something that came while preparing the ritual. They said it was a good means to plunge humans into despair, I should try using it.]

The three-horned Dium had said that while using the same nightmare energy as the succubus. And hadn't the ritual master shouted 'that stupid thing finally failed' when Haren took out Arux? Combining these, it seemed the Dium received the succubus's ability but gave 'horns' to the demon race while tasking them with stealing the sky island's treasure.

In the past, they had estimated that Diums were weapons created by the old demon race who were utterly defeated in the Human-Demon War, but after a long time had they become separate living beings and formed a collaboration? Their goals would match since both wanted to conquer the continent.

The banquet hall was in an uproar.

"H-how are Diums still alive?"

"Surely the previous Holy Knight Commander sealed the Dedium and dealt with them all...!"

"To think the Great Catastrophe might come again..."

People trembled in fear. The news that Diums had actually been hiding in the empire that had been peaceful for twenty years seemed quite shocking. Some even staggered and collapsed from the great shock of learning that even the 'Dedium' was awakening.

In the space thrown into chaos, *tap*- Haren lightly tapped the railing to make a noise. Having naturally caught everyone's attention, he looked down. The smile he slowly drew by raising the corners of his mouth was certainly beautiful, but.

"Everyone is wondering how Diums are alive..."

For an instant it looked chillingly cold enough to give goosebumps.

"That was possible because there were traitors who cooperated with the Diums, right?"

The space fell silent at the coldly uttered words. The sound of people drawing in breaths was heard here and there, and just then Noi stepped forward. Noi, who had been waiting behind him as the Holy Knight Commander's aide until now, stood boldly in front of the railing and spoke.

"We discovered nearly a thousand corpses in the eastern Encroachment Zone. It is understood that over the past twenty years, Diums have gained strength and prolonged their lives through sacrifices received from traitors, and we surmised that the method of obtaining such large numbers was through slave markets. The missing persons information provided by Her Highness Imperial Princess Beatrice was of great help in this, and based on that, we investigated starting from the Jerab Special District where the empire's control is weakest."

People whispered "Surely not..." at the news of slave markets, but when the city's name came out, some froze. Recalling the recent commotion there, that is, the incident of the empire's worst criminal being caught, they looked at him abruptly.

And now, realizing who that prisoner was with, their faces turned pale with shock.

"After infiltration and search, we discovered a slave market operating in a place claiming to be a shop dealing with foreign goods."

Then Noi took out a thick scroll from his chest, unrolled it and said.

"I will now read the list of related persons investigated based on the ledgers obtained there and various testimonies. First, the administrator of the Jerab Special District, Count Gomel. Baron Baros of the eastern Lebernaum region. Next to that, Anania's..."

*Rustle rustle rustle-* the scroll's paper fell endlessly. All the empire's nobles and dignitaries had attended today's banquet, which meant they had all fallen into the trap.

Haren stretched his hand forward and calmly ordered.

"By the authority of the Holy Knight Commander, I hereby order the arrest and imprisonment of all those whose names are called from now on. The charges are slave trading and suspicion of treason."

*Tap tap tap*, holy knights entered the banquet hall and escorted the nobles away. As if they had been waiting armed by the commander's orders in advance, they came out and dragged people away each time Noi called a name.

It was like the Jerab gate had opened.

"Oh..."

He was genuinely impressed. So this was why his companions had been busy for days. They had even prepared clear evidence of slave trading for comparison, and when someone protested, Noi kindly recited the transaction dates and amounts one by one.

Some cried out with pale faces.

"N-no! This is a misunderstanding!"

"I absolutely did not side with the Diums...!"

"S-s-so it was just slaves...!"

They shouted that they were not on the Diums' side as if in a last struggle. Perhaps they judged it was better to have only traded slaves than to be branded as traitors. Of course, there might really be those who only used the market to buy slaves...

Noi looked down at them coldly and said.

"The previous Holy Knight Commander personally led the crackdown and abolition of slave trading. Anyone caught trading, regardless of reason, will be punished without distinction. If you have any objections, you may inquire with Sidon or the temple."

Perhaps the slave market was a long-standing evil practice that had continued despite numerous crackdowns. The powerful might have hushed it up among themselves, but now the one leading the punishment was the Holy Knight Commander and hero of the empire. There would be absolutely no escape this time.

He was surprised at how cold Noi's lime-green eyes were, but for a moment they seemed to waver with moisture. How was this moment approaching for him?

Soon Noi shook his head slightly and calmly began reading the list again. Everyone in the banquet hall was frozen and couldn't say a word. As if sensing that showing even a little confusion here now would immediately brand them as traitors, they kept their mouths shut.

Finally, after reading the scroll to the end, Noi said.

"This is the extent of personnel identified so far, but I believe there are certainly more. Slave trading couldn't have occurred only in Jerab. So we plan to establish a department to track traitors from now on. We will persistently find out who are those dreaming of a new world by resurrecting the Dedium..."

The continuing explanation was splendid, but in summary, it seemed like a special investigation. The news that it would operate under the Holy Knight Commander's command was practically a warning. A warning to traitors not yet caught.

The Pope ordered in a dejected tone.

"Open the underground prisons too. This is a matter that must be dealt with severely."

He had staggered at the series of shocking announcements and finally sat down almost collapsing against his chair. Though he had looked somewhat displeased at first when Haren revealed the Diums' survival without prior discussion, now his attitude had completely changed. Following the Pope's orders, cardinals and high priests also hurriedly left the banquet hall.

Even several church personnel were escorted away, and though they called out to the Pope, he didn't even look their way. The cardinal who had overseen his interrogation even ordered their mouths to be shut. It was an unexpected sight, as he had thought they would protect their own.

Though he had been most wary of the church, the numbers seemed fewer than expected? Beside him, Beatrice muttered as if surprised.

"Hmm, even the imperial palace's head steward is being taken away."

It seemed even the imperial princess hadn't checked the list of traitors in advance. Just then, several golden-haired people presumed to be royalty approached and subtly complained why she hadn't given them a heads up, but she just shrugged her shoulders. Saying how could she tell them when she didn't know herself.

In fact, since he didn't know the empire's personnel at all, he was just watching with interest. Oh, that person's being caught, my my that one's being dragged away too, that kind of feeling.

Even watching from this third-party position, he found himself glancing at the holy knights, wondering if this was the atmosphere Haren had intended. Such a terrifying atmosphere would leave a shocking impression on everyone.

That the current Holy Knight Commander of the empire would lead the fight against Diums and purify Encroachment Zones, and would never tolerate traitors.

He looked up at Haren unfamiliarly. The fragments of light pouring from the chandeliers pooled brilliantly in his golden hair, making it look just like a crown.

### Chapter 133

After the great commotion had passed, the banquet resumed.

In fact, he had thought it would end in disaster since the people gathered in the hall were all stiff and the atmosphere was ominous, but the Pope stepped forward and ordered.

"We can't end such a precious occasion like this."

The hero had returned to the Order's embrace after several months. The welcome party had a special meaning to celebrate him, so it was too significant to end just like this.

The banquet proceeded under the Pope's direction. The band began to play, and the nobles gathered to converse while cautiously eyeing each other. As if worried they might look suspicious if they acted awkwardly now, they tried to behave as nonchalantly as possible.

Haren and Noi had come down to the first floor and were giving instructions to the holy knights, while people hovered around waiting for their conversation to end. However, someone who pushed through the crowd as if cutting in line greeted them first.

"Wow. To have investigated so much over the past few months, you're truly amazing!"

The grinning man had a round face and hair that came down to his chin. His deep golden hair and golden eyes were striking, so he glanced at Beatrice. Since the other royals who had approached her earlier all had a similar color combination to this man, he thought this one might be a royal too.

But Beatrice clicked her tongue softly.

"Tsk. With that grinning face."

Her tone was quite harsh. Though she hadn't been very friendly towards the other royals earlier, this time she was downright hostile. No, perhaps it would be more accurate to say she seemed to look down on him.

Suddenly, a memory from the past came to mind.

'That stupid guy should at least do his job properly after taking the crown prince position over me! Someday the Diums' survival will be revealed, and by then the imperial palace should have noticed suspicious points and been investigating to avoid looking foolish! But that guy just grins stupidly!'

It was Beatrice who had suddenly burst into anger while discussing missing persons trends. She had said she told the crown prince first before informing Haren, but he showed no will to search at all. Hmm, could this man be the crown prince then?

"I'm so glad to meet the hero of Solares again."

"I prayed daily at the temple only for the hero's well-being."

A blonde man and woman followed behind him. Seeing the nobles all bow deeply at once saying "Glory to Solares" as soon as the two appeared, he thought they must be the Emperor and Empress. Even Haren bowed his head to greet them.

"It seems the Empress's prayers safely guided me to Hesron."

The Empress covered her mouth with her hand and smiled happily, while the Emperor looked at this scene with satisfaction before casually saying to Beatrice.

"Biche, you should have told Tio too. It would have been good if you had investigated together."

"I told His Highness Terios early on, Your Majesty."

"Ahem, the child must have missed your words being so busy with public and private affairs. Then you should have guided him more as his sister."

"I stopped because Your Majesty previously scolded me for interfering too much with the Crown Prince, it was my oversight."

The Emperor coughed roughly. While he was inwardly applauding Beatrice's way of speaking, the Emperor barely covered his embarrassment and spoke to Haren. He seemed to want to change the subject quickly.

"To go undercover and enter those dangerous Encroachment Zones, eliminate Diums, purify them, and even find traitors. The previous Holy Knight Commander must surely be rejoicing in heaven. You have suffered so much, hero. Now the imperial palace will help with investigating traitors and subjugating the remaining Encroachment Zones."

"The resurrection of the Dedium must absolutely not happen. To think they were hiding in Encroachment Zones making such terrible plans..."

The Empress added. They must have guessed from the earlier announcement that a great battle would unfold in the last Encroachment Zone the hero would head to. So they said the imperial family would provide full support to the hero who would lead the charge, even offering all the treasures containing the empire's thousand-year history.

He had heard that before the Great Catastrophe, the imperial palace and temple had fiercely vied for power. That they had often competed with merits from the Human-Demon War. This would mean the imperial side also had plenty of weapons to counter demons, so it was very welcome if the imperial family cooperated.

"We cannot allow the Dedium to raise its head in a land where the hero exists."

Their surprisingly active goodwill was surprising. Perhaps it was natural given the gravity of the matter. Though their attitude was somewhat subservient, making Beatrice's expression displeased, even she didn't pick at it.

Then a crowd of other nobles rushed over. Now that the Emperor and Empress had broken the ice, they didn't want to miss the opportunity.

"The news that Diums are alive is truly frightening, but we feel reassured because the hero is here!"

"That's right, how fortunate...! We just need to believe in and follow the hero!"

"My family will also support the Dium subjugation in the northern Encroachment Zone!"

"The knights of Yones territory will join too."

Offers of troop support followed one after another. In fact, he had thought the atmosphere would be chaotic or that everyone would shrink back before Haren after seeing people they were just with in the banquet hall being dragged away on suspicion of treason, surprised by his intimidating declaration.

But rather, they approached even more actively than before, shouting they would follow the hero, and their eyes even shone more passionately. Though each was shocked by the news that the Great Catastrophe that had plunged the continent into chaos might be revived, it was as if everything would be fine if they were with the hero.

"I feel reassured with all of you here."

At Haren's smiling words, people nodded with tears in the corners of their eyes. Their expressions were full of emotion as if the hero's path was walking with God.

The atmosphere changed to be much more cheerful with the hero's response.

As if the true banquet had just begun, people laughed, chatted, and danced. Though a great battle was scheduled for the future, today was a rare day when various dignitaries of the empire had gathered, and they happily enjoyed the party, uniting as those who would sincerely follow the hero.

The banquet grew noisier as it reached its peak. Even the holy knights who had finished arresting traitors changed clothes and joined the party. Especially from over there, Kalterik's laughter could be heard loudly.

"Wahaha! Do you know how many Diums I took down in the Encroachment Zones!"

Since they had kept the Diums secret until today, he probably hadn't been able to talk at all about the fierce battles fought while traveling through Encroachment Zones. As if his mouth had been itching, Kalterik poured out stories excitedly, and everyone around him sighed in admiration.

Mela seemed calm beside him, but she quietly added that they had to collapse a ravine to kill the three-horned Dium. Nearby, Noi was also smiling with a much more relaxed face as he met his colleagues from the Order.

The three probably hadn't had time to greet old acquaintances during their busy past few days. For them, today might truly be the day they finally returned to the holy city.

And Haren was, of course, surrounded by people.

If there was one unchanging truth in this banquet hall, it was that there were always many people around him. When Haren took one step, easily thirty people followed in a crowd.

"My eldest son dreamed of becoming a holy knight after seeing the hero, and he finally became a knight candidate this time! He trains hard every day saying he'll definitely earn the name of Sidon!"

"Ah, was it Matis Young?"

"How can this be! To think you remember the child's name, it's an honor! He'll surely be overjoyed!"

Haren continued the conversation eloquently, smiling among them. The nobles who received the hero's response rejoiced as if they had received a great favor, and seeing this, others rushed to speak up too.

He glanced curiously at the scene. There were always many people around him anyway so their eyes wouldn't meet, but he found himself secretly looking. Was he feeling distance as he newly realized how different the hero and he were? Even as he laughed at himself, he glanced slightly when.

"Now, how about this champagne?"

Beatrice suddenly appeared as if blocking his view and spoke to him.

...*Ah,* it seemed like his eyes had almost met Haren's for a moment.

But before he could be sure, the imperial princess grabbed his arm and moved to another place. As this had been repeated several times already, he was now too tired to object. Under the absurd pretext of showing him the beautiful parts of the hall, she dragged him around here and there.

He looked down at the champagne glass handed to him with a sour face.

"I told you I don't want to drink."

"My, and I specially got delicious alcohol."

"...I can't today because I'm not feeling well."

He was extremely weak to alcohol. He had been in his past life, and though he wasn't sure about this body, he thought it was better to be cautious for now. The status window had emphasized not to act up, no, to be careful until the soul connection was undone. So he wanted to avoid alcohol which could be a factor in needless accidents.

Beatrice opened her eyes wide at his refusal.

"You're not feeling well today? Has there ever been a time when you were feeling well?"

*Hey.*

As he glared at her blankly, she burst into loud laughter. She laughed bending over at the waist, apparently not caring about the imperial princess's dignity even in a place with so many nobles. She wiped the tears from the corners of her eyes and said as if satisfied.

"Ah- this is fun, so fun. Since there are many people, I can monopolize you like this. That guy needs to pay for not showing you to me for the past few days."

### Chapter 134

Her words were completely incomprehensible. First, it was bewildering as it seemed she was treating people like objects again, and what was that last part about? Regardless of how strangely he looked at her, she nodded saying she should seize this opportunity, then affectionately grabbed his arm.

"Now, seeing such a splendid imperial palace, doesn't it change your mind a bit?"

"About what?"

"The thought of wanting to stay in such a beautiful place later!"

"Nope, not at all."

He answered in 0.1 seconds and turned his head indifferently. So that was the reason she had shown him around the hall. She had kept leading him, saying the garden beyond the windows looked beautifully different from various angles, but it was truly an absurd and even laughable persuasion.

From the start, he didn't particularly like crowded places, and the more splendid they were, the more burdensome they felt. And in fact, even now...

He had been feeling like a mismatched puzzle piece here the whole time.

"Your Highness, it's an honor to meet you."

"Well, you should consider it an honor."

Quite a few people approached Beatrice too. No matter how peculiar her personality, she was still clearly a royal, so there were many nobles who approached wanting to form connections with the imperial family.

Banquets were usually spaces for building such relationships.

A party to converse together, laugh, and have a good time. Kalterik, Mela, Noi, and... Haren would be perfect examples of people enjoying the party properly.

Though he had felt it a few hours ago too, a new impression struck him.

"...They really seem like people from a different world."

Was it because the event called a banquet and this palace molded from gold itself felt unfamiliar? Or was it the awkwardness of classes like royalty and nobility? The nonsense about him being from a dimension where the class system was abolished - let's just honestly admit it.

He felt that Haren was a very different person from 'him'.

It might have been a sense of disconnect he had felt since the announcement earlier, no, perhaps since the moment he arrived in the holy city. There were always many people around Haren, and he looked comfortable among them. It was fascinating to see him smiling and conversing, naturally forming social relationships. He didn't look awkward at all wearing such splendid clothes and mingling with so many people.

As if this was his true self, and all the glimpses seen when they were alone in the past were just illusions. Everyone loved and wanted him. Well, he knew Haren didn't simply accept that comfortably... but the distance that had gradually widened since entering the banquet hall had completely pushed him into a corner.

"...Hmm."

Right now, he felt like a gloomy loner at max level antisocial.

Wasn't it exactly like that - feeling distance alone from someone who had to stay close somehow when it was just the five of them before coming to the holy city?

He looked around his empty surroundings. Even those who had picked fights at first had now lost interest in him. Building connections with the hero was probably more important now. So no one tried to approach him, and if their eyes happened to meet, they flinched in surprise.

Even as Beatrice dragged him around, people quietly stepped back to make way. The uncomfortable looks were so familiar it was sickening.

*...This is what's familiar to me.*

"I'm tired, so I'll rest a bit."

He blurted out rapid-fire to Beatrice's back as she was drinking, then moved. He felt he should leave this place quickly. Anyway, the reason he had to be present was probably to connect the commotion in the Jerab Special District with the truth in the earlier announcement, so his part was done.

He had heard there were several rooms prepared for guests to rest in the back of the hall. The explanation he had heard while caught by Beatrice was finally useful now.

He immediately found an empty room and entered. Originally, since everyone was desperate to talk with the hero in the hall, the back was completely empty. He wanted to return to the somewhat familiar Holy Knight Order building, but unfortunately, he didn't know the way. They had come here after riding in the imperial princess's carriage for quite a while.

He could just grab anyone and ask for directions, but... right now, he didn't want to receive any more uncomfortable looks. He felt like he had reached some kind of limit.

"Haha..."

A sneer escaped at how ridiculous he looked. Those gazes were all because of Isaph. It was the evil deeds committed by that trash that earned contemptuous looks, not his fault. He tried to shake off the strange feeling by endlessly repeating this to himself.

It just happened to be similar to the looks he received in his past life.

Only after grumbling for a while did he look around the room. They had said it was the most splendid building owned by the imperial palace, and indeed even the guest room was brilliant. He walked slowly across the spacious room, then plopped down in a soft chair and looked up at the ceiling.

"Should I continue making that..."

In fact, he had been making something for the past three days. He had prepared since receiving notice from the status window that the resolution was complete, and had planned to give 'that' to Haren after severing the soul connection.

It was quite an impulsively conceived plan, so at first he had mocked himself and discarded it, but after being bored with nothing to do in the room for days, he had ended up picking it up again.

And now that he happened to have time...

He took out the materials from his chest. They say handwork erases idle thoughts, so this was just what he needed now. Though he had failed several times due to lack of dexterity, this time it seemed like he might succeed. Somehow he was filled with this groundless confidence every time he tried anew, but anyway he moved his hands boldly.

His mind gradually emptied. He only thought that the cat would appear when severing the soul tomorrow, so he must catch the NPC. This time he had to prevent it from running away.

"Should I make a trap with cat treats... Oh, come to think of it, that cat doesn't eat anything...? It's really not an ordinary familiar..."

As he muttered to himself, becoming absorbed in his work, suddenly there was a knock-knock sound. Someone was knocking on the door. As he raised his head quizzically, wondering how to react in this situation, there was another *knock-knock*, so he reluctantly got up.

*Knock-knock-* He also approached the door and knocked lightly. Thinking it was probably a guest looking for an empty room, he responded with a presence. If they had business, they would have stated their purpose first.

But this time knock-knock-knock- the sound came three times.

What? Did they not hear? Bewildered, he also knocked harder *knock-knock-knock!* Then from the other side came *knock-knock-knock-knock-* four times.

*Are they joking?*

Finally he grabbed the doorknob. Opening the door just a little so the guest couldn't confirm it was him, he said irritably.

"Someone's here..."

"Yeah, I know."

*Bang!* A hand that came through that gap abruptly flung the door open. Completely caught off guard by the intrusion, he flinched and stepped back a couple paces, and the other person naturally walked into the room.

Smiling brightly, pink eyes looked straight at him. Sky blue and pink mixed in a mysterious way, hair like a sunset at the beach. There was only one person with this unique color combination.

"...Laria?"

Laria, the owner of Lara Workshop he had visited in Nadael and Isaph's old acquaintance, had come here.

As he just blinked his eyes at the truly unexpected visitor, she smiled. Her attitude of closing the door again was very natural.

"Someone said they saw you go in here. After all, you're bound to stand out wandering around in just a gloomy black robe even in such a splendid building? Thanks to that, I found you easily!"

"...You were looking for me? Why?"

"Of course I'd be curious when so many things happened to my friend?"

Her attitude of spreading both arms wide as she spoke looked quite indignant. As if very hurt by his cool reaction, she poured out words saying how could he look at her with suspicion right after meeting.

"How surprised do you think I was when I heard you were caught by bounty hunters! I rushed to the holy city but couldn't even meet you! They say the hero took you out as soon as he returned, how could you not send even one message to me until now?!"

He looked at Laria dazedly as she said she had waited, thinking he would attend this banquet as part of the hero's group. Was she worried about Isaph...?

"If you came back to the holy city, shouldn't you pay back the money!"

*Ah*.

"94 gold for the ring, and 134 gold in total including all the potions you took!"

So she had caught all the potions he had swiped too. While being forced to buy the ring, he had taken a few potions too, but it seemed there were no freebies or extras even for friends.

Inwardly uncomfortable at having to meet Isaph's past acquaintance without the NPC, he had been slowly backing away, but rather his wariness decreased upon grasping her purpose. When he stopped retreating, she finally approached with a satisfied smile.

As she headed for the table, he hurriedly hid the things spread out on top. Laria just shrugged and sat on the opposite sofa.

"Now- since you suffered in prison, a gift!"

"..."

"This is free. So don't hesitate and eat."

What Laria placed on the table was a white box. When he shot her a suspicious look in case she might saddle him with more debt, she chuckled and said that, so he finally opened the box happily. In fact, a very sweet smell had been wafting since the moment Laria visited.

As he had guessed, inside the box were two pretty tarts. *In Korea they give tofu to released prisoners, do they give tarts here?* One was a grape tart, the other a chocolate tart. But while the fruit tart looked plain, the chocolate tart's topping was extremely excessive.

Chocolate cream was piled high like a mountain on top of the tart, brownies and chocolate chips were stuck in abundantly, and syrup was drizzled so generously it flowed down to the bottom of the box. It was a dessert that looked sweet enough to make your tongue ache just by looking at it.

"Thanks."

And he quickly picked up that one. His sugar levels had just dropped. Since the moment Beatrice had dragged him away in the morning, he had felt stuffy as if something was stuck in his stomach, so he hadn't eaten a single meal. Though food had been prepared on one side of the banquet hall, the atmosphere was not at all conducive to eating so he couldn't even approach it.

As he happily scooped it up with a fork, Laria stared at him blankly, then smiled brightly. Somehow it seemed like she had been watching all along to see which one he would choose.

### Chapter 135

"I thought there was no way you'd be caught by bounty hunters, but hearing today's banquet announcement, it seems you were caught on purpose? Was it to divert attention to hide the hero's investigation?"

"That's part of it, but the situation got complicated because of me then. As I tried to take responsibility, well, the background is a bit complex."

"Wow, to think Isaph could be this altruistic. It really doesn't suit you, could it be you were influenced by traveling with the hero?"

As he mumbled answers while eating the tart, Laria clapped her hands in amazement. It was clearly a teasing reaction, so he didn't even look at her as she asked in a bright tone.

"Since you suffered so much, you must be getting a hefty allowance from the hero?"

"...Hmm, probably. I'll pay you back as soon as possible."

Though her persistent debt collection was bewildering, he couldn't pretend not to know since both the ring and potions had been very effective. The ring had protected him from the Encroachment Zone's contamination, and he had used the potions to treat Haren's fatal wounds.

Although Haren had seemed reluctant to give cash as compensation for his hardships, wouldn't he pay on his behalf in this situation? It was a debt incurred while obtaining items necessary for entering Encroachment Zones. He didn't think the hero wouldn't have that much money.

Maybe it could be resolved right away if he just gave one button from the clothes he was wearing now...

As he nodded while recalling the gold buttons on the formal uniform, Laria smiled and took something out of her chest, waving it.

"That's right. If you want this item back, shouldn't you pay up quickly?"

What she held in her hand was a white stick, the object he had brought down from the sky island. She had taken it as collateral when he said he had no money at the workshop. Though he was glad to see the flashlight after a long time, a sudden cunning thought arose.

Now that he was back in the holy city, there would be plenty of other magical tools that could serve as flashlights. So was there really a need to get that back? Should he just hand it over and pretend not to know about the debt, keeping his mouth shut? It was a debt he had been forced into anyway.

As he was fiercely turning over these crafty thoughts, Laria said.

"After parting with you, I got bored and analyzed this, and found one very peculiar point."

"...A peculiar point? What kind?"

"No matter how I tried, I couldn't analyze it. There shouldn't be any item in this land that I can't analyze!"

*What's with this confidence?* When he looked at her with bewildered eyes, she shook her head firmly. She declared her skills were certain, asking if he knew how many diverse items she had received and analyzed from mercenaries so far.

Lara Workshop was said to be known to all mercenaries in the empire. It was a place with loyal mercenary customers who could shield them from the temple's watchful eyes, to the extent that they boldly sold healing potions monopolized by the temple. Moreover, since she said they repaired various weapons too, as the owner of such a workshop, she would certainly have encountered many items. Mercenaries traveled to various places after all.

Then could the fact that she couldn't analyze it itself have some special meaning? As he pondered uncertainly, Laria raised her hand holding the white stick high. Her expression of narrowing her eyes while letting the ceiling light shine on the object was quite serious.

Only after staring at the stick for a long time did Laria lower her gaze. Her eyes, which subtly turned towards him as he was quietly eating the tart again, held a strange light.

"So this means, it's not an item from this land."

*Well,* that's true since it was brought from the sky island...

"It probably isn't a human item either."

*What?*

His eyes widened in surprise. That stick was an object that had been on the hand of the Solnium god statue behind the first emperor's stele. He had naturally thought it was a kind of funerary object placed by those who made the tomb, but what was this meaningful statement? Just as curiosity welled up and he was about to quickly ask.

Laria smiled brightly.

"By the way, you're not Isaph, are you?"

*...Huh?*

His thoughts stopped abruptly. He couldn't even breathe at the shocking statement. Though he should react as calmly as possible, the more he saw the pink eyes smiling brightly at him, the dizzier his head became.

He tried to calm down while taking deep breaths with difficulty. Perhaps Laria and Isaph often played like this? Right, hadn't she said they had known each other since childhood? So he clung to the possibility that it could be a joke he didn't know about.

"...What are you saying out of nowhere. It's not funny."

"Ahaha, really? I suddenly remembered a joke we used to play when we were young and tried it, but was it a failure?"

"Hah, how old are you to still—"

"And I only first met Isaph about 4 years ago."

"..."

He had fallen into a trap.

His fingertips began to tremble. Why? Wasn't it a rule in possession stories that those around wouldn't notice the possessor's changes? No matter how differently they acted from the original person, shouldn't they just think 'I guess their mind has changed now!' and let it pass? Implicitly, they shouldn't bring up the past, and should just show interest and favor towards the new appearance.

Moreover, did this mean Laria had noticed something strange from the start?

'Let's meet again. Then we'll talk about our childhood days after a long time.'

Laria had said such a greeting when they first parted. At the time, he had nodded and retreated because he had to leave urgently... Did she already know he wasn't Isaph?

He looked around unsteadily. Where was En, the NPC? It should be time for it to appear, but the window was just quiet. The curtains were all drawn so he couldn't even see outside. Anger, bewilderment, and shock all mixed together. It was with him at the workshop, so why didn't it give any warning!

Meanwhile, Laria's story continued calmly.

"You'd better get out of that body quickly. Ah, I had heard that among necromancers, those with poor abilities sometimes try to subjugate strong evil spirits and end up having their bodies taken over instead, but I didn't know it would be Isaph..."

*If I could leave this body, I would have done so long ago!* Though he protested vigorously inside, his whole body was stiff with shock and he couldn't even open his mouth. Laria's behavior was still light and playful, but he felt crushed by a terrible tension all over his body.

As he just froze, Laria shook her head.

"Isaph wasn't the type to be caught like that, hmm, is it the effect of weakening after the Klam incident? Did something take advantage of that gap to squeeze in?"

"..."

"Anyway, if you want to die peacefully, come out now. If that friend finds out, he'll tear you to pieces, you know? Well, you're probably already dead."

Laria looked at him and advised. As if this was really only for his sake, as if she was just worried, she spoke kindly while meeting his eyes.

"Isaph is a genius to a frightening degree when it comes to necromancy, so you might suffer even worse than you imagine. He's not that bad a friend... No, he is bad, but..."

Her voice swirled dizzily in his head. It felt like a huge iron ball had struck his head making it ring, and his whole body seemed to be swept up in a whirlpool. What on earth should he say? What could he say to someone who had already noticed, no, was certain that he wasn't Isaph?

Wasn't this a problem for game progression too? In such a serious situation, a status window should appear. After looking around the air resentfully, he finally hung his head low.

His hands resting on his knees clenched tightly.

"A-actually, I've lost my memories."

"Hm?"

"As you said, I weakened after the Klam incident, and when I was arrested, no, while I was imprisoned, there must have been some problem. I only have memories from the day I escaped..."

He brought up memory loss, the cheat key that explains the protagonist's strange behavior in possession stories. It was the only solution he could think of in the current situation. Usually this should be used at the beginning of possession to arouse less suspicion! The reason for Laria's silence was obvious, so he added words haltingly.

"The reason I recognized you in Nadael is because memories are coming back sporadically. Old things are a bit mixed up, so I must have thought you were a friend I knew since childhood. Since you said something like that too..."

"Oh my..."

Laria sighed deeply and then came to sit beside him. He tried to flinch away from the extremely ominous approach, but she grasped his hand as if feeling sorry for him. It was an infinitely gentle touch.

"To think such a thing happened, you must have suffered a lot..."

"Y-yeah. So..."

"Friend. You seem to be having trouble making up excuses, shall I help you?"

*Click*, before he could show any reaction, handcuffs were fastened on his wrists. Laria's ring had transformed into a snake-like form and bound both his wrists.

*Damn it,* she didn't believe him at all. Since he didn't know how much Laria knew about Isaph, it had been a gamble with low odds from the start, but he hadn't expected the outcome to be like this

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He tried to move his arms but couldn't break free from the handcuffs. His hands sank down as if a one-ton weight had been attached. It was even difficult to keep them on his knees, and his wrists hurt as if they would break.

"I've heard that the longer an evil spirit stays in a body, the more tenaciously it tries to cling. You seem duller than I expected so you might not be an evil spirit, but anyway, since you don't seem to have any intention of leaving on your own... I'll have to use some methods."

"..."

"Isaph said, the more you know about a soul, the easier it is to control. So from now on, you have to 'answer' my questions honestly."

The eyes looking straight at him were chilling. Was it fear of the situation? No, his whole body had tensed from the moment Laria uttered the word 'answer'. His goosebumps rose and all his nerves reacted abnormally to her voice.

"Are you ready now? Answer."

"...Yes."

His mouth moved on its own. His body obeyed as if Laria's word 'answer' was an activation phrase, and he instinctively guessed the cause.

*The tart.*

Something must have been in it. Wasn't Laria a famous alchemist? So she must have deliberately fed him something like a truth potion mixed into the food! Whether he was horrified or not, Laria's questions began.

"Well then, shall we start with the basics. How old is our friend? Answer."

"...Tw-twenty, four."

Though he tried to grit his teeth and resist somehow, his lips parted forcibly. As he answered while groaning, Laria looked him over with strange eyes. Was his desperate attempt to refuse amusing? She shrugged her shoulders and then threw out the next question.

"Is our friend from the Holy Empire? Answer."

"...N-no."

*Damn it, I'm from another dimension, not even the empire!*

He felt hopeless as he absolutely couldn't stop the action of answering. It was impossible to even raise his hand to cover his mouth.

*What's going to happen to me now? If this kind of questioning continues, won't it eventually reveal that I'm a 'player'?* *Will the game forcibly end if that truth is exposed to a character in the game? Is this another hidden bad ending in the game?*

"Hmm, then... What's our friend's name? Answer."

"I, nngh."

"You have to answer?"

"...Evan."

Finally, his name from his past life, from Earth, burst out. He had tried to hold back somehow, uselessly recalling the folk tale that you die if the grim reaper calls your name three times, but it came out in the end.

*Shit...*

He recalled it after months. His original name, Evan. It felt endlessly unfamiliar, as he had only lived as 'Isaph' since entering this world. The orphanage had probably given it to him, but he had rarely experienced being called by it so he didn't have any particular attachment. Moreover, since his life on Earth had ended, it was a completely finished name he would never use anyway.

*Hah*. As he sighed and resigned himself inwardly, somehow there was no reaction from Laria. He had expected more questions, so why was it quiet? He raised his head quizzically and...

"Ah, hahah, ha..."

He found her covering her mouth with her hand, with a very embarrassed expression. As if she had made a huge mistake, her face had turned pale and she was even sweating profusely.

Laria met his eyes and burst into an awkward laugh, saying:

"It is you...?"

"...What?"

"Your original name is 'Evan', isn't it."

Laria busily moved her hands in front of him as he froze stiff. Her movements to undo the handcuffs were full of awkwardness, apology, and even bewilderment at having made a mistake.

As if she had uncovered a part that shouldn't have been touched.

"You, when you came over to the Holy Empire, you changed your name 'Evan' and hid it in your current name. Isaph van Dina. You said you didn't like others calling you that but wanted to keep it in your name..."

"..."

"When I accidentally analyzed your belongings before and uttered that name, you tried to kill me right away, ah, I'm really sorry. You really had lost your memories. I thought it was a coincidence until the ages matched, but I made a mistake."

His silence seemed to come across as a threat to Laria, and she rambled on. There was a desperate energy trying to change the atmosphere somehow. As if what she had suffered when she called the name 'Evan' in the past had been terribly frightening.

"Haha, actually I thought it was a bit strange when you chose the chocolate-covered tart from the start! Who would choose something so sickeningly sweet, if not someone like you. I wondered if an evil spirit had somehow figured out the original's taste and was imitating it, but haha, it was you. Right, there's no way you would be caught by an evil spirit! I was just trying to find out because I was worried about you. You know that, right? Hm? I'm on your side."

"..."

"Well, you must have summoned undead while going around Encroachment Zones, so it's definitely you, I was just needlessly suspicious. To use your abilities like that even after losing your memories, you're really amazing. As expected of a necromancy genius! Hahah, ahahaha. Oh right, the tart's effects will disappear after an hour! There are no other problems for your body at all, so don't worry!"

The words pouring out didn't enter his ears at all. They seemed to bounce off his ears. He quietly looked down at his hands, now free from the handcuffs.

His vision spun. Whether from the tart's effects or his wildly beating heart making him dizzy, nausea welled up. Suddenly he felt as if he had dropped out of this space and was observing as a third party, then abruptly felt chills as if thrown back into this reality.

He repeatedly clenched and unclenched his fist with difficulty. Feeling incredibly unfamiliar with the body moving according to 'his' will, he asked in a choked voice:

"...My original name, is Evan."

"Yes. Though now no one would be able to call you that..."

*Beeeeeep*- A ringing began in his head.

\*\*\*

The surroundings were noisy.

The sound of people laughing and chattering, music, the clink of glasses, someone's scream from over there, and then the noise of something falling over. All sorts of things mixed together, swirling around his ears and making his head dizzy. He tried covering his ears but it was no use at all.

*Why is it so noisy?*

*Where am I, and what am I doing now?*

He tried desperately to grasp his mental thread, but it was difficult to catch something floating so buoyantly. Even his body felt like it was about to float away, so he had to flail about. Following the hazy judgment that he should get out of this chaotic place, he stood up only to stagger and fall over.

Someone firmly caught his collapsing body.

"...ph. Isaph!"

A clear voice pierced his ears. He blinked his eyelids slowly and wiped his blurry vision. It took a long time to properly identify the other person as his focus kept wandering.

*Oh, why is Haren in front of me?*

He looked around painfully with his splitting headache. He had been about to collapse onto the table, and Haren had caught his body with his arms. Only upon seeing the many bottles of alcohol on that table did he realize what he had been doing for the past while.

*Ah... I was drinking...*

After Laria left, he had come out of the room. Unable to bear the silence in there, he had entered the banquet hall and encountered Beatrice, and had downed the glass of alcohol she offered in one gulp.

Beatrice had been very pleased and led him to a table to drink together, but after crossing some line, her expression gradually became serious. The smile disappeared from her face and she tried to take away his glass saying he should stop drinking, but just then he spotted a servant carrying wine bottles and glasses nearby and approached.

The servant was startled by his sudden approach and fell over. Whether because he had roughly taken the bottle as if robbing it, or because the person approaching was Isaph, the servant even screamed as they fell, causing a commotion around. Wine glasses shattered with a crash, spreading the disturbance further.

Regardless, he had continued drinking. No, he had just poured it down his throat straight from the bottle, so Beatrice had probably called Haren or he had come first to find the cause of the commotion.

"Ah, I caused trouble... Haha, everyone must be uncomfortable. I should leave quickly..."

He rambled incoherently, not even knowing what he was saying, as he pushed Haren away and moved. For now, since the area around him was empty again, with no one within a 10m radius, he just thought he should get out of there quickly.

Uncomfortable gazes flew at him from all around. Though at first they had been afraid of the necromancer's rampage, now that the hero had stepped in, they shot glares at him with relief. Their eyes were fierce, as if looking at a rude person ruining the party.

"I'll, leave on my own, so you, stay here..."

"Stay still."

As he tried to walk away staggering, Haren firmly grabbed his arm and led him. Though it seemed like he was supporting him, in reality he was probably half-carried as they moved. Ah, was this escorting a drunk troublemaker?

*Click*.

Haren headed for a guest room at the back of the hall. A sigh escaped as it happened to be exactly the same room he had rested in earlier, but in the end he sat on the sofa led by Haren's touch. His body crumbled as if lying down.

"Why on earth did you drink so much? Did something happen?"

"Is the busy protagonist even concerned about a drunk like me?"

"Isaph."

He looked up at Haren while advertising his drunkenness with just his voice. He found it strange that Haren kept questioning him when he should just go back now that he had chased him out of the banquet hall. He tried waving his limp arm to tell him to leave, but Haren just stared down at him.

After blankly meeting that gaze, he belatedly guessed the reason and let out a dry laugh.

"Aah, don't worry. This isn't a 'problem' so it won't affect severing the soul? Since I'm not cursed or anything..."

"..."

"We'll be able to finish it safely tomorrow. This body should be able to do it? This body, no, I?"

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Only incoherent words came out. *Was it because he was drunk, or was his head just a complete mess from the start?* It was utterly difficult to think about anything calmly.

Anyway, Haren's curiosity must have been satisfied, so he waved his hand again telling him to leave, but Haren grabbed his wrist.

"Isaph. Did something happen when you were with Beatrice? Or did some problem occur when you left the hall a few hours ago?"

"...Huh?"

His persistent questioning was bewildering enough, but this time the content was even more surprising. *Did he say he saw him leaving the hall? Could it be he knew about this room and deliberately came in?* Indeed, Haren looked around as if exploring the surroundings.

As he just blinked, Haren's questions continued. No, by now it was closer to an interrogation than questions.

"Why did you drink alcohol so uncharacteristically? You seem weak to alcohol, so why did you drink so much in such a short time? What on earth happened-"

"Can't I just drink, why do you keep..."

"Answer me."

"Ah. Why are you suddenly being so persistent?"

However, one word Haren chose happened to twist his mood, and he shook off his hand irritably. But Haren didn't back down. Though it was partly because he was more languid from being heavily drunk, it seemed Haren had no intention of letting go from the start.

In the end, as only his arm swayed like seaweed, anger welled up towards Haren for making him look so ridiculous. He stood up abruptly and glared at him fiercely, saying:

"Why. Are you trying to prevent me from causing trouble again like before? Because you're the hero and have to protect people? You must be very busy if you have to manage even troublemakers like this one by one."

"Isaph."

"Is it because I ruined the atmosphere of the banquet hall? You must have been having fun with everyone, but I just had to cause a problem. So you're trying to make me restrain myself, to stop making the guests uncomfortable..."

His voice trembled as he demanded if that was why he kept prying. He tried to be sarcastic out of indignation, but in the end just bit his lip hard. He covered his face with his left hand as if hiding it. He was being too emotional because of the alcohol.

Even before that commotion occurred, everyone had been looking at him uncomfortably.

Just hours ago, he had drawn a line saying those gazes weren't because of 'him', but stemmed from the trashy evil deeds committed by this body's owner. He had told himself over and over that it was just because they were similar to the gazes he had received to the point of nausea in his past life, that he was being oversensitive, that he should distinguish between them...

But now, he...

"...Right, I was wrong. I'll stay here quietly until I sober up, I won't cause any more trouble so you can go back now."

He spoke in a voice drained of strength. After all, the gazes he had just received in the banquet hall were because of the commotion he had caused. Though the servant had reacted strongly, he had still deliberately approached and taken the wine bottle knowing everyone disliked him. This was 'his' action.

Haren gripped his wrist again.

"Isaph, that's not why I was asking. I just..."

Though his action of still not letting go was bewildering, nevertheless his touch felt a little, just a little gentler than before. As if trying to soothe him, carefully enveloping.

"I was just trying to check if someone had bullied you again like at the Order. Seeing you drink so much alcohol, it seems like something unpleasant happened, huu, if I had been with you from the start, no problems would have occurred."

His behavior of being certain bullying had occurred was quite strange. Should he be bewildered that Isaph wasn't the type to suffer such things, or should he nitpick asking what business it was of his if such a thing happened?

Moreover, his voice sounded as if he had been frustrated about being separated for the past few hours, making him even more confused. Had his ears gone bad from being too drunk?

"I was trying to go to you but Beatrice kept hiding among people so it was difficult. I had only left you with her for a while because it would be chaotic until the announcement, but I didn't expect her to keep running away with you afterwards..."

"...You were trying to come to me? Why?"

He became even more confused by Haren's muttering. As he finally removed the hand covering his face and looked at him, their gazes immediately tangled with the blue eyes.

He answered only after moving his lips a couple times.

"...Because I'm the one holding your right of disposition now. So it's also my role to make sure no unnecessary disturbances occur."

The words about preventing trouble would be in a similar context to what he had sarcastically said earlier in his anger. However, somehow now the indignant feelings didn't well up. The words that Haren had been watching him the whole time even while surrounded by so many people in the banquet hall, that he had been trying to come to him, just made his heart flutter.

*Thump thump*, even his heart seemed to beat faster. Dismissing this as just being due to his drunkenness, he turned his head abruptly.

"Why. Are you afraid I'll summon undead again like at the Order?"

"...Hmm."

*What, why aren't you denying it?*

He was bewildered by Haren's silence after needlessly nitpicking. But he felt too guilty to voice his complaints out loud, given how many incidents and accidents he had caused. Hadn't Haren often used expressions saying he was unpredictable?

Moreover, Haren had once inquired about his future course after sentence reduction, saying what would happen to his position if a prisoner he had stepped forward to reduce the sentence for caused a disturbance. Though he had been bewildered then, asking if it was protective custody, he had really caused a commotion in the banquet hall today and put him in a difficult position...

Had his caution level risen even higher for causing problems while still under his right of disposition? Was he trying to keep close watch now... *No, but I only took a wine bottle, wasn't the servant's overreaction the problem?* *Though of course it was understandable to be surprised when I appeared gloomily out of nowhere!*

As he grumbled inwardly, Haren let out a small laugh. As if his thoughts were clearly readable on his face, he chuckled and shook his head.

"Though I can't say for certain that's not the reason, more than that, if you summon undead you'll receive unfavorable gazes. I just wanted to prevent that."

His gentle voice rang out as if soothing him. He stared at him blankly. This time, it really sounded like nothing but concern. Both his caring about what kind of gazes he would receive, and his saying he tried to prevent it.

*Thump thump thump*, his heart beat loudly. It pounded much faster than before, sending heat throughout his body.

"...Forget it. I'm just going to sleep, so you can leave now."

This is because of the alcohol, surely just that. Repeating this to himself, he ordered him to leave and fumblingly took off his robe. It was both an expression of his intention to sleep and because he was too hot and needed to remove his outer clothing at least.

*Thud*-

As he flailed several times in his dazed state, almost like molting as he took off his robe, something fell from his chest. Instead of him, who was focused on fighting with his clothes without even realizing, Haren picked it up from the floor.

"What's this?"

A black ball of fur. With his dizzy vision, he couldn't make out what Haren was holding well, so he sighed only after narrowing his eyes. It was the gift he had planned to give Haren tomorrow. He had hastily hidden it and stuffed it into his robe a few hours ago, so it had fallen out like this. It wasn't finished yet...

Meanwhile, Haren looked the ball of fur over. As if he had guessed its identity even in its unfinished state, he asked with a very uncomfortable expression.

"Don't tell me, is this a curse doll?"

"It's a worry doll."

He explained in a burst of emotion. *Isn't that looking at it too harshly even if it's unfinished? Of course, well, it did look quite eerie with its limbs dangling and neck tilted! It was even understandable to see it that way since it had fallen from a pitch-black robe!*

"...A worry doll?"

"It's a doll that eats worries and anxieties for you. There's a story that if you put it under your pillow when you sleep, the doll takes away nightmares too..."

*Was there no such custom in this world? It was about the doll eating worries when you confide in it, because people often feel much better just by having somewhere to express their inner thoughts. Though it might be a playful superstition, sometimes such things can provide comfort.*

"Hah, I had prepared it to give to you after severing the soul tomorrow..."

"...To me? Why?"

As he spoke with a deep sigh, Haren reacted in bewilderment. At first his eyes showed that it was unexpected for 'him' to have such a doll, but then his face became very confused at hearing it was a gift.

He touched his nape and answered roughly. In fact, he had long pondered how to explain and give this part, but thanks to being drunk, the words came out easily. The honest purpose and raw sincerity.

"So you won't have nightmares. Because I won't be able to wake you up anymore."

"..."

"Well, it's also an expression of apology for suddenly connecting our souls... No, but I think I suffered more, didn't I?"

As he rambled on, Haren's gaze quietly turned to him. As always, they were calmly beautiful eyes, but for an instant they seemed to waver greatly.

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He knew the worry doll was quite out of the blue. In some ways, it could be seen as meddling. But inwardly, he had been uneasy about glimpsing Haren's nightmares, so he wanted to offer an apology like this somehow.

In fact, he couldn't be certain that Haren wouldn't have nightmares just because he gave him a doll, no, surely nightmares would visit him again someday, but still... *Wouldn't this absurd gift come to mind at least once after waking up? Like laughing at how ineffective the worry doll was.*

Since they say some memories can never be forgotten, he hoped it would be covered by amusing memories instead.

"..."

Slowly, Haren lowered his gaze. His action of just holding the black doll without saying anything somehow made him feel embarrassed. He hadn't thought it was such a small doll, but it looked very tiny in Haren's large palm.

"...The button used for the doll's eye is about to fall off."

"I-I was in the middle of making it. It's not finished yet."

"If possible, I'd like it to have purple buttons."

"Huh? I don't have that color..."

"I'll get some for you."

The sudden request was puzzling. *What? Does this mean he doesn't dislike the doll at least?* He nodded, half relieved and half bewildered. Actually, since Haren had discovered it, he felt it was over and was too lazy to work on it more, but since he had called it a 'gift', should he reflect his preferences?

On the other hand, he felt a bit awkward as Haren kept fiddling with the doll. Though he didn't know what he meant by muttering "Is it weak like its owner..." while shaking its dangling limbs, he felt embarrassed as he kept touching the unfinished parts of the doll. Even to him, it looked too amateurish.

Haren had received all sorts of splendid gifts in the banquet hall. Since the Order, imperial family, and nobles had lined up to offer treasures welcoming the hero's return, his doll looked several times shabbier now. *Why did such a banquet have to be held today of all days?*

"If Laria had come 30 minutes later, I would have finished it at least..."

"...Laria?"

Haren reacted to the words he had mumbled as if to himself.

"Who is that person? Judging by you saying they 'came', were you two together in the room?"

The suddenly pouring questions were quite sharp. As he stared at him as if demanding an answer, he blankly nodded.

"Yeah. She's my old... no, the owner of Lara Workshop..."

"Why did the workshop owner come looking for you?"

"The ring and potions I took when going to the eastern Encroachment Zone were all on credit. So she came to demand repayment of the debt."

His head was gradually getting dizzy. Though he answered as if swept along by Haren's urging, his mind was spinning. After painfully retracing his hazy memories, he soon chuckled. *Right,* at first he had thought the reason Laria came was just to collect the debt...

"Haha, but now she probably won't charge me..."

Considering what happened afterwards, it seemed it would likely be written off. Laria had apologized to him repeatedly and then left the room as if fleeing. Recalling that scene kept making him laugh dryly.

*What was the big deal about 'that name'.*

Giggling, he laughed with his head down, and Haren grabbed his shoulder.

"Isaph. What conversation did you have with that person?"

"I told you, I was pressured about the debt. So I even made plans to rip off one of your buttons-"

"There's no way she came all the way here just for such a reason. What exactly happened?"

Haren asked persistently, cutting off his nonsense sharply. He said if it was just about credit, they could have talked in the banquet hall, so why did she come to the room separately? And if they had met before coming to the holy city, how did she know his identity and come all the way here?A barrage of questions followed.

*Is he trying to check if he had been bullied again?* But when he looked up, a different energy was wavering on his face compared to when he had been interrogating earlier. As if, with a look of great displeasure and dissatisfaction.

"What on earth did you two do alone for you to laugh like this?"

He stared blankly at Haren, who looked ready to summon the Lara Workshop owner for questioning by his authority as Holy Knight Commander. Thanks to his persistence, the memories he had barely buried with alcohol resurfaced, and on the other hand, it made him think of a certain solution.

He stepped closer to him and said:

"Before, you said it seemed like there were more souls in my body."

"...?"

"Is that still the same? How is it? Is there still something else now?"

Haren looked down at him with puzzled eyes. At first he seemed like he was going to point out not to change the subject, but his expression became strange as if the content was quite out of the blue. Regardless, he asked very seriously.

"Whether it's two or three... I don't care what it is. Hm? Tell me."

In the past, in the eastern Encroachment Zone, Haren had said it seemed like something very strange was inside his body. At that time, he had prevented Haren from trying to sense his soul in more detail, but now he desperately wanted his answer.

'Your original name is 'Evan', isn't it.'

It was just a coincidence that the names overlapped. *Yes, perhaps it was a setting where only people with the same names from different dimensions were connected? Like only souls named 'Evan' could possess Isaph's body as players?*

The more he imagined, the more plausible it seemed. The ages being the same too was either a coincidence, or this could even be a qualification requirement. Wouldn't there be more than enough people with the same name and age from the previous dimension, and similar tastes?

With an anxious feeling, he grabbed Haren's hand and placed it on his chest.

"Focus on me. How is it? Do you feel anything different?"

Since they would sever the soul connection tomorrow, today was the last chance. He had never been able to feel the state of this body himself, so he hoped Haren could read it. Wasn't he the hero revered by this world? He hoped, desperately hoped, that the son loved by God would see something strange.

Haren looked at him with a confused face. He seemed unable to understand any of his actions, but when he gripped his hand tightly again, he finally lowered his gaze slowly.

Quietly looking at the hand placed on his chest, exactly over his heart.

"Yes. There is something strange. I still can't tell if there are two souls or three, but the feeling that something else is in that body remains. It's a very heterogeneous energy..."

At the answer that finally came from his mouth, the tension drained away with a *thud*. Though it was somewhat vague, those words alone were so welcome. In the past, he had lightly dismissed the reason Haren felt multiple souls as just being because he was broken from being hit by a truck, but now he focused on the part about being 'different'.

"I see, so that's it..."

*Isaph and 'I' are clearly different beings.*

Relief and joy rushed in like a flood, and he quietly savored that wave of emotion. Right, how could they be the same person in the first place? He had clear memories of 24 years lived on Earth and this was clearly a 'game'. Even status windows appeared, yet he had fallen into such an absurd confusion that it was newly amusing.

Looking back, he had reacted excessively to an incomprehensible degree. It was just a coincidence that the names overlapped, yet why did goosebumps rise the moment he heard that name from Laria's mouth? Of course he would be surprised if a game character called his real name...

"Why are you suddenly asking this?"

"I just got curious out of the blue. Haha, aren't you curious too? If there really is something else in this body, you might actually be talking to a being that's not Isaph right now. Wow, it's scary, so scary."

"...Are you very drunk?"

Haren looked at him very sourly. He had tried to speak gloomily with the concept of 'Do I still look like Isaph to you?', but it seemed to have completely failed due to his very drunk voice.

Feeling embarrassed, amused, and all sorts of mixed emotions, he just laughed emptily, and Haren grabbed him. Thinking he would probably ask why again, he waved his hand and said:

"Forget it. It's just nonsense from a drunk, so you can..."

"What on earth happened for you to have such an expression like you're about to cry?"

The touch gently cradling his eyes was so soft that he blankly looked up at Haren. *Do I have a face like I am about to cry? I am just happy, so why?* He was feeling relieved that Isaph and 'he' were different beings, and yet...

Perhaps, just perhaps, that fact was newly separating him from this world. If there was another soul in this body, it would be the original owner's soul, and if so, after the quest ended he would have to return the body to him and leave.

Freedom.

Though it was the reward he had desperately longed for, his head was complicated. Meanwhile, Haren's hand still cupping his face was warm, making him even dizzier. He could just return to the banquet hall now, so why was he doing this? Even though he had asked quite a strange question again, Haren was rather concerned about his condition instead of that.

His insides churned. Was it because this touch was so gentle, because the words he had said echoed in his mind, because the familiarity of his hand he was now holding was 'his' sensation...

"Why this, um..."

Unable to hold back the surging emotions, he kissed Haren. He stood on tiptoe to overlap their lips, then gently licked his lower lip, and rubbed his upper lip while tilting his head slightly. A faint breath brushed by.

Then as something hot and moist from deep inside touched, just before the two became entangled.

"Hmm, this is strange."

He withdrew and muttered. Though it was puzzling that Haren hadn't pushed him away until then, anyway now he was looking down at him with a stiff face.

"What are you suddenly doing?"

"Just, it felt good then. That night, just your lips touching felt so good I lost my mind, so I tried it again now but... it's a bit strange. The feeling is different."

When he was under the incubus's curse at that time, his reason had completely evaporated and he had clung only to lust. With his mind blank, reduced to an idiot, he had repeatedly thrown himself into Haren's arms, all his nerves drawn to the holy power he held, clinging desperately. Every time they touched, he had trembled with ecstasy, aware of only that sensation.

So he tried it again now. Since his mind kept being confused even while heavily drunk, he had tried to cover it all up with a powerful shock therapy.

But...

"...How does it feel now?"

As he just fiddled with his lips quietly, Haren asked softly. The feeling of touching him without the succubus's curse, without the survival instinct trying to cling to his holy power while pickled in demonic energy?

"I don't know. Just, um... I'm not sure."

In fact, to be honest, he had expected it to feel bad. He had clearly anticipated feeling very unpleasant or a strong aversion, and had acted prepared for that...

*Thump, thump, thump*, his heart was beating too fast. With the fastest and roughest pounding he had felt today, no, perhaps in his entire life. His lips that had briefly touched tingled, and his whole body trembled as if vibrating.

As if it felt too good.

### Chapter 139

*Is this 'his' sensation? Or just because I am drunk?*

Thinking it sounded like a feeble excuse even to himself, he rolled his eyes around. Somehow he had an intuition that he shouldn't do this. An intense premonition that if he went further, he would cross a river he could never return from, a warning sent by his subconscious.

"...I want to try a little more. I think I'll know then."

Yet he recklessly plunged in. He grabbed Haren again and kissed him. It felt like his whole body would burst from unbearable itching if he didn't. He moved as if chased by an instinct that he had to touch again somehow.

The sensation of soft flesh being crushed as their lips overlapped was chilling. Though he wanted to go deeper, unlike when he had surprised him earlier, Haren's lips were tightly closed as if stiffened, so he nibbled on that lower lip. He licked with the tip of his tongue, and tilted his head slightly while exhaling as if pleading.

"Haah..."

Whether he had wedged his way in or the other had opened up, he didn't know, but finally their tongues touched. A satisfied exclamation escaped. At last he rubbed the warm flesh wildly, licking here and there while panting. Perhaps because he was drunk, he quickly became short of breath, and his breathing was even hotter than usual.

His breathing collapsed into a mess. A headache soon arrived, but rather than thinking he needed to catch his breath, he just focused on kissing as if driven by instinct. Then from some point, he felt that the other was slowly matching his kisses as if guiding his breathing, just a little, very slightly. He even felt like he was lowering his head to respond.

He briefly separated his mouth, then gently pressed it again, leading him to steady his breathing. He complied and moved closer to him. Gradually more wet sounds fell between their lips.

Was Haren not pushing him away simply out of consideration for a drunk? No, perhaps this was also a 'management' action falling under close surveillance. Because he was acting very strangely, maybe he was soothing this crazy person so he wouldn't go to the banquet hall and summon undead.

Whatever it was, he was just grateful, and he grabbed Haren's collar and kissed him more deeply. Before he knew it, he was in a position clinging to him as if hanging on. In the gaps created as they occasionally tilted their heads, they silently caught their breath, then overlapped their lips again as if interlocking, deeply mixing their tongues.

His breath was so full of alcohol that it seemed to pool in his mouth. He even chuckled as if getting drunk on it himself, and around then Haren pulled his head back.

At a distance so close their lips could brush, he asked in a whisper:

"...How far do you want to find out?"

"As far as we can go."

Regretting the brief separation, he tried to press their lips together again. With their lips lightly touching even during the question and answer, it was even more tantalizing. But Haren lightly bumped their noses together, putting on a small brake. As he stared at him, only then did he meet his gaze directly.

The blue eyes wavered mysteriously. Though they seemed to be asking something, his head was too soaked in alcohol now to interpret the meaning of eye expressions. He was just strangely amazed that he was seeing the most beautiful person from today's banquet so closely. Was this a windfall?

Confirming his dazed reaction, Haren asked in a tone as if sensing something:

"Are you going to say you won't remember this tomorrow?"

"Do I really have to remember...?"

"...Even if you remember, you'll say to treat it like it never happened."

Haren's voice lowered as if it was clearly expected. Somehow it even sounded cold, so he reached out and cupped his face. Rather than intending to soothe him, he just wanted to touch the pretty face he was looking at. While clumsily caressing his cheek, he asked:

"Is that not okay?"

"..."

"You agreed it would be good to forget and treat it like it never happened..."

"That's-"

Haren started to speak but then firmly closed his lips. Though he didn't know what words he had swallowed, he was satisfied that he could freely touch his face while he was lost in thought.

As he tried to ruffle his neatly swept back hair...

"Ah."

He stopped his hand with an exclamation at the sudden realization.

Right now, he had wanted to empty his mind and recklessly try doing what he had done with Haren in the past, yes, that is, have a relationship. Wasn't it common to pursue sexual sensation when you didn't want to think about anything? He had thought he'd try something like that too.

The more he kissed, the more dizzyingly blank his mind became, so it seemed to be working, and since he was heavily drunk and not in his right mind anyway, he had intended to go all the way.

But the premise was wrong from the start.

"That's right. You won't get aroused by me, so there's nothing we can do in the first place..."

Though he could somehow manage up to kissing, he wouldn't be able to do the next step. *He would need to get hard to put it in or not, wouldn't he*? That day Haren had been excited from sharing the incubus's curse, but now he was completely fine. He didn't even seem to have had a single drink of alcohol.

'Did I perhaps say I was aroused by you?'

A distant memory suddenly surfaced, making him regretful. There was no need to dwell on it and get hurt, he just felt disappointed. He was starting to get heated now, the tingling sensation from when their lips touched was finally spreading warmth throughout his body, but it was clear the other wouldn't be the same.

What should he do? Should he ask him to relieve him with his hand like the first time? Could he be satisfied with that and end it? Various thoughts sporadically arose and drifted away in his mind. By the way, was what he wanted now a relationship 'with Haren', or just 'a relationship'?

If it was the latter...

"Hmm, I wonder if it doesn't have to be you..."

Could this be how his drunk personality gets heated up? He didn't know since he had never drunk this much alcohol in his past life, but maybe this body was like that? If so, could he feel this tingling satisfaction from touching anyone?

It wasn't impossible. The reason he had felt so good and his heart had pounded so much when he kissed Haren earlier might just be because he was sensitive from being drunk? But even if that was the case, who would get close to this body, he thought, letting out a dry laugh. They were so surprised just from him taking a wine bottle...

"...What did you say?"

As he was continuing various thoughts inwardly, Haren's words fell coldly. Only then did he realize he had voiced his earlier hypothesis out loud and flinched, and this reaction of his seemed to confirm to Haren that he hadn't misheard, as a smile appeared on his face.

"Are you thinking of grabbing someone else and crashing your lips together?"

"I wasn't going to actually do it..."

"So you did make such plans. To try 'as far as we can go'."

"No, that's not..."

Haren's voice was very cold and sharp. Sensing he had touched on something wrong as he spat out the words as if grinding them, he hesitated and stepped back, and at that moment Haren's smile deepened. In a very ominous direction.

Haren strode towards him and he stepped back again. It was an instinctive action, but it was enough to make the atmosphere even more miserable, and the outcome of this chase was obvious. After retreating a few more steps, Haren finally caught him with his arm as he staggered and fell. Their bodies suddenly drew close.

"Right. I can't let you go around committing such reckless acts. I'm the one responsible for you now."

"Look, there's no one I could cause trouble with in the first place, this is really an unfair misunderstanding..."

"So, let's make this something that will disappear tomorrow."

Their lips met. He bit his lip painfully and fiercely mixed their tongues. It was far different from the gentle kisses earlier, and it felt like he was blaming him for the many wrong answers he had chosen. As if it contained reproach, irritation, dissatisfaction for those, and... self-mockery that he was swept up in it anyway.

"Go ahead and do as you please."

*Thud*, at last his body fell onto the bed. It seemed he had ended up here while stepping backwards earlier. Haren climbed on top of him as he startled in shock, and undid the buttons of his formal attire.

His cape had already fallen to the side, and his perfect appearance until just before was quickly becoming disheveled. The dazzling original form that he hadn't dared to touch and had backed away from crumbled under his hands. He flailed about, unable to stop Haren as he came to kiss him again.

Haren pressed down on him with his whole body as if trying to prevent him from ever leaving this place, as if subduing him so he couldn't dare go look for someone else. He was already much bigger than him, and as he crushed down on top of him, he felt suffocated under the thick chest.

### Chapter 140

*Huk*, when he turned his head to the side, the lips pursued him more roughly. The fierce kisses that didn't even give him time to catch his breath went beyond giving him a headache and almost made him lose consciousness. The more he struggled, the more out of breath he became, so he finally had to stop his meaningless resistance and match his breathing as if clinging to him.

The brief physical struggle, or rather, his solo flailing, drained all the energy from his body. Haren sneered at his action of painfully complying.

"Seems like your body was always easily aroused."

"Huu, ah, wait a moment..."

"Your lower half is already reacting like this."

A hand that dug into his waistband grabbed and pulled out his genitals. The half-erect member swelled tightly and stood upright as soon as it was enveloped in his palm. Transparent fluid oozed from the tip, and as Haren spread it up and down as if coating the entire shaft, his mind quickly went blank.

Though the touch was fierce, his body accepted even that as a dizzying stimulation. Drunk, he perceived sexual sensations more sensitively, and the more he firmly gripped and shook his lower half quickly, sparks flew before his eyes. It was frighteningly overwhelming, and though he fumblingly grabbed Haren's arm, he couldn't stop him.

The chilling situation of his center finally being in another's hand pushed him to climax in an instant. *Huut*, he curled his toes and his whole body trembled.

"I thought you were more severely affected by the succubus's curse because your body was weak, but it seems there was a different reason."

Haren's voice lowered further at his quick ejaculation. Taking advantage of his dazed state from falling into pleasure, he removed his pants and placed his lower body on his own thighs. Using the semen on his hand as lubricant, he pressed and dug into his hole.

The invasion of two fingers was instantaneous. He groaned, throwing his head back at the sensation of forcibly wedging in. Though a reflexive aversion to the excessive foreign object arose, whether due to being drunk or learned from previous experience, he unknowingly tried to relax his body's tension.

*Ahh*, *ugh*, as he gripped the blanket and struggled to breathe, Haren murmured.

"Until you were imprisoned, you must have wandered around freely to various places, but after being bound by shackles you couldn't do that anymore, so you must have felt stifled. Do you miss the old days?"

"Huut, what, does that have to do with, ah!"

*I woke up in prison, how would I know this body's past?* Moreover, the topic of old days was not at all welcome to him, so he suddenly felt indignant, and Haren's lips hardened stiffly. *Puk*- his fingers thrust deep inside in one go, and a shrill cry burst out.

Though it was clearly a violent touch, his body steadily climbed the trajectory of excitement. Not only did the alcohol fan the heat, but perhaps this was also a trace left by that night. He reacted sensitively to Haren's touch, and heat rose in every place they touched.

And Haren also knew too well which points made him writhe.

"Ahuk! Hu, ah, there, too, fast, hik, don't press, uung!"

Even nasal sounds burst out wildly. Every time Haren persistently stirred a point on his inner wall, his body arched and curled up, thrashing about in a mess. Transparent fluid flowed continuously from the tip of his genitals, and his vision wavered with tears.

The touches grew increasingly fierce. He couldn't breathe as he was violently ravaged to the point his whole body shook, and his ragged breathing fell like moans overcome with pleasure. Though he tried to grab that arm somehow to calm him down, with his weakened hands he seemed to only grope him like a pleading whine.

"Hua, ah, uung, please, huuut!"

"You, why on earth."

Haren's words fell coldly in fragments. He seemed very displeased by his sensitively reacting behavior even without the succubus's curse. His fingers, suddenly increased to four, crushed and pounded his inner walls, and the intense stimulation pushed him to climax as if shattering his head.

*Spurt*, as he ejaculated, he cried out his name like a scream.

"Ha, Haren...!"

Taking advantage of the moment the other's actions paused, he hurriedly clung to him. Unable to bear the overwhelming sexual sensations, feeling like he might not only lose his mind but cross a dangerous line, he desperately hugged his neck. His whole body trembled violently.

"Huuk, eup."

He swallowed his breath with his face buried in his neck. *Ugh*, his shoulders heaved. At the sound that fell as if holding back tears, he felt Haren's body stiffen slightly. His pitch-black hair, wet with sweat, was disheveled and covered his face as if hiding it.

Haren very slowly grabbed his arm.

"...Isaph?"

Calling him in a somewhat careful voice, he tried to smooth back his hair. As he turned his head to the side, rejecting the touch, somehow Haren's fingers hesitantly wandering came into his view. He spoke, truly exhausted:

"I really feel like I'm going to throw up... Don't do it so fast...?"

"..."

For a moment, he was truly terrified. Fortunately it didn't force its way up his throat, but he had precariously crossed the limit and his vision had turned yellow. As he barely steadied his breathing, he now mulled over what Haren had said earlier and answered.

"And I, haah, 'I' am having my first time with you. You know that too..."

He knew that night had been Haren's first time too, and Haren, who was much more perceptive than him, would have grasped it even more clearly. They had been each other's first, and so they had judged there was a great need to cover up that day's events as if they never happened.

He didn't understand why Haren's voice had grown fierce while talking about that part, and he also wondered where he had gotten angry from, but anyway, he gently rubbed his forehead against his neck a couple times and said:

"Do it slowly. Okay...?"

No matter how much he was currently filming 'drunk\_person\_turned\_dog.avi', he didn't want to end it with a vomit finale. However, there was no response from Haren, so he painfully racked his brains. To prevent this relationship from flowing too intensely, he would need to calm the other down first, so he searched for moments when he had seemed to be in a good mood.

Barely tracing his mind, he looked up at him and suggested:

"If you're still in a bad mood, do you want to bite my neck instead?"

"...You know you're really acting as you please, right?"

"Well, if you don't want to do it, then don't..."

*Hmm,* he thought it would work but was it a failure? He had stopped when he called his name earlier, so he had looked for a similar moment when he seemed to enjoy it, but was the performance of his search engine poor?

He was disappointed at failing in his reasoning, and also felt dizzy from briefly thinking in the meantime. The two climaxes he had rushed to in an instant made him even more dazed. It really was difficult to have a relationship while drunk...

*Thud*, no longer having the strength to hold onto Haren's shoulders, he sprawled back onto the bed, and Haren stared down at him.

"...Ha."

The short exclamation sounded like a sigh, or felt like a dry laugh. As Haren swept back his hair, he blankly watched the golden strands that were ruffled by that somewhat impatient-looking touch. Though he regretted the beautiful adornment he had seen in the banquet hall crumbling, on the other hand even that disheveled appearance caught his gaze.

Soon Haren lowered his upper body and buried his lips in his neck. He braced himself for the stinging pain to come, but the stimulation poured in a form he had not expected at all.

"Ah, I said bite, why are you licking..."

"Doesn't it not matter what I do?"

"Huut, just bite instead. It tickles, uung, it's ticklish."

Haren licked his neck very gently. He licked with his tongue almost as if melting ice cream, then without baring his teeth, he nibbled on his neckline with just his lips as if mumbling. *Clank, clank,* as the shackles shook, the ticklish sensation intensified and he flailed about.

If he had just bitten hard it would have simply hurt, but even when his teeth accidentally touched, it was only the slightest brush, so his whole body tensed sensitively. His body hair stood on end at Haren's exhaled breath.

There was a problem with this behavior. Going beyond simply being ticklish, he caressed him affectionately as if handling something precious, so heat spread fiercely through his nape. He had no immunity to this at all. As his body melted limply, whimpering sounds escaped.

"Hu, uung, like thaaat... I said bite..."

"You told me to do it slowly."

Since when did he listen to his words so well? He was bewildered, but even that made his whole body jolt as he answered with his lips pressed to his neck. Without even checking, his face and neck were surely flushed red.

He struggled to push Haren away, but he was an opponent his strength absolutely couldn't affect, so he only ended up ruffling his hair. The needlessly soft golden hair tickled his neck, making him moan again, and at his reaction, Haren smiled as if he had discovered a weakness.

### Chapter 141

From that moment, Haren tormented his neck even more persistently. Though this action alone might seem very gentle and affectionate, it rather pushed him into an excessively dizzying sexual sensation. His body melted hotly, becoming limp.

He didn't even know when his top had been removed. He could only flail about as Haren licked his nape, then tickled his collarbone as if nibbling it. With his arms completely weakened, he couldn't stop him.

"Ah, huut, why there...!"

When Haren finally kissed his chest, he flinched in surprise and flapped his upper body. Though lips had touched his body that night too, they hadn't licked and caressed so earnestly like now. As he struggled, Haren firmly wrapped his waist and moved his tongue more stickily.

He pressed down on the areola firmly with his tongue, then started to tap and swirl the nipple with the tip of his tongue. His head spun at the stimulation poured onto a place he had never considered. Though he wasn't biting painfully, it felt like it was swelling up hard and tight, and even the slightest brush of teeth sent thrilling shivers through him.

"I didn't, hut, tell you to bite there...!"

"I'm not biting."

"Now, that's, uut, that's not, ah, really, annoying, huung."

He couldn't continue speaking. Haren blocked his heaving with his body, but even this was different from the earlier restraint. Then he had been crushed under his chest, gasping from being pinned down recklessly, but now he gently embraced him to stop his resistance. Their bodies seemed entwined like vines. His leg that had risen to Haren's waist kept swaying in the air.

Emotions that were difficult to express kept rushing in. This affectionate, close embrace, and the warm touch caressing various places as if soothing him, made him dizzy again and again.

He was weak to this warmth.

Simply touching and contacting someone like this was unfamiliar and novel. If it had been rough like before, would something have been different? If he had just fiercely driven him, he wouldn't have been able to think about anything, but now strange emotions overwhelmed him. He even suddenly felt sad.

Though he didn't know why, his heart pounded wildly and his lower abdomen boiled. Moans like crying poured continuously from his mouth.

It felt like swimming in a very hot sea. Melting limply, he rode waves of sexual sensation, and before he knew it, his genitals had risen again and were dripping fluid. Yes, this was just because he was excited. It felt like he needed to see it through to the end quickly.

"Now, hut, stop this..."

"There's still more—"

"Haren, I, huu, want to do the next thing. Okay?"

Clearly anticipating that the other wouldn't pretend to hear his restraint, he quickly called his name. Grabbing him as he paused, he spoke pleadingly.

"You've already loosened me up down there. Hurry... ut, put it in quickly..."

Now that he thought about it, it had been a very strange order of preparation, but anyway he urged Haren on. He tried hugging his face buried in his chest, and even clumsily stroked his hair a few times.

Then suddenly, he wondered if he wasn't aroused yet... Could that be why he had only touched his rear with his hands and then caressed his neck and chest? Was this a kind of foreplay? But not realizing that, had he said something out of the blue, making him fall silent...

"Huu."

As he continued various thoughts with his dazed mind, he watched Haren rise with a soft sigh. Just as he was guessing he might leave now, Haren reached down to his pants, and soon he unconsciously swallowed at the state of the genitals that came into view.

Given all his worrying until now, he should have felt relieved, but fear struck him first. Should he admire the hero's spirit of sacrifice in stepping forward to prevent the prisoner from causing trouble elsewhere, or should he worry about his own future? Seeing it anew with his eyes was shocking. Was that weapon really going to enter his body...? Was it possible? Though he knew the answer since he had done it before, worry welled up.

So when Haren stroked his own genitals a couple times and leaned his body towards him, he hurriedly said:

"I want to do it from behind."

He absolutely didn't have the courage to watch the insertion process. Moreover, as Haren approached just now, their eyes had met directly, and in that instant his heart had pounded so hard that he wanted to avoid facing him.

As he quickly turned his body to lie face down and buried his face in the pillow, Haren asked:

"Why are you hiding your face like that?"

"What does it matter? You just need to put it in..."

"Ah, so it doesn't matter who you're doing it with? Aren't you treating me too much like a sex toy?"

The words following his soft sigh were incredibly bewildering. As if this weapon would exist with anyone else. Rather, he was confused because he was too aware of who the other person was. Though he was dumbfounded at how his thoughts were jumping around like that, following an ominous intuition, he confessed.

He hadn't wanted to say it because it was embarrassing, but the biggest reason he had avoided facing him was...

"You, huu, you keep staring. Even when I told you to close your eyes then, you kept looking..."

That day, Haren had marveled several times at how red his body was. It would be surprising to see a person pale enough to be mistaken for an evil spirit become flushed and bright red with arousal, but his gaze had been fixed so intently that it was embarrassing. He had even touched his reddened eyes, saying his nape was heated too, giving a real-time commentary.

Even when he covered Haren's eyes with his hands, it was natural for his arms to lose strength in the midst of their relationship, and then he would look all over his body again. It was especially problematic that he kept trying to see his face. It was utterly embarrassing to fully show his expression whimpering from sexual sensations.

Haren laughed softly at his mumbled words. Before he could complain about being mocked, Haren pressed his body to his back and whispered in his ear:

"You said you'd forget everything from that day, but you remember it all."

"Ut, you too, it's the same, ah...!"

*Kuguk*, as if blocking his retort, the genitals entered. He gasped, his breath caught at the sensation of roughly spreading his hole and wedging inside.

Haren gently caressed his body as if soothing his tensed, stiffened form. The touch stroking his waist was so soft that he reflexively steadied his breathing. As that excessive size pierced his body, terror arose that his entire body would split or burst, but pleasure as intense as it was overwhelming also struck his head. His vision went chillingly white.

*Huup*, *ugh*, he gripped the pillow while making sounds like his breath was being taken away. *Kuk*, *kuuk*, hot heat spread through his whole body each time the genitals entered. It was difficult to hold back his gradually wetter breathing, but fortunately he could somewhat hide his moans by burying his face in the pillow.

Though the position was strenuous and his breathing was a bit constricted, it didn't seem all bad? Just as he was finding some advantages, Haren slowly began to move. He tried to bury his face deeper in the pillow and swallow his moans, but.

"Eup, hueup, eu, ah... Why again..."

Haren moved slowly, no, frustratingly slowly. *Suwuk*, *juk*, he moved in and out very languidly, even staying just at the entrance, and his body, already sensitively heated, grew impatient as it recognized every single movement of the genitals. His inner walls clung to the genitals as if whining.

Though the size alone gave excessive sexual sensations, he knew the pleasure of when it moved faster and entered deeper. If he hadn't known it would be fine, but knowing made him anxious. Regardless, Haren stuck his body to his back and licked the back of his neck and spine.

As if he liked it better with him in this position, he freely bit, sucked, and licked various places on his back. This too was poured very gently. Ticklish heat spread throughout his body, and after enduring for a while, twitching, he finally raised his head. His face felt like it would burn from the hot breath pooling in the pillow.

"Ah, what, huuk, what are you dissatisfied with..."

"How could a mere sex toy be dissatisfied with its owner?"

"Hau, you're just a bundle of dissatisfaction right now."

He irritably lowered his hand. It was so frustrating that he felt like he should relieve himself directly. His genitals had been tightly swollen since Haren had been caressing his chest earlier, so he needed to resolve it at least once. He reached down, suffering from the sensation of about to burst, but Haren grabbed him abruptly.

He restrained him very easily and pressed his hand down beside his face. Interlocking their fingers tightly to subdue him, he whispered:

"You asked me to put it in. You wanted to do it from behind, so is it okay to relieve yourself from the front?"

"Aeu, huk, then mov-move faster..."

"You said you'd feel like throwing up if I did it fast. Huu, I have to be more careful in this prone position."

His gentle voice resonated in his ear. Trembling at that breath, he said it was okay not to go slowly now, but Haren pretended not to hear, and even stopped him from trying to move his lower half directly. The difference in strength was so great that just wrapping one arm around his waist blocked all his actions.

In the end, he could only sob resentfully, completely embraced by Haren. His whole body was so heated that even the sensation of the firm chest touching his back felt stimulating, but the other wasn't moving.

### Chapter 142

Was he the only one anxious because he was drunk? Even that night, Haren had seemed somewhat excited and clingy, but now he wasn't sharing the curse and hadn't drunk alcohol, so could he endure it? Though he felt wronged, he couldn't stop now that they had come this far.

Finally, he turned his head to look at Haren. Though he had stopped all his other actions until now, he didn't prevent this one. So, facing him directly, he spoke with a whimper:

"Just, huu, just do it from the front."

"Yes, I should follow your orders."

His beautifully smiling face as he answered was vexing. Anger welled up as it was obvious he had been aiming for this from the start with his actions.

*Chomp*! He bit Haren's nose tip.

"..."

Haren froze stiff. He was more surprised as Haren stopped with his eyes wide open. Though he had done it out of anger, he hadn't expected this reaction, *is he an-angry?* As he was cautiously gauging the situation, Haren let out a dry laugh.

"There will be a mark tomorrow."

"I-I didn't bite that hard."

"Will it leave a scar? Then will everyone recognize it?"

"No! You can heal something like this instantly...!"

*There's not even any blood! What scar from just a slight teeth mark! Even a normal person would recover quickly, let alone you who heal even faster!* Whether he was panicking or not, Haren rubbed his nose tip against his lips as if teasing.

"Bite a little more."

"Ah, no. No, eup, I said no."

*What kind of person pushes their nose into someone's mouth?* He tried to express his refusal, but the nose kept poking into his opened mouth, so he was busy avoiding it. The sharp bridge of the nose jabbing at him was almost painful. *Ah, really! Why does he keep getting obsessed with strange things!*

He glared at him while pulling his head back sharply.

"Just wait. I'll ambush you when you're off guard. I'll put a hole right through your body somewhere."

"Haha, I'm really looking forward to that."

"Ah, why am I the only one who knows the hero's personality is this rotten."

Suddenly, a sense of injustice washed over him. Just hours ago in the banquet hall, everyone surrounding the hero had revered him, moved as if receiving God's grace from a single glance. They had all rejoiced, seemingly purified by the hero's merciful smile and gentle voice.

The hero who had existed so dazzlingly perfect under the splendid chandeliers had now taken off his clothes and thrown away his character along with them. Though he had never been particularly kind to him, why was he like this? He had gotten used to his temper, but now he was even pulling strange antics.

As he groaned and avoided, afraid of being poked in the nose again, Haren muttered softly:

"That's right. Why do you know so many things that only you know..."

Was there a sigh of realization about the situation buried in that very quiet murmur, or was some enjoyment mixed in? Whatever it was, he urged him on with a sob. He needed what came next quickly.

"Ah, hurry... If you're going to do it from the front, change positions and move quickly."

"...Haha, I guess it's natural that only you would say such things to me."

Haren laughed softly and raised his body. He followed Haren's touch docilely in his dazed state. Though he thought he would just flip him over since he was in a prone position now, Haren sat him up against the bed's headboard.

Though his lower back was cushioned by pillows piled behind him, facing him in this sitting position felt a bit embarrassing and unfamiliar. His legs were spread wide, resting on Haren's thighs.

"Huuk, ut, it feels strange..."

But more than embarrassment, he focused on the following insertion. The sensation of his insides being pushed was vivid, and he could clearly see his stomach bulging each time the genitals entered. Was it because of the position, or would it be noticeable no matter what with this size?

As he fumblingly wrapped his arms around his stomach, his eyes met Haren's. To hide his face from that blatant gaze that seemed to be observing each of his reactions, he hugged Haren's neck. "Stop looking..." At his mumbled words, Haren exhaled a strange breath as if laughing or not, and pressed his lips to his head. He was embraced as if trapped in his arms.

*Squelch, squelch*, wet sounds began to resonate in the space. Now Haren was entering deeper than before, but perhaps considering his drunken state, he was still matching his speed slowly. The earlier elaborate caresses seemed to have melted his whole body into liquid, making him cling to Haren as if flowing down.

Now he understood a little. In this position, he had no choice but to receive Haren as he approached. The wall was behind him, and Haren was in front. He couldn't even close his legs. Each time Haren entered, he had to tremble and moan.

"Now, huu, how is it? I need to check since you chose me as a tool."

"Good, huu, ah, there feels good..."

As Haren seemed about to tease him persistently about another strange part, he quickly said it felt good. He was tired of arguing and didn't want to miss the flow of the relationship that had just earnestly begun. He sobbed while rubbing his forehead against Haren's neck. Hot breaths poured out continuously.

"Ah, Haren, uung, like that..."

He wrapped his legs around Haren's waist too. Now he was in a position completely clinging to Haren, swaying as he thrust and receiving him. The pleasure that had been precariously teetering earlier finally poured out, overwhelming him with welcome excitement. His inner walls clung to the genitals as if squeezing them.

Haren exhaled softly. It sounded like his patience was cracking, and it seemed like the hands gripping his waist tightened each time he called Haren's name.

"Huu... Does it feel that good?"

"Ah, huu, goo-good, uung, it's good. Please, ah...!"

He answered frantically to the hoarse question that sounded like it had scratched his throat, and finally when Haren deeply pounded a certain point on his inner wall, he writhed intensely. For an instant his vision went white and chilling shivers ran through his whole body. His arms and legs wrapped around him tightened, making Haren's movements even more persistent.

Their joining point seemed to stick together messily. The sound of sweaty bare skin rubbing, the squelching sound of something long entering and exiting a wet place, his sobbing moans, and the other's ragged breathing all tangled together, filling the space with lewd noises. His head spun.

Pleasure violently stirred his mind, hazy from drunkenness. Though he had volunteered for this relationship, the stimulation gradually became overwhelming. Excessive ecstasy repeatedly made his whole body boil.

"I'm, dizzy, uung, dizzy... Huut, don't, huk, don't stop."

He blurted out strange demands incoherently. With his mouth completely loosened from intoxication with sexual sensations, he urged the other to solve his problem almost whining. Though it would be reasonable to be bewildered, a small "haha" laugh just seemed to circle his ear before he soon felt a hand patting his lower back.

The speed of insertion slowed considerably, but the stimulation didn't decrease as he rubbed just the peak point firmly. No, rather he melted even more from the elaborate act, sinking into hot pleasure.

As he threw his head back with his eyes tightly shut, letting out a "huuut" crying sound, Haren kissed his eyes. Just as he was thinking he was probably wondering if that spot was particularly red again, Haren murmured.

"Cute..."

"...Uung?"

He didn't properly hear the soft voice tinged with impulsive energy. When he looked up at Haren with a dazed face, belatedly asking what he had said, Haren kissed him instead of answering.

"Huu, ung, eup..."

It was already difficult to breathe, and kissing on top of that made his head spin. Squelch squelch, below they endlessly interlocked and above their tongues kept mixing as overwhelming breaths exchanged. As hot, moist flesh rubbed together continuously, his body, drunk on alcohol and melted by heat, steadily headed towards climax.

The heat spread throughout his body finally boiled over as if exploding.

"Ah, aah...!"

*Splurt*, semen poured out as if scattering. The fluid, thinned from ejaculating several times, flowed like water between their touching chests. It felt like fireworks were exploding all over his body, his thighs trembled violently, and his fingertips and toes curled tightly.

Even his inner walls clenched fiercely, and around then a hoarse moan was heard from Haren too. As he trembled, tightly embraced by him, something sticky flowed down the cleft of his buttocks. Rapid drowsiness followed the dizzying satisfaction.

*Ah, I think I'm going to faint...*

Slowly, Haren stroked his waist. As his consciousness gradually sank below the surface of sleep from the gentle touch caressing him as if continuing aftercare, he quietly whispered:

"Now, how does it feel?"

"...Hm? What..."

He looked at Haren blankly. With his vision blurred, it took a long time to properly meet his eyes. After blinking drowsily, he belatedly recalled the background that had led to this situation. He had come this far after kissing him out of curiosity about how it would feel to touch Haren without the succubus's curse.

Embarrassment washed over him at the blue eyes staring straight at him.

"...I don't know, I don't know about that..."

He mumbled while turning his head to the side. He knew this evasion was ridiculous since he had been constantly saying it felt good while being embraced by him until just now. But that was just reacting to sexual sensations... It was a different context from the feeling he had tried to find out... and so on. He tried to let go of consciousness as if fleeing while inwardly making arguments he couldn't voice aloud.

Anyway, he was already on the verge of falling asleep. As he languidly closed his eyelids, using drowsiness as an excuse, Haren spoke in quite a light voice:

"Alright. That can happen."

It was unexpected. He had thought he might point out why he still didn't know after kissing, but surprisingly he accepted it readily. Feeling relieved, he nodded in agreement too. *Right, it's possible not to know. So now I'll just fall asleep...*

"We can keep doing it until you know how it feels."

Haren whispered, pressing his lips to his ear. His very gentle voice had the characteristic of bewitching people as always, so he kept murmuring without realizing it before suddenly flinching. Even as he was falling asleep, the back of his neck suddenly went cold.

*Huh? Something seems wrong...*

He barely opened his eyes and looked up at Haren in confusion. Whether he was surprised or frightened by Haren's actions as he suddenly laid him down and climbed on top of him. He faced him blankly before flailing about as he received the lips overlapping again, unable to avoid them.

His consciousness sank into the dizzying ecstasy pouring over him once more.

### Chapter 143

**#Part 12. 84%**

His head felt like it was about to split.

Groaning "kuung" from the terrible hangover, he barely managed to open his eyes. As he struggled to move his strangely heavy eyelids and clear his blurry vision, he was shocked by the scene he soon confirmed.

"...!"

Haren's face was right in front of him.

Moreover, he was in Haren's arms, so he stiffened, unable to even breathe. Though Haren seemed to be sleeping with his eyes closed, as soon as he saw his face, the memories of last night buried under the hangover all rushed back at once. They came crashing down as if striking his head.

It was the first time he had drunk so much alcohol as he had yesterday. Usually people say their memory gets cut off in such cases, but his memories were frustratingly clear. Why, even though he had been a dog, not a human!

However, the immediate situation was even more serious than that. He couldn't understand why Haren was still here. They had clearly agreed last night to "treat it like it never happened tomorrow", so shouldn't Haren have been gone when he opened his eyes?

He tried to get up in shock, but even this wasn't easy. As he groaned, struggling to escape the arms embracing him, *pat pat*- a large hand gently stroked his back.

Haren spoke softly with his eyes still closed:

"We'll treat everything as if it never happened once we leave this room, so you don't need to try to run away so quickly."

His voice was full of the languid energy characteristic of someone who had just woken up. The voice, lower than usual, wrapping around his ear felt so novel that he flinched, tensing up. As if this reaction seemed like resistance, Haren slowly and gently caressed his lower back.

"Don't push yourself. Your waist must hurt too."

"Get your hands off."

"..."

"I'm not trying to run away, ut, it's just ticklish..."

He embarrassedly explained the reason as Haren's hands seemed to be tightening. His body was still sensitive, so even this patting touch was about to spread a ticklish heat. Though he had been painfully holding back, not wanting to moan as soon as he woke up. His nape grew hot.

Only then did Haren, with his eyes half-open, quietly look down at him before silently withdrawing his hand. But his arm was still draped over his body as if pressing him down, so he couldn't get up.

Though he didn't know why Haren was acting like this, he ended up just rolling his eyes while still embraced in his arms. He stubbornly kept his gaze lowered, as their eyes would meet if he raised his head even slightly.

"..."

As he remained in the silence, memories of last night began to creep back. It seemed he had fallen asleep, almost passing out after their relationship, but hadn't Haren kept asking him how it felt every time he was about to lose consciousness just before that? Had he continued when he couldn't answer properly in his dazed state? Was it his obsessiveness flaring up in a strange place again, or what?

Should he consider it fortunate that Haren wasn't asking again right after waking up? He still couldn't answer that question...

*Whooosh*- heat rose to his face. Though he had only tried to find his last memory, unnecessarily the entire preceding process was unveiled too. The sensation of Haren licking his neck, the action of tightly embracing him from behind, and whispering with his lips pressed to his ear, and so on.

Even now, still being in Haren's arms made him get swept up in the memories even more. Though he was thankfully wearing clothes, thinking that Haren must have washed and dressed him made him flush hot to the tips of his ears.

He struggled to get up.

"I want to go out now. It's stifling."

He vowed never to drink alcohol again. Moving to escape from Haren's arms as the first trial in strengthening his resolve for abstinence, just as he finally became free, his ankle was grabbed. This happened just as he was about to leave the bed.

*Swuk*, Haren gripped his ankle and fiddled with it, making him turn back dazedly.

"Why, why are you doing that..."

"I was wondering if you wouldn't have been able to walk if we had done more..."

"...?"

It took time to understand. His voice, still languidly low, sounded so pleasant that the confusion might have been caused by the denial that he couldn't possibly be saying such things in that saintly voice. Moreover, his tone sounded as if he greatly regretted his action of leaving his arms.

*No, what are you saying when it's already difficult enough?* His waist was throbbing and his knees kept threatening to collapse, losing strength. If they had done more, he wouldn't have even been able to crawl out of bed.

But Haren's gesture, as if wishing for that, not only made his body tense but also somehow made heat start to rise. Haren's hand wrapped around his ankle felt just like shackles.

"Now I think I know a little how to treat you..."

The soft murmur resonated ticklishly, and he hurriedly tapped the back of Haren's hand. At this action telling him to let go, Haren stared at him blankly before finally withdrawing his arm. Even this was done very leisurely.

Though it seemed they had lain there for quite a while after waking, why was he still in bed? Was this uncharacteristic laziness? As soon as his ankle was free, he quickly moved away from the bed and said:

"You should hurry and leave too. The people gathered at the banquet must have been surprised by the protagonist's sudden disappearance..."

Since he hadn't returned after escorting the prisoner, they might think he had left the building entirely. Just as he was thinking everyone would be disappointed since they had gathered to see the hero, his words suddenly cut off. As if struck on the back of the head, he just opened and closed his mouth a couple times blankly.

Afterwards, he hurriedly felt his chest as if checking something and looked over various parts of his body... before turning to look at Haren. Meeting the gaze of Haren, who was just staring at him quizzically, he said:

"...The connection, it's severed."

The bond tying their souls together had been undone.

He instinctively knew this even though no status window appeared to announce it. It was a very strange feeling. Until yesterday, part of his energy had flowed elsewhere, but today it only circulated within his own body. Though he should clearly be glad to have returned to normal, somehow he only felt an emptiness as if his chest had been hollowed out. A bitter and desolate feeling of something that had been tightly entangled for a long time suddenly disappearing.

Haren also slowly touched his own chest and looked back and forth between his hand and him. Did he also feel something had fallen away? A strange energy mixed in their gazes meeting in the air.

As if they even regretted it.

As they looked at each other silently, he flinched first and came to his senses. No, considering all the hardships he had gone through since connecting souls, he should be cheering three times for finally being free, so why was he acting like this?

He turned his head abruptly out of embarrassment, then belatedly realized the problem.

"Ah!"

*The NPC, that bastard didn't come!*

He had expected the NPC would surely come when the soul connection was severed, so he had planned to firmly catch it. But today the cat was nowhere to be seen!

When they first connected, complex magic circles had appeared all over, but was severing it simple? Was it a system that automatically released when the Dium's curse was resolved? Or had he set a reservation in advance for the day it came to notify him it would be severed soon?

As he suddenly cried out and grabbed his head with both hands, Haren approached.

"What's wrong? Is there a problem?"

"Ah, it's nothing. I just haven't seen the cat in a long time, so I'm having withdrawal symptoms."

He blurted out strange words and looked around irritably, but of course there was no sign of the cat. Not only were the curtains drawn on the windows so he couldn't check outside, but he was also certain it wasn't nearby anyway. Haren's gaze grew even more mysterious at his behavior, but it was difficult to explain.

Feeling awkward for no reason, he fiddled with his nape.

"Anyway, I'm free now. You don't have to stick with me anymore."

Since his soul was connected with Haren, problems arose with his abilities if he was separated from him beyond a certain distance. It had been a ridiculous situation of a necromancer suffering from evil spirits, but Haren had always tried to stay by his side and even cared about his condition.

Now that he no longer had to go to such trouble, Haren would probably be comfortable too. He was liberated from a bothersome task.

"...Still, if there are any aftereffects or other problems, tell me anytime. It's thanks to you that we got rid of the Dium's curse."

Haren spoke softly. It was surprising that he seemed willing to keep taking care of him as much as needed in the future, even though he must have gone through his own hardships until now. On the other hand, even that voice sounded somewhat regretful.

*Sarak*- Fingers that had quietly approached tidied his disheveled hair.

...Suddenly another subtle silence settled. Since they had just had a similar moment in bed earlier, he wanted to quickly break the silence. His chest inexplicably tickled, so he deliberately turned his head and backed away from Haren's hand.

Why were they still in such a close state when the soul connection had been severed and they no longer needed to stay close?

"That's enough. Just give me a good sentence reduction later."

Though he was secretly tempted by the offer of lifelong welfare, when they first connected souls, he had said his only purpose in helping him was for sentence reduction. So he felt awkward saying two different things, and moreover...

Suddenly, he wondered if 'sentence reduction' was the success criteria for the quest.

It had been a rather broad quest context of needing to help the hero, but the standard for judging its success or failure would be the hero's acknowledgment. Since he had been dragged out the night before his execution and came to be with the hero, wouldn't the moment he escaped his death row status by having his contributions recognized and his sentence reduced be the success?

When the shackles fastened around his neck were removed, would the game end?

### Chapter 144

Only then did he realize that he might leave after receiving 'freedom'. At first, he had wondered whether the quest reward of becoming free meant freedom from prison, or freedom from this world... It was probably the latter.

Even though this game had become so realistic that it no longer felt like just data made of 0s and 1s, even if this place really existed in some dimension and he was just peeking through a game, he had sensed the end from the moment he learned that another soul existed in this body.

The NPC had never denied his chants about logging out until now, too...

They would soon be heading to the northern Encroachment Zone, so that might be the final scenario of this game. While connecting these various thoughts in his mind, he put on his black robe. Now that he had tidied up roughly, it was time to leave this room.

Perhaps because the current situation was embarrassing, his movements became hurried for no reason. After spending an incredible night, they had remained embracing for a long time even after waking up, but now everything would be as if it never happened once they left this space. This form of contract was absurd, and he was newly surprised by his partner as well.

Suppressing his complex thoughts and emotions, he grabbed the doorknob. Just before turning it, he blurted out words like a machine gun:

"I'm sorry for my drunken behavior yesterday, and thank you for accepting me. I'll forget it cleanly so you don't need to worry about it at all, um, so now I'll go out first..."

*Swuk*- Just as he was turning the doorknob, Haren, who had somehow approached from behind, pressed on the door. He flinched as the door that had opened slightly closed again at his firm push. However, the reason he was surprised was not just that, but also his current position with Haren.

He had approached from behind, putting him in a position as if embraced by him. No, it would be fair to say he was almost embraced. Haren's shadow, which had come closer by slightly bending his upper body, completely covered him.

"Why, why are you doing this..."

Though he was wearing his robe, he tensed all over as he could feel Haren's warmth to the point that he flinched when Haren's firm chest touched his back. Haren was still in simple attire, wearing only a shirt and pants without his full formal wear.

Haren whispered softly:

"...I forgot to thank you for the doll."

*Doll?* He was bewildered by the sudden topic, then belatedly recalled giving Haren the worry doll last night. More precisely, Haren had picked up the object that had fallen while he was flailing about drunkenly taking off his clothes...

He felt embarrassed as he had completely forgotten about it. First of all, the doll was unfinished, and recalling the purpose of the gift with a sober mind made him feel ashamed, as if he had meddled excessively. To think he had given a worry doll telling him not to have nightmares anymore to someone who had shown such heroic dignity at the banquet yesterday.

He cleared his throat awkwardly. Though it was fortunate if the recipient liked the gift, was there really a need to give thanks in this position...

Around then, Haren spoke as if whispering softly:

"I always had 'that dream' on days with big events."

"..."

"When I became a holy knight, when I connected with the holy sword, when I received grace and became the Holy Knight Commander... I always had the same dream whenever these things happened, so perhaps yesterday might have been another day I would have that dream."

The day he returned from searching the Encroachment Zones and revealed the truth before the imperial citizens, and even arrested the traitors hiding in the empire. His voice, saying he had instinctively felt he might have a nightmare unconsciously since such a big event had occurred, resonated strangely in his ears.

Haren didn't know that he had seen all of his dreams. Still, the fact that the hero suffered from nightmares would be close to a flaw by his standards, so he had thought he would never mention it again, but for him to bring it up first and reveal that it had been repeated for a long time... Moreover, wasn't the confession itself that he always had the same dream telling him it was related to 'that day'?

"...So, did you have another nightmare yesterday?"

"No, I slept soundly without any dreams."

"Oh, seems like the doll really worked."

"That's right. I was fine sleeping while hugging it."

"That's... What?"

*The doll is only palm-sized, what are you talking about?*

At first, he had welcomed the news that Haren had slept soundly, but he became bewildered by his next words. The advice he had given to Haren when he visited him after he had a nightmare before was...

'Take care of your sleep from now on too. Try to avoid nightmares by drinking good tea or hanging something by your bedside, or even hugging a doll while sleeping...'

*What, was he saying he had used him as a doll substitute?*

*Huh*, a dry laugh escaped out of bewilderment. He had been startled to see Haren right in front of him as soon as he woke up, but was that the reason he had been embracing him? Though he felt dumbfounded, he didn't feel inclined to question it readily. He still felt uneasy and sorry about peeking at Haren's nightmare.

"...Once we resolve the northern Encroachment Zone too, you won't have nightmares anymore."

So he deliberately spoke in a declarative form. Though it was a groundless prophecy, he hoped it would lighten his heart a little. That was usually the reason people went to fortune-tellers or got their fortunes read. When they heard from someone else's mouth that all the problems they were currently trapped in would be resolved well, they would feel much refreshed and filled with hope.

Just then, since Haren always had nightmares of being dragged to Encroachment Zones, perhaps his dreams would end together when all the Encroachment Zones in the empire disappeared.

"Be careful not to get badly hurt until the end..."

"Even if I get hurt now, you won't feel pain, so why are you saying that? As if you'll care."

His response was rather cold despite being given kind words. Feeling dumbfounded, he turned to look at Haren, and confirmed that his gaze was fixed on the doorknob. He still had his hand resting on it. As if he could open the door and leave the room at any time.

*...No way.*

With an uncertain feeling, he lowered his hand. And as if he had been waiting for that, Haren wrapped his waist and buried his head in his shoulder. Their position grew even closer. "...I'm a little tired." Though the quiet voice sounded like an awkward excuse, he didn't laugh.

*Thump thump*, his heart beat loudly.

Though he had clearly sobered up so there was no reason for it to beat like this anymore, it pounded so big and clear that it shook his whole body. Just being embraced in his arms made him feel dizzy as if the whole world was turning upside down.

The atmosphere between Haren and him always rode rapids like this. Calm but then rough, sharp but then suddenly turning gentle.

"You're right. As you said, since we've severed the connection, it's no longer something to care about, but..."

"..."

"For now, let's just stay like this for a moment."

Because everything would disappear once they left this room.

He relaxed the tension in his body that had been stiff until now, turned around and embraced Haren. Last night, and the conversation they just had about nightmares, would all disappear. The reason he had felt like crying and the background for why Haren had to sleep embracing him would never be mentioned again.

*What kind of sight were we, finding freedom only under that ridiculous promise?* He covered all his thoughts and closed his eyes.

Only their hearts resounded noisily in the room sunk in silence.

\*\*\*

The holy city was in an uproar.

The news that the Diums, the catastrophe that had devastated the continent 20 years ago, were still alive and currently trying to resurrect their god, spread throughout the empire in an instant.

Though everyone was gripped by fear and felt betrayed by the news of traitors, the presence of the hero suppressed that chaos and directed the flow of emotions. Now was the time for everyone to unite their will to prevent the resurrection of the Dedium.

The only Encroachment Zone remaining in the empire, the gray land in the north. All the holy knights of the Holy Empire gathered in Hesron for the great battle to take place there.

The nobles who had shouted they would support the knights of their families and city troops at the banquet kept their promises. Thanks to this, the holy city was filled with warriors, creating a solemn atmosphere. The will to help eradicate the Diums hiding in the northern Encroachment Zone and assist the hero's purification overflowed.

In this holy city, the most serious place was naturally the Holy Knight Order.

The holy knights were scheduled to lead the march towards the Encroachment Zone. Intense training in preparation for this continued, and even those great knights became exhausted and collapsed. The confusion due to the commander's vacancy over the past few months probably had an effect on their lack of proper training too.

And among them, his gaze was particularly fixed on those struggling and rolling on the training ground floor. Strangely, they were receiving much more intense training than knights from other branches, but their faces were oddly familiar.

"...Are those the knights from the Nadael branch?"

### Chapter 145

A few months ago, he had participated in a large-scale monster subjugation in the city of Nadael, disguised as a mercenary. He had clashed with the holy knights dispatched there and caused a strange conflict, but after that, he had completely forgotten about them and now saw their faces again after a long time.

'The guy next to him is carrying two swords? Usually those who can't even use one sword properly walk around like that.'

'Don't become a burden to us, and don't cause any harm either! We came to subjugate monsters, not to be volunteers protecting you. Especially those intoxicated by their own power tend to fall ridiculously, so be particularly careful.'

He remembered that from their first meeting, they had spouted nonsense to Haren, and in the next subjugation, they had shown inadequate performance, so the vice commanders had vowed to firmly establish discipline when they returned to the holy city. Though he thought they would have forgotten after considerable time had passed, it seemed they never backed down once they made up their minds.

The entire Nadael branch was receiving special training from the two vice commanders, Kalterik and Mela.

"Huh, huk, please spare..."

"Your posture is a mess. Again."

Mela even went so far as to call out the holy knights who had participated in that subjugation one by one to the sparring ground. A beating disguised as training, no, posture correction continued.

Seeing this, the Nadael branch commander could only watch nervously from behind, sweating cold sweat and unable to step forward. Considering his title and the prestige of the city of Nadael, the branch commander should have been of a rank to request a reasonable limit from the headquarters' vice commanders, but...

Even the hero participated in this special training.

"If you bump into a cat while walking on the street, it would be your fault for being careless, right? Even if the cat suddenly jumped out, how much pain would the small animal that collided with your sturdy body feel?"

"Y-yes...?"

"Sir Samuel should do training to increase his agility."

Hare took charge of training Samuel, who had been the captain of the holy knights dispatched for that subjugation. Though it wasn't clear what kind of sermon he was giving, anyway, since he was participating in this strange special training, no one dared to add a word.

Having the empire's hero personally oversee swordsmanship seemed like it would be a very honorable and enviable thing, but the knights actually present just turned their heads away slightly with pale faces.

"We've also started reinvestigating all the trials related to the problems that occurred with the holy knights during that time!"

Noi approached and told him as he was watching the scene on the training ground through the window. He hadn't known that the conduct of the Nadael knights would become such a big catalyst. He nodded dazedly.

Currently, he was still living in the Holy Knight Order building, that is, in Haren's resting room.

Anyway, he had no place to stay in the holy city, and the imperial citizens' antipathy towards Isaph the death row inmate was too great for him to stay separately. Also, he couldn't wander alone, if only to give assurance that the hero was thoroughly managing the unholy necromancer.

Moreover, the day after the hero's return welcome ceremony, a letter from Laria arrived at the Holy Knight Order. The letter delivered along with a chocolate tart was very long, but in summary, it was an apology. Though she had apologized until the end that night and left, to even send such a detailed letter, just what kind of treatment had she received from the previous Isaph?

Anyway, at the end of that apology letter, there was an address written saying to come find her anytime if he needed help regarding his lost memories. It seemed she owned a separate house in the holy city. There was also a postscript saying she would continue analyzing the white stick.

As he was quietly examining this letter, Haren suddenly approached. He quickly crumpled the paper and hid it in his chest, but seeing this, whatever Haren thought, he unexpectedly told him to keep staying in the Holy Knight Order building. At the time, his gaze was fixed on the word 'Laria' on the letter envelope.

'It seems the chances of running into her alone outside would be higher...'

Judging from Haren's muttered words, he might have made that decision because his condition had been up and down after talking alone with Laria that night. Anyway, from the position of a prisoner who couldn't move around separated from the hero, it was right to stay quietly near him, who was practically living in the Order building now.

And he too didn't want to create the possibility of running into Laria, as Haren said. She wouldn't be able to enter the Holy Knight Order building freely. Though he felt sorry for the delicious-looking chocolate tart, he threw it away as it was quite suspicious.

Afterwards, he stayed in Haren's resting room just like the previous few days. It was a much larger space than his one-room apartment in his past life, so it wasn't uncomfortable at all, but Haren kept adding various things to the room, as if something was bothering him.

He brought in new furniture, gave lots of doll-making materials he had mentioned before, and finally even put in some strange toys. By that point, he tried to dissuade him, telling him to stop.

Anyway, since he had nothing to do anyway, he started making worry dolls in earnest. He told Haren he would make him a new one so he should discard the existing one, but he stubbornly kept it. He was a very strange person.

During that time, preparations to go to the final Encroachment Zone progressed steadily. Perhaps having gotten used to it from accompanying him for the past few months, Noi often came to the office and summarized various situations for him.

"The movements in the northern Encroachment Zone are definitely not normal. It's a wide mining area, but recently Diums have come down to attack villages, they say."

"Diums came out? Doesn't their attack power decrease when they leave the Encroachment Zone?"

"Yes, that's right. But the fact that they're moving despite that means they must be cornered! Since there haven't been any missing persons recently, they must have come out because they couldn't get food!"

Noi's tone sounded quite proud. He said the entire empire was in a state of tension due to the surprise arrest of traitors at the welcome party. There were also many cases of civilians reporting buildings suspected of being slave markets.

Certainly, making a big impact once had a good effect. Nodding blankly at Noi's words, he asked:

"I think I heard that troops were deployed there last time, was there not much damage to the village?"

"...Ah, yes. The holy knights defended well, and since the north is under strict guard, there was less damage."

He said that mining was developed in the north, so cities and villages were maintained almost as they were despite the nearby Encroachment Zone. People couldn't easily leave because it was their livelihood. Compared to the previous Encroachment Zones, civilian houses were extremely close, so Haren had sent troops in advance. So it was clearly fortunate that there was little damage, but why was Noi being cautious?

It seemed Noi had reacted uncomfortably at this timing before too. Just as he was feeling uncertain, Noi quickly continued to the next topic.

"Still, we decided to dispatch more holy knights and troops to protect civilian houses! Many knights are volunteering, so it's a very reassuring situation. But according to reports from the north, some stone walls are being built in front of the Encroachment Zone. The Diums might be trying to make their own defense..."

Though ridiculous, such actions rather proved that the Dedium was sleeping in the northern Encroachment Zone. It became certain that the battle there would be difficult, but it wasn't as hopeless as before. It should be fine since there were many troops. He just needed to identify the paths well.

Would he receive another round of critical gazes if he summoned undead in front of everyone? As he tilted his head listlessly, Noi made an unexpected suggestion.

"Anyway! There will be a final battle in the north, so how about wearing different clothes then?"

"...?"

"I know you really like black robes, but if you wear bright and cheerful clothes, other people will be less afraid of you too!"

He was saying they should change his attire when moving with the Holy Knight Order, since the black robe itself gave a gloomy impression. He said if he showed a changed appearance on this occasion, people would see him anew...

He knew Noi's suggestion came from good intentions. Yes, if he made a good impression by performing well this time, he might be able to move around the holy city more easily after getting his sentence reduced later. It was an opportunity for image renewal.

But... wouldn't it all end the moment he summoned undead anyway? As he awkwardly scratched his cheek, Noi had already prepared several outfits and quickly spread a pamphlet on the table. It had splendid uniforms drawn on it.

"Without a hood, it might be good to show your face clearly..."

"You don't have to force yourself to do it."

Just then, Haren entered the office and spoke. His tone was calm, as if he had heard the conversation going on here, and Noi fiddled with the edge of the paper with a very regretful look.

Mumbling that he had been bothered by how everyone was uncomfortable with Isaph at the last banquet, it seemed he had wanted to reverse my image in this northern Encroachment Zone battle.

But Haren just shrugged his shoulders.

"That plan doesn't seem particularly effective. And above all..."

Haren, who had somehow approached behind him, tapped his nape. The touch of his hand brushing down his neck while gently pushing back his hair was very soft.

"There's no need to show your face to everyone..."

*Hmm, I wasn't particularly drawn to that part either.* Nodding his head, he quickly expressed agreement with Haren's opinion. He thought Noi wouldn't be able to refute Haren's words and would back down, but somehow Noi's eyes widened.

"Eh, ek...?"

Seeing his face full of confusion, he realized that Haren had made quite an intimate contact with him, and moreover, he had accepted it as if it was too natural.

### Chapter 146

*Ah, how could this be?* He had become accustomed to skinship without realizing it.

Noi made an expression as if asking 'Did I see wrong?' and rubbed his eyes with both hands. Meanwhile, he quickly pulled up his robe's hood, and Haren's hand moved away. Only then did Noi check the bag beside the sofa with a face that seemed to say 'I must have seen wrong after all!'

Just then, saying he had something to report to Haren, he busily searched for documents.

"Sir Haren. The families that have newly expressed their intention to support troops..."

These days, the military forces were expanding daily. The northern Encroachment Zone was said to be the largest, but at this rate, it seemed they might be able to surround it completely. Since they would naturally win if they were with the hero, it seemed everyone was participating to get even one line in the history books.

Noi spoke with shining eyes:

"Everything is going smoothly. Now we just need the interrogation of the traitors to go well..."

"Huu, it seems you were looking for me."

*Bang*, the person who appeared opening the door wide was Beatrice. With dark circles under her eyes and somewhat disheveled hair, she looked very different from usual. Though she might be completely unlike her usual self who always maintained elegant splendor, her golden eyes alone shone clearly.

"I've finally created a method to break the seal of silence."

Beatrice spoke boldly, her eyes gleaming brightly. At this news, Noi immediately stood up from his seat and welcomed her with a "Finally!"

The traitors arrested at the hero's return welcome party were all imprisoned in the underground prison that handled serious criminals under the Pope's orders. Slave trading itself was a crime, and above all, the suspicion of treason was the heaviest.

[All living beings fall to 'desire'.]

The Dium encountered in the eastern Encroachment Zone had said these words. So they wanted to understand what desires the traitors had that made them side with the Dedium. It wasn't just one or two, but dozens of powerful people who had betrayed humanity. Incidentally, another purpose was to find out if there were any more accomplices.

But a problem arose from the first day of interrogation.

None of those imprisoned could answer questions properly. Though they would know that the right to remain silent was meaningless since they were arrested by the Holy Knight Commander's authority, they all kept their mouths shut. It seemed more forced than voluntary, and when pressed persistently, they discovered strange inscriptions appearing and disappearing on their necks.

After Beatrice examined them, she said it seemed to be a seal of silence spell with several magics complexly used. She said they might die if forced to answer. So after researching ways to break the spell, it seemed she had finally succeeded.

The paper she held trembled. It must be the result of several days' hard work.

"Let's depart right away."

Haren moved immediately too. Beatrice laughed "kukukuk" with sunken eyes from staying up for days straight. Though it was understandable that she was happy to have finally found a method, her glistening eyes gave a somewhat awkward sense of distance. She was almost like a mad scientist filled with madness.

Suddenly, Beatrice turned to look at him and their eyes met directly.

"Come here. I've worked so hard, you should at least act cute..."

"The direction is that way."

Haren skillfully cut off Beatrice's nonsense and gestured for him to come along too. He naturally stood in front of her, blocking her charge. Thinking he might suffer an unpleasant fate from Beatrice, whose sanity seemed precarious, if left alone here, he quietly followed Haren.

Just then, he had been curious about the traitors' desires too. Just what great thing did they want that made them join hands with the catastrophe that had plunged the continent into terror 20 years ago?

Mela and Kalterik also joined on the way to the prison. It was natural since they had been on the recent journey together. Having directly witnessed the mountain of corpses piled up in the eastern Encroachment Zone, they were all full of anger towards the traitors.

But at the prison they arrived at, the group fell silent.

"Th-th-they all suddenly died..."

"Suddenly, you say."

"Y-yes. There was a brief problem during the shift change, sob, but the prison was empty for barely 10 minutes, and when we returned, everyone..."

The guard spoke incoherently. His voice trailed off as if he was very ashamed to report this disaster to the hero. Kalterik, Mela, and Noi kept examining beyond the bars as if they couldn't believe it, while Beatrice burst into a dry laugh. It was an inevitable scene.

All the imprisoned traitors had died.

Those who had been alive just minutes ago had suddenly stopped breathing. Their forms slumped on the floor looked somewhat eerie. The already gloomy prison felt even more desolate.

"Could it be the Diums' doing..."

Mela muttered as if sighing. It was the most likely guess to explain the sudden deaths. But there were several problems with this. What was the use of silencing them when it had already been proven that traitors had been sending sacrifices to the Diums?

Was there any reason for Diums to try to hide human desires? Though he thought there might be something they wanted to hide, like methods of dealing or otherwise, the reason this hypothesis was particularly unsettling was...

"Then, that would mean the Diums' power reaches even the holy city..."

Kalterik muttered in a confused voice. It would mean that the Diums' power had penetrated the barrier of the holy city, which was supposed to be divinely protected. Though the seal of silence had been effective earlier, it was shocking that even the life and death of the spell's targets could be decided from outside.

The group looked around the prison uneasily, and especially Beatrice cried out grabbing her hair with both hands:

"I went to all the trouble of creating a breaking method, and it ends like this?!"

It was understandable to be furious when the place to present the task she had completed by staying up for days and nights had been blown up and disappeared. For the first time, he looked at Beatrice with pity, when suddenly an idea occurred to him.

"Should I try calling them with necromancy?"

"Wh-wh-what did you say?!"

"Since they just died, and if I call them in soul form, there shouldn't be any restrictions from the seal of silence, so we might be able to interrogate them easily."

Noi was startled, but at his following explanation, he just opened and closed his mouth. It was probably too tempting a proposal to refuse. Though the guard on the other side was shocked, the group exchanged strange glances with each other. Their aversion to necromancy would have relatively decreased after being with him for the past few months.

But as they hesitated, seemingly reluctant to readily agree, he approached the nearest corpse for now. In fact, though he had spoken confidently, he needed to check since he had no experience directly summoning the soul of a dead person.

Since necromancy was essentially the art of summoning spirits, and Isaph was said to have originally wandered around absorbing souls from corpses, it should be possible. However, since the NPC had run away and there was no support from the status window, experimentation was necessary.

*Swaaah-*

Just as the purple energy spilled on the floor was about to spread widely.

"What on earth are you doing!"

"How dare you in this holy city...!"

Thunderous shouts struck the prison. He flinched at the ear-splitting volume and removed his hand, looking towards the door. Someone was just entering the underground prison.

It was the Pope and a cardinal.

Behind them, guard knights and priests, and even other nobles rushed in together, all looking at him with shocked eyes. Especially the cardinal, pointing at him, shouted angrily:

"That unholy bastard still hasn't come to his senses!"

It was the cardinal who had overseen the interrogation when he had been imprisoned before. At that time, he had gritted his teeth saying he would repay past humiliation, but had been unable to do anything due to the imperial princess's intervention. His anger seemed to have accumulated since then, as his eyes bulged as if they would pop out and his voice grew louder.

The Pope also reproached him in a stern voice:

"This is a space under the temple's jurisdiction, how could you try to commit an act against God's will here!"

*I haven't raised the dead yet...*

He rolled his eyes awkwardly. *No, well, given the situation, it was a solution a necromancer would naturally think of, wasn't it? It was just professional spirit*. He couldn't possibly voice the excuse he muttered inwardly.

As he remained silent with nothing to say, the cardinal became enraged at his attitude. He boiled with anger saying there was no sign of repentance at all, but Haren stood in front of him, blocking the cardinal.

"I must firmly correct that bastard's behavior...!"

"I am currently in charge of managing Isaph. So let's stop here."

The cardinal paused at his firm tone. Though he looked like he wanted to argue more, when Haren stared down at him intently, he finally just moved his lips a couple times before falling silent.

### Chapter 147

But the Pope, with eyes that were quite displeased, looked him up and down and said:

"There must never again be an instance of using necromancy like this in the holy city."

Though the Pope had a benevolent appearance, his eyes looking at him were filled only with great displeasure. Well, no matter how much he had assisted the hero, the Pope couldn't possibly acknowledge him. Hadn't he pointedly left him out when praising the group's merits at the banquet hall?

The Pope sternly warned Haren:

"This part is absolutely unacceptable, so the Holy Knight Commander should be mindful too. As much as you hold the authority to manage the prisoner, you must prevent that thing from acting impudently."

Since life and death were God's domain, the act of a human daring to call the souls of the dead was tantamount to overstepping. It was an act that strongly contradicted doctrine. A reproachful gaze was directed at the Holy Knight Commander, asking how he could allow such a thing to happen in the middle of the holy city, not even in an Encroachment Zone.

In the end, Haren also answered with a silent bow, and afterwards Noi, sweating coldly, quietly tried to change the subject.

"Y-Your Holiness! All the prisoners suddenly died...!"

His tone of voice, even stamping his feet, was quite desperate. Kalterik and Mela also pretended to look around the prison while quietly standing as if to shield him. As he watched their backs with newfound unfamiliarity, fortunately the Pope's attention shifted as well.

He nodded, saying he had just come down after receiving that report.

"I too was in the midst of closely conferring with imperial personnel, viewing the traitor situation as grave. Knowing you had put effort into interrogating them, I was very surprised to hear the news... but it must be the Diums' cunning trick."

"They are truly wicked creatures. How on earth can they do such a thing!"

The Pope spoke in a dejected tone while slowly examining the prison. The cardinal also shuddered as if it was terrible, then immediately cried out viciously:

"They were traitors anyway, so we should see it as them meeting a deserved death! Isn't this punishment for daring to side with the Dedium and dreaming of a new world!"

He clicked his tongue, saying there was no reason at all to sympathize with their deaths. He was surprised by such extreme expressions for a temple official. He remembered some priests had been caught too, was there no compassion at all?

Moreover, when the Pope nodded, those wanting to look good to the Order quickly agreed. Opinions poured out saying they deserved to die, their corpses should be burned at the stake in the plaza, their entire families should be executed too, an example must be shown, and so on. Though he understood everyone was viewing the current matter seriously, it sounded more aggressive than expected and even somewhat inhumane.

*Well, this isn't a sentiment I should have, having just tried to summon the soul of the recently deceased with necromancy to interrogate them...*

Just then, Haren whispered softly to him:

"Go back first, Isaph."

It seemed wise to leave quickly before any needless trouble arose, as he was like a thorn in their side here anyway. Even Haren would find it difficult to directly defend his necromancy in front of the Pope.

He nodded to him and then quietly slipped out through the back way of the prison.

"Huu."

A sigh escaped as soon as he came outside. *Ugh*, he just didn't match with prisons. He shouldn't match with prisons in the first place, but this time he had been reproached by many and especially seen many corpses, so he felt very uneasy. Though those who had offered slaves to the Diums truly deserved to die, he hadn't expected them to go like this.

According to Noi, there were no more missing persons occurring throughout the empire. It was probably thanks to the surprise arrest of traitors at the recent welcome party causing huge ripples, and even if there were those not yet caught, they would all be busy being cautious.

Though the interrogation had regrettably fallen through, the arrests had been effective anyway, and offerings to the Encroachment Zones had also stopped, so was it okay to consider this good enough...

As he walked along thinking various thoughts inwardly, he spotted a familiar figure in the backyard.

"Just... how long..."

It was a man pacing in the empty lot behind the prison tower, and the reason he caught his eye was none other than his flashy accessories. His whole body sparkled so brightly that it naturally drew his gaze, and soon he remembered someone with similar characteristics. Especially that fluffy hair!

The peacock, no, lord of Nadael.

"Did I properly convey my words to His Holiness? That I'm begging for a meeting?"

"Y-yes. But he said he would contact you later as he's in the middle of a meeting now..."

"Haaa, I should have been careful with my words then! I got too excited talking about the city of light..."

The lord vented his irritation while talking with someone presumed to be his aide. He even ruffled his hair violently while berating himself that he shouldn't have boasted too much.

In the past, he had repeatedly boasted that the 'bright light' that swept away the monsters was God's miracle visiting Nadael, but had that somehow offended the Pope? It was a time when the holy city was depressed from losing their hero, so it would have been displeasing if another major city bragged about God taking care of them.

Was it a misunderstanding arising from the details of Haren's undercover activities not being fully known, or was there some other problem?

The lord started walking alone after instructing his aide to try requesting again, but his appearance looked quite unstable. He paced around one area irritably and sometimes even muttered something with his head bowed. Especially, one hand fiddled with his necklace obsessively.

A necklace with a small golden ball pendant.

According to Beatrice's explanation, it was a gift given only to those who were in the Pope's good graces. A kind of symbol of being in the Pope's inner circle. Come to think of it, hadn't all the nobles with the Pope in the prison earlier been wearing that necklace too? Just as he was retracing his memories, the lord mumbled:

"The time to fill it... has passed too much..."

His voice was too quiet to hear properly, but at least he could tell he looked quite anxious. Just then, something glinted where the lord had passed by. Though he thought about pretending not to see it, he moved anyway as a sort of repayment for receiving the gate pass.

"Your bracelet fell—"

"Hiiiiieek!"

As soon as he called out, the Nadael lord fell backwards in shock. Though it was common for people to be surprised when he approached, he hadn't expected him to fall on his bottom like this.

Since it happened even before his hand could reach him, he awkwardly stopped his motion and looked down at him. The Nadael lord's eyes were so wide they looked like they would pop out, and he too was quite surprised to face him. Thanks to his posture, he could see his face clearly, and...

Somehow he seemed to have aged considerably since before.

Though it had only been a few months since they last met, the lord looked at least 10, no, 20 years older. He had become an old man with wrinkles all over. Had he been struck directly by the passage of time from worrying so much, with all that had happened in the empire? As he stared strangely at the graying hair, the lord trembled violently.

"Hiek, I-I-Isaph, kuk, kek, cough!"

As if too shocked to face him, he choked and coughed violently. Though he had talked before about presenting Isaph's head as a tribute or whatnot, when actually encountering him up close, had he become gripped by fear?

Somehow feeling he should show respect to the elderly, he stepped back slightly and just held out the bracelet. The lord looked back and forth between him and the bracelet with a flustered face before receiving it with both hands.

Afterwards, the lord left as if fleeing in a hurry. Though he hadn't particularly wanted a conversation, he followed his retreating figure with his eyes. Thanks to the lord taking his hands off his neck to take the bracelet, his necklace was accidentally visible.

The golden ball was open very slightly.

"There was something inside..."

It was unexpected that the necklace could be opened, and moreover, he was puzzled that something was contained inside. He had thought the golden ball had symbolic meaning as the Pope's gift, but was the object inside important?

Though he couldn't see properly as it passed by too quickly, it was some kind of pitch-black crystal. With a very crumpled appearance. An object that didn't match the golden necklace at all, looking like trash to be honest. Just what was that?

*Thump*-

Suddenly his heart beat loudly. Somehow he felt strangely elated with an odd sense of familiarity, or perhaps chillingly cold. Puzzled by the sudden palpitation, he pressed his chest firmly and turned his head.

The sunlight falling on the grass where the lord had disappeared looked unfamiliar.

### Chapter 148

The large-scale expedition to eliminate the northern Encroachment Zone began.

Though the sudden death of the prisoners was bewildering, it also increased the importance of eradicating the Diums. The Order emphasized that the north must be swept clean to prevent the Diums' wicked tricks from causing any more chaos in the empire, and provided all sorts of holy objects and potions. The Order burned and disposed of the prison corpses within hours, and proclaimed it as a warning to traitors.

And from the imperial palace, members of the royal family expressed their intention to participate. Beatrice was first, seemingly quite indignant about having her project ruined. When the First Imperial Princess stepped forward like this, perhaps feeling pressured, Crown Prince Terios also decided to join.

It seemed they judged it would be safe anyway since they would be with the hero. Though Beatrice clicked her tongue saying another burden had been added, regardless of the background, the troops' morale rose endlessly.

This expedition was different from the start.

In the previous three Encroachment Zone entries, they had always moved busily with just five people, but this time the difference in numbers was so great it was embarrassing to compare. Troops waited in dense formation, too numerous to take in at a glance, and they were also well-armed with various holy objects and magical tools. Priests also accompanied them to support holy power.

Also, since it was an official march, they could use warps. Taking a warp from the holy city would transport them instantly to the city closest to the northern Encroachment Zone, and from there they could reach their destination within about an hour, they said.

He watched with interest as people lined up in rows and columns to take the warp. Though warps usually had a personnel limit, since this was a special situation, the empire had adjusted the transport capacity to maximum, they said. He felt sorry for the staff with dark circles under their eyes on the other side of the space.

A brief time arose while they made final checks on the warp. While everyone was solemnly gathering themselves, he quietly approached Noi.

In fact, he had been harboring an uneasy question all this time. But his companions had been too busy, and especially after the incident of the traitors' deaths, they seemed even more hectic, so he couldn't bring himself to ask. He had buried it thinking it wasn't worth taking up their time, but now a gap had appeared.

That question was about the golden necklace.

"Noi. I'm curious about something regarding the necklace bestowed by the Pope..."

"Huh? The necklace?"

"Yeah. What's inside that golden ball?"

Though Noi looked puzzled by the sudden topic, his eyes grew even rounder at the following question. Tilting his head, he asked back:

"Something inside the necklace? This is the first I've heard of that..."

"...Really?"

What was this? Was this something even Noi didn't know about? He had thought Noi, being quite devout, would aim for the Pope's bestowed gift, and would therefore know the necklace well, but he had a bewildered look as if hearing about the 'inside' for the first time.

*Hmm,* since Haren was cynical towards the Order he wouldn't be interested in the necklace, so he had asked Noi, but had it been completely off the mark? As he was feeling disappointed, Noi suddenly brightened his eyes.

"Could it be you've become interested in the necklace? You might be able to receive one if you achieve great merit this time! I could even write a recommendation...!"

"No, not at all."

A dry laugh escaped at such an absurd suggestion. As if he would want the Pope's necklace. And no matter how hard he worked in this subjugation, would the Pope acknowledge a death row inmate, and a necromancer at that?

However, despite his reaction, Noi tried to promote the necklace again.

"If you receive the necklace, people's perception of you will change instantly! Actually, there's an atmosphere that wearing that necklace means you've gained special qualifications. Those people get along well together too."

Though he had expected factions from the moment the necklace became a symbol of the Pope's line, for him to speak like that, the bonds must be quite blatant. Noi introduced that even among the people gathered now, many wore the golden necklace. The lords of major cities, margraves guarding borders, grand dukes, marquises, and so on.

"And quite a few from the imperial family have received necklaces too. His Majesty the Emperor and Her Majesty the Empress also have them..."

The continuing lineup was splendid. Did having the necklace create connections with the imperial family too? No, it would be more appropriate to say that one had to be of that rank in the first place to belong to the Pope's line.

On the other hand, he thought those mentioned now were particularly active in this subjugation. The commanders leading knight orders second in size only to the Holy Knight Order and Imperial Knight Order all wore necklaces, and red tassels were attached to their shoulder pauldrons to distinguish them.

Though it was natural since they were people wanting to look good to the Order, somehow it gave him a strange feeling. Then was the black crystal contained inside those necklaces something shared only by those who received them? Was this also a strategy to solidify the Order's power? Since sharing secrets was one way to strengthen bonds...

While he was pondering deeply, Noi's promotion continued. Did he want to create some motivation for change in him by emphasizing how attractive the necklace was? Evangelizing him to be moved by God's will? No, rather than that, Noi's goal seemed to be 'Isaph's image transformation'.

Somehow Noi had been extremely active in trying to change his reputation lately...

"Transport preparations are complete!"

Just then, the warp mage's shout rang out. Though sales representative Noi withdrew with a regretful expression, he added a final "Still, think about it." With strange eyes watching him, he moved onto the huge magic circle.

The destination was the northern city, Gaches.

Some of the troops that had been dispatched earlier greeted them. They reported on the recent situation while heading to the Encroachment Zone together. It was about the wall the Diums had built high at the entrance to the Encroachment Zone and suspicious noises occasionally heard from inside.

He watched Haren's back walking at the front with renewed wonder. Countless people were walking while looking only at his back.

The northern cities and villages were under strict guard, just as he had heard from Noi before. The residents were generally armed, and tension subtly permeated the streets. He had thought this was because of their proximity to the Encroachment Zone, but it seemed that wasn't the only background.

"How can that bastard walk with his head held so high!"

"What an utterly shameless fellow."

As they moved, sharp glares flew from all around the streets. Even the holy knights around him kept glancing at him in a quite ominous way, and the reason was...

"How dare he appear here again after massacring the residents of Klam!"

"My relatives lived there!"

*Thud*! A stone that flew from far away rolled at his feet. After staring blankly at the ground, he slowly raised his head to check the bulletin board by the road. Among the names on the northern map posted there, one familiar name caught his eye.

'Klam Village.'

*Hmm, so Isaph had carried out a massacre in this vicinity.*

Though northern villages were generally clustered close together, only Klam Village was located in an isolated spot. Since there were no residents now, it must be a vanished village, but the name still remained on the bulletin board. Perhaps they had preserved it to not forget their anger towards Isaph.

No wonder Noi had shown strangely uncomfortable signs whenever mentioning the north.

'Actually, we did keep the northern Encroachment Zone in mind since it was close here, but now the entire north has such high wariness towards outsiders...'

He suddenly recalled what Noi had said when staying in Nadael before. Perhaps this was why Noi had recently suggested changing clothes for this subjugation, and had aimed for an image transformation while promoting the necklace earlier.

"That shameless face...!"

"Isaph."

Just as criticism was about to pour out from the street again, Haren called him. No, not just calling, he grabbed his arm and made him stand beside himself. Thanks to this, he naturally avoided the stones that had been flying towards him.

The residents hesitated. The hero's action was practically blocking their antipathy. Though the purpose was to prevent disturbance, he openly protected him. The residents all firmly shut their mouths, and didn't even dare to raise stones in the direction where the hero was.

He looked around awkwardly. Actually, since he viewed the north's anger as justified, he was somewhat worried about Haren stepping forward like this. Wasn't it an action that would needlessly erode public sentiment?

"...Want me to put a rope around my neck? Should I walk more like a criminal?"

"I don't know what you mean by walking like a criminal, but that's enough."

When he whispered quietly to Haren, he looked at him with strange eyes. His behavior of being calm until criticism poured out but becoming uncomfortable when someone protected him seemed quite odd to him.

### Chapter 149

But wasn't it natural? Actually, it was more surprising that Noi was being considerate, and even Mela and Kalterik were glancing at him with concern. Thinking back, it seemed the two knights had also tried to shield him with their bodies as much as possible while walking through the streets.

Though their greatly changed attitude from the past was surprising and strange, his position remained the same now as then. Isaph was truly trash, and what did it matter to him whether such a person was cursed or not? So he was insensitive to the criticism poured on Isaph's body, and rather worried that others might suffer harm from protecting him.

Perhaps his experience of being shunned by all sorts of people in his past life had helped with his current indifferent reaction. Though unfortunately such an attitude seemed to be perceived as shamelessness and increased public anger, even this was familiar. He just rolled his eyes awkwardly and tried to quietly step back.

"Stay beside me. You'll need to search the interior first when we reach the Encroachment Zone anyway."

But Haren didn't release his arm and instead pulled him closer. Afraid that his paper-thin body might fall into those arms if he struggled needlessly, potentially creating an even more tremendous scene, he finally followed his words.

He walked to the Encroachment Zone standing side by side with the hero. He moved hoping only that his back wouldn't be pierced by the stinging gazes.

Soon they arrived at their destination.

This time he had thought he wouldn't be surprised since he had heard many explanations about the Encroachment Zone's terrain beforehand. The previous three times he had been startled each time, encountering them without prior knowledge. However, the Encroachment Zone drew an exclamation from his lips even at the last.

"Huh..."

The massive rocky mountain beyond the tunnel was entirely the Encroachment Zone. The peculiar point was that a river wrapped around the mountain like an embrace, making it stand apart like an island. The colorless land covered in black fog looked even more like another world.

He understood why the cities and villages had remained intact even though an Encroachment Zone had appeared in the north - the half-collapsed tunnel was the only passage. They would be safe if they just blocked this tunnel. And they had said the Diums had built a wall this time, and indeed a high stone wall had been erected beyond the tunnel. He looked at it uneasily before stepping forward.

*Swaaah-*

Darkness poured out from where he stood and spread widely across the ground. As undead rose smoothly from within the darkness that spread in a swirling range, the troops behind murmured.

Though they must have been informed that Isaph would search the Encroachment Zone with necromancy first, they seemed surprised to actually see the undead. Moreover, there were so many of them. Before he knew it, nearly 200 undead were floating around him.

"How many corpses must he have searched for to..."

"Truly horrible..."

"Quiet."

Kalterik suppressed the commotion rising from behind. Mela too *swuk-* looked around at them, casting gazes telling them to be quiet. After glancing back at them, he sent the undead into the tunnel. They smoothly entered the Encroachment Zone, passing over the wall built by the Diums.

As the undead increased, the shared vision also increased. Though his mind was complicated, he organized the screens familiarly to check the space. It felt like monitoring CCTV screens one by one while sitting in a control room.

But he saw a very bewildering scene.

"...A fortress?"

A fortress was discovered in the mountain. According to what he had heard from Noi, this place had been mined a few times but abandoned as too treacherous, yet there was a two-story building. The miners wouldn't have built something like that, would they? Just what was happening in that place?

He tried to examine the maze-like fortress closely, but a problem arose.

"Kuk."

The vision cut off abruptly.

Though this was the first time this had happened, he instantly sensed what the situation was. Someone inside had hunted down the undead. Though he instinctively withdrew the summoning just before the undead was completely destroyed, the shock was severe. When he suddenly staggered, Haren immediately caught him as if embracing his body.

"You don't have to push yourself."

"No... I can't stand this."

*How dare they block my necromancy like this?*

Though the responsibility to do his role well was heavy, first of all this situation itself greatly irritated him. You could say his pride was hurt. He bit his lip firmly and summoned undead again.

Actually, earlier he had deliberately summoned them excluding the residents of Klam Village. Since it was inevitably a conscious place, he had excluded them, but this time he called as many undead as he could summon. As if reflecting his pissed off mood, the undead's energy became more aggressive.

The energy spread around him rippled fiercely. Beyond the level of his robe hem fluttering wildly, even the river's surface churned, and he heard some people behind letting out shocked exclamations.

Meanwhile, he surrounded the undead with purple energy as if protecting them before sending them back to the mountain. Undead poured like heavy rain from all directions of the mountain. *Kigigik-* The sound of them colliding with the energy in the mountain spread like screams. Standing at the front of the space where even an ominous wind whirled fiercely, he endured desperately.

The undead moved quickly, avoiding attacks pouring from the Encroachment Zone. The vision flipped around dizzyingly. Especially the residents of Klam searched the space very actively. Though they were always excessively loyal to him, this time they were even more passionate, and thanks to this, he could analyze the space.

*Ugh*, barely swallowing rising nausea, he spoke:

"This time, there are, demon race inside..."

It was the demon race that had attacked the undead. Monsters were with them too, and their numbers were enough to form a legion on that side as well. About equal to their numbers. It was bewildering as this was the first time seeing bodies while examining an Encroachment Zone, and the demon race interfered with the investigation as if they had anticipated the entry of his undead.

He knew the old demon race and new demon race were cooperating, but he hadn't expected to see them like this in an Encroachment Zone.

"The inside of the mountain is all carved out, and a building that looks like a fortress has been built in the center. For cores, seven have been identified from outside, but there seem to be several more inside the fortress too. I couldn't enter there because the resistance was too fierce..."

He explained the situation step by step. As it was the first time a fortress had been discovered in an Encroachment Zone along with demon race, Haren was wary, and Noi and the vice commanders gathered and organized the information systematically.

They prepared more meticulously since many people would be entering. Until now, he had always gone in and given directions one by one, but there were too many people for that this time. So they proceeded by roughly drawing a map to show everyone and advancing with formed strategies.

The entry began smoothly.

They easily broke down the wall built by the Diums and entered the Encroachment Zone. Though everyone seemed tense at entering an Encroachment Zone for the first time, they calmly followed the commanders' orders. The holy knights surrounded themselves with holy power for protection, the rest wore holy objects and magical tools, and the priests also reinforced power with prayers. Holy power wrapped around the troops like a shield.

He was benefiting from the bracelet Haren had given him in advance. While newly thinking that raids really depended on equipment and parties needed a balanced composition of tank-DPS-heal, Kalterik stepped to the front and shouted loudly:

"We'll clear the fog first!"

They decided to first eliminate the black fog of the Encroachment Zone that was hindering vision now using holy objects. It was a treasure provided by the Order that would spread holy power widely over an area to push back unholy energy. Kalterik raised a long rod high with a shout.

*Chwaaah-*

As holy power rippled widely around him, the fog began to clear. He stepped back quietly while admiring it. His role was to scout the Encroachment Zone anyway so he had done his part, and above all...

[You've come again, wretch!]

He felt uneasy about the possibility of the same thing happening as in the eastern Encroachment Zone.

If by any chance the Diums recognized him here too, it would be quite awkward. First of all, he didn't want to get close to Diums, and such a situation itself had plenty of room to make him appear as a traitor.

So he had to hope the subjugation would end safely while hiding among the soldiers as much as possible. It was fortunate there were many people. Though he had already revealed himself by searching with undead...

He entered the Encroachment Zone with half anxiety, half unease.

### Chapter 150

[So humans finally dare to enter here!]

[Kill all those stupid creatures!]

But whether it was fortunate or not, no Diums were visible inside the Encroachment Zone, only many demon race appeared. The demon race showed extreme hostility towards humans and charged at them. Their momentum rushing forward with bloodshot eyes was fierce.

But they had prepared for their existence, and not only did they have many holy objects, but psychology played a big role especially in such battles. That is, the holy knights of the Holy Empire who had won the Human-Demon War in the past would not cower before the demon race.

"Still causing trouble without knowing your place after being utterly defeated!"

"Don't break formation!"

It was no exaggeration to say that all combat-capable forces in the empire had gathered here. The knights advanced vigorously, and at their front, Haren commanded calmly.

"First Knight Division to 10 o'clock, Second Knight Division to 3 o'clock, Third Knight Division to 5 o'clock. The rest capture the demon race and prevent them from interfering with the holy knights."

Since holy power was needed to break the cores, the holy knights had to step forward. Haren identified directions for approaching the cores and gave orders, and his subordinates faithfully followed. Not only the commander-in-chief's calm attitude but the hero's presence itself raised everyone's morale.

This scene was very fascinating.

Originally, it had sometimes felt strange that only their party of five, including him, had color in the colorless Encroachment Zone, but this time not only were there many people with color, but perhaps because the battle was taking place in a fortress, it felt several times more novel. Should he say it felt like they had come to destroy the Diums' world?

The systematically conducted battle was also new. Despite numerous demon race attacking, they maintained formation as they advanced, and even breaking cores was accomplished without much difficulty. *Jjeojjeok*- The familiar sound ringing out everywhere was welcome. If they had come here with just the original party members, it would have been extremely difficult.

"To think cores really are where that guy said..."

The holy knights who had moved according to Haren's orders looked at him with surprised faces. They seemed quite amazed that he had accurately identified the presence of demon race and monsters, and had not lied about the cores' locations.

The advance was instantaneous.

Despite the demon race's persistent interference, the holy knights broke all seven cores that he had specified. It was a moment when Haren's emphasized agility training shone.

"As expected, since purification isn't working, we'll need to enter the fortress."

Haren said after looking around. Though they had dealt with all the cores identified outside the fortress, the Encroachment Zone's contaminated air still hadn't cleared, so there must be several more inside.

So they decided to divide into groups to deal with the demon race in the fortress and to find and break cores, with the latter composed of elite knights. The space felt hot with rising morale. After pondering, he spoke:

"I'll go in too. Maybe I can find the cores by searching with undead again from inside."

When looking around the Encroachment Zone from outside, he hadn't been able to approach the fortress. Not only was the demon race's resistance fierce, but it seemed as if some kind of barrier had been put up. It was impossible to examine it, completely hidden by pitch-black fog. But things might be different searching from inside the fortress.

Though it meant entering an extremely dangerous space, and made his earlier hanging back seem meaningless... it felt wrong to hide alone in a space where everyone was fighting so hard.

Seeing these people who endured desperately while pouring potions on their injuries, striving fiercely with one heart and mind to eliminate the contaminated land from the empire, he felt somewhat pricked by conscience. The fact that no Diums had appeared so far also played a part in his decision.

Haren stared at him intently. Though he knew better than anyone the utility of examining spaces with necromancy, he seemed reluctant to readily accept his accompaniment.

"...It's a dangerous place."

"Where in an Encroachment Zone is safe? And resolving this quickly is good for me too."

He spoke deliberately nonchalantly, and finally Haren nodded.

Advancing into the interior of the massive two-story stone fortress was not easy, but not too difficult either. Though demon race rushed down from the upper floor pouring attacks, Haren at the front swung his sword widely to shake them off.

*Kwagwang!*

Though it was a simple frontal approach, the power was not simple, so the entrance was destroyed instantly. Through that gap, he quickly sent undead flying. Though demon race filled the interior too, the undead flew around rapidly and found the cores one by one.

Not a small number of five cores were discovered inside the fortress too, but this time his attention was drawn to something other than the cores.

"...There's something behind the fortress..."

From the center of the vast wasteland behind the fortress, the undead's entry was blocked. It felt as if some kind of barrier had been erected like a wall. He instinctively sensed that the waves emitted from that were why he hadn't been able to examine the fortress earlier.

Perhaps this fortress was built to hide something inside that barrier. And what would need to be hidden in this Encroachment Zone...

"C-could the Dedium be there?"

Noi spoke in a trembling voice. Seeing the other knights' faces also stiffening with tension, he could infer they were all thinking the same thing.

The god of those called catastrophes that had burned the continent 20 years ago. The Dedium was preparing for resurrection here. This was enough to instill fear in the holy knights. Anxiety even spread that they might face an awakened Dedium today.

The current holy knights were not those who had fought the Great Catastrophe in the past. Since those had died fighting the catastrophe, most of the knights standing here were their descendants, and though considerable time had passed, fear of the Dedium remained in everyone's hearts. It must be an emotion engraved from seeing it in childhood, hearing about it through previous generations, and living in the ruined continent.

"But Lady Evelyn's seal must be binding the Dedium firmly! Surely!"

As if sensing that atmosphere, Noi shouted energetically on purpose. That seal was created by the previous Holy Knight Commander, that is, Haren's mother, sacrificing her whole body. They shouldn't fear the Dedium's resurrection in a space with the hero.

Everyone shouted "That's right!" vigorously and solemnly strengthened their resolve to completely eliminate the Dedium here. Soon after, the knights dispersed to focus on their tasks. They blocked the charging demon race and monsters inside the fortress too, while other elite groups watched for gaps to strike out and break cores.

*Chwak! Chwaak-!*

The demon race's screams, the sound of holy power and demonic energy colliding, the roar of the stone fortress crumbling. Even in the space so noisy it made their ears ring, everyone did not stop advancing, and they gradually entered deep into the fortress.

"Dium letters are engraved..."

As they headed towards the back of the fortress, they discovered walls densely covered with letters. They had seen a similar scene in the western Encroachment Zone too. The altar where the ritual for the Dedium was being performed had been fully engraved with Dium letters, and this place was similar. He walked while tracing the wall.

Somehow his heart was beating quickly, *thump thump.*

Was this tension, or anxiety? He couldn't calm down no matter how deeply he breathed. His heart was beating so hard his whole body trembled, and he walked with his left hand pressed firmly to his chest. The tips of his right hand touching the wall trembled spasmodically. Why was he like this?

At the place they finally reached, a black barrier was erected high like a wall. He could faintly see into the opaque interior...

Beyond that barrier, there was a massive, pitch-black 'egg'.

*Thump-!!*

His heart pounded violently. An egg so immensely large he had to tilt his head back fully to look up at it. It was black as pitch so he couldn't see inside, but he felt it instinctively. Everyone would probably sense it.

The Dedium was inside that egg.

"Heuk..."

His stomach kept churning. Why? Why was he reacting this much? Feeling like he might cry, he looked around in confusion. Though other knights also seemed surprised at discovering the massive egg, they didn't show strange reactions like him.

Though he wondered if it might be due to peculiar waves flowing from there, only he was like this. As he clutched his chest and panted, Mela grabbed his shoulder quizzically.

"Isaph? Is something wrong? Why are you-"

"Don't touch me."

Suddenly goosebumps rose all over and he sharply shook off Mela's hand.

### Chapter 151

Mela looked at him with a bewildered expression, but he had no presence of mind to explain. No, he didn't even know how to describe his condition in the first place. Why on earth was he acting like this?

He shook his head forcefully while taking deep breaths. Since even Haren turned to look this way, he straightened his posture and deliberately moved with feigned composure. The goal was right in front of them now.

However, just before approaching the barrier.

[My, to think you've already come this far...]

Someone appeared in front of the barrier as if a droplet falling with a plop. The one who appeared gracefully was the first Dium they had encountered since entering this Encroachment Zone.

And this Dium had four horns rising high on its forehead.

The appearance of two horns each rising sharply vertically on either side of the forehead was somewhat different from the Dium encountered in the eastern Encroachment Zone before. While one and two-horned ones had been similar not only in horns but mostly in appearance too, from three horns they became distinguishable, and four-horned ones looked like completely individual beings.

However, its body size was small like a human's, just like the one encountered in the east, and its pitch-black hair fell neatly to its chin in a clean bob cut. Dressed in an elegant tailcoat, it looked as if it might be attending a party.

"D-Dium..."

"Heuk!"

The holy knights stirred. They seemed very startled at encountering a Dium for the first time since entering the Encroachment Zone. Moreover, it had as many as four horns and peculiarly had an appearance similar to humans.

The four-horned Dium's head shown at the banquet hall earlier had been in its original state with a giant monster's body restored. So everyone couldn't help but show an uncomfortable aversion at facing a Dium resembling humans for the first time.

[To think so many humans would visit, really...]

The Dium stood in front of the barrier and slowly looked around while cupping its chin with one hand. It nodded as if appreciating all sorts of roaring sounds coming from the fortress.

*Swuk-* Its pitch-black eyes with no distinction of whites narrowed.

[How delightful. If I kill you all here, this empire will end too.]

The Dium raised one hand high while smiling with its mouth corners stretched up to its cheekbones. And as it waved elegantly and lightly as if conducting, black dots appeared densely in the sky. Those gradually growing larger in the cloudy sky were all demon race.

Flying-type demon race burst out in swarms from the rocky mountain.

"Re-reorganize the formation!"

Kalterik shouted urgently. Ground demon race were already difficult to deal with, but flying types raised the difficulty several times. The atmosphere that had momentarily wavered at the sight of enemies swarming while flapping their huge wings was caught by the vice commander's thunderous shout.

Haren too seriously looked up at the sky to assess the enemy numbers and ordered Mela:

"Tell everyone to gather here."

It would be difficult to face flying-type demon race with forces scattered throughout the Encroachment Zone. It seemed they needed to focus on dealing with the demon race before breaking cores now. Mela quickly moved to carry out Haren's order. She contacted each unit with communication artifacts and even personally gathered scattered personnel.

The ground demon race also moved positions as if trying to join their flying kin coming from the sky. Watching this, he felt a strange unease.

Though it was a critical situation... why was there only one Dium?

Of course, considering the power that a four-horned Dium boasted, even now was absolutely not an easy situation. It was several times stronger than a three-horned one. But still, it was strange that only one Dium was visible after entering the Encroachment Zone.

However, separate from such doubts, the current situation of fighting only demon race fortunately did not greatly unsettle the knights. Though they were surprised at first by the numbers swarming in, they soon found calm. The reason was not only what was mentioned before, but also because members of the imperial family were here too.

"Hmm, now it's time for me to use magic in earnest."

Beatrice said as she stepped forward. But after exchanging some whispers with Asil, her guard knight, she soon clicked her tongue and looked to the side. Crown Prince Terios was standing there.

"I have a secret weapon received from Father! A secret technique that Grandmother seized during the Human-Demon War!"

Crown Prince Terios shouted brightly while rolling up his sleeves. Until now, he had never fought once, and the demon race approaching him had all been handled by as many as ten guard soldiers. It was surprising that he had come this far when he seemed to have no combat ability at all.

However, the battlefield stirred at the Crown Prince's words.

"If it's a weapon obtained by the previous Emperor, could it be that one!"

"With that alone, mere old demon race would..."

Relief bloomed on everyone's faces. What kind of weapon could it be to get such reassured reactions? He looked around the scene quizzically and then at Beatrice. The imperial princess had already stepped back several paces, as if there had been an imperial order to support the Crown Prince.

Though Beatrice seemed quite displeased, she didn't show outright antipathy. No matter how lacking he might be in her eyes, he was the Crown Prince and future heir to the throne, so it would be good for him to perform well in front of everyone on this occasion.

What the Crown Prince took out from his chest was a red crystal. In the center of the crystal was a vertically slit yellow pupil, and occasionally the eyelid blinked, making the crystal itself momentarily look like a demon race's 'eye'. It was somewhat eerie in appearance.

*That doesn't seem like a holy object...?* Just as he was becoming puzzled, fierce reactions erupted from the sky.

[How could His Majesty's possession be in their hands!]

[We shall tear that human to pieces!]

The being that demon race would call 'His Majesty' could only be the Demon King. Then that eyeball might be something the Demon King used, perhaps even symbolizing him. Like the hero's holy sword.

Noi spoke with a surprised face:

"His Majesty even provided that weapon! Since demon race unconditionally obey the Demon King's orders, we'll really deal with the flying-type demon race quickly! Since no new Demon King has been born after the Human-Demon War ended..."

Oh, so that was a kind of command speaker? Seeing the demon race's dismayed reactions, he watched the scene with excitement, expecting its effectiveness. Indeed, games were about equipment battles.

Crown Prince Terios held out the crystal and shouted:

"Demon race, all kneel!"

His shout rang thunderously through the space. Though his voice was usually clear, now it was mixed with the demon race's turbid tones. It seemed as if he was commanding with a new voice layered through the crystal.

*Saak-* Red energy spread out from the crystal. The energy expanding its range across the entire mountain was clearly demonic energy. Though the demon race struggled as if trying to resist, and the flying types in the air tried to endure while flapping their wings.

"I said kneel! Follow the order immediately!"

When the Crown Prince shouted loudly again, they all finally crashed to the ground. *Bang!* It was almost pitiful to see them tumbling down as if crushed by an irresistible order. Some buried their faces in the ground and shed tears of blood.

Though the demon race seemed to be looking for a chance to resist while crawling on the ground, when the Crown Prince fiddled with the crystal next, red energy from it covered the demon race. It was like a dense net spread widely. Soon they all completely pressed their foreheads to the ground.

It was a very rare scene of humans subduing demon race with the Demon King's weapon.

"Waaah!"

"It worked! Now everyone deal with the demon race!"

The entire army cheered at the scene of all demon race in the Encroachment Zone being subdued. Noi was so happy he was jumping up and down, Kalterik let out a roar of joy, and even the corners of Mela's mouth turned up slightly. Light relief could be seen spreading on Haren's face too.

*Huu*, he also quietly let out a sigh. Though he had been internally nervous when the flying-type demon race swarmed in groups, fortunately they had dealt with them easily. Since killing demon race caught in the net would be too easy, they could smoothly purify the Encroachment Zone after just breaking the cores inside the fortress.

However, at that moment, a giggling laugh was heard from over there.

[Humans.]

In the scene where all demon race were kneeling as if crushed by the red net, only the Dium stood tall. Though they had thought it was caught too since it had clearly shrunk its body just before, seeing its smiling face, it seemed it had just been bending over to laugh.

The Dium stood up with a loud "Ahaha!" and leaped lightly. It hadn't even increased its size. Though the Demon King's order had clearly settled on its entire body, it rose up as if such things were no restriction at all... and ripped through the net with a swoosh.

[Your fatal mistake lies in still not knowing who 'we' are.]

### Chapter 152

It was a shocking scene. Though they had said demon race couldn't disobey the Demon King's orders, the Dium ignored it very lightly.

Before they could grasp what had happened, *whack*! The Dium charged.

[You brought quite an interesting weapon.]

In an instant, the Dium stood right in front of the Crown Prince. Though the guard knights tried to protect the Crown Prince in shock and dismay, the Dium grabbed his neck with oe hand and lifted him up. The body dangling in the air was thrown *bang*! into the wall.

The Crown Prince, embedded in the fortress's stone wall, coughed up blood "kuhuk" and fell to the ground. Beatrice was horrified at his form lying face down without even a twitch. The Demon King's crystal that the Crown Prince had dropped shattered pathetically under the Dium's feet. Beatrice didn't even have time to swing her rod.

[The path here must have been too easy to be fun. You must have come with thorough preparations, but our welcome was too careless.]

As the Dium spread both arms wide chwak-, black energy spread as if scattered. The energy that flew everywhere finally manifested as the demon race's third horn.

[Ku, kuaaak!]

[Revenge, against the humans...!]

*Wudududuk*, demon race with new horns sprouting from the center of their foreheads rose one by one. Though the Dium had torn the Demon King's net-like order, its remnants had barely been suppressing the demon race, but those who manifested black horns no longer obeyed the crystal's orders.

How on earth? Why didn't the Dium submit to the Demon King's orders? Moreover, though it should have tried to protect something that was the Demon King's symbolic weapon, it completely destroyed it instead. Was it different because it was new demon race, or... was there really a reason 'we don't know' as the Dium said?

Chaos spread across the battlefield.

The demon race with third horns sprouting had become twice as strong and were difficult to hunt. They were beings not easily felled even by holy objects. Though the knights tried not to lose their composure, the Dium dug into gaps in the formation.

*Sswaeeaek-!*

Though it merely moved around quickly, even that alone spread agitation. They probably hadn't imagined the enemy would enter among them. Since rashly attacking risked hurting allies instead, everyone hurriedly avoided it and even staggered and fell.

The Dium's purpose seemed to be only causing chaos, and it had an alarmingly great effect. Though everyone had prepared for battle with the Dium, facing a sub-boss level opponent from the start was enough to make them dumbfounded. It would have been somewhat better if they had met them in order from one horn. Moreover, that thing was too fast, far too fast. While the eastern Dium had maxed out recovery, was this one's speed stat maxed out?

"Catch that thing!"

"Don't let it come any closer! Use magical tools!"

Just then, the commanders with red tassels on their pauldrons shouted. They were the lords of great cities and mostly high nobles, those wearing the 'necklaces' Noi had mentioned earlier. Perhaps their will that had been more passionate than anyone's about preventing the Dedium's resurrection was shining now too.

The commanders revealed their hostility towards the four-horned Dium and shouted at the top of their lungs. The magical tools they had prepared flew fiercely at the Dium. Magic ropes, arrows, and so on.

[Ahahat, you really do things in such an interesting way.]

The Dium looked them over one by one and smiled with narrowed eyes. It covered its mouth and giggled, then easily avoided the countless attacks pouring towards it. It was vexing how it dodged nimbly as if mocking them, causing allies to get hurt instead.

Haren spoke to Kalterik and Mela:

"I'll leave commanding the battle with demon race to you. I should deal with that Dium."

It was a chaotic situation due to the demon race with third horns. Though Haren had been reading and commanding the battle situation from the front, now that one Dium was digging in like a loach and messing up the formation, it seemed he would rather take on the Dium directly to eliminate it.

While cheering that it was an excellent decision, he quietly slipped back. Though nowhere would be safe with demon race flying around, he wanted to get away from the Dium for now. He had stepped forward because there were no Diums, but one had appeared after all.

Just as he turned to head towards a corner of the fortress.

[Hello, Evan.]

The Dium appeared right in front of him.

Goosebumps rose as it appeared whispering such an incredible name. As if it had identified his existence all along, and as if causing chaos on the battlefield had been solely for him, it smiled brightly. The Dium wrapped its arms around his stiffened waist and soared *whik!* upward.

Though Haren seemed to shout his name from below, the Dium flew very high up and set him on top of the fortress's watchtower. Fear of falling chillingly froze his body.

He barely rolled his eyes to see the demon race swarming towards Haren below before quickly raising his gaze again. Cold sweat dripped continuously.

"G-get away."

He raised his hands with the thought that he had to escape from the Dium. Though he tried to use necromancy, the Dium easily caught both his wrists and subdued him. His whole body was already trembling so he couldn't even properly resist. One wrong move and he would fall.

The Dium tilted its head askew and spoke:

[My friend in the east pleaded so desperately, yet you left so coldly, I was hurt. How great was the heartbreak it felt until the end...]

Bewilderment welled up at the deeply regretful tone. Not only was its sudden attempt at conversation absurd, but how did it know about what happened in the east? Though the four-horned Dium had clearly died in the snowy mountain then, were the horns antennas? Did they share information in real time through them?

*Moreover, 'Evan'? Just how...*

Did it know Isaph's real name, or had it perhaps read the 'him' from the outside world like the eastern Dium? There was more than one thing confusing him. Unable to know what to say, he just opened and closed his mouth, and as if understanding his mind, the Dium nodded.

[You are being drawn to 'us'. Why do you deny it?]

"What nonsense, I've never-"

[Think carefully, Evan. You were coming to find us. You might have thought you came to Encroachment Zones forcibly captured by the hero, but that's not true. You were drawn to our traces.]

His shoulders trembled with a flinch at the Dium's intimate whispered voice. The memory of that day struck like lightning.

[You... are fated... to return... to us anyway...]

The four-horned Dium being buried in the snowy mountain after purifying the eastern Encroachment Zone had said that. The Dium that had reached out both hands to him desperately while shouting that he must stay with it had left such last words at his departing back even then.

[You were fated to come here.]

As if reminding him of that memory, the Dium murmured subtly. Though he should deny it immediately, there had been a pulsing he felt from the moment he entered here and saw the massive egg.

*Thump, thump, thump...*

Even now his heart was beating rapidly, but paradoxically his insides felt like they were growing chillingly cold. As he failed to get his bearings, the Dium brought its face close, whispering from an intimate distance where their noses almost touched.

[My friend in the east misunderstood you. Having met humans often, it became too confident about knowing their desires and made a mistake. But I'm different. I can clearly know what you want.]

"No, no. Don't spout nonsense about sending me back to the original world again."

[You, want to stay in this world, don't you?]

*...What?*

He had expected the Dium to make another absurd, unappealing proposal about making him wake up in the hospital again and struggled. He moved prepared even to sway at the dizzying height of the watchtower top trying to first free his hands caught by it, but his whole body froze at those words.

The Dium tilted its head as if finding him very pitiful as he stood dazed.

[You would want to keep staying here but are in a state where you can't. Because both your body and soul are unstable.]

"...What, do you, mean."

[Haven't you felt it? The feeling like you're separating from your body, like having an out-of-body experience. That's evidence your soul is unstable. Naturally the body becomes weak too when the connection between body and soul is loose.]

He just blinked at the explanation continuing intimately. Just as the Dium said, sometimes he had felt like he was being pushed out of this body, like something else was moving his body. As if handing over control to another being.

Moreover, the Dium's words sounded exactly like they were distinguishing between him and Isaph. If it had just seen him as Isaph, it wouldn't have made the proposal about 'this world'. Should he be glad about that distinction, or feel aversion? Just what had the Dium read from his soul?

How much did it know about him, and about Isaph?

### Chapter 153

To him, frozen and unable to breathe, the Dium asked again as if whispering:

[Don't you want to keep living here?]

"..."

[There is one way. That is... receiving our 'horn'.]

Already in close proximity with the Dium, when it grabbed both his wrists and brought its head close, he ended up almost embraced in its arms. The Dium whispered as if soothing him that everything would be resolved if he just received a horn.

All of it - his unstable state, and his wish to stay in this world.

[Though we are persecuted now, we will soon possess this land. If you join with our god, you will be able to fulfill your wishes freely.]

The Dium grabbed his chin and led him to look down at the demon race below.

[If you become a subject like them, you can be eternally in this world-]

"The more I listen, the more you sound like a total cult bastard!"

A shout burst out. Was it a characteristic of cults to go too far if you just keep listening quietly? Making proposals as if it knew all his desires, as if it would bestow grace.

"Those damn horns only look good to you guys, fuck! I'm not attracted at all!"

He knew horns meant power to the Diums. Not only the difference in strength according to number, but even the priest they had met in the western Encroachment Zone had said something about receiving another new horn when the Dedium awakened, so horns seemed to be a very special symbol to them, but not at all to him. As if he would covet such things.

Though he might have felt a little, just a very little desire to stay in this world, if the method was 'horns' he absolutely declined. Moreover, a subject? Was it telling him to serve the Dedium?

"No matter how you dress up the proposal to become a traitor...!"

[Is it wrong to yearn for a new world? When we're offering even an unstable being like you a chance to stay here.]

*Ttuk-* The Dium cut off his words mid-sentence. As if unable to understand his reaction at all, it tilted its head sideways and stared at him intently.

[It's a proposal to create a proper place for those who were discriminated against and ignored like you. Promising that you'll never go hungry or cold again, that you can move around freely and comfortably. You are surely drawn to this proposal. Lies don't work before me, Evan.]

"...Don't call that name."

[I have the talent to recognize beings who harbor the same desires.]

The Dium smiled with narrowed eyes. Its pitch-black eyes faced him directly. As if knowing that since some point, no, perhaps since the moment he entered this Encroachment Zone and saw the 'egg', his heart had been pounding greatly.

[So just honestly admit it now and come with me to our god-]

*Paaah-*

Just then, brilliant light pierced between the Dium and him. Though this Encroachment Zone was full of dark clouds, suddenly a bright sun rose and illuminated the space. He immediately recognized what that was, and who the being that had raised that sun was.

Following that, *kwang!* A huge roar struck his ears. It shook everything around, and though he thought it was just because of the loud noise, the ground beneath his feet really did partially collapse. The fortress wall had broken.

"Isaph!"

Haren shouted from below. Whether his call inspired some courage in him, he pushed the Dium away *whack!* Taking advantage of the moment the Dium's attention was caught by Arux, he was able to shake off its hands.

His body swayed greatly at the sudden movement. As he staggered as if about to fall, the Dium tried to grab him, but he avoided it.

That is, he chose to fall.

Rather than being caught by the Dium, he would rather fall. Fierce wind struck his ears violently and his black robe hem fluttered chaotically. Falling from a high place, he reflexively felt his heart grow cold and a strange sensation as if his organs were floating, but there was no fear anywhere.

The reason was obvious...

"Falling so dangerously like that!"

"I believed you would catch me."

He was caught and embraced in Haren's arms. Though he had fallen from quite a high place, Haren caught him very firmly, and he curled up in those arms, feeling familiar with the warmth emanating from them. Relief spread like sorrow and he fumblingly wrapped his arms around Haren's neck and muttered:

"Quickly, go somewhere else. We need to get away from that Dium."

An eerie aversion seemed to crawl over his whole body like insects. He leaned into Haren's embrace as if burying himself to escape that unpleasant sensation, and Haren looked down at him silently for a moment. Though his lips moved a couple times as if to ask something, in the end he just tightened his arms embracing him and moved.

Actually, he had briefly considered using that strange power that had subdued the Dium in the previous Encroachment Zone. However, not only were the aftereffects considerable, but the feeling when using it was very uncomfortable so he wasn't drawn to it. Moreover, though it might be his imagination, it felt like the Dium was deliberately trying to induce such a thing, making him even more reluctant to use it. And Haren had also asked him not to use it.

*Whaaah-*

Meanwhile, the small sun, Arux, continued to emit light while circling. Just Arux's appearance changed the battlefield's atmosphere positively. Though it drained Haren's holy power continuously, the sun's presence was needed now. Not only did it amplify the holy knights' holy power fivefold, but it had meaning as a holy object that the empire had sought in times of crisis.

Thanks to this, the holy knights swung their swords more passionately. They seemed to be gradually grasping the attack patterns of the demon race with third horns, engaging in battle skillfully.

"Huk, Commander! We've broken them!"

"Only one remains now."

Just then, Kalterik and Mela approached and reported to Haren. It seemed while the knights were dealing with the demon race, the two had moved like guerrillas breaking the fortress's cores one by one. Though they said the path to the final core was difficult to approach with flying-type demon race positioned there, it was positive that only one remained.

The two knights made somewhat strange expressions seeing him. Was it because he had just been talking alone with the Dium? Since it had been the only Dium in the Encroachment Zone, its specifically taking him away must have caught everyone's eye, and though it might arouse suspicion... somehow both their gazes alternated between him and Haren.

Though him being embraced in Haren's arms had happened in the east too, now Haren was patting his back as if soothing him. He realized belatedly too. That he had been trembling continuously after falling down, so Haren had been calming him.

"Yes. Then we should purify as soon as the last one is dealt with."

While Haren explained calmly, he awkwardly signaled to be put down. Since Haren would probably eliminate the final core himself, he needed to step back. Though Haren complied and set him down on the ground, he firmly instructed the vice commanders:

"You two absolutely must prevent the Dium from approaching Isaph."

"Understood!"

"Yes."

Though looking confused, the two vice commanders answered resoundingly. Rather than various questions, they needed to focus on the immediate task. Breaking the final core and purifying the Encroachment Zone. Though the barrier and egg behind the fortress remained, from the moment of purification, the Encroachment Zone would be as good as conquered.

"Sir Haren! I'll help too!"

Just then, Noi pulled out a tree branch from his small terrarium to assist Haren. Since it would be difficult to break through while dealing with demon race one by one, it seemed he was trying to dig through gaps instead. Haren looked up at the sky while mounting the branch.

*Paah* the small sun emitted light even more brightly. He poured out holy power one last time. Thanks to this, the battlefield's morale rose even higher, and everyone praised the hero while gathering themselves. Beatrice's magic too kept spreading warm sunset light from over there.

The goal was right in front of them. Hidden between Kalterik and Mela, he tried to calm his panting breath. The Dium was still standing atop the fortress, and though he didn't check, he could feel it was looking at him. His whole body tingled.

[Hmm, though it's not complete yet... perhaps it would help to show how pathetic an end humans who oppose us meet.]

The Dium murmured softly. Though quite far away, its voice resonated in his mind as if whispering right in his ear.

*Kugung-!*

The ground shook greatly. Black energy suddenly poured onto the ground in front of the wall protecting the egg, then spread widely, creeping along.

Goosebumps rose all over.

An unpleasant sense of déjà vu. This process was familiar to his eyes. This scene similar to when he used necromancy was the precursor to the moment some soul was being summoned. The being rising up touching the ground that had somehow turned pitch black in front of the wall-like barrier...

*Jjeojjeok-*

Using swordsmanship exactly like Haren's, it created a crack in the small sun floating in the sky. The holy object, split exactly in half, finally fell *ttuk* to the ground.

Shocking silence descended.

Haren, who had just been about to rush towards the final core, and Noi, who had been assisting him with the tree branch, both froze. No, Noi was trembling all over. Dismayed murmuring leaked between his lips.

"L-Lady Evelyn...?"

Lady Evelyn, the previous Holy Knight Commander, had appeared as an evil spirit.

### Chapter 154

Everyone was too shocked to say anything. With faces turned pale white, they didn't know what to do, and he too just bit his lip firmly.

It was exactly like Lady Evelyn's appearance he had seen in Haren's nightmare in the past. Though now she was a spirit so her body was transparent, her eyes had no focus, and black death energy was swirling around her... she looked exactly the same as her last appearance when she had rushed to protect Haren.

[What would you do if I brought your mother back to life?]

He recalled the proposal the Dium in the snowy mountain had made to Haren. Saying they couldn't be certain Lady Evelyn had died since she had only disappeared after sealing the Dedium, it had offered to bring her back if he would leave and live together far away. Though he had thought it nonsense then too, he hadn't known they would insult Lady Evelyn like this.

Anger welled up from indignation. The situation was more serious than expected. Didn't Lady Evelyn appearing as an evil spirit mean the Dedium's seal had been broken? Though they should quickly check the egg over there, no one here could move.

"..."

Even Haren remained still.

Though he always analyzed situations rationally and commanded calmly, now he stood frozen, unable to even raise his sword. Whether he was in shock, or overwhelmed by horrifyingly terrible emotions. He couldn't read at all the emotions contained in that pale white face.

"These utterly wicked bastards! I will surely take that Dium's head!"

Just then, the first loud voice burst out. It was Beatrice. She raised her rod violently in rage with blood vessels bursting in her eyes. Thanks to her shout, the knights began regaining their senses one by one.

Then Beatrice stepped forward herself and commanded:

"Everyone get your wits about you! Don't stand there dazed before those who dare insult the empire!"

The formation barely regained order at the imperial princess's resounding cry. Since they had dealt with most of the ground demon race and monsters except the flying types, they tried to sweep away the remainder first.

[Hooh.]

The Dium had come down and was watching the scene from nearby. Now seeming more interested in the imperial princess than him, it admired her while watching. And just before the knights' full-scale offensive was ready, that Dium clapped its hands.

[Then how about this? I heard humans find this the most difficult to deal with.]

After a quite dramatic gesture, hordes of zombies appeared rushing from the mountain. The things that approached staggering while making strange "grrrr-" sounds all had the appearance of villagers.

Since they had said the Dium had attacked civilian houses earlier, had it kidnapped residents then and turned them into zombies? Or perhaps it had been accumulating them steadily from the past. Though it was a space isolated like an island, there were many cities and villages nearby.

The knights were dumbfounded at the appearance of hundreds of colorless zombies.

"How could this be..."

They said knights had struggled most with dealing with zombies during the Great Catastrophe 20 years ago too. After all, it wasn't easy to cut down beings with human appearances, whether familiar faces or not.

"If you can't cut them down, capture them! When exposed to purifying light, the zombies will close their eyes too!"

Beatrice shouted angrily. The Dium's trick rather increased the imperial princess's anger, and she swung her rod in fury. *Whak!* Sunset light burst out violently strong and covered the area. She seemed to be trying to stop the zombies' steps with mind magic.

Beatrice must have heard in advance that zombies' color would return when the hero purified the Encroachment Zone. So she shouted at the top of her lungs that they must hold the residents until then, and her subordinates followed one by one. Each used magical tools to bind the zombies.

Thanks to this, fortunately they blocked the zombie horde, but the big problem of evil spirit Evelyn remained.

"N-no!"

"Please...!"

The evil spirit was the previous Holy Knight Commander and a being everyone idolized in the past, perhaps even now. Who could dare swing a sword at the great person who had brought peace back to the empire by sacrificing her own body?

Though some holy knights tried to stop Lady Evelyn, she was Haren's master, that is, a genius of swordsmanship. No one could handle her wearing the evil spirit's death energy on top of that. Knights fell in an instant.

Kalterik and Mela rushed at Lady Evelyn with gritted teeth. After putting all sorts of protective holy objects they had been wearing on him, he watched their backs dazedly. Though they were resolute... even they rolled on the ground under Lady Evelyn's sword strikes.

Only then did Haren barely regain his senses.

"I'll, do it."

He stepped forward while muttering as if grinding his words. As he leaped straight towards Lady Evelyn, there was no more hesitation in his movements swinging his sword.

*Bang! Kwang–!*

Though it was just swords clashing, thunderous explosions kept ringing out. The close combat continued so quickly that their fight could not possibly be followed with eyes. All he could see was just the scene of golden holy power and pitch-black death energy mixing as if distorting.

Opposite energies clashed fiercely. The air trembled to the point of tingling, and it felt like anyone who approached would be swept away. Even the holy knights, and even the demon race tried to move away from there.

*What must Haren be thinking now?*

How it felt to cross swords with the master who had taught him in the past, and how it felt to face his mother who had disappeared sacrificing herself coming to save him at the end, now as an evil spirit. He couldn't possibly imagine.

"Th-the hero seems to be gaining the upper hand!"

Among the violently colliding opposing energies, gradually the golden light began to expand its range. The holy knights who noticed this cheered. It seemed the hero's swordsmanship had surpassed his master's.

But then.

[Ha, ren...]

The evil spirit uttered two syllables. The evil spirit that had only made zombie-like "uh- uhh-" sounds until now spoke that name.

*Ttuk*, Haren stopped.

As if caught by an irresistible force, his movements ceased and he looked at the evil spirit. Though he had avoided looking directly at the evil spirit's face all this time, he unconsciously met her eyes and... *chwak!* In that moment, a fierce attack poured down.

From Haren's shoulder to chest was cut long and deep. As blood poured down *jureuruk*, Haren staggered. *Juchum*, he stepped back a couple paces touching his chest.

"...!"

He rushed over there in shock. Golden light soon swirled around Haren's body healing the wound, and everyone praised the hero's ability with relief at that sight. But knowing the truth of that recovery power, his mind seemed to turn white.

As if feeling Haren's pain himself, he clutched at his own chest too. Though pain couldn't possibly be shared now that the soul connection was severed, he seemed to feel how much pain he was in now. The reality of being struck by Lady Evelyn's sword felt even more terrible, making him stagger as he moved.

But at some point he could no longer advance further. Though only a few steps remained to the battlefield, his feet wouldn't move.

...What could he do against that evil spirit?

*Should he subjugate Lady Evelyn like controlling undead? How dare he? Could he be righteous just with the justification of subduing an evil spirit interfering with the Encroachment Zone's purification?* And more important than this issue... he instinctively felt he could not subjugate that soul. The 'class' was different.

Just as he hadn't been able to touch Haren even when their souls were connected in the past, he had an intuition his ability wouldn't work on Lady Evelyn. Even though she had become an evil spirit, she still retained her class.

Should he try anyway? But how could he.

[Uh, uhhh...!]

The evil spirit began rampaging. As if seeing Haren's blood had been some kind of catalyst, she charged around everywhere uncontrollably. Knights fell cut by the evil spirit's fierce sword, and her attacks grew even more violent.

Was the evil spirit excited now, or filled with resentment?

It seemed like chaotic anguish of being utterly unable to control herself could be felt from the evil spirit. Though Haren barely chased after and blocked the evil spirit, his speed gradually slowed. It must be because of the wound.

He bit his lip. Just as he was about to move with the determination to try something, anything, footsteps were heard. In the space where everyone was scattering in panic, only one being approached here.

The owner of those small footsteps was Noi.

"...Lady Evelyn..."

He turned to look at him walking over with tears dripping. He had his hands clasped tightly together, but it didn't look like an action simply from sadness and heartbreak. Rather feeling a very solemn determination, he tried to grab Noi following some ominous intuition. He tried to grasp his shoulder that kept advancing forward, but suddenly wind whirled up.

*Whaaak-*

Wind spreading out from him swept across the entire Encroachment Zone. A spring-like warm wind completely unsuited to the contaminated land spread everywhere.

"I always wanted to repay you, and now must be the time."

Light green flowers bloomed on the colorless ground. Not just one, but hundreds, thousands of flowers bloomed brightly covering the area around the evil spirit. He recognized them. He remembered them clearly having seen them in a space he could never forget.

*Fairy flowers, Anesia.*

Flowers that stabilized others, that the fairy race bloomed by pouring out their life force. Those flowers now bloomed fully at the evil spirit's feet, softly sparkling as if embracing her.

### Chapter 155

[Ah... ahh, ah...]

Strange sounds rang from the evil spirit's mouth. As if wanting to say something but unable to speak anything, only crushed sighs kept falling. But gradually, very slowly, the hand holding the sword lowered.

The fairy flowers were working.

The tip of the sword that had been swinging wildly slaughtering everyone trembled and gradually pointed to the ground. *Paah* more flowers sprouted as if not wanting to miss the moment. Though the flowers blooming in this space where living things became contaminated corroded as soon as they bloomed, they still rose up firmly.

Though it was resolute will trying to seize this opportunity, the paler Noi's face became as more flowers bloomed. No, this couldn't simply be described as turning pale. As the blood drained completely, even Noi's light green eyes seemed to become dull and fade.

His life force was dropping.

Even without having heard the explanation about fairy flowers before, it was clear enough to see that Noi was dying now. Though his lips dried up completely, his tightly clasped fingertips hardened like dead trees, his whole body swayed and his knees buckled and collapsed... Noi did not stop the blooming.

[Ah...]

And finally all the evil spirit's movements ceased.

The evil spirit standing in the center of the light green flower bed remained dazed with the sword tip dropped *ttuk*. No more wicked black energy flowed from around the evil spirit. What emotion was buried in the movement slowly looking up at the sky?

Just as everyone was watching that scene in wonder.

[This won't do.]

The Dium charged. The monster that had been observing from over there until now shot *whak-* forward, and of course Noi was in its path.

"Protect the aide!"

"Noi!"

Holy knights rushed around urgently to protect him. Even Kalterik, who had been groaning from the fatal wound received from the evil spirit just before, moved while crying out his name like a scream. Mela also ran hurriedly.

Though dozens restrained and stopped the Dium, its sharp fingertips finally pierced through the troops and grazed Noi. As Noi collapsed *bitteul*-, the fairy flowers stopped blooming. Red blood poured hududuk onto the light green flowers that had bloomed at his feet too.

[Uh, uh...!]

The evil spirit's stabilization began to break. The sword rose again, and wicked energy burst out violently. The air trembled tingingly. However, just as the evil spirit was about to rampage again, *puk*- a white sword pierced through her abdomen.

Piarus, the holy sword that grew stronger against unholy things. The hero's sword. It now pierced through the evil spirit. *Chwak-!* The following movement of drawing the blade sideways to completely cut through the spirit body showed no hesitation.

Silence descended on the space.

[Ah... ahh...]

The evil spirit slowly tilted to the side. It was a collapsing movement with no resistance or defiance anywhere. The evil spirit raised her head as if trying to look at Haren for an instant but... before their eyes could meet, she closed them firmly first. Was it because she was disappearing, or was it some being's final will?

The evil spirit met her end without ever meeting Haren's eyes, dropping her head again as if wanting to hide even her face from him. Starting from where the holy sword had pierced, golden holy power spread and the spirit body scattered like dust.

"..."

Haren quietly watched the evil spirit's disappearance.

[Haha.]

In the space where no one could say anything, the Dium's neurotic sneer fell. The knights had barely subdued the Dium with magical tools, but with its limbs bound, it muttered in a very unpleasant tone.

[To ruin the drama I expected like this.]

It was a voice mixed with futility and displeasure. The anger contained in the black energy spreading from the Dium writhed threateningly. The nearby knights sensed the instinctive warning and hurriedly moved their bodies away.

*Wudududududuk*-

The Dium's size grew. Everyone screamed at the sight of the creature that had grown large enough to crush even the fortress's huge pillars with one hand. Dozens of soldiers were knocked away just by the Dium swinging its arm.

What it was aiming for now was Noi.

"Heuk, huk..."

Noi was panting while kneeling on the ground. His pale face looked like it could collapse at any moment, and 99% of his life force seemed to have disappeared. He was standing at death's door now. The focus in his dulled faded eyes flickered.

The Dium approached such a Noi with *kung, kung, kung* thunderous sounds.

[The fairy who interfered with my drama, I will personally...!]

"It was a completely uninteresting drama, so the director should take responsibility."

*Ttuk*, the Dium's hand reaching for Noi fell. Haren, who had cleanly cut it off at the wrist, stood before the Dium. Though his usual smile was drawn on his face, to him it looked more like an image of cold blue anger.

*Kwang! Bang! Kwaang-!*

Haren drove the Dium back. Though he should have been tired from fighting the evil spirit just before, there was no sign of it at all. Rather, his sword strikes became much fiercer, and the storm bursting from their close combat felt like it would tear their cheeks. Though the holy power swirling around him was clearly brilliant golden light, it felt like just looking at it would blind their eyes.

The attacks pouring on the Dium were, honestly, close to butchery. It was rough movement unlike his usual self, and the Dium could not find any chance to resist. The monster's huge size was threatening to other knights, but to the hero it just meant more surface area to attack.

The Dium became tattered in an instant.

[Kuk, you, damn, hero...!]

"The actual parasite who lived by begging is you, so why is every Dium I meet so shameless?"

[Ha! The arrogance of an ignorant, kuk, foolish one is laughable. You still, about us-]

"Let's not waste time with useless conversation. I clearly know at least that I must kill you here."

Haren firmly cut off the Dium's panting words. And just as cleanly, one of the Dium's legs was cut off. Unlike the eastern leader, this Dium didn't seem to have such regenerative power as it quickly became completely mangled.

[Aaak, uh, uaaaaaaak!]

The Dium let out a horrible scream. It tried to shake off Haren while swinging its arms wildly, but he maintained his balance too easily and even jumped back and forth between its arms as if mocking it. *Aak!* The Dium raised its hands high again with another scream. Though they expected it to strike down at Haren...

*Sswaeeaek-!*

Suddenly the Dium's body shrank. Having transformed surprisingly, it flew somewhere. In that direction was Noi, and it quickly dug through the gap between knights who had let their guard down watching the fierce battle.

"Ah, no!"

Even with only one leg, the Dium grabbed Noi. Though the knights tried to stop it, the Dium's movements were too quick. Haren and Mela hurriedly chased after it.

*Chwak!* Both their attacks aimed at the Dium simultaneously. Though they tried to stop it, guessing it would threaten them using Noi as a hostage, the Dium stretched out its hand in the exact opposite direction from the two knights while giving up one arm.

The flying-type demon race that had stayed only inside the fortress to protect the final core all flew at once following that gesture. Their goal was to undo the bindings restraining the zombies. And Noi was thrown above them.

Everything happened in an instant.

Beatrice and other mages and knights fell to the demon race's attack. The zombies that had been suppressed until now began rampaging wildly. Those zombies naturally targeted the prey falling above them. Everyone stretched out their hands in frenzy.

"..."

That scene burned into his eyes one by one.

It was a very strange feeling. Was it because the shock was too great? This moment seemed to enter his mind split into units of 1 second, no, 0.01 seconds. It was like watching each frame stretched out per second. People's screams, Mela and Haren's charge, the zombie horde's roars.

*Jjiing-*

His head hurt. It felt like his brain was being finely shattered. Though it wasn't a situation where his sensations mattered, he flailed trapped in hot pain as if his whole body had been dipped in lava. His vision distorted chaotically.

The scene of countless zombies stretching their hands toward one prey. Though he didn't share vision with Noi, and though he had never experienced anything similar to this, he felt a terrible sense of déjà vu as if all those hands were reaching for him.

From some point, he was panting as if his breath would stop. No, was he crying?

'This isn't right. No, please...'

An unfamiliar yet terrifyingly familiar voice rang in his ears. He ran forward while crushed by fear, or sadness. As if chased by all sorts of surging emotions, he rushed toward that scene.

*Swaaak-!*

Purple energy burst explosively from around him. Like spilled ink, it spread clearly and violently, drawing dozens, hundreds of magic circles on the ground and in the air. His power that covered the entire space as if conquering the area.

"Get away."

Finally tore away all the zombies' souls completely.

### Chapter 156

The souls of hundreds of zombies were forced out of their bodies in an instant. The souls visible between the fiercely swirling purple energy were all rotted and crumbling. As if souls couldn't remain whole after becoming zombies, large holes were pierced throughout their spirit bodies, and they scattered like ash within seconds of emerging.

*Ttuk*–

The zombie horde that had been like a mass of ants collapsed like puppets with cut strings. Fortunately, Mela caught Noi, who had almost plunged headfirst to the ground.

Everyone turned to look at him with shocked faces. Eyes stunned as if they hadn't expected it to be resolved in an instant like this. They were newly surprised by Isaph's ability, and their admiration was mixed with fear as they understood why he had been called a catastrophe in the past.

But among such gazes, he felt no joy at all.

"Huu, heuk..."

He trembled while looking only at the fallen zombies. Though he wanted to dismiss it as just being too surprised, or because of moving with a weak body, his heart beating this unstably and tears even welling up was definitely not normal.

*Damn it, this shitty game was trying to infect him again.* His vision kept overlapping messily and ringing echoed in his head.

*Why did he feel like he had experienced this exact thing? Not just once, but multiple times even.*

*Though his life on Earth had been monotonous to the point of boredom, with being chased by evil spirits and falling being the only disturbance, why was he like this? And though dealing with the zombies was clearly a good thing, why was he so sad? Why...*

He was curious but didn't want to think about it in more detail. His intuition warned him. Anxiety, or fear welled up that if he looked too deeply, he would experience something terribly frightening. It was an emotion one might feel when looking at something about to boil over and explode.

"Isaph, are you alright?"

Haren, who had somehow approached his side, asked. As he tried to support him, not wanting to show his face covered in tears, he spoke with his head deeply bowed. His voice trembled.

"I'm fine. Heuk, quickly break the last core first and..."

"W-we broke it!"

Just then, holy knights shouted from the fortress. They had seized the moment when defenses weakened as the Dium called the flying-type demon race guarding the final core to the battlefield. The commander's emphasized agility training proved effective again.

He wanted to leave this Encroachment Zone quickly.

After rubbing his eyes roughly with the back of his hand, he looked at Haren. His intention seemed well conveyed as Haren nodded, and over there Kalterik faced off against the Dium one last time. As if proving their years together, without Haren saying anything separately, he restrained the Dium to create an opening for the hero to purify.

*Paaah*-

Bright light gathered at the tip of the holy sword held vertically. Though the small sun had been shattered, brilliant light poured down as if lending its touch from above those dark clouds. Haren recited the divine words quickly with his eyes lowered firmly.

"[Purify.]"

Though it was already the fourth time, the still-welcome word struck his ears. This would be the last time now too. He looked around filled with emotion.

Color slowly began returning to the black and white Encroachment Zone.

The color spreading from where Haren had thrust his sword into the ground always brought overwhelming joy. The color of soil, of mountain trees, even the color of rocks. The scene of the world regaining its original light looked like some marvelous will. Color was bestowed even on the zombies collapsed on the ground.

At that sight, he bit his lip firmly, feeling somehow like he might cry. He looked around again, wanting to feel only the moving beauty of this scene. As even the dark clouds cleared revealing the clear sky, he felt even more overwhelmed.

If even he who had seen it several times was this shaken, the knights witnessing the purification scene for the first time today were truly deeply moved to the point of tears. Some even knelt and offered prayers to the hero and God. Warm light poured down gently as if embracing them.

But for the Dium and demon race alone, it struck down fiercely like prison bars.

[Kuhuk...]

The flying-type demon race that had troubled everyone for so long fell like autumn leaves, and the four-horned Dium too collapsed *thud* and crawled on the ground in pain. Already completely mangled from its fierce battle with Haren earlier, it couldn't withstand the beams of light. Though it didn't disappear immediately, it writhed and groaned.

Someone approached such a Dium.

"I said, I would take, your head."

It was Beatrice. Though she was in poor condition from the demon race's attack, she staggered over and looked down at the Dium. *Whak*! A sunset-colored rope shot from the end of her rod as she swung it, binding the Dium's neck.

[How dare you, mere...]

"I dare."

*Kwak*! Beatrice stomped with her foot on the Dium's head as it tried to raise it. The more the Dium groaned with its face pressed to the ground, the more fiercely Beatrice's shoe tip pressed it down. He watched somewhat awkwardly as she seemed to be having a battle of wills while subduing a beast.

But Beatrice didn't kill the Dium immediately. *Jiljiljil*- the place she dragged the Dium to was in front of the black barrier. That barrier too was now gradually melting down from the top after being exposed to the purifying light.

Beyond the barrier was the massive egg.

As the opaque barrier disappeared, the egg became clearly visible. Everyone was newly surprised by its size, and above all, tensed at the form faintly visible inside the egg. Haren muttered softly:

"Dedium..."

The god the Diums served, the monster that had brought catastrophe in the past. The massive Dedium with as many as five sharp horns was curled up inside the egg. Just like a test subject receiving nutrients in a capsule. Though it had its eyes closed, everyone was tense.

Dealing with that egg would be the final hurdle.

The knights solemnly organized their formation. Though more than half their forces had fallen in the previous battles, no one was afraid. The light returning to the Encroachment Zone strengthened their resolve. Once they dealt with this, the empire would be free from catastrophe.

[Ku, aak...!]

The four-horned Dium struggled. But Beatrice's rope subdued it more firmly. She seemed to intend to show it the death of their god before its eyes. *Kukkuk*, her laughter fell ominously.

But when all the barriers finally disappeared, that is, when the path to approach the egg was finally clearly opened... everyone fell silent. A scene that couldn't help but silence them unfolded before their eyes.

"...Dium corpses?"

"Why, are these things, in such a state..."

Hundreds of Dium corpses were strewn around the egg. Whether one-horned, two-horned, or three-horned, all had died with their chests hollowed out. Their hearts were missing. It was an eerie scene beyond bizarre.

And that wasn't the only strange point.

"There's... no movement from the Dedium at all."

Haren spoke softly as he approached the front of the massive egg. Though the plan had been to cut through the egg itself since the Dedium hadn't awakened yet, seeing the monster's condition up close, he noticed something strange.

The Dedium showed not even the slightest movement, and wasn't breathing.

Though they wondered if it might be an illusion, or fake, the Dedium's body was too definite for that. The Dedium he had last seen in Haren's dream. It was exactly the same down to the scar remaining on its neck where Lady Evelyn's sword had cut it.

His chest grew cold. From the moment he saw the Dedium in the massive egg, his heart had been beating strangely, but this was different from the pulsing he had felt since entering the Encroachment Zone. His head spun as it pounded heavily *kung kung kung* as if sensing something ominous.

[We will remember your sacrifice.]

He traced past memories. In the western Encroachment Zone, in that desert canyon, Diums had come to the altar and fallen after digging out their own hearts. It had been conducted like a ritual to awaken the Dedium, and the appearance of those Diums who had collapsed then was similar to these ones strewn on the ground.

Then had all the Diums around the egg now offered their hearts to the Dedium? Considering Lady Evelyn's soul appeared as an evil spirit, that meant they had shaken off the seal, and with this many hearts offered as sacrifices, the Dedium should have awakened, so why...

[Haha, finally...]

Just then, the four-horned Dium laughed. As the monster that had been shamefully dragged along caught in Beatrice's rope smiled looking up at the sky, one by one they followed its gaze upward.

*Jjeojeojeok*- black cracks were forming in the sky.

Then the ground shook *ururu*. Though it shook greatly as if an earthquake had struck, everyone remained frozen with their gazes fixed on the sky. He had seen this exact same scene before.

[Behold, our world.]

Such a sight had unfolded when the Dium priest had created cracks in the western Encroachment Zone. He had cursed at that time asking if it was a monster wave pattern as Diums poured out through those black cracks...

*Why was this happening suddenly?*

Though no Diums came down from the sky immediately, just the fact that cracks had formed was shocking. All the Diums in the northern Encroachment Zone had been found as corpses, the only leader was subdued, and even the Dedium showed no movement, so how? Just who on earth had created those cracks?

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Moreover, the cracks seemed to have started from the south and split all the way here. From one large crack, multiple cracks spread as if extending branches. The sky was gradually breaking.

Beatrice urgently pressed the four-horned Dium.

"Just what is this situation? What did you do to cause this...!"

[Ha, hahat, ahahahahahat!]

The Dium burst into maniacal laughter. It cackled wildly, finding it utterly hilarious how everyone had become dumbfounded at the moment they had grown solemn, saying this was the final stage after all the empire's forces had gathered here.

Then the Dium, with its one remaining arm, pressed against the ground and raised its upper body unsteadily to look around. It seemed to be doing so with the purpose of properly enjoying this scene.

"I told you to speak!"

Beatrice *puk*! kicked the Dium's head. The Dium answered while still laughing "ahaha" with its head sharply twisted.

[I'll give a gift to you who played with me.]

The Dium's black eyes narrowed. As if this truly came from goodwill, it even nodded its head as if to give praise to all who had strived to come here.

[Recently you captured 'traitors'. Saying there were those who offered humans to us like sacrifices, those who dreamed of a new world while betraying the empire.]

"..."

[But that's not actually true. Haha, ahahahat! Would we offer mere humans to our god, or would we survive by barely getting by eating humans, yes, begging from humans as the hero said? Well, sometimes the lower ones couldn't control their appetite and went down to cause trouble...]

The Dium shrugged its shoulders. Listening blankly to the story continuing nonchalantly, he finally froze at information that struck like lightning.

There were words the western Encroachment Zone's leader had said.

[Ha! You wouldn't know. To awaken the god, hearts that have absorbed this land's energy are needed. So you couldn't even dare imagine how we feel watching our comrades who have long been together here step forward to dig out and offer their hearts. How noble that act is!]

Right, if they were sacrifices, their 'hearts' should be hollowed out. But the corpses found in the eastern Encroachment Zone's snowy mountain cave had been completely intact. They had closed their eyes as if they had died with only their souls escaping, without a single wound in their neat appearance.

In other words, those humans were not sacrifices for awakening the Dedium. It seemed only the hearts of their own kind were needed for the Dedium's resurrection.

*Then what was that mountain of corpses? If the Diums had eaten them they should have become zombies, but they hadn't, so why had so many people died...*

[Humans. You need to know more about 'yourselves'.]

"..."

[And this is a gift from 'us', given out of my pity because the love of the god you serve is so trivial and shabby.]

*Whik*- the Dium swung its index finger. Since it had summoned demon race with such a conducting-like gesture hours ago, wariness rose reflexively, but... this time a completely different scene unfolded. In a totally unexpected direction.

"Kuk!"

"Heouk...!"

Several allies suddenly clutched their necks. As they wrapped their hands around their own necks and convulsed, he now perfectly remembered their faces. The commanders, lords of great cities, that is, those who had the 'necklaces'. And just now, the golden necklaces around their necks were trembling bururu.

They tried desperately to remove the necklaces, but before their shaking hands could properly move, *puk*! their necks burst open.

Something had exploded inside the golden balls and pierced their necks. In an instant, over ten people died. *Ttuk*, the corpses that had lost their necks collapsed to the ground. It happened in the moment everyone was looking at them quizzically.

Though it was a shocking incident, an even more bewildering scene unfolded next.

"...The corpses..."

The fallen corpses aged rapidly. Both bodies and separated faces wrinkled up. Was it because they had fallen victim to the Dium's wicked trick? No, it seemed more than just that...

[Isn't it truly interesting? The sight of them gladly accepting without even knowing they were wearing dog collars. Thanks to that, we were able to make a 'path' very easily.]

The Dium giggled.

[And I don't want to allow mere humans to take my neck...]

*Puk*- the Dium tore out its own heart with its hand. The hand that held it up as if offering it to the sky trembled. With its eyes gradually dimming, the Dium muttered one last time:

[All of this is for our god, the Dedium...]

Since it was in no state to escape anyway, rather than dying shamefully by human hands, it chose suicide. The arm stretched toward the sky soon fell limply to the ground *ttuk*, and the black heart rolled pitifully across the floor.

It stopped at Haren's feet.

"..."

Now the Dium's heart and the commanders' heads were strewn across the ground. The space they had reached expecting a final battle was filled only with death. Though they had achieved the purification they aimed for, nothing felt resolved. In the chilling silence, Kalterik approached him who was quietly looking down.

"C-Commander. Just now, I-I received a report..."

Kalterik had briefly stepped back after receiving an alarm from the communication artifact earlier. With a pale face, his whole body trembling, he looked at Haren. His complexion that seemed about to faint at any moment was ominous. Unlike usual, he neither shouted nor showed anger, but just moved his lips dozens of times before.

"In the empire, contamination, that is, an Encroachment phenomenon has appeared."

"What? Just where..."

Finally Kalterik reported in a strangled tone:

"In the center... of the holy city..."

#Part 13. 94%

They returned to the holy city.

Just hours ago, it had been filled with the imperial citizens' cheers. People had scattered flowers while cheering on the knights marching to the northern Encroachment Zone. Though it was a departure, it had looked just like a victory parade.

Because there was no way this expedition could fail with so many knights, and above all the hero, stepping forward. Everyone had believed that and praised the knights' steps.

The temple had offered prayers supporting the subjugation. Thousands and tens of thousands of believers had gathered for the ceremony praying for light to shine before the knights. Since the temple couldn't accommodate them all, public prayer ceremonies were held in the plaza too. Expectations of finally repelling the catastrophe had joyfully rippled everywhere.

That holy city was now plunged into despair.

"An 'egg' has appeared in the plaza..."

The plaza where countless flowers had been scattered had faded to colorless, and in its center appeared a massive egg like the one they had seen in the northern Encroachment Zone. It was a very bizarre sight. It writhed as if it had taken root in the ground and was taking the land's energy. Though the inside of the black egg was opaque, it seemed the real Dedium must be in there. Everyone felt that without needing to say it.

Though the city guard had barely managed to set up barriers around it to block pedestrian access, they couldn't stop the fear emanating from the Encroachment Zone. Residents were in an uproar evacuating, and the guards welcomed the hero while crying.

Haren headed straight for the temple.

He moved to hear the exact story about this situation, and to understand what the Dium had said they 'needed to know'. He couldn't possibly guess what emotions were buried in each of his steps, what emotions dwelled in his now chillingly hardened face. He could only walk following the group in the suffocating air.

When they entered like that into the Pope's office located at the very top of the empire's central temple.

"H-Hero..."

Dozens of trembling high priests welcomed them. They were all high-ranking Order personnel. The cardinal who had tried to torture him was there too. All had faces gripped by fear, but it didn't seem to be simply from fear of the Encroachment phenomenon occurring in the holy city.

They all had 'necklaces' around their necks.

Black energy was flowing out from them. The black crystals contained inside seemed to have even melted the gold as they were fully revealed. A grotesque form like condensed vengeful spirits.

As if they wanted to remove the necklaces but they absolutely wouldn't come off their bodies, they looked up at Haren while trembling with the cords gripped. Moreover, the black crystals were stuck to their chests, emitting death energy and rotting their flesh.

Then not only temple personnel but other people also rushed in here *ururu*. As if news had spread that the hero had arrived at the temple, those who urgently gathered were the high nobles who hadn't joined the expedition due to lacking combat ability. Even the Emperor and Empress came.

"C-contamination in the holy city...!"

"Just what, how could this happen!"

He blankly watched the necklaces sitting on their necks too. Around when he confirmed other imperial family members entering behind them, doors opened over there. The being who appeared from a small room inside the office was the Pope that everyone returning to the holy city was looking for.

"Our First Sword, hero..."

The Pope who they had faced at the hero's return welcome ceremony last time and in prison days ago had looked very healthy. Though he was an old man with white hair and a long beard, he had few wrinkles on his face and moved quickly. He had thought this was because he took good care of himself as the Pope of the Holy Empire.

But now the Pope's face was covered in wrinkles. His back was bent as he approached staggering while leaning on a cane, and finally knelt before Haren and bowed.

"P-please, s-save us."

### Chapter 158

The truth was terrible and simple.

As soon as the Pope knelt, everyone else followed and lowered themselves before Haren. As if he was the only being they could rely on, they bowed to him and confessed.

They too had all been sending humans to the Diums. It was something done centered around the Order, no less. But their purpose wasn't the Dedium's resurrection or becoming subjects of a new world.

Their 'desire' was simply.

"Twenty years ago, Diums who had lost the Dedium came and offered a gift. It was black crystals, and when worn around the neck, we could regain you-youth..."

The cardinal spoke while trembling. In the past, when the previous Holy Knight Commander Lady Evelyn sealed the Dedium, the Diums who lost their god were driven to a disadvantage. The gray areas that had occupied the continent disappeared in an instant, reduced to just a few zones remaining.

At that time, they said a four-horned Dium with long hair came and knelt before the Pope and cardinal, prostrating itself and offering black crystals. It had begged that if they would just let them live in hiding without eliminating the remaining Encroachment Zones, it would continue to present these.

"They gave them without cost a few times, but as time passed, they said they needed 'materials'..."

Those materials were human souls.

Only then did the Order personnel and royal family members who shared the necklaces realize the crystals' true nature and were greatly shocked, they said. Though they had seriously discussed for several days, the youth they were enjoying from the Diums' gift was already too sweet, so they couldn't bring themselves to give it up.

Haren stood quietly, staring down at the heads of those kneeling before him, and spoke as if grinding his words. His voice froze chillingly.

"So, you sent humans directly?"

"A-at first we only sent death row inmates. Since they were going to die anyway...!"

As the cardinal cried out urgently, the royal family members nodded too. It was an absurdly ridiculous defense. Wasn't this saying they judged it right for them to die for their own youth since they would be executed anyway? Despite harboring terrible monsters, they still thought themselves valuable as Order personnel and royalty.

Beside them, Beatrice sighed softly.

"The death row inmates who came to my greenhouse sometimes said strange things, so this was why. They said their imprisoned companions would occasionally disappear without a trace, calling it the prison's ghost story."

Perhaps that was why the inmates wanted to go to the imperial princess's greenhouse even more. Because there they could at least 'live' and breathe somehow.

But death row inmates alone wouldn't have been enough to meet the growing demand.

"Gradually more people learned about and wanted the crystals. So we started sending prisoners with heavy sentences too, though not death row, and also..."

"And?"

The cardinal hesitantly moved his lips. As if reluctant to speak, he just rolled his eyes several times before finally lowering his head deeply and confessing.

"Be-believers from... mountain villages too, bit by bit..."

An explanation was mumblingly added that they hadn't just taken anyone randomly but had chosen only those with improper conduct or past troubles. However, since they weren't inmates, it seemed highly likely they had picked on minor misdemeanors not worthy of trial, or even less than that. In other words, they had classified and disposed of people at the temple's discretion.

The discrepancy in missing persons Noi had mentioned before must have occurred at this point. While slave markets left traces, things that happened deep in the mountains were easily buried. Moreover, who would think civilians were being kidnapped by the temple? They would just assume they had fallen while climbing mountains.

Kalterik trembled all over.

"How, how could you do this to believers! Even in dangerous mountains, there must have been families who found it suspicious!"

At his shout, the cardinal glanced holkeum at the lords. That action alone was answer enough. As city administrators, they could appropriately stop searches for missing persons. Perhaps they had even brought believers to offer from the start.

*Kwak*- strength entered Mela's hand gripping her sword hilt. Though she too would feel revulsion toward humans having a past of being captured and experimented on by illegal forces, she couldn't have imagined such terrible things happening in the Order of all places.

Fierce killing intent poured from the two vice commanders. However, since Haren was chillingly silent, they could only hold back, not daring to cause a disturbance before him.

The Order offered believers to the Diums, and the lords of great cities cooperated with this. The royal family must have participated in a similar flow. The tight bonds between those who had 'necklaces' had such a terrible background. From the start, those golden balls were just disguises to hide the black crystals.

Since this trade was centered around the Order, it made sense that the Order's power had grown day by day. Nobles who couldn't gain enough power to have necklaces and priests who couldn't catch the Pope's line must have used the slave markets.

Though they had thought they caught quite many traitors in the previous search, they hadn't known it was rotten from the highest levels like this. No, was this the natural result? After all, how could the bottom be clean when the top was rotten?

"They said they would help search for traitors..."

Beatrice sighed. On the day of the hero's return welcome ceremony, the Emperor and Empress had said they would lend their strength to tracking traitors as if deeply moved by the hero's announcement. But that was merely a ploy to remove themselves from the search net.

Thinking back on their attitude that day, it seemed they hadn't thought of themselves as traitors from the start. Since they weren't wishing for the Dedium's resurrection or dreaming of a new world. It was an absurdly brazen attitude.

While tracing memories, he suddenly realized another truth too.

"Don't tell me the reason the cardinal left quickly then was to cast the seal of silence spell."

The Pope had sent high priests saying to open the underground prison, but even this must have been a ploy for silencing. Because they were afraid stories about youth might leak, and ultimately their own transgressions might be revealed. The reason the Pope had continued the banquet then must have been intended to keep the hero's feet tied to the party venue.

*Could this be why they stopped me from calling the corpses' souls in prison too? Since those with necklaces must have killed the inmates, perhaps they deliberately criticized harshly out of anxiety that all truths might be exposed through my necromancy.*

Mela must have made similar deductions as her eyes grew large and she turned to look at the cardinal. When she pressed asking if that was why they had stopped Isaph, the cardinal mumbled something about "n-necromancy is originally unholy..." but his voice was too small to hear properly. The shame of someone who knew it was an excuse from the start showed through.

Haren asked quietly:

"...Then, why were you so enthusiastic about subjugating the Encroachment Zones?"

His voice was dry. Though his tone had contained sharp anger until asking if they had sent humans, now it was calmly settled. Was it because he had little faith in the Order to begin with, or did it feel like flames turning blue after passing some point?

Not only the cardinal but others too rushed to answer his question. They looked very desperate, perhaps wanting to save their lives by showing loyalty to the hero even like this.

"W-we didn't know they were trying to awaken the Dedium!"

"The Diums, those things clearly said they would just stay quietly buried in their Encroachment Zones...!"

"We never thought for a moment that Diums would dare pull unholy tricks in land where the hero was! But when we heard they were plotting resurrection, to properly warn them..."

Since the Diums had initially lowered themselves saying they would offer gifts if just allowed to live, they must have looked like very weak and trivial beings in the Order's eyes. Though they gradually had to send more humans, anyway the Diums quietly made crystals for them. Such tributes must have made them perceive the Diums as only weak beings.

But when they heard the Diums were secretly planning the Dedium's resurrection behind their backs, it seems they thought they were daring to rebel and wanted to establish discipline at this opportunity. They must have wanted to show the empire's might with the hero at the front. There was only one Encroachment Zone left anyway.

"We thought they would lower themselves and show loyalty again..."

"Though we graciously showed final mercy saying we would stop the conquest even now if they ceased trying to resurrect the Dedium..."

"What the hell is this nonsense!"

Finally Kalterik burst out with a horrible cry. Though he had seemed to be enduring well until now, he finally screamed and grabbed his head with both hands.

Kalterik had been more shocked than anyone at news of the holy city's contamination, and had been watching Haren's reactions all the way here. But unable to contain his anger at the shape of the truth he actually faced, he finally exploded. The cardinal's last words seemed to strike him as particularly absurd.

Kalterik pointed at the massive egg in the plaza outside the window and shouted:

"Then that, why did that egg appear!"

"Sir, no matter what, such disrespect...?"

"Answer me!"

As the large-bodied Kalterik stamped his foot, the cardinal flinched and looked around nervously. Then as soon as his eyes met Haren's, he quickly lowered his head and reported.

"A-a few hours ago, a Dium came to the outskirts of the holy city. It was smaller than me with only two horns, and it said it wanted to give a 'gift' while apologizing for the earlier disturbances... Thinking they had finally come to their senses..."

The holy city had recently reinforced its barriers in preparation for rampaging monster attacks. So they must have looked down on the two-horned Dium that couldn't break through those barriers, especially given its small build. But...

"The only unsettling part was that the Dium had a 'third eye' on its forehead, but when it held out the black crystal, we wanted to discuss it in detail with His Holiness first..."

*Third eye.*

At those words, Kalterik and Mela turned to look at each other in shock. Among hundreds of Diums encountered while traveling through Encroachment Zones, there was only one being with a third eye. The Dium priest. And when that thing first appeared, its words introducing itself were...

[I am the body where the Dedium dwelled.]

The two-horned Dium that came to the holy city had the Dedium dwelling in it.

### Chapter 159

Now he realized why the Dedium in the egg at the northern Encroachment Zone hadn't shown even the slightest movement. The Dedium must have abandoned its body and started activities with only its soul moved elsewhere, that is, to a new physical form.

Perhaps there had been problems in the process of breaking Lady Evelyn's seal, or maybe they hadn't been able to find 'that' which the Dium in the snowy mountain had said was needed for the Dedium to become whole. The actual background didn't matter anymore now.

"To let the Dedium into the holy city...?"

Mela exclaimed in dismay.

Just then, the power holders must have been desperate for the Diums' gift, that is, 'youth'. Since Noi had said no more missing persons occurred after the welcome ceremony, they probably couldn't kidnap mountain village believers anymore while being cautious from that day. So they must have grown anxious as they couldn't replenish the crystals' energy.

'The time to fill it... has passed too much...'

He swallowed a dry laugh while recalling the Nadael lord's words. Hadn't they brought catastrophe upon themselves? Indeed, the cardinal's following story was exactly as expected. After secretly bringing the two-horned Dium into the holy city, while heading to the temple underground together, it had suddenly stopped, then abruptly emitted death energy and contaminated the space.

The cardinal's voice describing that moment was gripped by fear, but to those listening it was just pathetic. They had been moving through the holy city's back alleys...

"Th-the lord of Nadael was acting particularly impatiently then. While pressing to quickly replenish the necklace's energy, he grabbed the Dium, and his neck was cut off and he died right there... The contamination started right after..."

It was absurd how he shifted blame as if the incident occurred because of the Nadael lord. Even now he blamed others. The lord had joined them on the way to meet the Dium at the city outskirts, and though he said the lord didn't seem in his right mind then either, there wasn't a single being in their right mind in this whole affair to begin with.

"Ha."

The bustling, chaotic space immediately fell silent at Haren's sigh-like sneer. Though it was a very small breath, everyone firmly shut their mouths and lowered their heads as if cold water had been poured on them.

Haren covered his face with his hand. After staying silent for a moment as if suppressing a storm of emotions, he soon walked somewhere.

His quiet steps headed right in front of the Pope.

"While knowing what tragedy those monsters brought to the continent. Even after seeing everything - the front lines being pushed back, several kingdoms falling, countless people dying - why."

"..."

"Why did you accept trade with a catastrophe that had barely been subdued?"

Even Haren who had been young then, even a child who stayed in the safest space, had felt the ominous war situation. So the Pope, who was already the Order's leader then, must have had access to even more information and seen the terrible scenes, yet still agreed to trade with the Diums.

No matter how the Diums offered black crystals like tributes, they should have rejected the very objects being handed over from the start. They should have cut off their necks right there saying how dare they try to tempt anyone with such things. They shouldn't have even engaged in conversation. But the Pope had not only responded to dialogue, but accepted suspicious gifts and even distributed them to those around him.

"..."

Those kneeling also glanced furtively at the Pope. Indeed, the Pope was the origin of everything. The starting point where a kind of 'addiction' spread. No matter how tempted by youth, those black crystals looked ominous just from their appearance. So how could they readily accept them?

Even if they provided fantastical effects like allowing one to enjoy youth, shouldn't that have made their intentions more suspicious? It was close to optimism to think of it just as gifts from those driven to disadvantage...

Until now, the Pope had stayed behind the cardinal in explaining the situation. But when Haren pressed him directly in front, the Pope's hands pressed to the ground trembled paruru before he painfully opened his mouth.

"Be-because they revealed... where the dimensional... boundary was..."

*Dimensional boundary?*

Though it was the first time hearing these words, something reflexively came to mind. The black wall he had seen when entering the eastern Encroachment Zone's snowy mountain cave in the past. That thing that gave an eerie impression like a void.

Just then, the status window had also used the expression 'boundary' when referring to that wall.

[Cross the boundary of 囗!#&.]

He sighed as he realized the identity of the broken characters in the status window. Not just him, but Kalterik, Mela, and Haren also seemed to recall the same thing.

Haren quietly pressed for an answer.

"Just what meaning does that boundary have?"

"That is the Diums' door, that is... the point connecting their dimension and this world... So if we blocked that place they could no longer cross over, and since the Diums had essentially revealed their weakness, we believed..."

Though the story continued haltingly and incoherently, one word caught his attention sharply. Suddenly he felt his blood run cold.

"...Their dimension?"

The Pope looked around nervously at his dazed murmur. Not just because of him. Almost everyone except the cardinal found that expression strange and looked at the Pope, so his gaze wandered here and there. He was full of discomfort and awkwardness, not wanting to reveal the details.

The cardinal whispered "Your Holiness, now..." in a trembling voice, and finally the Pope opened his mouth.

"...Because the Diums are beings we summoned from another dimension..."

A painful confession continued. A secret the Order had long kept hidden, an inside story even more terrible than the truth that they had traded with Diums to enjoy youth. The reality laid out one by one was terribly absurd.

The Order and imperial family had long fought for power.

The long conflict that had continued for a thousand years, starting from the Holy Empire's second emperor, had quieted with the end of the Human-Demon War. During the war they had competed over which side achieved greater merit, but after their common enemy the demon race disappeared, there was no justification for either side to grow their power.

Just then, since the two groups had joined forces in the final battle of the Human-Demon War, it was ambiguous to say either side had clearly won. The Pope was very displeased with this, but picking fights with the imperial family recklessly like street thugs was beneath the noble Order.

After the war ended, the Pope pondered long in the peaceful era that followed. He wanted to raise the temple's prestige even higher, and so finally committed an act that should never have been done.

"Th-thinking that if we showed the Order defeating powerful new enemies we summoned, our power would rise high, we attempted it. According to ancient forbidden books, just as there exist other stars in the universe besides our star, dimensions too are diverse... So we summoned new monsters unknown to this world from a far dimension..."

But those monsters, the race that called themselves 'Diums', were too strong.

This was something the Order hadn't considered. The confidence gained from victory in the Human-Demon War became arrogance and led to misjudgment, and the catastrophe occupied the continent uncontrollably. In other words, this dimension was being invaded by beings from another dimension.

"But when Lady Evelyn sealed their leader, though the losses were great, we thought somehow everything was resolved well. Just then the remaining ones revealed the location where the dimensional boundary existed, so we judged we had their final lifeline in our grasp..."

The dimensional boundary was a passage that formed when two different dimensions connected. *Even the Pope hadn't known where it would appear*, he said. So while the Dedium existed, enemies had endlessly crossed through that passage and the front lines were pushed back helplessly.

*Then was the phenomenon of cracks forming in the sky the appearance of connections to another dimension?* The priest had spoken as if showing their world while creating it.

But after the Dedium was sealed, it became difficult for Diums to freely use the passage and they couldn't even properly create cracks. So when the four-horned Dium came and revealed the passage's location, they thought it was evidence of surrender.

"Since the passage was deep in the snowy mountain cave, we thought we could just block the entrance if needed. Though it was somewhat suspicious how frequently they returned to their dimension recently... Ugh, though it was unsettling, when Encroachment Zones disappeared one by one these past months, we even thought it fortunate..."

His voice became ant-like small. Come to think of it, these people were those who had been hiding the Diums, that is, those who knew of the monsters' survival. Yet the reason they believed when Haren said upon his return that he hadn't seen Diums in the Encroachment Zones must have been because of that passage. They must have thought the Diums had hidden well through there. Since information seemed to be shared between them even though they were scattered in the four directions.

"Ah..."

A sigh burst from his mouth involuntarily. The strange phenomenon experienced in the eastern Encroachment Zone, what he had thought was just the map changing, *could it have been moving to another dimension?* While surprised, his heart also pounded *thump thump*- greatly. His stomach was queasy and his vision even spun.

This reaction had continued since the moment he heard the story about summoning monsters from another dimension. Was it because the inside story the Pope revealed was terrible? He was newly surprised that even this game acknowledged the existence of other dimensions. Or was it because suddenly...

The thought occurred that it was like 'him'.

### Chapter 160

He clutched at his chest fumblingly. Though he tried to calm himself by taking deep breaths, even the trembling in his fingertips was difficult to settle.

[Give me that body, and I will send you back to your original world.]

The Dium's words from the eastern Encroachment Zone resonated woong woong in his mind. They had said such things because they truly came from another world. They hadn't simply fought humans to take the continent like the demon race had, but targeted this dimension itself.

The reason they were black and white and the Encroachment Zones faded to colorless might be the effect of this world distinguishing them since they crossed over from a completely different dimension. *If this dimension was completely conquered by them... would their occupied lands gain color then?*

Just imagining it made goosebumps rise all over. As he shook his head thinking this was excessive delusion, suddenly a loud voice burst out in front.

"Your Holiness! Didn't you clearly say the Diums were weapons created by the demon race who were utterly defeated in the Human-Demon War? You even gave them the name 'new demon race'!"

The one who burst out shouting was the Emperor. As he demanded roughly with his eyes opened so wide they looked about to pop out, the Pope quietly turned his head away.

"How could you hide such a truth? And then dare to give me a necklace and addict me! You damned old man...!"

*Wudangtangtang*! Noise erupted. The Emperor had rushed at the Pope and thrown punches. The cardinal reflexively tried to block but was hit instead and rolled on the ground. Then other imperial family members joined in and chaos broke out with everyone tumbling about. These elderly people engaged in a dogfight.

In this mayhem, finally Beatrice screamed:

"You crazy bastards! How dare you pretend to be victims and act angry?!"

"B-but Biche! The Pope summoned catastrophe and handed us necklaces to use us like subordinates...!"

"Shut up! You're the one who readily bowed your head saying it was good!"

The imperial princess's condition with both hands clutching her head was not good. Her hands gripping her hair trembled dulduldul. It seemed like her fist might fly at the Emperor any moment. The attitude of the royal family members shamelessly acting wronged after enjoying youth through the necklaces seemed to anger her considerably.

The Empress spoke while sobbing:

"St-still. If they had told us the Diums were monsters from another dimension, we wouldn't have given Tio that weapon, and then such a terrible thing wouldn't have happened..."

Crown Prince Terios had brought the Demon King's weapon to the northern Encroachment Zone subjugation. Though it effectively subdued demon race, the Dium had risen up as if mocking that weapon. Of course, since Diums weren't demon race to begin with.

[Your fatal mistake lies in still not knowing who 'we' are.]

He fully understood why the Dium had mocked them then. Come to think of it, the fact that Diums used a language separate from demon race, and that there was no communication at all when they first appeared 20 years ago, were all evidence they had crossed over from another dimension.

They said the Diums learned the imperial language after about half a year, but perhaps that too was aimed at infiltrating this place through the most widely used language in this dimension.

Beside the sobbing Empress, the Emperor also buried his head in his hands and sighed:

"Ah, Tio..."

"Please don't act shameless when you've been helping keep the Diums alive all this time. Pretending to care about your child won't make your wrongs disappear."

But Beatrice's tone remained mercilessly cold. Perhaps the reason she had been pushed back in the succession struggle was due to decisions by royal family members desperate for necklaces. With her aggressive personality wanting to raise the imperial family's power, they must have worried about conflicts she would create with the Order.

So they had placed Terios, a good imperial descendant who would simply follow the royal family elders' wishes and obey the Order like a fool, as Crown Prince. Then he joined the subjugation as Crown Prince and collapsed with fatal wounds... In the end, their greed had essentially driven the next Emperor to his death.

Just as he could guess such background about the Crown Prince's appointment, Beatrice must have clearly understood the inside story long ago. Her eyes grew large with anger until the whites showed. *Swuk*, the royal family members avoided her gaze while pretending to bow their heads to the hero.

Though they had prepared thoroughly, there were many casualties in the northern Encroachment Zone. Half the forces had fallen, and among them those in especially serious condition were Terios and Noi. The two who were unconscious were sent to the infirmary immediately upon returning to the holy city, but it was uncertain whether they would even open their eyes.

Kalterik trembled all over and muttered as if grinding his words:

"Noi offered even his life force, blooming thousands of fairy flowers to help the subjugation...!"

The fairy race was more vulnerable to Encroachment Zone contamination. Yet Noi, who had entered each time risking danger, stepped forward this time not fearing even death. He had tried to calm the evil spirit that appeared in the northern Encroachment Zone by pouring out all his life force.

"And the previous Holy Knight Commander suffered such humiliation..."

Mela also sighed before firmly shutting her mouth. She fell silent immediately upon recalling why Noi had to step forward, who that evil spirit was. Because there was another who would be most angered by that fact now.

Haren stood silently.

"..."

The words he had spoken aloud since entering here must have been very few. He hadn't even raised his voice once, and unlike Mela, had never even gripped his sword hilt. Though he had sometimes sighed and burst into dry laughter, even changes in Haren's expression were rare.

Though he was the calmest being, everyone watched his reactions.

"We're truly sorry."

"We never imagined things would turn out like this..."

"We'll help from now on, no, we'll surely pay for our crimes! We'll take responsibility somehow, so please, couldn't you remove our necklaces...?"

The son loved by God, this world's hero. Believing he must have a way to remove the necklaces, they all crawled to his feet and pleaded. The sight of them prostrating themselves with their upper bodies was laughable. Those who had enjoyed nearly absolute power now pressed their heads to the ground and begged.

These ones who had just days ago cruelly cut off loose ends by swiftly killing imprisoned people to protect their secrets were now crying and begging to be saved when blades came to their own necks.

[Isn't it truly interesting? The sight of them gladly accepting without even knowing they were wearing dog collars. Thanks to that, we were able to make a 'path' very easily.]

Indeed it was an appearance worthy of the Diums' loud laughter. The crystals that the Dium had offered when it came to the Pope in the past were like poison poured into the headwaters.

In fact, youth alone wasn't the core of desire. From the start, the Pope was one blinded by 'power', having summoned monsters from another dimension wanting to raise the Order's prestige. So the Diums had essentially shown him another way to grasp power.

With this, humans used the Diums' gifts like symbols of power and built grotesque bonds while firmly concealing secrets. Thanks to this, the Diums gained control over everyone's lives without having to find each power holder individually. It was like humans had put leashes on their own necks and offered them up. What an absurd ending.

The Diums' mocking laughter seemed to ring in his ears.

*Kugugung*-!

Just then, the building shook greatly. Everyone's heads turned to the side at the earthquake that shook the entire temple. They instinctively sensed it. This was not a natural phenomenon but vibrations starting from that 'egg' in the plaza.

Moreover, that wasn't the only strange phenomenon.

"Di-Diums are pouring down from the sky..."

Kalterik sighed as if being strangled. Diums began descending one by one from the heavily cracked sky. It was similar to the phenomenon seen in the western Encroachment Zone before.

The difference from then was that now they all descended slowly and didn't immediately form an offensive formation. Those coming down were only one and two-horned ones, and there seemed to be a limit to how many kindred they could call through the cracks. Perhaps stronger individuals could only cross through the boundary in the cave. Should they consider it fortunate that they had collapsed the snowy mountain at least?

Of course, nothing was positive now that the Dedium had planted its egg in the middle of the holy city. The Diums pouring from the sky seemed to number in the thousands, and the sight of black dots densely embedded looked like it could induce claustrophobia.

The holy city stirred. Though people had evacuated far from the plaza, the sky could be seen from anywhere, so the city residents screamed at the sight of catastrophe pouring down. The despair from the streets reached here.

However, the Diums that reached the ground simply stood tall around it as if protecting the egg. Their black and white bodies looked like statues had been erected.

### Chapter 161

Gradually, the black egg became transparent.

"The Dedium really is in there..."

Beatrice muttered in dismay. The two-horned Dium, that is, the Dium with a third eye that had come to the outskirts of the holy city, was floating there. But three more horns had somehow sprouted on its head. One each on both sides of its head, and one more above its forehead.

The newly sprouted horns looked very small. But the fact that there were five horns was undeniable, and he had a feeling that perhaps the moment all those horns grew fully, the Dedium would emerge from the egg. It probably needed time to awaken in its new physical form.

*Thump- thump-*

The egg in the plaza writhed just like a heart. He couldn't distinguish whether his own heart was beating rapidly, or if he felt that way because the ground shook with the egg's movements. Just as he staggered and painfully looked at that place.

The Dedium in the egg half-opened its eyes.

The Dedium moved its lips, and though the murmured sound from far away couldn't possibly reach here, it rang loud and clear in his mind. Like a message spread to everyone in this dimension.

[Insects of this land. Do not fear the new world to come.]

It wasn't the Holy Empire's language. The Dedium was now using its dimension's language. Yet it was naturally interpreted in his mind. Though it had used the imperial language before, did coiling up in the heart of this dimension, the middle of the holy city, have some meaning?

[You need not be afraid. If you submit to me, I will accept you all as subjects...]

The Dedium's continuing voice even sounded merciful at first glance. It was very generous, as if willing to forgive the audacious crime of sealing it for so long.

[The proof of that submission is...]

Suddenly the Dedium's gaze turned to the temple's peak, *right here.*

[Offering human souls to me.]

An explanation followed that anyone who came to the plaza and presented offerings would be gladly granted qualification to remain in the new world. That story was enough to remind one of the day a holy knight had led his young son to find the Dedium.

Kalterik must have noticed this too, as he began to burst out in rage with "That...!" But just then Haren moved and he quickly shut his mouth.

"..."

Quietly approaching the window, Haren looked at the egg in the plaza. As if meeting eyes with the Dedium, and meanwhile the Dedium's proclamation continued.

The deadline was three days.

It was the time given to those who wished to become subjects of the new world, and they said one only needed to offer other humans within that time. A warning was attached that the Diums would remain still for three days, but if attacked first, 'war' would begin immediately.

After the Dedium's message ended, Haren turned his head and ordered:

"First send holy knights to prohibit entry to the plaza. Put up protective barriers around it and block access routes so no one can approach that place."

It was a very calm series of orders. Though thousands of Diums were standing still now, it somehow felt strange to hear it as just an order to protect the holy city's residents since they could change at any moment.

That is, that tone seemed to come from a guess that those blinded by survival might commit terrible acts, namely human sacrifice.

*Swuk*, Haren looked down at those kneeling on the floor and said:

"First we should bind up the trash here."

\*\*\*

Several hours later.

A special order was proclaimed in the Holy Empire. It was like a kind of emergency martial law where the hero held all command authority in the empire, exercising power above even the Pope and Emperor. They said it was a sacred authority granted only to the hero who received God's grace, and the first such order proclaimed in history.

All personnel wearing necklaces were imprisoned in the underground prison. Shackles were placed on their wrists and ankles, and they were even muzzled in case they tried to bribe the guards.

Though Beatrice trembled with anger for a while, she suggested it would be better to resolve the problems first before revealing the truth. With the news that the holy city was contaminated already stirring up the whole country, if it became known that their leaders, the Pope and Emperor, had secretly helped keep the Diums alive, the holy knights would be shaken first.

Haren agreed as well, so only the hero, the two vice commanders, the imperial princess, and him came to know the truth about the Diums. He watched the four with mixed feelings. Though they too must have felt great shock and above all deep betrayal, they moved their bodies somehow. They tried to calm the holy city.

"Wondering if there might be a way to control the Diums, we checked the office but..."

Mela and Kalterik thoroughly searched the Pope's office. They were looking for forbidden books dealing with beings from other dimensions. Since they had hidden them for over 20 years, they hoped they might have investigated the monsters' weaknesses during that time.

But what came out of there were only absurd items.

"We only found lots of teleport scrolls for instantly moving to the snowy mountain that was the eastern Encroachment Zone..."

"These lazy bastards."

Beatrice cursed softly. She expressed true contempt at the traces of deliberately trading with Diums. Now she seemed to lack even the energy to shout, just grinding out curses in a very hoarse voice. Over the past few hours, she too had worked to protect residents by spreading imperial palace forces.

But as the day grew late, the holy city's anxiety only grew.

With dark clouds gathering, people trembled in fear as the dark night sky became difficult to distinguish from the cracks. Worried the entire sky might be covered in cracks, or that the Diums' attitude might change at night. Though holy knights were trying to calm the residents, the massive Dedium egg visible from anywhere in the holy city was enough to frighten everyone.

The imperial citizens couldn't even figure out where to evacuate to. The cracks in the sky had spread nationwide, so they didn't know when or where monsters might fall. So opinions were divided on whether they should stay in the holy city with the hero despite being scared, or get as far away as possible from the Dedium's egg. The holy city was now in chaos with people trying to leave and enter.

"They say some have even appeared trying to actually offer people..."

Kalterik reported dejectedly. Though fortunately these attempts had been thwarted since Haren had anticipated this and instructed the knights about it early on, such incidents made the holy city even more chaotic. Though they should unite their strength against a common enemy, they were becoming enemies to each other.

So now the holy knights were frantically trying to protect the plaza while also preparing for surprise attacks by Diums. Though they were all tired from returning from the northern Encroachment Zone subjugation, they had no time to rest.

And this was surely the same for the four right now.

The Holy Knight Order building's strategy meeting room had become a control tower. Since all the empire's leadership was currently thrown in prison, the hero, two vice commanders, and imperial princess had to oversee and command everything. They posted all kinds of situation reports on the walls and remained completely alert.

Would it have been somewhat better if Noi were here? More than his genius memory, they missed his clear voice. He had always brightened the mood with his cheerful attitude when things got heavy. But now he was collapsed unconscious... Perhaps that fact drove the four even harder.

He quietly slipped out of the space. Everyone was busy anyway and there was nothing he could do there. Since the operations headquarters had been set up, his only task had been to stay quietly in a corner to avoid making unnecessary noise.

So the place he headed after quietly leaving was...

"I think Laria's villa was around here..."

It was the address written in the letter received from Laria before. Though he had thought he would never visit, he ended up coming here after all.

The reason was quite absurd. He had just walked to get some outside air, then wanting to get away from the massive egg in the plaza he moved with his back to it, and naturally ended up in this area.

From the moment he saw the egg, no, perhaps from the moment he saw the 'shell' in the northern Encroachment Zone, did he want the alchemist's help because the dizziness was too severe? Or... did he want to confide in someone about the shock of forcing mass out-of-body experiences on the zombies?

Amidst all sorts of confusion, he knocked on the door. The wooden villa was located in a forest at the edge of the holy city. He couldn't understand why a wealthy alchemist would get a villa in such an isolated place.

"I-Isaph?"

Laria was startled. Her eyes grew large as if receiving a completely unexpected visitor, and she even rubbed her eyes with her hands as if in disbelief, making him look at her dubiously.

What's this, why such a reaction when she had even sent a letter saying to visit anytime? His bewilderment must have shown outwardly as Laria hurriedly shook her head and spoke:

"I didn't think you could come with things being so ominous now."

"Well, the holy city is quite unsettled."

"No, not just because of that atmosphere..."

Laria hesitantly moved her lips before guiding him inside, saying to come in for now.

### Chapter 162

He followed her while glancing around the space.

The villa's interior boasted a pastoral scene. Vines grew on the walls, and subtle herb fragrances wafted from modest flowerpots placed here and there. It was similar in atmosphere to the workshop owner's research room on the third floor of Lara Workshop.

Come to think of it, the Lara Workshop he had visited then had boasted different scenes on each floor. He had felt like touring different countries... Wait, hadn't he seen similar buildings in Jerab? The special district formed by people from fallen kingdoms had various cultures melded together.

*Could Laria also be from a kingdom that fell in the Great Catastrophe...*

It seemed Isaph wasn't born in the Holy Empire either, so how did their connection begin? As he sat on the sofa looking around the interior with a strange feeling, Laria carefully asked:

"Do you remember this place?"

It was a question asked while setting down white cups and dessert on a low wooden table. The mug contained warm cocoa, and the dessert was cookies with large chocolate chips. He looked at those items and Laria in turn without saying anything.

But his intention must have been felt through just his gaze as Laria hurriedly exclaimed:

"I really didn't put anything in it! It's safe to eat!"

Laria even demonstrated by eating the food herself as if trying to prove her innocence. He looked at her dubiously as her actions seemed somewhat desperate. He hadn't come here to leisurely have tea time in the first place.

Meanwhile, Laria's explanation became even more earnest, so he just shook his head roughly.

"Anyway, why did you think I couldn't come?"

When she first saw him, Laria had been extremely surprised. It was a strange reaction to be just because the holy city was unsettled. At his pressing, Laria hesitated like before. She rolled her eyes around for a moment, wandering, before reluctantly answering under his obvious gaze.

"Haven't you heard the talk going around the holy city?"

"What talk?"

"...About how the hero must sacrifice himself to seal the Dedium."

"What?"

The hesitantly continuing story was incredibly shocking. She said that among the imperial citizens who had fallen into fear because of the Dedium's egg planted in the center of the holy city, talk was arising that the hero must step forward. Though it was natural to think of the hero as one to face the Dedium...

The method was none other than the 'sealing' performed by the previous Holy Knight Commander in the past. That is, she said a kind of sacrificial theory was emerging that he too must step forward and seal the Dedium like Haren's mother had done.

"What nonsense is that...!"

He stood up abruptly in shock. He had already been dumbfounded by the sight of the power holders kneeling before Haren in the temple begging to be saved, but now other imperial citizens were saying such things too.

Though absurd, he felt such an atmosphere wasn't so surprising. Twenty years ago, when catastrophe occupied the continent, the front lines were endlessly pushed back and the end seemed imminent, if one person's sacrifice had stopped all the disasters and driven out the monsters, they would naturally hope for such a miracle again.

Moreover, the empire's atmosphere of revering the hero seemed to add fuel to the sacrificial theory. They would expect that he who received God's love could completely subdue the catastrophe if he stepped forward.

"Ha..."

Suddenly he thought perhaps power holders had been behind the movement praising him as the greatest hero in imperial history. They might have thought Haren's existence would be a warning to the Diums. A dry laugh burst out.

Everyone just clings to Haren.

Though it was something he had known all along, stress rushed in enough to give him a headache. He shook his head with difficulty while taking deep breaths. It would just be a passing atmosphere. Surely encountering the Dedium just naturally reminded them of Lady Evelyn's seal, making it temporarily a hot topic.

Ultimately, wouldn't they expect the hero to fight and defeat the Dedium? Just as the holy knights followed his orders now even in their exhausted state, trusting him. Their expressions believing they could overcome any hardship with the hero.

Just then, Laria spoke what he had been thinking:

"Still, there's more talk that the hero could kill the Dedium. Saying God's manifestation couldn't possibly fall to such a monster."

He just let out a sigh. Though he heavily exhaled the breath that had somehow filled up to his chin as if pressing down his insides, he still felt stifled. Though better than the sacrificial theory... in fact, even this was just relying on Haren.

His troubled state must have shown outwardly as Laria casually suggested:

"You look tired, how about having some cocoa?"

"..."

"Ah, really no! I'm truly innocent. I always served this when you visited!"

Her expression insisting she hadn't tampered with the food looked extremely wronged. But was she in a position to feel wronged? When he looked at her incredulously, she shook her head even more vigorously.

She repeatedly explained that she had just been concerned since his face looked pale from the moment he came to the villa, then after moving her lips a couple times, she said:

"...I swear on my family. You can believe that, right?"

He felt strange. Laria would know that Isaph had lost his memories now, so should he point out 'how can I trust that when I don't even remember your family?' But when she mentioned family, her face fell so sharply that he couldn't bring himself to speak.

Though that oath didn't particularly resonate with him since he had never had a family, should he believe it since society treated it as proof of innocence? He reluctantly sat down.

Right, he was running low on sugar anyway...

Swallowing a sigh inwardly, he picked up a chocolate cookie and dipped it in the cocoa. This way the cookie would become moist and the sweetness would soak in deeply, making it much sweeter to enjoy. Actually, from the moment he saw the dessert on the table, he had wanted to eat it like this.

However, as a final precaution, he only took a very small bite. Hmm, if something had been put in it, it would be over the moment he swallowed anyway, so it would be laughable. What could be more terrible than the Dedium reviving, was also part of his resigned feeling. And the cookie matched his taste better than he had expected.

As he took one bite, then another, captivated by the chewy texture, Laria muttered:

"Your habit is exactly the same, to the point I feel sorry for suspecting before..."

"...What?"

"You used to eat like that whenever you came here."

He froze stiff. He should just react saying the original owner of this body was someone who knew how to eat too, he should just pass it off as coincidence...

"Anyway, why did you come? Though I've been waiting for you all along, I was surprised it would be today. You must be tired after going to the northern Encroachment Zone this morning-"

Laria's continuing voice rang in his mind like an echo. He took deep breaths with difficulty as not only dizziness but nausea began to well up. Could Laria have tampered with the food after all? But she was just looking at him with a puzzled face.

"I, the reason I came..."

Right. Why did he come here? Should he ask about the strange memories that kept coming up every time he went to an Encroachment Zone?

But 'his' voice that had rung in his ears then had been somewhat youthful. Like a boy who had just entered his teens. So wouldn't Laria, who was said to have only met Isaph 4 years ago, not know?

*He was confused. Had he visited to understand the possessed character's settings since it was becoming difficult to progress the game? Expecting he could recover all memories through the alchemist?* As various thoughts randomly arose in his mind, suddenly goosebumps rose.

*So this was...*

-*Meow*.

It was similar to the shock when he had heard a cat's cry from the road that day. He stood up abruptly from his seat as if chased by it. He moved his feet randomly to check whether what had rung in his mind was illusion or reality, and.

Finally he discovered the black cat outside the window.

"En!"

Suddenly his mind cleared sharply. *After searching so long for that NPC, it was here!* The black cat was visible in front of what looked like a small storehouse in the back garden. It sat in exactly the same pose as that final moment on Earth long ago.

*What? Just what are you trying to do with me now?*

Bewilderment and displeasure mixed together. Just as anger welled up feeling like that cat was mocking him and he was about to rush out, Laria asked dazedly from the sofa. As if knowing what he had reacted to without looking out the window.

"You call that cat 'En'?"

"Yeah. I gave it that name before, but for now it's urgent so let's talk later..."

Laria blinked her eyes.

"But that's your twin brother's name."

### Chapter 163

"...What did you say?"

"You told me yourself. That your brother's name was 'En'."

While muttering about how even though twins usually don't distinguish much between older and younger, he had always carefully called him older brother, suddenly Laria's eyes grew wide. She spoke in a very surprised tone:

"I heard you lost your memories, don't tell me you don't remember your brother either?"

"..."

"No wonder, I wondered why someone who had never called the cat by name before suddenly said 'En'. Maybe that name was most special so it came back first..."

*Piiiiii*- Suddenly his ears felt like they were being torn apart. Though Laria wasn't even speaking in a loud voice, it was painful enough to make him clutch his head and stagger. Ringing in his ears came too. *No, was someone's voice mixed in like an illusion?*

'Please wake up, En...'

Once again 'his' voice full of crying rang in his ears.

He staggered from the terrible ringing. Because he was so confused, he just thought he might be able to get away from the noise if he left this place. Though quite illogical, he moved without realizing it. Seeing him move unsteadily, Laria approached in confusion.

However, before she could grab him, he finally staggered and collapsed ungracefully to the floor.

*Crash*!

He fell while sweeping items off the wall as he flailed. The sound of odds and ends hitting the floor and the sharp shattering sound of something breaking struck his ears. Though Laria seemed to be telling him to stay still in shock, saying she would bring something to clean up, even that voice resonated woong woong making it difficult to understand.

The floating sensation of his body being suspended and the feeling of being roughly slammed down mixed together. Until now, he felt as if he had been casually watching a reflection in water when suddenly his nape was grabbed and he was dragged here and thrown down.

Though he had clearly thought he was watching the water's surface from far away, his whole body trembled suffering from cold as if he had actually been submerged in water for a very long time, like he had fallen into the deep sea.

"No, that's not it..."

He mumbled incoherently while groping the floor. *What was it, what was he denying now? Did he just want to claim that even the taste, eating habits, and the name 'En' were coincidences?* His vision flashed white. Like, like when his sight had been dyed by the headlights spilled from a truck long ago.

*Right, I definitely came here after being hit by a truck. Damn it, I'm a player possessing this damn game.*

Suddenly he recalled the cat he had found on the road that night. A cat identical to the NPC that had been with him since entering this world. That cat's eyes were purple, and the last voice that had rung in his mind as he lost consciousness after being hit by the truck was...

'It's time to return now.'

An eerie shock struck the back of his head. This sensation came simultaneously with his hand getting cut by mirror shards as he pressed against the floor while staggering. So he had broken a mirror too. Though blood was now flowing freely from his palm, he just blankly looked down.

He stared strangely at his reflection in the sharply broken mirror. Purple eyes. Though they had clearly been light purple at first, they had somehow become deep enough to be vivid.

"What are you?"

His blood felt like it was running cold. His hair stood on end as goosebumps rose all over his body. Still feeling his body and lips moving according to 'his' will as incredibly unfamiliar, he stood up unsteadily.

Though Laria had approached his side and said something, it didn't register in his mind. He just pointed at the outbuilding outside the window while taking deep breaths. The cat was going inside.

As if calling him there.

"That, what is that storehouse for?"

"...That place is your research lab."

Laria answered with a confused face. Though she seemed very shocked and flustered by his continued strange behavior, she explained as calmly as possible. As if it was proper consideration to show a friend who had lost his memories.

The villa of the owner of Lara Workshop, who had mercenary connections strong enough that even the Holy Empire's Order would find it difficult to easily suppress - and the small storehouse hidden protectively in that villa's backyard was a space for 'Isaph', she said.

He rejected her support and headed there alone. He rushed over mindlessly and bang! roughly threw open the door. He frantically searched for the black cat in the dark space.

"Come out. I said come out!"

He just felt he had to catch the cat. He had to interrogate the NPC. He had to demand what this body was, what the true identity of this damn game was, and what they were doing to 'him'...

-*Meow*.

Just then, the cat cried beside him. It seemed to have been waiting on the shelf right beside the door from the start. Though he could have found it immediately just by turning his head, he hadn't seen it because the space was dark. Perhaps it was because the cat had had its eyes closed until just before.

Don't be so faithful to the black cat setting at a time like this.

While thinking incredulously inside, he tried to grab the cat. But the moment he finally properly met those purple eyes, something appeared before his eyes.

It was no longer a status window but...

'Evan, how long are you going to sleep?'

It was a memory.

\*\*\*

*Blink, blink*...

He repeatedly opened and closed his eyes very slowly. He gradually recognized each element of the scene filling his vision. Old walls, a window with peeling paint, and a worn blanket covering his body. Though they were all unfamiliar things, they were welcome enough to make him feel suddenly sad.

"Evan, how long are you going to sleep?"

Just then, someone spoke behind him. A youthful boy's voice. 'He' was lying curled up on his side in bed, and the boy patted the blanket pang pang urging him as if waiting for him to wake up.

"You need to play with your older brother."

"What older brother? We're twins."

His mouth moved. It wasn't his will. That is, he watched what was happening as if possessing this body. It felt like having an unrealistic dream, and also like watching a movie in first person. The sensation of his body moving regardless of 'his' will was strange.

"I was born earlier! Besides, you were sick so you're much smaller than me, and I went through so much trouble taking care of you! How can you completely ignore your brother's efforts and be so cold..."

"It would have been our parents who went through trouble, not you."

"Aah so cold, so cold."

The boy bounced around as if wronged before suddenly grabbing his hand and pulling. While being dragged by the boy, he glanced at his reflection in the mirror. *Black hair reaching his shoulders, skin so pale veins showed through, purple eyes sunken with fatigue. A small, skinny build...*

He was so small it was hard to believe he was twins with the boy beside him. While the boy looked to be in his early teens, his body seemed not even ten years old. Their impressions and feelings were different too. While the boy seemed energetic, he gave off a weak and frail impression. His arms and legs visible outside his white garment looked like they might break.

'It was the same back then too.'

The vast desert visible after leaving the house following the boy was somewhat familiar. Though the barren rocky desert stretching endlessly seemed like a harsh space difficult for people to live in, a village had formed. A small community of less than a hundred people living together. He was surprised by the gray area visible in the distance.

An Encroachment Zone was nearby.

Just then his body trembled-. He couldn't tell if it was a reaction to his thoughts, or this body's action. He just strangely listened as the boy turned back and spoke.

"You still get surprised every time you see the Encroachment Zone. I told you there are no more monsters? The Holy Empire's Holy Knight Commander sealed them and they all tucked their tails and ran away! Even if some survived, they must all be dead after so much time has passed."

"..."

"Are you still scared? You really are a child, a child."

"...You're a child too."

The boy laughed mischievously at the grumbling response. His smile with dimples on both sides looked refreshing. The boy spread his shoulders boldly and shouted:

"Don't worry. If monsters, if Diums appear, this brother will protect you!"

"Not my brother."

Though he picked at the words sullenly, the corners of his mouth rose slightly.

He followed the boy around here and there. Though this community seemed to have settled in the desert only a few years ago, it even had a market. This was all thanks to the souls from Grimodia Village over there, which had fallen to the Great Catastrophe in the past.

"Recently the mister who freed the souls bound to that land got the location of an underground food storage as thanks! Isn't that amazing?"

The boy leading him spoke excitedly. He seemed very thrilled, saying he wanted to learn abilities from that mister, and around then he finally noticed the 'souls' hovering around the residents. He had thought they were all residents, but some were undead.

And everyone treated this scene as natural.

"The mister said even if you learn soul magic you won't be able to use it in the empire, that you can only get along with imperial citizens if you know nothing... But it's still cool! And do we really have to live in the empire? I'd be fine living here with just our clan forever."

The boy grumbled discontentedly.

"The Holy Empire hates people like us anyway. They curse at us all as necromancers. Well, we can't say it's not necromancy! Anyway because of that, other kingdoms follow the empire's lead and reject us so we ended up hiding here, tch. Is there any need to go into the empire?"

"..."

"You think so too, right, Evan?"

### Chapter 164

Was he confused, or shocked? He had heard before that countless kingdoms had fallen to the Great Catastrophe and even the surviving countries all received aid from the Holy Empire.

As the entire continent followed the Order's principles, they abhorred all abilities related to souls, and because of this, this clan seemed to have been driven here. Since no one would come near an Encroachment Zone, they formed a village and lived here.

While he organized thoughts in his mind, his body moved on its own. He opened his lips hesitantly and spoke:

"...I just want to be together, wherever."

At the quiet answer, the boy's eyes grew large. As if overjoyed at his response, he smiled brightly and quickly clasped both hands together while shouting. The sensation of small hands intertwining felt vivid.

"Right! So let's just stay here forever-"

"En."

Just then, someone's soft call fell. At that address, the boy before him flinched and looked up behind him. Two people's presence approached, and their shadows covered him and the boy.

The boy, no... 'En' burst into an awkward laugh "Ahahat."

"Mom, Dad..."

"You must go to the empire someday. You can't stay here forever."

"That's right. You need to receive education there and see the wider world!"

A gentle but firm admonishing voice, followed by an energetic one. He was grateful for his turned body as he examined 'them' one by one. The titles the twins had just used were so unfamiliar and shocking.

*...Mom and Dad?*

They were people with the same black hair and purple eyes as him. The woman with short hair had a calm impression, and the man with hair reaching his waist had an energetic impression. En's personality must have taken after that man.

Though he heard they were parents, they felt impossibly distant. No, perhaps he was trying to distance himself. Because if he didn't, he felt he would be swept away by too strange emotions. While not even knowing what they were, he struggled desperately in his mind to maintain distance. It was aversion toward emotions he was experiencing for the first time.

However, his body was already embraced in the woman's arms. She lifted and held him very naturally, asking "Were you very cold?" while wrapping him in the hem of her outer garment. The child's small body leaned against her familiarly.

Time flowed like a dream.

That day, perhaps because the weather was a bit chilly when he went out following En, this weak body caught a cold. En apologized while hovering around, and lying together in bed, chattered endlessly.

"Evan. They say 'Harenir', the son of the Holy Knight Commander who sealed the monsters, is going around doing relief work diligently. *I heard he became a holy knight at a young age, and honestly, I thought he got into the Order easily because he was that person's child?* But he personally visits villages damaged by monster attacks to help, and recently he even calmed a rampaging demon race test subject somewhere. Isn't that amazing?"

The topic En mentioned most was about Harenir. The boy's eyes sparkled as he recited the young holy knight's life story. Though he had antipathy toward the Holy Empire for rejecting them, he seemed greatly impressed by the young holy knight's actions.

"He's really like a hero. No, he'll definitely become a hero!"

"...Hero?"

"Yeah. The Holy Empire calls those who receive God's grace 'heroes'. They say grace usually descends during the coming-of-age ceremony, so we'll find out in a few years? But I'm certain!"

En spoke in an excited tone. He gave a whole speech about how heroes throughout imperial history had been extraordinary from birth, saying Harenir's healing power was proof of this too.

Actually, not just En but the village residents too felt favorably toward Harenir. Though they lived here in hiding, they were grateful for the Holy Empire's efforts. Because they had stopped the Great Catastrophe that had turned the entire continent to ruins. After all, if the empire's Holy Knight Commander hadn't sacrificed herself in the past, everyone would have died.

En murmured beside him as if dreaming:

"They say heroes get mysterious abilities, so maybe he'll receive power that helps eliminate the remaining Encroachment Zones in the empire? I hope he resolves the Encroachment Zones. Then we could keep staying here with the villagers too..."

Grumbling was added that the reason their parents wanted to send them away was clearly because of the nearby Encroachment Zone. Also complaints about what the problem was when there wouldn't be monsters anyway.

His body moved slowly, grabbing En's hand while saying:

"Yeah..."

The small agreement was full of sincerity. It wasn't just casually agreeing with En's words. During the past few days while he was sick, villagers often visited the house. They even gave precious fresh fruit while worrying about him. And they gently patted his head as he hesitantly accepted.

The village where few lived took care of each other warmly. A quiet and peaceful neighborhood. He liked this place, and just thinking about it made him smile. His heart beat pleasantly.

Though it was just the body's reaction, somehow even 'he' felt dyed by it. He too liked this peace, and liked En's chatter beside him every night until he fell asleep, and was even piercingly happy about their parents' warm embrace every morning.

So...

"Uh, uhh, why..."

The attack that night felt terribly despairing.

The cold wouldn't go away for a long time, and on that rainy night, he suffered from high fever. The three family members gathered beside him as he lay in bed wheezing. Then when it became noisy outside, his parents said they would go check, and soon even En couldn't contain his curiosity and went out while telling him to stay in the room. The final touch of pulling up his blanket was careful.

He curled up under the blanket groaning and dozed off. When he opened his eyes, quite some time seemed to have passed but the house was empty. But because it was too noisy outside, he dragged his limp body toward the outside of the house. Though he thought it might be because of the still pouring rain... he finally encountered it.

The ruined village, blood vivid on the ground even under the pouring rain, and walking like zombies over it... the villagers losing their color. Though his whole body trembled making his vision unstable, 'he' discovered several one-horned Diums moving away in the distance. A nauseating disgust welled up suddenly.

The Diums had feasted.

After the instinctive realization, knowing what happened to humans killed by Diums, he could predict what would happen next. It was obvious what situation this young body would face.

[Uh, uhh...]

*Squeaksqueak*- zombies ran toward the small child crying in front of the door. Even the uncle who had patted his head just this morning, the grandmother who had given him fruit, and also... his parents and En.

Only now could 'he' observe this moment like a third party. Thanks to this situation overlapping with some memory, his mind suddenly separated. He watched like a stranger as his body became completely mangled while running away from the zombies.

*Ah, so that's* it.

So this was the memory that came up in the northern Encroachment Zone.

"This isn't right. No, please..."

At the moment hundreds of hands rushed at him standing at a dead end, finally purple light spread explosively from his body. It tore away their souls in an instant.

Perhaps their souls were broken from the moment they were eaten by Diums, as their spirit bodies were somewhat crushed. He collapsed and sobbed before the villagers' corpses that had fallen like puppets with cut strings.

"Please wake up, En..."

He pulled the corpse fallen closest to him, his twin's body, into his arms fumblingly and wailed. His parents' corpses were stretched out behind too. Though the zombies' color returned, it brought no joy at all. Rather it showed their deaths clearly, making it only more despairing.

He seemed to cry for several hours straight. Sobbing until passing out, then regaining consciousness and crying again...

Then at some point, souls rippled around him. They were all villagers. Though their forms weren't whole and they couldn't even communicate, they didn't leave his side. And among them, especially his parents' and En's forms gradually changed.

Whether this body used some ability, or it was their will. The broken souls gathered and gathered... until finally taking the shape of a small animal.

As if to comfort the crying child, in the form of a very cute cat.

"Are you still staying by my side?"

He sobbed while hugging the cat. Growing sad at the illusory warmth felt from the small body in his arms, he cried even while knowing the reason for the action licking his eyes. After making the ridiculous excuse that it was just rainwater, then making such a foolish promise that he would cry for the last time just now.

From that day on, he was consumed by anger.

The Holy Empire had clearly said there were no more monsters. Though Encroachment Zones remained, they had proclaimed they had dealt with all Diums, that this continent was safe. So all countries bowed their heads and watched the empire that had brought peace. 'They' too had come here following such background.

*But why were Diums still alive? Why?*

### Chapter 165

He went to confess at the empire's temple. Moving his young body, walking for days until he was completely battered, he told them Diums were alive inside the Encroachment Zone.

But everyone ignored his story. They dismissed it as nonsense babbled by an unsound child. No matter how much he persuaded, no matter how he cried for them to check just once, they wouldn't listen at all. Some even burst out angrily at him.

Saying how dare he spout such impossible nonsense when they had eliminated the Diums through the Holy Knight Commander's noble sacrifice. They threw him out telling him never to speak such things anywhere again. They even clicked their tongues as if letting him off easy because he was just a child. It was the same at any temple he went to. Having his opinion completely ignored, he was consumed by despairing anger.

If the empire wouldn't do it, he would chase the Diums himself.

With that single thought, he prepared like mad. Since soul magic was all he could do, he studied surrounded by his clan's souls. In the ruined village, now covered with graves he had made, he read books alone and self-studied by finding various texts following the souls' gestures.

Then finding limits to researching only in the village, he later headed to the Jerab Special District. It was easy to obtain rare information in the place where people from fallen kingdoms gathered. There were always those who preserved historical records even when countries fell, and he had spirit vision. He went around receiving help from souls.

He was busy learning soul magic and tracking Diums. Though they said the Order had disposed of all research materials about monsters after sealing the Dedium, he went around searching for exactly that lost information. Rather than gathering evidence that Diums were alive, it seemed he investigated ways to counter the monsters. After all, no one would believe his words anyway.

From the moment he left the village, he wore only black robes. Though 'he' still observed the unfolding memories like a third party, he suddenly thought it might be mourning attire. That must have been the only reason his hands trembled when first gripping the robe hem.

Time flowed quickly.

Whether because there wasn't much memorable from the blindly spent period, or because these weren't what it wanted to show 'him', only some scenes flashed by in fragments. Research materials on Dium language found in Jerab, glimpses of foreign goods trading posts, and blankly enduring heavy rain...

After completing preparations, he entered imperial territory proper and explored near Encroachment Zones. The Diums that had long stayed quiet seemed to grow restless, as mainly one-horned ones came out to kidnap and eat people. However, as if warned by higher beings, they only dragged people who approached near Encroachment Zones inside.

He approached corpses abandoned at Encroachment Zone entrances. Since contamination began from the moment of entering, he had to move as quickly as possible. He tore away the souls of corpses just about to become zombies and read their memories of the Diums they had last encountered.

The souls of the villagers from the past had been very crushed, making it difficult to peek at memories. If he forced out-of-body experiences on zombie souls early, their spirit bodies were less damaged and he could gather information. Through memories collected carefully like that, he gained shocking realizations.

'Diums are not beings of this dimension.'

The colorless Encroachment Zones they occupied gave a sense of disparity as if not blending with this world at all, and that was because Diums truly were beings from another dimension. That was also why instinctive aversion welled up.

What those monsters ate from humans wasn't specific body parts or brain matter, but 'this dimension's souls'. Among those, they only absorbed the essence and discarded the rest. Humans whose soul cores were destroyed lost color and became zombies moving only with contaminated soul dregs.

All living things have an instinct to return to their source. So zombies coveted souls that fully existed in this dimension and rushed at living humans, and that appeared as zombie attacks.

[Uh, uhh...]

Souls gathered and rippled around him in shock. They were those whose out-of-body experiences he had induced for research these past few days, and though he had meant to release them after investigation, they continued staying by his side.

They showed blind loyalty to him, thanking him for stopping them before harming their kin, and for getting corpses out of the Encroachment Zone. Though he had only brought them out to investigate in detail, the undead's assistance was quite useful so he accepted them.

The souls bound to him sometimes showed him 'paths'. Perhaps because they were killed by Diums, they keenly noticed places where similar victims might occur. It was mysterious foresight. Though he hesitated as it was very dangerous, on rainy nights he followed them. As he went around the entire empire like that, his undead gradually increased.

Memories of meeting Laria then also flashed by briefly. The background of earning her goodwill was mentioning family upon seeing souls rippling around her, and from then on Laria cooperated with him.

The Holy Empire was in an uproar over the necromancer's appearance.

They denounced him as a new catastrophe and even put out wanted notices. It was absurd how they issued bounties for using abilities that went against doctrine while leaving Diums alone. He was already busy, and now having many humans chasing him was annoying.

Some cardinal even blocked his path and gave him a lecture. Though he tried to ignore and pass by, the cardinal taught how wrong necromancy was as an ability, and shouted for him to quickly repent before God and seek forgiveness. He seemed quite angry by then.

"So what."

They should use this effort to check Encroachment Zones instead.

His steadily accumulated anger poured out like venting on the cardinal. Rather, the Order seemed secretly excited about the appearance of a new villain, that is, a public enemy.

Regardless, he focused only on tracking traces of Diums. He was busy enough just visiting Encroachment Zones scattered in the empire's four directions.

Then by chance at the snowy mountain where the eastern Encroachment Zone was located, he discovered an existence he hadn't thought of at all.

'...The cardinal?'

The cardinal he had recently thrown aside with undead was entering the cave. Though he usually didn't look at people's faces and remembered few, he recognized this one due to their recent conflict.

But he suddenly appeared at the snowy mountain cave entrance and headed inside without a word. Was he going to die? Though truly surprised... after several dozen minutes, he witnessed him coming out safely. He walked out stroking a golden necklace with a very satisfied face, then disappeared instantly just like before. He seemed to have used a magic scroll.

'Could it be the Order already knows about the Encroachment Zone situation?'

He felt the need to investigate the truth, and after careful consideration, sent undead into the Encroachment Zone. However, there was a problem. With undead, that is, souls whose essence had been drained by Diums, it was not easy to grasp the appearance of monsters hidden in the Encroachment Zone. It seemed to be the influence of contamination by beings from another dimension.

Though undead vision couldn't properly see Diums, they could faintly hear 'sounds'. Since the east was strangely quiet, he headed to other Encroachment Zones.

[All of this is for the Dedium...]

Finally in the western Encroachment Zone, he overheard shocking rituals taking place. The Diums weren't content with just living in hiding but were trying to resurrect their leader too. It seemed they planned to break the previous Holy Knight Commander's seal and conquer the continent again.

He became too anxious and wanted to tell 'him', Harenir, about this fact. He was a being that came to mind reflexively. As En had said, he felt he needed to tell him who had become a hero receiving grace at his coming-of-age ceremony that his mother's seal was breaking.

But his reputation in the empire was already at its worst. He should not have thrown aside the cardinal last time. Though regrets came too late, having no choice, he sought Laria's advice and tried approaching Harenir.

'Say something nice at least.'

He knew Harenir wanted to search the Encroachment Zones. He was wary of the contaminated lands remaining in the empire, and suspected they might be traces of traitors like his father. So he wanted to convey that he agreed with his thoughts and wished to cooperate with the search.

So the best compliment he could think of then was...

"You have a beautiful soul."

Harenir had a soul more beautiful and holy than any human he had seen traveling the entire continent. A brilliant soul as if embracing all light of this dimension. However, despite delivering words he had gathered courage for, Harenir did not come to find him.

*Why*...

This body seemed somewhat discouraged, but 'he' became dumbfounded. It felt like confirming just how far communication ability dropped when staying only with undead.

This body stuck in the research lab just stroked the cat's back while muttering, "He can't come find me because he doesn't know where I am? Right, that must be it. Should have set a meeting place first." *Idiot*.

This body even randomly studied divine language briefly. Though he suspected he might try speaking to Harenir in divine language, among the complex characters he especially traced the word 'purify' with his hand. He even quietly recited it while stroking repeatedly.

'I hope he resolves the Encroachment Zones.'

Only then did he understand this action followed his twin's words from the past. It seemed he had sensed that when Harenir 'purified' an area with the grace he was said to have received, the Encroachment Zones would disappear.

### Chapter 166

Afterward, he waited longer for Harenir but naturally couldn't meet him. Around then, the energy in the Encroachment Zones started feeling ominous too, so he judged he should move first.

"I need to go into the Encroachment Zone myself."

Laria was horrified at his declaration. Though she tried to dissuade him to reconsider, he answered "...Yes, I did" after 10 seconds and requested she make magical tools that could withstand even Encroachment Zone contamination. He emphasized especially needing stealth capabilities. She grumbled about whether he knew how difficult it was to create multi-function magical tools, and that he must be the only one who used the owner of Lara Workshop like this.

Laria prepared two rings. She boasted that the rings that looked woven from leaves were made with very rare materials, but she hesitated greatly in actually handing them to him. Perhaps seeing him wearing these magical tools to head there as like going to a grave, she repeatedly tried persuading him to reconsider.

Though Laria's actions came from worry, he was impatient then so her dissuasion was just annoying. Growing frustrated with her arguing while hiding the rings in her fist, he hardened his expression and said:

"Next time we meet, you'll have to hand over the other one right away."

Making two but only giving one. He glared at Laria before leaving the workshop immediately. She seemed to shout at his back asking if there would even be a "next time."

He chose the eastern Encroachment Zone among the four directions.

He had heard ritual sounds from the west, and discovered ominous buildings in the north too, but only in the east did he see 'light'. He wanted to examine that place because the colorful lights bursting in the colorless space were very strange. Moreover, since it was a place Order personnel frequented...

Just what was the identity of that light, and how had the Diums maintained their lives here? Following his intuition that answers to all questions would be in the east, he moved and...

[Haha, offering so many kindred this time too. Truly beings blinded by desire.]

He discovered a Dium laughing before a mountain of people piled high enough to reach the ceiling. Though tense at encountering a monster with four horns for the first time, he was bewildered by the sight of countless people stacked in layers as if peacefully sleeping. Though all had faded to gray, they hadn't become zombies either. Just what was this?

*Whik*- when the Dium waved its hand, souls were pulled out from the people in an instant. It extracted only the essence from those, moving its fingers as if bundling threads. Finally, what sat in its palm was... a very small black crystal.

Nausea rose at its grotesque shape crushed to points. A crystal of hundreds of souls gathered. Its effects were obvious. As an object made by gathering only soul essence, it would restore the soul of its possessor.

The Dium spoke while throwing and catching that crystal *tak, tak* upward:

[Though drooling with such ugly desire, they kept the outer packaging pretty, how amusing. Who's calling who a monster?]

*Outer packaging?* Something struck like lightning in his confused mind. What the cardinal had happily stroked while leaving the snowy mountain cave. The golden necklace.

*No way.*

After tremendous shock came deep disillusionment. He came to understand everything - why Encroachment Zones still remained in the empire until now, why the Order repeatedly blocked the hero's searches, and... even the reason they had ignored his report as a child long ago.

The puzzle pieces fit together perfectly from the Diums' conversations. The four-horned Dium cackled saying now even other humans were offering their kindred, and that even its luxurious robe was their gift. Laughter mocking how desire made humans foolish echoed in the cave.

'He' watched as the hand pressed against the wall trembled. So that's how it was, this body had encountered all the truth like this. Though surprised at the past fitting together one by one, he still felt a sense of distance. There was still a point he couldn't comprehend.

Because he wondered what this all had to do with 'him' even while watching this body's, Evan's, past.

[Oh God...]

The moment he saw a Dium walking out from the black wall behind the mountain of corpses, he was shocked. Every monster in the cave bowed their heads in worship to it. Though this body finally discovered the 'wall' and froze in instinctive fear, he was stunned seeing the Dium's 'third eye'.

Unable to think anything more, he blankly watched what unfolded. Though it was a small two-horned one, the eye on its forehead revealed what currently dwelled in its body.

The Dedium.

Their conversation poured out afterward. The Dedium had slept long after being caught by the previous Holy Knight Commander's sealing technique and had only recently barely awakened. But because the physical body was still bound by the seal, it seemed only the soul moved elsewhere temporarily.

But even that wasn't complete. Since lower beings couldn't handle a god's class and quickly died, the seal binding the body had to be broken to act fully. The four-horned Dium knelt while reporting the situation of the resurrection ritual proceeding in the western Encroachment Zone.

He thought while blankly watching it kiss the Dedium's instep.

'This is the chance.'

Though 'he' was clearly observing, somehow he had synchronized with the body, or perhaps even from a third person perspective judged this moment couldn't be missed. He clearly felt strength entering the hand pressed against the wall now.

From then on, scenes flashed by tumultuously.

This body hadn't brought proper weapons since planning only to examine the Encroachment Zone interior. Nevertheless, thinking he had to strike now, he called forth all summonable undead and charged. Though they were weak undead, they moved desperately carrying out his will. What he wanted was just a momentary gap.

In the chaotic space, this body rushed mindlessly at the Dedium and.

"Get away."

Tore away its soul.

But the god from another dimension, though vulnerable with only its soul barely moved while sealed, didn't fall easily to him. All he could tear away with all his energy poured out was only half.

And he stole that half and ran away.

He moved far from the cave mindlessly with his battered body. Thinking the Diums wouldn't rashly come out if he got as far as possible from the Encroachment Zone, he crawled desperately while bleeding. Though the undead bought time desperately, the fear of not knowing when Diums would find him existed like a knife at his throat.

So he had to think. What way there was to not lose the Dedium's soul. Though the intuitive solution was very dangerous, since it was revenge worth sacrificing his life for, the decision wasn't difficult.

He put the Dedium's soul inside his body.

Since it was a soul of class he couldn't subjugate anyway, he had no choice but to swallow it. But this alone wasn't enough. Quick judgment was needed as his body tried to become contaminated from the aftermath of taking in a soul from another dimension.

"Must hide it."

He had to hide their god from the monsters that crossed over from another dimension. And the moment he recalled the Diums' source, his action too was as good as decided.

"In a dimension far away where Diums can't find it."

Thanks to swallowing the Dedium's soul into his body, its 'memories' could be read. Though he only glimpsed a few things sparsely, among them was the identity of the black wall in the snowy mountain, and the method to use it. That dimensional boundary was a passage connected to other worlds.

So he entered the snowy mountain cave watching for a moment when no Diums were there. He used the gap when the Diums who had lost their god's soul returned to their original dimension in panic to find ways to recover him.

*-Meow, meoooow...*

The black cat cried as if sensing his plan before the dimensional boundary.

"...It'll be fine."

He looked down at the cat with a faint smile before cutting his own soul. He tore away almost all of it and wrapped it tightly around the Dedium in case it might rampage.

The monsters had crossed to this world coveting land overflowing with holiness. So to a very far dimension where none of that existed at all, he sent that bundle of souls.

That moment entered 'his' eyes clearly.

What this situation, exactly like what he had seen in a dream one day, meant, 'he' now realized certainly. Though he had thought he was just watching the view from behind the eyeballs, somehow he clearly felt all sensations now.

He came to fully share even the thoughts of the body that had become ragged from tearing away about 99% of its soul. This body was analyzing that since it had sent that much soul, it should be able to wake and live as a human in the new dimension.

*-Meow.*

Just then, the cat leaped following the soul. The cat conveyed its intention with a final turn of its head to meet eyes. A gaze wanting to look after the soul that would wander in the new dimension.

This body chuckled around then. "Still acting like a brother." The muttering like talking to himself echoed in the cave, and rang in his ears.

The moments afterward appeared unstably, cut off *ttuk, ttuk.* The body gripping only soul fragments had become too weak to even breathe. Scenes of various villages flashed by.

Then somehow this body reached the village closest to the northern Encroachment Zone. He hadn't come to the north much since there were many people, but perhaps the undead had led him here. As if to tell him terrible things were happening here.

It was a very small village.

A tiny neighborhood where just a few households lived together. And there he encountered the sight of all residents becoming zombies.

"Ah..."

A faint sigh fell. Just how did they manage the north? He had heard humans had blocked the entrance to this area's Encroachment Zone, had those angered by that rampaged? He blankly considered how much energy remained that could be used with this body, and though judging he might really die... thinking of the various villages and cities in this area.

Finally at the moment purple energy spread, his vision gradually grew hazily blurred. All the memories being shown to 'him' darkened gradually as if ending.

Both consciousness and sensation grew distantly far.

As everything became distant, finally he heard a small mutter to himself. That murmur containing a wry laugh despite the tired voice:

"I wonder if 'he' can find me now..."

Rang in his mind like a faint echo.

### Chapter 167

*Ttuk*-

His vision that had seemed covered by a black curtain cleared as his eyelids lifted. And the moment the familiar research lab scene entered his eyes, the cat collapsed.

He instinctively caught the cat in his arms. As if having used its last strength, the purple in its eyes slowly dulled and darkened before finally closing. The body that no longer even felt warm seemed like an empty shell.

"..."

*Pulseok*, his legs lost strength and he collapsed sitting down. He blankly looked up at the ceiling while kneeling. Though his mind was complicated from memories shared in an instant, information was still flowing in one by one now. It seeped in as if synchronization was occurring.

The black cat that had been with him on Earth was indeed this cat in his arms now. A being that had stayed by his side like family whenever he struggled. No, a bundle of souls that were truly 'his' family. They had tried to look after the child who would newly awaken in that far dimension, even if only like that.

And the cat that had been with him after returning to this world was Isaph's 'consciousness'. His family's souls were already crumbling and had been greatly burdened just moving to Earth, and having no strength to return from there, they had disappeared. Only their shell remained like a trace because they had been bundled in one form for so long.

So when letting him into the body, Isaph had moved all of his consciousness to the cat. Since the soul needed to be completely reunited again, he had only moved his mind - *should it be expressed as controlling the cat like VR?* He had handed over complete control of the body to him and moved himself as the cat.

Isaph had worried while calling him back here again. The 24 years spent on Earth were vivid in his soul, and confusion would come if memories were returned immediately. Especially since they were memories from another dimension. He had to devise a way to let him adapt to this dimension slowly.

So Isaph had read his memories from Earth. He had tried to understand how beings from this world were perceived there. A way to calmly accept sudden changes.

'Status window...?'

Isaph had referenced and imitated the media he had encountered. He had observed and mimicked how protagonists who crossed to other worlds adapted to new dimensions in novels, comics, games and so on. Though it was clumsy imitation, the effect was certain.

On the day he first opened his eyes here, hadn't he only been confused until meeting the cat, that is, until seeing the hallucination-like status window that Isaph had displayed for him, before becoming stable?

'Ah, so this is a game...'

A wry laugh escaped as he recalled his relief that day. Though the status window no longer appeared, information seeped into his mind now.

Though only a few months had passed since separating his soul in this dimension, 'he' had lived 24 years on Earth. That was because that dimension had no holiness.

'Time flows differently in places with lots of holiness.'

When they had visited the sky island before, though not even a day had passed there, ten days had passed when they came down. Noi had explained the time difference according to holiness then...

"I see, so I was Isaph from the start..."

The truth revealed as various clues combined was too shocking. The feeling like some other being was moving his body every time he used abilities following the status window was all because he had temporarily handed over control to Isaph.

So that's why he had occasionally felt déjà vu, and felt his soul stabilizing as he grew accustomed to necromancy. Though he understood everything, he was still confused.

Perhaps because his memories from Earth were too vivid, it was still difficult to accept Isaph and himself as the same person. Like feeling a vague distance before shocking information, it just felt unreal.

His situation seemed like some experiment. If all of a person's memories were erased and they lived a new life in a completely different environment, could they truly be called the same person as before? *Was this like the Ship of Theseus discussion, no, was this somewhat different...*

*Pisik*, laughter leaked out. Right, it wasn't completely different living conditions since he had lived alone seeing ghosts on Earth too. That bastard, if he was going to send him anyway he should have given him abilities too. Though he knew they were left to call souls later, he felt annoyed for no reason. Whether the 24 years overlapped by coincidence, or whether even this was deliberately planned by Isaph finding such a dimension, he didn't know.

He blankly repeated clenching and unclenching his hand. Among the truths he was realizing one by one, the most surprising was definitely 'that'.

"To think that other soul in my body was the Dedium's soul..."

He didn't know how shocked he had been from the moment he discovered the Dedium in past memories. Everything Isaph had done afterward was also astounding and reckless.

Was that why shamans on Earth had thrown salt at him and driven him away, and why animals had avoided him as if seeing an evil spirit?

'Your soul is strange. It feels like... something very strange is inside that body.'

'Whether feeling the soul is broken into several pieces, or something else is mixed in. At least it's certain the state isn't normal...'

Now he understood all of Haren's words too. He had amazingly accurate intuition. His soul was broken, and contained the Dedium's soul too - a perfect analysis. His perception of three souls wasn't wrong in some context either.

Thinking about containing the Dedium's soul, past events fell into place one by one.

'You know your curse from the priest was getting worse. That's a curse engraved on your soul that your ability can't heal. So I connected our souls to restore your soul...!'

Haren had been cursed by the priest in the western Encroachment Zone. The curse confused his mind and couldn't be removed even by the hero's self-healing power. Then pushed by the status window's compulsion, he had connected souls with him and declared he would resolve the curse.

Haren had doubted whether necromancy could do such things, and he had vaguely explained that anything related to souls was possible and moved on. Though he had answered as the status window guided while wondering just how Isaph was going to handle it...

Because the Dedium's soul was in this body, that was used to erase Haren's curse. After all, a mere priest's curse couldn't dare harm a god. Perhaps that was why the priest had been surprised seeing him then - because he had read the Dedium's soul in him.

Also the reaction of the Dium encountered in the snowy mountain...

[So you've come back!]

*That Dium knew I had stolen the Dedium's soul, so couldn't rashly kill me for fear of harming the god's soul. So it tried persuasion but peeked at my memories at my bewildered reaction, and guessed what Isaph had done. So it tried to trick me who hadn't yet grasped the truth to obtain the body.*

But the cat blocked it then, and afterward... *my reason snapped at seeing the collapsed cat. Because the memories remaining in this body, the affection for family, were too intense.*

[You, how, why, how could you use that power...!]

*The ability I used, that power that subjugated the Dium, was the Dedium's authority.*

*At first the Dium had been angry thinking I had accidentally used the god's authority. It had raged that a mere human dared steal the god's soul and now coveted his power, but its attitude changed after I completely brought it to its knees. It kept shouting while chasing me:*

[You must be with me...!]

A dry laugh came out recalling the Dium's desperate gestures. It wasn't just because it felt like simply trying to recover the other half of the soul for the Dedium. The reason it had reached out its hands so desperately while even saying I was destined to return was.

"My soul and the Dedium's soul are completely entwined..."

Only now could 'he' feel the state of his soul. Until now he had strangely found it difficult to properly perceive his own condition and had to ask Haren to analyze it instead... but now he understood.

His soul and the Dedium's soul were tightly entangled.

This was similar to when the status window had guided that "time was needed to reduce binding force" when breaking the soul connection with Haren. Then the status window had explained that because the souls had been connected longer than planned, they needed to stay attached for days even after erasing the curse. That forcing them apart would cause damage.

*So I, the state of 'me' who had been with the Dedium for 24 years on Earth... could be considered completely attached to its soul. Though it was just a few months in this dimension, hadn't I lived a long time bound with the Dedium in another dimension? Souls are affected by perception.*

*Now I cannot separate the Dedium's soul.*

*Since I could use the Dedium's authority, it was no different from being tangled almost as one. Perhaps that was why my heart had pounded so much seeing the Dedium's shell in the northern Encroachment Zone.*

[Don't you want to keep living here?]

[There is one way. That is... receiving our 'horn'.]

The Dium's words from that encounter rang in his mind. Having grasped that his memories were unstable, it had tried to trick him with clever lies. It must have analyzed that the reason their kindred's offer to send him back to his original world didn't work at all was because he wanted to stay here.

Or perhaps it had deliberately induced him to use the Dedium's authority to have his soul completely contaminated. At least the analysis that his soul was unstable was quite accurate. How could a human soul entangled with a god from another dimension be normal? Even the physical body containing it must be reaching its limit soon.

So perhaps even saying he needed to receive a 'horn' to live...

He blankly looked down at his two hands. His bloodless white hands seemed even more faded to colorless in the darkness. His heart grew coldly chilled.

*Had Isaph not known this would happen?*

He had stolen the Dedium's soul, bound it with himself and even sent it to another dimension. Could such a genius at soul magic truly not have known what outcome this would bring?

### Chapter 168

*Swaaah*

At some point, rain had started falling. A damp and chilly cold wrapped around his whole body.

Though everything was unreal and far beyond his understanding, somehow organization was gradually taking place in his mind. Whether it was the original body's cool-headed mentality, or his instinct.

That day, while being captured in Klam Village, Isaph had expected to meet 'him'. That he would surely notice his ability and come looking. So perhaps when he heard news of the hero's death while imprisoned, when he heard news of his coffin entering the holy city... he had made 'preparations'.

He felt like he had been played by the scenario Isaph had designed.

Opening the memories one by one, he learned that Isaph had realized earlier that the Dedium's soul was moving around. He had deduced it through analyzing zombies' memories for years, through the scenes of Encroachment Zones they had been dragged into.

Perhaps he had decided to infiltrate the Encroachment Zone himself to find the Dedium's soul. That's why he had rushed in without hesitation the moment he saw the Dedium in the snowy mountain cave.

Then why had Isaph been searching for the Dedium's soul in the first place? What was his final plan after discovering so much?

"..."

He blankly looked up at the ceiling. Sitting alone in the dark research lab where not a point of light entered, he thought quietly. In the past memories gradually flowing into his mind, he recalled Isaph who had spent hundreds of similar times here.

*Buried in information and materials gathered through souls across the continent, and finally finding some legend... no, while recalling myself.*

"Haha, I think I understand..."

He ended up laughing self-mockingly at the realization that finally came. His shoulders shaking, covering his eyes fumblingly with both hands, his body trembled for a long while.

Rain poured like that night.

#Downpour, and Night

*Ttuk, ttuk, ttuk...*

The sound of raindrops hitting the window continued endlessly. Laria sat on the sofa quietly looking outside. Her hands wrapped around a white mug moved repeatedly as if playing piano keys impatiently. It was a gesture full of anxiety.

The darkness of the rainy night completely covered the forest so that even the research lab in the backyard couldn't be seen properly. Though Laria desperately wanted to go there, 'he' really hated others entering his space. Having already made a big mistake, she had to be careful.

The day she first met him had been just like today.

It was a night of pouring rain. Laria had come out unable to bear the cat's crying sound that kept coming from outside, thinking to let the cat into the workshop briefly if it was shivering from cold. But she discovered someone in black robes collapsed beside it.

'...A corpse?'

At the time, Laria had truly thought he was dead. Though she didn't want to get involved in troublesome matters, the cat cried so sadly that she reluctantly dragged him in. Only belatedly did she recall the criminal stirring up the empire recently.

A necromancer in black robes, accompanied by a black cat.

Just then, the cat didn't look ordinary either. As that necromancer's infamy was terrifying, Laria was about to report him immediately. But just a little, a very little curiosity welled up. Wondering what kind of human who boldly used necromancy in the Holy Empire looked like, she removed the robe's hood and.

'...He's just a child.'

She was shocked by the youthful face revealed beneath. Moreover, his complexion was so pale it wouldn't be strange if he died right away, so Laria decided to try saving him first. The curiosity that had made her workshop successful encouraged the desire to talk with this young boy.

So Laria sat Isaph in a chair, tied him tightly with rope, and poured a potion in his mouth. After several minutes passed, Isaph woke looking very tired, and consistently ignored Laria's repeated interrogation. *Ah, he had denied just one thing.*

'Why is a child using such power?'

'Not a child. I'm twenty.'

It was a reaction as if somehow displeased with that word. Since the Holy Empire held coming-of-age ceremonies at 18, Laria was very surprised to hear he was already 2 years past becoming an adult. Of course, he was still young for a villain making the empire stir.

But besides that, he didn't respond to any conversation. Laria grew frustrated and tried threatening to report him if he didn't answer, saying to think about his situation... Just then Isaph stood from his seat. An undead secretly summoned behind had untied the ropes.

It seemed Isaph had just wanted to warm his body in a warm space briefly. Before the dumbfounded Laria, he threw one line as if in place of the potion's cost:

'Don't try to act tough. With your siblings dangling at your waist, threats aren't scary at all.'

That one line was the start of their relationship.

Laria had lost her family to the Great Catastrophe. Her young two sisters and parents had all died pierced by Diums. When that massive monster lifted her family's corpses and opened its mouth as if to eat them, she had thrown potions randomly to drive it away. Then she had lived blaming herself for not acting sooner...

Thanks to Isaph, Laria saw 'them' and even conversed. She ended up crying for a long while after receiving her young sister's comforting pat telling her not to cry every night anymore. They said the reason they lingered around Laria was all because of her insomnia.

After helping free them with Isaph's help, Laria 'swore' to cooperate with him unconditionally. With a magical oath that would inflict fatal wounds if broken. Though not knowing the identity of the undead with him then, she had pledged to help no matter what even if he was truly an evil necromancer.

However, even after receiving that oath, Isaph didn't reveal anything. He would just occasionally visit covered in wounds to receive potions, so wondering what dangerous places he was going around, she followed him and finally learned. Both the identity of the undead, and the cause of the wounds.

Those injuries all came from physical fights when he couldn't quickly drop zombie souls. Laria was horrified and begged him not to fight with such a weak body, and he gave the strange answer that he wasn't weak anymore.

Learning the truth about the Encroachment Zones, Laria grew serious.

She seriously suggested spreading rumors through the workshop owner's connections but Isaph cut her off flatly. He warned her not to complicate things and make trouble since he would investigate directly, and though his tone was very cold, Laria wasn't hurt. Because she felt who his quietly muttered words were for - asking why she wanted to bring trouble upon herself when she was already out of favor with the Order.

*Isaph was always like that.*

He rarely spoke of himself first and disliked others approaching. Whether because of some wound from the past that made him keep distance from everyone, or to avoid diluting some resolution. Even after making a space for him to hide in the corner of the holy city, getting close to him was difficult.

Laria was so curious about Isaph that one day she secretly entered his research lab and 'analyzed' his belongings. She could read the time imbued in objects. So...

'Your real name is "Evan"? That name is pretty too, so why...'

The moment she spoke that name, Laria almost became undead. She rolled on the ground caught in purple energy that burst explosively from Isaph.

She learned later that Isaph used an alias deliberately because he didn't want to forget the voices of those who had called that name, because he disliked that calling mixing with other people's voices.

The cold atmosphere that continued for a while was resolved quite by chance. Because Laria wanted to apologize to Isaph, while hovering around looking for a chance to talk with him who consistently ignored her, she discovered a book discarded outside the research lab.

It was a very worn book, but as she fiddled with it here and there, the thick cover's back tore and yellowed paper fell from inside. On it were crudely drawn four people - two adults and two children, probably estimated to be family.

One child was big and one was small like a cat. Was the younger sibling a baby?

'En?'

Isaph immediately burst out when she recited the letters found under the drawing. Laria reflexively cried that she hadn't analyzed anything, and Isaph just took the drawing with a shocked face looking at her. He seemed to have thrown away the book not knowing there was a hidden page.

After blankly staring at the old paper for a long while, he carefully moved his hand along the drawing as if worried the paper might tear, and muttered:

'My brother must have drawn this.'

That was the first time Laria saw Isaph's smile.

It was a smile that quietly spread across his face that was always expressionless, no, rather full of only tiredness as if exhausted by so many things. She stared for a long while, unfamiliar with his lips drawn in a faint gentle curve, slightly upturned corners, and eyes sparkling with gentle energy.

### Chapter 169

Laria sensed it was an opportunity. She restored that paper as perfectly as possible, and quickly made and offered a frame to preserve it in the best condition. From that point on, Laria began to hear bits of Isaph's story.

Though even after years together it still remained at bits, Laria was satisfied with that much. He was too careful a person to try finding out forcefully. Though it was partly because his ability was frightening, more precisely it was because of the atmosphere he gave off.

Isaph seemed like a being standing on broken glass shards. A feeling that probing would hurt not just her hands but him too. That precarious and delicate atmosphere made her hesitate to rashly question, to induce him to recall the past in detail.

Whether it should be called worry, or if anxiety was a more appropriate expression. Even the cat that Isaph uniquely kept close felt increasingly unsettling to look at. Though in cat form, it didn't feel like an animal at all and was even eerie. An instinctive distance like when the living see the dead.

Isaph always seemed to be surrounded only by dead beings.

So one day she suggested to him that it must be lonely going around alone and that he should make friends or companions, but was completely ignored. So she playfully put her arms on his desk and subtly said:

'Could it be, I'm already your friend?'

'Not a friend.'

It was a knife-like answer. Though she had whined about being hurt then, when he didn't visit for months afterward, Laria fell into deep thought. Had her words been that burdensome? No, rather... it felt like he was drawing a line with her.

Isaph avoided getting close to the living and rejected deep connections. Moreover, she realized then that he left no traces anywhere, as if it wouldn't be strange for him to leave at any time. Even the research lab glimpsed through the window was just desolate.

She didn't want to grasp what that meant. No, actually there wasn't even time. Because around then he suddenly appeared and left saying he would enter an Encroachment Zone.

Isaph was always difficult to understand, but recently she couldn't guess his thoughts at all. Why he had made her swear "not to interfere no matter what happens" when he left after receiving the ring, and just what connection that had with being imprisoned and receiving a death sentence days later.

Though she had been prepared for various dangers from the moment she swore to cooperate with Isaph unconditionally in the past, this kind of nerve-wracking situation was unexpected. Because of this she was on the verge of insomnia again.

Moreover, this time he appeared having randomly lost his memories...

"Haaah..."

Laria let out a long sigh. Though Isaph who had lost his memories was new, he was that much more worrying too. She even grew afraid wondering what kind of scheme he was planning again. He had looked very unstable just before.

As she endlessly tapped the mug held in both hands, *kiik*- the sound of the villa's back door opening was heard. The only passage connected to the backyard opening meant he had returned. Laria immediately stood from her seat.

*Ttuk, ttuk, ttuk...*

Rainwater fell heavily beneath the black robes full of cold air. Laria hurriedly tried to get a towel but met his eyes directly. Purple eyes that made her chest grow chilly.

"Hello, Laria."

The infinitely calm greeting was enough to give her some intuition.

"I came to get what I left."

There was only one thing he, Isaph, would call that.

Until now, Laria had never had any of Isaph's belongings. Whether because he was wary of letting others inside his line, or intended to leave no traces anywhere. But now Laria had exactly one thing of his.

Laria answered with difficulty:

"Ah, I haven't finished analyzing how to use it..."

Though she wanted to speak calmly, her voice trembled strangely. *Just why?* Was it because of the cold air he brought from outside, or because his atmosphere had changed so much in just hours? Though this was more familiar, it felt somehow ominous.

Laria's eyes wandered here and there.

"I just feel that 'we' can't use that item properly. Moreover, analysis keeps showing it can't be used in this land, so I need to spend a bit more time investigating..."

"It's fine. I know."

Isaph calmly cut off her rambling words. The dry, calm tone was clearly 'his'. As was the gaze staring at her plainly saying not to waste time unnecessarily.

Laria moved her feet hesitantly. The item that had been kept near her always since the day she had almost snatched it from him months ago. That white rod returned to Isaph's hands.

Isaph quietly looked down at the rod before soon turning around. At his back trying to leave the villa as if his business was finished, Laria grew suddenly anxious. Though not knowing the cause, she was just caught in the same anxiety as always.

This was an emotion that had existed since the moment she had quietly examined Isaph's cat in the past. Though she hadn't dared try analyzing it, the more she met those purple eyes, her chest strangely ached. Because it seemed just like a mass of very miserable wishes bundled together.

So though she should have felt relieved that Isaph didn't have the cat now, instead her heart grew cold. Laria hurriedly called out:

"Wh-where are you going? Are you going to the hero?"

Isaph didn't answer.

But just before opening the villa's door, he quietly muttered. Without even turning to look at Laria, he spoke to himself while just quietly looking down at the handle.

"...Perhaps, meeting you then and leaving this item too were all part of the designed scenario."

His murmur that it might have been taken if he had gone to the eastern Encroachment Zone with it had a faint trace of laughter mixed in. He shrugged saying it was just a light speculation, and wouldn't make sense if examined deeply but was quite scary.

Whether because Isaph's laughter was unexpected, or because that sound rather made him seem more distant, Laria couldn't open her mouth anymore. Perhaps she sensed instinctively that no words could hold him back.

Laria just blankly watched his back disappearing into the rain.

The midnight downpour poured like darkness.

#Part 14. 99%

Three days passed.

During the three days the Dedium had given, the Holy Empire of Solares faced upheaval day by day.

On the first day when the Dedium's egg appeared in the holy city, under the hero's command, holy knights busily went around the city trying to calm residents. They cried out loudly that we are with the hero, not to be swept up in catastrophe.

Those efforts seemed to work, but the day after the downpour, the number of black cracks formed in the sky gradually increased until finally Diums fell across the entire empire. It happened simultaneously with contamination occurring in the plazas of various great cities.

Though the Diums just stood still like statues, that alone was enough to plunge the imperial citizens into terror. The hero deployed not just holy knights but all available forces nationwide.

However, the next day, perhaps an even bigger problem than nationwide contamination occurred.

Word spread that the Holy Empire's power holders including the Pope and Emperor had traded with Diums. Though information that Diums were beings from another dimension wasn't circulated, the whole country stirred at the fact that the empire's leaders had received youth from Diums in exchange for offering imperial citizens.

Whether conversations from the office had leaked, or spread through prison guards' mouths, the exact source was unknown, but in fact it was a truth difficult to hide since the commanders wearing 'necklaces' had lost their heads in the northern Encroachment Zone. Moreover, since most of the leadership that should lead the empire in this immediate crisis was imprisoned, rumors due to that vacuum were also rampant.

The imperial citizens trembled with betrayal and condemned that hidden traitors had ruined the empire. Since they had even silenced imprisoned traitors by killing them before, the reaction could only be intense.

In the chaotic empire, people looked only to the hero.

They clung to him as if he was their only hope and begged for salvation. The reason people didn't throw stones at temples yet despite cursing the Order was all because of the hero.

This was not simple trust but...

"If the hero seals the Dedium, things might be different! He's the son loved by God!"

It was close to a hero sacrifice theory.

Voices emerged one by one saying everything would be resolved if he sealed the Dedium like the previous Holy Knight Commander, like his mother had done. Even expectant analysis came out that only if he stepped forward would everyone truly receive salvation and peace come to the empire.

The story that had spread subtly from the first day the Dedium's egg was planted in the holy city gained more strength in the empire rushing toward catastrophe day by day.

### Chapter 170

This morning after three days, that public opinion had taken on a fervor close to madness. It had become so overheated that even in the Holy Knight Order building, people were talking about whether others had heard those rumors.

At this, Beatrice was greatly enraged.

"They must have all lost their minds! Even holy knights speaking marketplace gossip!"

Having returned from the imperial palace, she burst in roughly opening the door and fumed. Currently most of the royal family's leadership was imprisoned and the only remaining family members were fools. Though praiseworthy for not participating in the 'necklace' trade, in other words this meant they were those who either lacked power to be included in such gatherings, or didn't know how to use what power they had.

So currently Beatrice was personally checking all major matters that needed handling in the imperial palace. Even when delegating to others, she ended up checking herself out of frustration. The chaos created by the leadership vacuum was regrettably large enough to understand why the Diums had offered such necklaces. They had paralyzed the empire like this.

Thanks to this, though Beatrice had barely slept these past three days, her face now rippled with anger more intense than fatigue. She had just finished shouting at the absurd sight she encountered immediately upon entering the Holy Knight Order building.

Unable to help being more greatly excited due to nerves frayed from insomnia. And for the same reason, Beatrice belatedly realized she had entered the strategy meeting room, that is, the space containing the protagonist of the sacrifice theory.

Harenir was in the middle of conferring with the vice commanders before the central table. Meeting his eyes, Beatrice flinched before slowly saying:

"Ignore the talk going around the streets. Everyone's reason is clouded by fear, and they truly believe the hero will fight and defeat the Dedium. ...As do I."

The last words were added very quietly. Though her tone was extremely embarrassed, it contained clear sincerity. At this, the two vice commanders who had been frozen also quickly nodded.

Kalterik and Mela too had encountered the hero sacrifice theory pouring out in the empire recently. But having held back worried about bringing up the topic first before their superior, they were grateful for the imperial princess's words. Kalterik quickly cried out loudly:

"That's right! How could the son of God possibly fall to the Dedium!"

"I agree as well."

Though Mela also seriously added her opinion, Harenir showed no particular change in expression. He just calmly spoke while scanning the empire's map he had been examining until just before:

"Well, no need to worry about it."

Though he nodded his head slightly saying thank you to everyone first, rather his clean response bewildered the three. Though they hadn't wanted Harenir to take the sacrifice theory seriously, his peaceful attitude seemed just like he had expected this atmosphere all along.

Beatrice moved her lips a couple times. Though she felt something was strange, while wondering what to point out, Harenir turned his head.

"How is the holy city's troop situation?"

His attitude returning to the previous topic was supremely smooth. Not just Kalterik but even Mela only moved their lips before straightening their posture and reporting upon receiving the commander's gaze. Now was a situation where not even a second could be wasted.

Today, the fierce battle with the Dedium would be fought.

Everyone sensed it. It was the final day of the period the Dedium had given, and since this morning, the egg planted in the plaza's center had been gradually becoming transparent.

The Dedium's horns inside the egg had gradually grown larger, and now even from far away one could clearly see there were five. Though its body was still small, before the clear fact that it was the Dedium, imperial citizens trembled in fear. It was terror engraved by the Great Catastrophe 20 years ago.

Though opinions emerged that they should attack that egg first, they needed to be careful since contamination had occurred in several great cities immediately. They needed to evacuate residents, and Diums might fall from the sky again, and the empire's main forces needed time to regroup after fighting the fierce battle in the northern Encroachment Zone.

Everyone sensed a completely different battle from until now would unfold. They would clash in all-out war. At this, not just soldiers but knights too were tense, and not a few deserters emerged. End-times theories also emerged saying there was no hope in a land where even the Holy Empire's leadership had become traitors.

Still, most held on believing in the hero.

Even at the moment the Pope's betrayal was first revealed, the hero had remained calm. When not just imperial citizens but even holy knights had sent gazes hoping for explanation from him, Harenir who had gone up to the training ground's platform then had only recited the holy knights' first oath.

'I shall protect the continent carrying on Solnium's will. Following God's will who created the land of life by finally driving light into dangerous ground dyed in darkness, I shall wield my sword until life's end.'

His voice declaring the oath spoken when appointed as holy knights was enough to inspire the holy knights. They cried out with tears that they would wield their swords together with the hero. A pledge was also added that if they could only be with the hero until life's end, that itself would be glory.

This story spread across the empire immediately. Countless people relied on the hero's unchanging attitude and suppressed chaos while offering prayers to Solnium. Though the sacrifice theory emerged in some quarters, there were more who expected the son of God would defeat the monster.

In whatever form, everyone looked only to the hero.

"Now we should head to the plaza."

Among this, Harenir was supremely calm. His appearance showing no emotional turbulence these past three days gave everyone reliable trust, and this was the same for the two vice commanders Kalterik and Mela. They thought the hero never wavered, that they just needed to believe in and follow him.

But just before, his composed reaction even to the sacrifice theory caught their attention. A feeling of discord from being too calm. The two hesitated, and Beatrice too opened her mouth with a sigh.

"You..."

But even after calling out to him, she still couldn't find words to say.

As First Imperial Princess, Beatrice had seen Harenir quite early. From the moment they first met at the banquet the imperial family prepared for him becoming the youngest holy knight in history, she had thought he wasn't ordinary. It wasn't about his extraordinary holy power or swordsmanship, or expectations he might become a hero.

It was just a first impression based on feeling that Harenir's azure eyes that everyone praised looked empty as if faded. So she had sometimes teasingly said there was something strange about him. She had guessed it was probably due to the influence of his father being a traitor.

But today... his quiet eyes gave a chilling feeling like facing an abyss. A dark pit whose inside could never be looked into.

"If you have nothing to say, don't waste time."

Before the hesitating Beatrice, Harenir turned his head dryly. As he seemed about to order the two vice commanders to prepare for departure, she hurriedly called out:

"I-Isaph. Right, you were there. Are you joining this expedition too?"

She finally noticed Isaph sitting in the corner of the meeting room. When that guy killed his presence, he went startlingly unnoticed. He was a gloomy, no, quiet fellow to the point it was understandable why Kalterik sometimes called him an evil spirit.

Isaph was quietly looking outside the window wearing his usual black robes. Though the black cat that always accompanied him wasn't there, since it seemed she hadn't seen it since coming to the holy city, she dropped her interest. Beatrice quickly spoke to him, and by the time Isaph turned his head, Harenir too had stopped moving.

"Yeah. They say they gathered necromancers in case zombies appear. So I have to go too."

Everyone had witnessed how necromancy could stop zombies in the northern Encroachment Zone last time. It had been a truly shocking scene. Since knights had struggled with zombies in the past, if zombies appeared in this battle too, necromancers would step forward to help.

Just then, since the prison in the holy city was full of necromancers falsely reported when there was a bounty on Isaph, they could quickly deploy them as forces. Even if they couldn't force out-of-body experiences on a large scale like Isaph, it would be good enough if they could just hold souls briefly.

Kalterik muttered in surprise "I hadn't heard news of you joining..." Originally since Isaph's role was searching Encroachment Zones, they had vaguely thought he wouldn't be able to join this time. Though it would actually be welcome if he joined since the countermeasure was established after seeing his achievements, seeing the commander tilt his head too, it seemed Isaph's participation hadn't been discussed in advance.

Isaph just shrugged his shoulders nonchalantly.

"I need to work even just to get my sentence reduced when the Encroachment Zones disappear. Haah, I thought it would end with the last expedition but more work came up, and so much appeared too, it's a bit unfair..."

His grumbling tone as if annoyed was the same as usual. Moreover, since it was such an absurd content unsuited to the serious situation, Kalterik burst into a dry laugh, and Mela also shook her head. Beatrice, relieved that the atmosphere had lightened somewhat, spoke again:

"Come to think of it, you seemed to be unseen recently, where were you?"

### Chapter 171

"..."

For an instant, a crack-like fissure spread across Isaph's face. He pressed his lips firmly shut, and around then the two vice commanders also exchanged glances.

They actually had no memory of seeing Isaph these past three days. Though they had noticed his absence, they had been too busy to find time to look for him. They had also come to believe he wouldn't cause problems now.

After staying silent for a while, Isaph slowly turned his head and answered:

"Just, had some things to do."

At his somewhat dry tone, Beatrice tilted her head.

"Things? What things?"

"...I saw Noi. Wondering if his condition was alright."

Since he wouldn't be planning strategy together here anyway, he said he had been by Noi's side. He said he had examined his soul and there was no particular damage, that if he rested well like this he would eventually open his eyes. Though it seemed it would take quite a long time.

At this, Mela nodded with a small sigh. The three knights had been checking the infirmary's reports here from time to time, and they remembered receiving news that Isaph had visited this morning. Though they were only hearing about it for the first time today...

Beatrice chewed her lower lip. Since the topic of Noi rather made the atmosphere solemn, she needed to quickly find a new subject.

But just then the sky rumbled kurururung-. Recently such vibrations in the continent were as good as ominous omens. Since it was the sound that came when Diums fell from the sky or when the Dedium in the holy city writhed greatly.

There was no more time to delay. Harenir ordered:

"Prepare for departure."

Kalterik and Mela moved their lips. Though they too knew the imperial princess's intention in starting the conversation and hesitantly exchanged glances, they finally bowed their heads.

"I will have everyone standing by."

"I will conduct final checks so we can depart immediately."

Following the commander's orders first was their duty above all. Afterward the two left quickly, and Beatrice too reluctantly left the space. She too was a commander who needed to check the imperial palace's forces finally.

The ashen sky was gloomy.

Since the day of the downpour, the blue sky could never be seen in the holy city. The dark appearance with thick dark clouds gave a feeling just like an Encroachment Zone faded to colorless. The cracks spread all over as if breaking the sky added to the ominous atmosphere.

Beyond the cracks was black like an abyss, and that would be evidence that it was connecting to another dimension. Though few people knew this truth, even the current appearance alone was enough to give fear. People were reluctant to look up at the sky.

They just wished the hero would quickly defeat all the monsters, and finally restore the holy city's beautiful sky.

"..."

In the corridor before the office, Harenir quietly looked up at the sky. His blue eyes taking in the ashen sky were infinitely quiet. Even in the moment alone after sending his subordinates away, no turbulence existed on his face.

Isaph approached such a Harenir. Though his footsteps were very faint, Harenir opened his mouth first as if he had something he wanted to talk about.

"This time stay in the rear no matter what. Necromancers are only accompanying to prepare for unexpected situations, so absolutely do not step forward."

It was a firm instruction. Since Isaph had been caught by Diums several times in the previous Encroachment Zone, he cautioned him not to catch the monsters' eyes so such things wouldn't happen this time. Though he had seen Isaph talking alone with the Dium then, rather than harboring doubts and pressing him, he emphasized his safety.

Harenir too wasn't completely unperplexed by those incidents. But each time, Isaph's state had been so unstable he couldn't ask anything. He couldn't bring himself to press someone who was either streaming tears or trembling all over with a pale face. Whether it was the hero's mercy, or because the other party was 'him'.

However, today those doubts were no longer important. Harenir just repeatedly instructed Isaph not to step forward.

Isaph blinked his eyes. Though confusion briefly crossed his face as if he hadn't expected to hear such words now, he soon shook his head slightly and asked:

"Don't you want to run away?"

Though some hesitation was buried in the question that came from lips moved a couple times, on the other hand it also carried an air of being pondered for a very long time. When Harenir paused, Isaph added as if pressing for an answer:

"If it were me, I think I'd want to run away..."

However, Harenir still kept his mouth shut. Though it was quite a sudden question, it wasn't difficult to grasp its intended meaning.

Isaph asked if he didn't want to run away from this harsh situation of having to fight another great battle just days after returning from the northern Encroachment Zone, from the terrible reality of having to face the Dedium finally, and from the expectations pouring on him... from all of that.

His gaze clearly fixed on Harenir wanting an answer.

"..."

But Harenir didn't say anything. He just quietly looked down at Isaph, then soon just loosened his eyes. It was the first smile to appear on his face today, no, perhaps since that day.

"You always say such unpredictable things."

"You know what I'm asking."

"That's why I say unpredictable."

Despite the anxious urging, Harenir just shrugged his shoulders. At the attitude showing he had no intention of answering, Isaph narrowed his eyes and tried to question again. But Harenir brought up something else first.

"Your location couldn't be detected these past few days. Though this morning you seemed to be here..."

"...Must be broken from wearing it too long. I was here the whole time."

A hint of awkwardness was buried in the belated answer. His words saying he had stayed in the corner to avoid disturbing the holy knights as much as possible since the atmosphere had been so serious grew increasingly quiet, then finally Isaph bit his lip hard.

Just then, long fingers approached and pressed down guk- below his lips. As Isaph paused at the gentle restraining gesture as if wanting to stop him from biting, Harenir spoke:

"I've prepared a place for you to stay."

"...What?"

"You can't stay in the break room here forever. Since it seemed you wouldn't have a proper place to stay after getting your sentence reduced, I prepared one. I'd been looking since before going to the northern Encroachment Zone but am only telling you now."

It was a peaceful conversation as if there was no fierce battle ahead. With this battle's end Isaph would be free, and then he wouldn't need to stay in the Holy Knight Order anymore. Until now he had had to stay here quietly on the grounds that the hero needed to watch him.

So Isaph was bewildered at the talk of preparing a future residence. He couldn't even think to express dissatisfaction at the topic changing so far from his first question.

"You were so busy. But you prepared that?"

Not just these recent three days but even during the time preparing for the northern Encroachment Zone subjugation, Harenir had always been busy. He had been swamped from the moment of returning to the holy city and hadn't had a single moment of leisure afterward with the welcome ceremony and punishing traitors and so on.

Yet at the words that he had prepared a future residence for a prisoner in the midst of that, Isaph was truly surprised. He knew he had only stayed in the strategy meeting room recently.

A faint smile hung at Harenir's mouth.

"Indeed. I was really busy, but somehow that was quite fun."

"..."

"Just why was that..."

Harenir had been so busy since returning to the holy city that he hadn't even had time to go to his mansion, and catching brief naps in the Order building was all his rest. Nevertheless, he had gathered and examined various information, saving even that time. He quietly pondered those moments.

What these efforts pointed to, what feeling he had felt even after staying up all night finally...

"Perhaps I..."

Harenir reached out to Isaph. Though he cupped his face quite impulsively, it was just barely brushing with fingertips. Though he hesitated as if wanting to get a bit closer, as if wanting to feel his warmth fully in his hands... soon he withdrew his hand. He tightly clenched his trembling fingertips in the air.

Even if he could guess what emotion had dwelled in those dawns, even if all this inevitably pointed to just one thing, Harenir decided to look away. His firm reason warned that it must not be spoken aloud. For the sake of his path forward, and also... for the other's sake.

Harenir just repeatedly traced Isaph's face with only his gaze, then suppressing his desire to endlessly tangle with his eyes, turned his head. He had to turn his body too to cut off his gaze that didn't want to leave.

"...Thank you for your hard work."

Those words fell like a final farewell.

Afterward Harenir turned his back on Isaph and walked toward where the holy knights had gathered.

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A solemn energy overflowed in the holy city's central plaza.

Exactly three days from the moment the Dedium had proclaimed, as that time approached, the egg's pulsing grew stronger. Though kung kung kung fierce vibrations seemed to shake heaven and earth, the posture of the holy knights surrounding the Encroachment Zone did not waver.

'We are with the hero.'

Taking that as their pride, everyone stood firm.

Finally when the time came, the egg planted in the plaza's center became completely transparent. The Dedium murmured in a tone that was even somewhat melancholy:

[How can the living beings of this land be so foolish...]

### Chapter 172

It lamented how they kicked away the opportunity when it had wanted to grant all the qualification to become subjects of the new world, showing unprecedented mercy.

The words continued in a completely unknown language, not the imperial language that was the continent's common tongue. But as it resonated in their minds they naturally understood its meaning, and that feeling was very eerie. An aversion like their minds were being contaminated crawled over their whole bodies like insects.

Though some holy knights hunched their shoulders, they firmly maintained their formation. They steadied themselves by taking deep breaths and looking only at the hero's back. Because the hero stood calmly without the slightest waver.

He remained quiet even as the Dedium's declaration continued, then finally as if sensing something, drew his sword. The white holy sword shone dazzlingly even under the sky faded to ash color. Simultaneously, all the holy knights also drew their swords.

The Dedium opened its eyes in the center of the Holy Empire.

[Those who do not recognize the new world shall meet their end here.]

From the moment that proclamation fell, the Diums in the Encroachment Zone charged. Those who had been standing still like statues all this time suddenly changed their postures and rushed forward wildly all at once.

Bang, kwaang-!

Ururu...

Thunderous sounds burst out everywhere. The sound of holy knights and Diums clashing, the noise of plaza buildings collapsing, and so on. Though battle being fought in the holy city was unfamiliar to everyone, fortunately there were advantages. Not only could they easily receive support from holy objects and magical tools, but they could utilize the location effectively.

Though the plaza was contaminated, the entire holy city wasn't infected. This meant they could receive support from forces standing by outside as much as needed.

Sswaeeaek-

Archers waiting in the upper floors of nearby buildings shot their bows. Arrows poured like rain and mages also supported by attacking the Diums. Though the number of Diums reached thousands, the tide of battle flowed favorably for the empire.

The Diums that poured from the cracks were all one and two-horned ones. Though one-horned ones were just large monsters and two-horned ones could think, it wasn't easy to face enemies surrounding them on all sides. They drove them back without even giving them time to form strategies among themselves.

Though the Encroachment Zones appearing in great cities' plazas frightened the imperial citizens, the hero approached differently. These monsters were rather like rats in a trap. He judged that as long as they didn't fall into chaos, this side had plenty of advantage. Harenir had shared the characteristics of Diums he had grasped while going around Encroachment Zones with each branch, and the knights prepared with that in mind.

Thus superiority appeared equally not just in the holy city but across the entire empire. While fighting, Kalterik and Mela received reports from each branch through magical tools from time to time and relayed news to Harenir. Especially Kalterik's reports were delivered resoundingly, so they were effective in raising the knights' morale too.

"We're winning...!"

"Waaah!"

The knights were excited. The battle situation of gaining the upper hand against the catastrophe that had thrown the empire into chaos 20 years ago was enough to uplift them. Their sword strikes became even swifter.

Since the battle was being fought in the holy city, they engaged only in the plaza faded to colorless to minimize damage. They surrounded the space to prevent Diums from leaving the Encroachment Zone and entered, and though there was the disadvantage of needing to protect their bodies with holy power because of this, the advantages were far greater.

"No chance for zombies to appear either!"

Though everyone had worried about cases of being caught by zombies, there was no chance for humans to be eaten since they were driving the Diums to one place and dealing with them. The necromancers too quietly sighed in relief from the rear.

Now all they had to be wary of was the Dedium in the egg.

[Hmm, it seems you weren't just lucky in dealing with my children.]

Just then, the Dedium sighed. At the end of those words, sruruk- the egg's shell began to melt. The knights tensed at the sight of the massive transparent egg disappearing. It would be a sign that the Dedium was about to step forward in earnest.

Finally as the egg completely disappeared and the Dedium was about to act.

Sswaeeaeaek-

The sound of fireworks bursting rang out from all directions. As if they had been waiting for the moment the Dedium emerged from the egg, not just holy knights but those waiting in the upper floors of outside buildings too fired attacks. These all bound the Dedium firmly like a snare.

It was a treasure said to have been used by the Holy Empire's second hero. A treasure that bound enemies firmly so they could absolutely not break free. Though it had been one rope in the past, as time passed it had split into a hundred strands, and though each strand's binding effect was lower, if all those strands were used on one enemy, it showed similar effect to the original.

[With mere things like this...!]

"Though you were lucky enough to reach the holy city, this land won't fall so easily."

Just then Beatrice stepped forward and swung a wooden wand. Though it looked like an ordinary wand, it was the third hero's treasure, boasting the ability to double the user's power. The imperial princess's specialty mind magic strongly pressured the Dedium empowered by the wand.

Though the imperial princess had prepared this treasure in the northern Encroachment Zone days ago too, then she had had to step back to let the Crown Prince achieve merit. Though it was an imperial order, Beatrice bit her lip firmly remembering the outcome that compliance had brought about. The sunset light emitted by the wand grew stronger.

"Pre-preparations complete!"

"Everything installed!"

Then five knights shouted from below the Dedium. Kalterik and Mela were there too. As they who had moved busily with the Dedium at the center planted white stones in the ground and infused holy power, light spread from the stones connecting to form a circle.

What rose inside the circle then was Solnium's crest. They created a domain full of God's power using the fourth hero's treasure. Chwaaah golden light rose magnificently and struck the Dedium.

Though it couldn't raise holy power as widely as Arux, the first hero's holy object, within that circle an effect comparable to it activated. It was a kind of sacred realm. The second hero's binding and third hero's magic oppressed the Dedium even more powerfully.

[Ku, aak...!]

The Dedium struggled but couldn't escape the space.

Now they knew the Diums were monsters from another dimension. So instead of weapons used to subdue demon race in the past Human-Demon War, they had prepared with treasures based on holy power. The strongest energy in this land could bring a god from another dimension to its knees.

Kung! Finally the Dedium plunged headfirst to the ground.

"It's working!"

Kalterik shouted with joy, and Beatrice's face brightened too. Though they had faced catastrophe with heroes' treasures in the past too, then they had used them one by one and failed. But now expectation showed on everyone's faces that they might succeed since they had mobilized three treasures at once.

Everyone had aimed for this moment.

It was instinctively felt that no attack would work on the Dedium's 'egg'. After all, if it had been an egg that could be broken so easily by external attacks, it wouldn't have shown itself so boldly in the center of the holy city. So they had decided to attempt an all-out attack the moment the Dedium emerged from the egg.

Moreover, the Dedium had abandoned its original massive body and resurrected in a new body after 20 years. So they expected it would take time to adapt to that body, and analyzed that the moment just after awakening from the egg would be most vulnerable.

Also, no additional Diums had poured from the cracks during the current battle. At this, hope rose that perhaps the subordinates sent down to the empire days ago had been the maximum. Maybe they had deliberately inflated their size intimidatingly to create fear in order to induce humanity to betray each other.

Just then, since the Diums were ones who had made power holders put on their own leashes by offering humans 'youth', showing they had penetrated human society's psychology to that extent, they viewed that this could be such a strategy this time too. So as long as they didn't cower before the Dedium, it could be attacked however much.

All attacks concentrated on the completely bound Dedium. Especially the hero's holy power at the front poured out powerfully as if about to completely cover the monster while swinging his white holy sword.

"The Dedium can't move at all...!"

"Focus! Pour it on stronger!"

Kalterik too swung his greatsword bung bung while drawing the troops' concentration. Though the Dedium had been called catastrophe in the past, that was long ago. Now the situation and response strategy were different, so they could surely defeat it.

Puk!

Finally the hero's holy sword pierced straight through the center of the Dedium's chest. Judging it couldn't resist, Harenir had approached in one breath aiming for its heart.

Chiik- the black blood spilled on the ground disappeared as if burning away on God's crest. Holy power erased everything as if unholy things could not exist in this land.

[Kuhuk...]

"You should have just kept sleeping."

Harenir murmured softly. It was a dry and rough tone like grains of sand. Black blood flowed down over his hand that had stabbed the sword into the Dedium. The Dedium struggled painfully.

However, the Dedium's shoulders suddenly began to shake with its upper body deeply bowed, and this didn't appear like trembling from pain. As if barely holding back laughter about to burst out, the Dedium asked in a whisper while choking:

[Kuhut, kuk, kuhuhu... Why? Aren't you happy too?]

"...What did you say?"

[Thanks to me, you finally found those who drove your mother to death, didn't you?]

### Chapter 173

It was a dead whisper meant only for Harenir to hear. Saying it knew he had tried to uncover the truth about the Encroachment Zones for a very long time, it asked shouldn't he be grateful for what its subordinate had done in the northern Encroachment Zone last time? Because thanks to that, he had learned about the hidden traitors and all the inside story.

It wasn't they who had killed the previous Holy Knight Commander, but human desire.

[Rather, you should thank me.]

The Dedium looked straight at Harenir. Deep reproach dwelled in its pitch-black eyes that had no distinction of whites.

[Yet to dare show such an attitude, you've grown lax drunk on the love bestowed by this land's god. Insolent child, I must teach you a lesson.]

Tsk, clicking its tongue, the Dedium grabbed the holy sword with both hands. Then it pulled the sword piercing its body even deeper. Though Harenir sensed something was wrong and quickly withdrew his arm, black blood had already splattered all over the ground.

The floor with God's crest drawn on it glowed again trying to burn away the unholy energy. But the blood that burned like that remained on the ground like ash, and when it moved as if crawling and took a form similar to Dium letters.

Wujik, wujijijik-

Beyond energies colliding, a thunderous sound rang out as if the earth was collapsing. The ground containing the Dedium shattered into pieces and finally God's crest scattered. The knights who had struggled pouring out holy power to maintain the sacred realm staggered and fell.

[Though I've watched how the humans of this land have changed over these 20 years, how great the love said to be bestowed by this place's god is...]

The Dedium was utterly leisurely looking around while streaming black blood from its chest. Its voice fell very dryly, as if trampling the expectations of those excited by their advantageous battle situation.

[How very trivial.]

Then black energy bursting from the Dedium tore apart all bindings. The hundred snares broke as if bursting in an instant. Even the imperial princess's sunset-colored magic was pushed back by the storm.

"Kuk...!"

Beatrice staggered while coughing up blood kuluk. The Dedium didn't miss the gap when all bindings broke and quickly escaped the space.

Puk- pusuk-

The sound of flesh being pierced rang wherever it passed. The knights' bodies were cleanly pierced by the Dedium's outstretched hand as it flew around. Wususu, knights fell like dominoes.

[For the god's love to be this worthless, you who are upheld as hero must have suffered much too.]

The Dedium floating in the air looked down at Harenir and clicked its tongue as if pitying him. Its intention in deliberately taking position above him was obvious. The voice full of mockery asking if this was all the god this world upheld amounted to rang in everyone's minds.

Though Harenir leaped high and swung his sword, the Dedium quickly avoided him while giggling. Though its body had been pierced by the holy sword, the wound had somehow already healed about halfway. It seemed as if the heart hadn't been there to begin with.

All this happened in an instant.

Though the forces tried to catch the Dedium again, it was much faster and stronger than expected. Even without four-horned Diums, or even three-horned subordinates, it skillfully broke through formations alone. The hope that it might be manageable since it had abandoned its massive original body vanished futilely.

"...I'll have to try catching it in demon race form."

Having grasped the knights' wavering, Mela bit her lip hard. Then she removed her necklace and gave it to Kalterik as if passing it off, and despite his dissuasion, quickly ran and transformed into demon race form. She flew up with black wings fluttering to chase the Dedium.

[Hmm, this alone has been quite fascinating since before. Why do you insects try to protect those who betrayed your kind? Those who should feel revulsion toward their kind rush in ready to die, it's beyond amusing to the point of being pitiful.]

The Dedium's gaze turned to Mela's crushed horn. As if not feeling any threat from her large wings at all, it just looked Mela over with interested eyes.

[I merely follow Him.]

[That loyalty is praiseworthy, but that makes it more regrettable. If you had seen more broadly, you could have achieved your ambitions in the new world, tsk.]

In the Diums' world, horns were given solely based on 'ability'. Birth, background, nothing else mattered, and there was no dividing into factions or rejection of others. Everything was only for the Dedium and the god responded to subordinates' loyalty by expanding the world. It provided new land and food and loved all children without discrimination.

The Dedium shook its head.

[This land's god has blinded your eyes.]

Though Mela charged gritting her teeth, kwang! her body flew and crashed into the clock tower over there. With just one gesture she was thrown to a place far from the Encroachment Zone. "Mela!" Kalterik's scream burst out painfully.

The tide of battle wavered. Commanders rushed around trying to calm the knights' agitation. Though the Dedium was rampaging now, they shouted until their throats were raw to respond calmly since all others were merely one and two-horned ones.

But one of the two vice commanders counted among the strongest had been instantly defeated by the Dedium even after charging in accepting the distance from comrades that demon race transformation would bring. Moreover, wasn't that monster fine even after being pierced by the hero's holy sword? Though a scar remained on its chest, it was difficult to hold hope just from that. Rather, not knowing where its weakness was only brought despair.

Beatrice approached Harenir and asked:

"Is purification completely impossible in this situation?"

From what she had heard before, purification could be attempted after breaking all the 'cores' where contaminated energy of the Encroachment Zone was gathered. That is, purifying light was effective when death energy spread in the Encroachment Zone decreased.

But now there were no cores in the plaza. Instead, the continent's sky was covered in black cracks, so it would be no exaggeration to say the entire empire was under contaminating energy. So though Beatrice had vaguely guessed purification wouldn't work, she asked like grasping at straws.

Perhaps this was closer to a plea than a question. They needed a powerful card to settle the battlefield's chaos. Since everyone had shed tears admiring the hero's purification in the northern Encroachment Zone, they came to hope for such an impact. Though it would have been good if they had even a small sun, that had been broken last time...

"..."

Harenir slowly nodded his head. Though he clearly felt it wouldn't purify, he wanted to try understanding the imperial princess's intent. Because if they could just defeat the Dedium, all Encroachment Zones across the empire would disappear. If they could weaken it even a little, that would be good.

But just then, the Dedium spoke from the air:

[Oh my. It pains my heart too much to watch insects struggle caught in futile hope. So...]

When the Dedium raised its right hand, the sky rumbled kururung-. These past three days, the sky had shaken like this only when the Dedium's egg trembled or when Diums descended from the cracks. Since the Dedium had now emerged from the egg, this commotion meant...

Ururu Diums poured from the black cracks. All the dense dots embedded in the sky faded to ash were monsters.

[I shall show mercy and grant you a swift end.]

Even the hope that perhaps all Diums that would appear had already shown themselves was violated. The Dedium spoke quite gently with that eerie backdrop. The Dedium leisurely looking down at the ground from within the cracked sky, that monster's figure appreciating the continent fallen into despair and lamentation, was truly worthy of being called catastrophe.

The plaza, the holy city, the culture humanity had built up was trampled by Diums. Though the Diums' landing point from the sky was the Encroachment Zone, they tried to burst out immediately. Though knights waiting at the boundary tried to stop them, they were completely overwhelmed as thousands rushed in.

Gradually the front line was pushed back. Though they had evacuated residents as far from the plaza as possible, they couldn't know how far these monsters would run. Though they held back the Diums like a final mission, gradually discouragement fell over the knights' faces. At this rate it wouldn't be strange if the Encroachment Zone expanded at any time.

"Now really only 'that' method..."

The knights unconsciously looked at the hero. Though they had ignored the rumors going around the streets these past three days, now only 'that method' came to mind. Though their furtive glances toward the hero were guilty, they finally contained expectation.

Kalterik urgently cried out to Harenir:

"N-no!"

"Calm, stay calm. We must think of a way."

Beatrice quickly added words afterward. However, even her voice emphasizing calmness was trembling paruru.

"Kuluk, Commander. I'll try, to catch it, one more time..."

Just then, Mela returned limping. Though she was in a ragged state with even her wings torn from the Dedium's attack, she somehow staggered over and reported to the commander.

Harenir quietly shook his head.

"No. Let's try purification first."

He said at least they could stop the Diums if he purified, that they needed to confirm how much the light would work on the Dedium. His attitude ordering the two vice commanders to hold the Dedium until purifying energy completely descended was very calm.

Beatrice looked at Harenir strangely. Though he too seemed to take the current situation seriously, no confusion dwelled in it. Her eyes shook roughly at his attitude similar to hours ago despite the miserably failed operation. Now she felt she knew clearly what that composure stemmed from.

'Could it be you already...'

She could sense what choice Harenir would make if even purification proved useless. It was an intuition she wanted to deny. As she bit her lower lip hard.

"Haren."

Quietly Isaph approached. He who should have been waiting in the rear with other necromancers had somehow come to the center of the battlefield. Though the situation was urgent, at his single call Harenir felt all his attention drawn and turned his head.

Purple eyes met his gaze directly.

"Remove my shackles now."

### Chapter 174

It was quite a sudden request. The content was too absurd for words brought suddenly to such an urgent battlefield. Mela, Kalterik, and Beatrice all turned to look at him in bewilderment.

However, after a moment's perplexity, Harenir felt relief. Those shackles were items that would only come off with his holy power. So if he didn't remove them now, he would have been bound by a leash for life...

Harenir firmly trampled the tail of that supposition and reached out his hand.

"Yes. You've done more than enough of the cooperation promised initially."

When he first said he needed Isaph's help, the empire had only four Encroachment Zones. Though now contamination phenomena had occurred across the continent increasing their number, it was fair to say the initial deal was complete. After all, searching with undead was no longer needed.

Dalchak- the shackles broke and fell to the floor.

Isaph silently touched his neck. As if the feeling of the leash he had worn for so long disappearing was strange, somewhat empty, he stroked his nape.

"..."

Harenir looked unfamiliarly at Isaph's white, clean neck before trying to turn his head. While telling him to return to the rear now, yet with desire he ultimately couldn't kill, he looked at his eyes. For an instant, he seemed to think it was fortunate he could see him one last time.

However, just then he discovered an eerie gleam dwelling in those purple eyes. At the moment a chillingly ominous energy became vivid.

Swaaah-

Purple energy burst from Isaph. It was fierce and powerful energy enough to cover the entire area. After roughly sweeping through the space enough to be called tumultuous, hundreds of undead suddenly sprang forth.

"Wh-what!"

"Suddenly undead...!"

The undead legion threatened the holy knights and drove them somewhere. The knights who had staggered back surprised by the suddenly appearing undead finally realized they were being gathered into groups of one or two units. Those who had scattered fighting Diums in melee were assembled surrounded by undead.

"Your Highness!"

Simultaneously, Beatrice was lifted up caught by undead. Sir Asil, her guard knight, was greatly shocked at the sight of her being dragged to the top of a tall building. The imperial princess was captured where everyone on the battlefield could see.

All froze when the empire's first imperial princess was taken hostage. Though public sentiment toward the royal family had fallen after the recently revealed leadership's betrayal, the First Imperial Princess was an exception. The imperial palace knights urgently called for everyone not to move.

In the chaotic scene, Isaph walked toward the Dedium.

[Kiit, kiiik...]

The Diums didn't charge at him at all. The monsters that had been rushing wildly at holy knights quietly withdrew and behaved as if making a path. Moreover, the two-horned Diums exchanged glances then stood behind the undead and even joined in surrounding the holy knights.

It looked as if the Diums and Isaph were on the same side.

"Th-that guy must be another traitor!"

"Could he be trying to offer us to the Dedium?!"

"I saw him talking with Diums in the northern Encroachment Zone too...!"

The holy knights were shocked. Many had seen Isaph together with the four-horned Dium in the northern Encroachment Zone. Since the conversation had taken place at the very top of the fortress watchtower, it would be no exaggeration to say almost all knights had witnessed that scene.

Though they had found it suspicious then too, afterward Isaph had stepped forward and resolved the zombies. Thanks to his achievements they had saved the hero's aide, and he had helped everyone so the previous suspicious incident was buried. However now, that moment came to the holy knights' minds and brought feelings of betrayal.

"Th-th-that guy, just why..."

"Now, what is this..."

Kalterik and Mela were also very bewildered. They couldn't understand at all Isaph's actions taking the imperial princess hostage, and the imperial princess too was sighing as if perplexed over there. The two vice commanders tried to cut down the undead but hesitated with their swords remembering Isaph staggering when his undead were attacked in the northern Encroachment Zone.

But in one corner of their minds, they remembered the scene of the four-horned Dium chasing Isaph in the snowy mountain cave in the past. There the Dium had acted as if it knew Isaph, had wanted to be with him, and had shouted he would return again as he finally left.

Then the Dium in the northern Encroachment Zone had also talked alone with Isaph. Face to face, very intimately. But afterward with cracks forming in the sky and the chaos from truths encountered in the holy city, there had been no time to pay attention to past events...

Just then, someone shouted from over there:

"I heard from a friend who saw Isaph in Rus last night...!"

They shouted saying they had heard it through a fellow knight in the Rus branch. As suspicion that Isaph was a traitor was burning hot, that news spread from mouth to mouth and reached everyone in an instant. Kalterik tilted his head in bewilderment.

"What? He clearly said he had been watching over Noi all along..."

But the end of his words collapsed weakly. Though they had heard news from the infirmary that Isaph had visited, that was only this morning.

Rus, that city that was the empire's first capital, was quite far from the holy city. They couldn't guess why Isaph had gone there. Mela sighed.

"They say Rus's plaza was contaminated last..."

But they couldn't connect that information with Isaph's movements. While the two were confused, the battlefield grew endlessly more chaotic. Condemnation poured out saying villains never change, that bad guys remain bad guys to the end even after the hero showed mercy.

Harenir too looked around the space with a hardened face.

"..."

He too was bewildered by Isaph's sudden actions. But now the movements of the undead going around the space seemed to surround the holy knights, yet also looked like they were lined up as a barrier protecting everyone from the Diums.

In the space where everyone cursed and pointed fingers at Isaph, Harenir's gaze followed his back. The hem of his black robe fluttered as he advanced toward the Dedium.

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[Hooh, for you to approach me first. This is unexpected.]

The Dedium's voice resonated woong woong in his mind. The sensation of completely unfamiliar language being automatically interpreted and accepted in his brain was chilling no matter how many times he experienced it.

He blankly looked up at the Dedium. As if understanding his intent just from his gaze, it who had been in the sky whik- came down and stood before him.

[I was thinking of finding you after finishing business, how very interesting. Yes, what is your reason for coming here?]

The commotion murmuring behind grew louder. Though they were too far to hear the conversation's content, just the sight of him facing the Dedium like this was enough to confirm him as a traitor.

But he just stared fixedly at the Dedium without paying a shred of attention to that place. Standing directly face to face with the Dedium of similar size to humans felt strange. No, perhaps it was because his soul was connected to it.

Thump, thump. His heart beat greatly.

"Let's make a 'deal'."

He spoke as calmly as possible. Taking deep breaths for the words he would continue next, he organized his thoughts one final time.

He had been confused all along since 'that day'. The day the Dedium's egg appeared in the holy city, and that rainy night. Even after receiving all his memories back in the dark research lab, he had suffered a sense of disconnect as if floating from lack of reality. It wasn't easy to accept truth that rushed in all at once.

But only today had his thoughts become organized. And the moment he saw the Dedium, when he witnessed it emerging from the egg, he finally gained completely clear reason.

He, 'he' finally knew what he had to do.

"I understand now that I'm merged with your soul. How great a god I've taken into my body, how glorious this is. I'm ashamed of my transgression committed in that cave. As you said, this land's god had blinded my eyes."

[Hooh?]

"I've long seen how hopeless this world is. I felt it to the bone watching them reject without accepting differences. So accept me as a subject of the new world. What I offer is..."

Holkeum, as he gestured behind him with his eyes, interest dwelled on the Dedium's face. The situation where he had suddenly summoned many undead en masse to take the imperial princess hostage and subdue all the knights seemed quite amusing.

But soon the Dedium narrowed its eyes and asked chillingly:

[Now of all times?]

"Until now there was no way to offer sacrifices because holy knights were deployed in the plaza. You know too. I truly, from deep in my soul, feel drawn toward the new world."

He placed both hands on his chest and recited as if dreaming. Since he contained the Dedium's soul, his heart pounded at its every movement, and his gaze constantly followed it. His heart had thudded even seeing its abandoned body in the north, and now meeting it resurrected here today, he was even intoxicated with happiness.

Joy as if finally encountering his origin to return to, the being that must be with him. He couldn't deny all these emotions making him tremble.

[Hooh, this is truly sincere...]

The Dedium nodded while staring at his face. As if satisfied finding no false energy anywhere in his confession, it reached its arms out to him. The Dedium lifted his chin to make him meet its gaze directly.

[Then, how do you plan to return my soul? Now that it's very firmly entwined with you.]

Reproachful eyes poured down frighteningly. As if wanting to kill him but hesitating for fear of damaging its own soul, just its sharp fingertips seuuk- brushed his neck. It was an eerie sensation.

Nevertheless, just meeting its pitch-black eyes filled him with joy, and trembling with immense ecstasy all over his body, he spoke. Even his voice trembled as if apologetic.

"That's right. Due to my misjudgment, 'our' souls merged. So I know your power isn't complete and you can't open the sky's cracks wider, and can't properly use the dimensional boundary. If only your soul were whole, you could bring so many more subordinates..."

[Indeed...]

"So, give me horns first."

[What?]

The Dedium frowned. Though the final request seemed very sudden and even stubborn, he shook his head. Then he carefully wrapped the Dedium's wrist and guided it down to place its hand on his chest.

While fully conveying his wildly beating heart's pounding kung kwang kung kwang.

"I'm saying make me your kindred, your subordinate. Then..."

With sincerity that all this planning was devised only for it, he whispered joyfully:

"The great god of the new world can dwell in my body."

### Chapter 175

The Dedium could move its soul into the body of its kindred. So at the proposal to dwell in him after giving him horns, the Dedium tilted its head.

[You're saying to be reborn anew in your body?]

"If you want that's fine too, but since it takes time to adapt to a new body it wouldn't be appropriate in the current situation. So... just dwell in me and take back your soul. Though my ability can't return the soul, it should be very easy for a 'god'."

Though it wouldn't happen in an instant, with just a few minutes of effort it could recover its soul and return to its original perfect state. Since his ability couldn't separate this soul, and the Dedium wasn't drawn to damaging its own soul, it was a very rational deal.

The Dedium's eyes narrowed.

[Your talent for scheming is more extraordinary than expected.]

It seemed quite pleased with his plan. Though its face praised the consideration offered by a new subject, suddenly its hand placed on his chest curled round. Sharp fingertips remained as if scratching above his heart.

[But this alone cannot repay all the humiliation and trouble I had to endure.]

"I'll reflect on that while showing lifelong loyalty as your subject..."

[And, how can I trust you?]

Puk-!

The Dedium's hand pierced his chest. Kuk, he flailed while drawing in breath at the shocking pain of flesh being torn apart. It felt like his heart was caught in the Dedium's large hand.

However, an even more chilling sensation than this was the feeling of blood being sucked in through the Dedium's hand piercing his chest. Something inside him flowed to it. Though he reflexively wanted to shake off the cause of the terrible pain by gripping the Dedium's wrist, he finally let both arms hang limply.

"Heuk, huk..."

The Dedium stared at his obedient attitude. Chwak! Then as it withdrew its hand, hududuk, blood poured out and pieces of flesh torn away by that rough touch rolled on the ground.

[You, those were sincere words.]

Kugugugung- the Dedium's body began to grow larger. The Dedium that had had to go around in a small body until now regained a size similar to its original body and all wounds received during battle were healed. This was because what it had taken from him was its own 'soul'.

The Dedium absorbed only part of it within the bounds of not damaging its soul. Because it was a violent act only for itself, he had to endure the pain of flesh being pierced raw. Yet because he showed no resistance at all, a satisfied smile rose on the Dedium's face.

He staggered while covering his chest with one hand. Though it was difficult to stop bleeding with just this, he exhaled weakly while pressing like that.

[Yes, now I'll believe you.]

The Dedium's satisfied voice resonated woong woong in his mind. Dizziness came after spilling blood all at once. From over there, the knights' sighs of fear at the Dedium's transformation and curses condemning the prisoner's betrayal mixed chaotically.

Regardless, he just took deep breaths with difficulty. The Dedium tilted its head. As if his exhausted appearance didn't seem just from being attacked, it muttered quizzically.

[Hmm, you seem much weaker than I thought. Is it because humans have difficulty enduring soul fractures, or because you're using undead to hold the holy knights...]

"Huu, ugh..."

[Well, whatever it is, I can't let one who will become my subject now writhe in pain.]

As the Dedium's voice fell quite mercifully, he looked up at it and pleaded:

"Quickly, complete glory..."

Like the pride the priest they met in the western Encroachment Zone had shown saying his was the body where the Dedium had dwelled, he knelt before it as if feeling reverence toward the god. Pulseok, though it was collapsing with strength drained, he finally pressed his head to the ground before the Dedium. He bowed as if worshipping.

[Ha, hahaha! My child, there's no need to be so afraid.]

The Dedium picked him up with one hand. Its size was massive enough for his whole body to be enveloped in its hand. It placed him on its palm and met his eyes affectionately.

[I'll show you the new world.]

Its long hand touched his forehead. The Dedium was so pleased it bestowed two horns. Wudududuk- though the sensation of horns piercing through living flesh and rising up was painful, even greater ecstasy made his body tremble. It felt like being intoxicated by drugs.

When he gained horns, the wound in his chest where the Dedium had pierced was healed, and finally his 'eyes' opened. Though for an instant his vision seemed to fade to gray, afterward a completely new world unfolded before his eyes.

The Encroachment Zone seen with human eyes was just colorless land. But with Dium horns, the moment he became a subject of another world, this land looked different. Rainbow-colored lights rippled around. It was a diverse scene that could not be perceived as a human, with that insect's body.

"Ah..."

He shed tears trembling with joy. Finally he had become a member of the new world, gained the honor of being called the Dedium's kindred, and thus become able to receive the 'god' into his body.

The god mercifully wiped away his tears and began to dwell in him. It forgave him who had dared try to harm it in the past and bestowed glory. Sincere joy welled up from within his chest.

It was the highest grace a subject of the new world could receive. As he was enveloped in supreme happiness enough to make his whole body tremble, he buried his face in the Dedium's palm. His forehead center split juk- and prepared for a third eye to open between flowing blood.

And the moment the god's soul completely dwelled in him.

[...What are you doing now?]

"Ha, haha... Ahahahahahaha!"

He burst into laughter like a madman at the Dedium's voice resonating in his mind. He couldn't possibly hold back this loud laughter. He laughed while shaking his whole body kuk kuk as if sobbing.

Finally the Dedium's soul had all entered his body.

[You, why are you using energy elsewhere?]

The Dedium's voice seemed to ring out exactly from his heart. Because its soul had all dwelled in him, it could only communicate like this. As they became so perfectly one, the Dedium also felt his state exactly.

Why he had been particularly weak before, where he was using his energy now.

[Why do your undead seem to be not just here, but in that high sky too...]

The Dedium muttered in confusion. It noticed my energy was spread in a place far from the battlefield, even very far from the continent. The Dedium tried to grasp where it was located. Following the ominousness its instincts warned of, tracking the energy.

[Why, in a place, full of, this world's holiness...]

The Dedium's voice falling in pieces shook, and afterward his whole body convulsed. Sensing it trying to escape from him, he quickly ordered.

To the undead waiting on an island touched by God's hand in a very far land.

"Now."

A very small but vivid light burst blink- in the sky faded to ash.

Like the first beam of light that illuminated the land covered in darkness at the beginning, like rays of light like spears that Solnium sent down pitying the desolate dangerous ground. Isolatedies, the holy object containing God's will to balance the world, sparkled in the place that first received sunlight pouring on the continent.

The place God's beam of light trying to drive into this land again, trying to drive out all darkness and unholiness, was aimed at... was 'his' body.

He felt he finally completely understood Isaph, his past.

From the moment he learned in the past that the Dedium moved its soul around, he had made a certain plan. He had analyzed that even if they attacked the Dedium's physical body with however powerful weapons, if they couldn't completely destroy its soul too, catastrophe would endlessly repeat. Since it had finally awakened again even after the previous Holy Knight Commander's seal.

So he had devised one method, but worried because its possibility was slim. But his eyes were opened while gaining knowledge about the dimensional boundary from the Dedium's soul stolen in the snowy mountain cave. That's why he had sent his soul to another dimension without any hesitation. So the two souls would become intimately entwined, so... the Dedium would have no choice but to enter this body.

Since beings from another dimension become more dangerous as their territory in this land decreases, the Dedium would have had no choice but to step forward even though not properly recovered as Encroachment Zones disappeared. It was an incomplete resurrection and thanks to that though it was pretending to be fine now, it had actually been in great danger when pierced by the hero's holy sword. So it dwelled deeply in him wanting to quickly regain its original power.

That is, while working with the hero, he had gradually purified Encroachment Zones to drive the Dedium into a corner, inducing it to make hasty decisions. To the point of accepting even the human who had attacked it in the past as a subject.

And if he could just trap all of the Dedium's soul in this body.

[Let go, let go! I must return to my original body-!]

"No, you will die here today."

[You bastard, how dare you!]

"The new subject will go with you too, so don't be too sad..."

Because he would be able to kill that monster perfectly.

### Chapter 176

The method of using God's spear was simple yet difficult. Since it was originally God's item, humans couldn't use it, and even if used somehow, it wouldn't achieve even half the effect. For perfect effect, the spear had to be placed in a land full of holiness, in that place that had long been close to God.

The statue of Solnium on the sky island had one hand stretched toward the sky and the other extended downward. This followed the legend of sharing heaven's light, and in the past he had obtained that object from the statue's palm extended downward. But now he wanted to place it in the hand raised upward.

Then in that island touched by Solnium's hand, where magnificent holiness had dwelled for a long time, God could spread his will borrowing the body of the statue made in his image. It would become possible to add one beam of light to defeat the evil of this continent.

As soon as he realized this 'plan' in the research lab days ago, he had headed to Rus. It wasn't difficult to secretly mix into the warp crowded with refugees. Though he couldn't remove the shackles, he instead used soul magic to confuse the wearer's location. Though he would have been dragged away if a red line had appeared, that never happened.

Since he had discovered the way to the sky island in the past, now he needed to prepare a way to match the exact timing. He needed a being to help use the holy object on the island at the moment he wanted, that is, the instant he completely took the Dedium into his body. That place was so full of holiness that even time was different from this continent. He searched for undead that could endure maintaining connection with him in such a space.

Among the undead bound to this body, only those who had stayed with him in the desert could handle that. Though he sent them covered with lots of magic circles he had long researched to reduce the gap in space-time and surrounded by protective formations, perhaps they would disappear from encountering holiness too closely. Nevertheless, they all willingly followed his will, carrying the spear toward the sky island.

[Release! I command you to release!]

"Kuluk..."

Blood burst from his mouth. As the Dedium struggled to escape from his body, pain like his internal organs being slashed came. Since it had dwelled deeply in him to completely recover its soul entwined with him, it was difficult to escape immediately, and moreover, he had no intention of letting it go.

The body that had received horns and become the Dedium's subordinate instinctively wanted to follow the god's will. Though it tried to release him, his soul caught and desperately held onto its soul. An obstinacy rose that he wouldn't yield in matters of souls, that he couldn't bow even to a god from another world.

[How dare a mere insect...!]

The Dedium's body moved. Even while dwelling in his body, it moved the shell without a soul. The monster's fingers bent pikeuppikeup like a wooden puppet before finally gripping him. Having been placed on that palm just then, he could only be helplessly caught.

When the Dedium gripped his body tightly using both hands, the pressure made it hard to breathe. At this rate he might die first from losing his breath.

"Heuk, uk, euuk..."

It hurt too much. Though it was already this painful now, he became suddenly afraid of how great the pain ahead would be. He really hated pain. He was scared of death too.

Though he had accepted the memories, this place still felt like another world to him. Though the time spent in this world and on Earth were the same, perhaps it was because the latter experiences were more recent from 'his' perspective.

Nevertheless, he now faced the Dedium. Was the past's desire for revenge too deeply remaining, or was it because the months spent since returning here were too vivid? Yes, perhaps it was also because he had grown too close to the people here during that time.

So that Kalterik who had collapsed before the burning house, Mela who had nearly destroyed herself after destroying the laboratory, wouldn't meet such an end. Because he came to wish the world Noi would see when he finally opened his eyes would be whole...

After scattered thoughts rising up, finally only one reason remained. Ultimately that one thing was the foundation of everything that moved him.

'His' end must not finish like that.

'Don't you want to run away?'

He still wanted to run away now. While screaming at the top of his lungs that he didn't want to hurt, if only possible he wanted to run away immediately and ignore all catastrophe. He wanted to close his eyes and cover his ears saying what did the tragedies happening in this land have to do with him? Even at this moment he still felt so choked with resentment.

Why did you accept it so calmly?

He sensed what the complex magical formations he had discovered in Haren's office were. Though he had denied it wouldn't be that, Haren's reaction staying quiet even to his question had pointed to the answer.

His, Haren's composed attitude wasn't from the hero's excellent and firm reason. Rather it was closer to the calmness of one who had expected it would come to this someday. Only then did he realize the identity of the subtle recklessness he had felt from Haren while going around Encroachment Zones.

While seeing the Encroachment Zones still remaining in the empire despite his mother's sacrifice, and feeling the recovery power and grace given to him... he must have lived sensing that someday he too would have to sacrifice like his mother. He always walked carrying death in mind with sacrifice.

So perhaps during their past journey, if death came as if by chance, he wanted to accept it with relief that it wasn't his mission. Tired of death's shadow that had followed him for long years, he had thrown himself into danger like an escape.

But finally Haren, the hero had reached the final Encroachment Zone. He had accepted that there existed a mission he could no longer deny.

'If it were me, I think I'd want to run away...'

So Haren had just smiled without giving any answer to his words. He had felt indignant about that. His anger toward Haren's smile was greater than even the pain of being caught by the Dedium now.

Did he want him to run away? Did he want to click his tongue at the foolishness of one trying to sacrifice after living only as a perfect hero his whole life to protect his mother's name? Did he want to sneer that you who didn't run away despite guessing the sacrifice from the start were foolish, showing off that he was more rational? No, now all this discussion was useless.

I, that is what I wish for...

Is simply that the sky you look at last wouldn't be ash-colored.

Because he hoped this despairing battlefield wouldn't be his end, because he hoped he wouldn't accept that so calmly as his conclusion, because he hoped he who had lived preserved in perfect form wouldn't finally remain as a specimen...

That was all his reason.

Though receiving horns gave him different vision, the sky still appeared colorless. That must be because the Dedium hadn't completely taken this world yet. So the light sparkling in the ash-colored sky stood out even more vividly. The form glowing higher than the Dedium's head was fateful.

The small radiance gradually, but very clearly grew larger and.

"Finally..."

[Aaaaaaak! Let go, let go! I am not a being to die in such a place! How many worlds have I conquered, yet to mere gods of such a place-]

The noisy clamoring was enough to give him a headache. But he was glad those incoherent cries fully revealed its despair at being unable to escape from him. It would be even more absurd in this situation since it could avoid the beam of light if it could just return to its original body. Though he was coughing up blood, he endured because it was so amusing.

Yes, after all until days ago I had only accepted this world as a game. Though I thought it might be a real dimension because it felt too real, I finally recognized myself as a player and expected to log out. Hadn't I guessed I would leave this place after the northern Encroachment Zone scenario?

"Haha, I guess I made mental preparations long ago..."

Without holding back the sudden laughter that came out, he gladly faced the beam of light approaching him. From the sky covered in black cracks, a dazzling spear containing the sun's light poured down finally bearing complete radiance under God's touch. A sound like heaven and earth splitting struck his ears.

Brilliant light dyed his vision.

The massive beam of light pierced exactly through his heart. It was a huge impact enough to shake his whole body. Huk, he felt the breath he swallowed escape through gaps in his torn lungs. His whole body was stiffening. No, should he say his sensory nerves were being cut off? The ray thankfully pierced through the Dedium's body too.

The Dedium's scream distantly rang in his mind. Though it seemed to be shouting something, his brain's functions were stopping too so he had no strength to interpret. The horns on his forehead crumbled paseusu and then the Dedium's body that had gripped him began collapsing like a sand castle.

Released from it, his body fell kung to the ground and rolled. It felt like all his internal organs had burst.

"Kuluk..."

He wanted to see 'him' who would be far away, just a little, very little, but he couldn't move at all. After trying to barely turn his head only to cough up blood ulkeok, he blankly looked up only at the sky while laughing at it boiling pooled in his mouth. His ears rang woong woong as the space was completely chaotic.

The black cracks splitting the sky slowly closed, and light began returning to the colorless firmament. Was his gaze caught because it was such a marvelous sight? No, perhaps that dazzlingly beautiful blue sky...

"...Ah."

Because it resembled his eyes.

Because it clearly made him recall him even in fading consciousness, his mouth corners rose faintly. Though he hadn't closed his eyes, his vision shattered and scattered.

Finally it was darkness.

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A beam of light descended on the land sunk in despair. As radiance poured down as if illuminating dangerous ground covered in darkness, the dark clouds cleared and the sun rose. As the cracks trying to connect to another dimension disappeared, finally the whole sky returned.

The massive monster that had dominated the battlefield was pierced by vast rays along with one human, no, a being that had become its subordinate. That unholy god could not dare oppose this land's god and disappeared.

It was like a scene from scripture, like Genesis.

The holy knights trembled with joy calling Solnium's name. All thoughts that had confused them until now were pushed away in an instant, and they just shuddered at the miracle they had witnessed. It was humans' instinctive reaction encountering God's power. The entire army knelt and offered worship to God.

While everyone was moved to tears admiring such a miracle, Harenir blankly stared at just one place. With a face turned white, unable to even breathe.

"...Isaph?"

He searched for him repeatedly with his gaze. But that body with its heart pierced by the massive beam of light crumbled completely as if unable to withstand God's radiance. The ashes pooled on the ground like a coffin before being blown away by the coming wind and scattering forever.

It was a land where no catastrophe existed anymore.

### Chapter 177

#Part 15. 0.000...%

The empire boiled with joy.

Finally they had defeated the Dedium, the Great Catastrophe from 20 years ago. The monster that had resurrected in the holy city and plunged the empire into despair had knelt under Solnium's beam of light.

At last the sun rose completely.

Imperial citizens who had trembled with anxiety in shelters came running out cheering at the blue sky. They embraced each other and shed tears. If the situation was like this in places far from the battlefield, the joy of knights who had seen the monster fall before their very eyes was even greater.

However, confusion arose in the center of the battlefield, no, what was now the former battlefield plaza.

"C-Commander!"

"Please calm yourself...!"

This empire's hero knelt and groped the ground. As if trying to find something where the Dedium had disappeared, he frantically pressed his hands to the ground. Only red bloodstains that had been shed touched his hands and knees as they became dirty.

Yet the hero, Harenir who everyone revered as noble, paid no mind and crawled on the ground. With a face turned pale, he looked around repeatedly as if searching for someone, and rambled as if wanting to deny all this reality.

His voice repeating just one name collapsed in disarray. His gestures gathering the ashes from the ground were desperate. He even trembled while curling his body to block less than a handful remaining from being scattered by the wind.

The holy knights were bewildered. They had never seen such an appearance from the hero before. He seemed to have completely lost his mind now.

"Commander..."

"He..."

Kalterik and Mela didn't know what to do around Harenir. Beatrice too paced around impatiently. The scene just before had brought great shock to all of them.

Isaph had disappeared along with the Dedium.

Though they had seen it with their eyes, though it was a very clear conclusion, it was difficult to accept. Since they had been confused from the moment Isaph approached the Dedium while displaying large-scale necromancy, it wasn't easy to properly comprehend what had happened in the following minutes.

Everyone had condemned Isaph, and when he received 'horns' they pointed fingers saying he was indeed a traitor. Around then not just Harenir but the two vice commanders too had tried to approach him but... from then heaven and earth had shaken.

It was an instant until beams of light poured from the ashen sky. One or two minutes, no, perhaps not even tens of seconds.

'Ha, haha... Ahahahahahaha!'

They couldn't properly hear the conversation between the Dedium and Isaph. But they clearly saw red bloodstreams being engraved on Isaph's forehead right after receiving horns. Though it hadn't properly opened, it was similar to the Dium's third eye.

That is, the Dedium's soul had dwelled in Isaph's body.

Why Isaph had burst into loud laughter then, what was the reason he looked up at the sky afterward, and just why he endured kuk kuk while his whole body was constricted by the Dedium's shell...

'Now.'

While pondering his lip movements, Mela thought about the sparkle that had appeared in the sky just before.

"Rus should be in that direction..."

"Rus? In that place's sky..."

Beatrice took up the words, and then Kalterik muttered blankly:

"...The sky island."

As the words that Isaph had been in Rus last night came to mind, the three exchanged glances. Could it be that even that beam of light was all 'planned' by him? So he deliberately let the Dedium into his body...

As everyone was growing confused, a commotion broke out over there.

"The D-Diums are going wild!"

Though the Dedium had disappeared after being struck by the beam of light, its subordinate beings still remained. The monsters who had lost their god in an instant were in chaos before finally charging at humans like a last struggle. They rushed forward solemnly as if determined to take revenge for their god.

Several soldiers fell to the final rampage. They had seized the gap when guards were lowered thinking the battle was over. The Diums tried to create enemies that knights had struggled with in the past.

"Zombies...!"

Soldiers bitten by Diums began fading to colorless. Everyone was shocked at the sight of them becoming zombies, and necromancers hurriedly stepped forward following orders.

Subjugating zombie souls wasn't easy. Though Isaph had forced out-of-body experiences on hundreds of zombies at once alone in the past, now it took several gathered to barely subdue one zombie. The necromancers barely managed to drag the zombies' souls out.

But at the appearance of the souls that came out like that, Beatrice sighed:

"Why are those souls' forms... exactly like the undead Isaph commanded?"

The shape with holes pierced and crushed here and there brought déjà vu in an instant. Because the undead of Klam Village residents that Isaph summoned looked exactly like that. Then they had just thought damage was done to the souls because Isaph had tortured them to death but...

The zombies they encountered in the northern

Encroachment Zone had been contaminated long ago. So their souls were greatly damaged and scattered like powder as soon as they were extracted, but the appearance of souls separated right after becoming zombies all looked exactly like Isaph's undead.

Since hundreds of undead that Isaph had summoned here had surrounded the holy knights until just before, everyone remembered that form. One by one they exchanged dazed glances.

Beatrice pondered the abnormal loyalty Isaph's undead had shown him. Soon a distant past event struck her mind like lightning.

'He tried to recover his body by extracting the souls of Klam Village residents and absorbing their essence.'

Those were the words Isaph had testified when arrested for the massacre. That had earned the judges' anger and brought an immediate death sentence, and he was imprisoned. But now tracing back that story, it connected to something completely unexpected.

"The necklaces..."

The Diums had made crystals from human souls and offered them, and power holders had worn them around their necks to enjoy youth. That is, Isaph's testimony itself had been words targeting the necklaces.

"Could it be, that guy from the start..."

Kalterik muttered painfully as if being strangled.

In fact, while spending time with Isaph recently, everyone had come to see him differently and wondered if there might have been misunderstandings about the massacre case. Though there would be obstacles to reinvestigation since his testimony itself had admitted the crime, they had planned to quietly look into it after everything was over.

But plans had gone awry when the Dedium's egg appeared in the holy city. While planning to deal with immediate problems first and leave the rest for later, the truth that Isaph alone had been preparing for this moment during all that time shocked Kalterik.

He wanted to ask just how much he had known, since when he had been planning. There were so many questions. But now there was no one left to answer. He had disappeared forever without leaving even a trace.

Overwhelmed by suddenly learned truths, Kalterik fell kung landing on his behind. He looked around before burying his head in both hands.

At such a big reaction from the vice commander, knights too began showing confusion one by one.

"Come to think of it, it seemed like a 'third eye' appeared on his forehead..."

"Th-then could that prisoner..."

While preparing for the fierce battle with the Dedium, information that the monster could move its soul around had been shared too. They had been cautioned to be especially careful as the eye on the forehead was evidence. It wasn't simply that they hadn't noticed due to the chaos, but prejudice built up over long years recognizing him as a villain had hidden the truth.

That villain had actually sacrificed himself to defeat catastrophe.

Everyone was bewildered when the truth was revealed about one they had condemned as a traitor until just before. In the space where shocking level confusion spread, especially those who had been close to Isaph found it difficult to maintain their sanity.

Among them, the person who had lost reason most was definitely Harenir. Beatrice looked at him heavily as he dug through the ground until his white uniform became dirty.

"...I understand how you feel, but you must calm down. Didn't you see his physical body disappear-"

"Soul."

Ttuk, Harenir said. As if something had suddenly occurred to him, he raised his head sharply while looking somewhere. Right, Isaph's physical body had clearly disappeared. It had all burned away after being exposed to God's radiance. However, that was the 'physical body'.

Where do the souls of living beings who meet death in this land go? According to scripture, those souls return to God's embrace. But where does the soul of one who is no longer human, one who has become a being from another dimension, go?

However, the fact that his horns had disappeared at the end caught the ankle of speculation. Though they had been erased as if purified, until now other Diums' horns hadn't disappeared first even when they died exposed to purifying light. It seemed as if Isaph had died exactly as a human.

Harenir urgently recalled more memories. The existence of the heterogeneous soul he had felt from Isaph in the past connected with the situation just before when the Dedium dwelled in him. Even the strange attitudes Diums had shown until now attached as evidence.

But more than this, his attention was drawn to why he had felt Isaph's soul as 'three'. Why had he felt his soul was broken? Though if originally one it should have blended quickly, it had remained distinct until the end, always as if detached, only distantly observing all his own situations...

'What does it matter whether I was born in the empire or came from another country? I'm here now anyway.'

'Isn't it strange? You might actually be talking to a being who isn't Isaph now.'

'Only you know "me".'

A flag saying this was quite an unrealistic hypothesis was raised in one corner of his mind. But his reaction when asked what he would do after all this was over, that dawn, connected the thoughts.

'...I'll have to leave.'

Why had he stayed silent so long at such a simple question? Why had he always felt a distance from him as if stepped back one pace, a gap that felt like he could never close?

Moreover, in the snowy mountain cave, though there was plenty of circumstantial evidence that he had come here in the past, he had denied ever coming here even while coughing blood. Furthermore, he had faintly heard what the Dium had said to him just before...

[I will send you back to your original world-]

He had covered it up thinking he must have misheard in the chaos since it was such an absurd thing to say. At the time he had been consumed only with thoughts of having to save Isaph caught by the Dium.

However, his appearances of being bewildered at talk of another soul dwelling in his body yet later checking again with relief came to mind one by one. Even his expression when learning days ago that Diums were beings summoned from another dimension.

'Just like me...'

After pondering words that seemed to have been unconsciously uttered without even him knowing, finally Harenir murmured:

"...The dimensional boundary."

His instinct pointed there. It might be just a vague intuition not following objective evidence or rational judgment. Nevertheless, he was certain he had to go to the dimensional boundary.

This was a sense that arose from the influence of souls being intimately connected for a very long time. Just as Isaph had come to find Harenir in the cave in the past, now he too felt where the other's soul was. His own soul that had been deeply bound with him told him where the other had flowed to now, what abyss-like depths he was falling into heading toward extinction.

### Chapter 178

Harenir hurriedly headed toward the eastern snowy mountain where the dimensional boundary was located. Using the teleport scroll from the Pope's office, he quickly reached the front of the cave. Even the purifying light he had cast in the past hadn't erased that black wall.

However, now the cave was completely collapsed. Covered by an avalanche, it couldn't even be entered.

"Just where was he going, why...!"

"C-Commander! Let me clear it instead!"

There Harenir dug through the pile of stones himself. He tried to hurriedly enter while clearing away the mountain's debris with his hands. His appearance muttering just one name while panting with a pale face could hardly be seen as sane.

Kalterik and Mela who had followed were truly bewildered. They couldn't even guess why Harenir had come here. His hands became covered in blood in just a moment, showing how excited he was.

That was really strange. Though all wounds should have healed with the hero's excellent recovery power, the bleeding wouldn't stop. Was it because he was digging through the pile of stones without giving wounds time to heal, or was he caught in such great obsession that even reflexively acting healing power was pushed aside?

Finally the two vice commanders helped clear away the debris too. But when they opened the passage, they felt the cave, no, the entire mountain shaking. It was resonance starting from the dimensional boundary. Space distorted as if being sucked away while fierce whirlwinds struck.

The dimensional boundary was slowly growing smaller.

It was a passage that formed when one world connected with another world, and until now it had remained precariously open while the Dedium lived. But now that the Dedium was dead, as the world normalized trying to cut off unholy connections with other dimensions, it was trying to close the boundary.

Harenir ran toward that place.

Beatrice was horrified at that sight. Though she saw the black wall for the first time, she recognized what it was and instinctively felt that entering there meant death. Yet she burst out in shock at Harenir's action of running toward that place.

"No!"

There was no hesitation in Harenir's back as he threw himself into the dimensional boundary. His figure disappeared as if devoured by darkness, and even his footsteps vanished ttuk as if cut off.

Beatrice and the two vice commanders stood blankly before the black wall. Between them who couldn't speak any words struck by shock, only the cave's thunderous sound endlessly fell.

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Everything was growing faint.

The loud commotion that had filled all around until just before grew distant, and the extreme pain like his whole body breaking and the bloody smell pooled in his mouth, and the smell like everything burning away grew thin... his vision grew distant while endlessly dyed in darkness.

It was a very strange feeling. Though his two eyes had disappeared and he could see nothing, the sensation of growing distant was mysterious. He probably sank slowly while considering that his final curiosity. Perhaps he might have regretted that not even an afterimage remained of the blue sky he had seen at the end.

However, gradually he came to be curious about nothing anymore. His consciousness didn't stay long in one place but scattered like powder and drifted here and there. It felt like his body, consciousness, soul was floating away somewhere unknown. Into darkness, into the realm of nothingness...

Blink-

Just then something shone before his eyes. Though he couldn't possibly have eyes, he felt something wavering beyond eyelids. Was this a hallucination experienced in the process of dying? He tried to dismiss it as insignificant, but blink- light burst again.

He opened his eyes as if chased by that. Though he didn't know exactly what he had moved, 'he' clearly faced it with the feeling of lifting eyelids.

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**There is an unclaimed reward.**

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A blue window was sparkling in the black space. Even after closing his eyes and opening them again, it was clearly the 'status window' that had been with him since entering this world.

"...What is this?"

He muttered in confusion. And right after, he was surprised again at the point that he was speaking something aloud. Hadn't his physical body been breaking and his five senses disappearing? When he looked down at his hands, a transparent spirit body caught his vision. Even his robe hem floated dung dung in the air.

Had he become a ghost? Around when he was growing bewildered unable to understand anything at all, someone's voice, a very unfamiliar yet familiar voice rang in his mind.

-Hey, you haven't received your quest reward.

He was startled. He instinctively recognized that voice as his, that is, the original Isaph's voice. The soul that had lived wholly in this world, and Isaph who had communicated with him as a cat since right after calling him to this place.

That Isaph was his past so 'he' was him, and 'he' was also him. Yet Isaph used the address "you" toward him as if dealing with a separate entity. Though his attitude distinguishing between them was strange, he asked first.

Though Isaph's words were quite sudden, he had something more curious.

"Where is this?"

-Beyond the dimensional boundary.

"Huh? What's there?"

-Nothing. As you felt, this is the realm of chaos and 'nothingness'.

Isaph explained quite kindly. Though he had given only quite limited information when communicating through the status window, now he responded in surprisingly detail.

-If there exists a clear will to go to some dimension, one could find direction in the chaos. But that's only possible for souls in a complete state, that is, the living.

"...Then why am I here?"

-Originally souls born in one dimension go through cycles revolving around that place. You've often heard that life and death are God's domain, right? Like that, living beings of this land return to Solnium's embrace when they die then come back down to this land again. In Earth terms, should we call it 'reincarnation'?

Isaph's voice rang in his mind. In the form of a soul dwelling together in this body speaking to him, similar to what he had experienced with the Dedium just before. However, there was something different about conversation with Isaph - it felt like not just his voice but some knowledge too was flowing into his head.

Should he say it felt like old memories gradually establishing themselves after facing Isaph's past in the research lab days ago? No, rather than that... to express it intuitively, Isaph was giving a PPT presentation inside his head now. Though it was an amusing metaphor, it really felt like that.

Presenter Isaph explained while flipping PPT slides.

-You died in the plaza of Solares holy city. But because you were in a state difficult to consider a soul of this dimension, you came to the dimensional boundary. If a heterogeneous being like you mixed into this place's cycle, there would be risk of ruining the flow.

He neatly summarized it as a kind of classification and isolation. Oh, even while alive he had drifted like a mismatched puzzle piece unable to belong anywhere, and it was the same after death. Not surprising at all.

-To explain additionally, it's also because of the homing instinct engraved in souls. You want to return to your original dimension. But since dead souls don't have the strength to break through this chaos, now you'll wander here and gradually disappear. Should we express it as eternal wandering, or complete extinction...

Hmm, he nodded his head like a professor watching a presentation. So living souls could find direction by strongly exercising homing instinct. That's why when they fell to another place, that is, another dimension after being swept up in strange light in the snowy mountain cave before, it was possible to return to their original land crossing the boundary again.

But that was only for his companions. At the time, not only was his soul broken, but he was hiding the Dedium's soul in his body. So he had nearly been swept into chaos unable to find his direction. If 'he' hadn't caught him, perhaps he would have gone to the Diums' world.

While understanding by pondering each of Isaph's explanations one by one, one part suddenly caught.

"What do you mean by 'state difficult to consider a soul of this dimension' that you mentioned earlier? Do you mean I was classified as a being from another dimension because I received horns and became a Dium?"

-Hmm, good question.

Somehow strange pleasure, or satisfaction dwelled in Isaph's voice. As if he was pleased with his behavior of listening carefully to his explanation and asking questions. Oh, perhaps Isaph was playing the professor role and he was the student?

-To be precise, you cannot be called a Dium. Would you become a being from another dimension just because a few minutes passed after receiving horns? That was just horns being planted in a human body. That's why your third eye didn't properly open, and the horns disappeared after being struck by the spear.

He explained that the time lived as a human was too long to classify him as a Dium, that even though a god from another dimension directly made him a subject, change wouldn't happen quickly. Since changing species wasn't such an easy thing, he should be considered to have died in the process of just beginning to change.

Though he didn't understand why such details needed to be argued, he nodded for now. Isaph's story continued.

-The reason you're difficult to consider a soul of this dimension... is because your memories of Earth are clear. You remember everything from childhood to the end there. To the point of recognizing Earth as your hometown. How could a being so deeply imbued with another dimension's energy be considered a soul purely belonging to this dimension? It's similar context to the experiment you thought about that day.

"...Huh?"

-You asked if an individual could be considered exactly the same after erasing all memories and raising them anew in a different environment from the start. It's saying it's difficult to assert they're identical. Souls are very delicate and complex. And above all...

Though only the blue status window existed in his vision, from some point it felt just like talking face to face with Isaph. Even though his voice only rang in his mind.

Though it was an illusion, it felt like unfamiliar purple eyes were staring at him up close.

-You've kept distinguishing. Saying 'you' and I are different.

"That's because I had no memories..."

Somehow it felt like being scolded. After mumbling an answer hesitantly, he suddenly felt wronged. Why should he be mindful? He raised his eyes and lifted his fists as if doing shadow boxing, as if Isaph were there before him, and argued:

"You're the one who displayed the status window in the first place. Making me keep perceiving this place like a game!"

-That's right.

"...Huh?"

-So you've thought of this world as not a dimension where you exist. You endlessly separated yourself and thought and acted like a separate entity from 'me'.

Isaph responded as if pleased.

-That's the reason you're distinguished from me.

He was bewildered. Isaph's explanation sounded as if he had deliberately induced 'him' to distinguish himself from him. He was just perplexed as the voice rang even quite gladly.

It seemed he came to the dimensional boundary being classified as not this world's soul because he maintained memories of another dimension completely until life's end and kept distance from this dimension... so what was he supposed to do about that? Wasn't that even worse? Now he had become someone who had to wander eternally.

Isaph's voice rang softly in his confused mind.

-That's why I became able to give you a 'reward'.

### Chapter 179

"...What?"

-I'm saying I'll give you freedom. That was the reward I proposed from the start.

As if reminding him of the initial quest, a blue window appeared in his vision.

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**Quest**

**Finally the opportunity has come! Help the empire's hero!**

—------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

—------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

**Reward for success: Freedom**

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Though likely meant to remind him, his gaze fixed on the word 'Finally'. As he quietly stared at that, Isaph spoke:

-And to tell you now, actually you didn't die on Earth. That truck was a hallucination.

His mouth fell open at the story continuing so cheerfully it was absurd. Isaph said that while calling him back to this dimension, he had read his memories, and noticing that 'protagonists moving to another world' in media he had encountered on Earth were often hit by trucks, he had imitated that summoning method.

-They used such a strange expression as 'isekai/truck-kun' there.

Could that be why he had felt no pain even when hit by the truck then? Just how far could Isaph manipulate souls? He was newly surprised by his genius ability, and also oddly understood the distinction between him and Isaph through such aspects. There clearly existed a gap.

As his mouth fell open, kuk kuk laughter rang in his mind. As if knowing clearly what he was thinking even without him speaking aloud.

-So if you have lingering attachment to life, I'll give you 'freedom'.

Isaph explained that he didn't need to worry about the time difference with Earth, that using the dimensional boundary he could send him back to the moment just before stepping onto the road. Saying the hallucination had started from then.

He moved his lips a couple times. To think even the hospital bills he had worried about long ago hadn't existed in the first place. Though the truths he learned now from Isaph's explanation were very surprising and fascinating...

"...No thanks. I'm just tired."

Though his body on Earth was alive, he wasn't particularly drawn to it. It wasn't just because he had lived in difficult circumstances there. He just didn't want to do anything anymore after experiencing too much. It felt like his energy was completely drained.

Moreover, 'freedom'? Rather, shouldn't his current situation be seen as freedom from all pain and passion?

He completely relaxed the tension in his body that had stiffened while talking with Isaph briefly. He closed his eyes again in the sensation of drifting like at first. He didn't want to feel like meeting purple eyes like an illusion again.

"..."

Having unnecessarily heard the word 'life', he recalled what happened just before death.

Everyone had condemned and pointed fingers at him as a traitor. He wasn't particularly wronged. He had deliberately created such a situation, and people hating him was too familiar. He wasn't curious whether the truth was revealed after his death, and actually thought it didn't matter if it remained buried forever. If that happened, would his death be seen as a villain who clung to the new world coveting power finally receiving divine punishment?

He liked how educational that was. Wasn't a world where a villain disappeared much better than one that lost its hero? Right, when would he ever do such a grand thing again? When living on Earth, he couldn't even imagine doing such magnificent things.

Above all... because he had prevented 'his' sacrifice.

Having fulfilled even his only desire, he had no lingering attachments. He felt he could close his eyes feeling he had lived quite a decent life to this extent.

As his consciousness was growing distantly loose, Isaph spoke as if waking him.

-You're saying you don't want to live because you're tired?

"Yeah. Now that my strength is all gone..."

-You were never not tired while living in that body...

"Hey, you're the main culprit who made that state."

Not just this world's body but his body on Earth too must have been weak from containing the Dedium. Having an unholy soul, he must have always been precarious. When he argued feeling suddenly wronged, Isaph just made a hmm- sound.

-Think a bit more. Once the dimensional boundary closes it's over forever.

"What do you mean?"

-Because the Dedium died, the passage to other dimensions is closing. It's the process of the world normalizing. Solnium cherishes humans quite a lot, so he'll manage so that land never connects with other dimensions again. Then you won't be able to go to that world.

He became bewildered at the words that it would be impossible even with his ability. Though he wanted to say 'so what?', he found himself unconsciously pondering those words again. ...Wasn't something strange? He had thought he would be sent back to Earth, but why did Isaph's words sound exactly like they were targeting Solares?

Though puzzled briefly, he soon shook his head.

"Doesn't matter. I'm tired and don't want to do anything anymore..."

The sensation of drifting in chaos now wasn't too bad. It felt like it would be fine to completely disappear like falling asleep while floating endlessly. He didn't want to take any action, or even think.

As his consciousness was slowly sinking like that.

"-! ...ph!"

Some shout kept tickling his ears. Though distant as if ringing from very far away, his ears reflexively turned toward it. Like an instinct engraved in him, responding to 'his' voice.

"Isaph!"

Starting, he opened his eyes and discovered him, Harenir.

Like swimming through black water with whirlpools, or like cutting through void in a zero gravity space, Harenir approached this place. Fallen into great shock, he could only look up at him.

What? Why was Harenir here? And how did he know he was here? While he was confused, Harenir kept getting closer.

However, he couldn't approach him beyond a certain distance. As if some wall existed between the chaos he was sinking into and the space Harenir wandered, from some point he couldn't come down, and his repeatedly reaching hand didn't touch him either. Was it because he was a living being with complete color even here?

Even if he reached out his hand, it seemed impossible for them to touch. Able to foresee the gap without even trying, he just blankly watched Harenir like one fallen into an abyss.

Was it a hallucination? Could you see such things in this space of chaos?

-Hmm, even a hero's soul will wear away if he stays here too long.

"...What?"

He turned around. Though until now it had felt like talking face to face with Isaph, he didn't know why he naturally turned back now. It felt exactly like he was behind him.

-Last time when accidentally swept away moving to another dimension, you could cross the boundary in one step and return to your original dimension. The hero especially returned more safely as a soul that world loves. But now he has entered the chaos beyond the boundary.

The story was that even such return wasn't easy and crossing dimensional boundaries itself burdened souls, but he had thrown himself aiming for chaos from the start. He was truly bewildered. Not simply because of Isaph's explanation but... because those words meant the Harenir before his eyes now wasn't a hallucination.

Harenir had really come to find 'him'.

Even at this moment Harenir kept reaching his hand toward him. It was clearly a gesture trying to touch him. Though he wouldn't be able to catch him no matter how much he tried from there, he was persistent. Moreover, though where he was located was a much more ominous and dark abyss, he behaved as if willing to fall here if only he could get closer to him.

He stared strangely at Harenir's pale face. Both his behavior endlessly calling his name now and his appearance as if his mind had flown away were only unfamiliar. It was the first time seeing him so disheveled.

"How did you know I was here...?"

He muttered dazedly. Though it was just talking to himself, Harenir answered urgently. As he who hadn't even reached up his hand and only stared showed his first response, he cried desperately as if thinking he had to catch this.

"Because souls from another dimension cannot remain in this land. So I thought you would flow here."

The words poured out without even breathing. As one who had studied scripture more deeply than anyone, did he understand the world's cycles? Though it seemed reasonable he would guess that classification since he had died after receiving horns, Harenir's following words shocked him.

"Above all, because you always viewed this world as strange."

Though until now he had only guessed his awkward behavior going around the empire was because he was from another country, when learning about the existence of other dimensions through Diums, all those actions appeared new.

"The soul I felt when connected with you was too heterogeneous too...?"

"That was really because I contained the Dedium's soul...?"

"No, I thought about the reason I felt your soul as 'three'."

He spoke while panting. Though the connection was cut now so he couldn't check again, he said he had noticed the heterogeneity layered on his soul by tracing past feelings. This would be similar context to the distinction of souls Isaph had explained just before.

"Moreover, the Dium we met in the snowy mountain also said it would send you back to your original world"

He was confused whether to be surprised that Harenir had deduced 'he' might be a being from another dimension, or shocked that he had thrown himself here based on mere speculation. Perhaps knowledge gained from ancient books about other dimensions gathered nationwide after learning the Diums' identity had helped, but wasn't it too much of a gamble to commit with just that?

Before him staying silent, Harenir opened his mouth again. As if afraid of his lack of response, he poured out words waruru.

"I know you deliberately took the Dedium into your body to be struck by the divine spear. The most heterogeneous soul I felt from you before must have been the Dedium's."

Though it was in the form of supposition, it happened to be confirmed right by words he had blurted out just before. Moreover, even the identity of the undead that had followed him was all revealed as necromancers dealt with zombies appearing right after the Dedium's extinction...

Right, though it was surprising that all his true intentions were revealed... shouldn't he be enjoying joy since I went through such trouble to eliminate the Dedium for that much? Shouldn't he be relieved saying the Dedium's soul was perfectly destroyed too, that catastrophe would never resurrect again? What was my reason for stepping forward like that!

Just why did you come in here? Did you come to confirm because one question about other dimensions remained? Did you come to investigate the truth? Anger welled up between questions following one after another. It was rage asking why he had jumped into such a dangerous place after he had saved him at such effort.

Harenir as a living being seemed to have difficulty enduring the torrent of chaos. The sight of him shaking looked like his soul was being torn, making his breath catch and even bringing on a headache. Though he had no physical body, was this pain created by conception?

"Right. Everything you think is correct. So quickly go back. No matter how much of a hero you are, it's dangerous to stay here-"

"No, I won't go back."

But Harenir was stubborn. Though he had seemed to just repeatedly wait for his answer until now, he cut off the middle of his words and declared:

"If I can't go together with you, I won't leave either."

### Chapter 180

At his firm declaration, he felt tremendous bewilderment beyond frustration. Could he perhaps not have seen him die after being struck by God's spear? Though his body seemed to have all burned away, since he had been thrown to the ground, maybe it wasn't visible from far away?

Even if he hadn't seen, he should be able to guess sufficiently that he had died after being struck by God's beam of light. Just look at his transparent form right now. He spoke in confusion:

"Don't you have any sense of where this is? You'll die if you stay here."

"What does it matter when I was planning to die today after sealing the Dedium anyway? It's the same whether I die there or here."

"...Are you in your right mind?"

"Yes."

He lost words at the too-clean answer. Though he seemed completely not in his right mind, his answer was very clear. As if not even knowing what his own appearance was like now.

He lowered his gaze to check the hand Harenir was still reaching toward him. It was dirty as if having groped the ground roughly, and had become covered in blood as if digging through piles of stones, looking endlessly unfamiliar. He who had always gone around perfectly hiding his wounds.

"You told me not to have nightmares. After saying such things, after even giving such a gift, how can you act so cruelly? When you clearly know what nightmares I suffer."

"..."

"You, at least you shouldn't be like this."

Harenir poured out words as if arguing with him. A dry laugh burst out as he even said what would he do about the nightmares he would suffer from now on. Was this the kind of situation they meant by saying someone saved from drowning demands their bundle back?

However, on the other hand, his urgent voice sounded like trying to catch his attention even like this. Even the action of reaching out his wound-covered hand to him again.

As if acting exactly like this, showing his weakness... he might turn back like when he had embraced him instead of leaving through the door.

He was dazed. Right, he could understand that Harenir had to react strongly to someone's sacrifice. Due to the nightmare that had chased him for long, my final appearance might have felt more terrible. But could that alone explain these reckless actions?

He couldn't understand Harenir at all. Why he made such nonsensical threats when he was already dead, and his strange stubbornness too. None of it was reasonable.

"You seem not in your right mind, probably just shocked for now."

"No, I'm surprisingly in my right mind now."

"Just why are you doing this?"

Unable to accept this battle of nerves with Harenir here at all, growing impatient at the fact that his soul was wearing away even during this, he finally threw out a strong move. He spoke thinking this much would make him leave.

"Do you like me or something?"

"If that's merely the answer you want, I'll say yes."

"...Merely?"

However, the answer that came back only bewildered him instead. Was he saying he would even act out those emotions if he would choose to leave here? No, but...

"Can this, these emotions, this passion that breaks down a person... be expressed merely like that?"

Even a slightly wronged air dwelled on Harenir's face looking at him now. Did he want to argue with him, or was he confused himself now recalling again the storms he had gone through?

"This thing that makes a person so irrational, clouds judgment, breaks thought... that makes one throw themselves into the dimensional boundary regardless of death, can such reckless and blind emotion be expressed with just the word 'like'?"

Harenir's hands trembled. Then his whole body shook too, but this was because the space vibrated kugugung- just then. He reflexively recognized this phenomenon as aftermath of the dimensional boundary closing. Harenir needed to leave this place quickly.

But even in such unstable chaos, even when he finally staggered and fell to one knee in a place heaving as if in an earthquake, he kept his position. Rather he lowered his body trying to endure this place's turbulence.

Incoherent, completely unlike him, words poured out in disarray.

"I, I, that is, I just want you to be by my side."

"...What? So you jumped in here for that?"

"Do you think that would suddenly be a problem for me now? I've wanted you by my side from long ago, even though you were a being using abilities that went against the Holy Empire's doctrine."

"..."

"Even in the situation where the stigma, no, the charge of being a mass murderer was attached, I still wanted you to stay by my side. Even thinking that if I couldn't erase that crime, if everyone ended up condemning you I would have to keep you somewhere only I could see..."

Harenir spoke while clenching his hands before the wall blocking him from approaching him, in the space where he could no longer descend. Despite the many problems that had followed me in the past, he had wanted to keep me by his side, his voice trembled paruru saying that.

"While looking for an island for you to stay during that time, I imagined being together..."

"...Island? Don't tell me, the 'residence' you mentioned to me was an island?"

"Yes. Since you said you wanted to stay somewhere no one knew you, so I bought an uninhabited island and built a house. A large two-story house with high ceilings, ocean views from the windows, and walking paths laid out..."

He was truly surprised. When he had heard from him that he had prepared a residence, he had just thought of an ordinary house somewhere in the holy city or corner of the empire. But it was an island? The scale was so large it was bewildering.

"I imagined visiting that island sometimes. I even thought of excuses in advance. I thought I could say I came to monitor the prisoner, or check on his condition. I wondered if I could stay by your side with such ridiculous pretexts..."

Moreover, it was surprising that even then when he didn't know my truth, Harenir had still imagined moments together with me.

'Indeed. Though I was really busy, yet that was quite fun.'

Suddenly he recalled Harenir smiling while talking about that residence. He had said he had checked on the house prepared since before going to the northern Encroachment Zone even during these past few days... Then does that mean even while guessing he would die sealing the Dedium then, he had prepared that place solely for me?

He looked at Harenir strangely. Was it because his appearance now looked like kneeling and begging? He must be a being who had never lowered himself like this anywhere, ever. He must never have revealed such unrefined emotions so completely before...

A being who had lived only in perfect form as if painted, who had lived his whole life suppressing personal emotions as a noble hero meeting everyone's expectations.

"If all these blind hopes of just wanting to stay by your side while abandoning all missions given to me, all responsibilities, all expectations, all those dawns fallen into such foolish delusions... can be called love."

"..."

"I love you."

Harenir confessed as if panting. As if being strangled by emotions that had been suppressed until now, that had to be hidden in his clenched hand that couldn't even properly caress my face until the end. As if choking on emotions he was only now naming, he poured out everything as if unable to endure without spitting it out.

"I know this place is dangerous. But still, I think it's better to remain here if I can't leave together with you, I won't return to a world without you... No, more precisely..."

The rambling continuing words sounded like wanting to avoid some fact. Harenir turned his head unstably here and there and repeatedly tried to steady his breathing, but all those breaths fell exactly like crying.

Finally he buried his face in both hands and spoke as if sobbing.

"I know you've died. Everything - that your physical body became ash, that your soul is disappearing now. Even though I know there's nothing I can do, ugh, still I came in here wanting to be together with you. Thinking it wouldn't matter even if I disappeared if I could just see you one more time at the end..."

"..."

"If even all these dull choices that make me cling only to this moment can be called love, I love you. I love you so much."

Harenir confessed as if about to lose his breath. Desperate despair was buried in every sentence.

Though knowing he was dead, though having felt already that he couldn't take him back out, he had thrown himself in here. Unable to even guess why traces of another dimension's energy were on him, he had just been happy at the possibility his soul might be here - he couldn't say anything to those words.

Because his confession that he had gladly chosen even if it meant death as long as he could be with him was too immense...

He just wanted to cry.

Because it was too sad that only extinction remained before him despite finally hearing the confession, despite his overwhelming love. Because the reality that all we could do together now was scatter into death was tragic.

Just then, 'his' voice rang in his mind.

-Want to go see that island?

### Chapter 181

He barely held back from turning around with a start. Not only was he worried about looking crazy talking to himself in front of Harenir, but that question itself was quite absurd. He swallowed self-mockery inwardly.

Even if he wanted to go to the island, how could he go?

-You could go if you want.

Isaph spoke as if reading his thoughts. Only then did he realize he could communicate without speaking aloud with the soul dwelling together in his body. After a dazed sigh, questions quickly arose.

'...Can I really go?'

He heard Isaph's laughter. Huhu, he laughed softly as if pleased with his progress, then soon whispered generously:

-They usually express being able to do what one wants as 'freedom'.

He was confused. Was he saying he would create hallucinations in his mind like the truck-kun? Though bewildered unable to understand Isaph's words at all... unconsciously he began imagining that island.

No, perhaps Harenir's time preparing that island.

"..."

Why had he wanted to cry while hearing Harenir's confession? Why had he grown sad at those desperate and overwhelming choices that were beyond passionate...

Harenir had lived restraining many things to stay as a perfect hero. Because of that he hadn't known what his emotions were and couldn't readily name what his time pointed to. Trying to think only rationally, only as the perfect specimen everyone wanted, he had come here completely broken.

And he had never properly received others' goodwill. He had never had anyone by his side and even ordinary exchanges between people were awkward. Since everyone hated him anyway, he had pushed others away saying he didn't need them either. So he had just tried to avoid the confusion, the turbulence experienced by Harenir's side.

But the motion sickness he had thought would be fine if he just distanced himself from him had endlessly followed him. Even when not by his side, he had to suffer dizziness like the whole world shaking just from thinking of him. It was a painful equilibrium disorder.

However, though he had thought he was just staggering wildly in all directions, he had been tilting toward just one place. His tiny world barely curled up around just himself... had finally tilted and made him tumble toward him. Though thinking there was no place for him in his world, though trying to keep distance repeatedly since he would leave this place someday.

Yet because of you I wanted to stay.

And so because of you I tried to leave.

So you wouldn't be weighed down by responsibility anymore, hoping there would be no catastrophe in the world where you stay, for the reason that the sky you see last shouldn't be ash-colored.

"Ah..."

If all those confused and blind choices Harenir spoke of could be called love, then these choices of mine too...

Were all love.

"...I, want to, go see that island."

It was a muffled murmur. Not deliberately speaking quietly but because he had burst into tears without realizing, his voice couldn't properly form. His whole body was so full of tears there was no gap for sound to squeeze through. It was a quiet wailing.

But that didn't seem to be the only reason.

"Ah, no. Isaph. Why, just why so quickly."

Only at Harenir's shock did he notice his soul was scattering. A dead soul has no strength to endure the chaos in the dimensional boundary long. Perhaps it was from being struck by God's spear.

Harenir tried to approach again at the sight of him breaking apart from the edges. But the same wall still existed between him and me. He blankly looked down at his hands, his fingertips crumbling like sand.

In the situation where even consciousness was growing distant, anger suddenly welled up.

'You said I could go. You said I could go if I wanted!'

-Oh my, disappearing earlier than I thought.

'After saying strange things about unclaimed rewards and whatnot. After saying you'd give me freedom, why!'

He screamed in rage. He argued that after tormenting him with bizarre status windows every time, he was playing with people until the very end. He poured out curses asking why he only suffered before dying, saying because of him he had struggled alone on Earth and now after rolling around here endlessly this was the ending.

Around then Isaph made a hmm- sound close to exclamation.

-Good. With this much will I can send you up.

'...What?'

-Remember I explained earlier how you and I are distinguished? So I'll classify the souls and take on only the karma of extinction to disappear, and send you out as a separate soul.

He said it was similar to when he had cut his own soul and sent it flowing to Earth before. He became dazed. Having been extremely excited and throwing curses wildly until just before, he was bewildered by Isaph's calmness. Or was he surprised because that explanation was quite unrealistic?

-I promised, didn't I? That I would give you 'freedom'.

To make you free from all sadness and pain, and from the tasks he had given. Isaph whispered like that.

'Is that... possible?'

-I'm not called a genius at soul magic for nothing.

'No, I don't have a physical body...'

Isaph's ability was certainly amazing. But wasn't there an even bigger problem? A problem that even his soul magic couldn't solve. What good would separating and sending out just the soul do? Was he saying to wander around like a ghost outside? To possess something?

'My body turned to ash after being struck by the divine spear.'

-And that is the first beam of light that opened this land's history.

'Huh...?'

At his bewildered reaction, Isaph laughed softly. He didn't seem to have laughed much in his memories. No, had he laughed in the very distant past? Whatever it was, he whispered as if very pleased.

-It means it's a holy object full of life force enough to sprout new buds in dangerous ground covered in darkness. Can you understand my words now? You fool.

Was that last word self-mockery? Though absurd, an even greater shock struck his head, no, made his whole body tremble. Could his physical body be revived since he was struck by God's spear? Could it be, was even this part of Isaph's intended big picture?!

Admiration for Isaph began welling up. Right, he was truly a fool. How could he consider himself equal to a being who saw so broadly and planned so grandly...

-Actually I wasn't certain I could save you.

'...Huh?'

-Even if struck by the divine spear containing life force, I was unsure whether that body could revive completely. Since it's a body that died containing the Dedium, it might be branded as eternally unholy.

It was a gamble? While withdrawing support for Isaph, he spoke in an interested tone.

-But, your horns disappeared the moment you were struck by the spear.

'...So what?'

-It means God directly purified your body. He drove out the unholy energy and took care so you could return completely as a human. God's mercy, or... should we see it as gratitude expressed to you?

And so if 'he' truly held the will to live in this world, Isaph would separate souls and reward freedom from extinction, and God would gift a complete human body...

-And just then that hero, being one containing grace, won't lose his way back.

He would clearly know the direction to go.

The situation where all pieces fit together exquisitely was too surprising. They say one freezes briefly when greatly shocked, and like that his frozen back was pushed. As if there was no time to waste like this, his soul floated up as if Isaph had pushed him up from behind.

His soul that had been disappearing sinking into deep chaos headed toward Harenir.

"Isaph!"

"...Harenir."

Finally he touched him in complete form.

Harenir was surprised at his appearance having shed all scabs. Though he seemed to have difficulty understanding what had happened, nevertheless as if clearly knowing what he needed to do now, he embraced him and immediately cut through the darkness upward.

To escape together from endless chaos, from long darkness.

—------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

Quest perfectly completed.

—------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

-This was fun.

With someone's whisper ringing in his mind like an illusion for the last time, he finally encountered bright light.

Whiiiiing-

The radiance dazzling enough to hurt his eyes was sunlight reflecting off the snowy mountain. Everything around was so white it felt exactly like being wrapped in light, and snowflakes mixed in the wind sparkled like the Milky Way. It was as if reaching a new universe.

"Ah..."

He sighed. He touched his throat finding it unfamiliar that his voice, his sound came out, and unconsciously touched his smooth forehead too. A body. Physical flesh with warmth moved by his will. He repeatedly examined his body, amazed by the complete flesh without even a scar where his heart had been pierced, without a single wound.

"...Isaph."

Harenir's cloak covered his naked body. As if worried he might be cold in the snowy mountain, he carefully wrapped it around his whole body and gently caressed his face. His touch was desperate as if confirming warmth. It was a gesture wanting to clearly feel that he was alive, his existence.

He caught Harenir's hand and buried his face deeply in it. This moment of feeling each other's lives was happy enough to overwhelm. Though tears seemed about to come, he held back crying while taking deep breaths.

He wanted to properly see this world, this beautiful world a bit more.

Only now freely looking at the blue sky, feeling his presence in this world taking a couple steps, confirming the sight of his footsteps leaving marks on the ground, he soon looked back at Harenir again. Meeting him brought him greater joy than any other scenery.

"I'm really alive."

He spoke in a very excited voice. He was so happy that his, 'his' breath continued here together with Harenir. He repeatedly said he was alive while holding his hand.

Harenir stared at him fixedly. Though unable to say anything as if many passions were rushing in, he read love rippling with supreme wonder in his blue eyes. He now clearly knew what emotions were contained in his eyes.

Just then that far distant place grew noisy.

"Th-there suddenly appeared a person...! Uh uh, C-Commander?! Huk, Isaph too!"

"Huh? Just what is this. The dimensional boundary closed inside the cave so how did the two appear outside."

"Isaph!"

Kalterik's, Beatrice's, and Mela's voices were heard in turn. It seemed the dimensional boundary closing had dropped him and Harenir in quite an unexpected place. It was strange chaos until the end. Those people had probably received great shock when the hero hadn't emerged until the boundary disappeared.

Though regrettable for them with their pale faces, after newly welcoming those faces again, he moved his gaze back to Harenir. Somehow laughter burst out as he still looked only at him without even turning toward that direction.

It was finally the moment this world became 'his' life.

### Chapter 182

#Part 16. 1

The entire continent was in an uproar.

Though the Great Catastrophe from 20 years ago had resurrected again and tried to occupy this land, it disappeared under Solnium's light. The Diums who lost their god quickly weakened and were eliminated by knights joining forces, and the Encroachment Zones that had appeared across the empire soon disappeared. The sight of lands faded to colorless gradually returning to their original state was enough to bring wonder to everyone.

Above all, a beam of light that poured from the sky that had been covered in cracks they couldn't even bear to look up at made imperial citizens tremble with joy. It was clearly God's miracle. Everyone spoke with one voice praising how brilliant the aurora that came down shaking heaven and earth had been, how God had saved the world.

The legend of the first beam of light in Genesis was illuminated. The light that brightened dangerous ground covered in darkness was not just a mythical expression but God's spear that really existed. So when great catastrophe came to the continent, God would again extend a helping hand, and there existed a legend that he would appear waiting in the place that first received the world's light.

Isolatedies. The long-forgotten holy object's name too rose on excited imperial citizens' lips as they speculated that perhaps that spear had appeared on the sky island when catastrophe came 20 years ago. Just then since the hero had brought Arux, the small sun buried on the sky island, they praised that he must have prepared all this.

The final battle fought in the holy city too spread from mouth to mouth. Especially the prisoner's betrayal in the plaza and his end were central. It was quite an educational story criticizing what end a traitor who joined the new world coveting power had met.

However, soon the truth was revealed.

The shocking truth that actually that necromancer had deliberately taken the Dedium's soul into his body to be struck by the divine spear. One by one it became known that it was a choice to surely kill the Dedium that moved souls around, and that he had acted out betrayal to gain the catastrophe's trust. Rumors spread that he had even brought that 'divine spear' preparing it from the sky island. The very last story was even testified to by the Holy Knight Order's two vice commanders.

Following that, the fact that all the undead he had commanded were souls of zombies eaten and contaminated by Diums was also revealed. All forces who had watched at the battlefield spoke with one voice.

At the inside story that the being everyone had pointed fingers at as unholy had actually sacrificed himself to eliminate catastrophe and had also prevented damage from zombies, imperial citizens fell into great shock. With long-accumulated perceptions completely overturned, people reached a level of not knowing what to do.

The atmosphere flipped in an instant.

Guilty feelings toward 'him' led to public rage that power holders who had traded with Diums must be properly punished. The extreme punishments that had been said should be given to him before now changed direction toward the power holders. They must be stoned in the holy city plaza, their skin must be peeled off layer by layer, or a spear must be thrust in their chest like he experienced, and so on.

It was fervor that didn't subside even though the targets were none other than the Pope and Emperor. Though necromancy went against the Holy Empire's doctrine, hadn't those who had condemned 'him' for it actually committed terrible acts instead?

Therefore, everyone spoke with one voice saying they must properly punish the power holders to take revenge for one who had silently endured humiliation for long, and express gratitude for his sacrifice. Waves of mourning continued across the empire.

And he who heard all this news, Isaph, reacted very dubiously.

"No, why, go that far..."

Currently Isaph was staying at Harenir's mansion located in the holy city. This was a kind of recuperation, because though his body that came from the dimensional boundary was complete without a single wound, that didn't mean it was healthy.

It was merely his past physical body resurrected as it was, and at this he was truly indignant. He even argued with heaven asking if they couldn't have given him a better body since he was being revived anyway.

Moreover, regrettably, he had become even weaker than the last state he had felt himself in. Since half his soul had embraced the karma of extinction and disappeared, from now on he had to live with only the remaining half. Though it would gradually recover with time, currently it was very unstable.

Because of this, Isaph had fainted around when reuniting with his companions on the snowy mountain. Though he really hadn't wanted to, his knees had buckled completely and he had collapsed, losing consciousness simultaneously, and when he opened his eyes again he was in some mansion's bedroom.

It was where Harenir had carried him, and it was decided he would find stability here for the time being. It was closer to a coercive notification than suggestion and seemed like he would be confined if he refused, but Isaph accepted readily. His strength had fallen anyway and just then after that day he had started sleeping much more.

Thanks to this, Isaph met only very few people who visited here while separated from the outside commotion. And each time he couldn't help feeling very dazed at the empire's news he heard. The truth that he had returned alive had not yet been publicly revealed.

"These days the holy city plaza is piled with flowers..."

"Everyone is truly sorry for misunderstanding you. People are rushing to the holy city from across the empire to offer mourning flowers."

"Wh-why are they doing such things...?"

Isaph sighed deeply at Kalterik and Mela's words. He muttered awkwardly that since he was alive, with this much mourning he would never be able to go out later. Having not expected the truth about his death to be widely known at all, the current situation was just very burdensome.

And at such reactions from Isaph, the two holy knights' hearts grew heavy. They even grew sad feeling that though he had given even his life to defeat the Great Catastrophe, he had tried to leave without resolving any misunderstandings in the end.

In the past they had thought Isaph shameless for being indifferent to all condemnation, but now it came across completely differently. That had just been resignation of one accustomed to contempt after spending long hard years alone. Whether others misunderstood him or not, he had walked only for one goal.

Actually now it was unknown whether Isaph's ability was really unholy. Hadn't God sent him back alive? The Order blinded by desire must have just set up Isaph as another evil to solidify their power. To strengthen the Order's forces with the plausible justification that he had invaded God's domain.

"Huh, well. Now I can't even question the crime of suddenly lifting me up then."

Beatrice burst into a dry laugh as she spoke. Though he had dared take the imperial princess hostage and made her suffer humiliation before everyone, she couldn't pursue this responsibility. Not only did she understand the ultimate purpose of that action, but the insults and contempt Isaph had endured until then must have been even greater.

Isaph just rolled his eyes awkwardly. Then undead alone would have been difficult to subdue so many knights, so a hostage had been needed. The First Imperial Princess was the only royal descendant participating then and a being imperial citizens acknowledged should be upheld among the royal family as inheriting the first hero's blood.

Just then, since the magic Beatrice used was mental type, she could be caught with undead. Since Isaph's undead were blindly loyal only to him, they wouldn't fall to the imperial princess's confusion magic. Actually Beatrice hadn't attacked his undead until the end either.

Thinking of that point, rather Isaph was grateful to Beatrice and the two holy knights. Wasn't it because they stayed still that others couldn't rashly try to cut down the undead? If he had had to engage in battle with the knights, the path to the Dedium would have been extremely difficult.

"Well, rather I should be grateful you quietly let me... no, that expression sounds a bit strange."

Isaph rambled embarrassed by the endlessly ticklish atmosphere. It was already bewildering that these people who must be very busy in the chaotic empire somehow made time for sick visits, but they made truly sad expressions every time they met which was genuinely burdensome.

Moreover, they looked at him with pity saying he had suffered enduring all sorts of insults and contempt, but there was a very big misunderstanding in that. For a while he had had no memories and just lightly dismissed it thinking 'Oh, character setting'... and originally in the past he hadn't particularly struggled with it either.

Others' gazes weren't important to him, and moreover if he had been hurt by people's pointing fingers, he wouldn't have blown away his pursuers by taking them as undead like that. He had even publicly destroyed a noble's mansion to warn them to stop when it started getting annoying. He had completely smashed it.

While Isaph fell into deep contemplation, the three exchanged glances. Soon Mela stepped forward and spoke

### Chapter 183

"Isaph. Though you must be very tired, could you meet one more person?"

"You don't need to treat me like a patient that much... anyway, who?"

Isaph had been sitting on the bed even though the imperial princess was present. Everyone had stopped him from trying to get up and he was almost forcibly made to stay only in bed, and around now he gradually noticed his companions saw him as an invalid who couldn't walk a single step. Though absurd, he accepted it since beds were always right.

Anyway, who was coming here? Isaph tilted his head quizzically, and soon was surprised to see the person entering through the door Mela opened.

"...Isaph..."

"Noi? You're awake?"

Brown hair, spring-green eyes like new buds, and pointed ears too. The one approaching hesitantly was none other than Noi.

Until just days ago, he had been lying like dead in the Holy Knight Order headquarters' infirmary. He had collapsed after blooming fairy flowers in the northern Encroachment Zone, and having offered too much life force, it was unknown when he would wake again.

As Isaph was surprised recalling Noi's pale face he had last seen, Beatrice shrugged and explained:

"The day you were struck by Isolatedies, miracles spread across the continent as God's radiance drove into this land. When light spread through the earth, not only did withered trees sprout new buds but all patients lying in sickbeds rose too."

People had offered prayers in wonder at the scene like God's blessing, she said. Isaph was sincerely amazed too. It seemed it really was a holy object full of life force as 'he' had said. Well, since it had revived even dead people, should he be newly surprised that it raised patients?

"That's right. My waking up was all thanks to Isaph."

Noi spoke with a trembling voice.

As soon as he opened his eyes in the sickbed and heard what had happened in the holy city, he had fallen into great shock. Learning at once about the many confusions and upheavals that had occurred since right after the northern Encroachment Zone's purification, he couldn't say anything for a while.

The truth about the 'necklaces' was surprising, the Pope's ugly desires whom he had followed like a father were shocking, and he even trembled all over at the fact that Diums had been summoned from another dimension.

Though Noi was confused by the fact that other worlds existed, he quickly understood asking if that was why he had felt heterogeneity going around Encroachment Zones. After quick understanding with his excellent mind, anger and feelings of betrayal rose violently.

Then hearing how the final battle in the plaza had turned out, and what sacrifice Isaph had made... Noi had shed tears. He had lived thanks to Isaph in the northern Encroachment Zone too, and had also awakened because of him. Recalling the many thoughtless words he had poured out at their first meeting, he became too guilty.

To Noi who was wailing loudly, Kalterik and Mela revealed that 'he' was alive. Actually they had meant to tell him from the start but Noi cried so loudly the conversation kept getting cut off. Though their action of waiting for him to collect his emotions before sharing the truth was consideration, Noi burst into tears again.

Afterward he prepared to meet Isaph. Since they said Isaph was very weak now, he felt the need to calm himself as much as possible before facing him. If not, feeling he might cry while noisily questioning before Isaph, he took time to compose his emotions.

Only after days passed like that could Noi come here.

"How alone for such a long time..."

However, emotions welled up again as soon as he saw Isaph. Taking deep breaths at the door before entering had been in vain. Isaph sitting on the bed looked much more sickly than his last memory. His face was bloodlessly white and his eyes were full of languid fatigue.

At Noi's gaze, Isaph sensed something and said:

"I'm just dazed from sleeping a lot. Not sick."

Of course his explanation didn't reduce Noi's worry at all. The reason he had been sleeping more recently must all be because of 'that day' too.

That matter came especially strongly to Noi. Having deep ties with Lady Evelyn, the previous Holy Knight Commander too, the hero sacrifice theory that had circulated in the empire since after he collapsed had pained his heart too much. And looking at eyewitness accounts of the final battle, the hero, 'he' must have been resolved to seal the Dedium.

But Isaph had stepped forward to stop that...

"Thank you, Isaph. Really for everything..."

Noi was ashamed even of this gratitude. He bent his body as if about to kneel as he slowly lowered his head. He ought to express thanks even like this.

Isaph was horrified at that sight.

"No, no. Don't do that."

He quickly stopped Noi's bow while his shoulders trembled bururu. It was so burdensome he felt like screaming. His feelings directly led to hurried action and...

Pulseok.

As Isaph's knees buckled while jumping off the bed, he fell delicately to the floor. He ended up kneeling before Noi, and while in the past he would have fallen over like a sheet of paper, this time he collapsed like a tragic protagonist in a drama.

Long ago Isaph had been ashamed of experiencing the former rather than latter situation, but now he realized the latter brought even more extreme embarrassment.

"I-Isaph!"

"Are you alright?!"

Moreover as everyone rushed around Isaph in surprise, he lowered his head with an even more painful heart. With his whole body trembling burulburul, his face bright red, he warned:

"From now on, everyone is forbidden from giving thanks or greetings before me..."

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Only after being left alone did he finally regain peace.

Not only was it shameful how much the four worried about him collapsing to the floor, but their reactions even gave him a headache. Since they fretted saying they would nurse him until he was alright, he drove them out begging them to leave.

When he repeatedly pushed their backs, they finally left, but rather than being pushed by his strength, it felt like they exchanged pitying glances like 'with just these thin arms...' and withdrew. Should he say he received consideration so he wouldn't suffer more? Of course this too only stacked his shame.

"Huuu..."

He stretched while approaching the window. Though he walked this well, everyone's fuss seemed too excessive somehow. Around when he was shaking his head, someone entered the bedroom.

"Isaph."

It was Harenir. Without gap to even greet, his body was suddenly lifted. He had quickly approached and carefully lifted him in both arms, moving him to the bed. Since the action flowed naturally like water and even proceeded as if obviously proper, he grew bewildered belatedly.

What? Had he teleported? Why did it feel like he couldn't leave the bed? The blanket had even been meticulously covered in that moment.

"You must be tired, so don't force yourself to walk around."

"I was just standing by the window...?"

"If you want to look outside, I'll move you so call me."

"Just what are you saying?"

It was bewildering to the point of absurd. Even now he must have returned to the mansion right away upon hearing news he had awakened, but he was even trying to take care of him. Moreover, however he had taken his reaction, he said he was making teleport scrolls so he wouldn't have to wait. Then he could return here immediately from anywhere anytime.

A dry laugh burst out at Harenir's will to evolve into his personal transport.

"I walk well now. I even do two laps around the bedroom."

This bedroom was very spacious so at first he hadn't even managed one lap before collapsing panting. Compared to then, this was quite big progress. At his confident statement, Harenir seriously nodded his head.

"I'll make the scrolls quickly."

"That shouldn't be the conclusion."

That day when Harenir saw him fall in the bedroom, he had changed the carpet on the floor to a much softer one and even replaced all the furniture corners. At this point shouldn't he be seen as treating him as a newborn rather than patient?

Finally he just shook his head. Since the reason for excessive protection wasn't completely unexpected, he decided to let it pass thinking it would be fine with time and talk about other things.

Harenir's slightly disheveled appearance from rushing back to the mansion caught his eye.

"Anyway, since I'm continuously getting better, you don't need to come tend to me. Wouldn't it be troublesome returning every time I wake when you must be extremely busy? Especially since I wake up so irregularly..."

"That's why I can't miss time to see you awake."

Harenir answered in a matter-of-fact tone. As if what he had said last was exactly the reason he visited faithfully, rather he sighed as if having other complaints about the current situation.

"Actually I'm barely holding back from pretending not to know everything and leaving. I think I could do it well since I've thrown you out once before."

### Chapter 184

"Why, why have you become more extreme than before...?"

He sighed deeply. In the past, even while faking his death, Harenir had deliberately hidden it clumsily to avoid giving too much chaos to the empire. It was surprising that someone who knew so well the responsibility that followed a hero now spoke of wanting to throw everything away.

They say people's personalities change after surviving a near-death crisis, could this be such a case...

Moreover, the reason Harenir was now looking after stabilizing the chaotic empire no longer seemed to be from a hero's sense of duty.

"Though the dimensional boundary is closed now, according to ancient books, a world that has once connected with another world has the risk of 'passages' forming again. So it's taking some time to watch and prepare so it doesn't open again."

"Hmm, I don't think it will connect again..."

"Speculation alone isn't enough. Since we can't have you trying to sacrifice yourself again if catastrophe happens to come, we need to manage it properly."

Did he see him as some icon of sacrifice? Though he shot a dubious look, Harenir was very serious. Since they didn't know when humans blinded by desire like the Pope might appear again somewhere, he said he was even preparing an organization to monitor impure movements across the empire, no, the entire continent.

He was truly surprised by the story that continued from then.

Currently the entire continent was in turmoil. There was too much joy at defeating the Dedium to be drunk on when the problem of leadership who had traded with that monster remained. Since this content had become known when the monster was trying to resurrect in the holy city, dealing with it had just been temporarily postponed.

This was a major matter entangling not just imperial citizens' sense of betrayal but other kingdoms, and even fallen countries. Those who had had to bow their heads to the Order seeking the empire's protection after the Great Catastrophe, who had offered various authorities and territories in that process, protested the Order's true nature. They raged asking if they had been deliberately keeping catastrophe alive.

So the hero decided to compensate as much as possible with the traitors' assets. He opened the Pope's vault first. He gave compensation several times what the damaged kingdoms demanded, but considering the background that catastrophe had come due to the Pope's desires, this was natural.

The kingdoms received this very dazedly. To them too the empire's hero was a being who had faced monsters at the forefront so not someone to bare fangs at, and so they rather gratefully accepted the 'organization' the hero proposed afterward, they said. Since it was an organization to manage risks so catastrophe would never come to the continent again, it was just a welcome proposal to countries that didn't yet have such capacity.

"Amazing..."

How should he express it - wasn't it like continental police? Since all the continent's information would gather to him. Perhaps even greater influence than the previous Order might be established.

The truth that Diums had been summoned from another dimension was decided to be kept secret continuously. Since knowing information that other worlds existed could itself ignite dangerous curiosity, it would be buried forever, and only those involved would secretly watch and monitor so passages wouldn't open.

Though that story was surprising, his chest tickled unexpectedly. Though Harenir's actions would ultimately bring peace to the entire continent, the actual purpose was only for 'him'. Of course the reason being to prevent him from sacrificing again was absurd but...

Anyway, all his efforts were for the purpose of managing so the world where he would stay would be peaceful.

"The Order's personnel are all being replaced too. And punishment for those imprisoned is being discussed..."

He said heated discussions were also going back and forth about dealing with the traitors who had sent humans to obtain youth. Since attention was focused, appropriate punishment needed to be given, but as these discussions lengthened, they were trembling in prison.

However, the traitors were already suffering their karma.

"The black crystals in the necklaces had emitted death energy that rotted not just their bodies but souls too. Though they seem to be in quite pain as some occasionally try to commit suicide, so we're keeping them alive..."

Those who had gathered in the Pope's office hadn't been able to remove their necklaces. The crystals emitting black energy had dug into their flesh, and because of that their bodies and souls had festered it seemed. Perhaps this was the resentment of people who had died due to the leadership's desires.

Though thinking it was fitting karma, on the other hand the story that Harenir was keeping them alive came across somewhat chillingly. This was closer to just keeping them alive so they couldn't easily escape through death rather than the hero's mercy.

The day the Dedium's egg appeared in the holy city, that is, right after grasping the Order's truth, a special order had been proclaimed in the empire. Though the content that the hero held all command authority in the empire, exercising authority above even the Pope and Emperor had been immediately lifted after the Dedium's death, it still seemed everyone hoped for and relied on the hero's command in this time of extreme chaos.

Though Harenir's reason for accepting such requests was only to guard against 'passages', and he seemed to think only of throwing everything away and leaving once things were roughly sorted out, he slowly nodded his head.

For the first time he saw dark circles under Harenir's eyes. Though he had easily stayed up nights for days with his excellent recovery power, now his face was very fatigued. His eyes had grown sharper too. Since so many events had occurred in succession it couldn't be helped but...

He carefully reached his hand to Harenir's face. Wanting to give him even a massage, he gently rubbed around his eyes and Harenir immediately leaned his head into it. As he even closed his eyes as if savoring the touch, he moved his hand with a bit more effort.

No matter how he looked at it, it seemed like Harenir rather than him should be in bed now.

"The hero is working too hard..."

"...Someone like me isn't a hero."

He was surprised at Harenir's quiet answer. Though he would be a being who not only had clear evidence of God's grace but was acting more heroically than anyone in the empire now, what was this modesty? However, his tone was too low to just be bewildered.

Carefully Harenir caught both his hands and buried his forehead in them. He lowered his body as if bowing while bending his upper body. Though no conversation passed for a moment, his action felt exactly like some kind of worship.

After quiet time passed, Harenir spoke slowly:

"I had something I wanted to ask actually - should we reveal that you stole the Dedium's soul early on too? Since thanks to that the Dedium's resurrection was delayed..."

Currently as truth about the prisoner spread heatedly through the world, large-scale restoration of honor was proceeding. The wave of mourning happening in the plaza was one example, and though he knew the two vice commanders and imperial princess were actively participating, perhaps Noi had joined in too. And now it seemed Harenir wanted to join too.

"You don't need to do that..."

"But you suffered for so long because of that. You were even misunderstood from when the Dium approached in the northern Encroachment Zone. So if we reveal the truth-"

"No, I'm saying there's no need to reveal complicated things."

He shook his head. Right now even the few guests who visited here felt very sorry every time they saw him so he was reluctant since revealing that part would make it even more serious, and above all...

"Just stealing the Dedium's soul doesn't explain everything. We can't reveal everything about why the Dedium became so firmly entwined with me that it had to dwell in me, and what happened."

If one thing was dug up, dozens of explanations would be needed in succession. He tended to judge it was better to bury matters that were complicated to handle. The misunderstanding created in the northern Encroachment Zone had naturally been forgotten, pushed aside by the memorial service spreading in the empire now so it wasn't very important either.

Moreover, there was only one person he wanted to tell all the truth to. He met Harenir's eyes steadily and spoke:

"I'm ready to talk now. It took some time to organize..."

Since coming from the snowy mountain he had frequently fallen asleep, and even when awake he was usually languidly stretched out without energy for long conversation. And above all, he had worried about how to explain his situation to Harenir. Not only was it too complicated but quite an unrealistic story.

So even as days passed he hadn't been able to give any explanation, but Harenir hadn't rushed at all. Though he too must surely be curious about many things, he had waited until he opened his mouth first. Knowing all that was consideration, he carefully opened his mouth.

A very long story began.

Starting with Isaph's past, he explained following the flow of time. How he had come to chase Diums, why he had stolen the Dedium's soul, and for what reason he had bound souls together and sent them to another dimension. He carefully connected the story of staying in that world for 20 years before returning here and adapting without memories.

Though he had organized it several times in his mind, once he actually spoke it out loud he ended up wandering a lot. Though he rambled repeating things he had said, Harenir listened quietly.

Having started the story at midday, by the time he finished the sun was setting. During the long time, Harenir had made no response except occasionally nodding his head.

He awkwardly asked while clearing his throat keum keum:

"It's unbelievable, right? Sounds like nonsense..."

"No, I believe it."

Harenir answered firmly. Then he rose from his seat and as if it were natural, poured warm water in a cup on the bedside table and handed it over, and spoke in an equally matter-of-fact tone:

"Since it's the story you told me, I believe it all."

### Chapter 185

He accepted it as if his story was doctrine, no, beyond that, like primordial truth and an eternal law. The acceptance was so ready that rather he was surprised.

"Though there are many fascinating parts, and points I can't imagine... still, I don't think it's lies."

There was no hint of falsehood in the blue eyes that looked at him while answering seriously. Not forcibly acting or reluctantly believing, he was sincerely accepting everything. He had just been silent while organizing it in his mind as he listened.

Afterward Harenir sat down again and quietly pondered his story while crossing his legs and propping his chin. Muttering "So that's why you acted so strangely then...", he occasionally nodded asking if the odd expressions he had used were also influence from visiting another dimension. Though he was grateful that he was trying to understand, that statement came across as quite absurd.

Saying he had acted strangely! Though indignant, he couldn't dare argue. Though the question of when rose in his mind, he would acknowledge this on conscience since there were too many such instances.

"You must have been very confused when you returned here with no memories at all."

Harenir nodded slightly saying that was why he had looked so bewildered unable to even recognize himself when he came out of prison. He seemed to be combining his explanation with past moments while tracing them one by one.

"You said you moved receiving 'guidance' from the cat you reunited with outside prison. So you accepted going to Encroachment Zones, and also followed it when using abilities. Could that perhaps have exerted power like revelation?"

"Revelation?"

"Yes. Before when I received grace, Solnium's whisper rang in my mind saying 'Spread your sacred realm and purify the unholy land.' I wondered if it felt like direction given like that."

It wasn't that kind of holy feeling at all...

He felt very awkward recalling the curses he had burst out at the status window in the past. Since explaining about games and system windows too seemed too complicated, or honestly because he wasn't confident in explaining, he had roughly lumped it together but Harenir showed interest in that.

He answered awkwardly:

"No, well, it wasn't that grand. Should say simple instructions appeared before my eyes... Orders like look at the ground, or run? Threatening to do it if I didn't follow..."

As he said he had had to follow instructions since he didn't know this world well then, he was surprised when Harenir sighed and asked if that was why he had sometimes looked at empty space. Had he with his good observation noticed subtle points early on? In the past Harenir had seemed to think he just saw souls on the street because he was a necromancer.

After several more questions and answers continued, Harenir murmured seriously:

"That being, that is, the being you distinguish by calling 'this dimension's Isaph' is really fascinating. Leading you to adapt here, assimilating souls as one and finally separating them to resolve the karma of extinction..."

Harenir was especially interested in the story that the original Isaph had dwelled in a cat and communicated with him. Saying though somewhat cold like a familiar, it had always watched over him around him. Since he hadn't noticed, rather he was more fascinated.

Though that being was him, it was really difficult to think of them as the same person. While talking to Harenir, he repeatedly understood why Isaph had called him a fool.

"Right. So actually... I don't feel like I suffered. Though the empire is apologizing now saying they misunderstood the prisoner and he had to suffer for long, that doesn't feel like 'my' time. It feels distant like a very long time ago to me, and above all, he was the being who prepared fiercely for a long time..."

He confessed awkwardly. Though the past was all intact in his mind, the emotions from then had faded slightly as if quite old. Should he say it felt like a past life?

It seemed he and he should be seen as distinguished from the moment souls separated at the dimensional boundary. A kind of branching point where they became different. While 'he' had kept distance from this dimension visiting Earth, he had stayed here continuously.

So after souls separated, he had belatedly received and found unfamiliar the shared time of him staggering alone toward Klam Village to force out-of-body experiences on zombies, enduring alone in prison. Afterward he had given information to him who had returned and helped him adapt to this dimension, gradually leading toward the final goal. All this effort was done by him.

He quietly looked down at his hands. Though he had thought this hours ago too, Isaph had never been saddened by others' gazes in the past. Rather he had only raged saying to investigate Encroachment Zones with this trouble. When he had felt sadness was... only when the black cat licked his wound-covered hands. Because it had made him recall again why his family couldn't leave and remained by his side.

He pondered Isaph's purpose in stealing the Dedium's soul. His plan to completely destroy the Great Catastrophe had started from the despair of losing his family and villagers. However, it seemed insufficient to call that just desire for revenge.

That is, Isaph... perhaps had stepped forward hoping the miserable loss he had had to experience would never repeat. That such tragedy should never happen to anyone.

"Thinking like that, the mourning proceeding seems right too. Since he really disappeared..."

Though apologies feeling guilty about the humiliation past Isaph had had to endure would have little meaning to him, mourning that revered and commemorated him saying he truly worked for the greater cause seemed right.

"I just, well, got lucky. He did all the planning."

He spoke while touching his nape. Should he say it felt like receiving applause when someone else had suffered greatly? However, Harenir firmly shook his head at his words.

"No. Because you were the one resolved to be pierced by the divine spear."

"..."

"Planning and actually carrying it out are completely different matters."

He declared that if he hadn't stepped forward it would have just remained a plan. His gaze wandered here and there at the embarrassing words. Though when he received past memories the board had already been exquisitely laid out and he had sensed just one last step was needed, he only made awkward arguments inside saying how could he ignore that.

As if reading such thoughts, Harenir caught both his hands and spoke deliberately:

"No matter how much you followed instructions, it was all you who had to endure the pain in that process. Don't ignore your efforts."

Harenir spoke carefully saying he knew he had stepped forward even in moments without the cat, that is, without any forceful instructions. As he spoke emphatically while meeting his eyes directly, though very embarrassing, pride welled up sneakily. If that hero acknowledged it, wasn't it okay to be proud?

Right, not just Isaph but 'he' too had suffered considerably. First he should get extra points for moving with a much weaker body than that guy had lived with. He had rolled in both figurative meaning, and literally crawled rolling on the ground in dictionary meaning.

He had really suffered like death, no, even actually experiencing death!

"Right, that's true. I had a really hard time."

He quickly poured out to Harenir. He flowed out that he had been really uncomfortable at first with no memories, that there were too many dangers he had had to face pushed by the cat's threats. He seemed to have spoken almost like whining wanting to draw out more praise from Harenir.

Harenir listened seriously and answered that he had suffered for each thing, and while chattering wildly excited by his acknowledgment... he discovered his expression gradually darkening. Around when he sensed something was wrong, he spoke.

In a tone that seemed a little, very little choked:

"...Perhaps, do you miss the world where you originally lived?"

"Uh, huh?"

"You said before you would leave when everything was over. I wondered if perhaps that was a plan to return to your original world. Since you only have memories of suffering here..."

He was truly bewildered. Since he had suffered greatly on Earth too, he had never wanted to return there. Could this be a misunderstanding from lumping together explanation about the game and not revealing the 'reward'? While wondering where to start correcting, he belatedly noticed the emotion dwelling on Harenir's face.

"You said your memories of living in that world are clearer..."

It was very deep anxiety.

Since he had poured out complaints that it was hard adapting to a completely different world from where he had lived, that there were too many uncomfortable things, from Harenir's position it was understandable to think that way. Perhaps afraid he might want to return to the world he was more familiar with.

### Chapter 186

Moreover, he hadn't spoken in detail about Earth. He had just said he had lived the same years in another dimension before returning, but Harenir seemed to think even that was deliberately not mentioned due to homesickness. That he had completely buried it lest talking about it in detail make him miss that place.

After pondering, he slowly opened his mouth. Though this was just an absurd misunderstanding to him so he had thought to simply deny it and move on, feeling that would only deepen the roots of anxiety, he felt the need to cut off the sprout now.

"Umm, the world where I lived was very different from here. Though there's no mysterious power like holy power or magic, something called technology developed. Compared to here, there are many convenient aspects, and lots of fun things too..."

Though there were no cheat skills like teleportation, not only was the overall transportation system excellently established, but above all there was a huge difference in digital culture.

Actually if he had to pick what was hardest after coming to this world, it would be the absence of phones. On Earth, he had been someone who lived with his phone all day long. He had gone through forced digital detox. Though at first it was fine since he slept over ten hours a day adapting to the body.

A laugh escaped as he recalled the past when he had unconsciously patted his chest trying to find his phone. And at his dry laugh, Harenir's expression darkened further so he quickly shook his head.

"Though it's true it was hard adapting to this world, it wasn't terribly difficult either. Looking back, I think that was because I originally lived here."

Though not in his memories, it seemed unconscious instincts engraved in his soul had worked. Things like immediately understanding and using the language, or quickly comprehending and connecting unfamiliar information about this world. There were too many instances coming to mind as evidence.

"And above all, in the previous world I was always alone. No family, no friends."

"..."

"I didn't even have money, so I wonder why he didn't send me to a better environment if he was going to hide me in another dimension anyway... Well, I guess it might have been the same wherever I went..."

Since he was entwined with the Dedium's soul, he would have been avoided by all living beings wherever he was, even if sent to a dimension other than Earth.

Actually that was why he had lived only with his phone. Since people were uncomfortable with him, he naturally ended up holed up in a small room just staring at screens. Hmm, though maybe he couldn't say completely alone since he had been with the black cat...

Sadness rippled across Harenir's face. He shook his hands saying he didn't need to take it so heavily. Since it was all past stories now.

"But thanks to living such a life, I adapted here quickly. Since I was alone here too and everyone was uncomfortable with me, it was familiar!"

"...Isaph..."

Hmm, could this not be sublimated into self-deprecating humor? He had even shrugged his shoulders saying he was experienced at being an outsider, but Harenir's expression only darkened further making him awkward.

Soon Harenir carefully wrapped both his hands and spoke:

"...From now on I will never leave you alone."

It was a serious tone as if making a vow. Though he had just told him the previous world was nothing special and there was no family or friends at all to miss, trying to remove Harenir's anxiety, rather it seemed to have given him a great sense of responsibility.

Though embarrassed, he felt his chest tickling on one hand. Thump thump, his heart beat pleasantly. Both Harenir's careful promise now, and even his anxiety worrying he might want to return to his original world. It was enough to make him thoroughly pleased.

"Right. Since you brought me out, you have to take responsibility."

So he deliberately spoke playfully while waving his hand lightly. Hadn't he chased after him trying to leave and even threatened to stay in chaos forever himself if he didn't come out? So since he had finally been led out by him, naturally he should take responsibility for time ahead.

He had to always stay by his side so he wouldn't be lonely, and had to play with him leaving no time to be bored too. Moreover, since mourning was proceeding outside so he couldn't leave the mansion, he had to fully support his life.

At his shameless orders trying to employ the empire's hero almost like a butler, Harenir softened his eyes. Around then he was saying the thin stew was tiresome so change the menu, and while at it since he had no strength to lift his hands he needed to be spoon-fed.

"I'll gladly follow."

"...Wait, you know I'm speaking in jest right?"

"But we'll watch your condition more regarding meals. You need to eat types that are easy to digest."

Though he had just been saying outrageous things to change the atmosphere, Harenir's reaction was taking it very seriously. He even soothed him saying wouldn't he be able to eat more varied food later if he got better quickly, so he needed to endure for now.

Th-this was a joke right? Just countering with even more extreme words than him? As he tried to sneakily pull his hands caught by Harenir away, just then he spoke quietly:

"For the first time, I was glad to be this world's hero."

"...Huh?"

"Because I received God's grace, so I could save you from chaos and return..."

He who had always been cynical toward God, who had always been cold about being called God's beloved son, confessed that for the first time he was grateful for that fact. He said he had also felt wonder at God's mercy that I who had my body burn away being struck by the divine spear could come back revived.

At Harenir's sincere confession, he only moved his lips. Though he hadn't been very surprised when encountering his disbelief in the past, rather this story bewildered him. Perhaps because he felt the reason his thinking had reversed so much was all because of him.

At his hesitant reaction, Harenir smiled faintly.

"So properly serving you who are like proof of God's existence must also be something I ought to do."

...Huh? How did that conclusion come about?

While he grew confused unable to understand his thought algorithm at all, Harenir firmly caught his hands. He even opened his fingers and interlocked them without gap.

Wait, surely he hadn't mentioned God deliberately to create an atmosphere where he couldn't argue back? Surely, really surely. He forcefully trampled down the rising ominousness.

Right, no matter what, the hero wouldn't act that far...

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He did.

"I'll eat by myself. I have hands too!"

He really tried to spoon-feed him by his side...

"Can you not see my legs? I'm telling you I can walk!"

He kept trying to carry him in his arms to move him...

"Did you install some sensor in the room? How did you know I was awake and come when I hadn't even called anyone?"

He came into the bedroom to stay with him as soon as he woke up. Originally after waking he would call mansion staff to request meals and contact with Harenir, but this time though he deliberately didn't press the call bell and quietly walked around the room, he was still caught by Harenir and returned to bed. The scroll had been made by then.

"I vowed that day, didn't I? That I would serve you well."

"I never accepted such a thing."

"After giving orders first..."

He didn't understand why someone who had probably never taken orders from anyone was acting like this. He stared at Harenir in bewilderment before finally making a strong move.

"I won't eat until you stop this strange behavior."

Last time he had reluctantly eaten as he was spoon-fed. He had just gone along with it once thinking it must be a joke, but seeing Harenir's behavior today, he had an ominous intuition it might continue from now on. He decided not to ignore this suspicion radar anymore.

At his declaration of hunger strike, Harenir paused. Though actually he could only swallow if his mouth was forced open, unable to choose that method he stayed quietly silent. Taking advantage of that gap, he even waved his hands.

"And, I want to be alone so please leave."

"How can a person change like this?"

"You're the one who changed..."

Perhaps saying he had gone crazy rather than changed might be more appropriate. It was too burdensome to keep summoning Harenir who must be very busy, and above all, he had some things he wanted to do alone.

### Chapter 187

Without even looking at Harenir, he spoke firmly.

"You suddenly came while working too. So come back after finishing work."

He was very worried that he might have suddenly disappeared in the middle of a meeting. Though thanks to the image he had built up, it seemed likely to earn understanding like 'The hero must have urgent matters to check!'...

Anyway, after repeatedly ordering him out, finally Harenir headed for the door. Though food had been brought to the room, when he didn't show even a grain of interest, Harenir seemed to reluctantly follow the threat.

"...Still, please eat."

Harenir gave a final instruction. Since he seemed like he absolutely wouldn't leave if that too was ignored, he roughly nodded his head. Harenir muttered that even his capriciousness was exactly like something, but his voice was so quiet he couldn't hear properly. Originally he had only been focused on him leaving anyway.

Only after seeing through the window that Harenir had completely left the mansion did he move with a sigh of relief.

"Huk, heok..."

So, literally, he 'moved' his body.

Though he had barely succeeded in making two laps around the bedroom, not content with that he needed to keep rehabilitating, but he kept hitting a wall because of Harenir. It was very regrettable since whenever he saw him walking he would immediately lift him in his arms and move him to bed.

Though just lying in bed would only slow recovery, rather he seemed to even want that. No matter how much he said he was fine, he postponed saying 'later'.

Of course since his legs trembled hudulhudul whenever he walked, and he fell over several times, from an observer's position it could be worrying but isn't that how one learns to walk? Ah, even he was treating this body like a newborn.

"Wow, I never thought I'd miss my previous body's condition..."

Moving a physical body with part of the soul lost was really difficult. It must also be aftereffects of experiencing chaos at the dimensional boundary. To use a metaphor, should he say it felt like walking wearing a very large mascot costume? Though sweat dripped ssiljil, he kept walking while panting huk huk.

The reason for doing all this was all because of the 'island'.

He wanted to go see that island Harenir had mentioned. He was also very curious about the house said to have been made for him. But he couldn't move at all in his current body condition, and just then Harenir was also busy organizing the empire. So he wanted to prepare his body so they could go right away when his work finished.

Just how beautiful would it be? This must be exactly like the excited feeling of wanting to move into a new house.

"Huuk, did I make four laps..."

Ttulseok, he sat collapsing into a chair while catching his breath. He was already tired. But since he was already alone, not wanting to waste the time he took out paper.

It was a letter to Laria.

Currently he was awake for very short times each day. And every time he woke up either a few guests visited or Harenir stayed by his side so he hadn't had proper leisure to write letters. First telling Harenir everything had been his first goal.

So now having finished that task, he wanted to contact Laria. Since she still didn't know he had come back to life, she seemed likely to be in great shock and distress.

He wrote the letter like giving thanks since he had received no small help from her not just in the past but while he had no memories too. After writing a simple letter just informing of his survival, he rose from his seat.

As he stretched jjuk, beolkeok, the door opened and Harenir entered.

"Work is finished."

Already? Though quite suspicious, seeing desperate energy rippling in the blue eyes looking at him, he couldn't bring himself to drive him out again. Though it seemed like barely a few hours had passed, why did he look so anxious? Had he developed separation anxiety?

Harenir quickly approached him. Feeling he planned to lift him in his arms and move him to bed again, he quickly held out the letter first. If he really wanted to be a butler, there was something he needed to do just then.

"Please mail this."

"...What is this? Why are you trying to contact this person?"

Harenir narrowed his brow seeing the name 'Laria' written on the envelope. Instantly filling with displeasure, he questioned why he was trying to inform an outsider of his survival, what was the intention of contact, and so on.

At these quite strange questions, he looked at him in bewilderment and spoke:

"I told you before. She's the person who helped me recover my memories. She also provided a space for me to stay before..."

In the long story told that day there had been brief explanation about Laria too. That he had hidden and researched in the villa she had saved him with in the past, that later too he had faced memories returning to the research lab through her, and so on. He thought he had fully proven justification for contacting someone who had given quite big help.

But Harenir's face remained only cold. Rather as if very displeased by news that he had stayed near her in the past, he even pressed his lips shut tight.

Since he showed absolutely no sign of moving, he roughly waved his hand.

"Fine. Then I'll go mail it..."

"No. You absolutely cannot go out."

Harenir immediately blocked his path. While he was surprised at the oppressive air as if about to confine him here, he quickly poured out questions.

"I heard you've been walking around the bedroom continuously, was that to go to that person?"

"What? How did you know about that too?"

"I heard from the servant who took the dishes. But why aren't you denying my words?"

"No, because what you're saying is absurd. I was thinking of asking a mansion servant to mail the letter for me."

It was bewildering enough that he had been receiving regular reports about his condition from outside, but why on earth would he think such things about the purpose of his rehabilitation? Since the mansion's servants were among the few who knew he was alive, he had just planned to walk the corridors to find someone to ask.

Looking up at Harenir quizzically, finally he just shook his head and spoke lightly. He didn't want to engage in needless argument.

"How could I even go to Lara Workshop, no, even the villa in the holy city with this body in the first place? I probably couldn't even endure a carriage."

"You even thought about carriages? Just how far were you preparing to go?"

"Why do you hate me trying to move so much? Surely, really surely you're not still doing this worried I might want to return to my original world? Even though the dimensional boundary is completely closed anyway-"

"Are you planning to find it if it opens again?"

His intention was clearly joking. He had deliberately exaggerated making a fuss asking surely he wasn't worrying about such things, but regrettably it seemed he had pressed some button. As Harenir's face not only hardened but even grew somewhat pale, he sighed deeply inside.

Ah, he had completely made a mistake.

Though part was overlooking that when Harenir fixated on something he would try to grasp it to the point of obsession, this was his fault. Though Earth was absolutely not a place to return to for him, Harenir probably hadn't accepted that yet.

Finally he covered his face with one hand and only after taking a deep breath spoke calmly:

"The reason I kept walking around the bedroom was because I wanted to rehabilitate to go to the island you mentioned then. Because I'm so curious about the house said to be there too..."

"Do you want to be alone that much?"

The answer that came back was bewildering though he had spoken holding back his embarrassment. As he removed his hand in confusion and looked up at Harenir, somehow he discovered his expression had darkened further.

He confusedly traced back the information in his mind. Come to think of it, had he said that island was prepared for only him to stay comfortably? So he had planned to visit making various excuses...

He barely held back a dry laugh trying to burst out. Though he should naturally accept going to that island together, why was this the reaction, he thought before slowly realizing one fact.

Ah, I haven't confessed to Harenir...

Compared to when Harenir had confessed so desperately and passionately at the dimensional boundary then, he hadn't said anything. Though he too had realized his feelings, he had never voiced them aloud.

No, but since they had finally come out together, couldn't he naturally guess they had the same feelings? He had happily held his hand on the snowy mountain, and not only stayed continuously by his side but recently even tried to appoint him as butler saying to take responsibility for him.

He had even laid out absurd words saying he had to always stay by his side and play with him so he should be able to notice sufficiently. Though he had just driven him out saying he wanted to be alone...

### Chapter 188

He moved his lips several times. Trying to say it directly, his whole body trembled bururu from embarrassment. It felt like ticklish feathers were brushing over his entire body. Though really too embarrassing, still since he hadn't said anything at all about emotions, that must be why Harenir was anxious.

Hesitantly he opened his mouth.

"You know why I came out of chaos, why I wanted to stay in this world..."

"Because you're inherently kind, you might have come out unable to resist my threat in the end. Choosing life doesn't necessarily mean wanting to be with me."

He barely held back a sigh trying to burst out. More than the embarrassing content, he felt his attitude was trying to induce something.

Though Harenir seemed to have truly frozen when he first mentioned another dimension, he appeared to have sensed some flow watching his reactions afterward. He probably figured it out when his face turned bright red around mentioning the island.

Had he been playing tricks since then?

Though dissatisfaction welled up dumbly, he couldn't bring himself to ignore Harenir. Because he felt what emotion was dwelling in his eyes looking at him now.

"..."

Anxiety, perhaps desperation.

Harenir was in a state of burning to confirm if he truly had the same feelings as him. Though he had noticed from his reactions, still wanting to hear it directly - should his heart be called greed? Or was all this stemming from anxiety?

Finally after taking a deep breath, he looked at Harenir. Right. Having seen how he had confessed, knowing he had thrown away everything and poured out emotions as if tearing open his heart to offer it, he couldn't just avoid it using embarrassment as a reason.

While carefully catching both Harenir's hands, meeting his eyes directly, he spoke:

"...I like you."

"..."

"I like you, and wanted to live because I wanted to go to that island with you. Because I'm curious about the house you said you made for me, because I want to feel the time you put into that place..."

Even in chaos where all emotions were fading dimly, in darkness where everything was growing distantly far away, he had finally come to dream of that place in his mind. Though thinking he had no lingering attachment to life, finally becoming curious about that place, no, perhaps from the moment he saw you coming to find him, attachment had grown...

The more he spoke each thing carefully, the more deeply Harenir's eyes rippled. As if trying to remember every moment of him confessing now, he stared at him fixedly. His actions of rolling his gaze here and there, lips sometimes pressed tight, trembling breath, shaking voice, and so on. He stared as if trying to engrave everything in his brain.

Though embarrassing, taking courage from his attention he continued speaking, and on one hand laughter came as his attitude felt like supreme concentration. Even just being the only one contained in those blue eyes was joyful.

"Really, I like you so much. To the point of being happy seeing the sky turn blue at the end because it resembled your eyes. To the point of thinking it fortunate I could recall you one more time before dying..."

"...Isaph."

"Hmm- somewhere they attach the expression 'love to death' when confessing like it's the highest form of emphasis, in that context I really did die. My feelings for you are so great I died from love."

Comparing, he nodded saying he liked him more than Harenir did. Though he had just tried to end it speaking somewhat playfully since Harenir was listening too seriously, his lips pressed tight. His eyes seemed to distort before he covered his face with one hand.

As if many emotions suddenly welled up, he took a deep breath. He watched bewildered as Harenir's fingertips trembled. D-did I make some mistake again?

"...You really, speaking like that is cheating."

Removing his hand belatedly, Harenir spoke in a choked voice. Though he had swallowed down his emotions, something still seemed to ripple in his throat. His eyes looking at him were also deeply submerged, and after facing him not knowing what to do, finally he raised his heels.

He kissed Harenir's lips straight on.

As he lightly bumped their lips together jjok jjok a couple times as if soothing the sadness rippling inside, Harenir looked at him with a start. It didn't seem necessary to explain his intention. When he wrapped his arms around his neck, he naturally bent his upper body, and wrapping around his lower back, kissed him deeply.

Their breaths mingled between their lips. Though Harenir slightly bit his lower lip as if reproaching him trying to get away like this, even this was actually done very carefully. An infinitely soft and tender kiss continued.

Finally confirming their hearts had touched, it couldn't help but be enjoyable as even their tongues met. Absorbed in the kiss, he clung closer to Harenir. While completely trapped in his embrace, he repeatedly chased his lips and sought his breath. Thump thump, his heart beat quickly.

Harenir seemed equally overwhelmed by this situation too. His whole body felt like it would shake from the heavy throbbing felt in the embrace wrapping around him. Though the kiss was sweet, a faint dull sadness mixed in. Wanting to erase that energy, he tangled their tongues longer.

"Haah..."

Around when the kiss ended, rapid breaths burst out as if having run at full speed. Though Harenir had continued slowly, as gently as possible, his chest heaved as he panted.

Quickly catching Harenir's hand and placing it on his chest, he spoke:

"I sincerely like you. I clearly love you enough that thoughts of returning to my original world don't arise at all, enough that I want to stay by your side even if given any other world."

He poured out his feelings waruru. He transmitted his loud and rapid heartbeat kung kung kung completely through Harenir's palm. His fingertips trembled slightly. He knew this trembling stemmed from different emotions than before.

Harenir stared at him fixedly. The intense emotions rippling in those blue eyes were infinite joy and happiness. After confirming that, feeling relief as if finally completing a mission, he collapsed tak-.

Actually the reason he had poured out so urgently was...

"But you know. My heart is beating too fast so it's hard..."

"I-Isaph?"

'I'm tired so sleepy. I'll just sleep for a moment...'

Though he had clung saying it was good while kissing Harenir, it seemed that had been too much. It seemed he had exceeded the excitement this body could handle. Beyond his heart pounding, his head spun pingul pingul. Along with extreme dizziness, his vision grew hazily blurred.

Seeing Harenir's shocked face faintly in his distant vision, he spoke with difficulty one last time:

"I'm, just sleeping. Just, deep sleep..."

He wanted to add explanation that it wasn't fainting but regrettably strength left his mouth. No, was this actually fainting? Whatever it was, he let his body collapse like crumbling into Harenir's embrace.

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Kkeumpeok... kkeumpeok...

Very slowly lifting his eyelids, he wiped his blurry vision. The ceiling entering his vision was too familiar. His return point, the bed. Perhaps he was filming a bed loop story. The genre had changed.

Around when he let out a quiet dry breath finding this amusing and the situation just before collapsing absurd, he immediately felt a presence beside him.

"Are you awake?"

Harenir was sitting in a chair right beside the bed. As if he had been handling work while watching him, he immediately pushed aside documents and stood. Following that, though he hadn't said anything, as if reading his intentions, he supported him and helped him sit leaning against the bed headboard.

What was this skilled nurse vibe? Following dazedly, when he checked outside the window it was already deep night. Amid his drowsiness, the deep worry settled on Harenir's face caught his eye. Since he had collapsed like that, it seemed he hadn't been able to leave and had stayed beside him continuously.

Wanting to let him know he was fine, he reached out his hand and stroked around Harenir's eyes and he leaned his head naturally as if it were obvious. Fatigue seemed to hang heavily on his eyelashes as he lowered his eyes halfway.

"Just when do you sleep...?"

"You sleep enough for my share too."

"If I sleep more here I'll have to sleep all day..."

"...Mm."

Harenir pressed his lips tight. Since then he wouldn't be able to talk with him, he seemed reluctant though drawn. He laughed dryly while rubbing around his eyes with a bit more effort. Though he knew the more he held onto Harenir the less time he would have to sleep, still he wanted to be a little greedy.

Should he say it was a feeling that came from newly realizing how terribly shabby this body was? Since he had fallen asleep even when the mood was good, he needed to enjoy his waking time well.

Suddenly he recalled a familiar name he had seen in the documents Harenir had put away just before.

"Did a letter come from the imperial princess? Come to think of it, I don't seem to have seen her recently..."

Since he slept and woke so irregularly, when news came that he was awake they had tried to visit somehow. Kalterik and Mela, Noi, and Beatrice who were the only outsiders who knew of his survival.

He had seen the three from the Order once more recently, but hadn't seen the imperial princess. Did she have busy matters?

### Chapter 189

As he hazily traced back his memories, Harenir nodded.

"Yes. She's asking if you can attend the upcoming coronation ceremony. I wrote that you can't go-"

"What? Coronation ceremony, you mean she's becoming Emperor?"

"That's right."

Though it was very surprising news, Harenir nodded calmly. Well, since among the current royal descendants only Beatrice was suitable for the throne, perhaps it was natural.

Since the Emperor had been removed on charges of betrayal, a new leader was needed. The imperial palace and temple were two important pillars in the Holy Empire. Though considering the chaotic times there could be direction to operate temporarily under an interim system, Beatrice wasn't someone without ambition to miss such an opportunity.

She must have calculated to ascend the throne when even other royal family members couldn't object. Harenir seemed to have supported bit by bit since he wanted to escape from all this quickly too.

"But isn't there a Crown Prince separately? How was that problem resolved?"

"Terios woke up on the miracle day too, but confessed he never wanted to be Crown Prince from the start. Said he just followed because his parents made him, and quickly passed it over saying it would be so good if his sister did it."

"...Hmm."

Though problems wouldn't arise thanks to the Crown Prince's ready concession, he was 120% certain that appearance had made the imperial princess even more angry. He sighed before belatedly recalling Harenir's words he had cut off.

"If it's a coronation ceremony it must be an extremely important event, why can't you go?"

"Because I need to go to the island with you. Where is there time to spare for that when there are many things to handle?"

Harenir answered as if it were obvious. He explained that it would be conducted simply anyway considering the current situation, and the reason for inviting him was just intention to raise power by showing friendship with the hero. So this time just sending an appropriate gift, and later when all chaos settled there would be a festival under the new Emperor's command so he could consider attending then...

He just blinked his eyes. Though wondering if it was alright to not attend when a new Emperor was ascending the throne in the empire, an extremely biased agreement followed that if it was 'that reason' it couldn't be helped.

Right, that's right. Because we need to go to the island. His heart beat pleasantly thump thump as will welled up. He spoke excitedly:

"Then I want to walk a bit now. For rehabilitation! If possible I want to stroll in the garden."

"Going outside with that body? Absolutely not."

"No. I'm going to walk. I feel stifled staying only in the bedroom."

He stood while rejecting Harenir's rejection. He had wanted to walk at least once in the mansion's garden that could always be seen through the floor-to-ceiling window here, and also couldn't miss this moment when his will to build strength was burning.

"If I really can't walk I'll stop, then you can carry me back right?"

"..."

"Hm? Haren- I want to walk in the garden."

When he caught and shook his sleeve while calling his name drawn out, finally he let out a short sigh and nodded his head. Since he attached the condition that he would help with going down the stairs, he quickly accepted.

Though he hadn't known that meant being carried in his arms in princess style, he held back since making noise in the corridor would only draw servants' gazes. Actually since it was his first time outside the bedroom he had wanted to look around the mansion too, but he absolutely couldn't raise his head. Postponing sightseeing to next time, he just buried his head in his embrace. His only consolation was meeting relatively few servants.

Sallang...

A cool night breeze blew in the garden. Welcoming the outside wind he felt for the first time in very long, he savored the grass scent permeating it. The scenery of the neatly maintained garden resembled Harenir exactly.

He walked leisurely while examining his surroundings carefully. Now Harenir was holding his hand beside him, not even looking at the garden but keeping his senses alert in case he might fall. Laughing dryly at his overprotection, he brought up conversation lightly:

"I had a strange dream just before. No, should I say a memory came back."

"...What do you mean?"

"You said 'he' separated from me and disappeared at the dimensional boundary right? At that time that guy conveyed some final words to me, and I just remembered them now."

He couldn't distinguish exactly whether he had spoken to his departing back, or whether he had only opened information left in his mind today. Either way, it was fascinating how that incident had come like a dream while he was just sleeping. Perhaps this too was like a system notification saying 'there is unchecked information.'

He spoke with a quiet laugh:

"He said he wasn't disappearing, but leaving to find family."

If not a soul of that dimension, after death they flow to the dimensional boundary following classification for proper circulation. So the cat that had stayed by his side on Earth, that is, his family's souls would have disappeared using up their strength there and been swept into chaos.

Isaph spoke reminding him of that point, saying he was just going to find them to be together. Recalling that whisper which was probably a final farewell, his heart grew peaceful.

Perhaps he had felt somewhat uncomfortable and sad that only Isaph had embraced all the karma of extinction and disappeared? Though he had distinguished that he and himself were different, there was still somewhat a feeling of losing a half that started from one root. But he was grateful that he had accepted it very readily and even viewed extinction like a reunion.

...Hmm, perhaps with his genius ability he had really discovered his family.

"So how do you feel now? Relieved?"

"Oh, how did you know? That's exactly how it feels."

"I can see it on your face..."

Harenir carefully reached his hand toward him. While arranging black hair scattered in the wind, he gently cupped his face. Though his story could sound complicated, and actually he still had confused parts too, Harenir just accepted everything.

Even now as he examined his face thoroughly, somehow laughter came. Thinking perhaps it was because he mentioned family, he shook his head saying he was really fine.

Perhaps because he had walked while talking, he was already out of breath. It wasn't a body to be newly surprised at anymore. He sat down ttulseok on a garden bench and stretched his two legs jjuk-.

"Anyway thanks to him it feels all finished..."

Huuu, as he let out a long sigh, Harenir came and stood before him. Though he tapped the bench tak tak telling him to sit beside him, he chose to lower his body to look up at him.

After staring at him fixedly meeting his eyes, Harenir asked:

"Actually there's something I've wanted to ask since before..."

"Hm? What is it?"

"...Perhaps, would you rather be called 'Evan' than 'Isaph'? You said you lived only by that name in the previous world."

His eyes grew large in surprise at the completely unexpected question. As he stayed silent with his mouth slightly open, Harenir quietly waited for his answer. At that serious attitude, laughter burst out feeling he must have had this thought since the moment he heard his story before. Why worry about such a thing.

He shrugged his shoulders and answered lightly:

"They're both my names, well. But if choosing one, I prefer 'Isaph'. I've been called that since returning to this world so I'm used to it, and it also makes me feel like I belong here..."

Rather being called Evan didn't particularly appeal since it would likely bring up memories from Earth. Moreover, if Harenir used that name wouldn't others be confused too? They would be curious about the reason. He didn't want that revealed more.

"Though I lived by that name in the previous world, I don't have attachment to it. Originally there weren't many people who called me there anyway..."

In the groups I belonged to in the past, everyone called me 'you know, that one.' The gloomy guy, uncomfortable being. They were even reluctant to call my name as if it were ominous. Since I have no good memories of that name, it's not a real name I particularly want to keep. This must be definitely different from that guy.

As he shook his head as if done, just then Harenir opened his mouth:

"...Evan."

"Wh-what. I said that name is done so why are you calling it."

Beyond being bewildered, goosebumps even rose. While his shoulders trembled bururu, he looked at Harenir with strange eyes and he answered calmly:

"Since there weren't many people who called that name in that world, I want to become the last being to call it. Then when you recall that name now, you'll think of me."

It was quite an absurd reason. Was he saying since it was a name that would be buried forever now, he would call it last and close the door? Should he see this as obsessive tendency showing in a strange place? He burst into dry laughter... then soon covered his mouth with his hand.

Somehow the corners of his mouth trembled slightly trying to crumble.

"..."

Because he had never been called gently by that name before. But just now Harenir's voice had been so tender, something unexpectedly welled up inside. It was a truly bewildering reaction. Awkward, uncomfortable, and... becoming sad.

Though there were memories of being called Evan in the far distant past, and times being called by that name after returning to this body too, those were difficult to feel as directed at him. Since visiting Earth, he had always gained a sense of distance like being one step apart from this world.

But Harenir's call now was directed exactly at 'him'. While looking straight at him, containing only him in his eyes, he called that name. Seongkeum, the world narrowed.

At his hesitant reaction, Harenir quietly looked up at him and asked:

"May I call it once more?"

"Once, just once more call it like that."

His voice trembled paruru. Though it shook exactly like crying, Harenir deliberately didn't point it out. Just carefully wrapping both his hands resting on his knees, meeting his gaze, he spoke:

"Evan."

"...Yes."

He bent his upper body as if crumbling. Moving his hands fumblingly to embrace Harenir's neck, finally he seemed to let out breath similar to crying. Yet while doing so he instructed not to call that name from tomorrow, and Harenir readily answered alright while embracing him back.

The warmth felt in Harenir's embrace was unfamiliarly sweet.

Only now did he feel like all things of the past had completely ended closing the curtain, and the curtain was rising anew in this world starting again from the beginning.

During past times he had lived feeling like a piece that didn't fit the world. Not belonging anywhere and not matching with anyone, he had drifted around floating here and there. But now, he thought this embrace was finally the place where he fit.

He mumbled while burying his head in Harenir's shoulder. Though it would probably sound quite sudden...

"Before I thought 'freedom' was a state of escaping from everything. I thought I could only become free by not being tied to anywhere or anyone and leaving..."

"...Then what about now?"

"Now it's not. I feel like I'm only free when I'm with you."

Looking back, in the past he had just been lonely while staying alone. But now, only in moments together with Harenir did he feel the sensation of being free for the first time. No worries, no sadness. He felt like everything would be fine no matter what happened in the future.

A place where he could exist, a person who wanted him, his world.

"Thank you, for being with me."

"For that alone, I can be confident I'm more grateful than you."

Harenir answered. That comparison came across somewhat suddenly and he opened his round eyes wide, before belatedly recalling the confession from hours ago. Could it be that his words saying his feelings were greater since he loved him enough to die for him had remained in his heart?

He burst into laughter while embracing him more deeply.

It was finally a free day.

- <The Hero's Coffin>, End

### Chapter 190

#Side Story 1.

He had developed a new hobby recently.

It was exploring Harenir's mansion, which was very spacious with many rooms and full of interesting items, making it excellent for walking around. Having gained confidence in walking after strolling in the garden last time, he immersed himself in touring as rehabilitation with the dream of conquering this grand mansion.

Since many guests visited the hero, not only was the mansion itself well-decorated, but the servants had also carefully displayed the numerous gifts the hero had received, making it enjoyable to view. Even without separate orders from Harenir, they had diligently maintained the mansion out of loyalty and affection for him.

Though the owner had been too busy to look around, he had benefited from their efforts. Just then, this mansion wasn't receiving any other guests, making it virtually an optimized tourist spot for him.

"At this point it should be called an art museum or museum rather than a mansion..."

"If you like it, you can take it."

"That's not what I meant."

He turned around in alarm. There stood the owner of this mansion, Harenir, with a peaceful expression.

Originally when touring the mansion, a servant always accompanied him. At first, they had watched from a distance worrying he might suddenly fall, but when he showed interest in the displayed items, they gradually approached and explained them. Their tone was full of pride.

Since those stories were interesting, he had accompanied the servant as if they were a mansion tour guide, but at some point Harenir had naturally taken that position. Though he had tried to dissuade him saying he didn't need to use his time since he must be busy, he had stubbornly stayed by his side.

Actually, since he staggered several times while walking, it was more comfortable receiving support from Harenir than from a servant. It was much more familiar too. Hmm, though it looked like using the hero as his crutch...

Anyway, looking at Harenir who was firmly holding his arm now, he asked:

"Are you really alright being here? You must have a lot of work."

From what he had heard from Noi last time, the documents piled in his office formed a mountain range. Since even the hero's aide was like that, Harenir would obviously be worse.

Though more than ten days had passed since that day, that is, the day the Dedium had disappeared, the empire was still in an uproar. Typically, post-crisis cleanup is more difficult than when problems first arise. As evidence, his few acquaintances hadn't had time to visit recently, and though he didn't need to feel sorry at all, they had instead sent apologetic letters and gifts.

Yet Harenir had continued to stay by his side. No, beyond that level, he had not left his side at all. At first he had accepted that he wanted to be beside him as he said he couldn't miss the chance to face him since he woke up so irregularly. But now he had recovered quite a bit...

"You don't need to worry about that part at all."

"But your face is getting more..."

Were his dark circles getting really severe, or did he not know it himself?

The dark energy that had never been seen in the past was now clearly present to a shocking degree, and his eyes had grown sharply sensitive. It was quite worrying as fatigue that couldn't be handled even by the hero's healing power was visibly accumulating.

Should he say he almost looked similar to himself?

Ah, was that too harsh an insult?

Anyway, it seemed difficult to understand that Harenir was just working hard to finish all matters quickly and go to the island. Moreover, he only walked around inside the mansion, and even this was just walking for rehabilitation since he had nothing to do, yet Harenir tried to participate in all these processes somehow.

Especially sometimes Harenir looked at him with a very distant expression. Should he call it blank, or describe it as astonished? Even his focus blurred, and only when he caught his hand and shook it did he come to his senses.

"Are you actually sleeping?"

"Don't worry, I won't collapse. Anyway, shall we continue looking around?"

"...Your answer is a bit off."

After looking at Harenir with strange eyes, he finally just shrugged his shoulders. Actually, it wasn't that he couldn't guess at all why he was acting like that.

He must be anxious.

It was understandable since not much time had passed since he had died and come back to life. The scene of his physical body turning to ash and scattering must have been quite shocking. Actually, since even he sometimes found it amazing that he was alive, he understood why Harenir couldn't take his eyes off him like that.

To let him know he was healthy, to convince him he was clearly alive, he decided to walk more diligently. Then wouldn't Harenir be reassured and stop this peculiar behavior?

...That was the optimism he had held about four days ago.

He had believed Harenir's anxiety would naturally decrease with time, and had expected him to leave the mansion around then. Since the hero who had taken the helm in the empire facing a period of upheaval must be very busy.

But Harenir had not left his side at all.

He stuck beside him, who was just walking around the mansion, spending every hour together. No, now rather than the warm expression 'staying together,' the word 'following' would be more appropriate. And that to a very obsessive level.

"I should stroll in the garden-"

"Let's go together."

Him chasing after during rehabilitation stroll time was nothing unusual.

"I'll just walk the corridor briefly, so you-"

"I wanted to walk too just then."

Even on the way to walk lightly after a meal, he followed.

"Now I should return to my room and rest-"

"I'll take you there."

He volunteered for all escorts stubbornly.

These reactions were too difficult to accept just for the reason that he was concerned because his body was in poor condition. At first he had understood thinking he must be worried, but it grew increasingly dubious.

Moreover, recently he faced Harenir first thing when he woke up. Even while looking at documents sitting beside the bed, he immediately responded to the sound and met his eyes when he woke up, and naturally took care of him. That meant he didn't leave his side even while he was sleeping. Seeing the documents getting thicker, work seemed to be piling up...

After pondering, he finally entered his office together with the reason that he was curious about Harenir's office. And when he sat on the sofa and told Harenir, "Work. I'll just look around," he reluctantly complied. He glanced at him from time to time while reviewing documents.

Only after an hour or two passed like that did Harenir concentrate on work. Having waited patiently until then, he quietly tried to move his body. Though he tried to leave the space killing sound as much as possible.

Clack!

"Let's go together."

Harenir rose abruptly from his desk and chased after him. He moved so urgently that the desk shook, documents spilled, and even the inkwell overturned. Regardless, Harenir didn't even throw a glance and immediately followed behind him.

As if the only important thing was following him.

After looking at that scene with mixed feelings, he spoke:

"You know. I've been thinking and want to ask..."

He chose his words while moving his lips a couple times. Though he guessed why Harenir was reacting like that and tried to tone it down as much as possible, he couldn't find an expression to replace it at all.

"Why have you become a dog?"

Though he knew it was too harsh a metaphor for the empire's hero, he just couldn't think of any other words. After spitting out that word like vomiting, he quickly attached follow-up words. The conversation he had been suppressing all this time poured out waruk.

"At first I thought you were worried because my body had weakened? So I thought it would be fine if I showed you I was okay, but why are you doing this? Now the frequency of falling has decreased a lot, so you don't need to care that much. I think it would be fine even if I rolled around thanks to you laying soft carpets on all the floors of the mansion."

"You're not."

"That's true, but!"

Of course it would be a bit dangerous to roll with this body! Anyway that's not what I'm trying to say right now! He looked straight at Harenir while shouting wak.

"I've understood the reason for your overprotection so I haven't said much until now, but why is it getting more and more severe? You've seen up close, but my body won't break just from falling once or twice. I'm deliberately walking and rehabilitating more hard because of you, but your behavior is getting more and more, too..."

"Like an anxious dog, you mean."

"...Yes."

Though he had tried to express it differently, in the end there was nothing else. Well, since he had already said it, there was no need to speak roundabout. A deep sigh burst out at the fact that he had finally spilled everything. He was out of breath just from shouting briefly.

Despite hearing such terrible words, Harenir just carefully cupped his face as if worried about his condition. Around when he was reflecting on whether he had needlessly lost his temper at him because his touch taking his temperature was very affectionate.

"Actually, I know I'm not normal."

"No, well, I wouldn't go as far as abnormal..."

"Even though I know why you want to rehabilitate, I keep having thoughts of wanting to confine you and prevent you from walking."

"That is abnormal..."

### Chapter 191

He sighed seriously. Could it be that the reason he had followed him every time he walked was that he had been eagerly waiting for an opportunity to confine him? To use his falling as an excuse to imprison him immediately?

As he looked up bewildered at this completely unexpected reason, Harenir exhaled briefly. As if he too was now ready to confess everything, he slightly lowered his eyes.

"I know you're practicing walking to go to the island with me. Though I was clearly happy when you told me that, I got anxious when you started walking around. Afraid you might suddenly disappear."

"How could I possibly become agile with this body, why such a needless worry...?"

"I feel like something will happen in the moments I'm not watching you."

Harenir's voice trembled slightly. His tone acknowledged that he recognized his anxiety was irrational and quite exaggerated. Nevertheless, he confessed that he was enveloped in those groundless worries and had to follow him, that he needed to keep him in sight so obsessively.

It seemed like an emotion impossible to suppress with reason. Knowing how calmly he usually judged things, he could guess that he himself was struggling with this situation the most.

He asked dazedly:

"You were fine at first. When I had just come back to life would have seemed more precarious, but you went out normally then. Though you did come back immediately when I woke up..."

"...Back then you couldn't walk enough to leave the room."

What? He had walked more diligently to show he was fine, but that had instead amplified Harenir's anxiety? So that's why he couldn't go out and handled all matters by receiving them at the mansion?

Though it was truly an absurd conclusion and ridiculous, he couldn't bring himself to laugh. The anxiety dwelling in those blue eyes looking at him now was too immense. Also, his hand still remaining on his face felt like he was clinging to him, making it impossible to push him away.

While hesitantly moving his lips, Harenir spoke:

"Your metaphor is correct. Truly, I want to put on a leash so badly."

He startled at the words that poured out like a sigh. Was he supposed to wear a leash as punishment for saying the empire's hero was like a dog? When he reflexively covered his neck, Harenir shook his head.

"How could I dare put such a thing on you again."

"Then the leash is...?"

"I mean I want to put it around my neck. So I wish you would hold the string."

Harenir spoke with complete seriousness. He said wouldn't such a leash prevent them from being separated beyond a certain distance, leaving him feeling extremely dubious. If it were handcuffs with one cuff each, he would understand it as a common fantasy, but such a thing...

Thinking it was a joke, he narrowed his eyes slightly, but Harenir's talk gradually shifted to concrete production plans. He was alarmed when he said he would make it worn on the wrist so as not to interfere with his daily life, and design it so that when they were separated by some distance, an alarm, no, a shock wave would come to him.

"Are you trying to throw away all the hero's dignity?"

"Someone like me is not a hero."

Harenir's answer fell firmly. Though it was absurd how he kept denying his identity since last time, shouldn't a leash be unwelcome even if he wasn't a hero?

While becoming truly confused, he suddenly realized something.

"You, could it be that's why you haven't been sleeping properly? Afraid I might disappear somewhere while sleeping?"

Recently Harenir had not only not left his side, but even watched him sleep. Though he had thought he would rest after he fell asleep, hearing the anxiety he was confessing now, it was clear he hadn't slept a wink. The increasingly dark circles under his eyes supported his inference.

"That reason is right too..."

If it's right then it's right, what other extraordinary thing are you going to say? As he looked at him with eyes urging a quick answer, Harenir hesitated before opening his mouth.

"I have nightmares."

"...What?"

"Since that day, that time, I've repeatedly dreamed that everything until now was just a delusion. ...So I simply can't sleep. Even when I close my eyes briefly, I wake up as if being chased."

Though his tone was calm, on the other hand it felt gloomy like sinking deep into the ocean floor.

He couldn't help but be surprised at his confession. At first he had been bewildered, saying he wasn't quick enough to surpass the hero's keen perception, why on earth couldn't he sleep from anxiety... But to think he couldn't fall asleep at all because of nightmares.

In the past, the nightmare that tormented Harenir was a dream repeatedly showing the moment his mother sacrificed herself. In that situation, he could only reach out his hand unable to do anything.

But now it seemed the nightmare visiting him completely erased reality like a mirage. Since he had fallen into such great shock that day, it even had quite a plausible background that he was experiencing a mental breakdown now.

"...So sometimes I'm confused whether even this moment is a dream."

Only now understanding Harenir who had worn a distant expression whenever looking at him, he just moved his lips. He could picture his nights, unable to sleep, staying up with open eyes confirming his breathing.

He felt a little, no, quite upset. It seemed meaningless to insist he had definitely returned, wasn't he living and breathing here? Harenir would surely know this part well too, yet would still be helplessly enveloped in anxiety.

After pondering deeply, he asked:

"What could I do to reduce your anxiety?"

"Lea..."

"Not a leash. Ah, confinement isn't allowed either."

After blocking the word about to spring out, he told him to think of other measures. Since those two things were too strange, it seemed he could do anything else except those.

As if his intentions were read, Harenir moved his lips a couple times. Since he also seemed to have something in mind right after receiving the question, when he urged him to say it quickly, whoosh, the story poured out.

"I want to personally take care of everything you wear, eat, sleep, and so on. I wish I could carry you in my arms when you walk around, and if possible even when you bathe. I want to watch you every moment and check everything one by one..."

His mouth fell open. Though he had wondered wasn't he already responsible for food, clothing, and shelter, combined with his following words, he just wanted to 'take care' of him. He seemed to think he could only be at ease if his hands were on him 24 hours a day.

Should he see it as desperate anxiety wanting to confirm body temperature even that way, or had he really gone around in circles and become abnormal?

Moreover, the things Harenir wanted seemed similar to what he had done once in the past, but had that been his true wish when he thought it was just a joke? Was he even disappointed it ended after just once?

Though absurd, he felt a chill unexpectedly. He felt that if Harenir weren't so well-educated to make requests in this form, it wouldn't be strange if he had been confined long ago. That's how bad his condition looked. Though he would be the one confined, it seemed Harenir would certainly be trapped together.

After looking at him with complex feelings, he soon changed his mind.

"Alright. Do as you wish."

If he tried it directly, wouldn't he rather get sick of it and stop?

Though he had stepped forward to take care of him from anxiety, he would clearly get tired after doing it a few times. Aren't dreams and reality different? How could a person who had been revered as a noble hero all this time constantly attend to him like serving him? It seemed better to let him try and wake him from that ridiculous dream.

"Ah, except for bathing."

"Is brushing teeth not okay?"

"...Mm, that's fine."

"Washing your face and hair should be fine too."

"I have imagined before that it would be comfortable if someone else did it... No, why am I negotiating this?"

Was it right to talk about such a topic with the hero? Though truly absurd, finally he specified he would only allow up to face washing and ended the conversation.

Right, it would end quickly after just enduring for a moment.

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He was in trouble.

"...I, I might get used to this."

He fled to the bathroom and sighed. This was the only space in the mansion where he could be alone, and Harenir was waiting just outside the door. Because he had carried him here in his arms.

Four days had already passed.

He had only agreed as a solution since Harenir was enveloped in such great anxiety that he couldn't shake off abnormal thoughts. So he had even planned to tease him about those statements for a while after this absurd lifestyle ended.

But Harenir had enjoyed it too much.

When he woke up, he gave him lukewarm water to drink then brought food and fed him spoonful by spoonful, and picked up meat too reading his eye signals. He even put in the effort to cut it into small pieces for easy eating. Afterward he helped with brushing teeth, washing his face with warm water, changing his clothes, and naturally carried him in his arms for all movements needed in these processes.

He had deliberately given annoying orders to make Harenir collapse quickly. Saying he wanted to see the library then moved there, then let's go to the garden again, and then asking to return to the room like that, he changed his words several times.

Though it was extremely irritating, Harenir really followed gladly. When he ordered and stretched out both arms to be carried, a smile spontaneously rose on his face.

### Chapter 192

Despite getting a sense of defiance from his very enjoyable reaction and acting more annoyingly, he only welcomed it.

Moreover, since he seemed to have many places he wanted to go around, he said he would carry him all the time so he could move quickly and comfortably anytime, and though he agreed as if swept along, he belatedly realized he had been tricked. He realized when Harenir smiled as he woke up with a start while dozing in his arms as he worked in his office.

Now all servants in the mansion knew about this eccentricity.

At first they too were bewildered. It would be surprising enough that the necromancer reported dead publicly was staying in the hero's mansion, but he was personally taking care of him. At the sight of none other than 'that' hero carrying him around, they all hurriedly lowered their heads.

However, it would be very ambiguous to view this behavior as that of lovers. Now the relationship between Harenir and him should rightly be called nurse and patient, supporter and dependent, vehicle and passenger, and so on. Thanks to this, the gazes of the servants watching them were filled with confusion, which grew day by day.

Though he should have been cautious, regrettably it wasn't Harenir getting sick of it, but rather he himself adapting to this eccentricity.

"Just why am I getting used to this..."

At first Harenir's actions had been burdensome and above all embarrassing. Though he had imagined in the past how nice it would be if someone moved him when he was too lazy to move, and wished they would even wash him for convenience, receiving it directly was really embarrassing.

Still, he had endured to subdue Harenir's absurd anxiety, and even to tease him later. Though he had persevered believing Harenir's care would end soon... day by day Harenir only enjoyed it more and he got used to it, which was a big problem.

At this rate it seemed like he might even wash his entire body. It was already quite dangerous as he was eyeing the next stage. While washing his face, he subtly coaxed that wouldn't it be convenient if he washed his hair too, and with one wrong step, he was in danger of completely giving in.

...Though he had washed his entire body a few times in the past, anyway that was when he was unconscious and now he was clearly awake. This was definitely a different issue.

His ears grew hot at the memory that came to mind. He rubbed his ears while striving to gather his reason.

"I need to get my head straight."

He washed carefully to pull himself together. After trying to rub with cold water, he trembled padeudeuk alone from the coldness and quietly changed to warm water. Hmm, since his body was still weak. It would be a big problem if he caught a cold with this body.

After washing until his body was warm like that and going out, Harenir immediately asked:

"It took longer than usual to wash, was it very difficult?"

Having waited in front of the bathroom all along, he immediately examined him thoroughly with his eyes. Since it was a gaze concerned if there had been a problem inside, a dry laugh burst out.

"Right. Since someone is doing all my tasks all day, I'm gradually losing strength in my hands too."

"Then you can leave body scrubbing to me too."

"Why are you becoming more and more abnormal..."

It's gradually becoming remarkable that such a conclusion comes out. While looking at Harenir with a sigh, he soon shook his head. Already he was naturally lowering his body again trying to lift and carry him. He even gestured with his eyes to quickly embrace his neck.

Perhaps this was the 'leash' Harenir had said he wanted to wear?

"No thanks. Now I want to walk by myself."

"You said you'd let me do as I wanted..."

"It's just how far from here to the bed."

He moved immediately since there was a possibility of being swept along if he argued with Harenir. Though he walked quickly lest he be caught by him, it was frustrating that his speed was similar to Harenir's normal walking pace. Not only was there a difference in leg length, but this body was really becoming shabby.

What about the strength I built up!

To degenerate like this just from not walking around for a few days. While glaring at his legs in frustration sitting on the bed, Harenir dried his wet hair with a towel. His touch carefully wiping away the moisture was very gentle.

Belatedly realizing he had naturally accepted his touch again, he sighed. After pondering seriously, he pushed away his hand and spoke:

"Let's stop this now. It doesn't seem to have much effect in reducing your anxiety."

"What? That can't be. My mind is so much more at ease these days."

"No. It's getting worse and worse."

As Harenir claimed, his complexion had brightened considerably. The sharply sensitive energy had decreased, and the appearance of anxiously trying to follow him was gone. But this was only because he was holding onto him continuously from the start.

He had agreed to this eccentricity to resolve Harenir's anxiety, but rather seemed to have strengthened it. This was evident just from his behavior waiting outside the bathroom all along.

And above all...

"I know you still can't sleep."

Harenir's dark circles still hadn't been resolved.

Though his overall impression had smoothed making it less noticeable, looking closely, the dark energy hadn't decreased at all. Seeing that, he resolved to stop this eccentricity.

He had thought it would be resolved by going along with his abnormal wish, but instead the abnormality had become more solid.

"I can't continue knowing it's not effective. So this is the end now."

"...It's only been a few days. If we do a bit more it should get better."

Harenir spoke in a very disheartened tone. As if I had given him a precious object only to take it back, he threw a gaze asking how I could change my mind so easily, which was very bewildering. No, by common sense, shouldn't he be grateful for ending this hard labor?

"And if not this, the only other option is a leash-"

"Ah, don't even bring that up."

He cut off his words while showing disgust. He even waved his hands and turned his back, climbing onto the bed and lying down.

Harenir was silent. Though he seemed displeased with his behavior unilaterally ending the conversation, it was a reaction of resignation that he couldn't hold him back if he said he was sleeping. Since sleep was very important for him now.

"...Let's talk again when you wake up tomorrow."

Though his quiet voice fell softly as if soothing him, on the other hand it also sounded like pleading. Regardless, he didn't answer and moved diligently inside the blanket, settling at the edge of the large bed.

Then he showed his arm to Harenir.

"Come here."

"...?"

"Let's sleep together."

He tapped tang tang telling him to come to the spot beside him quickly. As Harenir just blinked his eyes dazedly, he urged him to move quickly, but seeing him still standing as if nailed in place, he finally leaned his body backward. When he almost rolled off, Harenir immediately climbed onto the bed and caught his arm.

And that naturally led to him embracing Harenir. He hung daerongdaerong from him.

"Lie down."

"...Isaph?"

"Ah, I'm saying I'll put you to sleep. You said you were fine without nightmares when you slept with me before."

He pulled down Harenir who was still frozen in a daze. Why were his shoulders so broad, it was even overwhelming to wrap his arms around them. Though he tried to put Harenir in his embrace, his size was impossible to handle.

Just crumple yourself up a bit. Out of frustration, when he pressed him down with his arms, Harenir reluctantly gathered his arms and curled his body too. Only then finally embracing him in his arms, he sighed huu- and patted his back.

"You're getting more anxious because you're not sleeping. Do you know how important it is to get adequate sleep time."

Harenir's abnormal anxiety must definitely all be from not sleeping. A characteristic of anxiety or obsessive-compulsive disorder patients was short sleep time. It was a Möbius strip. He couldn't sleep because he was anxious, and because his sleep time was short, he became sensitive and couldn't shake off anxiety.

This cycle had to be broken.

"Isaph, no matter what this is..."

Harenir seemed very confused. It was understandable to be bewildered after being suddenly dragged into bed, but he simply covered his eyes with his hand.

"First close your eyes."

"..."

"Hey hey, don't raise your hand, don't try to open your eyes."

"...I didn't expect to receive such orders."

Harenir laughed dryly saying he had heard many strange orders from him since before. That breath tickled his collarbone directly, making his body tremble bururu once. After ordering him not to laugh either, he spoke:

"If you don't sleep, I won't either."

As if it was quite an effective threat, Harenir paused and closed his mouth.

### Chapter 193

Though he seemed like he had tried to calmly persuade him, long conversation was now declined. And above all, he was already sleepy.

"Sleep quickly..."

As soon as he lay on the bed, drowsiness came like an automatic reflex. He was still living a sleep-loving life requiring at least 12 hours of sleep a day, and this bed was very soft plus the blanket was moderately heavy, making it the best environment for deep sleep. He could fall asleep quickly just by placing his head on the soft pillow.

Actually now it was early evening so he knew it wasn't Harenir's bedtime. Still, repeatedly telling him to sleep quickly as if brainwashing him, Harenir muttered in a very subtle tone:

"If you're sleepy you could just sleep first alone..."

"Be quiet. Sleep together..."

In a completely drowsy state, he patted Harenir's back. Though it was still difficult to embrace him with his large build, he stubbornly wrapped his arms around him.

Then the repetitive action of patting him rather plunged his consciousness into deep sleep. Kkamuruk, after falling asleep, he woke up with a start.

"..."

Harenir was staring at him intently.

Somehow his hand that had been covering Harenir's eyes had already fallen down, so he moved his arm irritably. After closing Harenir's eyelids and whispering "sleep..." he fell asleep again in a blink.

His mind floated between sleep and wakefulness.

Checking whenever he opened his eyes from time to time, Harenir seemed to be watching him or fiddling with his hair. He ordered him to go back to sleep almost in a mumble while patting his back, and unable to resist his own drowsiness, even made groaning sounds briefly.

While grumbling irritably, he buried his head deep and clung to the warmth that somehow seemed to be moving away. Then gentle hands stroked him as if soothing him, and from some point he was firmly wrapped in a large warmth. With that familiar sensation, cozy comfort pleasantly arrived.

He entrusted his whole body, releasing all tension.

A languid refreshment after sleeping deeply surrounded his entire body.

Being naturally awakened rather than forcibly by an alarm sound was always welcome. While contentedly wriggling his body opening his eyes, he soon saw the scene before him and paused all movements with a start.

"..."

Harenir was sleeping right in front of him.

Somehow his position had changed to being embraced in his arms, the opposite of just before falling asleep, but that wasn't what was important now. He just blinked his eyes checking Harenir's condition. His even breathing tickled his ear.

Normally Harenir would have awakened immediately at his presence. Not only was he sensitive to human presence, but recently he had been in an even more obsessively anxious state. Yet now he hadn't woken up even though he had moved a little.

He curiously examined Harenir's face. The statue-like beauty encountered up close newly evoked admiration. Though he wanted to stroke his face with his hand, he repeatedly traced him only with his gaze lest he wake him from his sound sleep.

That's a relief...

A smile crept up the corners of his mouth. With satisfaction that he had succeeded welling up fully, he wanted to boast immediately but decided to be patient. When Harenir woke up, he would greet him saying he had slept really well.

...That was the very pleasant plan he had made, but.

"Huk!"

He fell back asleep just like that. Since Harenir was sleeping so well, his intention to close his eyes just a bit more led straight to deep sleep, and then he woke up with a start. Like someone who sensed they had overslept, as soon as he woke up he immediately faced Harenir.

Somehow he was looking at him with both eyes open.

"You really sleep for a long time. You slept even longer than usual, are you sick somewhere?"

"Ah, that's unfair. I definitely woke up first."

Though opportunities to see Harenir sleeping were rare, he had wasted it futilely. Had he seen him for just about 5 minutes? Missing the chance to give a morning greeting, and also losing time to appreciate him was quite frustrating. While he was lamenting, Harenir checked his forehead's temperature with his palm.

If there was something to console his regret, it would be the languor still remaining on Harenir's face. It stood out even more because he had only seen his sharply sensitive appearance until now. His eyes were also loosely relaxed, and his blue eyes were infused with drowsy energy.

For a moment, gazes were exchanged without words.

The quietness held at such a close distance where they could confirm each other in their pupils felt very sweet. As if being together lying here in this place was the greatest happiness in the world. Moreover, it was most satisfying that Harenir, who would have maintained a perfect appearance anywhere, was drowsily relaxed before him.

While savoring that peacefulness, he suddenly threw his gaze behind Harenir's back at a chilly feeling. The sunlight coming through the window was extremely bright.

"...Wait. Is it even morning now?"

"No. We've well passed noon."

"What?!"

"I was waiting thinking you might wake if I moved, so thanks to that I was lying down for a long time."

He was truly surprised. Indeed, was it an immutable law that if you fall back asleep again after waking once in the morning, you sleep endlessly? Though he had thought to put Harenir to sleep, he was worried that he seemed to have held him captive for too long.

But Harenir didn't seem to mind at all that the start of the day was late, and rather looked very comfortable. Well, since he probably hadn't slept properly at all until now, this could be counted as resting for a long time. And looking at his reaction, it seemed he hadn't had nightmares either.

"See? Nothing happens even when your eyes are closed, even when you're unconscious? Even when you sleep for a long time and wake up, I'm still here."

"...Yes, that's right."

At his confident statement, Harenir answered slowly and smiled. The smile created as his eyes slightly folded looked so happy that he felt even more satisfied.

He listed out the boasts he had postponed in the morning. Starting from asking if he knew how much trouble he had gone through to put him to sleep, he poured out even lamentations that his arm hurt from patting him.

Harenir opened his round eyes as if he hadn't expected to hear such nagging, and finally nodded his head with a dry laugh. It was the attitude of someone listening and reflecting. Finding it quite amusing to lecture the hero, the stories continued endlessly.

Warak- suddenly he embraced him more deeply. He wrapped him with his whole body as if wanting to fully savor his body temperature. He laughed inside as his speech was cut off by being tightly embraced by him. It seemed even heroes disliked nagging.

Harenir buried his head on top of his and lightly nuzzled. As if the anxiety and tension that had tormented him until now had scattered saruru, he even let out a contented sigh. Confirming the satisfaction permeating that breath, he asked:

"How is it? Now you don't feel like wanting to take care of me all day anymore, right?"

"..."

"You shouldn't..."

He sighed reading the answer from his silence. Though he had believed that after sleeping well and thinking with a clear mind he would surely affirm his question, it seemed that strange wish still hadn't disappeared. He let out a dry laugh and shook his head.

Then there was another way.

"If you stop that eccentricity and go out, I'll personally put you to sleep."

"...Even going out?"

"Yes. On the condition I do exactly like last night."

He knew Harenir hadn't left the mansion for quite a not-short period, including the past few days of eccentricity. He had said he couldn't bear to leave him behind because he became anxious when he started moving. So he set going out as a condition to let him know that he would still be here even if he went outside.

"You must have a lot of work piled up anyway. Actually, I'd just like you to finish quickly so we can go to the island together..."

Wouldn't it be better to just work intensively and get it over with? And he needed to resume rehabilitation quickly too. Though he thought it was a very good deal, Harenir kept silent.

As he seemed to be pondering, just moving his lips, he raised his upper body and escaped from Harenir's embrace.

"If you don't like sleeping with me, then don't."

"No, I'll do that."

The answer came right away. He immediately caught him trying to leave the bed, pulled him down, and embraced him into his arms. His arms embracing him like confining him were firm.

"Good. I'll put you to sleep, so work hard and come back."

Indeed, to calm a dog, no, a person suffering from separation anxiety, a firm attitude and appropriate rewards were needed. He smiled while savoring the feeling of having become quite an excellent trainer.

### Chapter 194

#Side Story 2.

White fluffy clouds floated like paintings in the deep blue sky.

A cool breeze came by pleasantly brushing his body before passing, the gentle sound of waves tickled his ears sweetly, and the wide-open view contained green meadows and a sparkling sea. It was a space where everything seemed to shine under the warm sunlight.

The clothes and hair swaying, rustle, were enough to enhance the sense of peacefulness. And above all, the firmly held hands, and the presence of the other who naturally met his gaze whenever he looked back made him infinitely happy. Those blue eyes were more beautiful than the sky and sea.

Finally, they had reached the 'island'.

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The conditions needed to come to this island together were two things: his physical recovery and the hero's vacation. Between the former and the latter, it was difficult to determine which was more difficult.

Anyway, he had expected it would take a long time to organize the turmoil since the empire had been greatly overturned. There were too many tangled problems. Moreover, since Harenir had been unable to leave the mansion for a while, causing disruptions in handling matters, he had guessed they would leave much later.

But surprisingly, Harenir finished his work much faster than he thought. When he expressed genuine amazement, he calmly shrugged his shoulders.

"There's a reason I supported the new Emperor."

That story sounded quite subtle. The new Emperor of Solares would naturally be Beatrice. Whether it meant he supported her because she was an excellent leader, or whether there had been some kind of deal while supporting her ascension to the throne.

Though he felt somewhat uncomfortable recalling the fact that he hadn't seen Beatrice for a long time, for now he nodded. Well, complex political matters and imperial interests weren't things he needed to concern himself with.

What he needed to do now was sightseeing.

"Wow, this place is really beautiful."

He went around the island continuously exclaiming in admiration. Though he had been eagerly looking forward to coming here, he hadn't researched about the island in advance. He wanted to face it knowing nothing and be purely surprised.

But even while blocking information, he couldn't stop the wings of imagination that naturally unfolded, and this place exceeded his thoughts in every aspect.

It was a massive island that was difficult to capture in one glance, making his expectation of a small uninhabited island seem ridiculous. The landscape was beautiful enough to deserve registration as a natural heritage, and even the temperature was appropriate and said to be unchanging through four seasons, making him seriously suspect whether they had perhaps seized an island already famous as a resort in the empire.

The villa where he would stay was prepared in the sunniest space on the island. The wooden building had such a high ceiling that it looked even taller than two stories. Also, through the wide windows inside the villa, the sea could be enjoyed freely from various places. Warm sunlight entered every room.

Even the number of rooms was many, and he got tired and collapsed after looking at each one. While sitting buried in a soft sofa, he sighed:

"Just how did you prepare this much?"

"Since you were looking forward to the island, I tried to live up to that expectation."

Harenir smiled roundly. Though he knew he had put in effort checking additionally over the past few days too, the scale was too enormous.

The island was divided into sections with various sights created, making it feel like coming to a theme park, and even around the villa, gardens were beautifully established. Moreover, the basement of the villa was full of ingredients with preservation magic cast on them, and even all kinds of seeds were prepared to cultivate a vegetable garden.

"I could spend at least a few months just playing and eating here... I don't feel like leaving at all."

"You've hit exactly the purpose I worked hard for."

"Hm?"

Though he had exclaimed as if talking to himself, Harenir's agreement was calmly attached. After looking up at him dubiously, he checked the villa again. Somehow this place looked a bit different. Was this what they called imperial confinement?

Soon he lightly shook his head and smiled.

"Well, I should work hard to explore as much as you worked to decorate this place!"

Having taken a short rest sitting down, he rose energetically. He hadn't toured the entire island yet. Though originally they would have had to enter by boat, they had used teleportation in consideration of his body condition, so he still had strength left.

He developed the will to go around the island even if he had to pour out all his energy for the day. Though even then he probably couldn't see everything...

He moved his steps diligently.

Before the sun set, he looked around the outside first. He never got tired of looking at the sea, and the gently blowing breeze was also very pleasing. The walking path encompassing the entire island was managed smoothly, and chairs were placed abundantly here and there.

Though he didn't need to ask, it was evident who the arrangement was for, making him laugh dryly. Right, it didn't matter whether this place was a well-decorated prison or whatever. Moreover, Harenir was also 'together' trapped here, wasn't he?

This island felt like a space filled only with happiness.

However, if there was just one problem...

"The sunset is pretty, can't we look a bit more?"

"Since it gets chilly quickly when the sun sets, we should return soon."

The hand he had quietly extended toward Harenir only swept through the air and came down. He looked at Harenir who had already turned his back and awkwardly fiddled with his nape.

'Just now, wasn't that a timing for a kiss...'

Somehow, it seemed like Harenir was avoiding him.

Until just before, they had been watching the sunset from the beach. The sunset with pink and purple hues intermingled in a mysterious blend was very beautiful. The clear sea held the sky directly, making it look exactly as if the sea and sky were connected.

The waves were calm and the sky grew colorful moment by moment. When he turned his head while admiring the spectacle that deserved the modifier 'splendid', he met Harenir who was looking only at him. As if containing only him in his eyes was more important than the sunset.

When he met that blind gaze, his heart beat thump- heavily. Their gazes tangled deeply, and he sensed this was some kind of 'moment'. Chased by the feeling of his whole body tickling, he approached Harenir... and tried to kiss him.

But Harenir quietly retreated.

Very naturally turning his head and checking the villa beyond, he said it was getting late so they should return now. Regretting the atmosphere breaking like this, he suggested staying longer, but was firmly refused. Though the explanation that they shouldn't catch a cold was consideration for him, it was utterly confusing.

The reason he called this a 'problem' was because this situation wasn't the first time.

When they had just arrived on the island, a similar atmosphere had been captured. The scene of noon sunlight brightly illuminating the forest was very peaceful and made him happy, and even then Harenir was still looking only at him. It was a moment that made him realize they had finally come to the island together.

The gazes they exchanged then were enough to create a strange atmosphere. But as soon as he slightly tilted his head, Harenir naturally moved away. Taking one step back and saying there were many places he wanted to show him, he guided him, and thinking it was just a coincidence, he followed. After all, as someone who had worked hard to prepare this island, it was natural to want to first confirm the reaction of the person receiving the gift.

But similar incidents were repeated several more times, and finally they faced the same situation in front of the sea with the setting sun. Even though he thought just now was quite a clear moment.

Rather than feeling upset, he was just confused. Though Harenir only looked at him enough for their gazes to meet whenever he turned around, and though his affection could be read in all his actions...

Why was he avoiding him?

"...Hmm, maybe I was too hasty."

Was the 'timing' I read wrong in the first place? Looking back at past memories, he didn't seem to be someone who kissed at particularly appropriate atmospheres. Hadn't he just rushed in and bumped lips?

...Suddenly he became extremely calm. Right, since he had never dated before, how would he know when the appropriate timing was? Perhaps he had just been getting excited alone all this time.

Above all, there was no way Harenir would avoid him.

"Shall we go back now?"

As he came to that conclusion, all his thoughts were neatly organized. Even now, wasn't Harenir looking back at him and reaching out his hand as if to support him?

While nodding his head to him, he swallowed a sigh inside for making an embarrassing misunderstanding.

### Chapter 195

...It seemed Harenir was indeed avoiding him.

No, not a speculation, but definitely correct.

"Just why?"

Four days had already passed.

And during this period, he hadn't had any skinship with Harenir even once. Though he would catch him when he staggered and often support him while walking, other than this nurse mode, he meant they hadn't had any lover-like contact at all.

He couldn't even get a peck, let alone the kiss he had been conscious of on the first day. Though he could understand this since it involved lips touching, a rather significant form of skinship, he couldn't even properly interlace fingers.

Out of frustration, when Harenir had grabbed his hand to support him, he had tried to slightly interlock their fingers, but as soon as he tried to burrow between his fingers, Harenir withdrew. He even pulled his hand away, swish, completely.

From the silence created then, he was certain Harenir was avoiding skinship with him.

Above all, since coming to the island, he hadn't slept in the same bed with Harenir!

While staying at the mansion, they had always slept embracing each other. When he had proposed "If you go out and come back, I'll embrace you and put you to sleep" to soothe his separation anxiety, from that day on he had come to him every night. Though he had fallen asleep first on the first day and often did so afterward too, anyway when he woke up, he was naturally embraced in his arms.

Looking back at his memories, they had never kissed lips even while sleeping embraced like that. But Harenir at that time was always tired from heavy work by the time he returned to the mansion, and he always met him while dozing off, so it could be overlooked. At least they had slept tightly embracing each other, feeling each other's heartbeats in their touching embraces!

Despite having been so close, now that they came to the island, skinship had drastically decreased. No, beyond decreasing, it had disappeared. Eventually, Harenir even used a completely different room in this villa.

"Why?"

Could it be... only I want to touch?

Honestly, he didn't think he was someone who particularly liked skinship. He meant he didn't yearn so desperately that he would become anxious or hang himself if he couldn't touch the other for even a moment. Since he hadn't been close to anyone for a long time, he had even found others' warmth uncomfortable.

Only now gradually, he was getting used to uniquely one person.

But feeling that that one person was avoiding him made him feel strange. Was there some problem? Could it be that his feelings had changed? ...No, this hypothesis was quickly discarded as it seemed not right just looking at Harenir's gaze.

Anyway, he was confused about exactly what reason he was avoiding him for, and was somewhat anxious. Though believing his affection remained, he couldn't kill all the sprouts of anxiety rising from deep within his heart.

This was his feeling until the third day, but finally today, when the situation occurred where Harenir even avoided his hand, his head cooled coldly. The string of patience had snapped, to put it that way.

He was gradually getting angry.

No matter how much he was someone who had never dated before, let alone someone who felt awkward with even common bonds between people, this was wrong. Moreover, wasn't this place exactly that 'island'?

"You mentioned this place when confessing!"

In the past, Harenir had chased after him disappearing into chaos and confessed desperately and passionately. At that time, he had said he had prepared an island for him, and he had come out alive wanting to go there. It wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that their mutual hearts wanting to be together on the island had painted the present.

For such a special space, when they finally came here together... wasn't it natural to expect lover-like contact? In the form of thinking they would do something here, at least they would kiss. They say couples imagine those kinds of things even on a single night's stay!

"No, why should I even be worrying about this in the first place."

He raged while hitting, thump thump, the cushion on the living room sofa. Currently he was alone as Harenir had left briefly saying he would bring snacks. This situation was frustrating, and also being enveloped in such worries itself was infuriating. He avoids my hand but prepares food to feed me?

His mind marked with anger couldn't think rationally. Already having suffered from anxiety over the past few days, it wasn't in a state to function normally.

So finally, he made a very impulsive decision.

"I'd like you to send some alcohol."

-Excuse me? Alcohol... you say?

"Yes. Alcohol with very high proof that can make one drunk quickly."

This villa had a very peculiar device. It was a magic artifact connecting to Harenir's mansion, and its performance didn't stop at simple communication. It could even receive items through a square box. It was like an otherworld rocket delivery.

Though there were limits to its size and frequency too, the item he wanted now could be received sufficiently. He repeatedly emphasized 'hard liquor' to the mansion's butler, and he answered in a bewildered tone that he would prepare and send it soon.

He waited in front of the box and took deep breaths.

It seemed he would have to rely on the power of alcohol.

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That night.

He told Harenir he had something to talk about and to come to his room. Though he asked if they couldn't talk in the living room, he refused firmly. After specifying the time and saying he would wait, he went to his room and prepared.

And at 8 o'clock, Harenir came at the time he had mentioned.

"...Did you want a late-night snack?"

"Yes. So sit down across from me."

Having just set the table, he greeted Harenir welcomingly. He had carefully placed fruits, cheese, crackers, beef jerky, etc. on pretty dishes and fully furnished it with a wine bottle and glasses. He had even thought of sprinkling flowers, but stopped as that would be too strange.

So he had aimed to create 'mood' in earnest and talk with Harenir. Let's talk candidly while having a drink. There might be problems he hadn't guessed.

But Harenir didn't approach and just rolled his eyes slightly before asking:

"How about eating in the dining room?"

"The dining room and this place have different feelings. There it seems like we should eat formally."

"...Then since you might spill food on the bed, rather using the table by the balcony--"

"We're not even eating on top of the bed, what's the problem? Come quickly."

He cut off the conversation that was trying to lengthen and gestured. The table was just placed near the bed, yet he didn't understand why he was acting like that. As he looked at him bewilderedly, only then did Harenir slowly approach.

Harenir's gaze went toward the wine. Though the food could be taken from the ingredient storage in the villa's basement, there was no alcohol there. Originally there wasn't even a single bottle of alcohol on this island. So he explained as the suddenly appearing wine would be curious:

"I contacted the mansion and received it. Because I wanted to try drinking here just once..."

Out of needless embarrassment he fiddled with his nape, but Harenir just looked over the bottle without any particular words. Thinking he might stop him from drinking, he quickly uncorked the bottle.

Glug glug glug, he filled the transparent glass full with wine.

Information vaguely came to mind that wine should be poured sparingly and savored, or should be enjoyed slowly by letting the aroma gather in the glass, but he completely ignored it. Originally he wasn't in a state to pay attention to such trivial things now. As he was gradually getting nervous, he wanted to quickly borrow intoxication.

"Drink first. You empty it too."

After ordering Harenir, he organized in his mind the conversation to have with him. Right. First talk about how much he likes the island, say the vacation spent here is very enjoyable too, convey thanks, and then...

Clack.

After emptying the glass completely in one gulp, he took a deep breath. Perhaps because he was too nervous, the alcohol wasn't bitter at all and there was no feeling of his throat burning. He stared blankly at the two glasses on the table that were completely empty and spoke:

"Sleep together."

"...What?"

Great confusion settled on Harenir's face.

Though he hadn't known he would throw a fastball so abruptly, it couldn't be helped. Though he had tried to set the mood and have a calm conversation, rage suddenly welled up asking why he had to go roundabout while worrying like this.

Conversation. Right, conversation is good.

He had to have a body conversation.

"Ah, you must be very tired. Since you worked hard walking around the island during the day, now quickly lie down on the bed..."

"No, I'm saying I want to sleep with you."

He trampled Harenir's avoidance. Using the excuse of being drunk on hard liquor as a shield, he spat it out very honestly. The dissatisfaction accumulated from not being able to touch all this time burst out explosively with several times the reaction.

### Chapter 196

Actually, he had been constantly conscious of Harenir since arriving on the island. Whenever a strange atmosphere formed between them, his heart beat greatly and he tickled with desire to touch closely. Should he call it sexual tension? He had kissed him before, and moreover, had even mixed bodies.

Though it wasn't something he had done in his right mind, he remembered the pleasure felt when their bodies touched. Though he might have ignored it if he didn't know at all, it was difficult to endure the boiling feeling when he already knew everything.

So this was sexual frustration.

Not having any skinship at all during this time manifested like this. If only they had kissed lips or at least held hands earlier, it wouldn't have escalated to this situation! Whatever the case, this was Harenir's fault and he was wrong. He should rightfully take responsibility.

He rose from his seat and approached Harenir. Though he tried to kiss him first, throwing away all shame and everything, regrettably his shoulder was caught.

Harenir spoke with a very bewildered face:

"Isaph, since it's late at night now, let's sleep first and talk tomorrow morning..."

"Is 8 o'clock late at night? Ha, right. Then let's do it quickly before it gets later."

"No, wai-wait a moment..."

His voice asking for calm trembled. Even stuttering, as if concerned he might charge with his whole body, he quickly rose from his seat and held him more firmly.

"...You don't want to do it with me?"

He felt upset at Harenir's strong restraint. Though he understood that the other would be bewildered since he himself was aware he was committing crazy actions, nevertheless his mood sank as Harenir refused with such surprise.

He stopped moving and bowed his head slump.

"So that's why you've been avoiding me all this time? Because your feelings have changed, to the point where you dislike even touching me-"

"No, absolutely not."

Harenir urgently cut off his words. After denying as quickly as firmly, then his touch gripping his shoulders was corrected to be much gentler. Though he had only looked down at the floor, it was a gesture trying to soothe him anxiously not knowing what to do.

He spoke in a tone as if his throat was being strangled:

"How could I, dare to, dislike touching you..."

"Good. Then let's do it."

He lifted his head immediately and charged. Since we like each other, and he doesn't dislike touching me either, then it's okay to kiss now. Having cleanly drawn a conclusion, he caught Harenir. He pulled him with momentum almost like grabbing his collar. For an instant, perhaps Harenir was also startled and staggered, and they fell onto the bed like that.

However...

"Why again! Just what's the problem!"

The film-like scene of bodies intertwining on the bed and hurriedly kissing did not occur. Harenir with his excessively good reflexes stopped by planting both arms on the sheets just before falling, and he ended up lying between his two arms. Though thinking this position was fine too, he pulled his collar again, but he just wouldn't come down.

He's still resisting in this situation? As he shouted, growl, out of anger, Harenir covered his face with one hand. Deep bewilderment was infused in the action of roughly dry-washing his face.

"Isaph. Last time after we kissed, you fainted and woke up hours later. Seeing that clearly with my own two eyes, how could I again to you..."

It was words poured out with a sigh. Only then did he vaguely blink his eyes recalling there had been such an incident before. He had completely forgotten. After confessing aloud to Harenir, he had kissed him and then fainted right away...

Could it be, that's why he had been avoiding all along? Though it might be shocking from the perspective of someone who witnessed that scene, indignation welled up at how ridiculous it was to still worry about something from who knows when.

"That was because I had too little strength then. I'm fine now!"

"...But you're still too weak. Later when you're healthy-"

"In my memory, I've never been healthy even once."

If that was the condition, it was clear they would never be able to kiss. To say he would become healthy was like an indefinite matter comparable to Harenir becoming weak.

It was true his body wasn't fully recovered as Harenir's vacation had started early. But he was absolutely not at the point where he would collapse if lightly hit like before, and it had been long since he surpassed turning several laps around the bedroom that he had set as the standard for rehabilitation in the past. He had even been walking around this wide island fine just now!

Finally he firmly grabbed Harenir's collar with both hands and spoke while raising his upper body. If he wouldn't come down, he would go up.

"If you're really anxious, check. Whether I collapse from kissing or not."

He crashed their lips together like charging. This was really something that should be expressed as lips colliding rather than a kiss, but it couldn't be helped. He needed to block conversation before Harenir could say anything.

Heumchit, Harenir's lips closed. Was this like the last defensive wall? Though absurd, filled with defiance, he kissed, smooch, licked his upper lip, and even turned his head here and there. But the defense line that wouldn't easily penetrate was infuriating, so he bit and pulled his lower lip and grumbled:

"Since coming to the island, I've been wanting to hold hands with you and kiss all along, but you've just been avoiding. What is this. It feels like only I like you-"

He couldn't finish his words. Just as he felt his back of the head being caught right after confessing honestly, Harenir kissed him like that. As if the string of patience had finally snapped, a deep kiss poured in one breath. As tongues mixed, wet squelch, wet breaths soon exchanged.

Harenir clung like someone who wanted to swallow even his breath completely, and he responded welcomingly while embracing his neck. His head rang with joy at the fact he was finally touching Harenir.

Strangely, the sensation was vivid to an excessive degree. Was it because he wasn't kissing while being cursed by a succubus or in a heavily drunk state, that is, with his mind blown away? Though he had drunk a full glass of hard liquor, it was just one glass and he had just swallowed it.

"Haah, ah..."

But rather having a clear mind now seemed more exciting. The sensation of lips meeting and being crushed together and moist flesh pieces continuously rubbing was thrilling. Heat began to creep through his body. Was intoxication circulating now, or was he just responding?

Of course there was no time to pay attention to such distinctions. Since what he wanted to focus on was only kissing Harenir, he constantly clung to him. The more he was embraced as if trapped in his arms, the deeper the tongue dug in. Gradually his body was pushed back and he lay on the bed.

Thump thump thump, his heart beat greatly.

Though he wanted to keep responding because he was excited with delight and Harenir's reaction was also very welcome, it gradually became difficult to endure. Not simply because his body was weak, but because he kissed without even giving room to breathe. The behavior acting desperately thirsty like someone who had wandered the desert for a very long time felt quite urgent.

Though he tried to create a gap to breathe somehow, lips immediately followed and attached, even becoming more intense. By now Harenir was kissing while tightly embracing him, imprisoning him as if pressing down with his whole body.

"Gasp, wait, pant, just a moment-"

Finally he turned his head to the side and panted. As he breathed rapidly, Harenir paused and froze. As if only now coming to his senses, he froze, and fearing he might leave, he first grabbed his collar.

"When you're, huuh, this excited. Just why did you avoid me all this time."

"...So doesn't it occur to you why I avoided?"

Harenir exhaled a sigh. Having judged he could no longer avoid now that it had finally come to this, he looked down at him with a face where numerous passions stormed. His touch carefully organizing his hair disheveled on the pillow was gentle.

"Actually, like you, I've been wanting to touch you constantly since the moment we entered the island."

"For that, you used separate rooms, and increasingly didn't even hold hands... Ah, wait. Could it be."

While he had understood that avoiding kisses was because he had collapsed after kissing in the past so he was trying to be careful, could the reason he had avoided all skinship altogether be...?

"Could it be you avoided because you thought you might get excited even just from touching hands?"

"...I was keeping a safe distance. Since you were weak, I thought I had to wait until you were okay."

A dry laugh burst out.

"After keeping such distance, you'd have gone all the way to the mansion in the holy city."

"No. The distance can't become that far."

"Huh, what are you saying when you've already used separate rooms. Now it seems you're not anxious even if I'm not in sight?"

"...Actually, I've cast magic over this entire island. Magic that detects the presence of living beings and can check where they are in real time, but it becomes difficult to grasp if I leave the island."

...Could this be a home security camera?

### Chapter 197

Though he was about to tease him asking if his separation anxiety was all cured now, he heard a completely unexpected answer. Isn't this motion-detecting CCTV? At his dubious reaction, Harenir added an explanation.

"I wanted to be considerate so you could move around as comfortably as possible here. Since you were burdened by me following you around continuously at the mansion."

"No, I wasn't burdened..."

"But when it's this spacious, isn't it okay because it's not stifling?"

"Your statements are increasingly sounding like prison promotion..."

Though he had jokingly evaluated a few days ago that he was experiencing 'imperial confinement' upon seeing this villa, he became bewildered wondering if this entire island had really been a massive prison. Moreover, the other party was so confident that he didn't know how to react.

But... honestly, he didn't feel all that bad. This vast island was created solely for 'him' and everything was tailored to his convenience. Moreover, since Harenir was also here with him, wasn't there no reason to dislike it?

Right, well, interpreted differently, it meant Harenir was caring for him that much. He thought it was fortunate he wasn't trying to confine him forcibly. It wasn't like he had put a leash on him; rather, he was the one desperate to wear it himself.

While he pondered briefly, Harenir, whatever he was thinking, tried to get up. As he raised his upper body as if to leave the bed, he re-gripped his collar and also raised his body following him. At this urgent action, he soothed him.

"Are you having a hard time again with your heart beating too fast? Instead of forcing yourself needlessly, let's stop here this time..."

"My heart is beating like this because I like touching you."

At this very honest confession, Harenir froze abruptly. As the blue eyes directed at him rippled deeply, taking advantage of that gap, he firmly wrapped his arms around his neck. The pulled face was right before him.

He bumped their noses together and let out rapid breaths. Was it because the aftermath of the intense kiss still continued, or the effect of being tense from the moment of lying on the bed?

"And, you're already excited too."

"...That's a problem I'll handle myself, so you--"

"Be quiet. I'm drunk so I'll do as I please."

While kissing just before, he could feel Harenir's state with their whole bodies touching. The fact that he had responded to him excited him further, making him not want to miss this moment. It was a resolute will.

With the thought of continuing this atmosphere, he quickly climbed onto Harenir's thighs, but somehow there was no particular resistance from him. Just staring at him as if sinking into some confusion, then soon he asked in a very intriguing tone:

"...You're drunk?"

"Yes. So don't stop me."

"...I see."

His attitude of nodding his head while exhaling a short breath was somewhat strange. Though it was suspicious, as the desire not to lose the immediate flow prevailed, he began unbuttoning Harenir's shirt first.

If he cut it off ambiguously saying just up to here for now and promised next time, he didn't know when they would do it again. He neither wanted to lose the warmth touched after days nor become awkward by stopping in the middle. Since they had started, he had to see it through to the end.

After unbuttoning and opening Harenir's shirt, he stroked the skin with his hand. It seemed he had struggled to unbutton the shirt before, but now he did it quickly as if experienced. Whatever it was, he was quite satisfied with the fact that he was touching his bare skin. Firm muscles writhed following his touch.

From the collarbone to the chest, and down to the stomach, he slowly stroked with his fingertips. While Harenir's twitching reaction was enjoyable, his body also responded in turn. The warmth felt directly through his palm was unfamiliar. Though they had had relations several times in the past, it felt exactly like touching for the first time today.

Thump thump thump, his heart beat rapidly. With heat circulating through his whole body, he looked down at Harenir with a somewhat dazed mind. After their gazes tangled silently, it naturally led to a kiss.

"Huff, hah..."

Even though they were just mixing tongues, he suffered from the sensation of his whole body whirling. He leaned against Harenir as if burying himself in his embrace, and began moving his waist following instinct. He moaned while rubbing and stroking below.

He acted very honestly under the shield of being drunk on alcohol, and that undisguised acknowledgment excited him more. Urgently putting his hand in his mouth to coat it with plenty of saliva, he lowered it. The desire to quickly prepare his rear and connect deeply with Harenir paralyzed his reason.

"Ngh, ah..."

"You shouldn't loosen up too hastily."

Though he tried to push in his index and middle fingers to the back without thinking, it wasn't easy. As he tried to force his way in irritably, Harenir caught his arm and restrained him. Though he worried saying he would get hurt that way, he was just impatient.

"Then, heuuh, loosen it together."

At his words, he caught Harenir's hand that paused abruptly and guided it. Though his face felt like it would explode from embarrassment having to do this much, his eager heart prevailed. He acted recklessly with the judgment that using both people's hands might loosen his rear faster.

However, when he inserted Harenir's index finger together with his hand, he trembled, shudder, letting out a high-pitched moan hik-. The foreign sensation experienced after a long time was too much. Moreover, Harenir's hand was much thicker and longer than his, so he was breathless even with just one inserted.

But fearing Harenir might stop if he paused too long, he pleaded painfully while rubbing his forehead on his nape.

"Quickly... I want to touch you soon..."

"Really, you..."

A suppressed breath burst from Harenir. Lifting his head to face his blue eyes, intense emotions were raging in them. As he kissed the side of his head diagonally and took a deep breath, he began moving the hand caught by him. Now he enveloped his hand and inserted it.

Squelch squelch, the more their fingers widened the inner wall, sparks burst before his eyes. Gasp, moan, he let out broken moans and repeatedly startled when the fingers brushed against one point. Though his reason flickered away, he couldn't give up being embraced by and nuzzling against Harenir.

The act of looking down at him while mounted on top of Harenir was addictively strange. The fact that only he could look at him from such a structure gave a peculiar satisfaction. As if knowing this heart of his, he willingly looked up at him, kissed his jawline, and slowly traced down. It was a kiss like worship.

Especially Harenir's lips lingered for a long time on his nape. The action of pressing his lips down on the neck where no shackle existed anymore was extremely careful, and this sensation seemed to come across quite differently to him. As if the pulse transmitted through his lips was unfamiliar, he even held his breath for a moment.

"Ah, good... Heuk, that's good, ah!"

Though his lips couldn't stay in one place for long as he was moving his whole body, he simply happily kissed various parts of his body.

While loosening his rear together with him with one hand, Harenir caressed his body with his other hand. After carefully removing his clothes, heat spread wherever his touch brushed as if handling something infinitely precious. The tenderness imbued in all his actions pushed him into a sea of hot pleasure.

Gradually his mind flew away. Whether intoxication was really beginning to circulate, or just the fact of touching Harenir excited him to the point of paralyzing reason. After irritably ruffling the hair touching his chest, he endlessly spat out urgings like "Quickly, hurry..."

Having started to act honestly on the excuse of being drunk made him extremely excited. He moaned freely while embracing and fumbling for Harenir, and this reaction soon...

"Ah!"

Created the result of climaxing as soon as Harenir's manhood entered his body.

Even though it hadn't been fully inserted yet, the moment Harenir exhaled a murky breath and looked up at him, he orgasmed intensely. In one breath, sexual pleasure reached its peak and his head turned white with a shiver.

Drip drip, the white fluid that spurted fell and flowed down his chest. In this highly embarrassing situation, not only his face but his entire body heated up bright red. Though he had kept saying it felt good, he hadn't known he would react this much.

### Chapter 198

He covered his face fumblingly with both hands. Even so, his whole body trembled, fully revealing he was intoxicated with pleasure, making it more embarrassing. As he bowed his head thud, Harenir gently caught his wrists and asked:

"Why are you suddenly trying to hide?"

"Heuuh, too, eut, coming right away..."

After answering embarrassedly, Harenir laughed quietly.

"After acting so honestly until now, that's what embarrasses you..."

He muttered as if talking to himself then pressed his lips to the corner of his eye. Instead of forcibly removing his hands still covering his face, he targeted their edges for contact. At the gentle kiss as if wiping away tears clinging to the corners of his eyes, he felt suddenly wronged.

Right, wasn't it because he acted this tenderly that he became more excited? Though naturally weak to warmth, the emotion felt in all of Harenir's actions made him even more sensitive. Even now as he whispered that he was fine while stroking his lower back, his heart lurched to the point of aching at that touch.

He brushed Harenir's hand away abruptly and burst out with misdirected resentment:

"This is all, heuk, your fault."

"Suddenly?"

"You making me, excited is too... eut, good..."

However, instead of arguing, finally his most honest inner thoughts slipped out. Though Harenir had looked at him familiarly at first with a gaze asking what reason he was being sharp for now, he paused.

Though he had rushed headlong as if in reaction to not being able to touch for a long time, regardless of the background, wasn't this their first relationship after their hearts had touched? Before, they had relations while suffering from a demon's curse, and then while completely drunk trying to forget worries.

But now, they had come together simply wanting to touch each other.

This moment approaching so specially made his heart not just thump but his whole body feel like it would swell and burst like a balloon. Hundreds, thousands of feathers tickled his skin.

"In the past, I thought you did it forcibly for me."

"...Why on earth?"

"Hm? That's..."

Not having expected a counter-question here, he blinked his eyes dazedly. He had thought Harenir would naturally agree. Because their relationship at that time hadn't been normal. Then he had been a death row prisoner, and he had been the manager holding his leash.

After searching for a suitable answer, he finally succeeded in narrowing it down to one reason.

"You're a holy knight."

And the noble hero of the Holy Empire.

He swallowed the rest thinking if he said this too, he would likely hear the absurd denial of his existence saying he wasn't a hero. Then suddenly his thoughts jumped elsewhere.

"Ah, come to think of it, as a holy knight, eut, shouldn't you not easily form this kind of relationship?"

"...I think it's extremely late to ask that."

Harenir sighed as if it were absurd. Even now they were already in an inserted state, so confusion was full at what kind of question this was. Moreover, just now while questioning his inner wall had also writhed making him struggle alone briefly, so he knew he had asked a very strange question.

Still, since it was something he had been curious about for a long time, he sent Harenir a gaze asking for an answer while groaning, and finally he spoke with a sigh:

"Holy knights are taught that they should only have relations with someone they've vowed to spend their lifetime with."

It was an answer given while slowly stroking his waist. Though he had guessed there wouldn't be a rule requiring absolute abstinence since holy knights also married and had children, expressing it like that made it feel quite weighty.

Having done such an act with him must have been quite awkward at the time. Though at first it could be overlooked because of sharing the demon's curse...

Around when he unconsciously moaned following the gentle touch, he spoke quietly:

"And I don't respond to someone I truly have no feelings for."

"...Huh?"

"At that time I kept denying and avoiding it seems, but still always... ultimately I was swept away by you."

Harenir lifted his hand and kissed it, also firmly tangling their gazes. As if his touch and gaze were all that had swept him away.

"You always committed acts beyond the range of understanding, and things never went according to my thinking... nevertheless I chose to respond to you. Not forcibly, but of my own will."

There was some pleasure mixed in that voice. Whether laughing at his past self's behavior of avoiding while looking back, or recalling how being swept away by him and helplessly being drawn in those moments was fun.

"So me dedicating my lifetime to you is a natural result too."

Harenir lowered his head and carefully buried his lips on the ring finger of his left hand. The sensation of his breath brushing felt exactly like wearing a ring.

He blankly blinked his two eyes. The tickling starting from his ring finger spread throughout his whole body. Hesitantly he moved that hand and cupped Harenir's face. As he naturally offered his face and even leaned against it, courage suddenly welled up.

"...I too, actually I too liked it then."

In the past when a banquet was held in the holy city celebrating the hero's return, there had been a question he had ultimately avoided while having relations with him. Having kissed him first with the reason of wondering what it would feel like to touch him without the succubus's curse, he had still avoided until the end.

'Now, how does it feel?'

At that time he had found Harenir's question uncomfortable. Though he made excuses saying it was because he persistently probed, looking back now, there was only one reason.

"Touching you, felt too good."

If time together with him felt good, he might want to stay in this world forever.

At that time, recognizing himself as a game player and guessing he would leave someday, he had tried not to place emotions here. He had tried to turn away stubbornly. However, no matter how much he covered it, the feelings only grew, finally giving him courage to stand before the Great Catastrophe... and at last making him return to live here.

Harenir's blue eyes shook greatly. As if knowing which moment he was talking about, he remained silent for an instant as if his breath was caught. Just by meeting his gaze, he could fully feel what kind of emotional torrent he was facing now.

Soon their lips met. They embraced each other and swallowed each other's breaths simultaneously, to the extent it was impossible to distinguish who kissed first. Their bodies tangled like vines.

All evidence vividly proving that they were together here approached too joyfully. The warmth felt from their embracing bodies, the heavy heartbeat resonating through their whole bodies, and even the gazes tangling from time to time.

"Hayuk, eut, aah...!"

Perhaps because his heart beat too quickly, the heat burning his whole body intensified even more. Each time Harenir thrust up, his inner walls clenched fiercely, clinging to his manhood and urging him.

Sometimes Harenir quietly let out breaths between his lips, or looked at him desperately to the point of persistence. He just moaned mindlessly while embracing Harenir, then hung from his shoulders following his movements, or sobbed as if suffering while scratching his back.

Was it because he considered this moment special? All stimulation felt vivid, and the desire to remember every sensation of this moment without missing anything pushed his entire body into a sea of hot ecstasy.

Heat circulated at the point of joining. Whenever he felt strength fully entering his thighs crashing against him, shivery pleasure welled up, and each time his manhood struck a point on his inner wall thud thud, it flickered dazzlingly before his eyes.

His whole body felt like it was melting like an overripe fruit. He naturally entrusted his whole body to Harenir and moaned while clinging to him. He acted as if Harenir should rightfully take responsibility for his strange state.

"Eugh, hah, ah, there, moan, please...!"

"I'll do it, slowly, huuu... breathe..."

Harenir patted his lower back as if soothing him. When he couldn't even breathe due to overwhelming pleasure, he created space to breathe, and if he still couldn't compose himself, he even kissed him to guide his breathing. Sometimes asking if he was dizzy, telling him to bite his shoulder if it was hard, he checked his condition every moment.

Actually, Harenir had never driven harshly even once while having relations today. As if only his satisfaction mattered, he led him to feel good and constantly checked his condition while confirming his face. Even his touch caressing his whole body was careful.

Though he had considered it just tender consideration, suddenly it felt like desperate pleading. When he looked down at him with eyes that couldn't even focus properly, could the action of urgently tangling gazes be expressed simply as warm affection?

Whatever it was, the emotion transmitted from all those actions with concentration so thick it was suffocating, drowned him in excessive euphoria.

"Haah, Isaph..."

So finally at the moment Harenir embraced him as if hanging with both arms and called his name, he reached climax again. He bent his waist back while letting out a silent moan. Shivers raced through every corner of his entire body, making his fingertips and toes curl and his thighs tremble madly.

### Chapter 199

As if his mind was about to fly away, he burrowed into Harenir's embrace and convulsed. He clung to him as if he were his only lifeline. Semen burst, spurt, from the tip of his manhood several times, making it impossible to control his body. His entire body was at the level of sporadically jumping.

"Hahh, agh, ah..."

Panting moans fell from his loosened mouth continuously. Around then, it seemed like suppressed breathing burst from Harenir too, then suddenly he withdrew his manhood. He vaguely perceived the sensation of him moving his hand at a place that almost touched the cleft of his buttocks.

He was simply dazed. So he gratefully accepted the touch that gently stroked his lower back releasing tension, and embraced him until his trembling calmed down, slowly laying him down.

His body melted in the satisfying afterglow that followed. Harenir even held his manhood that was still spewing thin fluid, drip drip, and stroked it up. With his whole body entrusted to him, he just blankly blinked his eyes and...

Soon only when Harenir organized his disheveled hair and carefully pressed his lips to his cheek did he feel something was strange.

Huh? Why does it feel like it's going to end like this?

"Wai-wait a moment."

And the moment he instinctively caught Harenir was truly when he was just about to get up. He naturally stopped at his call, but he was just confused.

"Aren't we, doing more...?"

"You're too exhausted now. I'll wash you now-"

"No, right now you still..."

Hadn't he not climaxed?

As he traced back his hazy memory, it seemed like he had withdrawn his manhood and moved his hand right after his climax... he wasn't sure if he had really resolved then. Even now his manhood was in an ominously erected state. The momentum that hadn't died at all looked threatening.

Though it had entered his body, he still got surprised when looking at it with his eyes. With difficulty calming himself, he just re-gripped Harenir's arm a couple times. Whether he had climaxed or not, a strange regret remained.

As if only he had been satisfied and it ended.

There was a high probability it wasn't a misunderstanding. Harenir had probably judged it appropriate to end here considering his body condition. Though understanding everything, even though he too had been afraid his whole body would boil and melt just before... he didn't want to end like this.

He wanted Harenir to be more satisfied too, or honestly, he even thought it would be nice if he were intoxicated with sexual pleasure and completely disheveled. It was embarrassed indignation asking why only he had to show such a face, and also honest desire.

Because only he would be able to see such an appearance from Harenir.

"Let's do it once more."

"But you seem very tired..."

"I didn't even faint. I'm telling you I'm fine."

He cut off his retreat using the reason Harenir had avoided relations earlier. Since he had said he was worried he might collapse even from just a kiss then, couldn't he who had proven he was fine even after having relations now very confidently request 'more'? He regretted ending with just once for their first relations on this island.

And actually there was something that bothered him about the previous relations. Though he was grateful that Harenir had prioritized and been considerate of him throughout their relations, looking back now, his condition had been somewhat subtle.

Though a vague guess, it was close to anxiety.

He had looked at him very desperately and repeatedly caught him with his hands trying to confirm his existence. Since he had seen it several times at the mansion too, he knew. Sometimes Harenir looked at him with a distant expression, and sometimes he carefully touched his fingers while even holding his breath. Though the frequency seemed to have decreased after sleeping together in one bed...

He wasn't particularly good with words. He had no confidence in offering warm comfort or promises to reduce Harenir's anxiety. So there was only one thing he could do.

He caught Harenir's arm and guided it down while whispering:

"This time, you can go deeper..."

"...Isaph."

Though he seemed about to say something, he kissed him immediately. Blocking conversation, he wrapped his arms around his neck without thinking.

Including past relations, he knew Harenir had never inserted fully. Nevertheless, he had reached his limit and felt real fear, not an exaggeration, that he might die if he went in further. If he accidentally hit some point while having relations, his vision would fly away white.

So he had never been able to say such words to him until now, but this time he wanted to try it. Actually he was somewhat curious too.

Using intoxication as an invincible shield, he spat out very honestly:

"I want to touch deeper with you."

It was words conveyed while their lips were pressed together. As he looked up at him while fully transmitting his completely disheveled breathing, his blue eyes shook slightly. Not wanting to miss the opportunity, he repeatedly bit his lips while urging, "Hurry-."

Finally Harenir exhaled a deeply sunken sigh.

"You must tell me if it's difficult."

"Eueung, quickly..."

He nodded his head and clung to Harenir again. Though a gaze followed as if looking at someone who hadn't understood the instruction at all, finally he silently embraced him back. Even just the touch stroking his lower back gently made heat bloom sensitively again.

Feelings about the coming stimulation mixed complexly. Curiosity, terror, expectation, fear. Contradictory things fought to take the lead tossing and turning inside to the point his head was dizzy.

He held his breath and watched the process of Harenir inserting. Though he turned his gaze away as if escaping because watching that scene was embarrassing, his eyes turned back there again. His heart pounded thump thump thump like beating with two hammers, as if dangerous matters were right before him.

Harenir seemed to want to be careful too as he caught his lower body and placed it on his thighs. Then he held his right leg and slightly raised it while inserting slowly, and the stimulation changed just from the angle of entry changing.

He made a moan heueung mixed with a nasal sound and rubbed his head against the pillow. He was impatient because the speed had slowed due to him entering carefully. By now his manhood had stood up again and was dripping thin, drip drip drip.

Then when reaching a certain point, his whole body tensed. It was enough to make his peach fuzz stand up. But as Harenir just lingered there and rubbed, he urged him impatiently. Because he was so excited, impatience boiled wanting him to move properly quickly regardless of what happened.

"Hurry, deeper, you can insert... Huk!"

Suddenly his vision flew away.

It happened the moment Harenir's manhood crossed a certain point. No, rather than crossing, the expression that it pierced might be more appropriate. Though he had felt the sensation of organs being pushed each time he inserted, this time the fear that some part had been forcibly opened beyond that level mounted. He trembled with instinctive aversion and real fear that his stomach would be pierced.

"Uh, ugh, I, wait, huft..."

Even dry retching sprang out. He was shocked, but he simply couldn't move rashly. Following survival instinct that if he struggled saying it was difficult here, something serious might really happen, he froze. His flickering vision couldn't even return properly. After seeing in front for a moment, it flew away repeatedly many times.

Harenir seemed to feel his whole body stiffening and carefully caressed his waist. Since his inner walls that had until just before clung to him as if urging, now tightly squeezed as if wary of an intruder.

"After all, huuh, we should stop-"

"Harenir, uh, ugh, you have to, keep your promise..."

He paused at the words spat out while sobbing. Though he seemed curious about the somewhat sudden word that sprang out, he fumblingly caught his hand and guided it to his stomach. While placing their hands overlapped on the place that bulged revealing fully what it had swallowed, he sobbed.

"If something, goes wrong with me, hik, you said you'd take responsibility..."

"..."

"Take responsibility, until the end, ugh."

Long ago, when they had relations for the first time, Harenir had recited such words to him like a promise. Though he had erased it saying it was an accident and to forget about it as soon as he woke up the next day, and actually had completely forgotten about it until now, it suddenly came to mind. Since it really seemed like something would go wrong, perhaps it was a survival tactic he was desperately clinging to just now.

Whatever it was, while crying and arguing to Harenir that he had to take responsibility, he heard murky breath burst through his teeth. Just then, his pupils confirmed through his vision that had barely returned were somewhat cloudy. Since he knew this was the reaction he showed when excited, he was startled. His whole body bristled.

Wai-wait a moment. Shouldn't he not get excited now?

"...Yes, I'll take responsibility."

Without even time to examine that ominousness exactly, Harenir came to kiss him.

### Chapter 200

His lips touching Harenir's was always welcome, but this time was different. It was burdensome to keep up with the kiss that drove forward without even giving room to breathe.

Moreover, Harenir began moving below in that state. Standing at his limit already, when he came pounding in, he convulsed throughout his body and climaxed. Even just the size of his manhood pressed down all his sensitive points making him suffer from excessive sexual pleasure, but now beyond that level, his vision repeatedly flew away.

"Ugh, eugh, deep, it's deep, huak, ah...!"

While bursting out high-pitched moans like screams, he randomly clutched the sheets then repeatedly scratched Harenir's back. The violent pleasure struck like smashing his head, rushing up his spine in one breath from his waist.

Now he realized he had been arrogant. In the previous relations, Harenir had been very gentle, so it ended safely. Moreover, looking back at his memories, he had always prioritized and adjusted to 'him' in the past too.

However, with Harenir's focus blurred now, he genuinely gasped at pleasure that felt like his whole body would break. His manhood pierced through his inner walls that were tightly squeezing. When he was pushed as he inserted and then pulled back by his waist, he sobbed as if suffering. The point of joining grew hot.

He couldn't come to his senses at the intense stimulation penetrating his entire body. Whether his manhood hitting his inner walls had turned his brain to mush, or his body had really been split in half. Though his consciousness was at the point of flying away, his body, ignorant of its owner's condition, continuously moved the hole and bit the manhood.

"Huuh, Isaph..."

As that happened, Harenir's moans became murkily disheveled. Though he had wanted to see him excited, he hadn't expected to face it like this. From this stage, there wasn't even room for him to appreciate it, and moreover an even bigger problem occurred.

"Hiik, if it, gets bigger, ah, no, hieuk...!"

His waist jumped wildly. As the striking stimulation seemed to stir his brain, his vision continuously blurred hazily. Even his scalp itched.

He felt like he would lose his breath. His whole body heated up as if submerged in lava, and moans fell mindlessly between lips that couldn't fully close. Harenir licked the saliva flowing down his chin, and received and swallowed it as if it were holy water.

Though it was stimulation that drove so frighteningly, he simply couldn't tell Harenir to stop. The reason was absolutely not that he couldn't calm him down.

Though he seemed to have lost his reason now, the hand holding his waist sometimes loosened. Even though he lost control, he ultimately wouldn't try to hurt him too much. So if he firmly pushed him away or complained of pain, or even just called his name, he could stop.

But he didn't feel like it. Because it was thrilling to touch Harenir so deeply, and even more, because his face clouded with lust was so different.

"Isaph, haah, please, Isaph..."

And because he didn't want to push away Harenir who was repeatedly calling his name. He chose to embrace him and panted.

Now he seemed to know what had taken the lead among the emotions that had been flipping in his mind just before. Though he had boldly told Harenir to insert deeper, when insertion actually began he grew scared, yet was still curious and glanced. Curiosity and fear kept flipping, but what was above all those emotions was...

"I like you, heuuh, I really like you."

It was clear love. Because he liked the warmth embracing him now, and because the fact they were together here was so joyful. He repeatedly clung to Harenir while whispering confessions. He hoped this moment would approach him too as definite happiness.

Abruptly, Harenir's movement stopped. As he even held his breath for a moment and blankly looked down at only him, he quickly pulled his face down and kissed him. Though it was intended to excite him, rather he moved his waist and suffered. Even just sharing breath heated up hot made his reason paralyzed.

Soon Harenir responded to the kiss and embraced him. But rather than an affectionate hug, it felt like imprisoning him so he couldn't go anywhere. His whole body was suppressed, and as he wrapped even his head with both arms, he was stuck unable to move at all.

"Hayuk! Ah, this, heueung, suffocating, aeueung...!"

All he could grasp was Harenir's back, and his manhood continuously hit his firm abs while dripping thin fluid. By now his softened inner walls and swollen sensitive point keenly heightened sexual pleasure.

Each time Harenir's thick manhood crossed some point, pleasure poured. Though it was one edge away from fear, trust that he would never harm him made him accept all this impact as only pleasure.

The sensation rising up his spine repeatedly pierced his brain sharply and tensed his whole body, then suddenly spread heat throughout his body melting his nerves. His body melts without form then startles again at dizzying stimulation.

"Heuuh, ah, aah...!"

After just dropping moans like sobbing from his completely relaxed mouth, he finally reached climax. He climaxed while convulsing his whole body trapped in Harenir's embrace. From the tip of his trembling manhood, highly thinned semen burst out, spurt spurt.

He couldn't come to his senses. His two hands sprawled on the bed convulsed intermittently, and even his eyelids wouldn't properly lift. During that time, Harenir's suppressed breathing fell on his ear. Gasp, after holding his breath briefly, as he raised his upper body and tried to retreat, he spoke while sprawled in a daze:

"Inside, ugh, eugh, you can do it inside..."

"...No. Huuh, if it's in too deep, you'll hurt..."

"Eueung, you take responsibility and pull out... You said you'd promise..."

It was words thrown out between sleep and wakefulness. Thinking the reason he hadn't climaxed inside at first was also consideration for his body condition, whatever it was, he babbled saying hadn't he said he would take responsibility? Though it was a statement that would likely come across as quite absurd, Harenir sighed deeply.

As if me mentioning that 'promise' gave some great stimulation, soon he embraced my whole body again as if imprisoning and ejaculated. Though he barely pulled out halfway with reason grasped at the last moment, by the time he withdrew, fluid dropped ttuk, ttuuk from the hole.

Since that sensation was quite explicit, he moaned while squirming his body. Harenir's lips touched his eyelids trembling.

"Yes... Let me, continue, to take responsibility for you..."

Though his consciousness was hazy, dry laughter came at that desperate whisper. Why did it sound like begging? Honestly, wouldn't I be the one to benefit...

Though he wanted to meet his gaze, it was simply difficult to open his eyes, so instead he fumblingly raised his hand and embraced Harenir's head. Pat pat, he stroked the back of his head as if soothing him. With savoring the sensation of soft hair tangling in his fingers as the last, he gradually let go of consciousness.

It was a deep sleep.

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Consciousness awakened slowly.

Without even dreaming, warmth heated his whole body with the languidness after sleeping very deeply. He had tossed and turned with needless worries for days, but it seemed he had finally slept soundly today. His body melted with satisfaction.

Though his consciousness had awakened, since he didn't want to get up right away, he indulged in laziness to the fullest, closing his eyes and enduring, then lifted his eyelids at the sensation of someone staring at him intently right in front.

"Are you awake?"

Naturally, Harenir was before his eyes.

Facing him quietly watching his face while embracing him in his arms in the morning was daily life at the mansion. Considering the time he had yearned because he couldn't touch him since coming to the island, he should clearly be glad now, and though he felt that way deep inside... a sigh burst out first.

"Haaah..."

The memory of yesterday was too vivid.

Crazy with sexual frustration, he had lost his mind with one glass of alcohol and rushed in. Everything was clear, even how he had gotten increasingly excited and spat out progressively higher level statements. Though Harenir had drunk alcohol together, he would absolutely not have gotten drunk. Since a hero with high self-healing power wouldn't get drunk with just one glass.

As he stubbornly covered his face with his hands, lacking the courage to face Harenir in his right mind, he asked:

"Why? Are you going to say it was an accident again so let's forget about it?"

"A-absolutely not."

Why the grudge? Though it became absurd, he grew awkward thinking how much dissatisfaction must have built up about that past statement for him to act like that. Finally he lowered his hands covering his face and fiddled with his nape. By now heat had risen there.

"Well, um, though I did commit it drunk on alcohol... I remember everything. I won't pretend not to know..."

### Chapter 201

He promised while mumbling, umm umm. It was words continuing while still lowering his gaze out of embarrassment.

Right, since Harenir had even washed his whole body clean and changed his clothes, he shouldn't pretend not to know. He was taking responsibility too. Around when he was nodding solemnly, Harenir muttered:

"I've been debating whether to tell you since yesterday..."

Hmm... after the sigh, the crisp truth followed:

"Actually, the alcohol you drank yesterday had no alcohol content."

"...Huh?"

"When I received the message that you had requested hard liquor from the mansion, I wondered why you would try to drink alcohol with your weak body, so I said to deliver one without alcohol content."

He froze stiff right there. Though indignation welled up at the absurdity of why his order was relayed to Harenir, he couldn't even have the mind to question that.

Whoosh, his face heated up bright red.

Not just his face, but his whole body must have reddened. He was too embarrassed at the fact that everything he had committed last night had been done in a sound mind. Though he had acted honestly holding up intoxication as an invincible shield, from the start it wasn't a shield. It was like holding up transparent glass to show. Almost like a magnifying glass.

'...You're drunk?'

'Yes. So don't stop me.'

'...I see.'

Moreover, the truth that Harenir had known it all made him even more ashamed. No wonder he hadn't seemed that surprised at the suddenly appearing wine bottle, was it because it was an item that had passed through his own confirmation from the start?

He should have doubted when he felt no intoxication at all after drinking a full glass. Hard liquor, no, even if the proof was low, drinking it in one breath should have stung his throat, but he hadn't realized even that. At that time, all his nerves had been focused only on the desire to touch Harenir right before him.

"I-if you knew from the start, why..."

"I was curious what you would say when you became honest."

Harenir answered as if it were obvious. It meant he had become curious about what kind of things this being who always committed unpredictable acts would say on the excuse of being drunk. He even added that he had always wanted to look inside his mind.

"Though I watched with that reason, I ended up getting swept away again."

However, the result was the same this time too, Harenir laughed slightly. It was a reaction showing great pleasure so his heart lurched for a moment, but indignation rose like a reaction.

"No, no matter what...!"

Though he tried to argue while raising his upper body, without even that gap, Harenir caught him and embraced him. As if he was so cute he simply couldn't endure, he hugged him with both arms and kissed various places on his face.

"At, eup, wait, move away, ik."

After struggling, he finally blocked Harenir's mouth with his hand. Creating a safe distance with difficulty by pulling his head way back, as he breathed heavily, his eyes curved.

Though his action was blocked, he smiled as if even this reaction was cute. He could fully feel his mouth corners rising under his palm.

Though the truth about last night was too embarrassing, and he even resented Harenir who had just watched while knowing... seeing him truly happy, he lost his fighting power. Right, when he was this pleased.

"...It can't be helped. The feeling of wanting to keep touching you on this island..."

Of course separate from such resignation, since embarrassment still remained, he grumbled softly. He muttered that the cause of his ridiculous behavior was all his fault, asking how desperate must he have been to do that. It was miracle logic.

Harenir opened his round eyes then soon nodded while smiling with his eyes again.

"That's right. I was wrong."

"...Somehow it's more frustrating when you agree so readily."

Meanwhile he didn't remove or avoid my hand blocking his mouth, just speaking while covered, so only his palm tickled a lot. As he moved his hand away grumbling, he was guided back into Harenir's embrace. The gap he had barely created closed futilely, but now he didn't have the energy to argue.

Harenir buried his lips on the side of his face and spoke:

"I'm glad you seem to like this island."

"How could I dislike such a beautiful place? It's the best place I've seen in my whole life..."

"Really? If you like it, I can create and offer dozens, hundreds of islands like this."

"...No, that much isn't particularly. It would cost a lot of money too."

Why the sudden acceleration? He had just said one word that he liked it, but Harenir tried to purchase additional islands immediately. His eyes even brightened as if he had found a way to entice him.

"How about finding out how much money the person who will take responsibility for you has?"

He looked at Harenir dubiously. Though he had been embarrassed about his behavior last night until just before, seeing a person trying to commit an even more extraordinary eccentricity right before him, he felt bewildered. He just didn't show it because he was too confident. Come to think of it, hadn't he said he had even installed home cameras on this island?

Bursting into a dry laugh, he shook his head:

"I'll pass on other places. ...Actually anywhere would be good as long as I'm with you."

The latter words were attached very quietly. Though he mumbled in an almost cringing tone out of embarrassment, Harenir seemed to have no difficulty understanding. Since he could see waves of happiness rippling in his blue eyes, he coughed dryly, ahem.

At least this much should have prevented the empire's hero from going bankrupt.

...And the fact that Harenir had only understood the latter words, he realized only after arriving at a new island a few months later. Just how had he understood that conversation.

'Doesn't it mean going to many places together would be good multiple times?'

He decided to give up understanding.

#Dawn, Again

Harenir von Luchete.

The hero of Solares, the saint who received Solnium's grace, Commander of the Holy Knight Order of Sidon, the first sword of the Order, the knight chosen by the empire's first holy object Piarus.

Harenir with all his grand titles had taken responsibility equal to their weight. Looking at these words differently, it meant he had never enjoyed leisurely time.

Considering the fact that he had received public attention as 'a child who might become a hero' showing powerful holy power and excellent recovery ability from the moment of his birth, even his childhood was not free. Especially after his mother sealed the Dedium, he had always lived consciously trying to show only a perfect appearance.

That is, busy days were like daily life to Harenir, and he had never had any particular complaint about living surrounded by numerous people. He had existed as the empire's flawless hero for a long time.

That Harenir had, for the first time in his life, gone on 'vacation'.

He left the empire's holy city and came to a very remote island. He didn't come out as a holy knight for reconnaissance, nor did he move following any responsibility or duty. It was something unimaginable to his original self.

Until now he had never once dreamed of such a vacation, and even if a gap briefly appeared in his schedule, he never wasted time. He tended to move by planning every moment.

But not on this island.

The day was decided only according to 'his' mood.

"Today I want to see the sea from the western hill. With lots of snacks."

"Shall I bring a mat too so you can view comfortably?"

"Good. I should enjoy it lying down."

Yesterday he had strolled through the forest, today he decided to go see the sea. Isaph carefully examined the food storage saying he had to pick snacks for today's picnic, but everything he picked was chocolate desserts.

Hadn't he eaten like this yesterday too? Harenir silently removed a few and packed fruits instead.

Though the location changed daily, the activities were generally similar. Isaph enjoyed viewing the sea most, and would sit reading a book then lie down slowly, and sometimes collected pebbles and seashells from the beach or examined nameless wildflowers in the forest. Though it seemed like he was just resting, he rested quite diligently.

Harenir had never experienced such a leisurely day. Flowing time idly without plans was something his past self would have severely disliked, but now it only felt precious.

Now he wasn't even newly surprised by such changes. To be surprised by such things, his thinking had already been flipped countless times being with this person since the past.

It had been like that even before coming to the island. While handling the final duties in the holy city, Harenir had suffered from an intense impulse to throw everything away and go to the mansion. It was the first time. Both feeling so frustrated at the fact he was busy, and also wanting to throw away all the tasks given to him.

He had anxiously checked the time with a heart wanting to see just one person at the mansion, even wanting to feast his eyes on that being who was highly likely to be sleeping.

### Chapter 202

In his heart, he wanted to leave his seat immediately. In reality, no one would even stop him, but Isaph had told him to come after finishing work, so he had no choice but to follow.

After spending such busy days, he finally came to this island.

Time flowed completely differently here compared to the past few weeks. It was such leisurely day after day that the period when he had to look at documents frantically seemed distant. Since all communication with the outside was cut off except for emergencies, Harenir could focus only on Isaph.

Though Isaph spent a very large portion of the day lying down, and merely walking in sunny places when he felt stiff, Harenir found watching him extremely enjoyable. As if he would never grow bored even looking at that alone forever.

"Wow, the weather is really good today too. The island seems to get more beautiful every day..."

Isaph exclaimed while looking up at the clear sky. With a hand shade over his eyes, his face was full of satisfaction as he looked around leisurely. Since he had said last time he was happy that Isaph liked the island, Isaph had frequently expressed liking it ever since.

Harenir softened his eyes and laughed quietly. Though all such exclamations were gratitude conveyed by Isaph pretending they weren't, in reality he was more grateful for being able to see him here.

Even right now, he couldn't take his eyes off Isaph stretching languidly under the warmly descending sunlight. His black hair and clothes swayed gently in the gently blowing wind, and his shoulder-length hair had become so soft recently that even just looking, its good texture was evident. His purple eyes sparkled like amethyst in the sunlight.

It was truly enjoyable to see Isaph's face relaxed languidly, dyed only with serenity. These days were so happy as to be beyond description...

Harenir sometimes suffered from the thought that this might all be a dream.

That he, having finally gone mad 'that day', was fantasizing about the other person. That he had come to this island alone and was drawing his image through delusion, as he had wished for him to be free here from long ago...

"..."

Since that day, Harenir had never once escaped from such anxiety. Sometimes he grew suddenly afraid and carefully held Isaph's hand to confirm his warmth, but even that sensation made him breathless with the thought it might be his imagination.

But he knew that showing such anxiety would greatly worry Isaph. He didn't want to burden someone who even now was trying to say several times how much he liked the island, conscious of him.

Harenir nodded to Isaph who was gesturing for him to come out of the villa soon, then quietly took out the fruit knife from the picnic bag.

With a sharp slice-

Blood dropped drop by drop from his deeply cut palm. Harenir even clenched his fist tightly as if to aggravate the wound, and only released his strength after feeling the stinging pain. A faint relief spread across his face.

"Just when are you coming out? Should I go first?"

"I'll come now."

Harenir stepped outside the villa with a faint smile. He acted as if hoping for slow recovery by repeatedly clenching and opening his hand, only erasing all traces of the wound as he approached Isaph.

It was still reality.

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Today also flowed calmly and peacefully.

They leisurely viewed the sea from the hill. For a long time, they looked at the horizon extending refreshingly without any barriers and the light ripples scattered like jewels on the water's surface. They had lunch with the food they brought, read various books, watched the sunset, and returned to the villa.

Harenir personally cooked dinner. Since there were many aspects to care for regarding Isaph's health, he naturally stepped forward, and occasionally Isaph hovered around him.

"This is amazing. That you can cook so well..."

"The Holy Knight Order has many occasions to camp for days, so I learned basic cooking."

"Wouldn't someone at the commander level not do that? Like leaving it to others."

"My mother disliked that."

She was a mother who taught that the higher the position, the more responsibility one should take, and if one couldn't do anything alone, one couldn't lead a group either.

Isaph nodded while muttering, "Well, when searching the Encroachment Zone, you cooked with your subordinates too..." Since in the past he had always stayed apart from the group, he seemed to find it quite interesting to observe Harenir's cooking up close today.

"Is there anything I can help with?"

Isaph asked enthusiastically as if wanting to assist too, but Harenir stared at him blankly. Fire? He shouldn't go near it. Knife? He shouldn't hold it either. Dishes? How could he let him move something so heavy? Vegetables? If he washed them with cold water and caught a cold, it would be terrible.

At the end of very reasonable arguments, Harenir answered:

"Just stay still beside me."

"What? How is that helping?"

"There's no greater help than that."

Though Isaph made a strange expression as if asking what nonsense that was, Harenir didn't change his mind. It wasn't wrong at all, and actually he wanted to use the spoon, fork, and knife himself to feed him, but was holding back because he disliked it so much.

Isaph often said, 'If you try to do everything for me like this, I won't even be able to walk on my own,' but that was the very thing Harenir wanted most, which was the problem.

Though he could force it, since Isaph was quite clear in his intentions, when his wishes were expressed but still forced, he showed great resistance. He had to be careful with someone who might unpredictably veer off in an unexpected direction.

So Harenir quietly accepted what Isaph had offered him under the pretext of 'substitution'.

"Come to think of it, originally holding me to sleep like this was because of your work, wasn't it? Now that work is over, it seems we don't need to do this anymore."

"It's the condition I set in exchange for not taking care of you. Words shouldn't change."

"I see... No, you're almost taking care of me on this island?"

"I'm not carrying you around every hour."

"Ah, that's true."

That night, Isaph sitting on the bed tilted his head with a strangely dissatisfied expression. He muttered that somehow he felt swept up in his way of speaking, but soon just fiddled with his nape.

"Hmm, well, it would be strange to sleep separately after coming here..."

Such behavior was Isaph's habit when embarrassed. His neck had already become slightly red, and after rolling his eyes here and there, he got into bed first. Then he spread his arms wide with a gesture containing the solemnity of someone trying to keep a promise.

Harenir habitually crumpled his body and nestled in Isaph's embrace. By now he had figured out how to bend his shoulders to fit perfectly. Though it was an uncomfortable posture, it was well worth enduring. He embraced Isaph's back in return with his arms, fully nestling deeply.

"When I wake up the position is always changed, why do you try to sleep like this every time?"

Isaph asked bewilderedly. Though now he held him in his arms, when he opened his eyes it was always the opposite situation. It would be better to sleep that way from the start.

But Harenir wanted this posture as if it were the first ritual of sleep. At his action of silently burying his head in his chest, Isaph muttered that it was strange yet moved his hand.

With gentle pats...

The touch stroking his back was very gentle. Harenir concentrated as if engraving the sensation of that small hand touching his back completely in his brain.

Actually he knew that Isaph struggled to embrace his large build, and couldn't fall asleep quickly in this position... but he simply couldn't give it up. It was also difficult to miss the rhythmic pounding heartbeat sound in his ears.

Harenir held his breath for a long time until the hand patting his back gradually slowed. Then only after Isaph had completely fallen asleep did he carefully change position to embrace him and close his eyes.

However, in the deep dawn, Harenir often woke to the sound of waves.

Though it was a villa located by the sea, the interior was thoroughly soundproofed, and especially in the bedroom, outside noise couldn't disturb 'his' deep sleep unless the window was opened. So despite the very quiet room, Harenir woke up as often as waves hit the sea.

As soon as he woke up, he first checked if Isaph was before his eyes. And only after seeing his deeply sleeping face in his arms did Harenir exhale the breath he had been holding. Though he wanted to embrace him more closely, fearing he might wake him, he just felt the warmth transmitted from his arms.

### Chapter 203

Every dawn, Harenir gazed at Isaph for a long time.

Though he had similar time just before falling asleep, waking up in the deep dawn and looking at Isaph approached very differently. A feeling of standing at the boundary between dream and reality.

"...Isaph."

Harenir quietly called his name. Though he tried to restrain himself so as not to disturb his deep sleep, he softly recited it with a desire he ultimately couldn't kill. Though it was a call with almost no sound attached, Isaph responded with a drowsy mumble, rubbed his head against his arm, and then fell back asleep making even soft rhythmic breathing sounds.

Such a response was so addictive, and the fact that a being responding to his call was before his eyes made him so happy that Harenir couldn't break this bad habit.

Isaph's breath made Harenir feel beyond overwhelmed, and also infinitely miserable. He felt ashamed at the faint breath sensing the times Isaph had endured alone, yet relieved that despite that, he could bring him from chaos and keep him alive on this land.

Every dawn, Harenir became a penitent believer before Isaph. While feeling wonder at his existence and filling with happiness, he simultaneously suffered from extreme anxiety and terrible guilt.

'Anywhere would be good as long as I'm with you.'

He was such a small and fragile yet infinitely strong, honest, and inherently kind being. How could he not have noticed the time he had endured? Though his gaze had been caught by his contradictory points from the past, and then even his heart had been mortgaged.

Isaph had always been above numerous contradictions.

In the past, though he never responded to the many criticisms directed at him, he threw it to the floor fearing the hero might feel burdened by just a single flower. Though he came breaking through the dawn's cold to wake him from nightmares, he hid alone from evil spirits himself, and even curled up his body as if used to it.

While indifferent even in moments when his own life was in danger, he somehow stepped forward when others were in peril. There were times when he came to treat his wounds even while sweating coldly. Worrying as if being sick alone was too sad...

With such contradictory points catching his eye, he often observed him under the pretext of needing to investigate Isaph's past in detail. Then from some moment, he couldn't stop his gaze directed at him. As if making excuses, he hid his heart wanting to keep him by his side under the same justification and tried to grasp his warmth.

But by the time he noticed the emotion hidden under that ridiculous behavior, Harenir had buried everything and stepped forward to seal the Great Catastrophe. He had just prepared so that investigations regarding Isaph could be conducted again after his death, and during that time he had planned to put him on an island to rest comfortably...

Even these plans seemed just pitiful before the path Isaph had walked. The more he traced back the past, the more painful Harenir became.

One day, after staying up all night with such thoughts, with his breath caught in guilt, he apologized to Isaph. When he apologized for having kept him in contempt and disdain for so long because he hadn't investigated the truth early on, he reacted very bewilderedly.

'...Huh?'

He just spat out an extremely absurd exclamation and scratched his cheek for a while. He awkwardly confessed that he had also cursed himself, and rather countered asking how could the truth have been revealed when there were no witnesses to the Klam incident, then soon shouted Ah!

'Come to think of it, that might have been intended too. If he had wanted to correct the misunderstanding from the start, the black cat would have given me such a quest, that is, mission, but it didn't at all.'

It was saying he could gain the Dedium's trust because his reputation was not good due to criticism. Asking wouldn't he have appeared as a being deserving to betray if he had no allies at all? At the conclusion that you too were used by 'him' in the same way, Harenir softened his eyes. Isaph's behavior of playfully passing it over like this made him feel more guilty.

Isaph disliked that expression and was uncomfortable asking why even he was like that when other people kept apologizing, making it uncomfortable. He firmly warned never to talk about this again, so Harenir had to nod his head.

Perhaps Isaph wasn't deliberately responding lightly, but truly indifferent because the past events didn't affect him at all. Actually, he said the distant past felt like a previous life and he was fine because he had no memories even after returning to this world, but that itself weighed down Harenir's heart.

Because it paradoxically illustrated the arduous time he had spent, both in the background of coming to regard his own past like a previous life, and in being able to familiarly pass over the contempt experienced after returning.

However, while feeling guilty about all the time Isaph had experienced, Harenir also suffered from inherently ugly anxiety. Though he had vowed to serve Isaph's will for life, if he longed for and wanted to return to the previous world he called 'Earth'... he felt he wouldn't be able to follow that alone.

Sometimes Isaph sat blankly.

Not watching the scenery, but just looking at empty space for a long time without saying anything as if immersed in some thought. Around when his focus became blurry, Harenir grew suddenly afraid and caught his hand. Then he exhaled briefly and shook his head.

'Spaced out again? Just suddenly old memories came up...'

He said memories of the two worlds sometimes mixed. Whether due to the influence of living the same time despite completely different environments, or because of the overlapping existence of the black cat, memories tangled in confusion. He explained that following the intuition that he needed to organize them well, time flew by while contemplating.

Isaph had deliberately spoken honestly after reading anxiety on Harenir's face. Since after being deeply lost in thought, passing it off as nothing would rather increase worry.

So Isaph also honestly shared his memories. That he only now realized his face from the previous world was similar to here, but there his eyes were particularly black so he was often called ominous, which now thinking about it seemed to be because he had the Dedium's soul, and so on.

At the end of the pleasant voice that continued flowing smoothly, Isaph always firmly instructed:

'Just because I think about another world absolutely doesn't mean I miss it. You know? If there were a vote on my situation there, it's clear I would receive unanimous support to go here.'

As if conscious of the anxiety Harenir had shown in the past, he added as if trying to let him know his worry was really needless. And sometimes he confessed as if wanting to give confidence that he truly liked life here.

'Actually, I've never been to the waterside in the previous world.'

'Why?'

'Because there were many evil spirits in such places, so I avoided them as much as possible since going near them would just bring bad luck. But now since that won't happen...'

'...'

'I wanted to comfortably see water just once. With this body I can use necromancy, and above all, you're by my side so it's very safe.'

Thanks to that, his story of thoroughly enjoying the beautiful sea felt sincere, and Harenir clearly understood the consideration mixed in. The intention contained in the additional comment that the sea viewed from the villa was especially good, all of it.

He was such a tender being. Though he seemed indifferent to everything, when someone is anxious, he gradually approaches and checks. He cares while pretending not to be conscious of it. Even just quietly holding his hand now was like that. Before him, Harenir became infinitely small.

Did Isaph know? The real reason he had been wary of dimensional boundaries possibly appearing again and regulated the entire continent.

That was not just to prevent monsters from other dimensions crossing over... but also with the purpose of blocking so Isaph couldn't leave for another world even if he wanted to. From the start, he was on high alert to ensure that path wouldn't open.

Though Isaph had said he would choose his side no matter what world was given as an option, he had to block even such choices from arising at the source. It was an extremely selfish scheme to bind him to remain only here forever.

Because of that, Harenir had willingly accepted the numerous tasks given to him for a while. He was fine with being busy as much as possible, and didn't mind even not sleeping.

### Chapter 204

Though this determination gradually changed into wanting to throw everything away as he became unable to separate from Isaph... Actually, he had been anxious because he too had planned to take Isaph to the island and stubbornly not separate from him.

If Isaph liked such an island, he could offer dozens or hundreds made for him. He wanted to get everything he paid attention to and desired. For the first time, Harenir was grateful for the wealth and power that came with his position.

He wanted to bind Isaph to this world by any means, and could truly do anything to entice him into wanting to stay here. It was an offering close to desperate struggle.

If only he would stay by his side until the end, if only he would allow him to atone and take responsibility for his sins throughout his life, if only he would permit him to watch him fall asleep peacefully...

"...Isaph."

With his breath caught in this heart, Harenir ended up calling his name again. This time he recited it with some sound attached, however small. Unable to ultimately kill his selfish desire because he wanted to see his eyes so badly, he tried to wake him from sleep.

Harenir sometimes found himself horrifying. In the past, he had plunged into chaos with the heart of wanting to see Isaph even once more, jumped in with the thought of dying together, and now he wishes for him to live by his side forever. Under the plausible excuse that he should compensate him to live comfortably for all his suffering, he tries to bind him so he can never leave.

With a flutter...

Isaph's eyelids trembled delicately. Whether awakened by that very quiet call, or woken by the obvious gaze, he blinked his eyes blankly. In the moonlight entering the room softly, his purple eyes were filled with a dazed energy.

From the moment Isaph opened his eyes, Harenir couldn't even breathe. Guilt like a tsunami swept over him for having finally woken him with his selfishness, so he remained silent without saying anything. Though he expected he would soon fall back asleep, he asked between sleep and wakefulness:

"Why aren't you sleeping yet...?"

"...I just, woke up very briefly."

"Is that so? Go back to sleep quickly..."

Isaph, who muttered with a completely languid tone as if dazed, closed his eyelids again. Only then did Harenir inwardly swallow a sigh of relief, but suddenly Isaph raised his hand and hit playfully his face.

"Sleep..."

At the touch that covered his eyes fumblingly moving position, Harenir burst into a dry laugh. Though unexpectedly hit in the face, it didn't hurt at all, and rather he even wanted to be hit more. With one touch of his hand, all the thoughts he had been having were erased.

Harenir, who had seemed to be sinking into a pitch-black swamp, was pulled up to reality in one breath. Without even realizing it, a bright smile rose on his face to the point he joyfully embraced Isaph. The warmth felt from him was so sweet that he even rubbed his head small.

Around then, Isaph moved drowsily. Wondering if he might hit him again, with expectation, he buried snugly his face in his embrace.

"I'm not going anywhere..."

It was a drowsily slurred murmur. As if guessing the reason Harenir was awake, he even patted soothingly his back.

Harenir blankly looked down at him who had come closer into his arms... then soon swallowed a muffled breath and closed his eyes. Only while listening to his small, even breathing could he seek sleep again.

It was a dawn like any other.

#Side Story 3.

A new Emperor ascended to the throne of the Holy Empire of Solares.

When Beatrice, who had been the First Imperial Princess, ascended to the throne, imperial citizens welcomed her saying the crown had finally returned to its rightful owner. Though the original Crown Prince had been the youngest prince Terios, in reality no one had seen him as material capable of leading the empire.

The imperial family of Solares was revered as noble as the blood of the first hero who established the empire continued through them. Beatrice was a being who embodied that significance in person. She had gone out to conquer Encroachment Zones and had proudly faced the fierce battle with the Dedium without hiding.

Also, even during the time when the continent was in turmoil due to the betrayal of the empire's leadership, she was the only one among the royal family who had tried to resolve the chaos. Thanks to that, public sentiment toward the imperial family had not fallen, so her ascension to the imperial throne was natural. Everyone gave praise at the coronation ceremony and welcomed her, scattering flowers.

As if responding to those cheers, the new Emperor led in calming the still unsettled continent, and firmly punished the traitors who had been involved in the Dedium's scheme. She stripped all their status and sent them as workers to rebuild lands that had become ruins due to the past Great Catastrophe. All assets were confiscated and distributed to damaged areas.

When the empire was stabilized like that, the Emperor declared she would hold a festival. The entire continent focused on this news. Because that festival was like a declaration that Solares had finally erased all traces of the Great Catastrophe, and only peace would unfold before them now.

For such a meaningful festival...

He almost couldn't go.

"Didn't you definitely say before that we should attend festivals?!"

"I said it could be considered, never said it was mandatory."

"At this rate rumors must be spreading about the hero's disappearance in the empire..."

At Harenir's nonchalant answer, he just exhaled her, her sighs. Regardless, he just took a displeased attitude saying, "No need to go particularly."

To explain the full details of this current situation...

During the past time, he had been together with Harenir on the 'island'.

As it was a place with very special meaning to them, each day spent here was truly precious and happy. It was fun just wandering around according to their mood each day without any particular plans, and they were fulfilled just by the fact that they were together.

Some days they walked in the forest, other times at the beach. Dipping their feet in the cool seawater only to be lifted out immediately by Harenir for fear of catching a cold, or struggling to resist but ending up both getting completely soaked in water, and so on...

Though there had been an amusing problem regarding skinship at first, fortunately it was well resolved, and from the next day on they held hands every day. When their gazes remained entangled for long, they kissed, and when heat rose from that, they mixed bodies.

Though for the last activity Harenir was careful to the end, not having prolonged relations and not doing it often either, rather because those once or twice occasions were invested in, he would feel so much to the point of being overwhelming and then become exhausted. Well, the conclusion is that they did everything they could do as lovers.

Every day was enjoyable, and each day was precious. Then...

"...Just how long are we staying here?"

He suddenly realized quite a long time had passed.

Actually, he had been curious about Harenir's vacation schedule from the start. But it seemed cruel to ask 'When are we going back?' as soon as they arrived on the island to someone who had obtained vacation after much hardship, so he had swallowed the question. He had thought he would go out when the time came, and had hoped he would rest deeply without being conscious of the end.

But even until the tenth day, Harenir hadn't said anything.

"Hmm, indeed a foreign country."

Right, I shouldn't judge by the standards of the world I lived in. Moreover, Korea was often compared as having extremely short vacations compared to other countries, so being surprised at ten days might be laughable. Also, considering the time Harenir had struggled, even ten days was short.

So fifteen days passed, twenty days passed, and finally approaching one month, he discovered.

Harenir had a communication artifact for emergency contact. Usually he kept the artifact on his person, but by chance he saw it placed on the table, and it was really shining like crazy. It was the first time he had seen a small crystal trembling so much.

Only then did he become confused and questioned Harenir:

"When are we going back?"

"Why? Has this island become boring? Should I look for another place?"

"No, I just thought everyone might be looking for you in the holy city..."

"You don't need to worry about that. Stay as long as you want to remain here."

At this attitude that only his intention mattered, he sensed something was wrong. His suspicion radar activated and he persistently interrogated Harenir, at the end of which he encountered a very shocking truth.

Harenir had not set a vacation period. He had simply left after saying he would rest after settling the empire's chaos to some extent.

Probably Noi and the two vice commanders would have understood that even a hero needed rest, and so hadn't contacted him for a while... But they couldn't have imagined he wouldn't return for nearly a month. And even with all communication cut off!

### Chapter 205

Harenir had instructed people to notify him if signs of dimensional boundaries forming appeared on the continent. So at first he answered as soon as contacts came, but since they were all just questions about when he would return, he didn't even check them anymore.

Especially since Beatrice persistently requested communication, he mentioned it as if annoyed, and while pressing him due to suspicion, he heard news of the 'festival'. Yes, that very festival hosted by the new Emperor.

Harenir hadn't even attended Beatrice's coronation ceremony that had been held before. Saying there was no time to attend there because they had to go to the island, he had said he would consider participating when the new Emperor held a festival later. He probably told Beatrice too that he would attend the next event...

However, after coming here, he seemed to have concluded not to attend the festival either. With the reason that being together with him was most important.

He became very serious. When he said they should quickly return to the holy city, Harenir hardened his face.

"Why? We've been staying well on the island all this time. There's no need to worry about outside matters at all."

"With so many people looking for you, is there really a need to stay here to the extent of ignoring all that?"

"It's fine. It's not like the empire will collapse because I'm not there."

"Then who will lead the Holy Knight Order...!"

"There are two vice commanders. It's not like I'm reported dead now, I've just gone away on vacation, so what's the problem? I like being with you on the island, and you said you do too, so we can just continue staying here just the two of us. Hmm?"

He even conversely tried to soothe him. Saying since all personnel of the Order had changed and the temple was being run anew, and a new Emperor had also ascended to the imperial palace, he wasn't needed.

What was this? Though Harenir's words seemed right... after thinking this, he shook his head with a sudden start. The problem was getting swept up in his way of speaking if you listened.

Wasn't he someone who felt tremendous responsibility as a hero? Since the Dedium had definitely been destroyed, did he judge he had kept his mother's will and no longer felt the need to step forward? Or was this a case like I've heard where if a child is suppressed and lives, they deviate greatly when becoming an adult?

After struggling to calm the tumultuous empire for a while, perhaps that was a silent message saying if they had a conscience, they should never look for him again since he had cleaned up this much before leaving?

But to say he was tired of the expectations and duties given to him, the feeling was quite different from the past. Because he was someone who acted cynically yet ultimately took responsibility to the end.

Moreover, Harenir's behavior now...

"Let's not go out to places where there are other people unnecessarily. If you're tired of this island, I'll prepare a new space, so if you just bear with it for a moment, soon-"

He seemed extremely attached to being together just the two of them. Should he see it as becoming addicted to rest taken comfortably in a place without people, or just clinging to the situation of 'just the two'? Perhaps he might even be unable to let go of the home security camera said to be operating on this island.

Since he didn't answer, Harenir buried his head in his two hands with a sigh. They had been in the middle of a conversation sitting side by side on the sofa, and he lowered his body fully as if leaning against him.

"Isaph. I don't want to separate from you."

"It's not like we're separating just because we're going to the holy city..."

"There's no need to go there, just why? I would only be happy even if we stay like this, just the two of us, for life..."

Why did it sound like he was being fussy? Though he burst into a dry laugh, he simply couldn't erase his complex feelings. Actually, since he was known as dead in the empire, he didn't necessarily need to return, but that wasn't the case for Harenir.

Did desert island life suit his constitution? Actually did he desire the uninhabited island more desperately than him...? Though he had jokingly said he was imprisoned on the island, Harenir really seemed to be using this place as a space cut off from the world.

He tried to calm Harenir as calmly as possible. Saying since he hadn't even gone to Beatrice's coronation ceremony, shouldn't he at least attend the festival to save the new Emperor's face, Noi and the two vice commanders must be very bewildered too, does it make sense to disappear without giving them any reason, and so on.

However, Harenir was immovable. Saying there was no need to care about outside people, he rather emphasized the advantages of living together comfortably just the two of them. Around when he was growing anxious at the crisis of really being swept away, something flashed to mind like lightning. Ah! His eyes opened wide in sudden realization.

"The festival!"

"...?"

"I want to go to the festival. I've never been able to comfortably view such a place."

There's no way he could do that on the island!

As expected, Harenir's mouth closed tight. Especially since he seemed concerned about what he had said last, he didn't even catch the tail like before.

He targeted that gap and quickly poured out a lot of anticipation for the festival. That he wanted to see the various foods eaten there, the typically boisterous atmosphere of festivals, the gorgeously dressed people, all of it. Moreover, wasn't this festival the first major event held in the empire after the Great Catastrophe had disappeared?

"...If you want that, then it can't be helped."

At the answer Harenir finally reluctantly spat out, he inwardly rejoiced. But since his face still looked dark as he raised his head, he gently caught his hand.

Perhaps, really possibly, one reason he was reluctant to return to the holy city might be because the festival was being held at the 'plaza'? Since the final battle with the Dedium had been fought there.

He deliberately interlocked fingers tightly with his hand and spoke:

"Yes, let's see it together."

"...Yes, together."

A faint smile hung on Harenir's lips.

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After such a conversation, that afternoon, he was finally able to return to Harenir's mansion. The festival hosted by the new Emperor proceeded for a not-short period of one week, and he thought it was very regrettable that they only returned to the holy city just in time for the last day of that festival.

But surprisingly, as soon as they arrived at the mansion, they encountered Beatrice. Though he had expected to reunite with acquaintances upon returning to the holy city, he hadn't known they would meet so immediately.

It was said that Beatrice had been visiting the mansion every single day. At first she too had respected Harenir's vacation and waited, but when he started ignoring communications, she had tried to find out his whereabouts by pressing the mansion's servants.

But everyone had sealed their lips tightly, and finally when the festival opened and Harenir still didn't appear, she ended up stamping her attendance directly at the mansion every day. Though this was the hero's mansion, it would be difficult to chase away the new Emperor.

Of course due to the Emperor being busy, she couldn't stay in the mansion all day, but coincidentally, Harenir and he returned at the time she was visiting the mansion. That was the full story of how she naturally noticed.

Thus, as soon as they arrived, they had a time of conversation in the reception room. Beatrice struck the table with a thunderous slam and burst into an angry voice:

"You said you would come for the festival! Is it reasonable to return only now?!"

"Let's be precise. I never gave a definite answer that I would 'come'. I said I would consider it depending on the situation then, when did I promise to show my face at the festival?"

"You who know very well what influence you have in the empire! Do you know how many times I was asked whether you would attend tonight's banquet?!"

It was said that a banquet was held at the imperial palace every night during the festival. Everyone had expected the hero's appearance from the first day, and after being disappointed day after day, it seemed they eagerly anticipated that he might appear at last for the final banquet. Since the finale was said to be conducted magnificently.

Probably Beatrice too had anxiously waited for Harenir with a similar heart. Dressed gorgeously in a deep gold dress, she disheveled her hair wildly without caring that her carefully done adornments were being ruined.

Whether the Emperor burst into anger or not, Harenir was very calm. With a face that even seemed indifferent, he shrugged his shoulders too.

"Rather, wouldn't it have been better that I wasn't there? Since it showed the entire continent that the new Emperor has sufficient ability to lead the empire even without the hero."

### Chapter 206

For a while, the Holy Empire had been extremely dependent on the hero. After the Dedium's egg appeared in the holy city, that is, right after grasping the Pope and Emperor's betrayal, the hero held all power. Special orders were activated according to the state of emergency, and he commanded the empire at the forefront.

Though those orders were immediately lifted after the Dedium's death, everyone still relied on the hero until the chaos subsided. They hoped he would lead, no, they believed only he could lead. Though his influence in the empire was already tremendous originally, due to the series of events, the tendency to follow only the hero would have intensified.

So Harenir paradoxically argued that his absence had as good as highlighted the new Emperor. Though Beatrice's intention was probably to solidify her power by having the hero at her side, wouldn't this direction be much better when considered long-term?

Beatrice burst into a dry laugh while brushing her hair back with one hand. Her deep golden eyes, full of dissatisfaction, looked Harenir up and down.

"You do package it well. While your only thought was to take him away and hide for an intimate time."

He cleared his throat.

And such a retort was enough to bewilder him. Beatrice's gaze, which he had thought was directed only at Harenir, was now including him too.

Ah, I see.

Having focused only on returning to the holy city, he had overlooked it, but being missing for such a long time just the two of them... of course it could only be interpreted as that kind of reason...

"I knew you committed strange eccentricities regarding that one from before, but I didn't know you would act this ridiculously."

Beatrice shook her head. Somehow her eyes were full of interest, making him wonder if the reason she had waited at the mansion was to confirm her conjecture. But there was more of a problem than just responding to her deduction.

Because other people were also in this reception room.

"Since not only Sir Harenir but also Isaph disappeared from the mansion, I did think they had gone somewhere together..."

Noi muttered in a trembling voice. He had come rushing as soon as he heard through Beatrice that Harenir had returned to the mansion. Though Noi had implicitly guessed since I, who had been recuperating at the mansion, had disappeared along with Harenir, seeing it with his own eyes seemed shocking as his hands even trembled.

Perhaps during that time he might have furiously run thought circuits like I had temporarily left for recuperation to recover my health, or had gone undercover to solve some problem. But the elements supporting such speculations would have been very weak.

And now Harenir's behavior of not denying Beatrice's words was practically the same as revealing the truth.

"Uh, uuh, uuuuhsincewheen...?"

"...Kalterik. The table is shaking because you're trembling."

Because Kalterik was vibrating his huge body, the table also moved up and down rattling continuously. He trembled so much that even the teacup on the table overturned. Though Mela seemed to be calmly cleaning up the tea, she dropped the teacup. The teacup rolled with a gentle tumble on the soft carpet on the floor.

Gradually his face began to heat up. Just then, everyone seemed to have hurriedly gathered here right before attending the evening event as they were all dressed in formal attire, making him newly realize how significant the vacation he had enjoyed with Harenir was. While the empire was running so busily, he had been lying around eating chocolate on the island until yesterday!

But thinking about it again, this was unfair. He had just rested because Harenir was resting, and he couldn't have imagined he would throw everything away like this and focus only on island life. Because of that, wasn't he now being interrogated like someone caught after a historic escape for love? His earlobes grew burning hot, so he covered his ears with a sigh.

Beatrice giggled and spoke:

"I found it strange from Nadael. He always wears a mask-like smile, but acted differently only to Isaph. He even called my name quite fiercely after I just touched him a few times."

"B-but since Isaph was so unique, and the situation wasn't ordinary either, th-that's why I thought it was natural for Sir Harenir to act differently..."

"Hmm, you all have a tendency to see that one only as a hero."

Beatrice, who cut off Noi's rambling defense, shook her head. After muttering that the more she traced back the past, the more clues there were, she soon sighed as if it were absurd.

"It seems like he helped me become Emperor so he could run away with that one alone? To dump all matters!"

"If you noticed, don't newly bring it up as a topic."

Harenir coldly cut off the interrogation about to continue in earnest. Though among the imperial descendants only Beatrice had been suitable for the throne, she had held the coronation ceremony extremely quickly. A chilly gaze flew as if saying if she knew thanks to whom, she shouldn't act like this.

"And let go since we're busy? We only returned because Isaph said he wanted to see the festival, so we need to quickly go around before it ends. Since Isaph should sleep early at night, there are only a few hours left."

"Please don't act like a nurse even here..."

His expectation that Harenir might create an escape route from this atmosphere was shattered. Rather, it became as if stamping a confirmation seal that 'our relationship is indeed like that' to everyone, and even turning on a display board.

It was so embarrassing that even a headache came. As he grasped his forehead with both hands, Harenir immediately responded.

"Are you hurting somewhere? You seem to have a fever, after all it's probably because you're tired from moving-"

"St-stop. Stop!"

He was alarmed at Harenir's attitude of worrying while cupping his face. They had used a teleport scroll to return to the mansion, so what fatigue could there possibly be? He struggled while pushing away Harenir's hands, and Beatrice watched this scene with great interest.

Of course, Noi and Kalterik sitting across from them had their mouths wide open and couldn't say anything. Though Mela had picked up the teacup from the floor, she dropped it again rendering her action meaningless. It seemed she couldn't even put strength in her hands. The three seemed unable to know what reaction to show or what words to say.

It was extremely embarrassing. Though he wanted to hide even in a mouse hole, how could Harenir only try to check his condition even in this situation now, which even made him indignant, when suddenly he became curious. His suspicion radar had been actively working since this morning.

"Wait a moment. Did we really return to the holy city? Why does it seem like we'll leave once the festival is over..."

"You only said you wanted to see the festival. So tomorrow we'll go back-"

"No!"

Beatrice burst out a scream. As she urgently sprang from her seat and was shocked, Harenir gave her a warning look not to shout loudly. A sharp gaze flew saying to be careful as I might feel a headache from loud noises.

"After returning after nearly a month, you're saying you'll leave again?"

"It would be better if I wasn't here."

"No! The longer your absence, the more people come to me asking to find you! How hard I worked to stop all kinds of strange events from being held during this festival! Ah, right. Isaph, you want to return to the holy city now, right? Right?"

Having felt a massive wall in Harenir's response, Beatrice immediately changed direction. As if judging she needed to target him to control Harenir, she sent a very desperate gaze.

The new Emperor of the empire quickly ran to him and even clasped her hands.

"Go quickly to see the festival. There's no problem at all even if you don't come to the banquet, so enjoy comfortably. Tonight mages at the imperial palace are set to shoot lights into the sky, which should be visible from anywhere, so enjoy it intimately together!"

"Hmm..."

"Solares has many festivals. It's full of events with long histories, okay? I'm sure Isaph will want to keep seeing them too. Why confine and bind him stressfully! Shouldn't you let that one wander around freely!"

Gradually Beatrice was becoming an eloquent speaker sincerely invested in his experiential activities.

### Chapter 207

Though at first she seemed to have planned to take Harenir to attend the banquet, she changed her plan in one breath and also seemed to have reached the thought that she shouldn't hold onto him and press him uncomfortably. She even proposed to cast a disguise magic so they could comfortably wander around the night market.

Should her, with a heart wanting to bind the hero to the empire greater than curiosity toward Harenir and his romance, be seen as having excellent qualities as an Emperor? Or should she be seen as having gradually reached her limit, exhausted from heavy duties? Her dark circles that had been hidden by elaborate adornments were now visible to his eyes.

Finally, they left the reception room as if pushed by Beatrice. By then, disguise magic had even been cast. Actually, since he had resolved to move around thoroughly hidden when viewing the festival, the situation had become convenient thanks to her, but it was also awkward to just welcome it.

Should he consider it fortunate that it ended like this when he thought he would be severely interrogated inside, or should he see it as merely postponed to the distant future? He simply couldn't imagine what kind of conversation those who remained in the reception room would have.

He awkwardly scratched his cheek and asked:

"...Are you okay?"

"About what?"

"They're people who have been with you for a long time, and suddenly this, um... since our relationship has been revealed."

Noi, Kalterik, and Mela. All three were people with deep connections to Harenir. Especially Noi had been with him since childhood and shared memories about his mother. He was worried that having this fact revealed to them might be uncomfortable.

But Harenir just opened his round eyes. As if receiving a question he hadn't thought of at all, he just stared at him blankly and tilted his head.

"Rather, I was worried it might have been burdensome for you. Beatrice acted too tiresome, right? Even just now, forcibly holding your hand."

"...Huh? That was just to cast disguise magic."

"She grasped it without any guidance. After all, we would have been more comfortable staying alone on the island..."

A dry laugh burst out. Wondering if that was the important thing now.

Moreover, the background was even that Beatrice had held his hand to cast magic only in simplified form since she didn't have her rod. She had even kindly added the warning that the perception-hindering magic might be lifted if she used great power or too much attention was focused.

Though he had even seen a gentle smile never seen from Beatrice before, Harenir just seemed very displeased that she had held his hand. When she had only held it for a few minutes.

Well, if he had worried about the relationship being revealed in the first place, wouldn't he have not gone to the island alone together? Moreover, even before that, he had carried him around openly at the mansion regardless of whether other people saw or not, so it was also ridiculous to be suddenly conscious of that part now.

Though Harenir's attitude of caring only about him even after experiencing such a commotion in the reception room was absurd, on the other hand it made his heart tickle. While thinking his standards were quite strange, he couldn't help but smile at the fact that he was first in that blind priority.

"It's fine. I've rested enough, so I'm satisfied."

Though he too enjoyed playing alone with Harenir, he didn't want to separate him from the world forever. Not with the intention of pushing him to meet public expectations, but because he cherished what he had built up. Hadn't he wanted to become the Holy Knight Order Commander following his mother even before she sacrificed herself?

So he developed the will to wander around as much as possible, considering tonight the last vacation. He should enjoy today thinking about the revelation of his relationship with Harenir later.

The festival night was boisterous.

Though he had seen a festival held to celebrate the Holy Day in the city of Nadael in the past, it couldn't be compared to the festival in Hesron, the center of the empire. There were many times more people, many shops were opened, and it was full of decorations utilizing magic artifacts.

Hundreds of transparent golden orbs floated in the air shining like lights, giving a feeling like seeing stars up close. It felt like entering a galaxy.

"Wow. It feels like coming to a completely different world."

He looked around curiously and exclaimed in admiration. Splendid performances were held everywhere, people sang and danced, and various delicious smells wafted over. Sight, hearing, smell, all senses were filled.

Even until just a few hours ago, they had stayed quietly on the island, but this place had a completely different atmosphere. To the point where he regretted seeing this scenery only on the last day of the festival.

"...Seeing how much you like this, it can't be helped."

At his reaction, Harenir muttered quietly. Though he had seemed displeased about returning to the holy city until just before, and had the momentum to take him back to the island immediately if even one small problem occurred, now he seemed to be withdrawing his position as he liked it so much.

He giggled and strengthened his will to view the festival more diligently. He needed to try to prevent Harenir from disappearing to a desert island again.

The heat grew thicker as they moved toward the central street of the festival.

He watched performances held in the streets with Harenir, examined items placed on stalls, and even shared simple foods. He hoped it was his imagination that whenever he tried to go to a store full of chocolate, Harenir subtly blocked the way and pointed to other interesting sights as if to divert his focus.

But today, elements different from festivals seen in the past were particularly noticeable. It wasn't due to differences in the place where the festival was held or what was being commemorated.

"...Why are people wearing masks?"

The closer they got to the center, the more masked people were seen. Masks that covered only the eyes, masks that covered up to the nose, even masks worn completely like a hood. Since a banquet was being held tonight, was it a masquerade ball?

As he looked around the streets curiously at the variety of types, the owner of the shop right next to them answered:

"Because it's soon 'Dianya's Day'!"

"...Dianya?"

They might be a couple running the shop together as the owners stood side by side wearing elaborate masks shaped like birds with spread wings. While becoming bewildered at the unfamiliar word, he strangely felt a sense of familiarity. "Dianya..." As he voiced and mulled over that word, he blinked his eyes blankly.

"...The day the dead visit?"

"Ooh! It's an extremely old ancient language, how did you know?!"

It was a legend he had heard when staying with his clan in the desert in the distant past. On this day, the boundary between this world and the afterlife blurred from midnight until dawn before daybreak. So all kinds of souls crossed over causing commotions, and to avoid being harassed by them, one had to hide one's identity.

Was that why people were wearing masks?

'Dianya' was an ancient word collectively referring to dead people, those who left far away, beings who would never be seen again, and so on. So this day was called 'Dianya's Day' or sometimes just 'Dianya'. Should he say it was similar to Halloween on Earth?

...Suddenly, he thought the last part of the name 'Isaph van Dina' might have been derived from 'Dianya'. Once such a speculation arose, it was probably 90% correct. Because he was gradually receiving memories of the past.

Anyway, there was a reason he couldn't readily recall this day.

"But the Holy Empire wouldn't observe this day. It's also too old a custom..."

"Oh my, that's right. Until now, the Order rejected everything related to souls as heretical, but this new Emperor is different!"

In the distant past, the empire had also observed this day, but as the Order's status rose, such culture disappeared. It's common to take a conservative attitude in the process of seizing power and solidifying it. Then it even degenerated to become exclusive.

The merchant murmured distantly:

"After all, it must be Isaph's sacrifice that changed the Emperor..."

He choked.

A cough burst out. Since it was truly an unimaginable reason, he looked at Harenir hoping it wasn't true, but he answered calmly. He even patted his back as if trying to calm him.

### Chapter 208

"That's right. Many things changed after that day."

"Yes. It was truly a major event."

The store owner couple responded enthusiastically. After Isaph died and all the truth was revealed, people came to view necromancy in a new light, such trends spread widely and now studies researching souls themselves were being re-illuminated, and so on...

And that explanation naturally led to promotion.

"So necromancers who say they'll follow Isaph's will have produced these candles!"

He was surprised by the smooth topic transition that flowed like water. Was this the level of professional spirit needed to open a shop and do business in the holy city? The merchant pointed busily at the candles on the stand while speaking.

"Though this day is said to be when evil spirits cause commotions, it's also famous as a day when you can reunite with people who have gone to places you can't meet them! So if you just light this candle, you'll be able to meet the person you miss tonight. Family, lover, friend, anyone!"

"This is today's popular item! If purchased together with a mask, at a cheaper price than buying separately..."

While listening dubiously to the explanation that continued droning on, he scanned the stand. The candles with strange patterns carefully engraved could be selected according to preference in color, length, shape, and so on.

As the merchant said, countless people who had purchased candles could be seen on the street. They either packed them fully in paper bags or carried them preciously in their hands. It seemed to have stimulated people's curiosity as a different event.

The merchant even placed one in his hand saying he could feel a mysterious energy if he held it directly, but actually he...

"Poor quality..."

From the moment he first saw them, he thought the magic formation engraved on the candles was too shabby. Though they showed signs of having worked hard in their own way, the spell equations or overlapping forms were quite flimsy. Even the energy said to have been imbued by necromancers was very meager.

He even suspected it might rather summon something strange. As he stared at the candle with infinitely cold eyes, beside him Harenir laughed quietly.

"Why are you laughing?"

"Sometimes you express tremendous opinions through your expressions. Especially regarding abilities, you react even more coldly."

He became embarrassed as he chuckled quietly as if his expression was very cute. No, wouldn't anyone who majored in any field react similarly? If you put something out as a product, you should at least meet minimum standards.

...Well, he may have made an expression as if looking at trash too.

"I-I'll take it back..."

Just then, as the owner awkwardly took back the candle, he felt very sorry.

"Ah, just, the color, I don't like it. Rather a different color..."

Stammering, while spitting out an infinitely awkward excuse, he pointed at any random candle. Though he had no intention of buying at all, the couple becoming depressed together made his guilt double.

Only then becoming animated, they proposed whether he would buy a mask too, but he shook his head. Even if evil spirits appeared, they wouldn't rush at him and Harenir, and also since they were already in a state of disguise magic, there was no need to hide further. Honestly, he didn't want to bring in any object that would hide Harenir's face, which was properly visible to his eyes.

But when receiving the paper bag containing the candle, the female owner suddenly brought her head close to him and whispered:

"This is a gift because you two seem close."

She winked one eye saying she had put one more small candle in the bag. However, her service was enough to make him cough again, with a splutter. This time he even choked.

H-how on earth?

Just hours ago at the mansion, his relationship with Harenir had been discovered by acquaintances, and now it was exposed to a merchant at the festival. And they hadn't even met for long! It was too optimistic to interpret those words only as meaning their friendship seemed good.

As he looked at her in bewilderment, the woman seemed to read the question in his expression and nodded at the hand on his shoulder with a face full of laughter. By now Harenir had naturally taken the bag from him and was patting his back and shoulders, calming him down.

"How could I do business without this level of perception? And from the start, he couldn't take his eyes off you even once?"

The woman smiled contentedly and waved her hand.

He blankly moved away from the shop and took out the small candle from the bag to check it. While looking down at the candle mysteriously mixing gold and purple colors, Harenir firmly fastened his collar and worriedly said:

"You seem to be coughing a lot, shall we go back now? The night gets chilly."

"No. You've already dressed me in an extremely thick robe."

He had been plunged into confusion about how even someone seeing him for the first time noticed, but seeing Harenir's behavior now, he reached the conclusion that not knowing would be more difficult. Even at this very moment, he still only watched him. Though the merchant had whispered to him, he with his excellent hearing would surely have heard everything, yet he didn't have a grain of interest in that.

Moreover, wasn't he too receiving his touch as if it were natural?

"You're right. Come to think of it, the robe colors are the same too..."

Now he was wearing a snow-white robe exactly the same as Harenir's. This was all because Harenir no longer put black clothes in his closet, and though he had hesitated quite a bit having worn only black clothes for a very long time, he decided not to particularly seek that color again. Though he had demanded gray as a compromise...

Anyway, a dry laugh burst out at how there were so many elements to discover their relationship, yet his chest area tickled with a pleasant flutter.

"But if you're tired, we should just go back-"

"No, it's a shame to end like this. I'm telling you this is the first time I've comfortably viewed a festival like this."

In one quick motion, he caught Harenir's hand, cutting off his words.

Actually until now, he had hesitated to walk around holding hands in places with many people, but having confirmed that the disguise magic effect was certain, he gained courage. Even when talking at a very close distance with the merchant just now, it hadn't aroused any suspicion.

Having walked around holding hands throughout their stay on the island, he had been secretly feeling empty. Anyway, since no one could recognize them and even complete strangers saw them as lovers, weren't this level of skinship okay? Though it was just holding hands after a few hours, he fiddled with his palm out of needless delight and asked:

"Haven't you also never walked around with such ease of mind?"

"...In that context, it's the first time."

Harenir answered belatedly and smiled. Eating, playing, sightseeing ordinarily. All these were novel things for them.

He had no experience participating in festivals due to being shunned in his previous life, and Harenir probably couldn't walk around streets comfortably like this since he had received everyone's attention from childhood. Though he said he had attended one in Nadael in the past, back then there was no disguise magic so he had to be careful, and above all, our relationship then and now was very different.

This moment approached more specially, making him smile spontaneously.

"I should get along well with the Imperial Princess, no, now Emperor? With the help of magic, we can walk around comfortably like this."

"...It's possible with artifacts too, so there's no particular need."

"Hm? I heard from Noi before that artifacts' disguise performance was quite insufficient? That's why you couldn't receive such assistance even while searching Encroachment Zones..."

"Then there are a few other mages who can do disguise magic, so we can request them. There's no reason to get along well with Beatrice."

Somehow the answer was strange. Though he could understand that disguise magic could be received even without Beatrice particularly, why did he feel like he disapproved of him becoming close to her itself?

...Wait a moment.

When Beatrice held his hand to cast disguise magic on him at the mansion, he had said "It feels like my back is being pierced"... Could it be?

"Are you perhaps jealous?"

"Isaph. Beatrice is someone who has wanted to do strange experiments on you from before. Don't be completely won over just because she showed some interesting magic. You should be more wary and avoid her."

"That story is from when..."

"Beatrice is skilled at waiting for opportunities. She has always wanted to take you to the imperial palace, and now that she's become Emperor, who knows what she might do."

Harenir spoke in a tone of coaxing and soothing. It felt almost like giving a warning that he shouldn't trust anyone except himself.

### Chapter 209

He threw a bewildered gaze with a dry laugh, and Harenir exhaled a short sigh.

"Isaph. Of course I would retrieve you somehow, but if the Emperor changes again in that process, it would be troublesome-"

"What? What kind of drama is unfolding in your head right now?"

He was bewildered by the extraordinary statement that suddenly sprang out when he was about to tease him about being jealous. Why would the Emperor change? Wasn't this an extremely dangerous remark? While they were currently walking the streets of the festival hosted by the new Emperor!

He gave up on probing deeper, feeling he might look into an abyss. Whether it was jealousy or not, he should just stop investigating further. Though he had always been unable to understand Harenir's thought circuits, he hadn't known he would suddenly accelerate like this.

While shaking his head, he suddenly discovered a strange landscape.

"Huh? Was there a forest there?"

Though he had stayed in the holy city for several months before, he rarely walked around the plaza so he didn't know the scenery well, yet a view clearly different from past memories caught his eye.

A dense forest had appeared in the center of the plaza.

Though not a very wide range, very tall trees were growing thickly, making it surprising that he hadn't noticed it until now. Was it because the festival streets were so splendid that he hadn't seen it properly? Or had he been walking in directions where that place wasn't visible until now?

"..."

While looking at it bewilderedly, somehow Harenir was silent.

From the moment he questioned that place, he had paused and said nothing. Around when the silence that had suddenly fallen between him and Harenir felt infinitely heavy, an unexpected clue arrived. It was a conversation shared by a group passing by.

"Ah! I forgot that I was supposed to bring flowers!"

"It's okay, they'll distribute them in front of the forest. The imperial palace has provided thousands of commemorative flowers for this festival, so we can get them there."

"Since the new Emperor also knew 'him', such support..."

Though the sound gradually diminished as they walked quickly, it was enough to deduce. He sighed briefly.

'These days, the plaza of the holy city is piled with flowers...'

'Everyone is rushing to the holy city to offer commemorative flowers.'

Kalterik and Mela, who had visited shortly after he was revived, had conveyed news of the holy city. They had said that since the truth about him had been revealed, all imperial citizens were apologetic, and major commemorations were proceeding with hearts of apology.

So that was where he had died.

At that time, the center of the plaza had been lost to the Dedium's egg, and it had become ruins as the final battle with monsters was fought. So he had heard that Beatrice had newly held a festival at the plaza deliberately to show everyone clearly that the Great Catastrophe had truly disappeared.

The reason he hadn't discovered that forest until now was almost 100% certainly because Harenir had led him avoiding that place. After rolling his eyes widely once, he spoke. Rather than completely changing the topic, since it was something he would have to face eventually, he decided to deal with it calmly.

"Did they deliberately plant trees there?"

"...No. They grew naturally."

Harenir answered belatedly. As if his breath had been caught for a moment, after taking a deep breath, he continued his explanation.

"Have you heard the story that life force spread across the continent after the divine spear was planted?"

"Ah, I remember. New buds sprouted on dead trees and patients in sickbeds rose, everyone prayed saying 'miracles' had descended..."

"That's right. And at the place where the divine spear was thrust down, around twenty days later, many sprouts rose and grew at a very fast pace. A dense forest was created in just a few days, so the empire arranged it like a park."

With the holy city's plaza having so many floating people, it was surprising they didn't clear the forest that had suddenly appeared in the center but rather made it into a park. Since it was a place where God's spear had been planted, that is, where Solnium's touch had reached, it was understandable to consider it sacred... but from the description, somehow it sounded exactly like a memorial park.

As if informing him that his conjecture was correct, Harenir spoke:

"Beatrice was contemplating naming that place 'Isaph's Forest' after you-"

"What? Absolutely not!"

"...Since I thought you would react like that, I told her to put it on hold for now."

"What hold, it's absolutely not allowed."

Goosebumps rose and his shoulders even trembled uncontrollably. He had already been embarrassed when hearing about the background of Dianya's Day returning just before, but this time his whole body got goosebumps. Though he had never wanted to reveal the fact that he was alive, suddenly he wanted to advertise to the empire. He felt like shouting to please stop because he was living fine.

According to passing pedestrians' conversations, it seemed the commemoration was still continuing, and while this fact was bewildering, it was particularly absurd that the imperial palace had provided flowers. Why would Beatrice, even knowing the truth?!

At his reaction, Harenir softened his eyes and smiled. But his complexion was somewhat dark, and suddenly he realized something.

Come to think of it, though he had already known about the forest's existence, he hadn't told him about it at all. ...No, he should see it as he couldn't.

"Have you been there? Kalterik and Mela said they went and placed flowers, which I disliked asking why, perhaps you too?"

"...No. Not even once."

"Hmm, then shall we go see now?"

It was an impulsive suggestion. Actually, though he had a tremendous sense of distance from that forest, he felt that if not now, neither he nor Harenir would be able to go there.

In some ways, wasn't it similar to the past situation? In the past, to disguise his death, Harenir had placed his holy sword in a coffin and had it paraded through the holy city. Later, he had gone to find the holy sword in the coffin placed in the Great Temple, accompanying me, couldn't that be said to be quite similar to now? Well, or not.

As Harenir couldn't bring himself to answer my suggestion and only pressed his lips tight, he moved first. Since their hands were holding, it naturally became the form of him following as they headed toward the forest.

There were quite a lot of people in front of the forest.

This place was away from the heat of the festival and emitted an overall calm atmosphere. Pedestrians had solemn faces, and there were also people kneeling on the ground offering prayers to Solnium. He was surprised and fascinated by the completely changed appearance from the last scene he remembered.

Less than a few months had passed, yet such a dense forest had been created. Around when he bent his head back to look up at the trees, people gathered nearby buzzed.

"We must pray for him..."

"May he now rest in peace..."

Were they people in commemoration? Feeling awkward being close to them, around when he was trying to step back a few steps, someone shouted:

"Aah, the reason the Dedium resided in Isaph's body must have been coveting his outstanding ability. He was the strongest necromancer on the continent! A sorcerer who knew how to resonate with numerous souls!"

"That's right, that's right!"

"It's clear the Diums approached Isaph because they coveted such abilities, choking up, we misunderstood him for too long. In the end, Isaph sacrificed himself offering his body as a sacrifice to lure the Great Catastrophe, yet until then we pointed fingers at him!"

...Huh?

The reason the Dedium resided in his body was simply to retrieve half of its soul. After his death, his acquaintances had actively stepped forward in the process of revealing the truth about him, and Harenir had also once proposed whether to announce the fact that he had stolen the Dedium's soul. Because he had received many misunderstandings because of it.

But since dealing with that story seemed too complicated, he had said not to announce it... why was it spreading in that way?

"It's sad that we lost him in misunderstanding when he was strong enough for even monsters to want him. Aah..."

No.

It was a misunderstanding so bewildering it gave him goosebumps. Amid that, suddenly he thought that voice was familiar. It felt similar to Serena, who had seemed to have great talent for delusions, whom he had encountered when disguised as a mercenary in the city of Nadael...

"We must repay the debt we owe to Isaph. We must find out more details about the truth about him and spread it widely to restore his honor!"

But he simply didn't have the confidence to enter that scene and check the protagonist of the speech. The speech-giver shouted loudly saying let's all do it together, but he really wanted to get infinitely far away.

While quickly moving his steps to the opposite side, his shoulders trembled. Though he knew the disguise magic was working, he needlessly pulled down the hood of his robe.

### Chapter 210

"Ugh, why on earth is the story spreading like that."

"...Kalterik seems to think that way too."

"What?!"

He was startled. He had just thought the Dedium had coveted a human body and resided in one who had become a new subject, but they were viewing it as if he had offered his ability like a sacrifice? Since he had been restraining knights with necromancy at that time?

Not knowing how to correct the misunderstanding, and also not wanting to step forward and explain, he finally decided to resign himself. Though it really gave him goosebumps, on the other hand, these rumors approaching deification were amusing.

"Would that guy have hated it too if he heard..."

It was a being he recalled after a long time. The one who had separated from his soul and disappeared, who had been with him as a black cat in this world.

Probably he too would certainly react very dubiously if he heard this rumor. The image of the cat's purple eyes becoming infinitely cold spontaneously appeared in his mind, making him let out a dry laugh with a snort.

He headed to a tent set up near the forest. As he had heard before coming here, flowers provided by the imperial palace were placed in abundance so anyone could comfortably take one. Since Harenir seemed quite puzzled at the sight of him taking flowers, he explained:

"This is for that guy."

He gave a flower to Harenir too, who had become notably quieter since arriving at the forest.

Afterward, walking into the forest together, he turned his head here and there. Threads connecting between trees that densely filled the small forest glowed faintly, illuminating the space.

"Oh, the inside of the forest is decorated too? But the atmosphere is too solemn."

"...After all, it's a space for commemoration."

"Hasn't it been two or three months already? By now they could just present it as a sacred place touched by God's hand."

"...To dismiss it as 'already', since that day's events gave everyone a great shock, it's natural."

Harenir's complexion was dark, and his words sounded almost like correcting his statement. His solemn attitude explaining the significance of commemoration, and also the fact that his voice had subtly grown quieter, seemed like behavior following the atmosphere of the space, making him burst into a dry laugh.

"Hey, though others might act that way, shouldn't you not?"

I mean, I'm doing something that should absolutely not be done at a memorial service? Walking around after being resurrected.

However, even at his words, Harenir's countenance still did not brighten, so finally he just shook his head. Though quite a long time had passed, it seemed that memory was still intensely lodged in him.

He still didn't know how Harenir had been 'that day'.

Kalterik, Mela, and Noi seemed unable to explain it to him, and even Beatrice avoided mentioning the events of that day.

But there were clues. The appearance of Harenir who had plunged into the dimensional boundary to find him was a mess. From his uniform dirtied as if having dug through soil to his hands full of wounds as if having cleared away piles of stones.

With a sigh-

At the center of the forest, while placing flowers on the flower-offering stand surrounded by candles, he quietly murmured. Actually, 'that day' was implicitly not mentioned even between them, but...

"At that time, when I received the horn. When I became a subject serving the Dedium, the colorless landscape of the Encroachment Zone looked different? I can't describe it somehow, should I say it was full of colors that human eyes simply couldn't perceive? It was to the point of being moved because it was so dazzling and beautiful..."

"..."

"But I think the current scenery is more beautiful. No, not speculation, it's definitely more beautiful."

The reason he wanted to come here was also because of that. He was curious how the place that had become ruins had been rebuilt, and wanted to see how different it was from his last memory. Perhaps there was also a desire to confirm that the monster had really disappeared.

And above all...

"Moreover, now I can see your eyes as much as I want. This is much better."

"...Isap-"

"Wowowow, you shouldn't say that."

He hastily covered Harenir's mouth with his hand in alarm. Though he had been saying tremendous things until just before too, he had still conveyed them as quietly as possible, whispering.

With short gasps, as he breathed heavily, Harenir smiled lowering the corners of his eyes. Though he couldn't continue his words to the end, nevertheless he smiled as if extremely happy that a being responding to his call was before his eyes. While reproaching him asking if this was something to smile about, he gazed unfamiliarly at the emotion dwelling in his blue eyes.

Suddenly, the fact that he was standing here with Harenir approached differently. He too seemed the same, and after just exchanging gazes silently for a while, soon as if by agreement, they grasped hands and turned their backs from the flower-offering stand.

Since now there wasn't much time left for the festival.

"Let's quickly see the rest. Ah, come to think of it, didn't they say the imperial palace would launch lights at night?"

"Yes, that's right. Since only a few minutes remain, I'll guide you to a place with a good view."

Since Harenir would thoroughly know the geography of the holy city, he quickly nodded his head. Now he led ahead, and he followed walking, leaving the forest.

That day, Harenir and he had each prepared for their end here. Without revealing their feelings to each other until the last, they had walked toward the end. But because that direction was ultimately toward each other... could they move forward together from here today?

Pounding.

He walked feeling the pleasant ringing of his heartbeat. Around when his steps became brisk with expectation of what famous place Harenir would guide him to.

"A shriek!"

A high-pitched scream burst from behind.

As he turned with a start, he saw a black and massive lump crawling between the alleys. That thing, which came approaching while pouring out gurgling noisily like sewage, was an evil spirit. Moreover, small lumps kept dropping like droplets, then grew into baby evil spirits.

"Huh, division?"

It was a very absurd scene. Just why did an evil spirit appear out of nowhere?

Could it be because it was the day Dianya comes?

But there was still time left until midnight, so why? After looking around in confusion, he soon sighed seeing candles in many people's hands.

The candles were flimsy, so did they finally call something dangerous?

And intense longing for the dead would likely have an effect too. When hearts missing the dead gathered too much, occasionally wicked things became entangled. Just when the Holy Empire had held such an event after a very long time, they probably hadn't been properly prepared.

In an instant, the streets became noisy.

"Terrified yells!"

"Sa-save me!"

People screamed while avoiding the evil spirits. They collided with each other and fell down while fleeing urgently, and also rolled after tripping on items spilled chaotically from stalls. As if finding such reactions entertaining, the evil spirits giggled and even toppled a huge pillar that had been set up as a festival decoration.

Everyone urgently looked for masks, but regrettably, that action rather stimulated the evil spirits. They quickly rushed in before people could hide behind masks. Some masks were shattered and blown away.

As the confusion grew, Harenir set him near a white tent. Next to the tent distributing commemorative flowers, he had grasped that the forest was full of holy power so evil spirits couldn't approach.

"I'll be back soon, so stay safely here-"

"I understand, so go quickly."

He nodded his head quickly to Harenir who earnestly urged him not to move away from the forest at all.

Though the festival street suddenly became noisy, and people were stamping their feet frantically shouting to contact the guard making it chaotic... actually he was just calm. Of course, the sudden appearance of a massive evil spirit was bewildering, but he was confident it wouldn't be a problem.

Because the hero was here.

Even though Harenir didn't have his holy sword now, he wasn't worried at all, and was just curious how many minutes it would take for the situation to be resolved. Is this the heart of a reader expecting a powerful development?

With a swift motion!

Harenir, who had already run to that distant place, took out a dagger from his embrace and cut down three or four small evil spirits at once. His movements of stepping on a collapsed stall and leaping were so graceful that he held up a 10-point card inwardly.

### Chapter 211

Afterward, Harenir helped people trapped under pillars and urged them to evacuate to the forest. Though Beatrice's disguise magic was still working, he had his hood pulled down deeply just in case.

He laughed quietly. Though he always denied his identity saying he was no hero, his action of stepping forward as soon as the commotion occurred was amusing. Wasn't he more heroic than anyone?

Anyway, it seemed like everything would be resolved if that large evil spirit, the main body, could be eliminated...

"...What? There's one more?"

As he turned his head to check how far that evil spirit had approached, he was startled. Though only one had clearly been visible, another one followed behind it.

The two began to divide simultaneously.

At a much faster rate than before, the number of evil spirits pouring into the streets multiplied several times. People's screams in terror loudly resonated through the space.

...Did I perhaps raise a flag?

Is there a world rule where things become difficult if you arrogantly think they'll be resolved too easily? Though he naturally believed Harenir would deal with them all, nevertheless his chest grew chilly.

Was it because he had lived a life completely separated from battle for months? The commotion encountered after living only peacefully and quietly began to approach larger.

With the festival streets full of people, it seemed difficult for the guards to enter quickly. Growing anxious, he just bit his lips nervously, when with a thunderous crash! He was startled by noise from nearby.

"G-get away!"

"Help me!" shrilly

Children screamed as if their voices would tear and struggled. They fell tangled together while running to avoid the pursuing evil spirits. The three evil spirits giggled maliciously then rushed to the pillar right beside them. It seemed like they were trying to topple it and crush the children.

Without even time to think, he stretched out his hand.

"Stop!"

Purple energy burst out as if storming. The color that gathered swirling from his fingertips exploded like a supernova and shot in all directions.

...Huh?

Did he fail at controlling his power?

His energy that spread to various parts of the street subdued hundreds of evil spirits in one breath. It pressed all entities to the ground as if grabbing the back of their heads and pushing them down. Though his energy drained, the shock of the situation took precedence.

Though he had stepped forward impulsively with just the thought that he had to block them, he hadn't wished for th-this much. Though he had only intended to subdue a few evil spirits before his eyes, he had made them all kneel. The energy spread so violently that for an instant a strong wind blew, making his robe flutter and his hood come off.

With a brilliant flash—

Just then, the entire space brightened. Crystals launched from the imperial palace for the finale of the festival sparkled in colorful splendor in the sky, brightly illuminating the streets.

"...Isaph Dina?"

While frozen from the unexpected situation, someone muttered from the other side. As he turned with a start, he met the eyes directly of the staff distributing flowers from the tent.

That person, perhaps had he met them before when he was dragged to Beatrice's imperial palace? Who had brought lace and ribbons to be worn on him following the Imperial Princess's order, wondering strangely...

'Be careful because if you use your ability strongly or receive a lot of attention, the magic will be lifted.'

Beatrice's warning flashed like lightning in his mind. Ah. He had warned to be careful because it was magic cast in simplified form, but he had drawn too much attention.

"What? Isaph?"

"How could he...!"

The streets became even more chaotic than when the evil spirits were rampant. Meanwhile, Harenir cut and destroyed the two massive evil spirits bound by the purple energy and quickly returned to him. Though the problem had been well resolved by dealing with the dividing main bodies...

"...Isaph..."

Receiving Harenir's gaze imbued with complex feelings, he just burst into a dry laugh. He should have bought a mask too when purchasing candles at the shop earlier. He had only trusted the disguise magic, but now he realized the importance of double security.

Perhaps the flag he had raised was not about the evil spirits but about resurrection...

It was a night where the lights in the night sky were reproachfully bright.

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Several hours later, he was finally able to return to Harenir's mansion.

Though he had feared being trapped in the middle of the plaza in the crowd of people and possibly being interrogated, fortunately Harenir had created an exit. He had stepped forward, removed his robe's hood, and strongly spread his holy power. It was partly to destroy all the remaining baby evil spirits in the various paths, but the purpose of erasing the disguise magic was greater.

At that time, the guards and holy knights had just barely broken through the crowd. They, no, not just them but everyone in the streets, recognized the hero and was shocked. Since there had been growing longing toward him as the hero had been absent for a while, it was a natural reaction.

Though it was a return after about a month, Harenir instructed the guards and holy knights to handle the plaza's damage with a very calm and skillful attitude. He additionally ordered them to watch for evil spirits that might appear in other areas, and meanwhile naturally pressed down my robe's hood deeply and hid me behind him.

After ending the brief conversation with the knights, Harenir took care of him and boarded a carriage. He moved quickly, taking advantage of the gap while people were still stunned from shock.

He hoped to be buried by Harenir's appearance, but resurrection seemed too big an issue for that.

From around the time they arrived at the mansion, the communication artifact vibrated like crazy. Noi and the two vice commanders all looked for Harenir, and especially Beatrice's contact rang the most loudly. The artifact trembled so much that he suspected whether it was representing the sender's feelings.

[I thought I might finally be able to rest a bit when this festival ends! But because of you, work is about to pour in again!]

"What did I do..."

[Giving such a shameless answer after resurrecting so spectacularly!]

Damn, was the resurrection confirmed externally too?

The commotion that occurred in the commemorative forest had covered the holy city in one breath. She said the reaction was as fierce as rumors would spread to all cities of the empire by tomorrow.

Because of this, contacts demanding confirmation were pouring in to Beatrice. Naturally it was because she was the Emperor who should know all of this situation, but also because she was known as his acquaintance, and the being who first recognized him had been a servant who had served the Imperial Princess in the past. Probably not only the imperial palace but also the temple and Holy Knight Order would be in disarray.

[Though I carefully put effort into decorating the end of the festival magnificently by raising lights, you ended up taking all the attention. Huh, really.]

Beatrice burst into a dry laugh as if it was absurd. Since it was the last day of the festival hosted by the new Emperor, she had prepared the finale with effort, but it seemed very unjust that everyone only showed interest in Isaph's resurrection.

But actually he was wronged too. If only the sky hadn't brightened, he might not have been discovered.

Of course, if he said this, Beatrice would likely burst into a loud voice again and grab the back of her neck, so he swallowed it. Just before, when he had proposed "Can't we say it was an evil spirit?" he had been sharply blocked, so he decided to watch his words conscientiously.

While staying with Harenir, he had sometimes imagined that his survival might be revealed someday. But absolutely not in this form. And to be discovered right in the forest where commemoration for him was proceeding.

[Do you know how rumors are spreading now? There's even a story that the hero who had left the holy city actually retrieved Isaph from Solnium's embrace.]

Beatrice kept bursting into dry laughter. Since the hero was the son beloved by God, it was something only he could do, so that's why he had been absent for a while, and they were additionally praising his hardship too, she said.

In some ways, it wasn't an entirely wrong story...

He awkwardly scratched his cheek. Harenir had paradoxically argued that his absence had highlighted the Emperor, but now he couldn't say such things anymore. Moreover, in the end, he had even drawn all attention to this side.

Still, Beatrice welcomed at least the revelation of the hero's return with delight.

[Since the hero has stepped forward like this, you can't escape again either.]

### Chapter 212

"...I'll return to the Holy Knight Order tomorrow morning, so for now just block movements trying to find Isaph. He shouldn't get too tired."

Harenir answered with a quiet sigh. Not minding at all that he himself had been exposed, he only worried about the attention that would be directed at him.

Beatrice giggled mischievously.

[The way various unpredictable things happen as soon as Isaph comes to the holy city, it's amusing because it really feels like he's back. Well, it's not bad. Rather it seems interesting too.]

Her voice adding that he always committed unpredictable actions was infused with cheerful energy. A brief conversation followed between her and Harenir, and after ending the communication, Harenir looked at him.

"Isaph, are you okay? You keep having a dazed face..."

Since arriving at the mansion, no, even before that, he had been worriedly examining him saying his complexion wasn't good. He apologized saying it seemed to be due to experiencing too much commotion at the festival, and that problems had spread because he hadn't quickly dealt with the evil spirits, but he just shook his head.

"No. I'm just getting sleepy."

As it happened, he had well passed the time he usually slept. Though he did have a headache since the streets had been so noisy, it would be more correct to explain that he was surprised by the accident he had caused. And most of all, because he had used his ability after a long time, he hadn't been able to control his energy and had poured it out all at once.

Harenir too checked the clock and quickly prepared for bed.

Lying on the bed, he naturally spread both arms. He acted habitually since they had always slept together on the island, but Harenir withdrew after embracing him deeply once. Since regret dripped visibly on his face as he said he had many matters to attend to tonight, he giggled. It was the retribution of one who had thrown everything away and shut himself in the island.

Of course, work would have grown tremendously by adding the accident he had caused too, but he had no mind to say more and closed his eyes languidly. As soon as he lay on the bed, drowsiness poured in between sleep and wakefulness.

There were too many things today...

After returning to the holy city after about a month, it felt like receiving all matters concentrated at once. With interest added. Come to think of it, he had been embarrassed earlier about his relationship with Harenir being discovered by acquaintances, but should he see this as being covered up now?

Though it was worrying how things would turn out in the future, he had to think about it later. His body was too fatigued to endure worrying.

Gradually his consciousness sank into deep sleep.

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Gently bobbing, he floated somewhere.

It felt like floating in the sky, then at some moment, a soft sensation enveloped his whole body as if buried in fluffy clouds. It was a feeling of his entire body being fully immersed in a huge, soft cushion. Liking the sensation, he wanted to check this place.

But he couldn't easily open his eyes. Being unable to lift his eyelids voluntarily, fear began to surge with a shudder. The darkness of the surroundings, which hadn't caused any thoughts until just before, approached coldly. As the warm energy within the cozy sensation was disappearing like an illusion and he was about to become afraid.

-You don't have to be so wary.

A calm voice was heard from behind. It wasn't particularly gentle or affectionate, but his tension eased at that composed attitude. However, he couldn't help but be surprised in another sense.

Because that voice was very familiar to 'him'.

-It's been a while.

It was Isaph's voice.

Similar to the sensation of being surprised when hearing one's own voice recorded and feeling it differently from the voice one knew, he received several times that shock and turned his head.

However, he who had expected to immediately face Isaph, encountered only empty space. As he tilted his head bewilderedly, his gaze gradually lowered at the sharp tapping sound coming from below. Somehow that noise seemed to ring somewhat irritably.

What he eventually discovered was...

"...A cat?"

It was a small, slender black cat hitting the floor with its tail. The cat with uniquely purple eyes was certainly that cat that had been with him in the past. Surprised, he just blinked his eyes several times, then asked in an almost extinguished voice:

"Wh-what? Is this a dream?"

-It's a dream. But not a delusion.

"...Huh?"

-Don't you remember? The visitor who comes on Dianya's Day.

At the utterly calm attitude, feeling the cat before his eyes was indeed 'him', he sighed blankly. Ah, right. The legend about Dianya's Day. On that day, the boundary between this world and the afterlife blurs...

'Though this day is said to be when evil spirits cause commotions, it's also famous as a day when you can reunite with people who have gone to places you can't meet them! So if you just light this candle, you'll be able to meet the person you miss tonight. Family, lover, friend, anyone!'

Words heard from the merchant at the festival hours ago came to mind. But he hadn't used a candle? Though he had purchased one, he hadn't lit it, so he became bewildered, then soon recalled the candles seen in the commemorative forest.

Candles had been all around the flower-offering stand, could it be that they had become the medium?

He was enveloped in quite a dubious feeling. Had he missed him? Well, umm, though he had thought of him while offering white flowers, could that be expressed as missing? But it was also difficult to declare that he hadn't missed him at all.

Needlessly embarrassed, he just scratched his cheek.

"But why have you come in the form of a cat?"

-That's what I'm saying. I'm quite regretful too. Why did you think of me as a cat?

"Huh?"

-It's common. Beings visiting from the afterlife appear in 'the form I want'.

Ah, an exclamation burst out spontaneously. Right, the Grim Reaper legend on Earth was similar to that too. They say it appears in the form of the being most loved during life and leads to the afterlife, are legends about the afterlife similar in any world?

Newly finding it fascinating, he unconsciously reached out his hand.

"It can't be helped. Since you pretended to be a cat in the past, accept it."

Gently squishing, he fiddled with the cat's paw pads. He simply couldn't resist petting the cat he was meeting after a long time. Though knowing this cat was just a virtual form and Isaph resided inside it, he was captivated by its appearance. Perhaps it was the influence of having carried it so much in the past?

But anyone would want to touch a cat examining its paw pads as if exploring its own body. Though he sensed danger as the cat's ears gradually folded back, somehow in the dream it was quite difficult to kill the desire. Strawberry jelly, and grape jelly on the thumb. Still cute.

The cat, discovering his face loosening with visible delight, burst out a sigh as if in resignation. Can a cat even sigh? Moreover, seeing it express dissatisfaction with its tail thumping impatiently as if in substitution made him happy again, before he recalled a belated question.

It was a question he should have asked as soon as seeing Isaph.

"Wait a moment. But you, didn't you say you would vanish at the dimensional boundary? I remember you said souls flowing there couldn't circulate and would completely disappear..."

-Originally that should have been the case, and I expected that too. But whether it was Isolatedies' mysterious power, or Solnium's consideration, I didn't perish.

In the past, Isaph had separated himself from him and said he would bear the karma of extinction alone. Though for a final greeting he had told him he wasn't disappearing but leaving to find family, he had thought that was a white lie...

But Isaph's tone suggested this situation was quite unexpected for him too.

-Well, thanks to that I found my family and am freely wandering around inside the dimensional boundary.

"...Didn't you say that place was chaos with nothing? A realm of nothingness?"

-And it's also a realm holding the possibility of connecting to all dimensions. Though finding direction isn't easy, it's not completely impossible, so.

Gradually his mouth opened. His words now... did they mean he was living wandering through various dimensions together with his family?

In the purple eyes of the cat facing him directly as he was surprised, a faint hint of laughter dwelled as if informing him that thought was correct.

-I tried to give you freedom, but I ended up gaining freedom too.

### Chapter 213

Though it was an entirely unexpected update, there could be no happier news. Despite having no physical body, Isaph rather seemed more comfortable because of it. Since he could easily tour here and there as a spirit body. Besides, since he was an outstanding sorcerer, he would have no particular difficulties.

While he just sighed blankly, the cat came and bumped with a solid thud against his head. It was expressing to close his mouth since his jaw kept dropping endlessly. Since both front paws were caught by him, it must have been a secondary option, but it was such a cute action that a broad smile formed.

The cat looked at him as if it were absurd, then soon just shook its head.

-Anyway, while wandering through various dimensions like that, today a 'path' to this place appeared.

"Ah, it must be because I was thinking of you while placing flowers on the flower-offering stand."

-...Flower-offering stand?

He conveyed exactly what he had heard at night about the so-called 'Isaph's Forest'. And as he expected, the cat looked quite dubious saying "Just why do such a thing?" and even trembled with a shudder with its body. Indeed, perhaps it was the only being who could sympathize with him in this aspect.

Suddenly he felt a different mood. Was it because he had rarely properly conversed with Isaph? During the period when they communicated through the status window, he had only unilaterally received quite limited information, and at the end, hadn't they parted after only hearing about how to provide 'compensation'?

Since they had met anyway, he decided to pour out questions he had harbored for a long time.

"I've been curious for a while, did you distinguish me as a different being from the start? Because you had visited a distant dimension, did you naturally recognize me as a separate entity?"

-Hmm, that's not it. Actually in the beginning, I worried that as you assimilated with the body, distinguishing would become more difficult. Since your adaptation speed was faster than expected.

Isaph answered willingly. As if he too had wanted to have a conversation with him someday, he explained in detail. Though he worried whether 'he' could properly adapt to the current dimension as Earth's environment was so different from here, he wasn't confident about whether it would be possible to separate them as distinct entities.

He said he had deliberately displayed the status window to induce distance from this dimension, and also minimized communication with the cat recognized as an NPC, but worried that perhaps the souls might completely merge. For example, he had adjusted the spiritual eye and read the necromancer's vision familiarly, which was an effect beyond what he had controlled.

-But, there was an event that completely separated you and me.

"Huh? What was that?"

-The moment you searched for the dangerous power sealed in your left arm-

A cough burst out spontaneously. It was a terribly shameful memory enough to make goosebumps rise all over his body. In the past, while disguised as a mercenary, there was a time when he had stepped forward to save companions who had attracted the attention of many people, seeking the Black Flame Dragon, the darkness of darkness in his left arm...

-After watching that incident, I thought I absolutely didn't want to become the same being as you.

The cat trembled with a shudder saying if that had happened, it would have been truly humiliating. Though hurt by his disgust, since even he would likely have had the same reaction if it were him, he awkwardly just averted his gaze to the side.

-And the romance with the hero was, well, one of the reasons for separation from you too.

"...Umm...?"

-Because he became interested since you didn't act like me. I wouldn't have told the hero to his face that God made him suffer greatly, or expressed his time as lonely.

Just as embarrassing topics came up again and his earlobes were about to burn bright red, he became dazed at the cat's calm voice that followed. Though he seemed to find the fact that Harenir and he were dating somewhat dubious, nevertheless he appeared to have focused on the point that they could 'separate' each other through it and seemed relieved.

Growing embarrassed, he just fiddled with the cat's jelly pads, when suddenly the back of his neck felt cold. Anxiety surged at the cat's words about watching him and Harenir. His fingertips began to tremble uncontrollably, and he asked as respectfully as possible:

"Um, perhaps... when we were together in the past, did you see all my memories? Occasionally you would display the status window as if reading my mind, perhaps you watched everything I did..."

Then even those things I did with Harenir...

As he swallowed inwardly the question he couldn't possibly utter aloud, the cat stared at him blankly. Around when he was about to choke under the quiet gaze, the creature tilted its head.

-At first I did, but as we gradually separated, I couldn't see. Though I had to check if things were proceeding according to plan so I occasionally examined your thoughts, but even that was limited to parts.

"I see..."

-Moreover, certain time periods when you were with the hero were blacked out, so I couldn't see at all.

He coughed awkwardly.

Though he thought he had hidden the main point as much as possible, had it all already been revealed through his anxious eyes and trembling voice? Whether he burst into coughing again or not, the cat remained only calm.

-Though I was suspicious about exactly what you did, well, the experience of having memories blocked like that was also new. I thought you were gradually acquiring soul magic too, and also that you and I were being distinguished to the extent of blocking viewing even to the same soul...

Had Isaph only watched from the position of a designer? While his dedication was grateful and fascinating, on the other hand his heart grew heavy. The reason he had focused on them being differentiated was because he had prepared for his own extinction, yet even so he seemed to have only welcomed it.

Newly he realized he had really survived thanks to him.

"...Indeed, you did all the hard work, but I'm getting the applause, so it feels strange."

-Hmm?

"There was a small incident at the commemorative forest today."

He briefly conveyed the commotion from hours ago. While throwing a gaze asking if that was a 'small incident', Isaph shook his head saying he only committed such peculiar actions. Reading a strong intention that he again didn't want to become the same being as him, he laughed dryly and spoke. It had been a burden in his heart from before.

"People who recognized me then looked at me as if truly grateful. As if looking at a hero. Though you're the one who did something significant enough for commemorative events to be held... When they looked at me pitifully saying I had endured humiliation for a long time, it felt quite uncomfortable-"

-There's a part you're misunderstanding.

Isaph, who had been listening bewilderedly, abruptly cut off his words. He even shook his head very firmly.

-I thought you would notice, but that Dedium could be negotiated with because it was 'you'.

"...Huh?"

-Since you had been to another dimension, you were less afraid of that monster. You perceived it as just a boss monster in a game, so you could lie right to its face.

It was saying that people who had only stayed in this world feared the Dedium more. Saying there was a reason it was called the 'Great Catastrophe', he explained that even without directly encountering the monster, people learned fear by seeing the ruins left on the continent.

-Moreover, pretending to betray and proposing negotiation were all designed by you. I wouldn't have thought that far. I had only planned to target the moment when the Dedium would eventually reside in my body.

"..."

-Above all, since you had control of the body then, it was possible because you finally decided to take the divine spear. I completed the plan thanks to you.

He became dazed at the words that it was only right to give a 'reward'.

At first, a rebuttal arose that wasn't that distance toward such a monster also created by your intention, but the following story was too surprising. Besides perceiving this world as a game, perhaps since he had lived bound with the Dedium's soul on Earth, his fear toward it had unconsciously decreased?

-It succeeded because you endured alone on Earth, if not, it would have failed.

"That's..."

-Hmm, well, if I had to express it by your standards... should I say 'we' succeeded together?

The cat turned its head to the side as if very embarrassed. Though it seemed to want to escape from this ticklish atmosphere right away, it still didn't withdraw its two paws caught by him to the end.

### Chapter 214

Finally, laughter burst out. As he was fiddling with its paw pads trying to fully enjoy the current pleasant feeling, the cat suddenly spoke firmly:

-But as a warning, it's better not to distinguish past time as only 'mine'.

"...What do you mean?"

-I'm saying this because you don't seem to have accepted the past yet. Only at the moment when souls were separated in the snow mountain cave did we become separate entities accumulating different memories, but the past before that is time spent not just by me but by you too. You seem to regard it like a previous life, but now it has become your reality.

"..."

-I deliberately gave you memories late to distinguish us, but that was only to send you alive from chaos. You shouldn't continue keeping a distance afterward.

It was saying to accept all memories of this place as his time too. In the past, he had once confessed to Harenir that he felt awkward because the times people were commemorating didn't feel like 'his', but even though he hadn't shared this with Isaph now, how on earth had he noticed? It seemed he had read him clearly again.

As he mumbled that it wasn't as easy as it sounded, Isaph coldly urged:

-Be careful. The more distance you keep from memories of this world, the weaker the bond between soul and body becomes.

"Huh? The bond, becomes weaker, means..."

-It means your spirit could bounce out of the body. Then you die.

His mouth opened wide at the chilling warning. Though he had thought it was just a dream consultation time, was it a situation where he needed to go to the intensive care unit? Growing afraid with a shudder, he asked trembling:

"A-are you lying?"

-Yes.

"...Hey."

As he became serious at the refreshingly returned answer, the cat narrowed its eyes and tilted its head. As it appeared almost as if it had been watching his reaction with amusement, he reached out a hand of revenge. Though he intended to pet it thoroughly, instead the creature took advantage of the gap where its two paws were freed and slipped swiftly from his embrace. Indeed it was a master of the big picture.

As he became hollow, Isaph slowly circled around him and spoke:

-Though the probability is slim, still there's nothing bad about being careful.

"...Just how should I be careful?"

-Your soul's state doesn't seem very unstable, but you've been establishing memories, right? Just keep doing that consistently in the future too.

He who had become puzzled about what was being referenced, suddenly recalled the 'spacing out time' he had on the island.

Occasionally, the past of this world and events from Earth would rise sporadically in his mind, and he would quietly ruminate on them and organize them, could that be the 'establishment of memories'? Though he had only done so because it seemed too dizzying otherwise, it appeared to have been an unconscious effort to stabilize his soul.

As he was just moving his lips, the cat spoke as if understanding:

-After all, since you spent a long time alone on Earth, it must be difficult to accept the past.

"...I wasn't completely alone. I was with the black cat."

The black cat, created by the amalgamation of souls of parents and twin brother from this world. That cat had followed him to Earth and watched over him. It had always approached when he was struggling or sad, and those moments had made him endure until the end...

At the words suddenly muttered, Isaph nodded his head. He seemed somewhat pleased.

-See. You and I have attachment toward the same being.

"..."

-Should I use the metaphor of a tree trunk? Feeling my body rotting, I split off a branch relying on the last possibility, and that branch vividly stretched out. So I cut off the rotten trunk, and now the remaining branch must live firmly rooting itself.

He was surprised at his metaphor. After surviving from chaos in the past, he had felt an emptiness as if losing a half that had departed from one root... The fact that he had thought the same thing seemed to prove they were the same being, making his heart flutter.

On the other hand, around when his heart was becoming complicated again at his attitude showing not a hint of hesitation in calling himself the rotten branch, with a light tap the cat's paw pad touched his nose.

Though it was probably with the intention to make him focus on his words, he couldn't help but burst into a dry laugh. He couldn't help but smile at the pleasantly springy sensation. Isaph faced his change of expression very dubiously, then soon shook his head.

-Looking at you, I think I understand why En treated me as a younger sibling even though we were twins.

"What?"

Is this perhaps meaning I look naive?

While he was narrowing his eyes as memories of his twin brother from the past taking care of him to the point of treating him almost like a newborn baby came to mind, Isaph tapped his nose a couple more times with gentle taps.

While touching him with an attitude as if saying he would do it because he seemed to like it though he wasn't inclined to, he spoke:

-You have a clear reason why you want to live in this world. Right?

"...Yes."

He knew without needing to specify exactly. His reason for wanting to live, the reason it had to be this world specifically.

It was all Harenir.

If perhaps, with a very slim probability, his soul detached from his body, what would happen? Would Harenir wander searching for the dimensional boundary again? He absolutely didn't want to see his crumbled appearance like in the past again. Just imagining it made him sad.

As he slowly nodded his head, the cat's eyes narrowed. For a moment, he faced the purple eyes silently, and it felt like they were having a great many conversations.

Soon the cat turned its head.

"I have to go now."

By now, a faint orange light was spreading from the far side of the space. Day was breaking. As the cat was about to turn its body too, he urgently asked:

"W-wait a moment. Can I see you again next time, next year too?"

-Well. I don't know if Solnium will open the path next time too, and moreover, the dead become more difficult the longer they're held. You know that, right?

Isaph answered calmly and didn't even look back at him. Though he desperately stretched out his hand, it avoided with a very graceful movement, making him feel indignant. Don't act like a cat even here.

Around when he was anxiously just looking at the cat's back, it spoke leisurely:

-But, well, actually I'm also a person who couldn't do that.

His eyes opened wide. That statement soon meant...

The eyes of the cat looking back slightly narrowed. Now he clearly knew that was his smile. The dawn softly imbued the purple eyes.

-Goodbye. Next time try to fall asleep a bit earlier.

#Side Story 4.

The festival commotion created a much larger ripple effect than he had thought.

"Isaph has returned!"

In just one day, such exclamations resonated throughout the entire empire beyond the holy city. Even other kingdoms took interest, and the level of reaction was greater than when the hero had disguised his death in the past.

All kinds of contacts poured into the imperial palace, temple, and Holy Knight Order.

Though everyone was surprised and delighted at the return of the hero who had been absent for about a month, the destination of this interest was also 'the being who was beside the returned hero'.

To this, Harenir finally chose to affirm the rumor spreading in the empire. Yes, that rumor saying 'the hero's absence was to bring Isaph back from Solnium!'

So externally, it was announced that he had just been resurrected and returned to the holy city, and Harenir firmly stated that because of this, it was difficult to accept outside meeting requests. The justification was that rest was still needed.

Though Harenir had been absent for not a short time, because his influence still remained, there was no one who dared to invade the hero's mansion recklessly. He was grateful to him for creating a way to hide like this.

Though it was regrettable that his resurrection had been confirmed and widely announced, he resigned himself saying it couldn't be helped since he had caused too big an accident. And though he understood that the form of the affirmed rumor was hard to say was wrong in some contexts... just because his identity had been exposed in the commemorative forest, the rumor had been strangely distorted.

### Chapter 215

'It seems Isaph went to the final battlefield to check if the Great Catastrophe had completely disappeared as soon as he returned, even though he was still in an unstable state...'

He, who had been lounging around in the mansion, immediately writhed upon hearing that story. Damn, who was the scriptwriter creating such a scenario? No matter how he looked at it, it seemed like that mercenary he used to know.

With goosebumps rising all over his body, he scratched his arms while showing his disgust, making Beatrice, who had delivered the news, giggle.

"It's as if Solares now has exactly two heroes."

"Can the Emperor make such a statement? 'Hero' is a term that refers to a person blessed by God."

"Since Solnium saved you, couldn't this also be seen as receiving blessing?"

When he sent a dubious gaze asking if it was okay to carelessly use such a special word that only five people in the empire's long history of a thousand years had received the title 'hero', Beatrice shrugged her shoulders. She responded confidently saying there was a very valid reason.

It was already painful that Harenir acted as if he, not himself, was the true hero, and now with Beatrice doing this too, it was extremely embarrassing. Moreover, she was now the Emperor of the empire.

While awkwardly fiddling with his nape, Beatrice's story continued.

"The imperial citizens are also unanimously saying so? Just as I was entering this mansion, I saw gifts piling up, you're really incredibly popular. Oh my, praise for the new Emperor has completely stopped, and they're only looking for you from across the continent."

"That's... not like I did it deliberately..."

It was definitely clear she was enjoying his reaction. As she said, numerous gifts and mail were pouring into the mansion now, which had begun after it became known that he was staying at Harenir's mansion.

He felt burdened, wondering why they were sending such things. Though he had asked for them to be returned, Harenir had just stared at him and ordered the butler to receive them for now. He hadn't understood his decision then, but perhaps it was similar to the reason Beatrice was teasing now.

He shook his head and asked:

"Anyway, just why did you come here? I told you Harenir isn't here now."

Recently he had been going out to the Holy Knight Order early every dawn, and though Beatrice would know this too, she had visited the mansion. Even now at his question, she just exclaimed "Well well, you call him by a nickname comfortably," making him narrow his eyes. Somehow she seemed hesitant to bring up the main point.

As he stared at her blankly, Beatrice finally burst out a sigh. Muttering that anyway news of her visit would have been conveyed to that guy, so she couldn't drag out time anymore, she met his gaze directly.

"I want you to examine the plaza."

"What?"

"On the last night of the festival, that dawn, many evil spirits sprang out again. Though most were weak ones so the holy knights dealt with them quickly, but since they've been appearing sporadically even after that day, there are quite many imperial citizens expressing anxiety. So thinking if you went around the streets once it might settle down, I came here to ask this."

This was followed by speculation that it seemed the world was still unstable due to the aftermath of connecting with other dimensions. It was an analysis that the boundary between the afterlife and this world had blurred much more on Dianya's Day than in the past.

He just blinked his eyes at Beatrice's serious story. Knowing he would find it burdensome, she had worried for a very long time, but after all, there was no more certain way to reassure the imperial citizens than having the being known as the most outstanding necromancer in the empire examine it, so she came to ask like this...

It was unfamiliar for her to set such an atmosphere, and also surprising that the Emperor came in person to ask, but there was an even more bewildering point.

"There was such a commotion? This is the first I'm hearing of it?"

"That would be so. Because the owner of this mansion is someone who tries to place you in the safest place and give only the most comfortable environment."

Though he was truly surprised, Beatrice didn't seem to find it particularly strange. Rather, she only expressed tired admiration at Harenir's efforts to completely shield him from outside commotion so he wouldn't get tired.

Could it be that the reason for Harenir's excessively early departures in recent days was all because of that? He might have been going around the streets, calming the empire's turmoil. He had just thought it was curious that his separation anxiety had been resolved so quickly...

Though it was true that he always came to the mansion to check on him when he woke up, only leaving again after that, and at night he returned as if somehow wanting to sleep together. Hmm, growing somewhat embarrassed, he just rolled his eyes, and Beatrice spoke gravely again:

"I don't want to burden you. Just think about it once, and if it seems difficult, there's also a direction of saying I came to receive your advice instead-"

"Alright, I'll go take a look. I was thinking those candles seemed like defective products anyway."

As it happened, he had been concerned about the candles seen in the festival streets. He had guessed it would be fine since that day two massive evil spirits had been dealt with, and had just considered it an unlucky commotion brewed by the abundant wishes of people missing the dead gathered together, but if problems continued to occur afterward, there was a need to examine it more closely.

Though it was burdensome to have to appear before people, still he felt somewhat uncomfortable inside since Beatrice was continuing to struggle without rest even after the festival ended because of him.

At his agreement, Beatrice opened her eyes wide and hurriedly rose from her seat. As if worried his mind might change, she said let's go quickly, and that she had brought plenty of guard knights too. Despite having already prepared everything to take him along, she had asked for his opinion. The change in her was newly fascinating.

However, just as they were about to leave the reception room.

"Isaph."

Harenir appeared. Though surprised at his sudden appearance, this time too Beatrice just muttered "You came so soon." It was a reaction as if she had expected he would naturally come.

Harenir had hardened his face stiffly as if he had deduced the reason she had visited the mansion in his absence. His blue eyes looking at her were infinitely cold.

"Beatrice. If you burden Isaph like this-"

"No, I said I'm curious and want to look around."

He shook his head, cutting off Harenir's words.

"You said it too. That I act coldly when it comes to necromancy. Just as I'm suspicious of certain parts in this commotion, I'm going to check."

"But you don't have to step forward and struggle unnecessarily. I've been going around the plaza so it's gradually subsiding, and especially when the weather is getting chilly now-"

"I tell you it's fine. And if it's cold, just give me a robe or something thick."

However, Harenir's dissuasion only strengthened his will. Since it had been confirmed that he had struggled on his behalf, he thought it would be better for him to step forward and end it all at once.

Harenir seemed to grasp that his intention wouldn't change from his attitude, and finally swallowed a sigh and moved. Afterward, to him who brought a thick robe, he showed both arms.

The white robe wrapped his body softly. Harenir carefully gathered the collar of the robe and attached a brooch, and fearing gazes from people more than he did, also firmly put the hood on. He also cautiously added admonitions such as to say immediately if tired, that they could return quickly at any time, and so on.

Since Harenir's overprotection still showed no sign of decreasing, he had given up long ago. He just nodded his head roughly while yawning, when Beatrice's exclamation was heard from behind.

"Indeed, newly surprising."

"What is?"

"No, just thinking I chose the right person to ask."

As he turned around dubiously, Beatrice just shrugged her shoulders. At that reaction, he realized he had shown a very intimate appearance with Harenir. No, to speak more precisely, rather than an expression of affection between lovers, shouldn't this be said to be unilaterally receiving service? Master and butler level.

Both Harenir and he had acted too naturally. Not just during the period staying on the island, but even before that, he had always prepared outerwear for him, so they had become habituated. Though Beatrice had already discovered their relationship long ago, he still felt embarrassed with heat rising to his face, while Harenir just spoke to her calmly:

"I'll accompany Isaph, so the imperial palace knights can be dismissed."

"Huh, trying not to let him out of your sight for a moment. No, is it that you can't separate from him?"

### Chapter 216

Beatrice burst into a dry laugh as if saying he was extremely devoted. Whether she did so or not, Harenir only focused on taking care of him as they went out, and he awkwardly looked at her before turning his head away.

They headed to the plaza by carriage.

It was a quite different atmosphere from when they had been viewing the festival a few days ago. Not just the empty feeling after a festival had ended, but the street itself was chaotic. Looking out through the carriage window, he saw several shops had collapsed.

When he focused with his spiritual eye, he also saw dead energy remaining here and there on the streets. Were these traces left by the evil spirits that had rampaged on Dianya's Day? Though it seemed the holy knights had patrolled and erased the traces, ominous smoke still rippled in not a few places.

"What? I heard there were no major problems?"

He had thought it was a request to just go around the plaza once because the imperial citizens' anxiety was great, that is, to just make a show. But seeing the scene, he was genuinely bewildered.

"The holy city has rarely been attacked by evil spirits, so the damage was great, that's all. Actually, the evil spirits that appeared at dawn were all weak so they were dealt with quickly, and also we're still continuing to clean up now..."

Harenir explained in a light tone from across, but no matter how he looked at it, it was definitely an attitude deliberately taken so that he wouldn't feel burdened.

A buzz of recognition swept-

From the moment they got out of the carriage, gazes were drawn. This was because Harenir got out first and extended his hand to him, but it was a natural result since if there was someone the hero would take care of like this, there was only one person. Currently, wasn't it known to the outside that the hero was nursing him who had just been resurrected?

Moreover, since Beatrice had arrived at the plaza first and was waiting for them, there were plenty of clues in the Emperor's behavior too. Since Harenir had urged the coachman to slow down as much as possible while moving by carriage fearing he might get tired, they would have made the Emperor wait for not a little time.

"That must be Isaph..."

"Oh my, to step forward like this even though his condition must not be good yet..."

As rumors of his arrival spread, people gradually increased coming toward them. Everyone truly seemed to want to confirm with their eyes the fact that he was alive.

Though he had prepared to some extent from the moment he accepted Beatrice's request, he hadn't known the reaction would be this big. And from the beginning too.

Even though he hid quietly behind Harenir, gazes stuck to him earnestly. Usually when he was with Harenir, everyone only looked at him.

"..."

Impulsively, he raised his head and looked at the people.

Various emotions were dwelling in the dozens of pairs of eyes toward him. Gratitude, joy, relief, and guilt. Some who met his eyes even inhaled with a gasp and became immersed in deep emotion. There were also those who were seen bowing their heads in greeting.

His feelings were very strange. Though he knew perception toward him had changed after 'that day', when actually facing it, an infinitely unfamiliar sensation came. Was this discomfort, or awkwardness?

Just wanting to escape, he turned his body with a sudden twist and staggered. He had misstepped in the process of hurrying.

"Be careful, Isaph."

Naturally, Harenir immediately caught and supported him. Though it was just a funny misstep, a sigh of concern was heard from behind. He deliberately pretended not to hear the accompanying mutter, "Indeed, still not recovered..."

But even after that, with each step he took, worries poured out like "How with such a frail body..." and also when he stretched out his hand, words like "How with such a thin arm..." were heard. Gradually his face grew hot.

It seemed everyone was somehow seeing him now as a patient who couldn't even walk or as something just born, making him extremely embarrassed, so he thought he would rather focus on the task. He needed to finish quickly and leave this place.

And just then, something strange caught his sight.

"...Souls?"

As he approached to first check the dead energy on the roadside he had seen while coming by carriage earlier, several souls were rippling near there. Not evil spirits, but just ordinary and common spirits. Weak souls that wouldn't have been visible if he hadn't been focused with his spiritual eye.

They were close to ghosts commonly seen on Earth too, not born from evil minds though still with lingering attachments to this world preventing them from going to the afterlife. The spirits noticed that he recognized them and approached with a wavering motion.

As he stepped back one step warily at their approach, they also stopped, and instead began making gestures with hands and feet. Their whole bodies also wavered with spectral tremors.

Wh-what is it?

"What's wrong? Is there a reason you're suddenly looking around at empty space?"

"Ah, so you can't see them."

At Harenir's question, he pondered how to explain. For now, spirits were gathered around the dead energy remaining at the collapsed shop, and they were dancing strangely, he was about to say... then soon narrowed his brow.

As he focused on the spirits' movements trying to convey to Harenir, a message was read. Since they didn't have enough strength to speak aloud, they were trying to convey something to him using their whole bodies. After pointing at the black smoke from the debris, their behavior of staggering as if spinning in disoriented spins while holding their heads was...

"It seems they don't like the evil spirits appearing in the holy city either? Saying it's noisy so they dislike it, asking to remove them quickly... They'll guide, the location, themselves...?"

As he interpreted fumblingly, the spirits jumped with enthusiastic leaps as if saying he was correct. They seemed very excited. Then they carefully approached him and circled around in swirling motions, and their intention was clearly read.

'Subjugate us.'

'Command us.'

'Hurry!'

Why did he feel like he was being threatened?

After looking at them dubiously, he finally stretched out his hand. As it happened, he didn't have a single undead servant under his command. In the past he had commanded hundreds, but dying once had naturally severed the connections. Perhaps they had gone to the afterlife comfortably.

Anyway, now he only needed temporary help, so he subjugated them weakly. As purple energy spread from his fingertips, the spirits' forms became distinct.

From various places, sounds of startled exclamations in surprise were heard. It was understandable to be bewildered since spirits suddenly appeared from empty space where there had been nothing. He deliberately looked only at the souls, now his undead servants, without turning back.

[It's here! Here!]

[Follow us!]

The undead servants, now wearing purple energy, could communicate with him. They actively led the way ahead of him, and Harenir stuck close with a strangely wary look. It felt like he was protecting him. Even though they were beings subjugated to him, he seemed quite displeased that beings he didn't know were acting intimately with him.

Swallowing a dry laugh, he followed the undead servants and soon reached a place where black smoke rippled. The dead energy was much thicker than what he had seen earlier. They had picked up 'it' from between what would have been rubble collapsed from the commotion.

"Indeed, the candles were the problem."

"Did this summon the evil spirits?"

"Though it wasn't intended, it became a medium. The magic formation in the center was drawn incorrectly."

The magic formation engraved on the green candle was very crooked. The candles would have sold like hot cakes as people enjoyed Dianya's Day after a long time, and in that process, either mistakes were made while hurriedly filling quantities, or perhaps beginners produced them originally, resulting in defective products.

There was a high probability that the commotion he had seen a few days ago had also originated from these candles. Though it was said that he and Harenir had dealt with the largest evil spirits then preventing a big problem, since the medium still remained, small evil spirits would have popped out like troublemakers afterward.

Even if holy knights had gone around pouring holy power to purify places where dead energy pooled, it couldn't have been completely resolved. Because the ultimate cause remained as it was.

At his explanation, Harenir nodded his head.

"We'll have to order a large-scale collection of these items."

"Tsk, oh my. It seems the necromancers of the empire don't even come close to your toes."

Beatrice also clicked her tongue and ordered her guard knights to gather the green candles distributed in the empire. She also ordered the arrest of all those who had produced the items, which seemed a natural measure, but he became somewhat confused by her statement.

Wouldn't it also be strange that there were many people good at necromancy, which was originally a shunned ability in the Holy Empire?

### Chapter 217

However, Beatrice roughly brushed back her hair as if truly displeased.

"They said they would follow your will and made and sold items to help the empire's event. But seeing the quite inadequate quality, it seems they just mentioned you for promotional purposes, which is vexing."

Can things turn out like that too?

Though dubious, he thought they couldn't avoid responsibility since they had stepped forward with unskilled abilities and ruined the new Emperor's first festival. Also, with the judgment that the Emperor's anger would grow the longer it took to collect the candles, in order to prevent needless bloodshed, he commanded his undead servants:

"Can you locate where all such candles are?"

[We'll try our best!]

[Leave it to us!]

Why are the undead servants subjugated to him always so excessively loyal? Maybe they're excited about being materialized wearing his energy? After all, they were beings who had been too weak to communicate with humans until now and would have naturally perished with time.

While watching the backs of the undead servants scattering through various alleys, he broke the candle with a snap. Though black mist rippled like a final resistance, he ignored it indifferently. It was energy that couldn't even scratch him.

At that moment, a sound of inhaling breath was heard from behind. Thinking they were probably surprised at the scene of undead servants flying through empty space, as he was just breaking the candle into smaller pieces, a child's voice mixed in:

"Wow, Isaph saved us again."

At first he thought he had misheard, but similar stories poured from here and there. He turned around dumbfoundedly.

Actually, from the moment he had materialized the spirits earlier, he had been somewhat tense. Both on Earth and in this world, whenever he showed appearances close to ghosts, he had received uncomfortable gazes. His ability was only a necessary evil, and though everyone acknowledged its utility, they treated it ominously.

But on the faces of the people facing him now, only gratitude was rising. Though he had heard news that perception toward soul magic had changed in the empire, still he had thought they would avoid him when seeing him commanding undead servants with their own eyes.

"He really has returned alive..."

"A choked sob."

Moreover, there were even some who were moved as if they truly realized his revival seeing him use his ability. It was very bewildering as he hadn't expected it at all.

Everyone welcomed him and on one hand acted as if guilty about the burden he had carried, and above all, the reactions marveling at his very existence were all unfamiliar. Because he had never received so much goodwill before.

Though he had thought he didn't care about others' gazes at all until now, strangely his chest area tickled. No, should he express it as his whole body tickling? His heart also began beating with heavy thumps, making him gradually understand what this emotion was.

At first he had thought it was just uncomfortable because people's reactions were awkward...

Am I now quite happy?

He pressed his chest firmly with his palm. Though the sensation of bobbing gently like a balloon was strange, he didn't want to reject it entirely. His fingertips trembled slightly.

Harenir suggested:

"Isaph, if you let us know which areas the candles are found in, I'll send holy knights."

"...Yes. But I'll handle the close ones myself."

Though the holy knights' holy power could cut down the candles, and actually that would be easier for him, he wanted to do it himself. Could it be that receiving some applause from people made him want to do better?

Harenir examined his hand with a face that was really reluctant. Since it was a gaze concerned about whether he might have been hurt by the black energy that rose when breaking the candle just before, he showed his palm with a dry laugh. Not a single scratch.

Soon he moved, sharing the vision of his undead servants.

This too was after a long time. He had often done this during the period of searching Encroachment Zones, but so much seemed different between then and now. While breaking candles one by one immersed in memories, he tilted his head after receiving a quite heterogeneous scene.

One of the scenes he came to see through the undead servant caught his attention.

"Why is energy so intensely felt from over there?"

Black smoke rippled heavily in the middle of the plaza. What could it be? Until now, the candles discovered were generally only one or two, but this time it seemed dozens were gathered. Since it certainly wasn't an ordinary situation, he moved warily.

And soon he discovered someone arguing while kicking a wooden box.

"Who made these candles! Who was it! Because of these, evil spirits were drawn and my villa became a mess! Just what are you going to do about it!"

The woman bursting with anger with momentum like she might file a damage lawsuit was wearing her hat pressed down deeply. Her insight in figuring out the candles were the cause of the commotion was surprising, but more than that, his gaze went to her hair revealed under her hat. The sunset-like color with sky blue and pink mysteriously mixed was familiar to his eyes.

Subsequently, the rose-pink flower petal-like eyes he discovered when she raised her head were also very familiar to him.

"...Laria?"

As he called her name dazedly, immediately she, Laria, turned toward him.

"Oh, Isaph? Is it really Isaph?!"

Her eyes grew so large they seemed like they would pop out. Though he had notified her he was alive by letter before, it was the first time meeting directly after 'that day'. While it was surprising to meet again at a moment he had never thought of, the content Laria had been shouting just before bothered him, so he approached.

"You said your villa became a mess because of evil spirits?"

"Ye-es, those things broke all the potions I was making too. At first I wondered what the problem was, but these candles were defective!"

Laria poured out her frustration. Since problems had continued from Dianya's Day and only today she had identified the cause and come to protest, he felt very regretful.

Seeing how she said villa, she seemed to be staying in the holy city. The scenery of that place was clearly drawn before his eyes. The last space he had shared with Laria was also a villa, and moreover, that place was also where he had hidden and researched in the past.

After a brief contemplation, he nodded his head and spoke. As it happened, he had been planning to go to the past research laboratory once anyway.

"I'll go check it myself."

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Harenir was very displeased about visiting Laria's villa. Though he tried to persuade him saying they could send holy knights, there was no need to go in person, he didn't change his position. Still, he didn't want to ignore that the space of someone who had given him great help in the past had been attacked by evil spirits.

Moreover, he knew that Harenir had secretly ordered the holy knights to move more quickly without his knowledge. Though he had said he would eliminate the nearby candles himself, he had ultimately secretly blocked it.

So when asked to choose between finding and handling all candles himself or going to Laria's villa, Harenir finally chose the latter. Instead, he attached the condition that he would go together and wait outside the villa.

Arriving at the villa located on the outskirts of the holy city, he surveyed the space with a renewed feeling. The floor was bare as if all the flowerpots that had filled the wooden house had been broken. The debris piled on one side showed how big the past commotion had been.

Looking around the interior regretfully, he spoke:

"If you suffered this much damage, you should have contacted me."

"I did contact you, Isaph."

"...Hmm?"

Bewildered by the immediate response, he belatedly sighed and scratched his cheek.

"Ah, lately a lot of mail has come to the mansion so I must have missed it. There's too much piled up to check-"

"No, I've been sending since before."

"...Yes?"

After news spread that he had returned alive to the empire, enormous letters and gifts were pouring into the mansion. Since it was burdensome, he had just piled them up, so he thought Laria's contact had been buried along with them, but somehow her words were strange.

"You let me know months ago that you had been revived by the life force held after taking Isolatedies. I've been sending letters continuously since then."

It was saying that since she had initially received a letter through a servant working at the hero's residence, she had naturally thought he would stay there and steadily contacted him. Growing confused, he just blinked his eyes.

...But I've never received any?

Could it be, really could it be that Harenir deliberately didn't deliver letters to him?

### Chapter 218

Though he became uncomfortable recalling Harenir setting up strange boundaries toward Beatrice before, he forced himself to shake his head. Perhaps during that period Harenir had been so busy that there hadn't been time to talk about letters? Yes, that must be it.

And it seemed Laria didn't particularly want to press on that part either, as she headed to the kitchen first. Clinking and clattering, there seemed to be sounds, and soon a sweet scent wafted over.

"...Cocoa?"

"Since you've visited after a long time, I should offer a drink to my guest."

Though he threw a gaze asking why sudden cocoa when he came to check the villa's damage, Laria just shrugged her shoulders. She gestured for him to sit on the sofa, saying the problem was already over, and she had roughly organized the villa, so there was nothing urgent.

He dazedly looked at the white mug coming up on the table. Beside the cup filled with rich cocoa, cookies with large chocolate chips embedded in them were placed on a plate.

Actually, he had become somewhat tired from going around the plaza, so the sugar was welcome. Using his ability after a long time had also consumed quite a bit of energy. As he quickly picked up a cookie, Laria sat across from him and spoke:

"That's an extremely excited reaction?"

"Yes. I haven't been able to eat like this for a while."

Moreover, recently Harenir had started managing his diet saying he ate too many sweet foods, so he had really been missing chocolate cookies. He picked up a cookie gladly and dipped it deep in the cocoa. The chocolate chips melted and wrapped softly around his tongue, making him happy in one breath.

Laria propped her chin on one hand and stared at him eating. Somehow she looked very pleased. Should he say it was an expression happy to see him eating well now, when in the past she had been wary of all the food she gave?

Around when it was becoming somewhat embarrassing, Laria asked:

"How have you been all this time? After the letter saying you had returned alive, contact was cut off, so I was really curious about your news. Then unexpectedly on the last day of the festival, there was a commotion about you appearing..."

"Just, well, I kept recuperating. Though I was revived, I wasn't in a sound state."

Since his relationship with Harenir had been discovered by several people due to staying alone with him on the island a few days ago, fearing Laria might notice too, he answered as circumspectly as possible. It wasn't a lie that he had taken a long time rehabilitating.

He conveyed a brief summary of recent days. He wasn't awake for even five or six hours a day, he couldn't even make one lap around a space the size of this villa before collapsing, and so on.

"Aha-. So you recuperated..."

Laria nodded her head slowly. Growing anxious in advance at her action of murmuring while dragging out the end of her words, he rolled his eyes here and there. While surveying the space with a wariness about escaping this topic, just then something caught his sight.

"By the way, why are there so many candles?"

A wooden box beside the sofa was full of purple candles. It wasn't just one either. There seemed to be about seven boxes filled with candles of various colors, and thinking back, he recalled that when she had been protesting in the plaza just before, she had argued over one box.

Then how many candles did she originally have? He became curious why an alchemist who could produce lighting artifacts had bought so many candles.

"Ah, haha. Just, I was curious about the Dianya's Day custom, so I bought quite a lot."

"..."

"I bought various types to research them together, but evil spirits became entangled needlessly..."

Laria explained while awkwardly scratching the back of her head. He stared at her blankly, then took out a purple candle from the box beside him.

Then he held the spoon given to stir the cocoa upside down and scratched the magic formation with the end of the handle.

"All the candles sold at this festival were subpar. I'll fix the formation for you, so try lighting this next time."

Laria had lost her entire family to the Great Catastrophe in the past. She had said the Dium killed her parents and siblings before her eyes. Among his old memories was one where he had freed souls of her family who couldn't leave her and lingered around. It had been Laria's request.

Perhaps, no, clearly Laria had bought so many candles wanting to meet them again. Since he had already helped them go to the afterlife in the past, they might have gone through a process like circulation, that is, reincarnation, but probably they would certainly have remained thinking of her too.

But actually, it didn't matter what candle it was as long as there was an earnest heart, not just candles with magic formations engraved. Just a very faint light would do. Since he too had faced 'him' in a dream after seeing candles at the flower-offering stand and recalling him that day.

This time, it seemed that wrong candles had been mixed in, rather blocking the path for souls to visit. Though he swallowed this explanation too, thinking she would be sad, and carefully corrected the magic formation on the candle. Still, it would be good if they could find their way more easily, and also he wasn't completely unable to understand wanting to rely on such tools.

"...Isaph..."

Laria received the candle with a face moved to tears, eyes welling up. As if it was more precious than anything, she grasped it firmly with both hands and exclaimed:

"Indeed Isaph is a merciful hero."

"What nonsense."

He showed his disgust at the embarrassing statement. He still couldn't accept that word being attached to him. He even got goosebumps and looked at her with absurd eyes, and she, as if concerned the candle might be taken away, quickly put it into her bosom and said:

"Actually, I was afraid to show you that your research laboratory had collapsed, so I deliberately served cocoa first. But receiving such a precious gift, my conscience is pricking painfully..."

"What? Research laboratory? Perhaps that storage in the backyard?"

"Yes, that place..."

Laria trailed off her words and smiled awkwardly. It seems the damage from the evil spirits' commotion wasn't just to this villa building.

From the hesitant story that followed, it seemed Laria had tried to clean up and repair the laboratory secretly from him. But in the middle of protesting at the plaza, she had encountered him, and when he said he would come here in person, she seemed quite surprised.

A dry laugh burst out at the revealed truth. No wonder, she had served cocoa out of nowhere and also subtly tried to change the topic.

"Though I drove them away as quickly as possible, even the ceiling collapsed..."

"It's fine. I'll know how bad it is when I see it directly."

He shook his head at the flustering Laria and headed for the back door of the villa. The door was hidden in a location that someone who didn't know this space couldn't easily find. After all, this villa was a space built with the purpose of hiding him.

He pulled the doorknob and stepped into the backyard, and soon marveled at the scene he encountered.

"Oh, it's completely smashed."

The small storage had been completely broken. About half the ceiling had blown away, and the wall was also shattered into fragments, to the point where it was surprising that even the form of a storage room remained.

"I'm sorry, Isaph. Because I needlessly bought many candles..."

Laria was gauging his reaction from behind. She apologized as if she had collapsed the research lab through her carelessness, perhaps this was also the reason she had shouted and argued loudly at the plaza earlier. Even though it wasn't her fault at all.

"But I didn't go inside! Since it's your space, I absolutely didn't peek inside either, just the pillars had fallen dangerously so I only cleared those-"

"Come in."

He cut off Laria's rambling words and moved. Since the storage's entrance door was damaged anyway, he stepped right over the debris of the broken wall. He roughly gestured for her to follow as she froze in surprise behind him, and carefully surveyed the interior.

In the past, he had researched ways to destroy the Dedium here. He analyzed the Dium using souls of zombies collected while wandering around Encroachment Zones, and also planned revenge based on legends gathered from across the continent. Since he had expected to die together, he didn't have many personal items.

Though he had stayed for several years, he looked at the barren space unfamiliarly. Even the feeling of the table under his touch was strange. Dust accumulated as the building collapsed was coated whitely on his fingertips.

"Do-do you want to clean? I'll help too!"

"No, it's fine."

He shook his head at Laria's suggestion.

Actually, at first he had been somewhat surprised by the news that the research lab had collapsed, and had also thought he might feel regretful since he had spent a long time living there, but not particularly so. After quietly taking in the space with his eyes, he slowly raised his head.

Warm light was coming in through the collapsed ceiling.

"Because there's no need to research here anymore."

### Chapter 219

It was a space where he had been immersed in research with the goal of killing the Dedium. So now that he had achieved that purpose, such a research laboratory was no longer needed. He suggested clearing out the storage completely, and took a frame from a half-collapsed bookshelf.

The frame contained a family drawn by his twin brother in the distant past.

Fortunately, the frame hadn't broken and the picture inside was intact. Four family members all with the same black hair and purple eyes. Mom, Dad, and the twins. Though they were clearly born on the same day, one was strangely drawn smaller.

He laughed dryly while carefully stroking the picture. This had been the purpose for wanting to visit the research lab again. There was also something Isaph had urged him to do in the dream, so he just wanted to see with his own eyes the traces left by his family from the past that felt as distant as a previous life.

His family, who had been with him as the black cat even on Earth.

Life in that world had always been recalled as lonely, but thinking they had been watching over him nearby made it feel different. A warm energy gradually spread from within his chest.

I wasn't alone after all...

As he was carefully wiping the dust on the frame's surface with his sleeve, Laria murmured quietly:

"Isaph. You... seem different."

His shoulders flinched suddenly. It was because he recalled memories of being troubled by Laria's exceptional perceptiveness in the past. Hadn't she conducted a terrifying interrogation before, thinking he was a different soul residing in this body? Though it was revealed they were the same person, Laria's instinct at that time couldn't be considered completely wrong.

Moreover, for her to say something like that even in a situation where she knew he had lost and regained his memories, was it the difference between 'him' and Isaph? Though he remembered everything in this world, and also fully held the moments shared with Laria, there was an inevitable gap from having been to Earth...

With feelings that became complicated in one breath, he turned to look at Laria. As he was contemplating whether to explain some background to her too, something dropped silently from her eyes.

"And I'm glad you've changed."

"...U-ung?"

Laria was crying.

He froze instantly at the completely unexpected flow. For now, he was more bewildered because Laria was crying right in front of him, so he didn't even know how to react.

"With a sniffle, you always seemed like you would disappear in a flash. Since you looked like someone who wouldn't be strange to leave anytime, I checked extremely anxiously whether you had visited the villa or not. I even considered attaching some detection device."

While surprised at her sobbing as she spoke, he was also enveloped in a very subtle feeling. A detection device? Isn't this like the home security camera Harenir had set up on the island? Why do people around me keep wanting to check my presence?

As he looked at her dubiously, Laria burst into a small laugh.

"Ha, seeing you make such an expression even when someone is crying in front of you, it also makes me think you're still the same."

"...Anyone would react like me if they heard about detection devices."

As he refuted with an absurd feeling, Laria giggled and wiped the corner of her eye with her index finger. Had she stopped crying because of his reaction, or was she rather shedding different tears?

Laria muttered quietly:

"I regretted that night every day. Thinking I shouldn't have returned that stick to you, I endlessly blamed myself for why I didn't hold you back while feeling anxious at your retreating figure..."

The night Laria was talking about now would be the day when he had regained his memories here. After receiving all the past from the cat at that time, he had also realized the ultimate plan and set out taking the divine spear, and she seemed to have been troubled for a long time by the fact that she couldn't stop him that day.

"But seeing your smiling face today, I think everything is fine."

"..."

"Though I can't fully understand what happened for you to change, when you let me into 'this place' and also say there's no need to research anymore... That makes me so happy."

Her voice trembled audibly as if encountering the research lab emptied on some day without warning and hearing directly from him about getting rid of this place had given an enormously resonant impact. After all, this had once been a place where she couldn't even take a step.

"I'm truly happy to see you again."

Laria met his gaze with a bright smile. Her rose-pink eyes, which had become moist like flower petals full of water, revealed that all her words were sincere. As he stared silently, she waved her hand with a laugh.

"Ah, this is said as a friend! Don't take it as burdensome... wait, come to think of it, you never accepted me as a friend...?"

Laria, who had been speaking playfully as if wanting to refresh the atmosphere, suddenly made a serious expression. It seemed the memory of receiving the sharp answer 'Not a friend.' from him in the past had come to mind.

He moved his lips a couple of times, then answered:

"...We are friends."

The black cat that had been with him before, that guy had corrected through the status window when introducing Laria to him as [Friend(X) Acquaintance(O)]. But as he ruminated on his memories carefully, a different point was seen.

In the past, he had been fixated only on pursuing the Dedium without looking around. Due to the great sense of loss from losing his family, he thought no one remained by his side, and rather found it burdensome when Laria approached him. He even thought it was strange that she worried about his wounds more than he did.

But perhaps he had vaguely pushed Laria away because he had never made friends before, or because he anticipated his own death that would come later? He might have tried to keep distance from her as he came to accept her closely without realizing it himself. After all, if he had truly disliked Laria, he wouldn't have eaten the cocoa and cookies she had served.

As he found such reasons one by one, the fact that he had quite liked the warmth felt at Lara Workshop in the past also vividly came to mind. Her clear greetings always welcoming him warmly, and even the trivial conversations they had shared.

Emotions hidden in past memories, no, those he had turned away from, took clear shape today and tickled his chest area.

"...You've been my friend from before."

Actually, he had hesitated somewhat to come to the research laboratory where the 'past' dwelled. He had been repeatedly caught by his ankles due to a peculiar sense of distance, feeling like it was a space from a previous life, but upon coming here, he felt very refreshed. Could it be thanks to the being who was happy saying it was fortunate he had changed?

It felt as if this world had become more of his reality.

"Really? Am I finally becoming a friend recognized by you?!"

Laria smiled brightly. Seeing her rejoicing with her body even bobbing up and down, he felt sorry for not having said this earlier. Of course, even before he acknowledged her, she had gone around calling herself his friend.

He gathered a bit more courage and said:

"I'll visit the workshop next time to eat cookies. Give me lots with bigger cookies then."

At his promise, Laria opened her eyes wide. Seeing her cover her mouth with both hands, it seemed she was quite moved. Around when he was becoming embarrassed at her murmur about needing to make this day a commemoration, she tilted her head.

"But Isaph. Will the hero permit it?"

"...Huh?"

"When even making time for conversation now was difficult, would he let us meet alone again? How cold those eyes I met just before were, ooh, I was really scared."

He froze in place. Laria's words now sounded as if she had noticed the relationship between him and Harenir... Am I thinking too much? I must be, right?

He asked, pretending to be as calm as possible:

"Why, did you, think, that?"

"Haha, Isaph. I was convinced by the fact that my letters weren't delivered to you at all."

"That's because Haren was too busy then so he forgot to give them to me..."

"Wow, now you call the hero by such a nickname?"

"..."

Am I caught?

As he was just opening and closing his mouth wordlessly, Laria shrugged her shoulders. She said there had been plenty of clues to infer not just from his awkward behavior now, but from much earlier.

"During the past month when the hero left the holy city, the two of you traveled together, right?"

"What? No, that's, just how?"

"It's an inference anyone who knows you stayed at the hero's mansion could naturally make. Moreover, your appearance looks just like someone who has rested well in a place with good water and beautiful scenery."

This doesn't seem natural at all?!

Though Beatrice and acquaintances from the Order might have known that Harenir had gone on vacation to an island, he hadn't said a single word about that to Laria. He hadn't even mentioned the word island!

### Chapter 220

Even if Laria had noticed that his face had become more relaxed because she had watched him for a long time, wasn't it a leap to connect that rest with Harenir being together? No, since it was known that the hero was taking care of him, was it not completely impossible? After all, she had known early on that he had been revived...

As he was genuinely confused, Laria tilted her head.

"Why are you so surprised? It was so obvious that the hero didn't want to be separated from you. That busy hero brought you all the way here, and even now is waiting outside. When he first entered the villa and scanned around, he was so frightening..."

He sighed quietly. Come to think of it, when they arrived at the villa, Harenir had looked inside first saying it might be dangerous, but he had just habitually dismissed it as part of his overprotection, which must have become another clue.

Even his reaction of accepting it naturally.

Ah, this is all Harenir's fault. Because he acted so naturally, he too had come to consider it familiar. While inwardly bursting with misdirected resentment, he made one final denial:

"We-well, the hero was known to be warm and gentle from the start. That he's kind to everyone..."

"That's why it's more obvious, Isaph."

However, Laria lightly deflected what he thought was his winning card. Though he had tried to argue that he was just receiving more of the hero's merciful protection as a merit for eliminating the Great Catastrophe, his mouth closed tight at her gentle response.

"When someone who seemed to love everyone truly loves someone sincerely, it shows in how they act. Rather, that's why it's more visible."

"..."

"I was amazed because I'd never seen the hero take care of someone so devotedly before, or loiter as if begging to receive even a single glance like someone wanting attention."

He just blinked his eyes blankly. If Laria had poured out shocking words like at first, he would have tried to make excuses out of a desire to deny, but rather her calm talk made him speechless. It was an attitude as if stating factual propositions.

Moreover, what was that testimony? Though he wanted to refute that it was an exaggeration, to the point where goosebumps rose all over his body, Harenir's image was immediately drawn in his mind.

At the mansion he carefully dressed him, on the streets he watched his every step anxiously lest he fall, and whenever he looked back, their eyes naturally met. As if he had always been looking only at him.

Heat began to rise to his face. It was even laughable to be surprised that others had noticed when he had shown so many signs. Out of embarrassment, he covered his face with one hand, and already felt his cheeks growing throbbing with warmth.

Laria exclaimed:

"Wow, your cheeks also turn red when you're embarrassed."

"...I'm human too."

His voice became small as if crawling in. Even the sigh he let out felt hot, so his entire body probably seemed to have heated up bright red. Though he knew covering just his eyes wouldn't do, he stubbornly hid under his hand, too embarrassed to face Laria.

A few days ago, others had also discovered his relationship with Harenir, but it hadn't been as awkward as now. Was it because they were Harenir's acquaintances rather than his? In contrast, Laria knew his past, and above all...

"You said before you wanted to become close to the hero, but to become this close..."

With a choked sound, he barely blocked a scream that was about to burst out by biting his lip. He needed to escape anyway. Feeling he would be questioned about what exactly had happened if he stayed longer, just as he was about to move his steps urgently, a very shocking statement caught his ankle.

"By the way, Isaph. Do you know rumors about the relationship between you two are spreading on the streets?"

"What?!"

With a jolt, his whole body jumped. As he asked in shock what on earth that meant without even breathing, she giggled mischievously. After muttering that she was seeing such a reaction from him for the first time, she explained:

"You two were discovered on the last day of the festival. Just before that, eyewitness accounts of two people in snow-white robes holding hands tightly and walking around affectionately were circulating through eager gossip? Like saying 'They are them.' At first, I too thought it was just a false rumor, but seeing today, it seems true."

Now even dizziness was starting to come. He wanted to deny it, but unfortunately, he recalled the merchant they had encountered on the festival street who had recognized him and Harenir as lovers. At that time, neither he nor Harenir had denied it...

He barely managed to ask:

"B-but that's just a rumor. The fact that you're certain is because you're perceptive, right? Since you happen to know me..."

"Hmm, it would be difficult to say there's no such reason at all..."

"Don't attach adversative conjunctions."

"But I think anyone who pays a little attention would notice."

She shrugged her shoulders saying rather it would be difficult not to notice. Her tone was as sonorous as it was regrettable. As he sighed with dismay, Laria smiled brightly.

"If you don't want to be discovered by other people, you should be careful. Haha, I think it's already too late though."

"..."

"Right, and it also seems like your diet is being managed now, so keep it a secret that I gave you cocoa and chocolate cookies today. I don't want to be dragged away by the hero."

Ah, damn. Was that a clue too?

Though he had tried to deny Laria's statement that 'everyone notices', the hope circuit in his mind felt completely shattered at the request appended at the end. Wasn't it a clue he had dropped without even realizing it himself? While showing signs in all sorts of places...

He swallowed a sigh inwardly, resolving to be very careful from now on.

#A Day at Sidon

Recently, the Holy Empire had a festive atmosphere every day.

All the people on the streets were smiling brightly and joyfully engaging in conversation. The topic was mostly about the two beings who had appeared on the last day of the grand festival hosted by the new Emperor, Beatrice de Solares.

Harenir von Luchete, Isaph van Dina.

The being who had suddenly left, and the being who had been thought to be gone forever, had returned together. Everyone rejoiced at their return and talked about how the two had come to the holy city.

The hero who had been absent for a while had actually gone to save Isaph, who had sacrificed himself to eliminate the Dedium, from the afterlife, and as soon as Isaph returned alive, he had headed to the commemorative forest to confirm the extinction of the Great Catastrophe. It was a moving content that didn't get boring no matter how many times it was discussed.

Though Beatrice lamented that the two had received more attention than the festival she had worked hard to open, imperial citizens also praised the new Emperor for this reason. Because she had created a beautiful festival worth the two heroes gladly returning to see.

As attention focused on their return from across the empire to the entire continent, naturally the two pillars of the Holy Empire, the imperial palace and temple, also became busy. Especially the Holy Knight Order, Sidon, where the commander who had been absent for a month had returned, bustled with welcome excitement.

Since Sidon was led by the hero who was the symbol of the empire, the loyalty toward the Holy Knight Commander, Harenir, was tremendous. Thus, all holy knights gladly welcomed the commander's return and also pleasantly held tension to prove they hadn't neglected their training while he was absent during that time.

However, there was also a strangely elated atmosphere that couldn't be explained by that alone.

With rapid footsteps-

"Everyone move, move aside!"

The garment of someone running through the white marble colonnade of the Holy Knight Order headquarters fluttered with a flourish. Those who recognized him carrying many books in his arms quickly made way. It was natural since there was no one here who didn't know him, and the target he was rushing to find like that was limited.

Eventually, arriving at the conference room, he said while bursting out with a heavy exhalation. His pointed ears twitched alertly.

"Isaph! Here, I've brought the books that necromancers said they referenced!"

"Ah, thank you. Noi."

Isaph nodded his head at Noi's shout. Then as he was about to receive the five or six books, Harenir, who was nearby, stepped forward first. After very naturally taking them and placing them on the desk, Isaph cleared his throat slightly and only opened the book after glancing around him.

Recently, Isaph had been coming and going to the Holy Knight Order to investigate the evil spirit commotion. A few days ago, he had quickly identified 'candles' as the cause of the commotion after looking around the plaza at the Emperor's request. Though that alone was appreciated, afterward he had stepped forward saying he wanted to examine the candles collected nationwide.

### Chapter 221

Given the field, everyone welcomed Isaph's participation. After all, there would be no sorcerer more knowledgeable about souls than him in the empire, no, the entire continent.

As it happened, since this case was primarily investigated by Sidon, the knights' order was stirred when Isaph visited. Even knights who had learned restraint glanced repeatedly at him. They wanted to keep checking if it was really that Isaph who had returned alive.

Now Isaph openly used his ability in a space where necromancy could never have been imagined being practiced in the past. A place for him to research comfortably was even prepared under the commander's order, and rather people even gathered to see that sight.

It couldn't be helped because...

With a flowing rush-

Purple energy spread like mist around Isaph. He glanced quickly at the book and created a complex magic formation in one breath. The energy that had spread earlier moved like a brush and drew the formation.

Even though it was a formation with at least five or six spells overlapping, there was no difficulty in operation at all, and he turned to the next page and followed another magic formation. It took less than a few minutes for as many as ten magic formations to float in the air. Just watching made exclamations spontaneous.

But Isaph erased them all at once with a sharp snap as he struck his thumb and index finger together. With a crystalline cascade, as the magic formations shattered, purple energy floated in the air like particles of light.

"I tried creating it in case it was a formation I didn't know, but the book itself was strange."

Isaph clicked his tongue briefly. The magic formation engraved on the candles distributed during the festival was, following his expression, very shabby, so he was in the process of identifying what reference materials the necromancers had consulted to produce them.

And as a result of analysis, he shook his head saying it was just overlapping plausible equations, that is, just fancy packaging with insubstantial content. He muttered coldly that since the reference materials were wrong from the start, naturally the candles would turn out that way too, making Noi exclaim:

"Wow, Isaph. You're really amazing. To analyze like that just by looking once."

Other holy knights also quietly burst into exclamations. Though everyone had acknowledged Isaph's ability from before, now it was to the point of feeling awe.

In the past, necromancers were recognized only as ominous beings who commanded undead, but watching Isaph changed their thinking. Necromancy was a power with broader and more diverse uses.

Isaph rolled his eyes slightly at the exclamations coming from various places. As if embarrassed, he moved his gaze here and there, and then fixed his eyes on those who were somewhat familiar, the two vice commanders. He probably thought they wouldn't react excessively, but...

"With a catch in his throat. It really is you who has returned."

"Now it feels real."

Confusion rose on Isaph's face as Kalterik was moved with an overwhelmed expression and Mela also spoke beside him as if agreeing. He asked with a suppressed voice:

"What are you saying when you already knew?"

"Before, I only saw you lying in bed. Seeing you standing and using your ability like this makes me so happy and proud..."

"No, even then I could get up but you stopped me. And what do you mean by the expression 'proud'?"

Isaph showed his disgust at Kalterik's statement which seemed to express renewed feelings. As he pulled his head back and looked at the two very dubiously, Noi burst into laughter. Seeing that expression of Isaph's too seemed to make his revival approach even more certainly.

Noi, Mela, and Kalterik.

The three who had accompanied the Encroachment Zone search journey during the past time would still be surprised again and again at the fact that Isaph was alive, despite knowing early on that he had been resurrected. His resurrection was not lacking in being expressed as a miracle.

And as much as Isaph's resurrection was surprising, the relationship between Harenir and him was shocking. If asked which was more surprising between the two, it would be difficult to distinguish superiority and inferiority.

Especially to Noi, that news came greatly.

Noi had watched Harenir since childhood and had always been by his side. From the day he left the slave market holding Evelyn's hand, and from the moment he was greeted by Harenir after going to her house, he had pledged to be of help to them. Because they had saved his life.

So he naturally followed into the Order to help Harenir who had become a holy knight, and worked hard to become an aide. The commander's aide position was selected through thorough screening, not connections. Having tried so hard to help Harenir like this, and having been together for a long time, he prided himself on knowing him best.

Therefore, Noi had received a tremendous shock when he learned of Harenir's 'romance' news. This was more than just the fact that he was in a romance, and even more than the fact that the partner was Isaph... it was because his confidence in knowing him well until now had been shattered.

And this shock seemed to be similarly felt by Kalterik and Mela.

"It's still surprising..."

"Yes. But thinking about the past, there are also many moments where it seems like it was from then..."

"I probably knew earlier than you two."

The three chatted amicably gathered in the aide's office. It had already been the same pattern for several days. Usually it started with Kalterik suddenly sighing, and since they knew what he was wondering about without mentioning a clear topic, the conversation flowed naturally.

When Mela spoke in a subtly boastful tone, Kalterik shouted in disbelief:

"What! How did you know!"

"When we climbed the snow mountain, Sir Commander told me to take care of Isaph. It was suspicious from then on, and thinking about it, even before that, subtly..."

"You're joking. You dropped teacups several times that day too!"

Kalterik refuted saying he remembered her repeatedly picking up teacups dropped on the floor because she couldn't even put strength in her hands on the day they first learned of their relationship. To that, Mela subtly turned her gaze to the side, and Noi burst into laughter heartily.

That day, the day Harenir and Isaph had returned from vacation.

In fact, Noi had worried a lot until just before that. Because it was the first time Harenir had been absent for so long and even contact couldn't be made. He naturally deduced the fact that he had left together with Isaph, but he only thought they were spending time recuperating since they would both be tired.

But as contact still couldn't be made, he even began to worry if some problem had occurred with Isaph. The point that he hadn't thought even once about them dating amid such concerns was quite amusing when looking back now.

'While your only thought was to take him away and hide for an intimate time.'

However, on the day Harenir returned, he could actually tell as soon as he saw him, even without Beatrice's statement. Because the gap of about a month had given him a new perspective.

That day, Noi had hurriedly gone together with Kalterik and Mela after receiving Beatrice's contact. However, Harenir, whom he met after a long time, just gave the three a light eye greeting and continued to check on Isaph. Though he would answer others' questions, it was obvious that all his attention was focused on just one person.

From that appearance, the speculation, no, the conviction of 'could it be?' arose, and it was clinched by Beatrice's statement afterward.

Recalling that day, Noi said:

"But Lady Mela and Sir Kalterik seem to have accepted it quite quickly. Even that day, as soon as Sir Harenir and Isaph left, the two of you nodded your heads saying it was fortunate..."

They were the two with stronger loyalty toward the hero than anyone among the holy knights. They had even helped disguise his death by lying to the Order to follow the hero.

Because of that, they would have disliked Isaph more in the past. The two had found it difficult to accept a death row inmate being with the noble person, and yet they had reluctantly followed because it was Harenir's will. Of course, now that all misunderstandings had been cleared, it was a very guilty past, but anyway their hearts adoring Harenir would still be the same, yet they quickly understood his romance.

Though surprised at the moment they learned the truth, now they even had the momentum to support it. To Noi's curious reaction, Kalterik was silent for a moment.

"...You say that because you didn't see that appearance then."

It was an answer barely given after moving his lips several times. And Mela too lowered her eyes with a similarly hardened expression.

'Then'.

It wasn't difficult to guess which moment was being referred to. Probably, it would point to right after Isaph had been hit by the divine spear and perished.

### Chapter 222

News about what happened then didn't spread widely. Though no one stepped forward to stop people's mouths, everyone hesitated to speak of that moment.

How could anyone easily talk about the sight of a person collapsing so desperately? Especially a being whom everyone had upheld as perfect for a very long time. When despair is too immense, even if one tries to speak of it, the tongue is weighted down by its heaviness.

Since Noi had only awakened after that incident, he hadn't seen the scene of that day, but he could roughly guess from the atmosphere among the holy knights.

"That's right. When thinking of that moment, anything is fine. No, even to the point of being grateful to Isaph."

Sincere relief was embedded in Mela's words. Because she never wanted to see Harenir suffering again, it didn't matter at all who he dated. No, it had to be only Isaph. If it hadn't been for Isaph, they might have lost him forever.

They couldn't forget the sight of Harenir's back as he plunged into the dimensional boundary that day. It looked closer to someone going to die following another, rather than the solemnity of going to save someone.

Noi looked curiously at the two who were feeling relieved, and Kalterik covered his face with his thick hand and roughly rubbed it vigorously as if washing it dry. His fingertips were slightly wet.

Soon Kalterik cleared his throat and changed the topic.

"By the way, these days, that fellow, Isaph, just why is he acting like that?"

He muttered even tilting his head as if he couldn't understand at all.

"He's acting like a wooden puppet."

"He already looks weak, but when he walks creaking, he looks even more precarious."

"Hmm, could it be that he wants to hide his relationship with Sir Harenir from other people?"

To Mela's description, Noi told his conjecture with an ambiguous expression, as if he might or might not laugh.

Recently, Isaph had been acting very awkwardly when going outside. Though he was the same as usual when with acquaintances, from the moment strangers approached, he would glance nervously being conscious of gazes and subtly distance himself from Harenir. As if they were avoiding public intimacy.

Just then, even now, the two could be seen walking in the garden outside the office window.

"I tell you I can walk by myself. You go do your work."

"I need to watch over you from nearby in case you fall and get seriously hurt..."

"My knees aren't that shabby anymore. You don't need to support me, so get away! We're outside!"

Isaph shouted with a suppressed voice and gestured for Harenir to go away quickly. From the behavior of mentioning 'outside' as if warning and looking around furtively, it was confirmed that Noi's guess was correct. He also urgently pushed away the hand that had caught him trying to support him.

As if they had already had a conversation on that topic before, Harenir finally stepped back. But instead they seemed to have reached an agreement about him watching from behind, as Isaph sighed and turned his body. His face was as if he was expecting that if they just didn't touch, they could hide it...

"Hmm..."

Noi sighed quietly. Though Isaph didn't seem to know, regrettably, Harenir walking behind someone was in itself a very strange thing. Because there was no being who could stand before him, the hero of the empire.

Though he would give way to the Pope and Emperor, even that was merely observing formal courtesy. So when with them, there was an atmosphere of official accompaniment, but now it was completely an appearance of following. It even gave the impression of chasing.

Because Isaph was walking in front, he couldn't see how Harenir was following him. He focused on Isaph's every step, and even extended his hand immediately if he seemed about to stagger, paying so much attention. He showed the hero's agility in this way.

Not knowing that, Isaph was calmly walking. Kalterik murmured in a strange tone:

"If we tell that fellow that trying to distance Sir Commander actually catches the eye more, he would probably be shocked."

"...But still, it seems other people don't know yet."

Mela gave more hopeful words to Isaph. Though Isaph's efforts rather evidenced that Harenir couldn't be separated from him, fortunately that wasn't an appearance completely unintelligible.

Currently in the empire, Isaph was a target that should be very devotedly 'protected'. Since he had disappeared making such tremendous sacrifices, the perception that he should be properly treated was deeply engraved in everyone. So it also appeared quite reasonable that the hero would take care of a being who had acted like a hero.

Moreover, Isaph's frailty was something that could be known just by looking at him without needing particular proof, so Harenir's behavior seemed like part of protection. Externally, wasn't Isaph a being who had just returned alive? They viewed his physical body as very precarious, considering he had been scattered as dust.

"After all, since 'that incident' happened..."

Not only that, but a strangely ethereal atmosphere emanated from Isaph. Even though he now wore snow-white robes instead of black robes as in the past, there was a distant feeling. When he removed his hood and quietly faced the wind, people sometimes held their breath.

His pitch-black hair without a speck of light, his face appearing even whiter in contrast to it, and his purple eyes difficult to read. Usually his appearance of blankly looking somewhere in languid calmness evoked the impression that he might disappear forever. This might be an aftereffect engraved by the shocking incident of the past.

So people who discovered Isaph couldn't take their eyes off him. Should it be said that they watched him anxiously like having a child by the water?

Of course, if Isaph heard such news, he would be extremely disgusted...

The trio exchanged glances and nodded their heads. A silent promise passed that they would keep this story among themselves.

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It was an especially sunny afternoon.

Having finished his morning duties, Noi moved busily. He had looked into and applied for an item days before, and it had just been delivered to the knights' order, so he quickly collected it and headed somewhere. His face holding a small box was full of excited energy.

The place Noi was heading to now was the commander, Harenir's office. Isaph, who had finished his walk an hour ago, would be resting there. He had heard the plan was to rest, then have lunch, and examine other books in the afternoon.

And what Noi held in his hand now was fruit he had prepared with the heart of wanting Isaph to eat it for dessert. It was a fruit that grew only in the southern region of the empire, very high in sugar content and refreshing, so he would certainly like it.

Around when Noi's brisk steps gained speed, he encountered Kalterik in the corridor.

"Oh, Noi? Where are you going now?"

"I'm on my way to Sir Haren's office, but the pouch you're holding now is perhaps..."

"...You guys, don't tell me you prepared it to give to Isaph?"

Even Mela joined in. With all three standing in the corridor, they looked at the boxes and pouches each other was holding and naturally realized the target of the gifts. Gazes sharing a sense of kinship passed between them.

Normally when heading to the commander's office, it would be common to bring reports to summarize, but from some point, the three had brought gifts they wanted to give to Isaph. As much as they had received his grace, they wanted to repay it even in small ways like this. Feelings of apology were also included.

Though Isaph sent a dubious gaze saying 'Why are you all doing strange things too?', in the end he would open the gifts and examine them as if curious. Watching such reactions was so enjoyable that all three ended up searching for items from across the country, and now they had reached the point of subtly checking each other.

"Hmm, Sir Kalterik. Seeing a very sweet smell wafting from the pouch, you prepared a chocolate dessert, I see."

"Yes. Since he brightened his eyes as soon as he saw it last time, this time I specially ordered an extra large set-"

"Sir Commander will stop you."

Kalterik, who had been speaking proudly, froze mid-sentence at Mela's point. Noi also shook his head saying that recently Sir Haren was meticulously managing Isaph's meals, so Kalterik's gift wouldn't even be delivered to him.

Leaving Kalterik who was just opening and closing his mouth wordlessly, Noi headed to the office with Mela. He tried to subtly move one step faster, but...

Swiftly-

Mela suddenly extended her arm and blocked the way. Such cheating with longer limbs than his! Noi looked up indignantly, then noticed her gaze was directed toward the office.

The door was slightly open.

### Chapter 223

"..."

At the scene visible through the door crack, Noi hurriedly bit his lip to swallow his protest. Kalterik, who had followed, seemed about to shout 'why are you leaving only me behind' but his mouth was covered by Mela's hand.

Now Isaph was fast asleep on the sofa.

And Harenir, perched on the armrest of that sofa, was quietly looking at Isaph. A deep silence lay over the space, to the point where it was impossible to know how long he had been watching. Harenir seemed to be deliberately sitting in that position to block the sunlight falling on Isaph.

His behavior of just quietly taking in Isaph with his eyes as if hesitant to even touch him felt somewhat tender. Then as Isaph stirred and the blanket slipped, Harenir very carefully extended his hand.

He pulled the blanket up to his shoulders without a sound, but just then Isaph opened his eyes. A smile spread gently across Harenir's face as he met the dreamy purple eyes.

"Did you sleep well?"

"Mmm... How long have I been sleeping..."

"Since right after returning from the walk. If you were very tired, you could have slept in the resting room."

"No... When I lie on the bed, I end up sleeping endlessly..."

"You seem to be sleeping endlessly now too."

"No, I'm not."

Isaph, who was raising his upper body groggily, glared at Harenir with eyes widened suddenly. But perhaps because he had just woken up and had no strength to put in his eyes, his face soon relaxed languidly, and Harenir laughed softly.

His action of supporting Isaph, chuckling softly, and helping him sit leaning against the sofa was very natural. When Isaph murmured "Water..." between sleep and wakefulness, he took a glass of water as if it were natural and brought it directly to his lips. Isaph drank it habitually.

"..."

Noi, who was watching that scene from outside, sighed blankly. He wasn't surprised at the sight of Harenir taking care of Isaph. It was too newfound to react to that now, and just... the change in expression shown by Harenir from the moment Isaph opened his eyes was fascinating.

In fact, until just before that, Harenir's gaze looking at the sleeping Isaph had been so sorrowful that it hurt his heart. It was strangely sad. Enough for Noi to vaguely understand what 'that time' he had never seen might have been like, and why the two vice commanders rather responded that it was fortunate Isaph was with him.

At that moment, Harenir seemed to focus only on Isaph's breath. As if checking whether he was really breathing with his eyes closed, and barely finding relief in his breathing sounds...

Then as Isaph woke up, and after exchanging just a few words, seeing Harenir laugh aloud, his mouth opened spontaneously. Because his appearance smiling as if the person before his eyes was so precious looked extremely like someone who had fallen in love.

'Hmm, you all have a tendency to see that one only as a hero.'

As Beatrice's words suddenly came to mind, Noi became ashamed of once priding himself on knowing Harenir best. His face laughing together with Isaph in the office now was filled with a smile he was seeing for the first time in his life.

He hadn't known him at all.

"Ah..."

So that's the expression Harenir makes when he's in love.

That fact plunged Noi into a new shock. And on the other hand, he was surprised at how ordinary such an appearance looked. It made him think Harenir was just an ordinary person too. That he too couldn't take his eyes off someone he liked very much, and smiled as if he couldn't bear how lovely the other person was...

Noi sighed quietly. There was an emotion weighing heavily on his chest area. It was regret and guilt that he seemed to have seen Harenir only as a too special being until now.

Though he had thought that trusting the hero's perfection and supporting him unconditionally from the closest place was helping him, he even felt regret that perhaps his belief might have been a burden to him. Hadn't his trust been a heavy blind faith?

Glancing discreetly at Mela and Kalterik, he could notice they were thinking similar thoughts. Though they said they had known about the two's relationship for a while, it was rare to directly witness such a scene. It was a sight so imbued with emotion that anyone who saw this scene would have no choice but to notice their relationship.

"Shall we go back now?"

"Hmm, that would be good..."

They conversed with their voices suppressed as much as possible, almost only with lip movements. Mela also nodded her head and gestured with her eyes to go quickly.

All three moved away from the office killing their presence as much as possible and whispered quietly.

"Sir Commander smiles like that too..."

"Though I thought I was familiar with him always smiling, I was surprised it was a completely different smile..."

Everyone seemed to have received the same shock. What was familiar to them was the smile the hero gave mercifully. The so-called 'saint's smile' in the world, the one God's son kindly bestowed on everyone.

Therefore, it was impossible to forget the sight of Harenir smiling like an ordinary person in love. Really, he too was dating in a general and ordinary form...

Thump!

At the sound of impact heard from behind then, all three turned their heads. It wasn't too loud, but since it was a noise created in the commander's office, a space where only two people were together so peacefully, they became bewildered.

Looking beyond the door crack with concern about whether something had happened, they saw Isaph blocking Harenir's face with his palm. As if the action had come out more intensely than he expected, Isaph also withdrew his hand with a bewildered look and explained fumblingly:

"Ah, I didn't mean to hit you. That, so I said I'd eat this much myself! Since it becomes a habit, we need to be careful...!"

It seemed he had struck him with his palm in the process of belatedly recognizing and restraining Harenir from feeding him water. At first he seemed not to know what to do with an apologetic air, but then suddenly changed his attitude and became irritable. As if sorry for hitting him, he cupped his face with his hands, then even raised his eyes defiantly.

To that, Harenir just blinked his eyes, then soon burst into laughter heartily. It was a reaction as if he greatly enjoyed being hit.

The three who watched that scene exchanged gazes bewilderedly.

"Hmm..."

Until just before, they had been surprised that Sir Commander was dating ordinarily too, but as for whether his appearance could truly be called 'ordinary'... it seemed like something they should think about a bit seriously.

At that time, a knight appeared turning around the corridor corner.

"Oh, Vice Commanders! Aide!"

He recognized Noi, Mela, and Kalterik even from afar and greeted them bowing to the waist, then approached with quick steps.

"Are you all on your way from seeing Sir Commander? Just now I also have a matter to report-"

"Oh no, not now."

Curtly, Kalterik cut off his subordinate's words. Then as if all this was for him, he placed his arm on his shoulder and led him to go back the way he had come. Noi suggested that about two hours later would be better, and Mela also nodded her head and naturally caught one arm of the subordinate.

The knight received the pat from the vice commanders bewilderedly and was dragged away as if being escorted.

It was a peaceful afternoon.

#Side Story 5.

That day was like any other.

Since returning to the holy city, many things had happened, and because of that it had been noisy for a while, but as time passed it gradually calmed down. Though the bubbling external reactions were still there, it was in a form that he gradually began to ignore, but anyway the day flowed stably.

While investigating the commotion caused by candles, he identified the necromancers' problem. To this, Beatrice showed interest and suggested whether he had any intention to teach the sorcerers, but he declined as it was too burdensome and instead said he would create materials for them to study.

Though he hesitated to voluntarily start work, he decided recalling the time in the distant past when clans dealing with soul magic lived in hiding. It was with the thought that if he changed the perception of the ability positively on this opportunity, they wouldn't be ostracized like that anymore.

There was also the reason that he didn't want to create people who would shrink just because they could see souls, like on Earth. What reason was there to be avoided for having spiritual vision in a world where holy power and magic existed?

### Chapter 224

Though there would be those who used necromancy frivolously and acted as if they had evil power, they would receive the iron hammer of the law, so for now he decided to focus on education.

And once work began like this, there were also satisfying aspects. Namely, going to work with Harenir, as he wrote books in a space provided by him within the Sidon headquarters, leaving the mansion together with him every morning.

He hadn't expected that he would welcome 'going to work,' but moving together with Harenir was better than staying alone at the mansion. Well, despite that, he would sometimes arbitrarily delay the work time saying he didn't want to get up in the morning, or tell Harenir, who came to wake him, to go first...

Anyway, though he acted so capriciously, Harenir consistently accommodated him. Since going to work together once or twice seemed satisfying to him too, he always tried to leave with him. He felt somewhat sorry that the Holy Knight Commander's rate of tardiness was steadily rising due to his laziness.

Today was also one of those days.

Having risen late, he suggested to Harenir that they eat in the garden greenhouse before leaving because the sunshine was nice, and he accepted it naturally. He often acted as if the concept of rejection didn't exist.

After eating leisurely in the greenhouse, he only began preparing to go to work after sticking to and rubbing against Harenir for a moment. This rubbing referred to the action of hugging Harenir tightly with both arms and burying his head. Though he often embraced him, sometimes when in a good mood, he would cling to him first as if rushing in and rub his head wildly.

Due to the size difference with Harenir, it was almost like he was hanging on, but anyway the familiar warmth felt only in that solid embrace was satisfying. Also his action of embracing him after pausing momentarily. It seemed to announce the start of a peaceful day.

"Why are you so late? Should I go first?"

However, Harenir hadn't come when he finished all preparations and was about to go out to ride the carriage. Though it wasn't appropriate to cast blame at him who was going to work late because of him, he shamelessly pointed out his laziness and went back.

Could it be, his body had reacted to the earlier embrace?

While inwardly forming an amusing hypothesis, he stealthily subdued his footsteps. But such embraces had been given several times before, so wasn't it newfound for him to react only now? He returned to him with curiosity and doubt mixed...

"Ah, let's go now. I'm ready."

He discovered Harenir hiding his left hand behind his back as soon as they met. He smiled as usual, but his face hardened stiffly.

...What did I just see?

"You, why is blood flowing from your hand?"

"That can't be. Here, my hand is fine-"

"Don't lie."

Harenir showed his left hand without a single wound, but he frowned sharply. He strode purposefully closer and snatched abruptly a handkerchief from the back pocket of his pants. The hastily inserted handkerchief was full of bloodstains.

Moreover, he could smell the blood that faintly remained in the space. It was certain that he had quickly used his holy power to heal the wound, then wiped the blood and shown it to him.

And above all.

"Your reflection showed in the window. Why did you stab your palm with a dagger?"

"...To check, if holy power, is circulating, properly."

"Do you have to check that through self-harm?"

Harenir's words breaking off haltingly were awkward. As it became certain he was hiding something, he interrogated him harshly, but he only lowered his eye corners. He spoke as if soothing, as if my getting heated over nothing was rather worrisome.

"This is just something that happened by chance. So you don't need to worry so much-"

"I told you not to lie to me."

"...Isaph."

Their gazes collided. Looking at Harenir, who was quietly receiving his fierce eyes, he guessed he wouldn't answer until the end.

With a sharp movement he passed by Harenir and entered the room. Then he picked up the dagger placed on the table, which was presumably used by him just before.

As soon as he drew it from the sheath, his wrist was caught by Harenir.

"Isaph. Why suddenly..."

"You said it happened by chance, so I'm also going to stab once. Then I might understand why you did it."

"Absolutely not."

Harenir, who became pale, immediately took the dagger from his hand. Despite being a very quick restraint, the touch that took the knife from him was so careful that rather his mood crashed straight down. He searched the table irritably looking for other sharp objects.

"What's the problem when it can be recovered with a potion?"

Around when he snapped irascibly while gripping a quill pen, Harenir finally confessed.

"...It felt like a dream."

"What?"

"Because now is so happily dreamlike, I wanted to check if it was reality."

It was a quiet confession. At first, he glared at Harenir bemused by its content, but he paused at his calm expression. There was no false energy anywhere on his face. It wasn't an excuse randomly offered to avoid the situation.

The touch that took the quill pen from his frozen hand was affectionate. His breath was caught with a hitch at Harenir's gaze examining his fingers in case they had been hurt from holding too tightly. He was worried about this level of pain while he himself had pierced his flesh with a knife?

He just moved his lips several times wordlessly. Usually when checking whether one is dreaming or not, don't they pinch their skin or slap their cheek? With so many other choices available, why like that...

"Wait, since when have you been doing this?"

In the midst of confusion, suddenly his chest felt cold. Harenir's act of not just cutting his palm with a dagger but completely piercing it looked too familiar. Followed by clenching and opening his hand as if aggravating the wound, and also wiping it with a prepared handkerchief.

Harenir silently lowered his gaze. As he just quietly fiddled with his hand as if it were so precious, he narrowed his brow and pulled his hand away.

He was about to urge him to answer quickly, but there was no need. As if surprised just by the act of avoiding his hand, Harenir stiffened visibly, raised his head and looked at him.

"...Since the island."

Though his action of entwining as if hanging onto his fingertips again was so desperate it was absurd, he couldn't laugh at all. He couldn't even manage a dry laugh. He just suffered from the confusion of whether the 'island' Harenir mentioned was referring to the place he knew.

He had only been happy during his stay on the island. He thought he had enjoyed love freely with Harenir while savoring peaceful happiness every day. The memories of that place were only warm and sparkling, filling him up just by recalling them...

Harenir was self-harming even on the island?

"Why..."

His head hurt. No, should he say his heart hurt as his chest area felt constricted?

Harenir's wound would certainly have been healed. He knew very well that with the hero's self-healing power, minor injuries recovered quickly, and even major injuries, though only half healed immediately, would be completely cured after a few days. So now his palm was also smooth without a single wound... but rather because of that, it was sorrowful.

Because it would certainly have hurt even if it healed. Despite that, he was sad because of Harenir who had to choose such pain. Was he so anxious that he found it difficult to accept reality without pain equivalent to piercing flesh?

"Why on earth didn't you tell me?"

"I didn't want to make you worry."

"No, even this much you should have told me..."

"If you clearly know I'm abnormal, what if you get tired of me?"

"..."

"So if one day you become burdened and leave..."

Harenir couldn't finish his words. As if just imagining it made his breath catch painfully, he answered with strained gasps in a tone like his throat was being strangled, and finally became silent when he reached the point where not even a sound could come out.

Though now Harenir answered his questions immediately, he couldn't be satisfied with such a change in attitude. Wasn't the reason he answered so readily also because of his action of avoiding his hand just before? Just because of that, he was so terrified that he told everything truthfully.

### Chapter 225

Moreover, Harenir's statement that he might leave didn't sound simply like worrying about a breakup between lovers. Could it be that Harenir was still conscious of other dimensions? Was Harenir worried that he might disappear whenever a passage formed because he knew how to use the dimensional boundary?

He couldn't say anything. As he kept his mouth tightly closed in shock, Harenir's fingertips trembled slightly. Like someone who had become suddenly afraid at his silence, he shook his head and took a step closer.

A beautiful smile hung on his face.

"No, Isaph. Today was just a moment, just because I was too happy, I don't do this every day. And now it's decreased a lot..."

"..."

"On the island too, at that time, since it hadn't been long since you returned alive, it didn't feel real. I'm fine now, so you don't need to feel burdened. You're already doing too much for me, okay?"

His voice falling as if soothing him was very gentle. He gazed steadily at Harenir, who repeatedly said he was fine.

Even in this situation, he rather worried about him and even apologized for startling him. That appearance was so perfectly drawn that...

He could tell all too well that Harenir was wearing a mask.

Now he was pretending to be fine in front of him. Because he had been too shocked by his self-harm, he was anxiously concerned that he might feel burdened.

In the past, he had once suggested to Harenir that he would put him to sleep when he returned from going out. It was a method he had devised after seeing him unable to separate from him at all, and consequently trying to attend to him every hour. And then he had been proud that he had resolved Harenir's separation anxiety well...

Perhaps Harenir had been acting from then on. Had he tried to pretend he was fine, fearing that if he revealed he was still anxious, he would get tired of him?

"Haah, I should have noticed something was wrong when he didn't want to leave the island..."

From the fact that he had installed a home security camera on the island in the first place, he shouldn't have seen it as Harenir's separation anxiety getting better. He had only thought that since it was such a wide space, he had installed safety devices. And right after returning to the holy city, since he went out well alone, he thought everything was fine, but was that because he had only stayed at the mansion? The mansion's servants were his eyes and ears, so he might have received real-time reports as in the past.

In the past, he had been anxious about being separated from him, but now he had reached the point of being afraid even with him before his eyes. Where had he missed it? His chest felt stuffy, making a sigh burst out spontaneously.

At that action, Harenir drew a smile again.

"Isaph, I'm really fine. I'll make sure you never get surprised again, so you don't need to mind, and there's no need to worry. I'm sorry for showing you such an appearance needlessly."

His touch carefully stroking his cheek while speaking as if promising was very affectionate. His appearance taking care of him most gently and kindly would be like the reliable hero all imperial citizens depended on.

He quietly looked up at Harenir. As he mulled over the fact that his promise was not about not doing such things anymore, but a pledge to be careful so that he wouldn't be surprised... he slowly grasped his hand that cupped his face. Holding it warmly overlapped, he met his gaze.

With practiced ease, he smiled similar to Harenir.

"Okay, I'll believe you. Are you really fine now?"

"Yes, of course."

"Good. Then go to work alone today."

"...Why? Not going together."

Harenir paused with visible hesitation, then asked while barely maintaining his smile. Then he suggested leaving quickly, saying he was sorry for needlessly dawdling, but he shook his head.

"I have business elsewhere. Let's go separately."

"...Is that so? Then let's go there together."

"No, you go to the knights' order. I know that your work is already being disrupted because of me, so let's move separately today. You won't become anxious just by being apart for a single day, right?"

He spoke calmly while removing the hand that cupped his face. Though he was also creating a book about necromancy, since that wasn't an urgent matter right now, there was no need to necessarily go to the knights' order today.

"But since you're weak, I need to watch over you from nearby, not knowing what problems might occur..."

"Harenir."

"..."

After calmly cutting off his words, he stared at Harenir blankly. He had experienced many times that it was of no use to argue that he was fine, that he was okay, in response to his worry. Until now, he had always debated on similar topics and eventually complied with his overprotection, but this time he didn't want to do so. Hadn't he reached this point by just letting things slide because it seemed easier?

As he kept his mouth tightly shut, Harenir's complexion gradually became pale.

"Where you're going, tell me."

"You don't particularly need to know..."

"..."

"Ah, I'll tell you. So don't make such an expression."

However, though he had intended to leave resolutely, he had to back down at Harenir's expression. When he couldn't even breathe like that, what could he do?

"I'm going to the imperial palace."

"...Why there?"

"I'm just going to examine some materials. I heard ancient books related to necromancy are stored in the imperial palace. Though they're in a restricted access area, well, I can enter through Beatrice."

"For that, if you ask to have them delivered to Sidon-"

"I'll go by myself. You just said with your own mouth that you're fine now."

He cut off Harenir's words firmly, resolutely again. It wasn't like he was going to leave forever to a very distant place alone, but just going to the imperial palace. It wasn't a dangerous place and also not that far from the Holy Knight Order headquarters. Yet his gaze couldn't leave him, making his chest painfully stuffy.

"Huuu..."

At the small sigh he let out, Harenir's eyes trembled. His fingertips also convulsed with a rapid tremor, but around when his gaze was directed there, he clenched with suppressed force his fist and hid it.

A picture-like smile barely hung on his face.

"...Alright. See you in the evening."

\*\*\*

That night, he reunited with Harenir very late.

He hadn't even realized the day was fading while looking into materials in the restricted section of the imperial palace library, naturally open to him. Only when he received news through the librarian that Harenir had come looking for him did he notice that the sky outside the window had turned pitch black.

"I'm tired, so I'll sleep a bit."

However, he didn't exchange any particular conversation with Harenir. He just scanned with his eyes the person with a somewhat paler complexion but still smiling in the end, and got into the carriage first. Then he closed his eyes as soon as he said he was tired.

Such days were repeated several times.

He even prepared to go out early every morning. Of course, Harenir woke up much faster than he did, and immediately opened his eyes if he moved even a little, but not much conversation passed between them in the mornings either.

He headed early to the imperial palace and only returned to the mansion after Harenir came to find him in the evening. Then one day he heard by chance at the library that the Holy Knight Order was preparing for nationwide monster subjugation, and he told Harenir:

"Since you'll be busy training, you don't need to come for me anymore. I'll return on my own."

"...I'm not busy."

"Don't lie. And I'm busy. When you come in the evening, my concentration breaks. Besides, the time you come to get me is getting earlier and earlier."

"Late, I'll go late at night. Since you don't have to come out right away when I arrive, I'll keep waiting, so can't I come to get you?"

"Nobody said the waiting itself is burdensome, so no."

At the firm answer, Harenir couldn't open his mouth anymore. Since he could easily hire a carriage from the imperial palace to return, there was no need to particularly make a busy person wait. Surreptitiously, when he glanced at him from the corner of his eye, he reflexively drew a smile, so he turned his gaze again.

Beatrice found this strange atmosphere very interesting.

"Could it be that you two fought?"

Since he was staying at the imperial palace library almost all day, separated from Harenir, she seemed to naturally assume there was a problem in their relationship. Her golden eyes approaching the space where he researched alone flashed as if seizing an opportunity.

"After that day, you two were always together, but finally a gap has appeared."

"It's not like that."

"My palace is always open to you. Now it's the Emperor's main palace, not the Imperial Princess's, so it's even more spacious."

He looked at Beatrice with incredulous eyes. She really makes that proposal steadily without getting tired. But on the other hand, her words 'always together' approached newly differently, making him put strength into the hand holding the quill pen.

### Chapter 226

The time he spent at the imperial palace library grew longer. There were even times when he sent a letter to Harenir saying he couldn't return to the mansion today because research was blocked and he needed to work overnight.

Beatrice watched this with great interest. As if she found it subtly fun to separate him and Harenir, or more precisely, as if she enjoyed watching Harenir's reaction to it, she gave him her research laboratory. Since she said it was surrounded by a magic barrier so any experiment would be fine, he accepted gratefully.

While staying in the laboratory like that one day, Beatrice flung with a bang the door open.

"Isaph, return to the mansion."

"Just a moment, after I check this..."

"Harenir has collapsed."

"What?!"

He, who had been examining a magic formation, rose with a start in shock. Before he could ask anything, Beatrice recited in rapid succession as if guessing his questions.

"He didn't collapse from injury, and he just woke up a little while ago. The diagnosis says it's overwork, but it doesn't make sense for a hero to collapse for such a reason in the first place. But as soon as he woke up, what he said was not to tell you, so naturally I came to tell you."

"Th-thanks for that."

"Huh, that Harenir collapsed. It sounds like nonsense even as I say it. I always thought the hero's perfect recovery was inhuman, but I never expected to see such a human side in this way. Seeing his state, I felt like a criminal for having fun separating you two."

Beatrice brushed back her hair saying that Noi and the two vice commanders who were at the scene were also in a complete uproar. As if the sight she had just seen still hadn't been forgotten, she even shook her head.

"I know you're training to solve that guy's separation anxiety, but do it with some leniency. You should start with 10 minutes, then gradually increase to 30 minutes, 1 hour, not suddenly one day, two days, isn't that too much?"

"No, I'm not training him..."

At first she had subtly promoted the imperial palace asking if we had fought, but now it had developed into an even more tremendous misunderstanding. It was confusing as she even criticized me for being excessive. While wandering, unable to follow the flow of conversation, Beatrice approached and pushed his back.

"That guy saw 'that appearance,' so it can't be helped. You understand."

"..."

"I want to take your side, but regrettably, I'm the Emperor, so I also need to look after the hero's health. So please go back now."

\*\*\*

He arrived at the mansion.

As he scanned the space unfamiliarly, feeling like it had been quite a long time since he came, he realized he was returning after really three days. Ah, surprised, he covered his mouth with his hand.

"I didn't realize time was passing while focusing on the final work..."

He hadn't intended to stay separated for this long. Though he was bewildered when, as soon as he entered the mansion, a servant informed him that Harenir was in the bedroom and sent a gaze asking him to meet the master quickly, there was a reason.

Upon realizing his absence had been longer than he thought, he too became sorry, and also worried about Harenir's state who had collapsed, so his steps gained speed. He headed to the bedroom almost running and opened the door.

"Harenir, I..."

However, he froze without even completing his greeting. After taking a couple of quick steps, he stopped abruptly.

Harenir wasn't far away.

He was sitting on the sofa with his head buried over his clasped hands, and his face was pale as if he might collapse at any moment. His eyes were also sunken as if he hadn't slept a single wink during the past three days, no, perhaps much before that. It was the appearance of someone barely breathing.

Harenir, who raised his head in response to the presence, remained blank even after seeing him. As if checking whether he wasn't seeing an illusion, he blinked slowly, and only belatedly drew a smile.

"Ah, Isaph. Seeing your expression, I think you finally heard the news, I'm sorry. For making you worried needlessly. Now everything is fine-"

"...You, don't get up."

He spoke to Harenir who was about to approach him quickly. As he recited quietly as if warning, he flinched visibly and froze on the sofa. Feeling his chest about to burst with frustration, he beat his chest with his palm, then soon moved with measured steps.

In one swift motion, he embraced Harenir's head. He felt pitiful to the point of anger as he was still sitting there, unable to refuse his order.

"Why do you keep pretending to be fine when you're in this state?"

"...No. Collapsing was just..."

"I said don't lie again."

As he cut him off resolutely, he felt Harenir's body trembling. He just awkwardly exhaled while held by him as if not knowing what to do, then finally embraced him back fumblingly.

Only after burying his face deeply in his chest did he finally burst out a breath and speak.

"I'm sorry. I know you were trying to show me that it's okay to stay apart since I get excessively anxious. My behavior must have been burdensome too. So I tried to endure well, but I made a mistake."

"No, why did you too take it as training..."

"I wanted to live in the normal way you wished for, but I ruined it all. I'll try to endure well again. I'll absolutely not show it. So please, just don't go too far away. Let me see you..."

Rambling, Harenir apologized and pleaded as if gasping. At his entreaty to please be before his eyes, he became extremely conflicted.

As he stroked Harenir's head with a sigh, he embraced him even more deeply. No, it would be more appropriate to say he crumpled his body and clung to him. Strength entered his arms wrapping around him as if hanging on.

Though he had tried to talk face to face properly, it seemed impossible to separate him now. Finally, he began the conversation in this position.

"I wasn't training you, I just hated that you were lying to me. It would have been better if you had just told me you were anxious from the start..."

That was also the reason he had stayed apart, using Harenir's lie. He had tried to see just how long he would endure saying he was fine, but to think he hadn't said anything until reaching this state. Even after collapsing, he was still promising to hide it better.

"I'm sorry. I disappointed you because I made a mistake-"

"That's not the kind of apology I want to hear. I wasn't disappointed in you either."

However, he hadn't been angry at Harenir. Though at first he had been serious because Harenir tried to hide the truth, that was anger stemming from hurt. Rather, he should say that the shock he received from not knowing his state at all was greater.

After the Dedium perished in the past, that would have been when Harenir was busiest. He slept only two or three hours a day to calm the empire that had been in an uproar due to the Great Catastrophe's revival, and watched the entire continent on high alert in case the dimensional boundary appeared again.

But Harenir, who had endured even then, collapsed today. It was too obvious that the cause wasn't overwork. He collapsed because I wasn't visible before his eyes.

"I think I've been seeing you wrong."

"...Isaph?"

At the quietly muttered words, Harenir flinched with alarm. When he subsequently detached him from his embrace, he hastily clung to him. As if my attitude felt like some ominous precursor, he repeatedly grasped my arms and shook his head. His face turned pale again.

"No. It's fine, now everything is fine-"

"How many times do I have to tell you not to lie to me?"

"..."

Harenir shut his mouth tightly. Frozen without even breathing with a complexion as if he might collapse any moment, he shook his head. Though he didn't know just how Harenir was misunderstanding his words, this was solely his reflection.

"I had no idea you weren't fine. I think I unconsciously thought that you would be fine soon. Because you're the hero who heals from any wound, I thought you could quickly escape from the shock of that day too..."

Despite clearly knowing the truth about Harenir's recovery ability, and despite having watched all the history he had acted out as if fine, he had done so. Even though he was someone who had such a great obsession with a flawless perfect appearance to the extent of healing wounds that appeared on his hands even in dreams.

### Chapter 227

At first, he had observed Harenir asking why exactly he was anxious, what he was so worried about. Since he thought it would be naturally resolved if they stayed together, he was shocked seeing his self-harm.

But it seemed his approach had been wrong from the start. His behavior of just insisting that Harenir should trust his affection without properly understanding his anxiety was wrong, and questioning why he couldn't do so was self-centered.

'That guy saw 'that appearance,' so it can't be helped.'

The words he had heard from Beatrice just before came to mind. Yes, he shouldn't have approached it ordinarily when someone had turned to ash and scattered before his eyes. He should have known sooner...

"Rather, I should apologize to you."

"...No. There's nothing at all you need to be sorry for-"

"So, this is my expression of apology."

He extended both hands to Harenir. Though he seemed to think he was going to embrace him like before, as he quickly spread his arms as if to hug him, his hands were directed somewhere slightly different.

With a soft click

A thin black string was placed like shackles around Harenir's neck. It stuck close to the skin, also looking at a glance like he was wearing a choker. Though it was a very light material, Harenir seemed surprised by the unfamiliar sensation and froze, and he drew a smile mischievously before him.

Exactly like a moment from the distant past.

"That's right, a collar. From now on, you're 'connected' to me."

A purple line connecting from his hand to Harenir's neck appeared in the air. As he shook it with a gentle swaying, the vibration was transmitted directly to him, and his Adam's apple could be seen trembling slightly.

"Do you remember when we connected our souls before? I've modified it by compensating for the drawbacks from then. From now on, I can grasp where you are and what your condition is anytime, and the same goes for you too."

"..."

"If you stab your palm, I'll feel it fully too. Though pain isn't shared, I'll know the fact that you self-harmed again, and my heart will hurt that much."

This was the spell he had researched over the past few days. Since Harenir's anxiety was too severe, he needed to find a way to solve it, and what he recalled then was precisely the connection of souls. Based on past experience, he prepared directions for modification, but determined its form as a 'collar'.

'To the point where I'd like to even wear a collar.'

He had just followed what Harenir had said he wanted. Since he had asked to have the leash held, there was no fault on his part. Inwardly repeating this, he explained with shamelessness:

"Since I'll pull the collar if you commit acts contrary to my will, don't have useless thoughts from now on. And if you try to forcibly remove it, your head will go with a bang and explode, so you should note..."

"..."

"Why are you taking it seriously? It won't explode. You can just take it off."

He acted threateningly in jest, but Harenir listened too solemnly. This was just a tool focused on 'connection' and could be attached or detached anytime. However, he seemed like he wouldn't have minded whatever lethality it had, which was bewildering.

"How much of the other's state can be grasped?"

"Simply, each other's physical condition? If somewhere is hurt or in pain, it will be felt immediately, and if you focus on the other, even heartbeats are possible."

Since he seemed most confused about whether his being alive was reality, he considered that aspect too. He placed his hand on his chest and continued explaining.

"The method of sensing each other's state is similar to before. You concentrate while recalling the other in your mind, and like I'm doing now, placing your hand on your chest, with the feeling of detecting not only your own heart but also another heartbeat... if you examine..."

His voice trembled with a quaver. It was difficult to continue speaking. Though he had only tried to explain the usage of the collar to Harenir, a heartbeat pounding forcefully was transmitted through his palm.

It was...

"..."

Harenir's heart.

Just by sharing that vibration, he could feel that the other was immersed in an immensely great joy and happiness. It was as if being overwhelmed by the other's emotions. Though he was just in the position of looking in, that heart's movement made heat circulate even throughout his whole body. His face grew hot.

Though he hadn't been able to read Harenir's anxiety, he thought he knew his affection well, but even that was beyond what he had imagined. An emotion so immense it was suffocating plunged him into an unfamiliar shock.

Just then, Harenir followed his explanation and exclaimed ah-:

"I really can feel your heart beating... Wait, it's too fast. Are you hurting somewhere?"

"You, your heart is beating faster! Why, why, why do you like the collar so much?!"

Though it would be a thoroughly absurd action to question when the other liked the gift he had given, he became very embarrassed as he was so pleased. His earlobes were not just burning hot but stinging, so he could guess his entire body was probably heated up bright red.

Though he spoke almost like shouting while stumbling several times, Harenir answered in a joyful tone:

"Of course I like it. Now I can feel you anytime, anywhere. I've wanted a collar from before, and rather I'm afraid it might fall off if I do something wrong. It seems like it would be good to implant it directly in the neck..."

"What scary words you're saying."

Though he was alarmed, Harenir was calm. He was even more shocked when he even said it was regrettable there was no distance limitation like an ordinary collar.

He had worried whether the suddenly worn collar would be uncomfortable, and actually, while researching, he had worried whether it harmed the hero's dignity too much, but Harenir himself had not a whit of interest in that aspect. It seemed like he wouldn't have minded at all even if a leash floated constantly.

While it was truly absurd, the immense heartbeat still felt in his chest informed him that all of Harenir's words were sincere, and finally a dry laugh burst out. Though seeing him happy while preciously enveloping the collar somehow made his feelings strange...

He tried to suppress the unusual sentiment and spoke:

"Anyway, I'm glad if you like it. Actually, I was so immersed in making this that I couldn't return for the past few days..."

He couldn't pay attention to anything else from the moment he planned the collar because he was focusing only on research. He was originally the type who didn't look around when immersed in one thing, and since he had clung to it with the goal of making it as quickly as possible, he had been stuck in the laboratory for three days. He absolutely hadn't left Harenir on purpose.

"And, um, though it might sound like an excuse... I didn't perceive that I was separated from you because I was thinking of you the whole time I was making it. Sorry..."

He mumbled awkwardly. His voice became increasingly smaller, and by the end he wanted to hide even in a mouse hole, but he continued his words to the end. Though explaining this background was very embarrassing, it seemed he should reveal everything to Harenir who had even collapsed due to his absence.

Harenir's blue eyes looking up at him rippled deeply, and he carefully cupped his face with both hands. Despite having miraculous recovery ability, the area around his eyes was red to the point of being sunken.

Just how had the time separated from him approached Harenir? The more he mulled over his entreaty saying he was fine to him, and that he would hide it better, the more upset he became. He spoke while stroking under his eyes:

"No matter how you are, I'll be with you. It's a world I returned to alive only because of you, after all."

"...Isaph."

"Only you know me. So I want to know you more in detail too."

Only Harenir knew the fact that he had been to another dimension. The one who uniquely understood him was precious, and he wanted to treat him well too. This absolutely did not become the 'burden' he worried about.

Since he had apologized for not properly looking into Harenir's anxiety during the past time, now he needed to make an admonition for the future. While lightly bumping with a light thump his forehead, he spoke to him as if growling:

"Don't lie to me. You don't need to act in front of me."

"...Yes, I swear."

Fortunately, and of course, the answer came back in the form he wanted. He smiled satisfiedly and kissed Harenir's lips.

He shivered with his whole body, then quickly embraced his back with both arms. As if the kiss he was giving was so precious, he swallowed his breath with an attitude like a believer. The kiss after a few days felt even sweeter.

### Chapter 228

As they stuck together as if not wanting to be separated even a little, the kiss quickly deepened. As their lips overlapped as if interlocking and their tongues mixed deeply, heat rose rapidly and their breathing became irregular. The sound of smooth and warm flesh rubbing against each other and becoming wet echoed continuously inside their mouths.

Their hearts pounded so hard that their chests felt constricted. It was thrilling to feel each other's heartbeats directly, and it was impossible to distinguish whose was beating faster and larger.

Heat spread throughout their bodies, tickling like feathers. He was immersed in the kiss and repeatedly chased after his lips, but finally he collapsed as if crumbling onto his legs while bursting out with an exhausted sigh. Though he had inwardly thought he might endure longer than him this time, it seemed it was just a vain dream.

"Hah... hah..."

As he panted, gasping for breath, Harenir gently stroked his lower back. It seemed like he was soothing him to calm down, or it was also a subtle touch as if trying to continue the excitement. What we would do after reaching the extreme of emotion was now obvious.

Come to think of it, was this the first time since leaving the island?

Since returning to the holy city, so many events had occurred that there had been no time for intimacy. There was also the effect of him quickly falling asleep due to fatigue from going outside after a long time...

He looked at Harenir with half delight, half embarrassment. He quickly met his eyes and smiled as if he had been waiting for him to look at him, when suddenly his gaze turned to his neck. The pitch-black string encircling his smooth, extended neck.

The sight of Harenir looking up at him while willingly bound to him gave him a guilty feeling deep in his core. Needlessly becoming embarrassed, he rolled his eyes here and there, when suddenly a question arose:

"I do this kind of, ahem... this kind of thing with you, but you were still anxious?"

Doesn't one usually become confident in a relationship after spending a night together? Since that act is seen as the completion or turning point of a relationship. That's why there are common stories of worry that the other's heart has changed after sleeping together.

Though he had pledged to try to understand Harenir's anxiety, it was still strange. Was he worried to the extent of surpassing the satisfaction from the relationship, or perhaps...

"Ah, do you not like this much from the start? Like you're not particularly interested."

"...Why did you reach that conclusion?"

"Hmm? Because you always ended after doing it once or twice..."

He scratched his cheek awkwardly as he answered the question that seemed to ask how his accident had jumped so strangely again. The relationship he had had with Harenir so far had always ended after just once or twice. The standard was set by him, and even the frequency dropped noticeably. Could that be possible even with high self-control?

Of course, even with just that he had been exhausted, but what he had initially thought was consideration suddenly progressed in a different direction. Above all, throughout their intimacy, Harenir's reason generally seemed intact.

Isn't there an expression that when people get excited, they lose reason and rush in? Even looking back to the distant past, even when he was under the incubus's curse, he had seemed relatively normal. Could it be that since he had been a holy knight for a long time, he had little sexual interest to begin with? Quite plausible.

"Also, you don't seem to get very excited when doing it with me..."

He thought Harenir wants him too. He doesn't misunderstand it as being forced like before, but the 'line' he had always maintained suddenly became curious. Like his desire also ended once filled to that point originally.

As he continued various inferences, Harenir smiled strangely. As if he really didn't know what to say, he stared at him blankly and answered:

"Really, you still touch people in unpredictable directions."

"Hmm? I was just analyzing..."

"Since I swore just now, I should keep it well."

He blinked at the sudden non sequitur. Suddenly what oath? As he tilted his head, he barely recalled the conversation containing that word.

'Don't lie to me. You don't need to act in front of me.'

'...Yes, I swear.'

What does that promise have to do with this?

As he became confused, Harenir firmly kissed his chin in quick succession. With gentle kisses, his body slowly tilted.

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"Ah! Ngh, ah, that, hah, no...!"

His sight was dizzying. He tried to push the other away several times to escape the stimulation that made his mind go blank, but his touch didn't reach at all, so he ended up just scratching the table. He barely burst out exclamations with repeatedly broken breaths.

A little while ago, Harenir had laid him down on the table in front of the sofa. Since they had only had stable and orthodox relationships in bed until now, the place was different. It was also fun wondering if this was a direction showing his excitement, and he too was excited to the point where his lower abdomen tickled.

But without even removing his upper clothes, Harenir went downward. After clearing away his lower clothes and lifting his waist to place his two legs on his shoulders, he lowered his head and...

"Spit, spit it out, ah, ah!"

He took his member into his mouth.

This was the first time. Startled at the shocking stimulation he had never felt before, he immediately shouted to stop, but Harenir didn't comply. His member, which had already been half-risen, stood fully upright in his mouth, and he unhesitatingly licked the shaft with his tongue.

Wrapping his member with warm flesh, and also swallowing it to the end in one breath, squeezing it in his throat, he couldn't come to his senses. The sexual feeling that rushed in at once seemed to strike his head. Sucking, slurping, the obscene sounds ringing from below added to the shock. It was as if he was kissing.

Though he had obeyed as if submitting when he refused saying not to do it normally, this time he didn't even pretend to listen. Though he was truly shocked, his body diligently heated up. His waist jumped involuntarily and he sobbed covering his face with both hands.

"Mmm, hah, this, ah, I said I don't like it..."

When he whimpered, Harenir pulled his head back. As his member came out of his mouth, he thought he was finally listening to him, but he tilted his head obliquely to the side and licked the shaft. After rubbing along the glans corona with the tip of his tongue raised, he even subsequently pressed against the hole at the tip teasingly.

"It seems, you like it."

"What?! Ah, ngh, don't, do that, ah...!"

"Your heart is beating, extremely fast."

And a lot of fluid is coming out too.

His face turned bright red at the quiet murmur. Since his body was in a position folded in half, Harenir's actions were fully visible. Though he couldn't believe both the fact that such a sacred and beautiful face was now buried in his crotch, and also that his member was being rubbed against his cheek, he gladly licked and swallowed the fluid.

As much as this reality was shocking, the stimulation was also immense. His heart beat so rapidly that his head felt dizzy. The guilty feeling he had felt when seeing the pitch-black collar around his neck earlier spread throughout his body like burning up, and he just opened and closed his mouth helplessly. The rebuttal he should have given him was completely incinerated.

Of course one would get excited when someone displaying noble beauty like a saint repeatedly sucked on his lower part. He felt so wronged that tears were about to well up suddenly, when his sight suddenly turned dizzyingly white.

Harenir swallowed his member again. Beyond simply putting it in his mouth, he came impressively close enough to swallow it all the way, almost to the scrotum. Before he could be alarmed at the sensation of lips rubbing over the thick flesh, he began stimulating while tightening his throat.

"Ah! You're cra-, cra-, crazy?! That, don't, lick, it, ah...!"

"Yesh, I shupposhe sho."

"Don't, hah, talk with it in your mouth, ah!"

He struggled, not just trembling with his waist but also heaving his chest. He answers well to the question of whether he's crazy, but cleanly ignores the dissuasion not to do it. It was to the point of making him angry, but truly regrettably, his sexual sensation rose instantly.

Excitement due to the new place and different stimulation quickly heated his entire body. Since he was already excited from having a relationship after a long time, this situation made him even more furious. But now even the wrong thing was in crisis of bursting, so he urgently pushed Harenir away.

### Chapter 229

"Ah, wait, gasping, get, get away. Whimpering, I said stop...!"

As a bright red danger alarm sounded in his mind, he grabbed Harenir's hair. He pulled at the fine golden hair randomly while shouting for him to get away.

But he didn't budge, ignored even when he scratched his arms, and even the attempt to push him away with his feet didn't work. Rather, he gripped his pelvis more firmly and repeatedly licked his member, and even moved his head back and forth. With a startled cry! While bursting out a scream-like moan, he threw his head back.

His sight was blurred with tears, making the ceiling invisible. He finally pleaded while crying.

"Pleease, sobbing, fine. Since this feels good, panting, not dislike, gasping, spit it out quickly. I think I'm going to cum, whimpering, moaning, no...!"

"Insh, your mouph."

"Ah, no, that's not, you're crazy, choking gasp, ah!"

There was no way he could properly continue his words. Though resentment toward Harenir answering with it in his mouth arose, it couldn't be completed into language. Unable to come to his senses at the sensation of his member being tightly squeezed in a warm and narrow place, rambling in shock while grabbing his hair...

"With a shuddering moan...!"

He ended up ejaculating into Harenir's mouth. And even right into the depths of his throat in a sudden rush. The climax pierced with shock made his entire body convulse frighteningly, and his mind was erased to white.

However, even in the climax that seemed like it would make him an idiot, his body, which had become highly sensitive, clearly perceived the pressure transmitted through his member. The throat wrapping his member squeezed with rhythmic contractions, fully informing that the other was now swallowing something.

The noble hero of the Holy Empire buried his head in his crotch and sucked his member, and even received and swallowed all that semen. He sobbed covering his eyes with both hands.

"Trembling, you, really crazy... Why did you swallow that..."

Tears burst out not just from embarrassment but shame. Rather than being excited by Harenir's actions, he should have fled earlier, but to end up ejaculating into his mouth. He felt very wronged, as if he had committed a great sin.

As he whimpered, Harenir finally came up and gently stroked his cheek. As if disliking the action of covering his face, he subtly removed his hand, and said while kissing with soft, delicate kisses his eyes:

With the most gentle voice, in a tone as if reciting scripture.

"I want to receive and swallow everything of yours with my mouth."

"Wh-what...?"

"You were curious. How much I get excited by you."

The kiss, which he thought was just to soothe his crying, naturally led to the act of licking and swallowing his tears. Though he trembled uncontrollably at the tongue stroking his eyes, Harenir firmly cupped his face with both hands and persistently moved his tongue.

He licked the surface of his eyelids that he had instinctively closed with a flinch, swallowed the saliva that flowed beside his lips, and even ate the sweat drops pooled at his nape. It was unbelievable that such actions were being committed by lips moving so softly it gave him goosebumps.

"It's been like this from before. I wanted to lick this small body entirely..."

"Ah, moaning, tickli-, ticklish."

"The warmth felt from such a fragile body, and also the soft touch are so addictive..."

With increasingly passionate kisses, Harenir gradually went downward while deeply kissing him with sounds. The neckline, collarbone, chest, abdomen... Before he knew it, his upper clothes were also removed, and as he received his caress as if being swept away, he confusedly recalled memories.

Come to think of it, in the past too, Harenir seemed to particularly like biting various parts of his body. As if the pulse transmitted through his lips was fascinating, he would press his mouth for a while... but this reminiscence was shattered abruptly and completely before taking on even a faint form. He was alarmed at where his lips were heading. Already beyond his member, he was in the process of going to the perineum, and beyond that.

No way, is he trying to kiss th-th-that place now...!

"No! Aak, that's not it! Don't do it!"

With a sudden flash! The purple collar appeared in the air and pulled Harenir. The moment breath touched his hole, he committed it without knowing in shock. Though even when explaining to him about the collar just before, he had thought there would be no occasion to use it, his expectation was shattered so absurdly.

Harenir was roughly drawn and collapsed as if crumbling on top of him. Just before, he had barely supported himself on the table to prevent crushing him.

"Ah."

"With a choked gasp, sor-sorry. I didn't intend to pull so hard, no, I mean, why are you trying to lick there!"

He shouted rambling. Apologizing then reproaching, while changing his face like Janus and reaching out his hand fumblingly. Because he was startled, had he tightened the collar too strongly and strangled Harenir's neck, his neck was swollen red.

As he was flustering, Harenir burst out laughing haha.

"So this is what it feels like to be caught by a collar and pulled... I should apologize for what I did to you in the past, haha, it's so fun..."

"...You, are you not in your right mind because you couldn't sleep?"

He even whispers saying to pull more while kissing tenderly his cheek. He seemed very pleased after physically feeling the fact that he was caught by my collar. It was as if he enjoyed the reality that he would inevitably be pulled whenever I pulled, but from my standpoint, I could only think he was crazy.

After looking at him dubiously, he belatedly recalled the fact that Harenir had collapsed today. Ah, it seemed that it was my fault for trying to have a relationship when he wasn't in a normal state from the start. Since I too had been cooped up in the laboratory for a while, it would be too much to have an intimate relationship in a situation where both were tired.

He shook his head and said:

"I think we'd better stop today and next time, with a startled gasp!"

"No. I've finally touched you."

A finger went swiftly into his back. Surprised by the foreign sensation he hadn't experienced for a long time, he trembled from head to toe with his body, and Harenir pleaded while burying his head in his nape:

"I couldn't even embrace you for days, couldn't hold your hand, let alone even see you with my eyes. After being away for three days..."

"Breathlessly panting, that, soft moan."

"You said I don't have to act anymore. Hm? I don't want to be separated from you."

Even while speaking, his fingers moved steadily. He methodically inserted his index finger, then put in his middle finger too and began to expand the inner wall in earnest, making him dizzy soon. The heat of his body that had heated up due to the shocking act just before had not disappeared at all and quickly set fire.

His breathing immediately became irregular. Just as the statement 'three days' poked sharply at his guilt, he couldn't bring himself to push Harenir away. As he just gripped his shoulders and moaned softly, he kissed tenderly his chin.

"Isaph..."

Whispering desperately, Harenir slightly tilted his head. His reddened neck entered his view fully, making his apologetic feelings grow, when he suddenly found it strange why it hadn't healed yet. With his healing power, it should recover quickly, surely he wasn't deliberately maintaining that state?

Though he was suspicious, on the other hand, he welcomed the situation where Harenir spoke so honestly. How could he tell him to stop when he expressed his desire for him without concealment like this?

"You can do it..."

Finally, he nodded and answered. His cheeks were so hot that he could perceive his face had heated up bright red even without a mirror. Harenir smiled joyfully with curved eye corners and kissed various parts of his face.

With persistent, probing movements, the touch digging into his back became more blatant. Before he knew it, his fingers had increased to three, spreading the inner wall as if pressing with firm, rhythmic pressure, then repeating the action of rubbing it round, making his mind dizzy. Haa, ah, at the moment when heat was contained in his broken breath, Harenir moved.

Then as he familiarly found a certain point and scratched downward by raising his fingers like hooks, his entire body trembled uncontrollably. As he moaned bursting out a shrill scream with a sharp gasp, Harenir kissed the surface of his eyelids and whispered:

"Your face now, it's extremely red..."

"Gasping, whimpering, don't talk about, that."

"When you're excited your eyes become red and tears well up at the corners of your eyes, that looks so good..."

He was alarmed at the words pouring into his ears. He had only urged him not to lie, but it didn't seem like he had told him to become this honest. Why is there no middle ground?

### Chapter 230

Though he shook his head small from the desire to hide out of embarrassment, Harenir's lips persistently followed. He even licked and ate the tears that flowed along the side of his face as he struggled. Shocked at the wet tongue, he blocked Harenir's mouth sharply as if striking it with his hand.

"Gasp, heavy gasp, you really, are strange."

"Yes, only you know."

"This isn't a compliment, hitch, ah-! Yelp, don't lick even my hand!"

Without gap to point it out, the finger that had entered from behind pushed forcefully deeply, making him writhe. But at that time, Harenir buried his head deeply in his palm as if kissing it, then suddenly began to lick with his tongue. The slippery tongue dug between his fingers, and eventually swallowed his index and middle fingers.

He couldn't come to his senses. With one hand, he widened his hole, and with the other hand, he firmly grasped his hand and sucked on it. Though he wanted to deny that this confusing situation was the reality he faced, by then Harenir's tongue had wrapped around his fingers more stickily.

Absurdity, awkwardness, and embarrassment were all mixed together, making his body a mess. Above all, the biggest problem was that seeing Harenir sucking his fingers kept reminding him of what had happened just before. With that nobly beautiful face, he had swallowed his member...

Intensely- His whole body burned as the memory he had tried to bury vividly came to mind. Harenir whispered quietly with a laugh, "Are you excited?" making him feel wronged utterly. It seemed his eyes had heated up bright red again.

"From, from behind."

It seemed like Harenir wasn't in his right mind today, so he should hide his face as much as possible. As he fumblingly turned his upper body, unexpectedly, Harenir didn't make any objections.

Until now, they had always done it in a position facing each other, and according to past memories, Harenir greatly disliked him covering his face. Since he had even resorted to strange tactics like deliberately inserting only the tip of his member or moving slowly to somehow turn him back to the front, he had been inwardly tense, but he followed his will readily.

He stood supporting himself on the table with both hands, feeling dazed. Though he felt slightly uneasy, before he could continue his suspicion, Harenir pressed his body against him. With a choked sound, he gasped at the sensation of his hole being roughly widened. Though he thought it had been sufficiently loosened by hand, it was still overwhelming.

Was it because it had been a long time, or because of the position? It felt larger than usual, making his breath break in stutters as if being crushed. He repeatedly clenched his hand placed on the table, then spread it wide while convulsing.

"Trembling sighs..."

"Sighed softly, Isaph..."

Harenir bent his upper body while calling his name quietly. He pressed his hand beside his arm and smeared his lips along his spine, and goosebumps rose at the soft kisses reaching up to his shoulder blades.

Before he knew it, his member had entered to the limit. Though he had just inserted it, its size alone pressed heavily on his sensitive spot, making his legs tremble uncontrollably. It was difficult to control his body as if he had entered boiling water. As he wriggled, Harenir firmly kissed the back of his neck and whispered:

"Actually, doing it from behind like this is good too."

"Gasp, that's a lie. I remem-, moan, remember that you were extremely, displeased back then."

"That was because you acted as if you would do it with anyone else, so I was annoyed..."

It was an explanation that he disliked his behavior of not looking at him as if he just wanted to have a 'relationship' regardless of the partner. He was about to refute that for such a reason, he had been too persistent about watching his face, but Harenir moved his body, and all his nerves were focused there.

With a slick motion- He gasped with his mouth open at the sensation of the member coming out then going back in. Though he retreated as if about to pull out completely, he stopped precariously at the tip and entered again, scratching as if pressing his hole with the glans. Every time the bulging glans corona brushed against him, a ticklish sexual feeling bloomed, making his body twist convulsively severely.

Having become highly sensitive, he struggled gripping Harenir's arm as if trying to stop him, or as if urging him. With trembling breaths, as it became increasingly difficult to stand supporting himself on the table, whether he groaned or not, Harenir bit the soft flesh at the back of his neck and continued his words:

"When you get excited, sighed softly, even the back of your neck turns bright red..."

"Gasp, choke, I told you, not to say things like that, moan desperately!"

"Of course there's regret in not seeing your face, but when embracing from behind, ha, it feels like completely confining you..."

Goosebumps rose in waves as his heated breath fully touched his neck. In one fluid motion, Harenir embraced his body that finally collapsed. The position firmly holding him as if targeting this moment was truly, as he said, like being trapped in his embrace. Due to their size difference, his entire body was enveloped by him.

He reached his hands forward hurriedly. Though he tried to create a little gap by supporting himself on the table, his body was lifted effortlessly just like that. For a moment his feet floated in the air, then were placed on top of Harenir's insteps.

"Gasped sharply! Ah, wait, this is too, deep, hitch...!"

He even embraced both his arms as if to prevent him from escaping. In the position where they were touching without gaps, he couldn't escape, and trembling and moaning every time Harenir thrust rhythmically was all he could do. The act of pushing into his inner wall became more intense.

"And the reason I only did it from the front was, haa, that I wanted to check if you were breathing properly..."

"This position, gasp helplessly, is difficult, ah, yelp!"

"Now that I can feel your heart beating, sighed softly, I'm much more at ease."

He tried patting Harenir's thigh frantically with his hands that could still move, and also raised the tips of his feet placed on Harenir's insteps and struggled several times, but nothing worked. Rather, the more he tried to escape like that, the deeper he embraced him.

Hot heat seemed to completely melt his brain and spread throughout his body, wildly digging through all his nerves. At the stimulation that made even his scalp tickle, he raised his head stiffly, then lowered it again repeatedly, not knowing what to do.

He was thrust into while almost being lifted in Harenir's arms. Every time their lower parts collided, sounds of wet slapping echoed, and even the sweat pooled on their touching bodies made the sound more obscene. The sensation of his entire body being confined and stuffy gradually heightened the distorted sexual feeling.

"Gasp, moan, waiit, I, floor, want to stand on the floor, hitch!"

"Above all, now, ha, I can also feel that you really like it..."

Though he wanted to refute Harenir, who whispered while biting his earlobe teasingly, he became excited along with him, regrettably, at his hoarse voice that fell as if scratching his throat. He too fully felt that Harenir was liking it very much now. The transparent fluid gushing out steadily from the tip of his member didn't stop.

Harenir moved his hand and pressed his chest. He seemed to want to check if the pulse transmitted through the collar and the heartbeat felt by pressing flesh together were the same, and his stomach churned at his touch that even felt desperate at a glance.

"Haa, Isaph..."

Harenir whispered love while burying his lips in his nape. The resentment arising from the confined position didn't even have time to change into anger. Because the love he conveyed was so immense, and the pulse of another heart beating so strongly as if about to burst his chest pushed him solely toward ecstasy.

Pounding rhythmically, he couldn't even distinguish whose the mixed heart sounds were. He just followed as if swept away and panted.

"Lip, lips, heu, kiss..."

It was difficult to complete a sentence amid the pouring stimulation. Harenir willingly understood the words transmitted almost as if crushed and kissed his lips. Satisfying dizziness rose as the wet and slippery flesh mixed.

The relationship had in a state where his entire body was tightly embraced and compressed seemed to have tightly strangled even his thought circuits to the point of paralysis. He was in a daze from chilling pleasures. His entire body shook powerfully every time Harenir pressed against his lower part, and he kissed him as if wanting to devour all the overwhelming breaths he burst out from above. The word 'sticking' was exactly appropriate.

Harenir's movements became more intense. His lower abdomen also resounded throbbing insistently to the point where it was difficult to endure anymore, making him shake his head.

"Hitch, my belly, gasp, feels like it's going to be pierced."

"It won't be pierced that easily. Sighed softly, after all the care I took to feed you well..."

### Chapter 231

"Ah, gasp, what, is that...!"

"If you're worried, breathlessly, shall we block it together?"

Before he had room to ask what that meant, Harenir grabbed his hand and guided it to his stomach. Just as he whispered that he should be careful since he hadn't been able to monitor his meals while they were apart, he flinched as the feeling of something bulging was transmitted to his palm. He tried to avoid it out of embarrassment, but he gripped very strongly and wouldn't let go.

Is this revenge? Is this revenge for making him wait alone?!

As if soothing him trembling with embarrassment, Harenir smeared his lips on the back of his neck. Though clearly his breath had been hot when they kissed just before, the breath touching him now was lukewarm, indicating how much his neck had heated up.

As if enjoying his reddened nape since he couldn't properly see his face, Harenir repeatedly licked and bit his neck. During his rebellion, heaving his whole body in frustration at that action and also at him still placing his hand on his stomach and not letting go.

"Wai-, wait."

He received a very dangerous intuition. He had thought his stomach felt tingly for a while, but that sensation jumped in a direction he hadn't thought of at all. Shocked at the feeling that suddenly came as if about to explode and split his head, he urgently called out to Harenir.

"Harenir. St-, stop for a moment. Gasp, I think I'm going to cum."

"You can go first... Want to do it in my hand?"

"Ah, no, that's not it, ugh! Don't, don't hold it...!"

Though he spoke relatively seriously, Harenir lowered his hand and grasped his member. He wanted to escape from the position of him embracing his stomach, but he wanted to decline this kind of position change. Moreover, he held his member with his hand as if to help him and stroked it, making white sparks fly before his eyes.

His palm hardened with calluses was stimulating just by touching, but when he shook it with swift strokes rapidly and also pressed hard, his mouth opened with a stunned gasp. It was a stimulus intense enough to break the danger alarm that had rung due to the urge that suddenly came upon him. His body falls into a volcanic crater with magma boiling.

After being unable to breathe, he belatedly tried twisting his entire body, but in the tightly embraced position, he couldn't escape. Even when he beat him wildly with his one freed hand, he was immovable. Gasping desperately, ah, wait, no. As he struggled rambling, Harenir wondered, then soon burst into an exclamation.

"Aha, shall I receive it with my mouth? Then I'll go down now-"

"Cra-, crazy, ah, gasp...!"

The moment he started at the shocking statement, he finally crossed the limit. In a powerful stream- water spurted from the tip of his member. Though he had tried to hold it in somehow, it happened in the moment consciousness returned briefly. The transparent fluid that burst out strongly even pooled after pouring down streaming continuously to the floor.

At that clear appearance, he realized it wasn't the urine he had worried about, but he couldn't just be relieved and happy either. Beyond the problem of shame, his thinking was paralyzed by the stimulation from the start. His whole body trembled uncontrollably as if electrocuted, and water continued to spring from the tip of his member.

His tears also dripped drop by drop onto the puddle on the floor and mixed in.

"With broken sobs, ah, it's not stopping..."

"..."

"I said, I was going to cum, gasp, because you shook it, with broken sobs..."

He burst out misdirected resentment. He unfolded the logic that it was his fault he had become like this, that it could have ended after a moderate ejaculation, but it became worse because of him. Even while saying it, he knew it was a miraculous blame-shifting, but he was so embarrassed that he wanted to avoid it somehow.

But he really had shocked him with his shocking statement, and moreover, he was still holding his member now. He hit Harenir's arm while whimpering. Still being held as if confined by him, it was frustrating that he could only use one hand.

At that time, a hoarse breathing sound seemed to be heard from behind, and soon Harenir embraced him tightly. A sticky liquid quickly filled the inside and even pushed its way out, flowing down his thigh.

"Haa... That's right, I did wrong..."

Harenir moved his hand, bursting out a breath mixed with laughter. He gently wrapped his member and shook it with light strokes, as if shaking it off.

"Ahh, this, this wasn't what I meant to, ugh...!"

"Since I decided to take responsibility for everything of yours, this is the proper duty."

He tried to stop Harenir urgently, but he answered in a very matter-of-fact tone. Even during that time, his hand steadily moved, eventually making him spill the last drop. In a weak stream... The weakened stream all fell into Harenir's hand.

Embarrassment rushed in in a crushing wave, making him tremble with small tremors with his head lowered. Though it seemed like he had had relations with Harenir not many but not few times, this was the first time he had spilled water. Not even when he was under the incubus's curse, or when he slept drunk, had this happened.

Was it because it had been a long time, or did feeling his heartbeat excite him more? Whatever it was, tears wouldn't stop due to the tremendous shame. As if knowing he was sobbing, Harenir kissed his cheek obliquely and soothed him.

"Don't cry. I'm so happy that you responded like this."

"Sob, I'm saying you made me like this."

"Yes, that's right."

Though he clearly tried to blame others again, Harenir received it very gladly. Since he seemed to be so pleased that it was his influence, he belatedly realized that his words couldn't become resentment from the start. He had tried to shift responsibility blindly, but ended up inadvertently making him satisfied.

Only now did Harenir release him from his embrace and turn his body. As if trying to calm him, who was still heaving, unable to settle his sexual feelings, he stroked his shoulders and also arranged his hair. His very affectionate touch made him relax, and as he subtly kissed his face and also moved tenderly as if licking his tears again, he pushed him away with difficulty.

"Stop licking..."

Of course, Harenir wasn't pushed away by his touch. It was like if he blocked the right, he would attack the left, making him laugh dryly. It was because he had lost even the energy to be angry. The floor he finally stepped on felt unfamiliar.

As he staggered unsteadily, his legs having lost strength, Harenir caught him and said:

"It's hard to stand. Put your arms around my neck."

Exhausted, he followed his words. He complied docilely, thinking he would embrace and move him to the bed, or perhaps go to the bathroom to wash him.

After releasing his tension and leaning on Harenir languidly...

"Agh! Ah, wh-, why on earth...?!"

He was alarmed as his two legs were lifted wide open. Harenir had not simply lifted him in his arms to move locations. He trembled tremulously with his body, shocked as his member entered with insistent pressure through the hole that hadn't yet fully closed, widening his inner wall again.

Though clearly Harenir had also ejaculated just before, his member hadn't died at all and rather seemed to have grown even bigger. His entire body, still in a sensitive state, heated up quickly at the tight pressure. He moaned as if about to cry and pushed Harenir's shoulder away.

"I, gasp, I just came..."

He couldn't believe the behavior trying to start again even after he had even spilled water. Feebly, with hands that had completely lost strength and were flimsy, he hit Harenir and shouted for him to let go, but he only answered calmly:

"I know. But since I couldn't properly see your face just before, can't you do it again?"

"Wh-, what?"

"I did see from behind, but it's regrettable that I couldn't see your climaxing face from the front-"

"Crazy, you, really crazy."

He hurriedly covered Harenir's mouth with his hand. He reached cognitive dissonance, questioning whether what he had said was correct, whether it was right as content uttered by a being with such a sacred face. Perhaps he had lost his mind from the moment he spurted water?

Though he reached the level of denying reality, fallen into great shock, Harenir was only serene. Rather, he kissed his palm deeply that was blocking his mouth and whispered:

"I hid too much, making you misunderstand. As if I only followed when you wanted."

It was saying he would correct the misconception he had created that Harenir's desire wasn't that great, that is, that he only had relations once or twice, accommodating only when he wanted it. He just opened and closed his mouth wordlessly. It was as if he was being punished for the sin of misunderstanding his self-control. Had he dug his own grave?

With gentle nips, Harenir bit his fingers and said:

"See how excited I get by you, how I go into heat."

"Ah, no, there's no need to be this honest, gasp...!"

### Chapter 232

Harenir moved below. As if trying to enter before the widened inner wall narrowed again, he thrust his member to the limit in one breath. With a slick wet sound, the moan he burst out like a scream.

The inner wall, softened by the previous intercourse, wrapped around the member hurriedly, not knowing his feelings. Harenir burst out a hoarse breath and rubbed against his lower part, making him writhe. Ticklish pleasure poured like a tsunami, trying to pull him into the orbit of climax in one breath.

He couldn't come to his senses at the too excessive stimulation. Every time Harenir moved, the sticky liquid that escaped from inside fell to the floor making drip, drip sounds.

"Ah, heu, no, I'm too tired. Rather let's rest, then, euheuk."

He pleaded while whimpering. No matter how he thought about it, having relations again right after just spewing water was overwhelming. Honestly, he wanted to rest even for a moment out of fear that the endless climaxes would break his mind.

Especially this position of being lifted in his arms had too intense stimulation. Though he believed he would absolutely not drop him, following an instinctive fear, he ended up clinging to his back. He couldn't do anything but stick to him and pant.

Just before too, he had been tightly embraced from behind and just been thrust into. Today's intercourse was too different from what they had had until now.

As he shook his head, Harenir exhaled quietly and spoke:

"Huu. Then... if you do it once more, I'll end it."

"...Just once?"

"Yes."

He paused as it was the first time Harenir had said first that he wanted to do more. He had always been the one to hold him saying let's do it once more. Actually, he wanted him to put him down immediately, but when he faced the blue eyes blurred with lust, his mouth simply wouldn't move. Thump, even his heart beat heavily.

Hmm, would it be better to just finish it at once and collapse rather than resting and having relations again? As he hesitantly embraced his shoulders, Harenir noticed the answer and smiled mischievously. Affectionate kisses touched his cheek in quick succession.

Then belatedly he felt that Harenir's statement was strange.

"Wait. Do more, exactly what...?"

"Eung, you just have to show it."

As if trying to cut off a long conversation, Harenir kissed his lips. His reason flew away immediately at the hot breath, and he responded to him as if swept away.

Yes, it would end with 'once'.

But a little while later.

No, after a time that couldn't be called 'a little while'.

"Aheuk, heu, you, you swindler!"

He burst out a moan like a scream while lying on the bed, gripping the blanket. He struggled trying to escape, but a large hand firmly grasped his waist and wouldn't let go.

Though he had clearly accepted after being told that it would end after doing it just once more, that standard wasn't simple ejaculation.

"I didn't, huu, lie... I said I'd end it 'if you show it'."

"This is, a fraudulent contract, heueuik, ah!"

He had ejaculated while being held in Harenir's arms, but he clung to him again, babbling that since it wasn't the same water as before but semen, he couldn't end it yet. He couldn't come to his senses as he acted persistently as if wanting to see him spewing water from the front.

Though he had barely moved to the bed after pleading that the floating state was too difficult, he was tormented in all sorts of positions as if it was rather fortunate. After being thrust into from the side with just one leg held high, his body was even folded in half with both legs placed on his shoulders.

He didn't know how many times he had ejaculated. Climaxes continued without pause, and his sight kept flying away. Though at first it was good to face Harenir's honest lust or the moans he burst out by his ear, now it was the limit. No, the limit had been crossed long ago.

Though clearly Harenir seemed to have ejaculated several times too, his member wouldn't die at all. It was huge as if not satisfied at all, and even seemed to become more ferocious as time passed. The idea that Harenir was satisfied with doing it just once or twice, that he wasn't one with much sexual desire, turned out to be a very great misconception, as he realized like this.

Squelching wetly, the junction was so wet with liquid to the point of being slippery. Even the thought that his stomach was full because Harenir had ejaculated so much occurred to him. Such lewd sensations confined him in chilling pleasure, and his body trapped in climax writhed every time he thrust deeply.

"Hua, I'm coming out again, no. Coming out..."

He couldn't close his mouth, which had completely loosened. He twisted his entire body while exhaling moans like an animal's cry with his chin trembling uncontrollably. Since ejaculating was painful to the point where his extremely swollen member was grasped with his hand trying to block it, eventually semen spilled between his fingers.

It was difficult to control his body, so he groaned while bending his head here and there. At his behavior, Harenir also seemed to reach climax as his movement stopped momentarily, and taking advantage of that gap, he turned his body. He tried to escape urgently, but was caught without even getting far.

He pressed him down as if pouncing from behind and whispered:

"I haven't seen it yet, so you shouldn't hide..."

"Heut, wa-, it's almost water!"

Of course, that content was quite sufficient to make him indignant. Though he was at the level of ejaculating weakly spurting liquid that had already become almost watery after ejaculating several times, Harenir strictly distinguished it, saying it was different.

He resented him while sobbing pitifully, clutching the blanket. Though he had clearly just ejaculated, Harenir's still massive member was no longer welcome but just scary. He didn't even show signs of fatigue. It was as if he was resolving all at once today what he had endured in the past.

"Just once, heuik, you clearly said just once more..."

"That's right. It would end after seeing you wet yourself just once more, haa, it's regrettable to have missed the first time."

Harenir turned his body while speaking as if truly regretful. Hearing him say he wanted to keep seeing his face in case he spewed water again, it was stupefying. Was it punishment for misunderstanding the hero's patience, caught in a fraudulent contract?

Feeling so wronged, he pushed away wildly as he approached as if about to kiss him.

"I, eung, I don't want to see you!"

"Why. You must watch how excited I get by you..."

"No, heuk, I've already seen a lot. You don't need to see more- heueut!"

Though he shouted while struggling, Harenir didn't take a single hit. Rather, he quickly grasped his member, taking advantage of the gap where his two hands held his hair. As the center of his body was caught by someone else, tension surged in one breath, making his waist tremble in spasms.

Harenir kissed his lips as he froze while gasping. As if trying to create a situation similar to when he had spilled water, he mixed their tongues, and he was swept along while filled with indignation. Truly regrettably, his body responded again.

Though he had messed up his golden hair by grasping it while trembling helplessly, he didn't mind at all and even rubbed as if savoring his touch. His appearance, disheveled because of that, excited him. Though frustrating, it seemed he really liked seeing that noble face becoming blurred, dominated by sexual desire in front of him.

Endless climaxes continued.

Though he floundered in excessive pleasure like a drowning person, eventually he was dragged down into ecstasy as if his feet were tied to seaweed. His consciousness repeatedly flew away and suddenly returned at chilling stimulations, and at those times, all his energy was used just to barely mix breaths with the other again.

Like that, that night, he was only able to escape after finally spewing water again in front of Harenir. He fell asleep as if fainting suddenly, feeling semen pouring in enough to fill his stomach making it feel bloated. He probably muttered that he was really crazy as his last words with loosened lips.

It was a night that made him realize that a person doesn't need to be unconditionally honest.

#Side Story 6.

Winter had arrived.

Due to the chilly weather, the time spent in the safe bed increased. Though this mansion maintained not just the rooms but all spaces warm, he didn't want to leave the cozy blanket. Should it be said that it had become more addictive by becoming even more lukewarm?

Harenir sometimes looked at him curiously as he was happy being in bed all day. He had become lazy like an animal hibernating, and waking him up drunk on oversleeping was always Harenir's responsibility.

Harenir, who approached the bed, called him gently:

"Isaph, you need to get up now."

"Eung, 5 more minutes..."

"You're repeating those words for the fourth time now. You need to have a meal."

He buried himself completely in the blanket to avoid Harenir's nagging. He hid in the bed as if Harenir, who ignored his laziness and deprived him of morning leisure, was bad.

Then Harenir laughed dryly and embraced him with the blanket. Wrapped in the fluffy blanket and placed on his thigh, it felt like being wrapped in a swaddling cloth. He cupped his face and gently rubbed his eyes.

"Quickly show me your eyes open too. I want to see."

"You see them every day..."

"I haven't seen them yet today."

He reluctantly opened his eyes at the plea pouring out sweetly to the point where his ears tickled. He blinked dreamily, not having shaken off the drowsiness yet, and realized that Harenir was really staring at him. He became embarrassed as the smile full in his blue eyes contained such extreme happiness.

### Chapter 233

Harenir probably enjoyed seeing this appearance every morning so much that he woke him up personally. But he turned his head away, embarrassed to keep showing his face just waking up, especially one that was probably swollen from sleeping too long. He hid in his embrace and grumbled:

"Isn't sleep deprivation the most dangerous thing for health..."

"You've already slept too much for that."

He clicked his tongue, he won't let it slide.

Looking at me so affectionately but his standard is razor-sharp. He coaxed him to get up now saying excessive sleep isn't good for health either, and as he was pondering what to do, Harenir said:

"Ah, that's right. It's snowing now."

"What?! You should've said that earlier!"

He got up from bed hurriedly. Almost as if molting from the blanket wrapped around him, he ran to the window. As winter had set in, it had snowed several times, but he had only seen the accumulated scenery and never the moment it fell, which was disappointing. Surprisingly, it had only come exactly during his sleeping time.

Moreover, the accumulated snow was shallow so it melted quickly, preventing him from properly enjoying it, but the snow falling outside now was actually heavy snow. He marveled at the snowflakes pouring in thick flurries outside the window.

"Wow, it's snowing so much. At this rate, we don't have to go to work today!"

"So you do care about going to work."

"...What does that mean?"

Are you saying I wake up too late for someone who cares about work? He glared at him dully, but Harenir just shrugged his shoulders and covered his body with a thick blanket.

"I'd like not to go out too. Recently, there have been many people looking for you, so it was difficult to see you outside, but in the mansion, we can be together all the time."

"You can know my location and condition now anyway."

"Still, being together by your side is very different."

Again citing his strict standard, Harenir grasped his left hand. Then he gently kissed his palm, making him curl his fingertips slightly, tickled by his breath. It was something done like a daily ritual.

Soon, a purple formation faintly appeared and disappeared on his palm and Harenir's nape. This was evidence that our souls were connected. To explain a bit about this...

A few weeks ago, he had connected their souls by putting a 'collar' on Harenir.

Thinking that sharing each other's location and condition every hour might be burdensome, he had deliberately made it in a detachable form. But Harenir had seriously requested if it couldn't be implanted in the body, worried that the collar might fall off.

He had said such things from the moment he first received the collar, but he hadn't known he was really serious. As he stood with a determined stance in front of him, who was reacting dubiously, as if really about to dig into his neck and put it in, he finally reluctantly explained:

'Actually, we could just connect souls like before...'

Honestly, he was very indignant at that time. Because that was much easier. He had spent days putting effort into imbuing an object with his ability so it could be attached and detached, but rather the other wanted 24-hour GPS. What had his research become!

At his despairing reaction, Harenir nodded his head saying he understood.

'Then for now I'll wear it carefully so it doesn't break. If we connect souls as in the past, the collar would disappear, which would be regretful.'

'Why on earth would that be regrettable...'

'I like that I can intuitively know I'm caught by you.'

'What is that...'

He couldn't understand Harenir's flow of thought at all. Though he was bewildered, on the other hand, his indignation decreased amusingly at his reaction.

Yes, actually he too had worried because the black string placed on Harenir's neck was much more noticeable than he had expected. Since he had such a nobly beautiful impression, the collar stood out heterogeneously. Moreover, the situation where he had first pulled his collar was needlessly associated, ahem, hem, anyway, he felt the necessity to hide it.

Furthermore, all acquaintances around would guess that the only person to hang such a string on Harenir's neck would be him. Thinking it would look really strange, he changed to completely connecting souls.

But in the process of modifying, Harenir consistently expressed that he didn't want to lose the form of the collar. How persistently he repeated it while he was drawing the magic formation, he looked bewilderedly at him who had now become a collar parrot following the uninhabited island parrot, and finally said with irritation:

'Fine. I'll do it as the collar you want, so don't regret it later.'

He firmly warned that he wouldn't change it again. Though the string wasn't visible externally, when he pulled Harenir, purple energy rose round on his nape, and even just fiddling with that place made the formation appear faintly. It was the trace of connection engraved on his body as he wanted.

But Harenir truly welcomed it. He especially liked the function he had put in his anger, making the magic formation appear at just a touch. He checked it by fiddling with his neck from time to time, and then also noticed that when his breath touched my palm, the magic formation responded too.

That was a resonance reaction even he hadn't known about. It seemed to be limited to those whose souls were connected, and Harenir was very pleased the day he discovered it. And from that day, he kissed his palm every day.

"You really excessively like strange things."

"How can checking that we're connected not be a joyful thing?"

Even at his dubious reaction, Harenir answered with a bright smile, eventually making only him awkwardly turn his gaze away. He had nothing to say when he liked it so purely. His chest needlessly tickled, but if his heart beat rapidly like this, the other would soon notice, so he quickly took a deep breath and calmed down.

Afterward, they ate in the bedroom.

Among the many rooms of the mansion, the view of the garden seen from the bedroom was the most beautiful, so he suggested having a meal in front of the floor-to-ceiling window. It would be a shame to miss the snowfield created by the heavy snow falling. It was absolutely not because he loved the bed and didn't want to leave even the bedroom. ...Well, he would acknowledge some influence.

Around when he was rolling around leisurely after moderately filling his stomach, the communication artifact rang. It was a contact from Beatrice.

[Isaph. There are sorcerers I'd like you to check.]

"Again? I saw some yesterday too..."

[This time they're ones who came from another country.]

Recently, people looking for him had increased. To this, Harenir seemed quite displeased, but he didn't stop his activities.

A wind of change was slowly blowing in the Holy Empire Solares.

This was a phenomenon that had occurred since the book he had been writing was completed. The book contained organized content about necromancy, no, soul magic, which was a higher concept including it. Since the trust toward the empire's necromancers had fallen very low due to the commotion caused on Dianya's Day, he had explained it as easily as possible to understand. It was a so-called basic introductory book.

But that book became tremendously popular. Not only necromancers but also those with spiritual vision looked at it, and even imperial citizens without abilities showed interest because 'that Isaph wrote it'.

At such a heated response, the Emperor of the empire stepped forward suggesting establishing an academy. In the past, all abilities related to souls had been shunned as ominous, but now it was an analysis that properly teaching sorcerers showing talent in it would help the national interest.

He was quite surprised at this news. Though he knew that perception toward necromancy had improved in the empire, wasn't it too radical for the nation to step forward and create an educational institution? After all, it had been shunned as contrary to doctrine for a long time. He was worried it might rather cause backlash if proceeded with hastily.

It was strange that he was even trying to dissuade her to reconsider, but Beatrice didn't change her mind.

'We should push it before the emotion of that day fades.'

The Great Catastrophe that had shaken the empire had disappeared because of his sacrifice. Since imperial citizens had fallen into great shock and guilt due to the truth revealed about him afterward, the atmosphere was one where everyone supported him, so she argued they should aim for this time.

She also said they should implant a new concept in the gap where the empire's perception had been reversed in an instant and became confused. Especially since the story that 'Solnium saving Isaph is evidence that his path is right' was spreading, it was proper to use this...

He pondered whether he should be surprised at her analytical ability, or disgusted at the burdensome rumor.

### Chapter 234

And Beatrice offered him a professorship position at the academy. She had subtly asked whether he was interested in teaching necromancers since the candle incident, but this time it was much more formal.

As it was such a groundbreaking institution, she said if they set him up as a symbol, everyone would be interested, and resistance would naturally die down, offering a high salary and promising various supports.

But immediately afterward, she was silent for a moment, then shook her head and withdrew her statement.

'...No. You had better just stay by that guy's side.'

It was obviously expected that the newly established academy would be busy. She shook her head saying that if they put him in as a professor there, he would have to be apart from 'him' for long periods of time, and that at least couldn't happen.

In fact, he had been planning to decline the professorship as it was burdensome anyway, but it was quite embarrassing to have it fall through for such a reason. Wasn't she treating him and Harenir as if they were a set that absolutely must not be separated?

'That's right. Isaph should be with Sir Harenir!'

But Noi, who was present at the place at that time, also quickly agreed. He had been attending the meeting where Beatrice was explaining as he had been keeping an eye on the academy matter too, but it seemed he hadn't had the slightest intention of sending him to the institution from the start.

'Isaph must not be distant. The two of them separating must absolutely not happen!'

'There's no need to be so absolute...'

'Absolutely! Unconditionally! By all means!'

He even blocked his words very firmly. How frightening his eyes were, which had grown as if about to pop out, so in the end he had to nod his head saying he understood, pushed by the momentum.

Now though their souls were connected so they would be fine even far apart, the people around them wouldn't allow it. Though he had been relieved since only Noi, Mela, and Kalterik were around when Harenir collapsed, just because of that, the three of them really badgered him. It was to the level where if he tried to move alone, they quickly caught him and brought him to Harenir's side.

Anyway, as a result, he decided not to go to the academy but to review the curriculum. Officials came directly to receive his opinions, and professor candidates also asked him to evaluate them.

Beatrice's current contact was also about that.

"Send the information about them by document first. I'll look through it."

Though he had been happy about not going to work, work had come up like this. Actually, he would have ignored it if it weren't for Beatrice, he thought, then wondered if that was why she had contacted him directly. Since recently he had been sleeping a lot more, he had been putting off work frequently.

Feeling somewhat guilty, he headed to the office within the mansion. Originally it was Harenir's space, but now he naturally used it together too.

He murmured while looking outside through the office window:

"Ugh, I was planning to play in the snow today."

"It would be a big problem if you caught a cold, so just look from inside."

"I could go out dressed warmly..."

"No."

As he stuck to the window, dripping with lingering attachment pressing his hands against it, Harenir detached him. His action of gently embracing his shoulders and making him step back was not just stopping him from going out to play, but felt like he was concerned that cold might be transmitted through the glass window, making him laugh dryly.

Even though he had set the mansion's internal temperature as warm as spring, he was worried he might get cold from just this. Harenir seemed to view him as weaker than glass.

He shook his head and sat down at his seat. Since the documents sent by Beatrice would arrive a few hours later, he thought he would look at other candidates until then. It was work left over from yesterday.

Originally, he had interviewed sorcerers who had been nominated as academy professor candidates one by one, but since it was bothersome to meet each one, he decided to conduct a simple test first and only see those who passed. However, though objective questions could be graded quickly, it took time to examine the answers for essay questions, and regrettably, since he was the only one who could check the spell formulas posed for the test, he had to grade them personally.

"This passes. This gets thrown out, and what on earth is this writing?"

While talking to himself and turning pages with a rustling sound one by one, he raised his head thinking he had worked quite a long time now. Looking at the clock saying it was about time to rest, he confirmed that only 10 minutes had passed.

Something was wrong here.

While denying reality, he looked around. Harenir was sitting at the desk right next to him, looking at documents related to running the Holy Knight Order. He knew that while he restrained himself when going out, in the mansion he absolutely wouldn't separate from him, but he hadn't known he would follow him to the office to work.

Was he saying he would work as much as needed as long as he could be together? While finding it amusing and looking at his profile, he turned his gaze with the thought of working again too.

But his concentration quickly scattered, and he rummaged through the desk. Doesn't one just want to clean when one should be working? He neatly arranged pens that were stuck in random directions, placed documents aligned at the corners, and also opened drawers one by one and organized the items inside.

However, since there wasn't much to see on his desk, his hand eventually extended to Harenir's desk. He didn't stop him at all as he snooped around and looked through various things nearby. Rather, he seemed to find his behavior very familiar.

With a sliding sound—

"Oh? This..."

Then he discovered a familiar object in a drawer he had pulled open. He dazedly picked up what was preciously contained in a separate box and asked:

"This doll, why do you still have it?"

A black lump of fur, no, a doll. It was the worry doll that he had given to Harenir long ago. The purple buttons attached as eyes wobbled feebly.

In the past, while he was making it, Harenir had accidentally discovered the doll, so he had passed it over in an incomplete state, then later made a completely new one for him. At that time, he had told him to throw away the first doll he gave, and though he knew he had an attitude of letting it slide at that time, he hadn't known he would keep it so preciously like this.

"Since you made it, of course I have to keep it."

"Such a mess like this? It would be better to just throw it away-"

"No. It's the first gift you gave me, how could I throw it away?"

...Was it the first gift?

Thinking back on his memories, it truly was, making him feel awkward. Still, to make an excuse, the me at that time didn't have any money or possessions at all, and also we weren't in a relationship where we exchanged gifts. Though even then Harenir had taken me to the festival and bought delicious food, well, wasn't that just what he should have done as someone who forcibly brought me along?

Though he tried to be brazenly assertive, he realized that even searching through recent memories, he hadn't given Harenir anything as a gift. The only things he had given so far were the worry doll, and the second worry doll he had remade. But the craftsmanship still seemed to have been poor.

The one thing he had given Harenir recently was... the collar?

"..."

He suddenly felt troubled. He lost confidence, wondering if that could even be called a gift in the first place. It was a problem due to the form factor.

He had received an island from Harenir, and even a two-story house...

Moreover, wasn't Harenir taking care of all his food, clothing, and shelter now? He didn't have a penny. Ah, was royalty from the book coming in? Should he have accepted the professorship? The salary he had let slide now seemed regrettable.

Harenir, who perceived that his complexion had darkened, asked. Sitting in his chair and looking up at him, he reached out his hand with concern.

"Why suddenly that expression?"

"...I just realized I've given you very little until now."

As he answered dejectedly, he tilted his head.

"You're giving even now, though?"

"Huh?"

"You're speaking in front of me right now. Breathing, making eye contact with me."

It was an answer suggesting that this was equivalent to the greatest gift. Though it was a very embarrassing statement that made his shoulders tremble with a shiver, Harenir was extremely calm. His attitude was as if reciting an utterly obvious fact.

Moreover, even now, Harenir looked at him fixedly, as if he had newly recognized this moment due to the topic I had brought up. The emotions rippling in his blue eyes were deep. It was as if he was moved by the fact that he was alive, so he finally burst into a dry laugh.

How long had it been since he escaped from chaos, yet Harenir still often became immersed in such emotion. It was truly absurd, but since he had pledged to try to understand him when giving him the collar before, he thought of appropriate actions for him to take in this situation. The answer came quickly.

He extended both arms and embraced Harenir. As he wrapped his neck, he embraced him back as if he had been waiting, deeply drawing him into his embrace. His breath, softly released, was happily imbued with laughter.

### Chapter 235

Naturally, Harenir sat him on his thigh. He seemed to like embracing him like this, and thanks to that, he had become accustomed to it too. By bringing his two legs together and curling his body, he could be fully embraced in his arms. As he rested his head on his chest, thump, thump, thump, the dull heartbeat tickled his ear.

While fiddling with the doll in his hand, he casually asked:

"You don't have nightmares anymore?"

The reason he had given the worry doll as a gift in the past was precisely because of Harenir's nightmares. While their souls were connected, if he had a nightmare, he could notice and go wake him up, but after they were cut off, he couldn't do that anymore.

Although except for the first time, it hadn't been repeated again, and also based on what he had observed in recent weeks, Harenir didn't seem to be having nightmares. Still, out of concern for the possibility, when he asked, Harenir paused momentarily, then drew a round smile.

"Yes. When I embrace you and sleep, I don't have any nightmares."

"...It feels like you're completely treating me like a doll."

"Also, because you embrace and put me to sleep, I can fall asleep well."

The first order of sleep was still for him to embrace Harenir. In order to be embraced by him, he crumpled his body to enter his arms, and even when asked if it was uncomfortable, he persisted firmly. Thanks to that, it had become completely established as a custom.

Harenir's answer was just gentle, so he glanced at him briefly, then lowered his gaze again. Seeing him speak like that, he seemed certainly fine, but he was still concerned. After all, he had acted perfect for a long time.

Still, since he had now sworn not to lie in front of him, he should believe him. As he was just pressing the worry doll with gentle squeezes, Harenir overlapped and held his hand.

While fiddling with the doll together, he spoke:

"You don't need to worry. For a while, I had nightmares of you disappearing, but sleeping together with you made it fine..."

"..."

"And the nightmare from before was content that repeated the moment my mother disappeared while sealing the Dedium. That fellow, my father, tried to offer me as a sacrifice to the Dedium with the reason of becoming a subject of the new world, and after my mother stood in his way, the day she offered herself and sealed the monster kept appearing in my dreams."

He was surprised at Harenir's calm confession. He didn't know that he had peeked at all his nightmares, and since he hadn't mentioned it either, it had naturally been buried as a secret. Though he had spoken with a nuance before that it was related to 'that day,' this was the first time he had revealed all the contents in such detail.

"Even on the day I became a holy knight, the day I connected with the holy sword, and also the day I became a hero receiving God's grace and was confirmed as the Holy Knight Commander, I dreamt that dream. It was a time when Encroachment Zones remained in the empire, so it would have been the effect of being continuously conscious of the Dedium, and perhaps I thought I should take responsibility because I was weak and sacrificed my mother..."

"Harenir, that-"

"I know. It was an excessive thought. Still, perhaps because the shock I saw in my young days was great, it lasted quite a long time."

"..."

"But since you eliminated the Dedium, I no longer have such dreams. It's all thanks to you."

At the end of the calmly continued story, a serious expression of gratitude was attached. It was so full of sincerity that after moving his lips a few times, he finally confessed as if spewing it out:

"Actually, I saw your nightmares from the beginning."

"...Pardon?"

"When you had that dream in the desert, it all came into my mind. It was because the nightmare kept repeating that I finally went to wake you up, but I couldn't bring myself to tell you I had peeked at everything..."

He closed his eyes tightly and confessed, feeling sorry for revealing the truth only now, but somehow there was no response from Harenir. As he kept silent continuously, wondering if he might be angry, he carefully opened his eyes slightly and examined him.

But on Harenir's face that he checked, only a bright smile was hanging. Since it was a very joyful expression, he asked dazedly:

"Aren't you angry? I'm saying I knew everything from the start..."

"Why would I be angry? Knowing that, you didn't laugh at me, didn't try to wield it as a weakness, and also didn't act like you knew everything about me."

...Should I see that as his expectations of me being very low? No, rather than that, it should be explained as a cynical effect on human relationships itself. Hadn't countless people seen and revered Harenir only as a flawless hero?

Though Harenir himself had acted to appear as such an image, gradually people would have demanded more perfection from him. Looking at him, he realized that being adored by everyone wasn't necessarily just a good thing.

"Rather, I'm happy about the fact that even before, you cared about me."

"...Aren't you seeing it too positively?"

"I can't help it. Despite knowing all that, the only action you took toward me was gifting this kind of doll. When I think of you making it while struggling alone..."

Harenir lightly shook the worry doll while bursting into a small laugh. Feeling embarrassed at the sight of the buttons wobbling, he cleared his throat and slightly lowered his head.

Strangely, heat had risen fully to his ears. Was it because of the embarrassing appearance of the doll, or was it the effect of his chest area tickling because Harenir's heart, which only accepted everything about him positively, was so immense? Though he tried to deliberately cover it with his hair since his ears would probably have reddened, Harenir seemed to have already noticed long ago.

Harenir firmly kissed his earlobe and embraced him more deeply. Thump, thump, thump. By now his heart was beating very rapidly, so perhaps it was impossible to hide from the start.

"Isaph. I'm completely fine as long as I have you."

"...Doesn't that also mean everything becomes not fine if I'm not there?"

"I suppose so."

He was bewildered, wondering if a state with the premise that he must be together only with him could truly be considered fine. However, seeing Harenir's reaction accepting that as natural, responsibility came behind his bewilderment.

Perhaps the reason he had felt there was a problem with those words was worry stemming from affection. And well, he had no thoughts of separating from Harenir's side either.

Nestling, resting his head on his chest, he spoke:

"Yes, then you'll continue to be fine in the future too."

Harenir's happy laughter echoed ticklishly in his ear. By now, their hearts were beating at a similar pace.

Having perceived that Harenir's mood had become quite good, he subtly requested:

"Can't we go out to see the snow?"

"It's too cold, so no. And you're very sensitive to cold."

"But I want to walk together with you."

He wanted to take the first step together with Harenir on the pristine white snowfield without a single footprint. Honestly speaking, he shook his clothes collar that he had grabbed.

Since he didn't feel like working more anyway, at the dimension of ventilation, and also aiming to attack using the gap where Harenir was joyful, he had to. As he continued to plead saying he had no intention of going far, just walking in the garden, Harenir finally nodded his head slowly.

"Instead, you must wear very warm clothes when going out."

He quickly nodded his head at Harenir's condition and stood up. Almost as if running, he walked and stood in front of the door leading to the garden, in case he might change his mind.

As he was stamping his feet impatiently, wanting to go out quickly, Harenir came from the other side bringing clothes and laughed dryly. He was about to gesture for him to come quickly, but... he paused seeing the clothes he was holding.

Wouldn't you roll around wearing that much? Looking dubiously at the thick fur clothes that wouldn't be strange to become a ball as soon as one wore them, he turned abruptly his body.

"Isaph!"

He sprang out toward the outside. It was from the confidence that since the indoor clothes he was wearing now were quite warm enough, there was no need to specially prepare such excessive outerwear. Wasn't he seeing him as too frail?

Without giving Harenir time to stop him, he quickly ran out and savored the snowfield. He looked up gladly at the heavy snow pouring down, and also looked down joyfully at the footprints he was leaving first on the pristine white snowfield...

Then he went back.

"...I'll wear it."

His bravado ended after just two steps. Having stayed only in the warm mansion, he had forgotten how cold the winter chill was. It was the end of someone intoxicated by a cozy space. Though it was shameful, he deliberately put on a brazen mask and showed both arms to Harenir, saying to clothe him quickly.

Harenir opened his two eyes round, then soon burst into laughter and embraced him. Whether the incident that had happened in an instant was so funny, he chuckled with amusement with even his shoulders bobbing. Feeling extremely embarrassed, he grumbled that he had just checked the temperature, and to give him the outerwear quickly.

Only after laughing for a while did Harenir clothe him. Not only that, he made him equipped with a scarf, hat, gloves, and fur shoes as well, and now he followed him docilely too.

"Wow. Though I thought I had become very familiar with this garden, now that snow has accumulated, it's another scenery. Come see it too, quickly."

Exclamations came out spontaneously with each step taken. The heavy snow that had poured since morning had completely newly landscaped the garden. The white trees and bushes were fascinating, and the snow flowers were also very beautiful.

Wanting to share this appreciation quickly, he turned to look at Harenir, but he was only watching his steps in case he might fall. A dry laugh burst out as he responded to his words saying it was pretty without even looking at the scenery.

Only then did Harenir raise his head. But that too wasn't because he was pricked, but only to see his smiling face. While becoming bewildered at his blue eyes looking only at him, on the other hand he eventually became pleased at such a blind affection.

He still loved Harenir, and he still gratefully acknowledged the reality of being together with him. There was no change between the day they first came to the garden together and today. Rather, it should be properly expressed that they had deepened with each other.

Was it thanks to the thickly worn clothes, or because of the warmth transmitted from their hands held together? Gladly welcoming the heartbeat that made his whole body warm, he moved his steps again.

It was a day like any other.

- <The Hero's Crown> Side Story, End