
IZUSHIRO
ILLUST RURIA MIYUKI
THE GREATEST MAGIC MASTER'S RETIREMENT PLAN
2


LIBERA
Receiving that order, the AWR released the dense wind at close range, bursting at the woman. The gale, which was like a compressed tornado, turned into countless blades of air.


Tesfia Fable
A novice Magicmaster from a noble family. After learning of Alus' abilities, she has become more earnest in facing the path of a Magicmaster.
Felinella Socalent
A second-year student at the Institute. On top of her beauty and grace, she also has the exceptional abilities of a Triple Digit Magicmaster.
Alice Tilake
The pleasant childhood friend of Tesfia. Behind her smile lurks a sad past.
Loki Leevahl
A transfer student from the military, and a capable spotter. Alus' partner in missions.
Alus Reigin
Ranked as No. 1, the genius and greatest Magicmaster. As he was raised in the military, he can be ignorant to the ways of the world.


“But are you serious about examining me...?”
The blush on her face turned redder and redder. She seemed to be imagining the scene that Alus was offering up.





The Greatest Magicmaster's Retirement Plan

CONTENTS

2

Fifth Chapter The Storm Begins

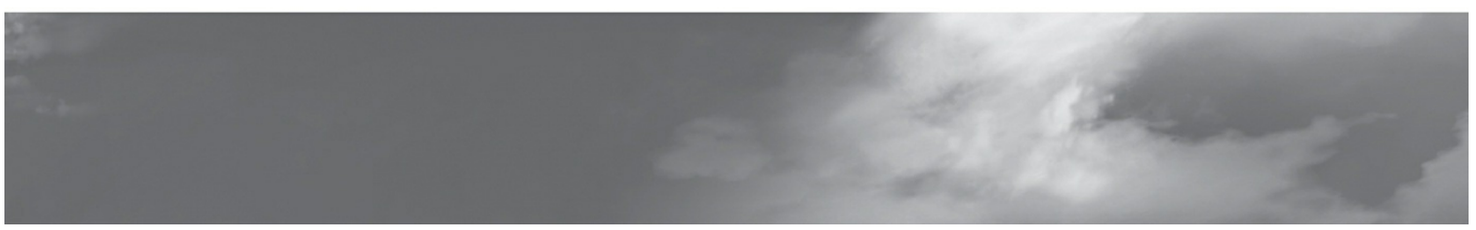
Sixth Chapter Outer World

Seventh Chapter Converging Turbulence

Eighth Chapter Broken Memories

Ninth Chapter Fomenting Darkness

Afterword



Fifth Chapter

The Storm Begins

The always lively students gathered in the cafeteria commons to fill their stomachs.

Oblivious to all else, they believed somewhere deep inside that today would just be another day.

However, with their assumptions so easily broken, the students stopped eating, as if they'd forgotten their hunger. Pale faces, unable to hide their shock, lined the tables.

Even after lunch, the Institute bustled with conversations about the upcoming live combat training in the form of an extracurricular lesson. It was only inevitable, as the students had never seen a Fiend in the flesh.

And today, more people than normal had crowded around Tesfia and Alice, the reason for which was later revealed during the usual training session at Alus' laboratory.

"We don't even know if we can form our own groups. We got a little ahead of ourselves, didn't we?" Tesfia remarked.

"That's true," Alice said. "I wasn't sure what to think about that."

The two winced and smiled wryly.

That said—there wasn't much composure in their expressions. Seeing how troubled their classmates looked must've rattled their nerves. On top of that, they'd finally become aware of the reason behind their training, as a clear goal was now in sight.

While they weren't able to casually crack jokes, they'd become proficient enough at their training to be able to hold a conversation in the middle of working on their mana control.

From what Alus could tell, they probably continued training even after returning to their dorm. Their hard work was paying off.

They no longer needed to pinch each other to move their mana, and the fact that they had no trouble doing this, despite chatting while they did so, was proof they were getting the hang of it. Their mana movement was still sluggish, but they were progressing astoundingly fast.

“Apparently, there will be more information as we get closer to the day,” Alice said.

“Rather than rushing to form groups, it would be more constructive to train on how to defeat Fiends.”

Hearing Tesfia say this, Alus had to hold himself back from saying, ‘That’s rich, coming from you,’ settling instead for smiling bitterly. Of course, the two girls couldn’t see his expression, due to the mountain of books between them.

“Well, the principal’s the one who will decide on the groups of five, anyways,” he told them.

“—!!” But the two were only surprised for a moment.

“Sir Alus!” Loki intervened, in a reproachful tone of voice. It wasn’t like he’d been told to keep quiet about it, but she seemed to see it as leaking information, regardless of how trivial it was.

“What does it matter?” Alus’ words conveyed his opinion that his talk with Sisty wasn’t something that needed to be kept secret. Nor did he feel obliged to keep it hidden.

“But... How do you know that?” Tesfia gave Alus a doubtful glance, but Alus, on the other side of the mountain of books, shrugged it off. He wouldn’t flinch over this, even without the barrier in place.

“Because I heard about it from the principal. Use your head a little, will you?”

“... Urk!”

Though he couldn’t see her, Alus imagined Tesfia grinding her teeth in mortification.

“Al, I wonder who you will group up with?”

“Who knows?” Alus answered Alice’s question. “But the other people in whatever group I end up in won’t have anything to do.” Sisty hadn’t gone as far

as to tell him the groupings. Well, he didn't need to know, nor was there any point in finding out. It was unnecessary noise that might even get in the way of his actions during the exercise, in the worst-case scenario.

"If anything, won't Al's ranking be revealed if he takes part?" Tesfia asked, as if Alus had forgotten about what he needed to keep confidential.

"Do you really think I'd screw up like that? ... But wait a moment. In that case, I could just be a spectator instead. It would be a good chance for you to learn how harsh the Outer World is. Hee hee."

Tesfia responded to Alus' disquieting statement with, "That would be unfortunate for us too..."

However, Loki laudably declared, "There's no need for Sir Alus to go through such trouble." And in the event Loki would take over for Alus, the students likely wouldn't have a chance to experience the harshness of the Outer World either.

In reality, it had already been decided that Alus wouldn't take part in the extracurricular lesson, but he chose to pretend like he was still participating.

During his duel with Tesfia, she had been remarkably sharp and noticed that Alus was holding back. That said, if he got serious, it would be impossible to completely conceal his true capabilities.

Of course, if he could just be a spectator, he wouldn't have anywhere near as much trouble on his hands. That's right—the principal might let him take it easy sometimes... but in return, some of the students in the extracurricular lesson might not return safely.

"You have a terrible personality," Tesfia said flatly.

"I'm sure everyone around you would talk poorly about you, Al. You would just let everyone except yourself fight any Fiends you'd encounter, right?" Alice asked.

"Hmm..."

Like Alice said, if Alus didn't fight, there was a high chance that the people around him would see him as a coward who'd lost heart before the Fiends.

A Single Digit's true worth only came into view in the Outer World where the Fiends ran rampant. So Alus being thought of as a coward behind his back, despite being the strongest Magicmaster, would be utterly humiliating.

Alus shrugged, then hung his head and let out a sigh. In the end, he'd get caught up in trouble either way. "Looks like it'll be a pain regardless. In fact, what are the Magicmasters in charge of the defenses even doing? Wipe out those weaklings during your regular patrols, will you?"

But even if all Fiends in the area were wiped out, a different location would just be chosen for the extracurricular lesson. And when he thought about it, the military was shorthanded because he had left it. He couldn't deny that truth, but it still didn't sit right with him.

Seeing Alus' fed-up expression, Tesfia began feeling anxious and posed him a question. "I don't think you'd go this far, but... you wouldn't pretend not to see a team member about to be killed... would you?"

"..." Alus said nothing.

"Hey!! That would be a problem too! Do you even need to lower people's trust in you like that? You can't be serious..." Tesfia was dumbfounded, but in the next moment her expression sobered.

That's right. Alus had two faces. And one was the cold, merciless face of an emotionless battle machine. Tesfia remembered the look.

"No, I've never once wanted to earn their trust."

That wasn't the answer Tesfia was looking for, and she responded in a somewhat heartbroken tone, "That's not it. I mean ours!"

"... Hm?" It was as if she was questioning if he didn't value their blossoming (or so she saw it) bond. "No, I don't need that either," Alus swiftly and casually said in his usual blunt fashion... going against her expectations.

Suddenly, the girls' expressions changed into astonished and depressed ones. Even Loki, next to him, couldn't hide her dejected face at his careless words.

Feeling the suddenly gloomy atmosphere, Alus realized he'd been too harsh and scratched his cheek awkwardly. These kinds of things made it clear to him

that words were a difficult thing to use. Either way, this was an atmosphere he was unused to.

Maybe, deep down, they all wished for Alus to be acknowledged by everyone. Or, perhaps his way of speaking that purposefully isolated himself, allowed them to catch a glimpse of the wall that remained inside of him. Though he himself might not even be aware of it...

Meanwhile, Loki wasn't particularly interested in the level of trust between Alus and the two girls. If anything, it'd be more convenient for her if there was none. But when she saw Alus' slightly bitter expression, her chest started hurting, which showed on her face. It seemed that Loki was very sensitive when it came to Alus.

Ignoring the general mood of anxiety, Alus tore up the note in his hand, rolled it up and flicked it away. Flying in a beautiful parabola, it struck its mark right on Tesfia's forehead.

Tesfia twitched, and looked over at Alus with her mouth open.

"You can say stuff like that after you've slain a Fiend. For now, you can just try not to wet yourself." Alus had a tendency to change the atmosphere, but as expected he couldn't say anything sensible.

"S-Sheesh! I can't believe you!" Thanks to Alus' provocative and uncalled-for remark, Tesfia's face turned red, and she had an angry outburst. But now she wasn't as serious as before.

In that sense, the atmosphere between Tesfia and Alus was different from the anxiety the girls were feeling before. This kind of back and forth was an everyday occurrence.

That said, it usually started because Alus teased her, or was too harsh. It was a verbal tit for tat. Alternatively, the cause would be Alus trying to be tactful when it didn't suit him, and he'd slip up.

However, Tesfia usually couldn't fight against Alus and, after an outburst or two, she'd end up silently focusing on her training. Even if he threw some abusive language her way, it wasn't bad enough to make her run off. Most of the time she unhappily kept quiet.

Eventually, she'd end up asking for hints in her training, and Alus would conclude that she had a self-centered personality.

Alus couldn't understand that part of her, but at the same time there was something familiar about it. Rather than seeing them as a male and female, calling them bad friends stuck together was probably going too far... but in any case, this kind of relationship was limited to him and Tesfia.

Leaving the now-enraged Tesfia aside, Alus continued to change the topic. "For the time being, you should prepare for live combat against the Fiends. For better or worse, this is something you have to try to get a feel for."

The girls were so focused on the 'live combat against the Fiends' part that they overlooked the implication in his expression.

"

"Does that mean moving on to the next step?" Tesfia quickly reacted.

In response, Alus wordlessly and casually threw something her way. It was the stick he'd broken in two before. And the other half was thrown to Alice. The two cautiously but hurriedly caught them.

"Normally this wouldn't be until a little later, but you should be able to manage it now."

Tesfia's and Alice's expressions suddenly lit up. They'd been acknowledged by Alus, or at least their efforts had paid off, and satisfied smiles of joy appeared on their faces.

However, in the next moment, the characteristic *psshhh* sound of mana dispersing sounded out.

The two awkwardly looked at each other with an, 'Ah.'

Regarding them, Alus thought to himself that maybe it was still too early, as he rested his chin in the palm of his hand.

* * *

It was the day before the extracurricular lesson.

The tension that had been rising in the Institute day after day was at its peak.

That prickly atmosphere was mostly coming from the grim-faced freshman students. Ever since the extracurricular lesson was announced, they'd been booking up the training grounds after school every day.

Of course, the first-years had the lowest priority, but that didn't stop the large number of reservations from the anxious students.

Physical damage in the training grounds was converted into mental damage, but in the Outer World a serious injury would be life-threatening. Despite their resolve, the novice Magicmasters had never experienced a situation like that, which was why they devoted themselves to their training.

They weren't even sure that concentrating on training was the correct decision or not, but they couldn't help themselves. However, apart from the training grounds, there wasn't anywhere else where the open use of magic was allowed, resulting in complaints from those who didn't get a spot.

The Institute responded by establishing a temporary special permit area. That said, as Fiends varied in shape and characteristics, there wasn't much point in training against other people, so the temporary area was enough to silence the protestors.

The groups had been announced a week ago. After that, students could be seen everywhere discussing strategies and combinations. Seeing how the situation had calmed down, it seemed that the students had—albeit forcibly—resolved themselves to face the dangers.

On top of that, their lessons had been changed. Now, all the lessons were about battles against Fiends and their characteristics. The students who had been serious, but still somewhat relaxed, were fully into it now as they realized their lives were at stake.

Since Tesfia and Alice had some of the highest ranks in the first-year class, they didn't end up in the same group. Moreover, it appeared that the average rank of the five members had been prioritized when forming the groups. The principal had also ranked the groups, and assigned the more worrisome groups with more competent supervisors.

By now, the students were either visibly tense, or they hid their unrest behind a calm appearance. In any event, the confusion from before had been

somewhat alleviated.

Rather than feel relieved, Alus figured that the upperclassmen supervisors hadn't ever seen a Fiend before, either. The students had felt threatened at first, but as they'd never come into direct contact with a Fiend, that sensation had gradually weakened. If anything, it was difficult to maintain tension with preparations and the passage of time.

Another aspect was group mentality.

By forming into groups, people had a tendency to divvy up responsibility and goals, thinking that someone else could do something even if they themselves couldn't. This was a trap that beginners easily fell into.

In the Outer World, this kind of negligence was fatal. In basic training in the military, that naivety got thoroughly eradicated.

Those immature enough to overestimate their abilities, or who were overly ambitious, would have their inadequacy beaten into them by the Outer World.

Then again, by the time they understood that, it was often already too late.

"There won't be any training today," Alus said, as the usual four, excluding Felinella, gathered at a table in the cafeteria.

Whenever Alus joined Tesfia, Alice and Loki, they would get stared at for some reason. While indifferently wondering why, Alus hoped this wouldn't become an everyday ordeal, as he continued, "Tomorrow you'll be using up a lot of stamina."

He'd suddenly made this proposal, but Tesfia and Alice obediently accepted it. They must have felt the same way. Unlike their simple mana control training, training to hold back the mana repulsion using the stick required a lot of mana.

"Agreed! I want to have a final meeting with the other members of my group, too," Tesfia said.

"Yes, I need to do the same," said Alice.

It seemed they understood Alus' intentions as well. Alus felt he'd done what he could when it came to refining their training. It would all be made clear tomorrow, but he believed they exceeded expectations.

When lessons for the day came to an end, not a single student in the class went home... apart from Alus and Loki.

Alus said, “Tomorrow’s going to be a busy day.”

“Yes.”

Like the other students, Tesfia and Alice remained in the main building. The two had probably noticed that while Alus and Loki were initially assigned to groups, the principal had later removed them.

Which was why Alus was on his way back with Loki. The only thing planned for today was finalizing the details for tomorrow with the principal later on tonight. In fact, Alus had been meeting with the principal almost every day up till today. And according to his own thinking, they’d discussed everything they needed to.

He personally felt like he’d been set up, but since it was part of a deal, he’d gotten serious about it partway through. But even then, they couldn’t be perfectly sure. In the end, the safety of the extracurricular lesson would depend heavily on the students’ capabilities. Like he’d told Sisty when this whole thing first came up, at best he could just reduce the number of casualties.

Loki should be aware of the importance of her own role as well. He could expect solid work from someone experienced like her.

His only point of concern was that the reinforcements that had been formed didn’t look like they’d be of much use. The reinforcements had been drawn from the more capable upperclassmen that weren’t selected to be supervisors. That said, more than ninety percent lacked any experience.

People like Felinella, who were as experienced as active-duty Magicmasters, were exceptionally rare.

“Loki, I’ll take care of cleaning up the mess. You don’t leave your post,” Alus said once more for emphasis. He’d said the same thing in the past. By the way, by ‘cleaning up the mess,’ he meant making up for whatever the reinforcements couldn’t handle.

Loki was expressionless as usual as she replied, “Understood,” and cast her eyes down. It seemed she wasn’t feeling very tense.

Well, in reality, the chances of meeting a high-classed Fiend in the area of the extracurricular lesson were low. Even in the one-in-a-million chance of a large-scale Fiend invasion, one of the detectors set in place could locate it. As the effective range covered a good 20 km out from the defense line, it would be possible to cancel the lesson and retreat.

In that sense, while preparations weren't perfect, they were as good as they could be.

* * *

Before anyone knew it, it had become Loki's job to open the door to the laboratory.

Since they lived together, her mana had been registered in the console. She placed her hand on the panel, allowing her mana information to be read and identified, resulting in the lock opening. The door then slowly slid open.

By the way, Loki always had a happy, deeply moved smile on her face whenever she opened the door to Alus' rooms. Alus once asked her the reason for this, but what he got in response was, "This is only my natural role!" This was said in an elevated tone, with the follow-up, "That 'naturalness' is what makes me happy."

Of course, this made no sense to him.

The laboratory itself had changed a lot this past month, almost all of which came from Loki living there.

It started with a simple partitioning of a corner of the laboratory. The bedroom, with Alus and his personal belongings, was a little cramped for two. After Tesfia's persistent arguing, Loki's personal room was built.

Loki was unhappy with the establishment of a space separating her from Alus, but as this was his minimum requirement, she had no choice but to reluctantly accept it. Though there were a lot of research materials and books, there was more than enough space for Loki's created room. Alus' bedroom was simply too small.

Normally Alus would devote himself to his research whenever he had even a little bit of time, but not today. As Sisty needed to gather the necessary

documents for their final meeting, it had been scheduled for late at night. That was when Alus would usually do his research, but today he pulled out a jet-black case hidden in a corner of his bedroom.

Loki, looking on from behind, had a mystified expression.

“Geez, to think I’d need to use this again so soon.”

He’d muttered this to himself, but Loki posed him a question. “What is that, Sir Alus?” She always stood upright in an orderly fashion when she was with him, but right now she was bending over a little, peeking over Alus’ shoulder in curiosity.

“This is my AWR... Night Mist.”

There was that many-legged ogre he’d dealt with the other day, and now he’d need it yet again. Alus found the thought of having to open this case so many times after coming to the Institute unbearable.

That said, having accepted the principal’s request, he knew better than anyone that he’d need to borrow his AWR’s strength in order to do his best to assist in the extracurricular lesson.

“Will you be using it?”

“That would be the easiest way.”

He couldn’t say, *Can’t you tell*? With his logical personality, he thought it was clear he was going to use it since he’d brought it out, and Loki should have known that as well. It seemed more like the nature of her question was one of curiosity.

Strictly speaking, this was the second time she’d seen Alus’ AWR in person. But, the first time, the blade remained in the scabbard, and at best she’d only caught a glimpse of the scabbard and handle through the robe he was wearing. That’s why this was the first time she’d seen Night Mist up close.

Ignoring her expectations, Alus casually passed mana through the clasp. With a soft *click* sound, the clasp undid itself. He removed the cover with familiar motions, an eerie sensation coming from the scabbard.

Inside was a weapon connected to the scabbard through a chain.

In order to fit the chain that was connected to the handle, there was an additional storage compartment in the scabbard. Due to that, the scabbard ended up being somewhat longer than the blade.

Lengthwise, it could even be called a knife, but the blade was double-edged; so perhaps it was more apt to call it a short sword. The thin chain attached to the handle continued on into the scabbard.

"—!"

The reason Loki gasped for breath was because in the next moment, Alus had unsheathed the blade. As the blade was drawn, a soft sound rang out, followed by the imposing metallic rasp of the chain's rings scraping against the blade and scabbard.

The blade had a black luster. And its simplistic yet elegant design, combined with its strange presence and pressure, made it clear that this was made to reliably and steadily slay Fiends.

However, that simplicity was what surprised Loki. AWRs were assist weapons intended to help facilitate the use of magic. Which was why AWRs were engraved with complicated magic formulas all over.

Yet Night Mist had not a single character for a formula on its blade. That went against common sense, even more so with it being the AWR of choice for the current No. 1.

As if reading her mind, Alus said, "The magic formulas are engraved... here." He grabbed hold of the chain that connected the handle and scabbard, pulling on it. The chain rattled as it stretched across the floor without end.

Loki's eyes opened wide with surprise, and she looked like she realized something. She timidly asked, "May I touch it?"

"Of course. It's nothing that interesting, though."

Though he sounded modest, Alus wasn't just an excellent Magicmaster, but a great magical engineer as well.

Night Mist was the fruit of his labor as a magical engineer, and any AWR craftsmen or magical engineers who laid their eyes on it would surely be

overcome with the urge to study it up close, though he himself didn't think it that impressive.

But just the fact that it was the AWR that the current strongest Magicmaster used was enough to grab Loki's interest. She tentatively scooped up the chain in her hands. "—! On all of these... are magic formulas engraved on all of these rings?"



“Yeah, makes it really easy to use. Of course, you need to learn all of the spells.”

As mentioned before, by engraving magic formulas into AWRs, the AWRs could assist with the use of magic. However, it was standard practice to limit it to one attribute. The magic formulas worked by identifying the attribute that made up the spell, and constructing the structural elements of it. In short, it omitted the need for an incantation.

Moreover, as the basic magic formulas required to determine an attribute were so vast, it was more effective to limit and specialize in a single one.

And since engraving the same AWR with magic formulas of several different attributes resulted in them leeching mana off each other and obstructing the activation of the formula, such practice was not recommended.

In short, the merit of having two or more basic magic formulas that determined the attribute was outweighed by the big deficit of using up more mana. Also, the magic formula used in the activation of spells was a construct of several different formulas.

For example, for the Icicle Sword spell, the ice attribute was the basis of the spell, and on top of that there would be the convergence, fixation, coordinates for the activation and establishment of the strength, as well as the process of molding the sword itself.

Tesfia being able to create that with just the basic magic formula for ice attribute spells being engraved on her AWR was thanks to her affinity and her efforts. Or rather, in the modern field of AWRs, that was the common approach and one of the answers that humanity had reached after many years of research.

The forgotten characters that made up the magic formulas, Lost Spells, also required a certain physical size. In addition, as the base formula for establishing the attribute was rather long, just engraving the foundation required an AWR with a relatively large surface area.

By the way, the merit of engraving just the basic magic formula was that a wide array of spells within that attribute could be used with a lowered burden.

Of course, that merely simplified the process, and if the user was inexperienced additional parts of the process needed to be engraved as well in order for the spell to take proper form. Engraving the entirety of a spell required the attribute formula plus a little more, needing even more space.

Doing this kind of process meant that the AWR could only use a single spell, but in exchange it would not only completely omit the incantation process, but also bring out the full power of the spell. It also required that the user perfectly understand the magic formula.

But, in reality, there were very few Magicmasters that understood a magic formula to the point of bringing out its full power. So it was generally more effective to only engrave the basic attribute formula and use the AWR to assist with a variety of spells. That's why normally no one engraved an entire formula on their AWR.

But Alus was different.

"Every link in this chain... is a different spell, isn't it?" The typically expressionless Loki shuddered. The larger a magic formula was engraved, the more effective its support would be.

On the other hand, the smaller the engraving, the more precise the required mana control, and focusing on that in the middle of battle was as difficult as threading a needle in the dark. Not to mention, there was also the minimum size necessary for the formula, as stated before.

Moreover, once a magic formula received mana, the construction of the spell began. After a Magicmaster intentionally focused on the construction of a spell, the magic formula would take over until the spell materialized.

That said, the process for materializing might need to be retraced, and an inexperienced Magicmaster would need to chant a verse or two. Shortening that formula would result in problems occurring in the materialization process. In that case, there wasn't much difference from incanting the entire spell from the start.

"I removed the basic affinity formula in exchange for entire formulas. In my case, there's no benefit in figuring out the attribute."

“But, how would the ma...” Loki stopped herself before finishing with, ‘magic materialize.’

It had been engraved like this because there were no problems. Alus being the greatest Magicmaster was proof of that, and he wordlessly stared at her.

Loki immediately apologized with an “E-Excuse me,” lowering her head. To her, doubting that the magic would actually activate was the same as doubting Alus himself, and she realized her huge slip of the tongue.

Seeing her shrink back in fear, Alus smiled wryly. If he were to be considerate and tell her ‘Don’t worry about it,’ she might become even more ashamed. So he settled for, “Well, it’s not a big deal.”

After letting Loki know her slip up wasn’t as serious as she thought, her gloomy expression let up a little. “T-That’s true.” After confirming thus that this was no problem for the greatest Magicmaster, she smiled proudly for some reason.

“Loki, I won’t tell you to get ready for battle, but you should make sure to at least be able to put up a fight. You never know what might happen.”

“I am always ready for combat.” A reassuring answer. Well, as she’d overcome harsh missions in the Outer World, it seemed this had been just unnecessary worry on his part.

Next, Loki pulled out a throwing knife AWR from her waist.

“...”

That action in itself wasn’t all that surprising. But... right now she was wearing her Institute uniform. And she didn’t look like she was armed in the slightest. In other words, her uniform must’ve been adjusted to allow her to hide knives. Perhaps he should have noticed that sooner?

But Alus was ignorant when it came to clothing—especially women’s clothing. Taking a closer look, there appeared to be a hidden pocket attached to her skirt. That certainly wasn’t a standard issue Institute uniform. Maybe nobody ever brought it up due to Loki’s ranking...

Just when did she have the time for that?

Alus would have liked to prepare himself for tomorrow, but in reality he had no need for it. So he used the time to head over to the principal's office early.

"Al, Loki dear!"

On the way, they met up with Alice who was on her way back to her dorm. She was planning on coming over to them anyways, so Alus couldn't understand why she'd bother shouting.

"Looks like you stayed behind for quite a while," Alus said to her. That was unexpected. In his view, just voluntarily staying behind was putting in considerable effort. In fact, this was around the time Alice's training at Alus' place would normally end.

"Everyone else is still there. Fia is keeping at it, too."

So that was why. The two were always together, so Alus had begun to think of the two as a set. If anything, seeing Alice alone like this was a rare sight.

"She must have some pretty bad luck." This extracurricular lesson was fairly trivial to Alus. So a meeting on it dragging on like this must mean that either Tesfia hadn't been blessed with good teammates, or their group couldn't be controlled.

"Haha... even if you say that, today's the day before the lesson. I think everyone's pretty much the same," Alice said, with a wry smile. Not asserting herself was so like her. "As someone in the 4000s, Fia can't leave the others be. Everyone's desperate and really passionately discussing things. But Fia's group doesn't seem to be meshing well with their supervisor."

Alus nodded understandingly. Tesfia was stubborn, and once she'd decided on something, she wouldn't bend. If she was dealing with someone she couldn't see eye to eye with, the situation would only get worse. "Then this is a good opportunity for her to learn of my hardships."

Behind him, Loki nodded in agreement.

Alice flashed a bitter smile and tried to change the topic. "Where are you two headed?" As Alice knew he was working with the principal, there was no need to hide it.

“To the principal’s office.”

“... Could it be about tomorrow?”

“There’s a lot of work for us to do too, but that’s nothing you need to worry about.”

“Hmm... I see. Then try not to keep at it too late, you two. We’ll be getting up early tomorrow.”

“That’s up to the principal, but I’ll keep it in mind.”

Alice seemed to sense something, and got a worried look. Alus felt a little bad about it, but he couldn’t go into details with her.

“Sorry for taking your time. Let’s do our best tomorrow... Loki dear.” Alice was about to cheer on Alus in her usual familiar fashion, out of habit. But she had realized that saying that to the current ranked No. 1 might be considered rude. Unable to take back what she’d already said, she changed her target over to Loki instead. However, shortly following that, Alice realized that Loki didn’t need to be cheered on either.

“...”

“...” “...”

Loki didn’t go so far as to tell her that this was none of her business, but an awkward silence fell over the three.

Even Alice, who was the reason for this complicated atmosphere, hesitated to start a new topic to change the mood.

Alus found that unusual, considering how innocent she was. Well, that was just how anxious she must be feeling. Unlike the frank Tesfia, while Alice was considerate of others, she had an overly-sensitive side to her.

“Well, if anything happens, I’ll help you out,” Alus muttered to her, as he passed by her. When it came to fighting power, the two should be decent. And they shouldn’t find themselves struggling against low-classed Fiends. But even then, the girls themselves were anxious. No matter how much Alus encouraged them, it wouldn’t rid them of their fear of battle against an unknown foe. That’s why the current No. 1 offering to help meant a lot.

In truth, he'd been forced to accept a lot of trouble. Having a little more trouble on his hands wasn't going to change much by now.

But even then—

"... T-Thank you!" Alice smiled brightly, as if she'd been waiting for him to say this.

After giving her a nod, Alus and Loki hastened their pace.

Alice stared at their backs. There was no longer any anxiety to be seen in her face. That might just be a temporary thing, but her overhanging gloom was gone for now.

But Alus wasn't done. When he was far enough away, he gazed into the darkness and said, "Because this might be the last..." with an emotionless expression.

* * *

"But we should be able to do something too, Principal."

"It's already been decided. It can't be changed now."

At the principal's door, hearing quarreling coming from inside, Alus hesitated for a moment.

He was going to knock, but shortly after that he reconsidered it, opened the door without waiting for an answer, and stepped inside. Sisty had already been working him hard enough. He no longer had to be considerate enough to knock.

As a result, he entered at the same time as Sisty's answer came. But unlike the normal approvals, this one time she told him to wait outside—creating an awkward situation.

In accordance with standard manners, Alus was to blame for this, so he clicked his tongue at the problematic situation before him. He figured he could just wait inside the room in a corner... by doing that, he hoped that the troublesome guests before him would read the atmosphere and hurry up with their business, but that proved to be a naïve hope.

Inside the principal's office was Principal Sisty, himself, Loki, and five other people.

The male student who appeared to be the leader of the group stood a step ahead of the rest, facing the principal on the other side of her desk.

The glances cast at the intruders that were interrupting this discussion were full of displeasure.

Feeling like things were about to become a pain in the ass, Alus retraced his steps in an attempt to leave.

“You... What business do you have with the principal?” the leader said, with contempt in his eyes. A mere student asking Alus what his business was instead of the principal was incredibly impolite. But Sisty didn’t rebuke him.

Alus bluntly replied, “It’s private.”

Next, Sisty spoke out. “Could you wait a moment?” she asked, indicating the sofa inside the office. In short, she was pretty much saying it was Alus’ fault for being rude, so he deserved to be caught up in this too.

With no other choice, Alus nodded and sat down, Loki following suit.

The group had a visibly surprised reaction when they saw Loki. Nobody went so far as to raise their voice, but they’d never expected that the girl with the second-highest rank in the Institute would be together with Alus.

In an attempt to recover the tense atmosphere, the leader restarted the dialogue.

Alus and Loki quietly listened, but the other members of the group were sneaking peeks at Loki with dumbfounded expressions.

Perhaps realizing this, the leader spoke up in a loud voice. “Principal, we want you to put us into the reinforcements. We will get everyone through the extracurricular lesson without a single casualty!”

“As I’ve said countless times, it’s too late to make any changes now.”

Backing up their leader, one of the remaining four group members opened his mouth. “With all due respect, this is not just the opinion of the five of us. There are many more second- and third-years who agree that this exercise is too harsh for the first-years.”

“There should be no problems with you being supervisors.”

The claim the group was making was on point in terms of efficiency. In other words, rather than working independently as supervisors, they would be able to work better together as a group of reinforcements.

However, this went against the meaning of the extracurricular lesson. If efficiency were to be prioritized while allowing the first-years to get the bare minimum of experience, then having Alus move against the Fiends would be far more certain.

“This matter has already been decided.” A measure of anger was mixed into Sisty’s voice. Her phrasing was strict, and it had enough of an impact to make the students shrink back for a moment. She was trying to cut away all their resistance with that one statement, as if to say that she was tired of dealing with kids.

... However, the group didn’t back down from their attempt. Next, they turned their attention to Loki seated on the sofa.

“Ms. Loki. As you are a first-year student, there is something I’d like to say to you.”

Alus was surprised they knew about Loki, but her ranking being what it was, it was only natural. She was already a celebrity at the Institute. As proof of that, the group’s behavior toward her—a freshman—was very polite. That was just how much influence and respect the high-ranking students had among the Institute students. If Loki sided with them, not even the principal could ignore them. Their goal was painfully obvious.

The silver-haired girl sitting next to Alus looked his way questioningly. And he returned her gaze with a fed-up look as if to say, ‘Handle it however you like.’

After closing her eyes a moment to think, Loki stood up with a determined expression. “I understand. This might certainly be too harsh for first-year students. However, I believe the principal has already considered this and put proper measures in place. That said, it’s not as if your point is without grounds. So why don’t you please start by telling me of your achievements.”

“Uh—!”

It was a crazy and unexpected question, but to Loki, confirming this was only

natural. If they were claiming that they'd be able to do good work, it was only reasonable for them to show proof of it. Of course, this was just to deal with them. Which was why Loki didn't ask for their ranks, but for their achievements.

And even if they did have any, there was no way they'd exceed Loki's own, meaning that she had an absolute advantage over them.

"Well, no, but in the Institute we're all high..."

"That's enough. Thank you," Loki interrupted the speaker with exasperation. That's right... that was enough. For starters, no matter how good they might be, they were still just students. Just the fact that they needed to tack on 'in the Institute' was all Loki needed to hear. "This is out of the question. What makes you think you can do good work when you don't have any experience? You say such strange things."

"Urk...!"

They were just wasting Alus' time without anything to back up their claims. Faced with such immaturity, Loki decided not to mince her words. Her thoughts were simple, and her cold eyes stared at her one goal. After all, Alus still needed to confirm the final details with the principal after this.

That must have looked like derision to the group. Their eyes turned grim, but Loki didn't care. "Please take your leave." Following up on that cold stare, she urged the group to leave in place of the principal.

"... Hmph, you'll regret this." The leader turned back to the principal, as if about to start the discussion again. "—!"

... And the principal responded by gesturing with her hand, indicating the way out. "This is a matter that has been decided on my authority. There's nothing you can do to overturn it," she said, as a finishing blow.

"... Excuse us." With that, the students stomped out of the room with hateful expressions. As the leader closed the door, he stared at Alus with a fierce look, but Alus brushed it off as usual.

"Hahhh..." Sisty sighed heavily. She leaned over her desk haphazardly, not even trying to conceal how exhausted she was.

Alus gave her a sidelong glance as he put his hand on Loki's head. While things hadn't gone the way he envisioned, the results were the same—that annoying group had left—so this was his way of praising her. Receiving a happy smile from Loki, he turned his attention back to Sisty. "Who were they?"

"Second and third years."

Of course, that wasn't what Alus wanted to hear, so he rephrased his question. "I understand that they want to join the reinforcements, but why?"

"For their careers, perhaps? Defeating Fiends will increase their rank, after all. Their final rank when they graduate will influence their military service."

"So that's how it is."

That was something hard to understand for Alus and Loki, who'd been in the military ever since they'd been aware of their surroundings. "But it still doesn't make sense. The role of the reinforcements isn't to actively defeat Fiends."

"It seems they must have misunderstood it."

"They probably wanted to pretend to be heroes," Loki said.

If Loki was right, that was a grand undertaking. Alus entertained the thought of having them receive their heroic posthumous promotions in the Outer World. But when he heard what the principal said next, he had a premonition that things were going to become bothersome.

"Perhaps. The truth is that they are all from well-off families."

"I see."

That referred to nobility, renowned or long-established families. People from those types of families all shared a fixation with rank. They had most likely been taught from childhood to earn a rank that wouldn't bring shame to their family.

That also explained the arrogant attitude before when the leader had asked Alus about his business here. Surely there weren't many that personified the nobility that Alus disliked as much as them.

They were a truly irritating kind of people... and probably, or rather definitely, a future source of trouble.

Alus didn't mention the premonition he had. It wouldn't make a difference now.

The principal had already gotten the top brass to approve their suggestions for improvements, and accepting that previous group's suggestion wouldn't have posed a problem with them either. But they'd already been considered for that position before, and the conclusion had been a resounding 'no.'

If those supervisors were allowed to join the reinforcements, the load on Loki, who would be in charge of dispatching them, would increase beyond what Alus could approve. She would be responsible for considering their abilities and dispatching up to 80 groups of reinforcements. That's why making adjustments on the fly, on-site, was easier and more realistic.

Moreover, if they were to do something suspicious, the situation would only become more complex. In short, it was an unacceptable option.

Concluding that any further thought on the matter was pointless, Alus moved on to the main topic. "About *that* issue, I'll get to work on it in the early morning."

"Yes, please do."

He was referring to cutting down the number of Fiends to reduce the risk of students running into any overly-powerful opponents.

Some might wonder why not just do it today, but that would be a fool's errand. Fiends were very active at night. As the sun set, the wavelength of the Fiends' mana changed drastically, attracting fellow Fiends and creating a chain of Fiends calling for more Fiends.

It was this nature of theirs that was the origin of the saying, *A dozen Fiends lurk near one in the open*.

If a single one found prey in the night, it would get excited and summon more of its kind... swarming in from every which way.

Also, Fiends had a tendency to gather when they smelled the blood of another of their kind. This tendency was weaker when the sun was still high. The reason was said to be the mana mixed in with the blood and other bodily fluids, but no one really knew for sure.

Either way, if Alus were to go hunt Fiends today, even more of them would gather the next day after smelling the blood and feeling the mana wavelengths. Which was why he would wait until the morning. “You’ll be the one bringing the equipment, right?”

“Yes. Preparations are already complete. They’ll be brought in the early morning.”

“I understand.” Having thus confirmed the important details, Alus posed Sisty a question. “What about my combat uniform?”

“It’s done, of course.” It must’ve been by her feet, as she ducked down to bring up a case and place it on her desk.

Alus thought the case was too secure-looking to just contain items of clothing.

“Go ahead,” Sisty said, turning the case so that the clasp faced him.

Alus undid the clasp and cautiously put his hand on the case. He was dealing with Sisty, so it wouldn’t be strange for there to be some surprise waiting within... but it turned out to be needless worry. That said, when he looked inside, he hesitated as to how to react. “...”

The first impression he got was... Well, he’d been the one to ask for it, so if he wanted to complain, he was barking up the wrong tree. But even so, he should be allowed to say something.

“Talk about bad taste.”

“...!” In contrast to Alus, whose cheeks were twitching, Loki stood on her tiptoes to peek over Alus’ shoulder, and when she did her eyes sparkled.

In the case was a black cloth with a white mask on top. There were two round holes for the eyes, and below, a larger hole for the mouth. It was an elliptical mask that was like a ghost’s face from a horror show.

“You think so? You seem to be the only one here that doesn’t like it. Our taste comes out on top with a two to one vote.” Astonishingly enough, it seemed Sisty really believed this was fine.

Considering her words, Alus didn’t need to look at Loki’s expression to find out her opinion. As someone born and raised in the military, he didn’t have the

qualification to speak for her tastes. The only clothes he had were plain, focused solely on function over form. But what was he to think about this? And if he could believe Sisty, he couldn't understand Loki's tastes if she liked this.

He started off by taking the mask and knocking on it to check its durability. It appeared to be made of the same material the military used for shields. In terms of pure strength, there was nothing to complain about. It was a blank mask. By wearing it, it hid not just the face, but all of the emotion on that face. The wearer would go beyond even Loki's doll-like expressionless face, and into the territory of a complete lack of anything that could be called an expression.

"I'm not happy about it, but I guess I have to thank you," Alus said with a sigh. The principal had given him an outfit to keep his identity from being exposed. Taste aside, it did fulfill its purpose, which Alus was grateful for.

After handing the mask to Loki, Alus pulled out the black cloth—the robe—underneath. It was plain and reached all the way down below his knees. As for the material... he already knew what it was. This was equipment provided by the army, something Alus and Loki had used before. But very few Magicmasters used it.

It was made from a special grade anti-magic fiber that was extra strong, but it was hard to move in. It was difficult for most normal Magicmasters, so they avoided using it. Only eccentric or skilled Magicmasters favored it.

By the way, both Alus and Loki preferred using it. Of course in Loki's case, the primary reason was because Alus liked it.

"We've checked everything we need for tomorrow, and I've gotten what I wanted, so we'll take our leave here."

"Yes, of course. I'm only going to show myself a little in the morning, but I wish you good luck." Sisty casually waved at him, as if she wasn't worried in the slightest. She had a bright and cheerful expression on her face, as if a weight was off her shoulders.

It took everything Alus had to keep himself from asking Sisty if she understood the severity of the situation.

It's going to be impossible, even with me and Loki, to keep any casualties from

happening, you know.

Alus and Loki defeating all of the Fiends on their own would be one thing, but they had to let the students move freely and accumulate experience. He didn't want her to have excessively high hopes for him.

That said, considering the missions he'd been on, the difficulty of this one was below average. That's why the only thing he felt was bitterness over getting caught up in something so troublesome.

* * *

Not much time had passed before Alus and Loki returned to their quarters. They hadn't even spent an hour at the principal's office.

For this exercise, a couple of teachers would remain at headquarters. Their primary role would be monitoring. They'd detect Fiends outside of Loki's 1 km detection range.

Loki also had the job of commanding the reinforcements, and the fact that she was a spotter had already spread among the teachers. With her Triple Digit ranking, no one objected to her role.

On top of that, the teachers would receive temporary access to the military's surveillance system, which they could use to get a general grasp on the situation.

However, while the detectors could identify high-classed Fiends, they weren't suited for locating weaker ones. This was ultimately just a tactic for the worst-case scenario, and in order to keep track of the students' locations, there was an emergency signal device with a locator chip in it.

By the way, the detection of lower-classed Fiends had to be relinquished due to how the sensitivity of the detection magic worked on the detectors. And in any event, the barrier projected by Babel should keep the low-classed Fiends from approaching in the first place.

In order to be ready for tomorrow, Alus and Loki went to bed earlier than usual. It was an early bedtime, but fundamentally within their usual rhythm.

Preparations were complete. They were convinced that even the

extracurricular lesson tomorrow would be just another peaceful day as they closed their eyes.

Apart from not having any time for his research tomorrow, Alus had nothing more to worry about. To him, even an accident would only add spice to his usual routine.

Unlike those two, however... most students were far away from having sweet dreams. At best they'd have a shallow sleep with anxiety as a pillow.

That held true for Tesfia and Alice, too. As proof of that, they were talking about this very topic right now.

"Let's do our best tomorrow," Tesfia said, for the umpteenth time. Most people would be able to tell that she was just trying to make a show of courage. Lying on their beds, the two gave each other words of encouragement.

"You too, Fia. Make sure to finish them off. And if you go up against more than one, consider splitting up and temporarily retreating."

"I know. You take care too, Alice."

Even in the faint darkness, the two put on somewhat forced smiles for each other.

However, Alice had something on her mind that kept her from feeling sleepy. She was worried for her best friend.

Tesfia's group had a lot of uncertain elements. In order to get a decent average, the group that included the top ranker of the first-years was balanced out with classmates with lower rankings. The same could be said for Alice's group too, and with her supervisor being a four-digit ranker not much higher than Tesfia, Alice's group was lacking in terms of fighting power.

However, her group wasn't as unstable as Tesfia's. The reason was the supervisor.

Tesfia had an upperclassman supervisor around the same rank as herself, but this one didn't have a good reputation at the Institute. His name was Cabsol Denvel, a third year. He was very proud of his noble lineage and looked down on underclassmen. The fact that he completely ignored Tesfia's opinions,

despite having only a slightly higher rank than her, was another cause for concern.

I wonder if she'll be okay, Alice thought, gazing at Tesfia with a worried look.

"When you slay a Fiend, make sure you move away from there right away," Tesfia said, referring to the fact that Fiends reacted to their own kind's blood.

She was behaving as if she was Alice's older sister, but Alice obediently took her advice to heart, answering, "Yeah. We have to make sure to identify the core, too."

The two nodded at each other, as they reconfirmed the topics that they'd reviewed many times over.

When it came to exterminating Fiends, it was standard practice among Magicmasters to never let your guard down until a Fiend's core was destroyed, though there were differences among the species. As there were Fiends that had exceptional regeneration abilities, judging their remaining strength by how they looked was unreliable.

No matter how much they'd reviewed the theories, it was still a fact that they'd never encountered a real Fiend, something that weighed heavily on Alice. There were also the worries she had about Tesfia's group.

Wanting to believe she was worrying over nothing, Alice spoke with a cheerful expression on her face. "It's okay. Al said he'd help if anything happened."

"... Really? Oh, I see... Well, I'm sure he won't have to make an appearance!" Tesfia said with bravado. But she no longer sounded as anxious as before.

Of course, if Alice were to point that out, she'd deny it immediately. Having always been by her side, Alice could see the change in Tesfia from her trust in that boy. *Geez, you're not being honest*, Alice thought to herself, while smiling. "That's true. We've been training for this time, after all."

"Yeah. I'm sure it'll be easy. It's a path any Magicmaster has to go through!"

Hearing her best friend's powerful declaration, Alice smiled once more.

Seeing that, Tesfia put on a big smile as well.

They weren't making light of the lesson because it was part of the curriculum.

If they were to say that they weren't scared of their first extracurricular lesson, it would be a lie.

But they'd been trained by the greatest Magicmaster...

That truth wrapped their hearts in a transient relief, and prevented the creeping unknown fear from reaching them.

* * *

The time was still too early to call morning.

Alus and Loki opened their eyes at almost the same time. For these two, an alarm clock was unnecessary.

After getting out of bed, they promptly got into gear, not exchanging any words until they finished their preparations.

"What should we have for breakfast?"

"It can just be something simple. Sorry."

Loki looked at him like it was far too late for that, and moved to the kitchen. Preparing food was already her job. This was something she did because she wanted to. Alus had no memories of discussing the division of chores.

He glanced outside the window. Though he couldn't tell the weather in the Outer World from inside the barrier, he felt like it would be a clear day today. The reason he might have felt like this was because he was feeling great now that the sun was finally starting to rise.

After a little while, they had a simple breakfast, but even so, it was well-balanced with nutritional values taken into account.

Once breakfast was done and they'd had a short tea break, Alus scooped up his robe that was on a hanger and put it on. "Let's go."

"Yes!!" Loki's brisk voice answered him.

His robe fluttered in the early morning wind as he opened the door, and the two left the laboratory.

That creepy mask was already firmly on his face as well. Alus was less than enthusiastic about it, but knew it was necessary.

Unlike Alus, Loki had no reason to hide her identity and wore her usual uniform. While it was unclear if she'd have to take part in combat, she could still use that altered uniform if that happened. She shouldn't have any problems, since the students were allowed to procure and wear combat uniforms on their own.

Of course, the Institute's uniforms functioned well enough for that purpose. The material used was exceptional. It didn't interfere with the wearer's mana conduction, but resisted foreign mana. Not using it would be a waste.

There were no students to be seen upon leaving the research building. That was likely because of how early it was. But lights could be seen from afar over at the main building where the teachers were. It seemed they were hard at work making preparations.

The time was just past 0400. The extracurricular lesson was to start at 0900. Considering the time to prepare, there would be no problems if the support personnel were in their designated locations in the Outer World just before 0700.

By the way, the two were, for some reason, on the roof of the research building.

"I'll run over to headquarters as a warm-up. What about you, Loki?"

"I will accompany you."

Alus jokingly said, "Don't fall behind," and kicked off the roof.

Loki couldn't tell what his expression was behind the mask, but she was sure the edges of his lips were raised like they usually were when he was jesting.

Before long, the two were at the barrier closest to them. This wasn't something your run-of-the-mill Magicmaster could do.

Alus was breathing perfectly normally, as if all that high-speed movement really was just a warm-up. Loki kept her breathing in rhythm, and her body was just slightly warmer than usual.

There were teachers in charge of monitoring the student groups here and there along the way, but with Alus moving so fast, nobody caught a glimpse of

his masked visage. Some seemed to notice Loki's uniform, but by the time they checked again she was far away.

The two then slowly stepped through the barrier created by the mana emitted by Babel.

As they went through, they felt the characteristic mana of the barrier stimulating their bodies. But Alus and Loki had been in the military for a long time and were used to it.

In the next moment, the scenery changed, as if they'd stepped into a different world. Even the color of the sky changed.

Alus took a deep breath. "This place is really great."

As expected, there were no clouds in the sky of the Outer World, and the sublime sun peeked over the faraway mountain ridges. The clear air filling Alus' lungs was as refreshing as always.

Hearing him say this, Loki's expression eased into a smile. "With this weather, there shouldn't be any problems with the detection radius."

"Yeah."

"What should we do? Currently... there are 23 Fiends within 1 km of us."

"Well, why don't we help reduce the work for the early subjugation forces?"

"I understand."

Of course, Alus could detect them too; but he wasn't going to be boorish and say as much.

By the time the two arrived at their destination after taking the long way, the teachers and reinforcements were preparing at the headquarters.

Even though he was wearing a mask, he might be identified if he was with Loki. That's why Loki handed over the device she received at headquarters, and Alus headed straight out to work.

From here on, they'd go their separate ways.

"How is the sensitivity, Sir Alus?"

"No problems," Alus said into the mana radio attached to his ear.

Loki's voice, responding with an "Understood," sounded somewhat exhilarated.

This device functioned by sending mana wavelengths and then converting them into sounds. It employed a crystal with a unique audio frequency and was called a Consensor.

"I'm currently 6 km northeast."

"Understood. There's no reactions to high-classed Fiends within the range of detection."

"Got it. I'll get to eliminating any as soon as I can confirm them as well."

"Please do."

"I'll leave that side to you."

A short pause. Then: "Please leave it to me. I will do the best I can," Loki said, with a voice full of resolve.

With that, their communications ended for now.

To Alus, the low-classed Fiends around here were nothing but small fry.

But if he were to carelessly wound them and spread their blood around, there was a chance that more Fiends would gather even though it was daylight hours, so taking care was necessary.

So he chose to bring down the Fiends by either sniping their cores, or destroying them altogether. In other words, destroying the entire Fiend's body. All that work amounted to a warm-up for Alus.

Low-classed Fiends tended to have physiques similar to small animals. There were, of course, exceptions, but few such irregularities were reported to have been discovered here. Even the largest Fiends here were human-sized at best, which meant that destroying the Fiends altogether was quicker than tracking down their cores.

It was a bit violent, but a Magicmaster of Alus' level would never fail to destroy the cores of low-classed Fiends.

As such, Alus got to work eliminating Fiends as he refreshed himself on the

sensation of pulverizing cores. With their cores gone, the Fiends crumbled away one after another, and after he passed the thirty-kill mark, he received a message from Loki.

“Thank you for your hard work. The extracurricular lesson will begin now.”

“Understood,” Alus responded. He rolled his shoulders once before staring up at the sky. As expected, this hadn’t been enough to serve as a real warm-up for him. But the sky was as clear as it had been at dawn.

* * *

The students were currently gathered at the starting spot, an open space just in front of the barrier.

While they were barely within the barrier’s reach, another few steps and they’d pass through it into the Outer World. They were at the boundary line.

The extracurricular lesson was planned for all three class year groups, with the first-years going today, the second-years tomorrow, and the third-years the day after that. They would all depart from here.

Amongst them was Principal Sisty, who would signal the start.

Most of the students were getting ready for battle. They were wearing their Institute uniforms or training outfits, with some even wearing training outfits underneath their uniforms.

As for Tesfia and Alice, they were wearing their uniforms as usual. They were already gathered with their groups, and could be seen discussing or making final confirmations.

Tesfia’s group consisted of herself, two five-digits and two six-digits, and the four-digit third-year, Cabsol Denvel. He was the eldest son of a distinguished family, and his sense of rivalry flared up against Tesfia to the point where he’d often interfere in their talks and plans. The reason Tesfia’s group took so much longer than the others was in large part due to him.

As for Alice’s group, there were four other five-digits. While they were five-digits in the 60000-70000 range, they were still better than Tesfia’s group members. Of course, when it came to battle, there wasn’t much difference

between five-digit rankers, but telling them that now was pointless...

They would come to experience that first-hand.

Moreover, second-year Senniat Fokmil was the supervisor for Alice's group. Though she was senior to Alice, their ranks were similar, so Alice found it easy to be relaxed around her. Not only were they the same gender, but Senniat was good at looking after others, so the first-years looked up to her.

"The extracurricular lesson will now begin."

The students all turned to look at the principal.

"If anything should happen, reinforcements will come running. The supervisors have also been equipped with emergency devices, so do please show off the results of your everyday training."

Principal Sisty didn't give them a tedious speech. As such, it was a very short speech, but the students had already heard all of the essentials before.

Finally, the principal sounded off a buzzer to signal the start of the extracurricular lesson, and the students crossed through the barrier.

But then—they stopped.

Their first impression of the Outer World could be summed up in the word 'stunning.' For the vast majority of them, this was the first time they'd seen the sights of the Outer World.

Before them was magical and grand scenery on a scale they'd never seen on the inside. The striking breath of fresh air from Mother Nature, sparkles that only real sunlight had, the warm colors, the sensations and moisture of the constant wind, and most of the varied smells that filled the world. The students felt all five of their senses being stimulated.

In fact, perhaps due to the impact, none of the students moved out right away.

The same was true for Tesfia and Alice.

"... Amazing!"

"Beautiful!"

They were so enraptured by the experience that they could only express themselves with such general words. Maybe there weren't any words that could accurately portray how they felt.

There was an abundance of greenery, with not a single modern building as far as the eye could see.

What overwhelmed Tesfia and Alice the most were the tall trees. Unlike the forests inside the barrier, which seemed somewhat artificial, those that had been growing free in nature had a majestic appeal to them.

Even the upperclassmen supervisors weren't exempt from the impressive scenery as their eyes opened wide. They probably felt like they'd been sent to an unfamiliar world.

Returning the over 400 students to their senses, Felinella clapped her hands once, loudly. Being one of very few students with Outer World experience, she was participating as a supervisor. "If you're all bunched up, you'll make good targets for the Fiends."

It was clear from her tone she was only half-threatening them, but it was enough to return the students to reality.

Everyone soon grouped up and spread out in all directions. Their goal was the headquarters that had been set up in the Outer World.

While they all had a somewhat pre-established route they'd need to take, their first priority wasn't to avoid encounters with Fiends. After all, battling against the Fiends was the point of the lesson. As such, they had few restraints placed on where they could go, and while there wasn't any reason to venture deeper in, curiosity got the better of them as they advanced farther.

The exercise had only just begun, but Tesfia could hear groups ahead that were already engaged in skirmishes against Fiends. While listening to the distant commotion, Tesfia braced herself and stepped forward.

Supervisor Cabsol followed her, which caused the rest of the group to move too.

But with no roads in the Outer World, they moved surprisingly slowly.

A while after they'd started walking—

Stop.

As they'd decided ahead of time, Tesfia in the lead raised her left hand to signal a stop. At the same moment, she raised a finger to her mouth to let the other students know to keep silent.

She heard the sound of rustling tree branches. As she lowered her posture and peeked out from behind a tree—

"...!!"

Suddenly, something fell from above.

And a black thing appeared in the corner of her eye. It had the build of a human child, but its hands were abnormally long, and its lightly-gripped fists reached all the way to the ground.

Meanwhile, its legs were unnaturally short, and it had a tail as thick as a human arm, curled up into a spiral.

In short, it had a very unsightly and bizarre appearance. Considering its center of balance, there was no way it could dash across the ground. Moreover, its darkish body and ruby red eyes only made it look more eerie to Tesfia and the others.

With that unusual coloring and odd physique, it was most definitely a Fiend.

After being taken aback for a moment, Tesfia returned to her senses and frantically scanned her memories of Fiend characteristics she'd learned in class. And when she finally remembered matching characteristics, she was convinced.

Confirming that there weren't any other Fiends around, Tesfia whispered to her group behind her. "It's probably a single F-class Belam. Let's stick to the plan to go around and eliminate it."

A Belam was one of the first Fiends introduced in class, and it was a good example of an F-class. It acted a lot like a monkey, but looked like a stunted old person with a crooked back. Their kind preferred to crowd together in trees, and they were common Fiends found near the barrier.

The group members nodded, showing they were on the same page as Tesfia.

While Cabsol silently looked on, Tesfia used her hands to direct each student to their position. After that, she held her breath and silently approached her target.

Unfamiliar with the Outer World, sharp branches scratched her legs, but it didn't register with her. Her heart was racing.

Tesfia fixed her eyes on her target so that her focus wouldn't break even for a moment, as she slowly made her way forward.

According to the lectures, Belams didn't often come down to ground level, but perhaps there were exceptions to everything. The appearance of it on the ground felt unnatural.

She closed in, while carefully observing... but suddenly the Belam's shoulders twitched, and it began looking around its surroundings.

Did it sense me? But it doesn't look like it's trying to run away...

Shortly thereafter, Tesfia got in range and looked around to confirm that the other members were in position.

Finally, from behind a tree, she peeked out at her target.

That was when it happened.

"...!!"

The Fiend's black fur stood on end. It rotated its head 180 degrees, and an eerie and strangely human smile-like expression appeared on its face. It followed up by letting out a low howl, stopping its gaze on a point behind it. Its mouth opened up wide, revealing small fangs within.

It was looking at one of the female students positioned behind it.

"It's caught on!!"

They had lost the element of surprise.

As she raised her voice, Tesfia thrust her katana into the ground. Mana passed through the blade, causing the magic formula to glow. It was a feat made possible thanks to preparations taken ahead of time.

Upon thrusting her blade in the ground, ice began to spread across the

surface. It drew a narrow line, heading straight for the Belam and forming a path of ice in its wake.

While it had noticed the female student, the Belam hadn't seen Tesfia, and it took her attack directly. Before the Fiend could pounce on the female student, its legs were frozen, lodging it in the ground.

Tesfia's magic continued freezing all the way to the Fiend's waist. "—!! ... Attack!" she yelled.

She hesitated for a moment, as her spell had been more powerful than she'd expected. Their intention had been to freeze the bottom of the Fiend's feet and use that opening to attack, but in reality the spell had frozen the Belam's entire lower body, leaving it unable to move.

Though the initial attack had been more effective than expected, the attacks continued according to plan, with Tesfia stopping the Fiend and the other members launching an all-out assault.

However, with some members' only attack spell being of the first rank, Arrow, there was a limit to how much damage they could do. That's why their fundamental plan of action was to physically attack with their AWRs.

But despite the Fiend being unable to move, none of the students' attacks were able to finish it off. The reason was because they weren't used to killing, even if their opponent was a Fiend. They weren't fully resolved to be Magicmasters and were being timid. It seemed like their first task, a rite of passage, was a challenging obstacle for these novice Magicmasters.

But after some time passed, they realized the situation they were in.

Kill or be killed.

Finally, somebody's attack hit the Fiend's head, causing it to let out a bizarre death scream.

Someone else followed up with another attack to the head. At the same moment Tesfia's ice melted, and the Belam collapsed to the ground, completely unmoving.

Having incapacitated their opponent, everyone let out sighs of relief as if to

say, *That's one*.

However, it was too early to let their guard down. After the group turned toward Tesfia, the Belam that they thought was unconscious slowly stood up.

"—!"

Tesfia started running before she even processed the danger. Raising her katana up high, she swung it down through the Fiend's body before it could finish standing up, cutting it in half. "Don't let your guard down!"

A moment after Tesfia's blade destroyed the Fiend's core, its body crumbled away.

Alus' training had helped her out. She wouldn't have known how sturdy Belams were otherwise, and would've invited an unwanted situation due to getting high on her first win.

Words of gratitude, "You saved us" and "Thank you" came from the other group members, once the sensations of cold chills running down their spines had passed.

"I'm sorry, Ms. Tesfia." The female student who had been behind the Belam apologized to Tesfia with downcast eyes. She felt responsible for getting noticed and creating a dangerous situation.

"Don't let it get to you. It might just have noticed one of the other groups fighting, or the smell of blood of its kin." The faint sounds of combat could still be heard nearby. Similar battles were likely happening here and there.

"But still, you're amazing. Defeating it in one hit!"

"Well, yeah... thank you." Tesfia's words of thanks were also directed towards a certain someone who wasn't present. What happened just now was no doubt due to the results of training under him. With just that one ice spell, she could feel that the power and effect of her spells were clearly different from when she had first enrolled at the Institute.

"Well, that was clearly just an F-class Fiend. You likely would have struggled more against an E-class, but good work."

Seemingly having hid during the battle, Cabsol finally reappeared, giving

Tesfia empty words of praise with a daring smile. His tone of voice was sarcastic, basically ridiculing her.

“Thanks,” Tesfia said, giving him a plain reply.

“But we can’t have you being unable to slay them in a single strike when they’re frozen. Do try to be more diligent,” Cabsol said condescendingly.

It seemed he was trying to point out how immature the first-years, including Tesfia, were by their inability to finish off the Belam in the first attack. However, they’d decided on an all-out attack from up close after freezing it with magic because ranged attacks lacked certainty. In other words, this plan was devised taking their inexperience into account, but Cabsol didn’t seem to understand this.

Or perhaps he said that despite knowing it.

“Thank you for your guidance.” In order to endure his arrogance and the resulting discomfort, Tesfia chose to tell Cabsol what he wanted to hear.

In the next moment, she had completely forgotten him. Her mind was already focused on something else.

I did it... I did it!

Tesfia closed her eyes, placing her hand above her racing heart and taking a deep breath of Outer World air. She had succeeded in slaying her first Fiend. She felt a sense of achievement along with her excitement... she had cleared what Alus called the bare minimum condition to be suitable as a Magicmaster.

This was the first step... Tesfia enjoyed a small happiness unbeknownst to anyone.

Sixth Chapter

Outer World

Meanwhile, as for Alice...

After she and Tesfia parted ways, Alice's group advanced down their designated route. So long as they hadn't taken the wrong way, currently they were headed in the direction of the headquarters, which was located 4 km southeast of the starting point.

Quite some time had passed since they'd split up and entered the forest, but they still hadn't encountered any Fiends.

Alice felt like she was being crushed by the pressure as she walked.

Considering the goal of the lesson, she knew combat couldn't be avoided, but somewhere deep down she still hoped that maybe she wouldn't have to face any Fiends.

"Ms. Alice, you don't have to be so anxious."

Suddenly, the supervisor approached, calling out to her. She spoke in a calm tone full of compassion, having seen how rattled Alice was.

In terms of ranking, Alice's group's supervisor, the second-year student Senniat, had a similar ranking to hers, but having had more training and a position of seniority she was more composed.

Moreover, being in the back of the group, she had an overview of the group and had seen the state Alice was in from there.

"Thank you very much," Alice earnestly thanked her for her kindness. The next moment, she looked away, embarrassed over her unease.

Compared to the other groups, Alice's group was slow. That was in part because Alice, in the front, was moving very carefully, but that couldn't be helped in the Outer World. Roots of abnormally large trees blocked their path, and with the overgrown shrubbery it was hard to see much around here.

It was even hard to tell if they were walking straight, so it was only natural

that they'd lose confidence in their ability to reach headquarters.

Alice used her naginata to clear away the obstacles, receiving scratches on her arms and legs, while she advanced on their path.

This kind of formation, where the highest-ranking student led the way, wasn't particularly unusual among the groups. While there wasn't any hard and fast rule, being affiliated with the Institute, the students tended to depend on a top-to-bottom structure based on rankings. In fact, it was only natural that a group of young people would rely on that kind of transient order when stuck in a situation that filled them with anxiety.

An hour after starting their march, the group finally reached a clearing. Their speed had been less than half of normal, and they were only halfway to the headquarters. Compared to where they'd just been, where the big trees were closely bunched together, here they had a much more open view from this clearing.

They decided to stop and take a short break.

In front of them was an especially tall tree. The sight of the thickly abundant leaves, rustling in the wind and with sunlight filtering through them, was mysterious. If they hadn't become Magicmasters, they'd never have seen this sight.

There were forests in the human domain as well, but they were artificial. Unlike these trees that were left to grow freely, there was nothing moving about them.

However, their admiration of the natural trees was suddenly cut short, and they were pulled back to reality because something unexpected happened.

"—!"

A grating dissonance, like strange laughter, rang out next to them.

A reflexive wariness surged up in the students, their bodies tensing.

Before long, *it* casually appeared from behind a tree, showing no signs of caution at seeing Alice's group.

It wasn't a stray dog. It had the black body color unique to Fiends. Its

abnormally well-developed canines looked to be as sharp as a knife.

“Eep...?!” Somebody behind Alice let out a fearful scream.

It wasn’t because of its repulsive appearance, but rather because of the Fiend’s red eyes suddenly coming into focus, glaring at the students. It looked to be starving. A delighted howl sounded out, as if it had found some delicious prey.

And then... “No way!”

Those words instinctively came from Alice’s mouth.

Behind the Fiend was another silhouette. It was yet another Fiend. They were likely of the same kind, but the second Fiend’s thick neck was a little twisted, and its eerie, wolf-like face was unnaturally tilted diagonally.

Senniat flinched, and said in a panicked voice, “Two E-classes! Dire Wolves! We should retreat, Ms. Alice.” A class surpassing the F class, and two of them at the same time!

But Alice shook her head at Senniat’s proposal. “That’s impossible. They’d catch up right away,” she answered courageously, but her voice trembled. Even so, her brain maintained a minimum level of composure, allowing her to analyze the situation.

Right now, with the time she’d spent training under Alus and her modest amount of pride supporting her, she was just barely preserving her self-control.

She quickly realized that it wouldn’t be so easy to escape in this unfamiliar terrain. Especially so against the Fiends, who lived here. Moreover, in trying to escape into the woods, where it was hard to see, the worst-case scenario was that the group would lose sight of each other.

Most of all—the opponents were wolf-type Fiends. They were obviously adept at pursuing their prey. Even if they desperately tried to get away, they’d most likely be caught in short order.

“Then I’ll buy some time, and you can use that to escape.” Senniat, feeling a sense of responsibility as the supervisor, offered to serve as a decoy, but Alice turned that down as well.

That was in part due to her disposition of not wanting anyone to get hurt, but there was a bigger reason at play. Alice had a plan in mind, and was convinced it would succeed. She firmly declared, “I will take this. You can use defensive spells, can’t you? That’s why I want you to please use those to buy time if the worst happens.”

“Huh?! You alone won’t be...”

There was almost no difference between Senniat’s and Alice’s rankings. That’s why Senniat had tried to say it would be even more difficult for Alice on her own, but Alice didn’t let her finish. “No! I’ll be fine. And if I handle only one of them, it shouldn’t be too hard. That’s why I want you all to lend me your strength after I’ve defeated one of them,” she finished gently, turning to the other members of the group.

The first thing Alice needed to do for her group members—who were trembling in fear—was to give them confidence. Especially since there would likely be more battles after this. She felt like someone once said this was the most important thing to help Magicmasters who were about to give in to the fear of the Fiends.

No, more specifically, she had heard *him* casually mentioning it during her training. Never underestimate the power of a Fiend, but the truth remained that they could be defeated by your own power.

By burning that into her memory and beating it into her body, it served as a source of courage, albeit a temporary one, becoming a driving force that let her control her mana and move her body.

That’s why Alice could close in on the Fiends, naginata in hand.

Her heart raced... her legs were shaking. All she could do was step forward without stumbling. Her reasoning for stepping forward despite her fear was her sense of responsibility as a higher ranker, and her self-confidence from having trained for this moment.

After getting closer, Alice stopped. As if to show how confident she was, she took a deep breath. She was still trembling, but tried to pretend she was relaxed. Of course, it wasn’t enough to fool herself, but it did help to calm her beating heart.

With firm resolve, Alice poured mana through her AWR. “—!!” As she did, her expression turned to surprise.

For a moment, she was mystified by how smoothly the mana was flowing, but she soon realized why. *Now that I think about it... I did do my best.* She could physically feel the results. Happy, despite the situation, she smiled to herself.

At the same time, a mysterious confidence welled up inside her, helping to ease her fear of confronting the Fiends. *Yes, I’ll be fine!*

She encouraged herself to help bolster her fighting spirit, and felt her mana fluently take on the shape of her blade. She then stepped forward reliably as she closed in on her opponents, the fear from before nowhere to be seen.



Alice began slowly spinning her naginata, the initial speed soon becoming faster to the point of causing the light of her mana on her AWR to create an optical illusion of light orbs surrounding her.

She smoothly moved her feet, unaffected by the weight and centrifugal force of her spear thanks to the spearmanship beaten into her body. On top of her magic, she also had overwhelming skill with her naginata.

The Fiends ferociously pounced on Alice after she took her next step. Their sharp claws at the ready, they flew at her in a straight line.

"‹‹Reflection››"

She didn't call out the spell's name because her incanting technique was inferior. It was a manifestation of her fighting spirit, intended to encourage herself and help clearly visualize the spell, thus strengthening its effect.

Reflection's original function was to reflect mana itself. Its effect on physical attacks was negligible. However, the rapidly approaching claws bounced off of an invisible wall.

Relieved, Alice recalled Alus' words. It was something he'd told her during her mana control training.

For starters, many Fiends are constantly generating mana in their bodies. In their cases, their black bodies themselves are an AWR. That's why you could say that the surfaces of their bodies are always wrapped in mana.

He'd also said that because of that, simple physical attacks had no effect on them.

That's why Alice figured that if their entire bodies were covered in mana, Reflection should work to nullify their attacks to some degree.

It wouldn't be strange for active Magicmasters to have learned that from firsthand experience, but the only students who noticed that were those with potential.

Of course, this alone wasn't enough to defeat Fiends.

So as a follow-up, Alice limited her target to one of the Fiends jumping backwards. She poured strength into her legs, dashing across the ground with

fluent motions, quickly closing the distance.

The next thing she did was to unleash a slash, by adding her own kinetic energy onto the spin of her naginata.

As the Fiend landed, she swung her blade at it horizontally, followed by another swing going up from its leg to its back.

Screaming out a creepy cry, the Fiend's black body was deeply gouged twice. It was lifted off of the ground by the impact of the attack. Ignoring its split skull, it forcibly jumped and desperately attempted to counter attack.

But in the next moment, its instinct warned it that leaving the familiar ground to leap up into the air was fatal.

"Now!"

Alice didn't overlook her chance. She had pored over all of the live combat lectures she'd received from Alus.

A quick slash from her naginata was followed by her spinning it freely—thoroughly chopping up the Fiend.

Feeling a good hit from her final swing, Alice stopped her AWR perfectly still after slicing through the Fiend's body. As expected, her strike had destroyed the Fiend's core. Its battered body gradually crumbled apart.

"I did it! ... Everyone, there's only one left...!" Alice turned to look at her group with joy. If they all jumped it together, they should be able to beat it... but having dropped her guard for a moment was a blunder she would pay the price for.

Magicmasters accustomed to the Outer World didn't lower their guard until their enemies had been fully destroyed. The instant they stepped out into the Outer World, all other thoughts were pushed into a corner of their minds.

"Look out!"

Immediately following that shout, the remaining Fiend behind Alice let out a muffled shriek.

As the voice shouted, the Fiend's claws and fangs had bounced off of a semicircular barrier placed around Alice.

This was Senniat's specialty, Spiral Veil.

As expected from someone in a supervisor's position, a thick barrier made from wind and the vibration of air was created in the blink of an eye.

"... Thank you very much."

"You have guts, along with the ability to respond and apply what you've learned. But... you can be a little absentminded." Senniat seemed less like a supervisor and more like an older sister as she pointed out Alice's oversight with a small smile.

But she then turned to look at the remaining Fiend. "All of you should join in, too. Are you going to have Ms. Alice do everything on her own?"

Despite Alice being reprimanded, her actions had inspired the rest of her group, relighting their fighting spirit. They firmly gripped their AWRs, no longer with fear in their eyes.

They positioned themselves around Alice. The remaining Dire Wolf was at a numerical disadvantage, and thanks to teamwork between the group members, they safely completed their first elimination.

* * *

Having received the news that the extracurricular lesson had started, headquarters finally kicked into high gear. The preparations were perfect.

Equipment like the kind used by the military had been brought in, and was being operated by veteran teachers. On top of that, they had upperclassmen on standby as reinforcements.

Loki didn't have to tell the teachers anything, but that wasn't the case regarding the reinforcements waiting outside. With her personality, Loki wasn't particularly eloquent when it came to giving a speech to others. However, she would much rather do it than betray Alus' expectations.

Stepping out of the headquarters tent, she could feel the unease in the air. That atmosphere was coming from the students serving as reinforcements. Though upperclassmen, they were still students, and some of them had a very pronounced tension in their expressions.

The eyes of nearly 50 students focused on Loki, who came in front of them. “The extracurricular lesson has commenced as of now. As discussed before, I will give you instructions through the Consensor. You will be left on your own to make detailed assessments of the situations.” She then continued, “Please make sure to operate in pairs. Also, headquarters accepts no liability for any unreasonable actions you take. Do understand that the results of any such actions will be your own responsibility.”

Her tone made it clear that headquarters wouldn’t concern itself with anything the students did on their own that would put themselves in danger.

Of course—it was just a threat. Loki recalled what had happened at the principal’s office. There was a chance that there were students, not just among the supervisors, but also among the reinforcements, that sought fame and glory. It was doubtful that her threat would be enough to repress them, but from personal experience, she could expect it to have some effect.

They were expecting some casualties to occur in this extracurricular lesson in the first place. A rescue squad had even been prepared. And Loki preferred to prioritize the students who followed the rules and not the others.

Though it sounded cold, both Alus and Loki had grown up in that kind of environment, so this was only natural to them. And the principal had asked Alus, knowing this.

Most of the students gasped at Loki’s one-sided declaration. Not only was the silver-haired girl before them a Triple Digit Magicmaster, but also the headquarters commander that even the teachers had to obey.

There were no longer any that gazed at Loki with love or interest. On top of that was her unchanging expression and monotonous tone, and all of the students understood what it meant to go against her, feeling cold chills running down their spines.

“Well then, Teams 1 through 10, move out. Please spread out as planned.”

With the headquarters being located in the Outer World, there was a risk it would be attacked. As Loki and Alus had gone ahead and eliminated any threats ahead of time, she didn’t think there would be any problems for the time being, but the teachers wanted to be extra sure. Because of this, 20 people split up

into 10 pairs would patrol the surrounding area.

Loki had turned around after finishing her instructions, when one of the reinforcements called out.

“Excuse me... won’t we lack firepower against the Fiends if we’re only in pairs?” a second-year student said. She was implicitly asking to be allowed to play it by ear, and use larger numbers against the Fiends. All the students present knew it was a question born from an excessive fear of Fiends.

However, the answer had already been decided. Loki simply stated the unabashed truth. “Currently, there are only D-classed Fiends and below in the area. For reasons of confidentiality I can’t tell you how I know, but it’s a certainty. You were chosen by the principal herself as having the ability to do this. It’s also her decision that two of you will be enough for a D class.”

“The principal said that...?” the students whispered amongst themselves. One of the strongest Magicmasters had acknowledged their ability. That encouraged some of them.

“But...” However, it didn’t help the pale face on the second-year girl. Things might’ve been different if she had actual combat experience. As expected, there were differences between individuals, and a firmly-rooted unease wouldn’t be so easily alleviated.

“It’s true you can never tell what will happen in the Outer World, even when going up against a D class. That’s why I said you will have to make a detailed assessment of the situation on your own... that also includes retreating alongside the first-years if you can’t eliminate the threat.”

“... I understand.”

They had permission to retreat from Fiends that were out of their league. That came as a relief, not only to the girl in question, but to all the students that were anxious about fighting Fiends.

In reality, that was yet another matter that had been decided beforehand. Loki secretly lamented the poor quality of the students if they couldn’t even grasp that from what she’d said without her having to explain it further. Despite knowing it was an inevitability with novice Magicmasters...

“Loki!” Suddenly, the deep voice of one of the male teachers came from inside headquarters.

“I will be right there.”

With that as their signal, the reinforcements moved into action.

Loki had two Consensors. One was to give directions to the reinforcements, and the other was a direct line to Alus.

The teacher reported that the detectors had picked up on something. As their goal was to defeat Fiends above a certain class, they had a tendency to miss weaklings below it, but they were lucky this time.

Loki put her hand over one of her Consensors. “There’s a reaction to B- and C-class Fiends near the area border. 4 km to the northwest. There’s 17 in total.”

“They must have picked up on the blood of their kind. I’ll head over right away,” Alus quickly responded.

“Please do.” The reason Loki had said there weren’t any Fiends above D class was because Alus was here.

Loki wrapped up their discussion and focused on the Consensor in her other ear. “Team 13, please head 1100 meters southeast to the coordinates 1981/6145. Teams 14 through 17, please head 500 meters east over to 1123/4579 and support Groups 34, 60 and 79.”

“Understood.”

“We’re on our way.”

“Team 12 is on-site, we have injured. Requesting backup.”

“I understand. Team 22, after your current job, move north and support Team 12.”

“Understood.”

Despite the hectic situation, Loki gave precise orders to the reinforcements. Even the teachers admired her abilities.

That’s when one of the teachers, a male Magicmaster in front of a big screen monitoring the situation, hurriedly raised his voice. “Group 4 has stepped out of

the operation area.”

“—!!”

A tense atmosphere immediately filled the headquarters.

Loki had already taken into account that amateurs would be reckless. And if it was just one group, she could deal with it. Her expression showed no sign of panic, though her eyebrows furrowed in anger and irritation over the reckless fools.

According to the original plan, the operation area was considered to be everything within 7 km of headquarters. This fact had been pounded into the students participating in the extracurricular lesson.

By the way, thanks to Alus’ secret help, none of the Fiends within the area were above D class, making it relatively safe. But they had a severe lack of information on the situation outside the operation area.

“What do we do, Loki?”

“Please calm down. Where are they right now?”

“They’re 1650 meters northwest of the operation area.”

“I understand. Teams 7 through 10, please head to coordinates 2377/7467, 1650 meters northwest of the operation area, and support Group 4. After that, please bring them back to the operation area,” Loki gave her orders through the Consensor.

The reinforcements hesitated for a moment before giving her an “... Understood,” one after the other.

“Teams 1 through 6, please bring the warning before the border line closer in.”

First, she’d need to swiftly deal with the situation as best she could. Exasperated by it all, she then continued to ponder whether the groups would make it back in time. At the same time—she felt something was off. Now that she thought about it, the first-years’ movements had been unnatural recently.

She figured they would be more reserved in their advance, picking fewer fights since it was their first time. But contrary to her expectations, they were

being aggressive, and the battles were too frequent.

It was strange—and as if to back up that sensation—

“Groups 11, 46 and 5 have left the operation area!”

The reports continued. “Group 37 has left as well... Wait a minute! Reinforcement Teams 17 and 22 have ignored orders and left the area!”

“Why!! Why is this happening?!”

The first-years were one thing, but the upperclassmen reinforcements doing the same was completely abnormal. Moreover, there weren’t even any first-year groups in the direction they’d gone in.

One of the teachers panicked, screaming into a Consensor, “Please respond! You’ve left the area, return right now!”

Everyone, including Loki, tensely listened in on the conversation.

“Did you hear me?!”

Without any response, the only thing coming through the Consensor was static.

Loki closed her eyes, pausing for a moment. The current number of reinforcements wouldn’t be enough for an irregularity of this scale.

Meanwhile, another report came in about a group that were diverting largely from the route.

What did this mean...? “Please keep up the monitoring.”

“But...” The teacher looked at Loki with a troubled expression.

Loki quickly stopped the teacher from continuing. “It will be fine... We’ll manage somehow.” As she said that, she was starting to get really fed up, and felt dark emotions welling up inside.

Normally, in this type of situation, the ones causing the trouble should be left to die. At the very least, the upperclassmen that knew better should be abandoned as a lesson for their transgression. It was clear that the students were acting on their own, so she believed it was their own fault if something happened.

They were overestimating their abilities, and reacting to the Fiends too aggressively. At the same time, their lack of restraint and caution was intolerable coming from novices.

That said, considering the position she was in, Loki spoke heavily into the Consensor exclusive to *him* as if it were her own blunder. “I am sorry. The following five groups have left the operation area. As have two of the reinforcement teams... it’s too much for...”

An answer came back before she could finish. “I thought so.”

“—! You noticed too?”

“It was just a hunch, though.” The sound of something collapsing onto the ground with a *boom* came through the Consensor. “Don’t worry. I’ll head over there.”

“I’m sorry for causing you trouble.”

“I’ve got an idea of what it is, so send reinforcements to the edge of the area.”

“I understand. The coordinates are...”

* * *

Alus pulled at the chain of his AWR as he cut off the comms.

Around him were the remains of the Fiend he’d killed moments ago, in the form of gray ash.

Before heading to the location, he first closed his eyes and expanded his vision. Using space distortion magic, he searched for any powerful Fiends in a 1 km range.

Alus was able to project a map of the area in his brain. With that, he was able to get a clear grasp of a Fiend’s size and shape, but of course there were limits as well. Strictly speaking, it didn’t distinguish between Fiends’ mana like Loki’s detection ability could. As such, it lacked information to accurately class them.

That’s why Alus had to class Fiends according to their shape, his previous experience and instinct. With his wealth of experience, his expectations were usually never off.

After confirming there were practically no Fiends around, he opened his eyes. “So this group is the closest.” Confirming only the location, Alus quickly moved out at extreme speed. Not even the Outer World’s dense forests could obstruct him. In fact, he used the trees as footholds, practically flying forward.

The closest group was easily 2 km away, but it didn’t take Alus even three minutes to reach them.

But to the students, a mysterious masked man had suddenly appeared before them, so it was only natural they’d be wary of him.

“Who the hell are you!” a male student, apparently the leader, raised his voice. He had short dark brown hair, and in his hand was a decorated and expensive-looking sword AWR.

“... I’m reinforcements dispatched from headquarters.”

While he was exasperated by the situation, Alus stuck to the role of being a plain staff member, telling himself this was the only time he’d do it.

“Tsk! So they’ve already caught on.” Perhaps underestimating Alus as being a student rather than a teacher, the young man rested his sword on his shoulder.

“You are all currently out of the operation area. Please return immediately.”

“Sorry, bud. We’ll be moving on out of here. In fact, it was never even declared that we’re not to leave the area.”

Faced with this insolent display, Alus suspiciously asked him, “You’re a supervisor, aren’t you?”

“What of it?” He wasn’t just watching over the first-years, he had the gall to act like their leader.

Alus quickly realized the heart of the matter from his attitude. They were most likely not working under the premise of the extracurricular lesson anymore. If he were to guess, the supervisor was the one hunting Fiends, forcing the other students to go along. The supervisor, who was supposed to support the first-years, was instead taking the initiative and defeating Fiends to raise his own rank. He was going against the very point of the extracurricular lesson.

This was probably the true goal of the upperclassmen that had been in Sisty's office. And this male student in front of him was most likely one of them.

The first-years behind him looked fearful. One of the male students timidly spoke up. "Sir, I think we should do what he says..."

"Shut the fuck up, don't tell me what to do!! Don't you losers want to raise your rank too? Fighting for real like this will accurately calculate your ranking. If you get it, then keep behind me!" The young man was acting as aggressively as your average street thug, shouting at his group.

The student who'd spoken up flinched, and shut his mouth.

While that was going on, Alus had slowly rolled his shoulders. That kind of claim might be acceptable for a Magicmaster in the military—if he was acting alone, that is. That way he couldn't cause anyone else trouble if he got full of himself and lost his life.

But right now, they were in the middle of an educational extracurricular lesson. Moreover, he was forcing the first-years to tag along, risking their lives.

"Oh... I see how it is."

"Huh? ...Gah!!"

Grabbing hold of the supervisor's shoulder and spinning him around, Alus rammed his elbow into his solar plexus. He followed up with a chop to the neck, knocking him out cold, then picked him up by the shirt collar and put him under his arm.

"It seems not even the supervisors are any good..." Alus said, glancing around him before turning his masked face back to the students. "You guys get back inside the area. You should be able to get to the headquarters if you go due west."

Alus' tone had already changed from what he'd started out with. The students all looked dumbfounded, but quickly nodded at him one at a time.

"T-Thank you very much."

"I'll take this idiot with me. Just follow after me and you shouldn't encounter any Fiends."

“U-Understood!”

Not bothering to reply to the first-year students, Alus headed straight west.

He instantly eliminated any Fiends around while carrying the unconscious supervisor. Mana was gushing out from his AWR, covering the blade and sharpening it.

They were only a few hundred meters from the operation area. It took less than a minute for him to reach it.

A reinforcement team was standing by. Wary of the masked man, the two readied their AWRs, but Alus raised a hand to stop them. He pointed at the unconscious body of the former supervisor, letting them get a general understanding of the situation.

“A group of first-years should be coming through here in a couple of minutes. I’m going to the next ones, so you guys take this guy back with you to headquarters. If he causes you any problems, you can just throw him into a bush or something.”

“Wha—!”

Their eyes shot wide open in surprise, but Alus had thought about doing that himself several times along the way. He then muttered into his Consensor, “The problem with Group 46 has been resolved. As I thought, it was the supervisor.”

“I see...”

“Loki, pick out someone from the reinforcements for their new supervisor.”

“I understand... however, we’ve lost contact with several of the reinforcements.”

“Tsk, right. Well, they still need a supervisor, so we’ll just have to put up with it.”

“Certainly.”

After some time, Alus turned back four groups, as well as forcibly returning an additional two. A similar situation had happened with all of them, where the upperclassman had taken over the group.

Once he'd dealt with a couple of them, Alus got sick of hearing their excuses and just knocked them out right away. He even seriously considered reporting them as missing in battle and leaving them in the Outer World.

Finally, quite some time after noon, the extracurricular lesson was supposed to end soon.

Once it was time, the students would return to the starting point or gather at the headquarters. After that, those who volunteered could remain from sixth period until evening and continue the lesson.

Because of the idiots and their rash actions, the lesson had been a little turbulent, but the procedure itself wouldn't be changed.

Alus was running through the Outer World after receiving a report, heading for what was likely the last group out of control. Having headed straight out of the area, they were proceeding deeper and deeper into the Outer World at considerable speed.

They were already quite a distance away from the area that Alus and Loki had cleared of Fiends early that morning. A-classed Fiends were likely not there, but harder to detect B- and C-class Fiends might have snuck in.

"Group 11 is requesting reinforcements."

"I'm already on my way." They must have already encountered a Fiend and were in over their heads. Alus was fed up, thinking 'this is what you get,' but a mission was a mission. He picked up more speed. The face beneath his mask was reaching the limit on how much crap he could take. It felt like even bothering to make an expression was a waste of effort.

Contrary to his low spirits, the robe made of anti-magic fiber fluttered in the wind as he sped forward.

With that speed, he completely left the small Fiends appearing from time to time in the dust.

* * *

Shortly before Alus received the report of an out of control group...

"Mr. Cabsol, if we go any further we'll step out of the area boundary."

“Just follow me.”

Tesfia and her group had eliminated three Fiends since their first encounter. But each and every time, Cabsol insisted on finding stupid faults. Finally, Tesfia lost her temper and said, “Then why don’t you show us how it’s done?”—which was the start of it all.

He then played around with an unfortunate F-class Fiend he happened to find, and began looking for his next target. “Come on... Come on out. I’ll murder you!”

Fortunately, they hadn’t come across any Fiends so far, after exiting the operation area, but Cabsol continued heading in a straight line into the Outer World, his eyes bloodshot.

Tesfia and the rest of her group felt how abnormal and dangerous he was, but they couldn’t leave him behind and abandon the extracurricular lesson. As there was no precedent for this lesson at the Second Magical Institute, they might be suspended or even expelled. She was the highest-ranker among the first-years, but she couldn’t make such a decision.

“With this, I’ll be a Triple Digit. I’m not going to lose to some first-year Fable whelp,” Cabsol muttered to himself. As if possessed by a deep-rooted delusion, he swung his sword AWR around, cutting down branches in his path.

While Cabsol Denvel’s family didn’t interact with Tesfia Fable’s family, there’d been a time when their parents had held similar positions. That was why the head of the Denvel family concerned himself over Cabsol’s abilities, frequently comparing him to Tesfia.

Eventually, her name had become a fetter for him, and he’d cornered himself, saying he would never lose to her. As such, he felt a sense of rivalry toward her, but when she enrolled at the Institute and earned a rank close to his as a first-year, that rivalry turned into hostility.

And having seen her abilities, Cabsol began feeling panic and resentment.

Of course, Tesfia had no idea how he felt.

To him, this live combat training pretending to be an extracurricular lesson was the perfect chance for him to slay Fiends and raise his rank. He didn’t have

any experience either, but seeing that cheeky Fable girl deal with one, his sense of rivalry flared up and he defeated one too.

And having successfully eliminated a Fiend, he lost any semblance of restraint.

"... It really is strange," a female student mumbled. Her puzzled expression showed slight unease and fear.

By 'strange,' she wasn't just referring to Cabsol's behavior. They were already outside of the operation area, but hadn't encountered any Fiends yet. It had been quite a while since they defeated their last Fiend. The chances of encountering a Fiend lowering the further you went in was something that went against common sense.

Everyone in the group had the same misgivings, and the girl's mumbling spread unease among them all.

"Yeah..." Tesfia also felt something was off. She could feel something like a Fiend around, so she readied herself for what would likely be their final Fiend.

Her group had already eliminated three Fiends. Since then, Cabsol had eliminated two by himself. Tesfia figured she would be able to persuade him to turn around once he'd slain a third Fiend for himself.

Before long, the sixth Fiend appeared by the bank of a lake.

Though, in reality, it wasn't worth calling a lake, nor was it all that deep. At best it was a somewhat big pond. There was clear blue water inside, with rainbow-colored light bouncing off of the surface. This plain and normal pond was giving off a magical, mystical impression.

At most, the pond was as deep as Tesfia was tall. The water was so blue it could be mistaken for the sky. She could easily see the bottom of the pond.

Only tall trees were crowded around it, as if all the short ones had been intentionally removed. Sunlight came filtering down through the trees in rays of light.

But Tesfia was only captivated for an instant, as the sound of *it* came from above them.

Remembering they were in the Outer World, they all looked up together.

Facing them, near the top of what had to be the oldest tree in this grand forest, was a giant Fiend hanging upside-down from a very thick branch.

It looked like a giant spider. Its many eyes glared ferociously at them.

“!!”

“What... is that...?” One of the female students cowered in fear, pointing at it, before stumbling backwards onto the ground.

“Ho... How could we... possibly...”

“No way no way no way... w-we’re going to die!”

“Aaaaahhh!!”

Panic descended on the group in an instant.

Without even looking at the female student who’d fallen down, the group turned on their heels and took off running without even looking where they were going.

Cabsol was also completely stricken with fear, but it froze his legs.

Tesfia, with her feeling of pride and responsibility as a high ranker, courageously chose to stay. Her legs shook as she stared at the massive evil incarnate hanging in the tree.

Meanwhile, the students, desperately running in an attempt to escape, unfortunately found themselves stopping, too.

“—!!”

“Why... Why the hell are these here?!”

It was less of a question and more an expression of despair.

Tesfia glanced over in their direction, hearing their voices... and in the next moment, her body froze with fear.

“How...” Of course, there was nobody to answer her question. The word had simply escaped her lips.

A group of abnormal beings had appeared in the way of the students that were running from the spider.

Before they knew it, a multitude of Fiends appeared from their surroundings. Their looks varied, with nothing in common, like a group founded on chaos. And worst of all, more and more appeared until the students were surrounded.

The situation was clear, but panicked as they were, it took time for the reality to sink in. In short, they'd been lured in.

It was a hopeless situation.

While Tesfia and the others didn't have the knowledge to identify the Fiends, the spider Fiend in the tree was a B-class at least. Due to the region they were in, there were likely no A-class Fiends, but a B-class was a ridiculously hard mark for a novice Magicmaster.

The surrounding Fiends were probably of a lower class than the spider, but still a step up from the weaklings they fought before.

Suddenly, the ground shook. The big spider had jumped down from the tree.

It exceeded eight meters in length. Tesfia could feel the evilness and pressure exuding from its entire body. Moreover, while it was in the shape of a spider, it was different from a normal spider, with more legs than she could count. The shape of each one differed, ranging from various beasts to insects. It looked like they'd just been haphazardly attached.

A round *something* stuck out from its body. It was impossible to determine if it was the head or the tail.

No, it was its face. The many red dots on it were most likely compound eyes.

And below that—a blank part. Tesfia thought it was part of its black skin, but then it slowly opened, showing a sticky string within. Considering how smoke was rising from the ground where the string had dropped onto it, it was probably highly acidic saliva.

In other words, that was its mouth. However, its dark teeth, that you could see behind what were likely its lips, weren't as sharp as a carnivore's teeth. Instead they were flat, to crush their prey. Despite the Fiend's grotesque appearance, its row of teeth looked creepily human, stirring up an uncanny atmosphere.

Its evil-looking appearance, its predatory nature exuding from its body, ripped away the students' will to fight for their survival.

"This can't be happening... I can't die in a place like this," Cabsol said, putting on a bold front as he tightly gripped his sword AWR. Mana timidly flowed into it, as he unleashed today's third Burning Shot spell.

As he swung down his sword, several balls of flame flew at the spider Fiend. It was an intermediate attack spell that created multiple fireballs at the same time. Being propelled forward, the fireballs absorbed and burned the surrounding air as they flew.

The giant spider didn't even try to avoid the attack, ferociously opening its mouth as if to intimidate them.

The fireballs' explosions were meaningless against the Fiend. At best, some smoke rose from its slightly scorched skin.

It was clear that Cabsol's spell was severely lacking in firepower against the Fiend's overwhelming size.

"Aaaaahh!!" Seeing that his spell had no effect, Cabsol broke down, staggering and falling down on his rear. His AWR slipped out of his hand, and he covered his head with his now-free hand, trembling.

Tesfia also stared at the Fiend with a pale face. The only attacks she could use right away were on the same level as Cabsol's. Her Icicle Sword was stronger, but it wouldn't make much difference against that skin. She wouldn't get the chance to use it, though, due to the time it needed to cast. The spider was surprisingly agile for its size. It wouldn't be strange for it to attack if it sensed a spell being cast.

However...

All of the students understood that this was true despair. "It's all over..." Their tears of fear were proof that they'd lost their will to struggle. Faced with the gates of hell opening up before them, everyone collapsed to their knees, listening to the Fiends' screams of delight with drooping heads.

"Not yet, we still have a chance. Don't give up!" Tesfia's words of encouragement were awfully weak. She knew how desperate the situation was,

so there was no power behind her words.

“But... how?” the students asked, as if blaming Tesfia for saying something so irresponsible.

Tesfia bit her pale lip. Of course, she didn’t have a plan in mind. Defeating a B-class Fiend was impossible for them. That much was clear from the level of the spells they could use.

But Tesfia just couldn’t give up hope. She didn’t think she could be forgiven for that. “I don’t know... but if we give up here, we’ll die!”

As if to ridicule their anguish, the Fiends gradually closed in toward them. The overwhelming pressure from these predators stopped them from thinking clearly.

There was no time to waste. The only thing on her mind was *we can’t give up*.

I know!! Tesfia remembered something, and rushed over to Cabsol. She forcibly rummaged through his pockets, feeling the Fiend’s compound eyes casually staring at her back.

Right now, all she could do was cling to the memory of what the principal had said at the start of the extracurricular lesson—that the supervisors were equipped with an emergency signal.

“Here it is!!” The device was a hemisphere that fit in the palm of her hand. Recalling what the manual said that she’d read beforehand, she poured all of the mana she could into the finely-cut jewel.

In an instant, it started flickering white. Next, Tesfia felt some form of mana wave filling their surroundings.

That’s right, with this, help will come... probably. “Help is on the way, so until then...”

However, nobody listened to what she had to say. The reason was clear to all. There was no time. No one was going to make it to them. They were outside of the operation area, and far from headquarters at that.

There was no way they could hold off the Fiends until the signal reached the headquarters, and reinforcements could be sent. They were still in a desperate

situation. All of the students apart from Tesfia had given into their fear, even letting go of the symbol of a Magicmaster, their AWRs.

They'd lost the will to fight and were turning their eyes away from reality.

They'd yielded to the world.

Only Tesfia remained, and she poured all of her strength into her hand as she grabbed Cabsol's collar and shouted, "You're our supervisor, so give us a hand!!"

But Cabsol's eyes had teared up, and his pupils dilated from fear weren't even looking her way. She suddenly looked down at her feet and saw Cabsol's trousers stained with a lukewarm liquid.

"...! Why?! ... If you hadn't taken us all this way..."

Tesfia ground her teeth, tears finally forming in her eyes as well.

The giant spider, capable of attacking at any moment, was simply watching over this pathetic scene. Even the countless Fiends around them stopped moving, as if waiting for their king's descent. Perhaps it was due to their instincts as predators to assess their prey's strength, but they'd at least had the intelligence to lure them in.

Or maybe they just enjoyed playing with their foolish prey.

Tesfia mustered up her will and told the group to gather in one place, even dragging those that couldn't walk there herself, including some who were unconscious.

"Fine. I will struggle until the end."

Her tears wouldn't stop now, no matter how many times she wiped them away, so she gave up trying.

She put strength into her legs, stood up and raised her head.

Pouring mana through her katana, she faced the Fiend, feeling pitch-black despair. Then her heart filled with determination. Victory or defeat no longer mattered.

That's why her mana responded to her.

The giant spider showed no signs of moving. It let out a creepy sound, shaking its large frame up and down as if mocking her.

In that case... Tesfia thought to herself, and dashed toward the pack of Fiends. Just from what she could see there were several dozen D- and C-class Fiends. But she could no longer accept waiting for her death.

The Fiends, stirred up by her reckless act, let out deep growls in response.

“Haaaaaaa!!”

Tesfia froze the ground and stopped the Fiends. But it was just for a moment. As for the C class-looking Fiends, simply moving a little was enough to break the ice and free themselves.

But Tesfia showed no signs of panic. She hadn’t imagined the effect would be so weak, but to begin with, she didn’t even have the composure to come up with a plan. All she could do was lose herself in a desperate struggle.

Dodging the Fiends’ attacks, she swung her katana.

The difference in outcome was vast between these D and C class Fiends compared to the E-class and below Fiends she’d defeated before. It wasn’t so much a matter of power, as it was a matter of their bodies not letting her blade penetrate.

While her attacks left scratches on their black skin, it was a far throw from being able to pierce through to their core. Even if she limited herself to the D-class Fiends, their numbers made it difficult to accomplish anything. She could feel herself exhausting her mana in her attempt to buy time.

“—!”

Suddenly, a Fiend’s sharp claw approached her face. She somehow managed to deflect it with the back of her katana, but—

“Ahh!!” Her world turned upside down. The Fiend’s massive strength easily sent the delicate Tesfia flying.

She rolled and bounced off the ground, finally stopping a little ways into the pond. Her mind was muddled... her eyes weren’t settling. As she faintly drew breath, she noticed the corners of her eyes were stained red.

She touched herself with a trembling hand, and when she looked at it she saw blood. It seemed her face had gotten cut at some point. But it wasn't a life-threatening injury, so Tesfia told herself that she couldn't give up yet and used her katana as a support to get back up.

A red globe appeared before her.

That magic fireball lit up her body. She felt as if her skin would be burned by the heat emitted by the fireball. It was a manifestation of evil, a spell unleashed by one of the Fiends unwilling to let Tesfia rest for even a moment.

The fireball—about as big as Cabsol's Burning Shot—was right on top of her.

Readying her katana right away, Tesfia prepared a spell.

"*‹‹Ice Wall››* ...!!"

However, before the ice wall rising up from the ground could complete, the fireball crashed against it. The resulting explosion of fire and ice clashing sent Tesfia's body flying once more.

Smoke rose from the explosion, as the girl flying through the air finally landed on the ground with a thud. Moss at the waterside served as cushioning, but Tesfia barely remained conscious.

Her mind no longer worked. Pain pulsed through her head.

But she was fortunate. If the fireball had hit her directly, the damage would have been far worse.

Still lying on the ground, Tesfia raised her head. Her hand was slightly scorched, but she was still okay. As proof of that, her fingers and body twitched and moved as she put strength into them.

"Aaagh..." Tesfia let out a groan, enduring the pain. Her hair was a mess, her face dirty and her uniform was burnt here and there. Having taken the full brunt of the explosion, she couldn't tell exactly where she was hurting.

Despite that, Tesfia staggered up to her feet and readied her katana. "Aaaaaa!!!!" Wringing out a scream, she moved her legs forward.

She could see the Fiends turn their attention to her group unable to fight, closing in on them.

Their numbers were only increasing. So far, her attacks had barely affected them, and she'd been unable to finish any of them off, as she couldn't destroy their cores. The Fiends she'd injured were squirming and crawling, readying themselves. Their eyes glowed red with anger.

"No, stop... I won't let you!!"

Tesfia desperately swung her katana around. She wouldn't let anyone die. While knowing it wasn't something she could stop, she would fight until the bitter end.

She poured her desperation into a single swing. However, that swing had no technique behind it. She just merely swung her weapon.

The Fiends showed no signs of flinching from her action, but rather collected themselves, and Tesfia looked down at her AWR. It was the spirit of the Fable family given form, something she'd used since childhood. However, now, there were no traces of mana running through it.

She collapsed onto her knees. The mana she'd been so desperately using had finally run dry.

She'd put up a brave front on her own. But in the end, it wouldn't change the reality of the hierarchy between Fiends and humans, one of predator and prey, a fact that was now clear to her.

Before she knew it, the giant spider approached her to finish it. Letting out a loud cry, it raised several of its legs up high. And as if presenting a sacrifice to an evil god, it let loose a creepy and ridiculing roar.

As it did, droves of *somethings* came falling down from the tree. They were like miniature versions of the giant spider before her. These smaller spider Fiends, likely the giant spider's children, appeared to have been waiting for their prey to weaken.

Tesfia no longer had the willpower left to be surprised by the situation worsening. Thinking about it, her resistance had just been out of desperation. Having forced herself past her limits, her mind could no longer feel shock over something like this.

Standing was the best she could do... When she realized the state she was in,

she felt her pain grow distant.

Finally, the giant spider Fiend attacked Tesfia as if to torment her.

With her wavering legs, she couldn't evade the attack.

Her vision was starting to fade, and the Fiend's attack didn't seem real to her, as all she could see was something moving in the corners of her eyes.

The next moment, the Fiend's claws tore through the sleeve of her uniform and ripped off her hairclip, scattering it and some crimson hair up into the air. Having lost her balance, Tesfia saw her torn hair tossed up in the air seem to float down in slow motion. The red of her hair showed a red glow, though not similar to that of the Fiends' red eyes.

Those were a creepily dark red color. Instead, her red hair absorbed the light, unleashing it from within itself in a scarlet color.

It was the color of the sun and life, a powerful light that couldn't allow her to give up.

However... that glowing red eventually disappeared, and Tesfia's body slumped onto the ground, on her back.

Shifting her glance, she could see most of her group deeply shocked and in a trance, or passed out from fear. How fortunate she would be if she could do the same...

She couldn't even move a finger. She wouldn't be able to close her eyes before the end.

Fiends approached her. She could tell from the ground trembling. Death was stepping closer to her, but it didn't feel like it concerned her. The grating, creepy cries sounded like they were coming from somewhere far away.

It's over. But I did what I could... She gave herself comfortless praise.

She was captivated by the Outer World's blue sky that she caught glimpses of between the branches.

It's beautiful...

But that sight was soon blocked. The Fiends' limbs, claws outstretched,

approached her face. And stopped just before it, as if to measure the necessary angle and distance.

Though even now, Tesfia was thinking of something else as she lay on death's doorstep.

Even in this desperate situation, I can feel my magic responding to me. I won't let you say I'm not suitable to be a Magicmaster ever again!

For some reason, she smiled. The blood running down her cheek mixed with her tears.

The sharp claws that would send her to the afterlife slowly rose to gather enough force. In the next moment, her weakness welled up, and she tried to cling on, unable to give up her life.

She didn't want her end to be in the middle of nowhere.

She'd only just gotten started.

There was still so much that she wanted to do. Having made her peace and praising herself was just a bluff.

The moment she thought that, her teeth began chattering. That wasn't fear. She was rejecting fate.

No! I don't want to die! I don't want to die!

Speaking her mind, she cast everything else aside and rejected the hard reality.

She mustered what little power she had left to get up. Tears overflowed from her eyes and distorted her sight.

But reality was cruel, and that sorrowful cry in her mind was ignored.

The Fiends' claws finally reached the optimal height, and after a brief pause, mercilessly swung down.

Al... "—!"

Tesfia couldn't understand what happened in that moment. Even though she'd been unable to close her eyes, she couldn't see what happened.

The tips of death that were swinging down toward her had suddenly

disappeared.

She heard a distant pained scream from a Fiend, and a loud heavy *thud* rang out, as the giant spider was slammed against a tree.

And it wasn't just the Fiends about to finish her off. The small spiders, as well as all the other Fiends had been blown into the same direction, as if gravity itself had flipped.

"I see I was a little late."

A quiet, familiar voice reached her ears.

It was the voice of a young man whose tone was arrogant and insolent, not even trying to hide how fed-up he sounded.

Raising her face while trembling, Tesfia saw a strange mask that was impressively white. Before long, she felt an arm on her back and was slowly lifted up.

"... You can say that again."

The arms that could be described as thin and not muscular felt awfully reassuring.

Tesfia smiled, and wiped at her wet eyelashes. Another tear came out from her eye and dripped down her cheek. She realized who it was. Or rather, she didn't even need to think about it.



They were far from headquarters, and the truth was that reinforcements would never have reached them fast enough after they sent the emergency signal.

She knew that better than anyone. That's why she knew there was only one person in the world who could pull it off.

"If you have enough sense left to be that cheeky, then you'll be fine," Alus said, having already checked to make sure she wasn't seriously injured. She had a small cut on her forehead, and the cut on her cheek wasn't as deep as the bleeding made it look. Her burns weren't minor, but were well within the realm of treatable.

Not having the aptitude for healing spells was regrettable, but these were the frontlines. This kind of thing was the norm, so Alus quickly changed gears. Since his role was as an instructor, he didn't mind if Tesfia surrendered to the fear and harshness that was the Fiends.

However, that didn't mean he wanted her to die. Which was why he had a slightly relieved expression under his mask.

He carried Tesfia and her katana over to the rest of the group, then picked up what was likely the supervisor's AWR and stuck it into the ground to use as a backrest. "As a reward, I'll show you how to defeat Fiends, so don't fall asleep."

He had meant it in an *aren't you glad you survived* kind of way, but wasn't sure if she got it. He even began thinking it may have been a little too harsh for her when she was covered in injuries, but Tesfia earnestly stared at him and nodded.

Having confirmed Tesfia was all right, Alus drew the short sword from underneath his robe and looked at the Fiends. "As I thought, that wouldn't be enough to finish you off."

It was possible to rely on just the directionality of kinetic energy to use Morshonell Link, the hidden power of Alus' AWR, Night Mist.

In other words, it was possible to use the kinetic energy on the direct line the short sword was thrown in, and amplify, duplicate, and apply it to all targeted Fiends, blowing them away in the same direction. This was yet another applied

use of space distortion magic.

However, as it was a relatively weak spell, the Fiends that had been blown away were already showing signs of getting back up.

“One B class, eight C class, thirty-eight D class or lower, huh... How nice of you all to gather round in a place like this,” Alus said, exasperated, as he scrutinized the giant spider in the center of the crowd of Fiends. That spider was likely making this pond its nest. Higher-classed Fiends having lower-classed Fiends following them wasn’t all that rare in the Outer World.

Meanwhile, Tesfia looked on from some distance away.

Not only had Alus counted all of the Fiends in an instant, he even identified their classes. On top of that, the chain of that ominous-looking short sword he held was giving off an eerie presence.

Despite being on the verge of losing consciousness, her racing heart wouldn’t let her. It was as if her instincts as a Magicmaster were telling her not to miss a moment of what was about to happen.

“It seems many-legged ogres and I are connected by fate. Well, no matter, this is a lecture for beginners, so don’t think you’ll get to die easily.”

Alus grabbed hold of the chain and threw it out into the air.

In that instant, mana flowed into it. Alus’ heart froze, erasing any emotions such as anger and hate immediately. If anything, he once again became aware of the slight joy and destructive impulses deep down in his heart.

That’s why he had no way of knowing what kind of face he was making right now, and he was fine with that.

Ahh... how irritating.

He unconsciously put his fingers on his mask. Removing what felt like shackles, he put it away inside his robe. His face, touching the air of the Outer World for the first time today, was very cold.

His stare was nothing less than inhuman, and a brutal light resided in his eyes.

Those again, Tesfia thought to herself. She recalled those eyes when Alus glared at her from the roof that night. This time, those eyes... from an

onlooker's perspective he was simply staring expressionlessly at the Fiends. Yet to Tesfia, those eyes seemed to go beyond being emotionless, not even seeing any of the colors of the world... they looked hollow and desolate.

That's why the chill she felt running down her spine was probably feeling that portion of his humanity he was missing, that perfect emptiness in him. It pained her heart.

It was an absolute hollowness, making her feel like she was going to be crushed just by looking at him... and her heart was shaken as she faced that abyss.

Whether aware of Tesfia's feelings or not, Alus threw the short sword in his hand. Half of the black blade burrowed into the ground without resistance.

With the sword as its origin point, the ground froze over in an instant.

Just what happened to the world after that?

When people blink their eyes, their vision turns dark for an instant. That instant becomes a blind spot in their consciousness, and they have no way of knowing what occurred in the world in that time. And as long as people aren't consciously aware of it, they don't know how many times they blink in a minute.

However, this time, Tesfia was able to confirm the change in the world before and after blinking. The scene before her completely changed as if the freezing had spread outward like a ripple in water.

The Outer World landscape overflowing with life had turned into a frozen silvery waste in the blink of an eye.

It was a world where everything had stopped. The several dozen Fiends had all frozen over in an instant, with icicles covering them.

Tesfia had knowledge of what spell that was. Freeze, a spell that froze the ground and sealed Fiends' movements. However, that was actually an incomplete spell.

Unleashed before her eyes was the strongest spell of that kind, Niflheim.

Tesfia was speechless... For a moment, she thought Alus had the same affinity

for ice as she did. But she quickly reconsidered, realizing she had the wrong idea. He had shown off his ability in the past to use advanced spells of all attribute kinds without any trouble.

However, Alus hadn't intended for this to be seen as some deeply meaningful guidance. While he used the same attribute as her, he'd only chosen the spell because it was the easiest of the ice affinity spells he'd learned, and because it led well into the next spell he would unleash.

Right now, only Alus and Tesfia were left in this frozen world.

Alus kicked the handle of the short sword buried in the ground, hard.

Tesfia, with her keen senses, could feel the mana vibrations similar to a sound wave spreading. But when she glanced at the trees around her, she saw they weren't swaying even a little.

Railpine—a spell that created powerful vibrations inside the body. Moreover, it was possible to make it devastatingly powerful by limiting its effect to a specific area.

The frozen Fiends were smashed to pieces by a vibration from inside, destroying their cores at the same time.

After Alus picked up his short sword, the frozen landscape returned to normal in an instant, and everything that had made up that wintry scene dispersed as particles of light. Once everything was done, not even any remnants of the Fiends remained.

"... Amazing."

It wasn't like Tesfia was so overwhelmed, she couldn't speak. But because her jaw had dropped so far, she couldn't even try to speak. When it came to sheer ability, Alus was in a different dimension from her... and she likely would've been unable to put her astonishment into words even if her throat hadn't been parched.

Alus suddenly turned. Not towards Tesfia, but to the giant spider that still remained. Its massive frame had been frozen, but it hadn't shattered into pieces. And once the ice started to melt, it began squirming again.

He glanced over at Tesfia, with a look that said he was just cleaning out the trash, and said without really expecting a response, “Then let’s begin. You’d better still be awake.” His eyes were a deep black, his expression blank.

Tesfia had no idea what he was really thinking. But even then, she muttered to herself, “There’s no way I could fall asleep after seeing that...” with an exasperated tone.

Short sword in hand, Alus adjusted the length of the chain and wordlessly began moving.

However, Tesfia couldn’t tell how fast he had moved. She’d never intended to blink, but before she knew it he was right in front of the Fiend.

“Your friends are all gone now.”

The Fiend wasn’t going to answer his mutterings. Alus had merely intended his remark as a report to the Fiend that all the other Fiends were dead. He was checking to see what his opponent would do, like a hunter joyfully looking to see what his prey’s next move would be.

Its answer was an enraged howl. Despite its bug-like appearance, drops of its saliva splashed out of its mouth that was full of human-looking teeth. It raised dozens of legs above its head and stomped down in a reckless, continuous attack towards Alus.

The giant spider kicked up the muddy ground at a fierce pace. And finally... the several hundred attacks were all dodged, and ultimately stopped even hitting the ground.

Noticing that, the Fiend’s legs stopped moving, still raised in the air. Its red compound eyes blankly stared.

“Haha, what were you going to do with that?”

Alus’ expressionless face finally moved a little. The edges of his lips raised into a twisted smile.

Out of the Fiend’s dozens, or even hundreds of legs, only the bare minimum to stand remained, with the rest cut off halfway through. With those short legs it couldn’t even reach the ground.

Its compound eyes trembled with rage. “Gigigigiii!!” A poisonous breath leaked through the gaps in its teeth. Body parts rose up from the joint of its neck alongside a strange sound, and before long it had sprouted new legs. Of course, it was a far cry from the number it had lost.

“Oh, so you can even do that? Then you don’t need the rest either.”

Alus threw his short sword. Flying in a straight line, the chain wrapped around the dozen or so legs on one side of the Fiend. He pulled hard on the chain with the light of mana within it. As he did, the Fiend’s legs were squeezed and an unpleasant sound rang out.

Pouring more mana into it, Alus didn’t hesitate to pull even harder. The legs cracked with a crunch. Dark green body fluid dripped onto the ground. The Fiend let out a scream as its giant body listed. Using its newly-replenished legs, it attempted to support its weight, but that only bought a little bit of time.

Not wanting to miss a moment, Tesfia kept her eyes peeled open. Just a little while ago that Fiend had been playing around with her, and now it was Alus’ turn to play around with it.

Alus wordlessly cut off the legs on the other side of its body.

With nothing to support its body remaining, the Fiend fell to the ground.

Alus stared down at it.

Seeing him completely expressionless—like he was staring at garbage, but at the same time looking somehow melancholy—Tesfia held her breath.

“... Are you finished?”

Emotionless eyes stared at the Fiend. There wasn’t a single bit of concern in his stare, as if he was looking at a dead insect at his feet, one he likely wouldn’t even commit to memory.

“...!!” The Fiend made a sound.

Alus looked a tinge disappointed. The Fiend’s stomach then swelled up a little.

At first, that looked like it would be the Fiend’s last breath, but Alus’ lips quirked. Showing interest in the resistance the Fiend was showing on the verge of death, he jumped backwards.

In the next moment, a slight amount of black liquid leaked out of the Fiend's mouth. When it touched the ground, it created a great deal of smoke. At the same time, the Fiend's stomach grew more than twice in size.

The instant its swelling ceased—the black liquid came surging out of its mouth towards Alus.

It was like highly concentrated acid, but not a single speck of it reached him. Considering how elegantly he'd dodged it, he must have been expecting a surprise attack of this level.

The reason he hadn't finished it right away was likely in part to teach Tesfia a lesson. Even for average Magicmasters there were plenty of means to deal with a powerful opponent like this one. Of the many that existed, Alus had chosen the method that would best serve as an example for Tesfia. In this case, he'd relied on a practical application of an existing spell, and created a new spell from it.

The ring he'd chosen from his chain was the one engraved with the formula for the spell, Niflheim. Mana flowed into the ring and brightly lit up the shrunken-down magic formula. He'd also purposefully canceled the advanced spell partway through its construction. The construction of the magic formula had been fully formed in his mind, but the reason he canceled it was so he could add his own touch to the construction.

Leaving the formula that defined the ice attribute as it was, he took over the formula construction that had been stopped partway through. More accurately, he'd deliberately left Niflheim, a spell that changed the laws of the world around it, in an indefinite, degenerated state.

Alus then built up new structural elements, and his AWR swiftly took over for him. It was an action that required complete understanding of the magic formula and delicate skill, but to him it only took as much effort as building something with clay. There were no theoretical components that could fail in his mind.

He slowly raised his short sword overhead.

A sparkling, crystallized *something* was unleashed from the tip of the sword.

As it touched the air, a crackling sound rang out as it changed into a veil of mist, facing down the spray of acid.

However, the difference in mass was overwhelming, and that wall of mist didn't look like it would be enough to stop the acid current that melted everything. Yet despite the impression, reality showed a different phenomenon. Niflheim's instant freezing affected a large area by changing the laws of the world. But the applied version of the spell Alus had used didn't work the same way.

Instead, it functioned by chaining solely across the air.

Niflheim worked by freezing on the level of liquid nitrogen, compressing magic particles into crystals. It also had the property of being amplified and scattering when clashing with something physical.

As a result, when Alus' spell came into contact with the current of acid, the effects explosively expanded and engulfed it. The harsh freezing chained across all of the acid in an instant, freezing it solid in the air as the arch it had been unleashed in.

Tesfia didn't know a spell that created a phenomenon like this. She had committed all of the ice affinity spells that existed to memory. However... when she scanned through her knowledge, she couldn't find a single spell that could do what just happened.

She was still a novice Magicmaster. And each and every superhuman feat Alus was showing off was infinitely expanding the possibilities of magic. She trembled in elation.

Tesfia was completely entranced, her eyes wide open so she could burn what she was seeing into her memory.

Now the expanding wave of freezing had frozen all of the acid, making its way to the giant spider. The spider's cells were instantly put into a form of suspended animation.

The giant spider stood in the same pose it was in when it spit out the acid. Like it had turned into a statue.

It was this phenomenon that showed why the spell was a degenerated form

of Niflheim. Niflheim's instant freezing wasn't actually freezing; it worked by stopping even the activity of cell nuclei.

In other words—it suspended the activity of body and substance, and instantly killed smaller Fiends.

However, this spell was different. When it came to freezing a target, it looked to have the same effect as Niflheim. But it didn't only suspend life. It also stopped even mana from working, thus belonging to the restriction type of magic. Its nature was to turn mana, and all of the cells that contained mana, into ice.

It wasn't just a freezing wave of cold; it completely restrained any mana it touched. That's why the giant spider Fiend's body didn't crumble into dust, but instead turned into ice that would melt away.

The Fiend was in suspended animation, still alive. If a Fiend were to have a conscious mind, it would've been able to identify the situation it was in.

Alus casually stared at the statue with the massive ice pillar coming out of its mouth. After that, he jumped on top of what had been a torrent of acid, stepping across it. That rainbow-like arch led all the way to the Fiend.

"... How boring." His impression escaped his mouth.

Those black eyes emotionlessly lorded over the Fiend. For some reason, that robed back looked melancholy again to Tesfia. Alus' fear-inspiring, chilling voice even seemed to contain some grief over the mundanity of the world.

To think there was such a gap between them. She'd said she would catch up to him one day, but the difference in power was just so vast. He was simply too far away from her. No matter how much effort she put into it, she'd never be able to kill Fiends so calmly and without hatred. It was like Alus had no emotions when he fought.

While Tesfia held her breath, Alus slowly walked across the pillar of ice until he reached the Fiend, and swung his short sword down.

A Fiend's power originated from its source, and until that was destroyed it wouldn't die. Even now the giant spider in front of him was simply frozen at the cellular level, its animation suspended. The flow of mana supplied by the core

to the Fiend so it could move was just stopped.

The spell restraining the mana and cells was temporary. It didn't change the rules of the world like Niflheim did. Both spells appeared to have the same effect, but the cause was greatly different.

By deceiving the laws of the world, Niflheim supplanted reality, encasing it in ice; as such, its period of effectiveness depended on the deterioration of the information of mana.

Meanwhile, this new spell suspended the Fiend by sealing the flow of mana, but the ice around it was physical ice; and if left alone it would eventually melt away and reawaken.

Of course, Alus wouldn't let that happen.

The blade of the short sword didn't have the length to cut across the entire span of the giant spider, but that was a trivial problem to him. A massive blade of mana appeared as he swung his short sword down, easily splitting the eight meter-long statue in half.

In the exposed cross section was the core, looking like a crystal. In the next instant a crack formed in it and it began to crumble.

As Alus jumped off the creepy statue, it... and the ice encasing it... cracked and fell apart.

"You all share a collective responsibility," Alus suddenly muttered, and he grabbed hold of two of the rings in his chain, as if to say that his work wasn't over yet.

"‹‹Real Trace›› ‹‹Auto Chase››"

In an instant, the entirety of the chain was coated in mana, and Alus threw it.

There were no Fiends in sight in that direction, but the short sword weaved its way through the trees at a frightening speed, pulling the chain with it. Many Fiends should still be gathered and hiding over there.

This automatic tracking spell worked by combining two types of spells. That said, neither of them were all that special to Alus.

The length of his chain, its range, was a mere fifty meters, though not every

ring in the chain had a formula engraved on it. That's why he used the Real Trace spell to replicate the chain, giving mana a physical shape. As a result, the chain continued on without end as the short sword chased after its targets. This meant the range wasn't fifty meters, but as long as Alus' mana lasted.

And with Auto Chase, the short sword itself became a ruthless murderer, independently eliminating all Fiends that entered Alus' field of view. The sword tracked the mana wavelengths unique to Fiends, and continued giving chase until it disappeared.

With the distances involved, he couldn't rely on the sword to take the shortest route and destroy just the core, but since the Fiends' cores were responsible for the mana wavelengths, it would complete its mission even if it took some time.

This was a technique among Magicmasters that made use of summons, sacred beasts or familiars.

It was also possible to do the same thing by using a freely controllable underling, molding its form as magic, and adding an autonomous process to it.

"We're going back," Alus said bluntly.

However, Tesfia's answer came in the form of a genuine question, as if she hadn't realized the battle was over. "What... was that?" Having avoided any serious injuries, her consciousness had cleared by now. Though she didn't fully understand what Alus had done, she had a passionate curiosity as a Magicmaster about unknown spells. Especially so when her own specialty, the ice affinity, was involved.

Her earnest eyes already had the light of intelligence back in them. The injuries she'd sustained from the Fiends weren't minor, but she'd recovered a little from her exhaustion from overusing her mana after resting awhile.

Tesfia's complexion looked a lot better than before, and her cheeks even had a hint of red to them, though that might have been less related to her health and more due to intellectual excitement. In fact, she was getting excited over seeing a new spell for the first time.

However, she had something she needed to say before pursuing the matter.

She looked straight at Alus, aware that her hands were trembling, as she was finally released from the nonstop tension.

It was a reaction to fear. She felt like she'd walked across thin ice, shaken to her core as she realized she'd just barely survived by the skin of her teeth.

Her lips tried to form words, but her mouth closed instead, like she was trying to endure a wave of emotion. "Phew," she forcibly exhaled. With that, she was finally able to squeeze out the words... "Thank you."

"Hm?" Alus looked at her suspiciously, as her face was turned down and her voice was hard to hear.

"I said thank you!" Tesfia raised her head, revealing a slightly reddened expression. She'd finally been able to give him words of gratitude. Controlled by overwhelming fear, she'd retreated back into her shell, and her pride had also kept her from honestly expressing herself. Her blushing face was proof of how conflicted she was. But she still told him what she had to. Though awkward, she possessed the ability for it as a daughter of the Fable family. "Thank you for saving not just me, but everyone else too!"

Once she'd made her decision, she was able to frankly speak her mind. And after she'd finished saying it, she felt exhilarated for some reason. A bright and refreshing smile appeared on her face.

So she can make faces like these, Alus thought to himself, while comparing it to her usual provoking expression.

However, Alus was puzzled by what she did next, raising the corners of his mouth. "... What's that supposed to mean?"

Tesfia had made a V sign at Alus with a satisfied look. "I was able to fight against Fiends, too!"

So that's what she meant. Alus smiled wryly as he covered her two raised fingers with his hand. "Don't get full of yourself over something like that."

"?!" Having her hand held by him, Tesfia repeatedly blinked and looked up at his face.

"... But, well, I guess you get a passing grade."

“Alright!” Tesfia said with a joyful smile. But the moment she relaxed, she felt her body hurting all over and scowled. Willpower and mana were one thing, but the damage her body had taken wasn’t going to go away anytime soon.

As she looked at him with a smile to hide her embarrassment, Alus asked her, “Can you stand?” He shifted his hand from her fingers to grasp her hand more fully to pull her up. Tesfia blushed for a moment as they held hands, but went with the flow and nervously stood up.

Getting on her feet, adjusting her posture and giving her head a shake to clear it, she hesitatingly called out to Alus, “S-So, well... about that spell you used...”

Alus was confused. He didn’t know which spell she meant. Niflheim, Railpine, Real Trace, Auto Chase... none of them were anything special to him.

He wasn’t opposed to revealing the trick to Niflheim, either, despite it being such an advanced spell. Defeating the Fiends with an ice affinity spell had been in part for her sake.

Seeing his expression, Tesfia hurriedly added on to her question. “The one where you froze things in an instant! What was that? It wasn’t Niflheim.”

While smiling wryly at her shoddy explanation, he was finally able to understand. He was also unexpectedly impressed and his evaluation of her improved a little at her knowing Niflheim by name. With those thoughts in mind, he purposefully put his fingers on his chin as he answered, “That one’s still too early for you... but well, if I were to give it a name, I guess it would be Mistlotein.”

“—!! So that means it *is* a new spell, right?” Just as she thought. Even she knew that a deep level of magic knowledge was required to create new spells. However, that was the extent of what she knew. But that was only natural, since modern-day Magicmasters didn’t understand every single tidbit there was to know about magic, even about the magic formulas they used themselves. But even if they didn’t know the fundamental principles behind them, they could still use them, like with Mana Chariots.

“Then, could you, uhm, tell me... please?” Tesfia hesitatingly asked. And with her unusual use of polite expressions, her sincerity really came through. At the same time, she became aware of how unprincipled she sounded, and the blush

on her cheeks spread all the way to the tops of her ears. But she stuck to her eagerness.

“Well, one day... More importantly,” Alus said, moving his gaze from Tesfia to a certain spot in the clearing. In that spot were the other students curled up and bunched together out of fear. Many were still in a trance or unconscious.

When Alus pulled out his mask from his robe, Tesfia understood what they needed to prioritize.

Pushing the topic of the new spell aside—though she still had half her mind focused on it—Tesfia staggered over to the others to tell them that rescue had arrived.

“Guys, we’ll be fine now,” Tesfia said cheerfully, while enduring the pain of her injuries as best she could.

However, the only group member that responded to her voice was the female student who’d first spotted the Fiend. She’d been curled in a ball until now, but finally came out of her extreme shock. Her shoulders began trembling.

Meanwhile, the male students were pathetically motionless.

Hearing Tesfia’s gentle voice, the female student awkwardly raised her head. “...” Her vision seemed to be blurry due to her tears, as she repeatedly looked around her surroundings. Unable to believe she had survived that predicament, she couldn’t relax until confirming with her own eyes that it really was safe.

“Like I said, we’re fine now.” Tesfia gently touched her trembling, stiff shoulders.

After glancing at Tesfia’s hand for a moment, large tears poured out of the female student’s eyes, and she embraced Tesfia, burying her face in her neck. She began letting out a muffled sobbing. Tesfia wobbled, but supported her with her small body, patting her trembling back.

“Now then, what to do with this guy.” Having put on his mask a while back, Alus looked at the passed-out Cabsol.

He turned him around with his foot. That short hair looked familiar... this was the second time Alus had seen this person. He was the arrogant third-year

leader of the group that had stormed Sisty's office the other day.

"Alright! Let's leave this guy behind."

"...!" Tesfia panicked for a moment when she heard Alus say that so casually. She quickly reconsidered, realizing it was probably a joke, but then she couldn't tell what kind of expression he wore underneath his mask.

In fact, his eyes which she could see through the mask's eye holes were looking at Cabsol like he was just a pebble on the side of the road. His tone sounded like he'd had enough.

In reality, Alus was ready to abandon him if he had to. The unexpected was always a threat in the Outer World, but it was different if the situation was purposefully created.

"He did cause trouble, after all..." Alus said.

But Tesfia hurriedly intervened. "Wait a minute! That's going too far."

"Hmph, then either way is fine, but carrying this guy will be a bother." That was more or less how Alus really felt. He truly believed it would be wasted effort.

Tesfia struggled to figure out how Alus assessed things. When weighing a human life against the labor of carrying him, he seemed to immediately eliminate pointless effort.

Then again, considering what Cabsol had done, that might not be all that unexpected.

"It's his fault that this happened, so letting him die would be irresponsible," Tesfia said, trying to help Cabsol. She thought it was a good idea, but when she thought of the pain she went through because of him, and the anger it caused her, she knew it was a bit of a stretch.

Opinions differed when it came to measuring a person's sin against their atonement. For example, in Alpha, the general judgment toward a murderer was to have them live and atone for their sins.

To Alus, paying with your life for murder was the correct decision, as well as being the more effortless judgment. Which was why he tilted his head at the

point Tesfia was making. “Is that so?” It was the kind of judgment he couldn’t understand, but he ended up accepting it. He was somewhat aware that he was a little off at times, or rather, he’d finally started to realize it as of late.

In the military, being abandoned in the Outer World for committing a major violation against orders was a natural punishment. It was a betrayal, not only against military regulations, but also against humanity. As long as there was proof, it was a serious enough violation to justify an on-site judgment.

While Cabsol was just a student, there was a limit to how far you could push it. His sins weren’t serious enough to immediately pay with his life, but Alus would be fine with at least abandoning him in the Outer World.

If he’s lucky enough... No, I guess he’d die.

As Alus sighed, Tesfia continued appealing to him. “Besides, it’s not like I can’t understand how he feels... Well no, I don’t understand, but...” she said evasively.

She, vexingly enough, felt something that wasn’t quite sympathy or compassion, but...

Magicmasters were all more or less bound by rank. The means Cabsol used this time couldn’t be overlooked, but young Magicmasters running off on their own with the ambition to raise their rank was unavoidable.

In fact, Tesfia herself had been more fixated on increasing her rank than most in the past. The people around her expected it, especially considering her status as a noble. She couldn’t properly put it into words, but she saw a glimpse of her past self in Cabsol.

Alus took this to mean she felt sympathy for him. That’s why he continued for her, “I understand, you could say this guy’s been punished enough. No, he should be receiving more punishment. I guess... this guy’s probably not going to make it as a Magicmaster.”

In other words, he’d be branded as a failure. That said, it didn’t mean he’d be treated horribly for the rest of his life. However, someone branded as a second-rate Magicmaster would be treated and recognized differently from a first-rate Magicmaster fighting on the frontlines.

It was the difference between contempt and respect. An unspoken rule of differentiating between ranks.

Suddenly, the sound of rustling leaves. Tesfia readied herself.

Next, a silver-haired girl jumped out from a grassy place. After gliding through the air, she softly landed.

“Loki.”

“I’m sorry. I was, uhm...” Loki faltered. Some time had passed since Alus headed out to help the last group, and with no report coming in, she probably just couldn’t contain herself.

“Sorry, I forgot about reporting.”

“No, I’m just happy that nothing happened.” Loki was relieved. While she believed he would be okay, she couldn’t push aside the unease she’d felt. Freed from her distress, her expression softened. “The main extracurricular lesson for the first-year students has ended. The principal has expressed her intent to continue the lesson, and all groups aside from this one are already moving on to the next stage.”

“Got it... Thanks.” Alus put his hand on her head as if praising a puppy.

Her eyes were downcast, and her cheeks blushed, but when she realized a certain red-haired student was there, Loki quickly returned to her senses. Her softened expression turned into its usual emotionless one.

“What about the Fiends?”

“I’ve wiped out all of the ones around here.”

“I thought that was you, Sir Alus. I could see the chain.” Loki nodded her head in understanding.

That’s when Alus suddenly asked her, “How many are on their way?”

It was an abrupt question, but Loki answered immediately. “Three teams are on their way. I believe they’ll be here soon.”

“Okay. I’ll leave the rest to you.”

“Yes!” Loki politely bowed. Her appearance was neat, tidy and cute. Despite

her having rushed over from headquarters, there was not a speck of dirt on her uniform.

But casting his gaze upon a point—he brushed off her shoulders with an exasperated expression. The next moment, green leaves fell to the ground.

“T-Thank you very much.”

Alus said nothing. That was just how quickly she’d come running.

“About where we left off...” Tesfia said. It wasn’t just because she didn’t like feeling left out. She was interested in the new spell, but more than that, she realized how ignorant and short-sighted she had been.

She also regretted not stopping Cabsol. Considering her position, it might have been hard, but she had made light of the dangers of the Outer World.

Man was very weak in this vast and mysterious world. Tesfia now understood the terrors of the world and accurately grasped how feeble her abilities really were.

The essence of defeating Fiends that Alus spoke of was likely not about skill, but mental attitude. And she was overwhelmingly lacking in that determination and power to refine her mind the way she was now.

“Hurry up and tell me, please. I want to become stronger. I’m sure I’ll see the world differently then...” That’s why she wanted to hear the answer to her question from before that had been left up in the air. No, she was already beyond wanting to know only that. It would exceed simple knowledge or technique. Tesfia felt like it would lead her into the future, a clue leading her to her own path as a Magicmaster.

However, her enthusiasm wasn’t rewarded. “What are you going on about?” Alus casually said, as if he’d forgotten their conversation. He pulled back his short sword’s chain. The chain of the AWR had finished hunting its prey, wiping out all the Fiends around, and returned to its scabbard.

“Like I said... s-start with that spell...” Tesfia was embarrassed by Loki staring at her unreasonableness, and was unable to continue clearly.

But Alus brushed her off. “It’d be a pain if anyone else were to see. And don’t

get your priorities wrong. Treat your injuries first. If you're falling behind against opponents on this level, you still have a long way to go."

He had said it lightly, but in an instant Tesfia's strong will returned and she glared at him. With traces of tears still on her face, she said, "I said I want to get stronger! Besides, you're planning on running away, aren't you?"

Tesfia firmly grabbed Alus' robe. Her eyes were serious and she looked headstrong, not going to let her chance slip away, even though she was injured.

"Fine... Loki, I'm taking her with me."

"Wai—Ahh!"

Suddenly Alus reached out with his arms. Tesfia was astonished for a moment, having suddenly been lifted off the ground, but then let out a small scream. She'd wrapped her arms around Alus' neck by reflex when she was picked up, but shame assaulted her, so she let go and awkwardly held her hands over her chest.

"I-I can walk on my own..." Her movements in his arms were very meek. That was probably because she hadn't recovered yet.

That said, Alus wasn't planning on waiting for her to recover and return at her leisure to headquarters. "Just shut up if you want me to teach you. I'll instruct you in a way where no one can interfere."

He didn't need to say any more. Like a child wanting to play with a new toy, Tesfia had no choice but to obey. "O-Okay..."

As if to protect her dignity, the proud noble girl banded her hands in front of her modest bosom.

* * *

In the end, Group 11 was rescued, with only Tesfia being injured.

The majority of the group either fainted or were unable to move, meaning they didn't resist or do anything unnecessary. The remaining members, taken in by three teams for a total of six people, had no external injuries.

However, the supervisor, Cabsol, had a haggard look on his face. His arrogance and dignity as a noble seemed to have disappeared, and he was

gasping for breath upon his return to headquarters.

In total, the supervisors of seven groups and four reinforcement teams had acted independently... in other words, they'd gone against the rules of the extracurricular lesson, and defied orders.

While some fault lay with the Institute, they would still face serious punishment. Some of the first-year students were traumatized because of their actions. Moreover, the fact that they ignored warnings from headquarters meant they'd be given even more punishment.

Most of the groups, though, including Felinella's group, finished the extracurricular lesson without any problems.

Normally, it took time before a verdict was handed down, but this time it was swift. Even so, this was the most problematic task for the principal among all that had happened during the lesson.

On the other hand, Tesfia wasn't publicly rewarded for the injuries she sustained, but they weren't for naught.

Just before the extracurricular lesson ended, Alus kept his promise and taught her the details of the structural elements of Mistlotein... while dashing through the Outer World with Tesfia in his arms. Though it was questionable if she was able to understand everything.

Her enthusiasm stumped even Alus, and if she'd had a notebook with her, she'd surely be writing down every single word he spoke despite the extreme speed they were moving at.

In the end, the only way to get her to calm down was not only to reveal the entire magic formula, but Alus even promised to keep her company once they got back to headquarters so she could write it all down. Of course, he felt strange having to compromise despite being the one teaching the tricks of the new spell.

However, since Tesfia forgot about her pain while they were at it, Alus was fine with it. At the very least it was better than having her cry out and flounder in pain while moving at high speeds.

Once Alus made that promise, Tesfia gripped the sleeve of his robe and

mumbled, “Thank you...”

“You’re welcome.”

Alus’ answer was plain, but Tesfia’s face turned red as they picked up speed, and it was unclear if she’d even heard him. Relieved by the promise he made, she was finally able to realize the situation she was in and was very shaken up.

That’s right—this pose she was in right now was very similar to that fantasy all girls of age had dreamed of at least once in their lives.

Either way, Alus decided not to tease or be sarcastic with Tesfia upon hearing her be so meek. Wanting to hurry on ahead, the genius Magicmaster kept his mouth shut and accepted her gratitude.

Seventh Chapter

Converging Turbulence

Just before returning to headquarters, Alus removed his mask and robe.

If he kept his mask on, he'd be treated as a suspicious person and invite needless chaos. Moreover, his job was pretty much done, so he no longer needed a disguise.

Upon their arrival at headquarters, Tesfia was taken to the field hospital, as it was called, though it was only on the level of the Institute's infirmary. Swift measures were needed to keep her burns from leaving scars.

Tesfia herself rejected treatment, saying it wasn't a big deal, but Alice—who was all smiles when she returned—quickly put an end to her resistance.

Accompanied by a rescue worker, Tesfia reluctantly entered the tent where a healing Magicmaster awaited.

Healing magic was constantly improving, but it still couldn't instantly heal deep wounds. At best, it could activate the cells to raise a person's regenerative abilities.

Things would be different if several healing Magicmasters were here to cast spells, but Magicmasters capable of using healing magic were currently few and far between.

When using healing spells, the healer needed to match their mana to the injured person. Normally, personal characteristics largely affected mana, with each having their own unique wavelength. That's why the healer needed to match their mana wavelength to the injured person to reduce any rejection.

At the same time, the healer needed to work on the cells, spurring on the regenerative abilities through mana. That went beyond the level of skillful usage of mana control, requiring superfine technique to adjust on a cell-by-cell basis.

It was distinctly different from Alus' mana control, and was of course always in high demand.

Active Magicmasters always needed to deal with getting hurt, but young girls should get those injuries healed if they could.

Tesfia still didn't know enough about the world to loudly boast about the scars known as a 'Magicmaster's decorations.' Fortunately, even the resident healing Magicmaster had the skill to heal the cuts on her forehead and cheek without them leaving scars.

Once Tesfia was out of sight, Alice lowered her head to Alus. "Thank you, Al."

Her bright smile was like a medicine that helped push aside a bit of the gloom Alus was feeling, and heal that fed-up feeling from dealing with nothing but trouble.

However, it really was just trouble. Thinking back to the giant spider, he was usually never that talkative when dealing with Fiends.

Alus indulged himself in his thoughts. Back then, he recalled feeling a slight sense of joy in battle—though an opponent on that level wouldn't be enough to satisfy that—along with a different feeling. Realizing that, he began thinking that his words and actions at the time were like someone else's.

Though it had only been a little... what he felt might have been anger, something he hadn't felt in a long time. That said, he'd never been angry with Fiends before, so it was a bit early to decide that was it.

But the end results were that he'd completely exterminated the Fiend, so from an onlooker's perspective it might look like punishment born from anger.

Alus objectively analyzed the situation. In which case, why did he feel that way?

However, no matter how much he analyzed it, he couldn't find a reasonable explanation, so thinking any more about it was a waste. As Alus preferred logic, he couldn't help but discard those thoughts.

So he responded to Alice's gratitude by saying flatly, "It was only by chance."

In fact, he hadn't known that the last rescue request he'd received was for Tesfia's group, so it truly was only a coincidence.

Though Alice didn't seem to think that way. She believed he'd worried for her

best friend, and used everything he had to save her, and she gazed at him without a doubt in her eyes.

Alus decided to ignore Alice after she began thanking him profusely.

After some time, Alice began worrying about Tesfia's condition again, and ran over to the field hospital after thanking him one more time.

Talk about restless, Alus thought to himself as he saw her off.

Shortly thereafter, Alice returned beaming with joy, with a big smile as if she wanted to say something to the sour-looking Alus. It was a truly captivating, innocent smile, but it definitely had a hidden meaning. "Al, there's practical training after this... but my group's tired and won't be participating. So I have some time on my hands..."

The practical training was voluntary, but the principal decided to continue with the extracurricular lesson, assuming there would only be a few participants. And if supervisors wouldn't be needed, Alus wouldn't be needed either. Though he was to keep himself contactable in case something happened.

He knew what Alice wanted to say. And that it was probably Tesfia who'd put the idea in her head. The reason for her roundabout way of asking was probably her way of holding back. But in this scenario, he almost felt that was worse.

"Okay." While he hadn't been the slightest bit exhausted by the battle, he honestly found it to be a pain. However, he didn't say it out loud. If he did, he'd create a difference in how he treated the two.

And with Tesfia's interest in Mistlotein, these two students were somewhat troublesome, but they got full marks for their enthusiasm.

"I hear you managed to exterminate some Fiends, too." Alus sighed. "To think I would be wrong about both of you."

In other words, Alice had fulfilled the criteria for passing, just like Tesfia. Meaning that they'd be able to receive Alus' instruction without reservation. As that was something Alus himself had brought up, he couldn't take it back now.

"I wouldn't mind if we ran into a B class, you know." Alice let out a muffled

laugh, probably having heard all about it from Tesfia.

Alus gave her a cold stare. “Don’t get full of yourself.” He knew she was just kidding, so he spared her with a light flick to the forehead.

Even then, Alice seemed delighted, and had a bounce in her step.

When Loki returned, he gave her words of sympathy as he guiltily asked her to continue looking after the students who stayed behind.

Thus Alice’s and Alus’ one-on-one lecture began.

Once they left the headquarters, Alice asked about something like it had just come to mind. But seeing how she’d curiously been looking on from behind, she must have been holding it in till now.

“Is that... your AWR?” She pointed at Night Mist hanging off of his waist.

This was a quality she shared with Tesfia. It was in their nature to ask about anything that caught their eyes, even more so if it belonged to the greatest Magicmaster.

“You want to see it?”

He knew the answer without having to ask. Or rather, her expression made it painfully obvious. But he still decided to check. Though with the answer clear, Alus had removed the scabbard from his waist when he heard her question.

Sure enough, Alice nodded her head without reservation.

“It’s a little heavy.”

Alice held it up with both hands as if it was a highly valuable work of art. Like she was a vassal receiving a treasure from her lord. “Oh, it is!” Her arms lowered a little from the unexpected heft.

She reached her hand towards the handle, muttering, “It’s beautiful.”

“...”

There was a pause before Alus reacted, as that was an impression he hadn’t heard before. Night Mist, with its jet-black blade, was more often described as creepy and rustic, and he himself believed it was an AWR purely for exterminating Fiends.

He suspected her sense of aesthetics must be quite unique, and started explaining about Night Mist, giving her the same information he told Loki before.

“Can I try it?” Alice didn’t mean using it to slay Fiends, but rather passing mana through it.

“I don’t mind,” Alus replied immediately. His AWR had magic formulas engraved on it, but just passing mana through it wouldn’t do anything. And if Alice was going to do it, he was sure she’d use the same incomplete and awkward form she used during practice. Though lately, she’d made remarkable progress... but Alus didn’t bother putting that into words.

If she grew through praise that would be nice, but Alus would find it irritating if she started getting carried away.

Alice began her enchantment of Night Mist.

“...?”

But only Alus realized something was off.

Alice was focused on her mana control like always. While she enchanted Night Mist, it wasn’t limited to just the blade, but also extended to the chain in the scabbard as well, and Alus’ instincts told him something was strange.

Continuing her enchantment, while unaware of Alus’ reaction, Alice opened her mouth in surprise. “—!! How far does this go...?”

“There’s 50 meters.”

“No way!!” Perhaps because she was disheartened, the flow of Alice’s mana stopped and dispersed.

But Alus had definitely seen it—or more accurately, felt it.

Her mana had caused one of the rings, albeit slightly, to react... the ring she’d gotten a reaction out of held the formula for Morshonell Link, which Alus had used when saving Tesfia.

He was unable to derive an answer for why that had happened right away. He quickly rejected the temporary conclusion he’d reached before even considering it. *Her attribute is supposed to be the element of light. It could have*

been a false response by chance... No, that wouldn't make any sense either.

Among all attributes, light and dark were exceptionally rare and were referred to as elements. Alus was confident in Night Mist's accuracy of reacting to mana. Moreover, the ring that had reacted, engraved with the formula for Morshonell Link, was an attribute-less formula. The spell's structure itself was really simple, with no attribute formula to serve as its basis. Which was why, if it were to be categorized, it would be attribute-less.

With the ring's reaction being so weak, it was hard to tell for sure. But as far as Alus knew, Alice's attribute was light. And at the same time, she most likely had something unique to her, just like him.

However, it was still too early to decide that Alice's mana had another property. While the matter interested him, he deferred his conclusion to later and didn't say anything.

After that, Alice spent quite some time under Alus' guidance, with Alus sometimes lending a hand, and successfully defeated over ten Fiends. Though with how few Fiends there were around headquarters, they had to go out a little ways.

Among the defeated was a C-class Fiend; however, it proved to be too much for Alice, so Alus had to deal with it.

Alice's attitude when dealing with Fiends was consistently fearless. That might have been because Alus was next to her, but she didn't step back even against formidable opponents. It was a resolute courage, something all Magicmasters should have.

Watching her spearmanship, Alus thought it was quite impressive. She was still somewhat restrained by her form, but the more experience she got, the more adapted for dealing with Fiends her style would become.

By the way, her enchantment still wasn't on the level of being able to damage a C-class Fiend. Tesfia was probably the same in that regard. However, there existed a difference between them... one thing about Alice that was inferior to Tesfia.

"Is that the only spell you can use?" Alus asked, instantly dealing with a Fiend

that was too much for her.

“Yes. That’s why I can’t do a lot of effective damage to Fiends.” Alice smiled faintly, scratching her cheek with a dirty finger. Her Reflection and Reduction were incredibly powerful against Magicmasters, and could protect her against Fiends, but couldn’t work as a decisive blow.

“At this rate, you’ll only be able to defeat up to a D class.”

“... There are only a few light attribute spells, and the attack ones are really difficult.” Alice herself knew she couldn’t go on like this. But the problem with her attribute wouldn’t be solved so easily. Her words sounded like an excuse, and she smiled wryly, like she’d given up.

An affinity for the light attribute was inborn. Very few Magicmasters had it. Even compared to the dark affinity that it shared similar traits with, those with the affinity for light were few. That’s why there was no detailed information about its characteristics, and the reason it was only inborn remained a mystery.

In the research field of magic, more effort was put toward the common attributes due to the rarity of those with the light affinity. As such, the current state of research on the two elements was hopelessly behind.

Alus was also able to use high-level magic regardless of affinity, but that wasn’t the case when it came to the elements. As one could expect from the name, attribute-less spells weren’t related to the attributes, which included the two elements.

“I see... Well, if you become a guinea pig for my research, I might think about it,” Alus said, surprising even himself.

“Hmm?!” Keeping a smile on her face, Alice tilted her head with a confused and anxious expression. Her face practically said, “What are you talking about...?” and showed a surprising amount of unrest.

Perhaps realizing that using the phrase *guinea pig* was a mistake, Alus corrected himself. “It means that because of your affinity, if I examine your body, I might be able to understand the light element and create new spells.”

“Huh?!” That seemed to cause a strong reaction, as Alice covered her body with her arms and froze in place. The words ‘examining your body’ held a

different meaning to a teenage girl.

It dawned on Alus that he could use a few more words, but he'd never had any intention of forcing her. While he was interested in element spells, there was little data available, and he merely thought it would be nice if he had a subject to examine.

But with this exchange, Alus was immediately fed up. "Then I don't care," he told her coldly, without humor or a smile. Because of that, his tone sounded unexpectedly harsh, and a serious atmosphere was created.

"Ah, oh, I was just kidding." Alice quickly realized the change, and followed up on her remark as if to apologize for misunderstanding his motives. "But are you serious about examining me...?"

The blush on her face turned redder and redder. She seemed to be imagining the scene that Alus was offering up. Even the tips of her ears turned red, and she looked down at her body, at a certain well-developed part, and looked at him in embarrassment.

Seeing that, Alus had no choice but to add onto his proposal. "I don't know what you're thinking, but you're probably wrong. In fact, what do you think I am?"

"Uhm, well... A boy?"

"... No. Well, I am. But I'll only be hooking you up to a special machine that analyzes your body's information. I'll also need you to change into a hospital gown so I can check your mana."

"Oh... is that all... Then that's fine. Or rather, please do."

Alus had thought he'd politely explained it, but when he heard Alice's reply combined with her wry smile, he felt he was being taken lightly. Perhaps she was thinking there was only so much a boy his age could do, even if he was the current No. 1. It felt like she assumed he was just making her tag along with his little game.

"Just so you know, I made this," he said, pointing his thumb at Night Mist.

"—!!"

It was now back in its scabbard at his waist, but Alice should have literally felt the power within it, as well as how elaborately it was made. He was putting his abilities on display so as to reassure her, and reconsidered that her taking him lightly might have been a little far-fetched.

Strictly speaking, Night Mist's creation had been a collaboration—but that wasn't anything she needed to know right now.

"... I-I wasn't doubting you," Alice said, in a very awkward tone.

In the end, it seemed his conjecture had been right after all.

In fact, in Alice's mind, she recalled a conversation with Tesfia when they were returning from training. After Alus had been particularly wordy on the topic of magic, the two had laughed at his behavior, comparing him to a child.

Back then, Tesfia had disrespectfully said, "I bet he's not even doing any impressive research."

Alus had a slight frown on his face, while Alice scratched her cheek with an awkward laugh as usual.

After many twists and turns, Alice finally gave her approval. She promised to let Alus examine her, then continued defeating Fiends for as long as time would allow.

And as usual, Alus ended up having to tag along with her training.

* * *

It was the next day of class for the first-years. Yesterday's classes had been canceled, and two days had passed since their extracurricular lesson.

The classroom was bustling with discussion, though there were still some vacant desks as well. That was because some still couldn't attend classes due to the shock of fighting Fiends. That said, there were only a few of those.

Two topics dominated the classroom.

The first topic was about an elusive masked Magicmaster who'd actively assisted the extracurricular lesson. Just a few should have seen him in person, and while somewhat exaggerated, those supposedly saved by him sang his praises.

“And then he just knocked out that creepy upperclassman with his bare hands!”

“He landed a clean blow with his knee...”

Most of it was gossip, but some weren’t far off the mark, thinking he must be a renowned Magicmaster, or a supporter the Institute had called in.

The other topic was Loki’s daring and resolute commanding, having the teachers obey her and ordering the upperclassmen like they were her own limbs. There were some exaggerations mixed in here too, but many students had been saved by her capabilities.

Thanks to those two, there had been practically no casualties among the first-years, aside from some students suffering from shock.

The extracurricular lesson had ended as well as it could in regards to injuries, which was what the principal had worried about the most.

Moreover, those who had plunged the day into chaos were made to pay for it.

The reinforcement teams and supervisors that exposed the first-years to danger by disobeying orders and acting independently had received punishment from the Institute. Most of the dozen or so students managed to escape with just a month’s suspension.

That said, those who already had a position lined up with the military after graduation would surely be reassigned. And those who were planning to sign up with the military would also suffer the same fate.

Also, while the suspension was only for a month, it was a painful blow for those who strove to learn powerful magic and rise in the rankings.

Then there was the only expelled student... Cabsol Denvel.

The reason was simply because of the casualties he’d brought about. Because of him, they’d encountered a high-classed Fiend they normally wouldn’t have encountered, and the students were exposed to mortal peril and mental trauma, with some still in hospital beds.

Incidentally, that female student who regained consciousness before anyone else was somehow managing to go to class. There was still a ways to go before

she would fully recover, but there would be no impact on her daily life.

As for the fate of the three male students still in the hospital, what happened to them would be up to their own efforts in recovery.

Cabsol himself was receiving medical care at his family home, but a fear had taken root in his heart, and the use of magic now triggered the trauma deeply imbedded inside him. His spirit had been broken and his life as a Magicmaster was now over.

The Institute had hesitated in deciding how to handle him, considering his noble lineage, but in the end they chose the aforementioned expulsion. It would also serve as a deterrent to keep others from following in his footsteps.

The reason the Denvel family didn't raise any objections was because it was already pointless. Even if the expulsion were to be revoked, Cabsol wouldn't be able to recover from his broken spirit and reclaim a future as a Magicmaster.

Returning to the classroom, the two people of note were both absent today (though nobody knew that Alus was that masked Magicmaster).

The reason, as expected, was the extracurricular lesson the day before yesterday. The first-years had had their lesson two days ago, the second-years had theirs yesterday, and it was the third-years' turn today, so the two of them were out eradicating Fiends by direct request of the principal.

But nothing like the events that took place on the first day happened again. With the B-class Fiends eliminated, Alus and Loki saw less action.

The Institute's swift punishments put a stop to any copycats, preventing any further incidents from troubling the two.

Thus the curtain fell on the Second Magical Institute's first extracurricular lesson. If it were to be added to the students' regular curriculum, the particular events and lessons learned from this round would surely aid in training the next novice Magicmasters to come.

Eighth Chapter

Broken Memories

Just when was that...

No, thinking about it now, it had started before she became aware of her surroundings.

The Element Factor Separation Project had been a major junction in her life. The young Alice's memories were almost all of that research facility.

Her parents came to visit every day. Her father was a pleasant man, her mother beautiful and gentle, and while they only met for a little while each day, the time was spent with bright smiles.

All of the memories she could remember were full of those smiles, or they were supposed to be.

When the time was up, they would always say, "We will definitely see you again tomorrow," waving their hands to her as their visit came to an end.

That was only natural for Alice. Which was why she wasn't terribly upset, and simply waited until she saw her parents again.

Having been born in a poor commoner family, Alice still brought her parents happiness. The family of three wasn't well off, but they were happy.

But shortly after Alice turned seven, she took ill in an epidemic and received detailed testing at the hospital. That expense, far from cheap, became a major burden on the Tilake family, who had little in terms of margin in their finances.

Of course, Alice's parents didn't regret their decision. But if there was a problem, it would be that the facility Alice was taken to wasn't a major hospital run by the government.

It was far too cruel to call it fate.

The results of the detailed testing revealed that Alice had a rare affinity for an element. She also happened to be an ideal test subject for the country's newly-begun plan. There were very few with an affinity for the elements, and back

then there was hope that they would hold great power to oppose the Fiends and become a symbol of humanity.

Before long, the country approached her parents about taking custody of Alice for the sake of the nation and humanity.

It was clear as day who'd leaked the test results to them.

Alice quickly recovered from the epidemic via a wonder cure, but the cure proved to be very expensive. As it couldn't be mass produced, the cost was something a poor family could never hope to pay. It was an extraordinary expense, far exceeding the general market price. This pressing situation couldn't be blamed on anyone.

"Please don't worry. We will only carry out a detailed examination of the girl's body and her special talents, such as the wavelengths of her mana," a government official said, having received word about Alice from the hospital. His glib, well-practiced words were stock phrases he and his colleagues used to persuade parents.

Alice's parents were presented with a large lump sum of money in exchange for their cooperation with the research. It would be enough to pay the astonishingly high hospital expense and still have money left over. Enough for her parents to never have to work again.

However, the offer left her mother speechless, and her father angrily smashed his fist into the table in front of him. "It's not a matter of money!"

The government official calmly continued, brushing aside the father's anger: "It's not like we're slave dealers. You're right. It's not a matter of money, it's a matter of humanity's future. Your cooperation might be what helps to save humanity. The girl's disposition might be what's necessary to save us from our predicament. If you agree to our proposal, we can guarantee her a future as a Magicmaster, even if the examination results aren't what we're looking for."

Not even Alice's parents could oppose that right away. At that time, humanity had managed to stop the Fiends' advance, but was still weak, and there was a risk of another major offensive.

Only a few accomplished Magicmasters existed, and as such the path to

becoming one of the nation's renowned elite had opened up. Alpha was already training new Magicmasters and establishing a national system.

In fact, with the qualities Alice had, the chances of her growing up and not being involved with the Magicmasters were slim to none.

"The period will only be for three years, and I can guarantee you visiting rights of one hour per day," the government official said, putting down a bundle of papers on the table full of data that detailed the project in question.

Alice's parents desperately read through the documents without even knowing the technical terminology, in an effort to understand everything. In reality, though—the moment a government official arrived at their house, they likely had no way to refuse.

After anguishing for a full week, their entire grace period, they finally made up their minds and reached a painful decision.

Alice's parents shook hands with the satisfied-looking government official and the contract was signed.

At the same time, they received a large amount of money. But they didn't quit their jobs. They only used the bare minimum to meet their expenses, leaving the rest of it untouched.

However, being unsophisticated people, they didn't know what the world was like. A research group like this one had used inhumane methods in the past. While the system that had allowed those abuses was now regulated under strict rules, it was true that research on Fiends was not as ethically strict then as it was in the present time. Using the excuse of the looming threat of the Fiends, organizations crossing the line were often overlooked.

Even using practically illegal methods, the research facility had been established for the sake of saving humanity, and was expected to achieve great results.

Unaware of that darkness, Alice had spent a full year at the facility.

Research on the Element Factor Separation Project, with its goal of reproducing the element factor, was at an impasse. The entire project was at risk of collapse. All the magic—that went beyond the level of what could be

considered humane—they'd tried on the limited number of test subjects had ended in failure.

But when the ethical brakes were removed "just this one time," under the excuse of it being for humanity's sake, they were easily removed time and time again.

The experiments gradually escalated, and the scars from them clearly remained on Alice's body. Fortunately, none caused internal damage, but these experiments could by no means be called ethical.

When the head researcher stared down at Alice lying in bed, he always whispered, "Don't worry, it will be over soon" into her ear, as the anesthesia was administered. His unhealthy, thin face practically screamed 'researcher.'

An unbridled, inquisitive spirit resided in his and the other researchers' sharp eyes, making Alice feel like they overlooked *her* while peering straight inside her body. She felt like she was only seen as material for experiments, and with a strict gag order in place, she could only act bravely in front of her parents. As her parents' visiting rights were held over her head, all she could do was obey.

"Mama, when can we live together again?"

"Very soon, dear. Just bear with it a little more. Mama is waiting for the day we can live together, too," her mother said with a smile.

"She's right, you know. You'll be so surprised when you come home. There are so many stuffed animals *this big* in there." Spreading his arms wide, her father tried to cheer her up.

But in reality, she could no longer remember what their house looked like, or exactly where it was anymore, like those memories had been stripped away.

Alice smiled, trying to rely on that wonderful hour each day. She didn't recall what kind of toys she had at home, but that wasn't a problem. That she would return home one day, and the three of them would once again live together, was her only support.

However... Her parents, who'd been coming to visit her every day, suddenly stopped coming shortly thereafter.

The personnel at the facility told her that they were busy with work.

Since Alice was a child, she couldn't accept it, but she could at least understand. Or rather, she pretended to understand. If she were to say something selfish, her parents would surely be troubled.

Her mother might get angry. And then her doting father would side with her, but ultimately be called overprotective and forced to sit down with Alice in their cramped kitchen as her mother scolded both of them.

Telling herself that if she just endured the pain and loneliness a little longer she could live with her parents again, Alice was able to hold it all in.

A certain girl taught her about hope and how to truly bear the situation.

The way children were managed in the facility was that everyone had their own room. While a private room might sound nice, to the children it didn't feel like a personal space, but more like a prison cell.

There was only one hour for visitors.

After that, it was back to their blood being taken and having some kind of machine examine every part of their bodies.

The examinations gradually escalated until the children suddenly started receiving shots and waking up in their own rooms. Fear took hold of them as strange things happened to their bodies and their memories began to fail. Once the anesthetics wore off, they felt pain and nausea.

They received healing magic treatments, but to Alice it was like a personal hell.

One day, Alice woke up from the pain and felt a fresh scar on the back of her neck. The scar was a thin red vertical line, and when she pressed down on it with her small palm, she had to hold back the urge to throw up.

"It hurts... it hurts so much..."

It was pain she could endure. However, seeing that creepy scar scared her and heightened her sense of pain. She suppressed her feelings of unease, letting out a quiet sob.



One week later, things began to change again.

The research facility had been a cruel place, but now a playroom had been set up. The girl Alice met there was a little strong-willed, but she called Alice's hair color beautiful and wonderful. She constantly concerned herself with Alice.

Alice was able to make it through her days in the facility thanks to always being with this girl. Just like the time with her parents, staying by her side became a pillar of support for Alice's mind. To the young Alice, this girl was the only one she could depend on, like an older sister. At the very least she was someone Alice could share her pain and loneliness with.

After that, Alice was able to smile just a little.

However, those days came to an end sooner than expected.

One of the test subjects passed away.

It was clear that it was a result of the experiments. Realizing that, the nation sent out an inspection team to visit the facility. The truth came to light, and the Element Factor Separation Project was canceled before the end of its projected three-year term.

Alice was taken into custody by the military, but due to the shock of everything that had happened, she didn't remember much that went on during that time. ...That said, she clearly remembered the first words the soldier that took her into custody said.

"Your parents have passed away."

She didn't yet grasp the concept of death, but she understood that she would never see her parents again.

That was the moment when something broke inside of her.

The colors disappeared from the scene before her, and the man's voice distorted, as if he and their surroundings weren't even from the same world.

It felt like everything important in her heart had been torn out. Her heart felt hollow, her face turning as white as paper. No, perhaps it was the world that now felt hollow.

Trying to calm Alice down, the soldier spent a long time telling her the full story. What she picked up from what he said was that a man forced his way into her parents' house and stabbed them with a knife. His goal was the vast amount of money that they were rumored to have received.

The culprit had already been caught, but most of the money was gone, having been wasted on gambling and the like, leaving only a little left.

Alice let the man's words go in one ear and out the other, indifferent. Once he finished, traces of the tears she'd unconsciously shed remained on her cheeks. She had kept her eyes cast down at the table the entire time, not even looking at the soldier.

She desperately tried to keep her parents' faces fresh in her mind.

She burned her memories of them into her mind, all the while feeling like she would drown in her muddled stream of emotions.

The soldier told her all kinds of things that were actually military secrets in a roundabout way, out of pity, so she could continue on without her spirit breaking. He must have felt the same pain she did with every word he spoke.

But even then, as someone left behind, Alice had to continue struggling against this unreasonable world.

That's why the soldier continued speaking, as if to carry her pain, feeling guilt and regret over being unable to save her from her harsh situation.

Alice, age 10.

She had no relatives, and only the small amount of money left by her parents.

But since she was too young to live on her own, the nation placed her in a state-run orphanage.

The money left behind by her parents was used for her room and board, with an amount being put into savings for her future. However, that guarantee of a future she couldn't see would never help support her.

She had gotten used to a world with no one around. There were kids her age in the orphanage, but their existence didn't register with her.

What changed her was her reunion with the girl that had taken care of her at

the research facility.

Alice only had a vague memory of the girl, not even recalling her name. But she seemed to recall her name sounded like a flower. The girl had mentioned it when they talked in the research facility's garden.

Their reunion took place in the orphanage, and they were only together for a short time, because the girl left the orphanage shortly thereafter. Alice must have heard the girl tell her she was leaving, and the girl had made a promise after that...

However, this all happened when Alice was wandering on the boundary between her own colorless world and the real world, which was finally starting to regain its colors... and when she tried to remember it, the scene would disappear into a sepia-colored haze.

The girl sat down with Alice on the bench in the orphanage's garden, and said something before embracing her.

But Alice only remembered the sound of the girl's heart as she was hugged for what felt like an eternity. It was like her mother's affection and her father's kindness wrapping around her. At the same time, it reminded her that she really had experienced those happy times with her parents.

Embraced by the girl, Alice let out what she'd been enduring for so long, and cried out loud.

Afterward, Alice felt like a heavy weight had fallen off her shoulders, and she fell into a deep sleep, still in the girl's embrace.

That was surely preparatory work to turn her pain into memories, to store away in a precious box deep inside her heart.

When Alice woke up, the girl had already left the orphanage.

A few years passed after that.

In the end, Alice striving to become a Magicmaster was inevitable. Her affinity was unpleasant and hateful, but it was the only thing she had left that her parents had given to her. That had supported her far more than her inheritance, which had decreased quite a bit while she was in the orphanage.

Moreover, it was a necessity for her to be successful in the magical nation of Alpha. That's why she didn't hesitate.

Alice transferred to an orphanage close to a military base. That was also due in part to the influence of the soldier who informed her of her parents' deaths. Being a military base, it also had a military arts training facility called a dojo. And that was where she was taught spearmanship for the first time.

Initially, she had wanted to practice magic, but she quickly fell for spearmanship. When she took a stance and focused on swinging her spear around, while keeping her core from shifting, time just flew by.

She didn't have any ideals like protecting humanity as a Magicmaster. She was fine with using her powers and living on her own.

Alice met Tesfia when she was twelve, when she was in the military dojo. Tesfia was dazzling to her, as she walked down her own path without deviating, as if to inspire Alice.

Shortly thereafter, they would reunite again, at a private training school for those seeking to become Magicmasters.

Being with Tesfia again would greatly change Alice's life. It brought out the tender smile she inherited from her mother, and helped her to regain her original gentle disposition.

* * *

"Will you really be able to tell anything with this?"

It was after school, in Alus' research laboratory. One week had passed since the extracurricular lesson. And when Alice saw the device before her, she had asked Alus the question with an incredulous expression.

"Yeah, as long as you don't move." Alus' reply was simplistic.

Right now, Alice was wearing a thin hospital gown and lying down on the padded top of the machine. She was, of course, holding down the cloth so that it wouldn't come off... over a certain abundant part of her body. Any fasteners would throw off the research results, or so Alus had said, inconsiderately.

"Don't worry, Alice. If Al tries anything, I will punish him," Tesfia said sharply,

sitting on a chair and flashing her katana.

“Fia...”

“Don’t you mean that you’ll be punished?” The moment Alus said that, he felt the pressure of Tesfia’s glare on his back. He shrugged his shoulders, before staring at the liquid crystal monitor in front of the machine that displayed the status of the examinee.

Alus’ new research had only just begun. It concerned the light attribute that Alice had, and was distinctly different from her training. That said, Alus wasn’t particularly enthusiastic about it, thinking it might be useful for research or creating new spells at best.

Those who had an affinity for the elements were rare, and little research was done on them, making it a relatively important topic of research.

“The measurements are done, so that’s enough.”

After Alice slowly rose up, she and Tesfia took a peek at the monitor.

“Will you be able to find something out with this?” Alice asked Alus.

“Will you even be able to understand it?” Tesfia said obnoxiously.

When it came to this redheaded girl, the moment Alus went as far as to teach her the basics of Mistlotein’s structure, her attitude changed. She’d sometimes be strangely meek... but even taking her concern for her best friend into account, she was being quite insolent.

As such, Alus completely ignored Tesfia and addressed Alice. “What I’m examining is your body’s mana, and your affinity to it, as well as the condition of your qualia. Or perhaps calling it synchronization and its tendencies would be easier to understand.”

Question marks appeared in the two girls’ expressions.

Since it was these two he was talking to, Alus roughly summed it up. “In other words, I’m analyzing the information that your mana contains. Mana doesn’t just contain your experience and your tendencies, but includes much more. So first, I need to get a clear understanding of that.”

Tesfia sighed, as she brushed his explanation off.

“I see!” Alice exclaimed, but it was clear she was just feigning understanding. Perhaps she felt bad about taking his time because she really didn’t get it.

“The tea is ready.”

“Ah, good.”

The tea that Loki made on her own with tea leaves was now Alus’ favorite. It was a good time to take a break and change gears, though that was mostly because he was tired due to being exasperated over the two girls’ lack of studies on Magicmasters.

“Thank you.”

“Thanks, Loki dear.”

Today, Loki had prepared enough for these two as well. Lately, it seemed that her antagonism toward them had decreased.

The next moment, Tesfia’s brows furrowed as she took a sip, and she shouted, “It’s so bitter!”

“You think so?” Alice said, with a puzzled look.

Behind Alice, Tesfia could see Loki smirking. She’d made just *her* tea extra strong.

I just hope it stays at this level, Alus thought.

Glancing at Tesfia sticking her tongue out with a *blehh* from the bitterness of a Loki Special, Alus took a sip of his own tea and slowly closed his eyes. “Now that we’ve had a break, let’s move onto training.” Stopping for today just after the examination would be getting their priorities backwards. Especially since only Alus could analyze the gathered data.

“Then I’ll go change,” Alice said, as she stepped into the bedroom and closed the door behind her.

Alice had developed quite a bit, but wasn’t improving as quickly as she had during the first phase of their training. She was weak at controlling the direction, but that was something she’d just have to spend time to solve. In terms of difficulty, it was like having different conversations with multiple people at the same time. Like replying with suitable answers to every topic, she

needed to focus on all of her mana and make several adjustments simultaneously.

Once Alice changed back into her usual uniform, Alus muttered, “Next, I guess we’ll try it at the training grounds.” The reason was simply because he’d concluded that, at their current rate, they wouldn’t finish their training before the first year was over.

Expressions of joy appeared on the two girls’ faces. They must have had things on their mind since battling Fiends during the extracurricular lesson.

Moreover, Alus could see how impatient they looked having to continue with their plain mana control training. It seemed they’d built up quite a lot of frustration, and while they’d stick to the usual training menu for today, he figured they could try some mock battles so that they could move their bodies.

Some time later...

Having finished their training with the stick, the two girls began heading home, as it was starting to get dark outside. That much was the same old... however...

“Hey, why are you leaving these behind?”

“Eh?”

“Hm?”

Taking the training sticks back with them was one thing, but why were they leaving their Institute bags behind?

That was something that had been on Alus’ mind for the past three days. There was, of course, an underhanded method among students known as ‘leaving your textbooks behind,’ but it was hard to imagine the two brightest stars of the first year doing something like that.

Of course, Alus should have brought it up when he first noticed it three days ago.

“Well... there’s a lot of lectures tomorrow, right?” Tesfia said.

“She’s right,” Alice chimed in.

So let us leave them behind, Tesfia seemed to imply.

Alus just wanted to confirm it with them, and had no intentions of pursuing it any further. Leaving their bags behind but taking the training sticks with them showed how passionate they were about training. And it spoke volumes about them practicing on their own at the girls' dorm.

"I don't mind you being so eager to train, but there's a test coming up." He was, of course, referring to the first semester exam. Not that he himself particularly cared about it.

"...!" "...!"

All of a sudden, aghast expressions appeared on the two girls' faces. They were dumbfounded, with Tesfia going so far as to drop her training stick.

"Hey, I said those things are extremely rare..."

"What am I going to do? My mother will be so angry." Seemingly ignoring Alus' warning, Tesfia looked astonished.

Shockingly enough, Alice and Tesfia had been toiling away at their mana control training and had completely forgotten about the test.

Alus stopped himself from retorting, "So it's already hopeless, huh," and decided to help them with a tidbit of information. "So you forgot. But there's still two weeks left."

But Tesfia only hung her head upon hearing this. "You mean only two weeks...! What am I going to do if I get a bad score... if I get a bad grade...!" she muttered, as if she was casting a curse with that gloomy face of hers.

But the way she quickly changed gears as she came up with a method to escape her predicament was just like her. "Alice! Please teach me!" Tesfia turned puppy eyes on her best friend.

"U-Uhm... I'm not very confident I can."

"No way..."

Hearing the two complain, Alus said, "I thought you two were supposed to be honor students." He'd convinced himself that they were capable in every subject. They seemed to be listening to the lectures like the other students, and

unlike Alus, they actually attended class. Surely they'd done enough to secure their credits by now. And if they were aiming for high marks, a high score on the test would be necessary.

"Hah, so you've got the ambition but your head can't keep up," Alus said while laughing.

Tesfia retorted, "But who knows if you'll get the credits, even if you get a good score!"

"..." Alus fell silent, as he quickly calculated in his head all the conditions to get credits. He ultimately reached the conclusion he was in a risky situation as well.

However... "You think I'd fail? I'm the only one who's contributed this much to the Institute. Don't underestimate the principal's power. Former or not, she was a Single Digit."

While conceding it was pathetic to rely on others to succeed, all Alus really wanted from the Institute was time to devote to his research. Besides, Sisty owed him for his work on the extracurricular lesson, so she'd need to at least help with something like that.

"That's unfair! Nobody expects a top-ranked Magicmaster to be skilled at bargaining and cheap tricks! Don't destroy people's dreams by using connections to make dodgy dealings!"

"Hmph... Who cares what someone who has to study for a low-level test thinks?"

Seeing Tesfia fuming and Alus bragging, Alice decided to try and change the topic. "I wonder what will happen with Loki?"

"Won't she just be exempt for this term?" Tesfia asked.

"No, when I enrolled, I was told the results of my test would be used as a basis for my credits," Loki said, looking quite undisturbed.

"Y-You sure look composed..." Tesfia said, unable to hide her unrest.

It appeared Loki was the first to drop out of the imaginary 'students struggling against the test' group that Tesfia was trying to create.

“I’ve already studied everything up to and including the third-year curriculum.”

“Wha—?!”

“Oh, Loki dear, you’re so smart!” Alice patted Loki on the head in a praising fashion. Loki brushed her hand away, furrowing her brows as if to say she wasn’t a kid.

But for some reason, she directed her anger towards Tesfia instead of Alice. She smiled coldly at Tesfia. “That’s why I don’t care what someone who struggles with a first-year curriculum thinks.”

“Urk...!!”

Alus intervened and put an end to Tesfia’s and Loki’s unproductive exchange. “What do you mean, ‘Urk.’ If you understand, then get to studying. I’ll cut down on the number of training days until then.”

“Eh, you’re not going to cancel them...?!”

“I could. If you’re fine with all your training so far going to waste. When it comes to mana control, if you skip out on training for several days just before you get the hang of it, it all goes to waste.”

“...!!”

“I was kidding... it was just a joke.”

Tesfia looked nonplussed, while Alice nodded repeatedly.

Alus may have exaggerated, but mana control was a delicate technique that was easy to lose at this stage in their training. While they wouldn’t have to start over from the beginning, it would take quite some time to get back into form after a two-week gap.

“Then this might sound strange, but... can you please teach us, Al?”

“Nice one, Alice!” Tesfia gave Alice a thumbs-up for raising the embarrassing topic.

It certainly wasn’t nice, and the situation was developing in a strange direction. It was likely a ploy to keep him from cutting back the time he spent

on them, but frankly put, Alus felt they were being overly brazen.

“Will the two of you just...” Loki, unable to take it anymore, raised her voice; but there was no need for it.

“I refuse! I’m busy, you see. I promised to help teach you how to defeat Fiends and to train you... but like I’ve said many times before, I’m not spending any more time than that on you.”

He’d only been saying the truth, but the dejection could clearly be seen in Alice’s eyes. “Besides, even if I teach you about magic, if you’re stupid you won’t even be able to use the spells that you could. In the end, you’ll just have to put in the work by yourselves.” Alus had intended this to be encouraging, but his tactless words invited misunderstandings.

“T-That’s true...” The atmosphere around Alice immediately turned gloomy.

“Alice...” Even Tesfia, patting Alice on the back to cheer her up, had a sorrowful feel to her.

Alus found himself scowling as the two exchanged words like, “Let’s do this together” in a low tone he’d never heard before.

“It was only a little. It wasn’t like I was asking you to help me get full marks... I just wanted you to teach us the tricks for studying what the test would cover... but it’s already too late for that, right... so don’t worry about us.” Wiping her tears away, Tesfia embraced Alice and Alice hugged her back.

“These girls...” Alus’ cheek twitched as he witnessed this ridiculous farce.

Tesfia being so cornered that she needed to go this far was the truth. However, seeing that her sob story didn’t have the desired effect, a bright (to her) idea popped into her head and she started renegotiating from a different point of view.

“Now that I think about it, you said you’d teach us how to defeat Fiends, but by that logic isn’t knowledge necessary too? I’d say that in a broad sense, studying for a test is part of learning how to defeat Fiends.”

Alus had indeed agreed to take the two on while not making the line clear. Technique alone wasn’t enough to kill Fiends, but that said, the knowledge

taught at the Institute alone wasn't enough either. In fact, just learning spells required a fair amount of knowledge. It was necessary to be able to take apart spells at their construction stage, as it was important to fully understand magic formulas.

Of course, there was a vast difference between the learning level Alus asked for, and what the Institute asked for.

"So, please?" Tesfia said, making a fair argument and pressing her hands together as if praying. Just looking at her meek appearance, you couldn't blame a boy weak to beauties for falling for her, but to Alus who knew how she was normally, she was being awfully shrewd.

"..."

Loki felt the same way Alus did and slightly reacted, but he stopped her with a glance.

Well, this was just par for the course. Alus pressed his thumb and forefinger against his forehead, sighing as he bent over for her entreaty. "Fine. But I'll only teach you about things regarding mana and Fiends," he said, thinking it might be of some use for their training. But if he was being honest, he was hoping she would say she already knew all about that.

Loki was surprised, but didn't say anything to stop him.

"Thank you!!" Alice said with a beautiful smile, her attitude from before having completely changed.

"Please take care of us, T-e-a-c-h." Tesfia looked really happy, and she bowed slightly, bashfully.

Alus would've liked to complain a little, as he felt he'd been played. But for some reason, he didn't feel too bad about it.

Well, I guess I can overlook it today, he thought, while the two girls smiled and shook hands.

Alus closed his eyes and took a sip of tea. He instinctively let out a sigh as he smelled the rich fragrance, feeling somewhat melancholy.

"That was pretty soft."

“I thought it was strong.”

Hearing Alus’ quick-witted retort, Loki sulked and fell silent, as she kept her eyes on him. “... You are being too kind,” she muttered under her breath, wearing her feelings on her sleeves, but Alus heard her.

With a bitter smile, he was about to reply when he suddenly hesitated. His past self wouldn’t have acted like this.

Once Tesfia and Alice left... the laboratory was always quiet, but the atmosphere was never normally this iffy.

Facing Loki, who still had that gloomy atmosphere to her, Alus said, “... That’s true.” He had to admit he was too soft and too kind. The reason his answer was delayed was because he himself was confused by it.

But the clever Loki quickly understood, and asked him, “Sir Alus, do you have expectations of those two?”

“I wonder...”

He was a little shaken. It wasn’t like she’d hit the nail on the head, but when he looked at those two... Though it sounded like excuses... “At the very least, they have the aptitude for it, so it’s not a complete waste. But, well, it might take some time. And whether I invest more time in them is up to them.”

Still unable to accept this, Loki opened her mouth, but Alus was even faster. “Either way, thinking of it as the price to pay while I’m at the Institute, it’s not all that high. On top of that, as long as it doesn’t end up as wasted effort, it’s not a terrible way to spend time.”

“But even then... I...”

Loki being unable to express what she wanted to say made the vexing feelings inside of her appear on her face. If anything, she was hesitating over saying anything unnecessary.

She was here for Alus’ sake. That wasn’t just because she was his partner, but so she could give him all of her life and time. She knew that he’d accomplished countless harsh missions on his own, and that he had the power to do so.

So when she heard he was enrolling in the Institute, she’d rejoiced that he’d

finally be freed from that cruel everyday life.

That was why... she felt so strongly about it, that Alus had the right to prioritize doing what he wanted here. That was why she clashed emotionally with those two girls who were getting in the way of that wish, and why she was unhappy with Alus just accepting it.

Loki knew saying it out loud would be overstepping her boundaries. But her unbearable emotions could be seen in her eyes.

"...?!" Suddenly, she felt a hand on her head.

"Don't worry, it's not a bad feeling. You called me soft, but I don't feel that in the slightest. In other words..." Alus slowly closed his eyes as he searched through his feelings, reminiscing about the busy days since he came here...

After a little while, he opened his eyes, seeing Loki in front of him, seriously waiting for what he had to say. And with a smile, he said, "A new environment can be surprisingly refreshing."

There wasn't much surprise or hesitation. He simply wasn't used to school life yet. It was unlike anything he'd experienced in the military that would sometimes bring about something unexpected. Things not going his way made for a different stimulus compared to battles with Fiends.

Unlike in the Outer World, his life wasn't on the line. Instead, there were differing opinions over trivial things that gave rise to incoherent feelings as the days passed. Like hearing a slight grinding and whistling from finely-assembled gears. It was unreasonable and unpleasant, but also impossible to predict what would happen next.

"That said, I'll pass on just wasting my time. If they prove to be useless, I will discard them... That goes for you, too."

Loki was unable to tell if he was serious or joking from his tone, but it was the kind of statement she could expect from him.

"That's why I'll spend some more time on them. You make sure you live up to my expectations, too." He lightly smacked her head with a faint smile.

"Y-Yes. I won't let you down." Loki hurriedly lowered her head, while

considering herself lucky that she'd been able to hide her red face. If that's what Alus had decided, she would obey. She was already as happy as could be that he had expectations of her.

Despite knowing she was being too simplistic, her expression was overtaken by an irresistible happiness. Fortunately, Alus couldn't see her grinning face.

But by the time she raised her head, Loki clearly asserted herself. "However, I dislike those two."

Alus opened his eyes wide in surprise at that. While it was something he'd picked up on, hearing it said to his face gave him a different impression.

"Okay. I won't force you to get along. But do try to restrain yourself," Alus said, trying to keep Loki in check, knowing that sometimes she got too emotional and created explosive situations.

Aware of that herself, Loki grimaced for a moment, ashamed of her own immaturity, before giving him an affirmative answer. "Understood."

Of course, Loki was only reflecting on giving Alus needless worry about something unnecessary. She had no intention of getting along with those two, resolute that she bore no blame in that, as she returned to her usual emotionless expression.

Sensing that the atmosphere had softened a little, Alus suddenly had an idea and asked Loki the same question he had asked Tesfia and Alice. "Loki, don't you have to study?"

Considering Loki's earlier back and forth with Tesfia, that may have been superfluous worry, but he decided to check just in case. His question wasn't about whether she'd manage to get the necessary credits, but instead if she wasn't aiming for the highest marks. But perhaps even that was redundant.

"It's okay. Aiding you is more important, Sir Alus."

As expected, his partner had already turned into a housewife. Then again, that wasn't something that had started just now, so he didn't think much about it.

However... "Then put that time into training."

“But...” Loki feared that doing this after Alus trained the two girls would only end up eating even more of Alus’ time.

“Don’t worry. It’s training that you can do on your own, after it gets started. And I’ll use that free time on my research.”

“If that’s the case, then please take care of me.” Loki deeply bowed to Alus in gratitude.

Alus felt she was exaggerating, but said nothing. That was his way of paying respect to her. At the same time he could feel a wall between them.

* * *

Loki’s training was primarily focused on increasing her detection range.

There were already artificial mana generation devices set up at 50 meter intervals, 1 km outside the Institute. The principal had already given her approval, of course.

Incidentally, humanity had succeeded at the artificial generation of mana through their research. Unfortunately, the power of science was only able to create an imitation of mana, and it wasn’t possible to use it as energy for spells.

Instead, artificial mana was seeing use in daily life functions. Even the street lights in the Institute ran on artificial mana.

Moreover, the devices set up outside the Institute were originally intended for that purpose, and as such, the generated mana was self-contained.

After doing some modifications to the devices, Alus allowed the faint mana generated to leak outside. “First, give it a try on your own,” he said, tossing a remote with dozens of buttons on it to Loki.

“I understand.” Easily catching the remote, Loki closed her eyes and pushed a button.

A common method among spotters was to use their own mana as a form of sonar, sending out waves of mana to detect enemy locations. There were many other methods, but the mana sonar was the orthodox one and was also the method Loki used.

There were also methods of vibrating the ground to determine the number of

individuals, and it was also possible to use sound, or the vibration of the air.

That said, using the mana sonar and identifying the wave that returned after contacting a Fiend's mana was reliable, and it was also possible to detect the Fiend's class, making it useful in most cases. Also, each practitioner required an aptitude for it.

Detection magic was usable regardless of attribute, and worked by turning mana into waves and analyzing the reflected information. As such, an aptitude for using techniques to prevent the deterioration of information, as well as sharp senses, were necessary. It was said that mastering detection magic was like being able to project your own senses.

There were other spells that didn't rely on attributes, among the biggest example of which was healing magic. It was inaccurately labeled as magic, but in reality it was technique.

Healing magic worked by applying mana on a cellular level, activating the cells and promoting the individual's regenerative abilities. It was a form of incredibly detailed mana control, and users were very scarce.

That aside, the training Loki was doing was using the remote to activate an artificial mana generation device and then accurately locate it.

Alus had made the preparations, but after adjusting the output and explaining how to use the remote, he didn't have to do anything. He could just leave the rest to Loki. She wasn't going to cut any corners. If she could locate all the devices, she passed.

Leaving Loki to focus on detecting all the machines, Alus returned to his research. And for the first time in a while, he devoted himself to it for a period of time.

* * *

When constructing a spell, Magicmasters needed to run through the magic formula in their minds.

More precisely, they needed to go through each structural step in order. After that, they relied on the AWR and their own power to trace through the construction, as the caster supplied the mana and held a clear image of the

process in their mind. As such, they needed a good understanding of the magic formula.

For example, a person doesn't need to fully understand how a useful formula works to be able to apply it to solve a complex calculation.

The primary elements of most magic formulas consisted of attribute, power, scale, shape, direction and modifications, as well as molding the spell and converting the mana.

In other words, in order to become a Magicmaster, there was a bare minimum amount of knowledge one needed to have.

"How many times do I have to explain it for you to get it?"

"Grrr..."

They were in Alus' laboratory. Tesfia and Alice had come not for their usual training, but to study for the test. The two were seated at a table with their materials spread out on top of it. On the other side was Alus, resting his chin in his hand.

Behind him was Loki respectfully preparing refreshments.

Right now, Alus' head was hurting from how shallow Tesfia's understanding was of magic formulas.

He didn't know what the standard level was for a first year, but if the test was going to be derived from the materials he was seeing laid out before him, Tesfia, whom he was in the midst of scolding, was far away from the level of understanding to reach his ideal.

She had a decent amount of knowledge, but seemingly lacked the confidence to take the next step and put it to practical use. Then again, considering Alus was asking about more advanced topics than their materials, it wasn't entirely her fault.

"Just calling that studying is impressive. There's no point in just memorizing the character strings in magic formulas."

"Why not?" Tesfia said. "You repeat it when using magic."

"The teacher said that basic magic formulas were important for the test too,"

Alice said.

After a short pause, Alus said, “I see. Fine, then. Continue.”

He’d told them to carry on as they pleased, but seemed to imply something more, which distracted them.

“If there’s something you want to say, then why don’t you say it? Why is there no point?” Tesfia argued, staring at Alus, having run out of patience. On top of her competitiveness, she had a genuine thirst for knowledge.

“That’s because it’s useless in combat. Loki, explain the disadvantages of tracing magic formulas.”

The question was suddenly thrown to Loki, but having been close and listening in, she answered without missing a beat.

“Even if you remember everything about a magic formula for a spell, there’s a limit to how many you can remember. A Magicmaster with a normal memory can only remember a few dozen advanced spells, and no more. That’s inefficient. While it can be important when incanting the spell, in this day and age where AWRs are commonplace, completely memorizing a magic formula is a waste of time. In fact, it only helps supplement the construction of modifications by a tiny bit. Everyone knows that incanting the spell makes it manifest more clearly, but using just its name is enough.”

Loki was more or less correct. Even simple magic formulas had over 50 characters. The problem was understanding the necessary construction components in a magic formula, and it was no exaggeration to say that everything was integrated into it.

Alus brought his black tea, poured by Loki, to his mouth, and praised Loki’s fluent answer. “That’s correct. On top of that, as the AWR is assisting with the construction, tracing the formula yourself is no different from incanting it.”

“That’s true...” Tesfia said.

“AWRs have only become widespread lately, so the current teachers probably studied by memorizing formulas.”

Alice tilted her head and asked, “Then, do we not have to do anything when

the spell is manifesting?”

If that were the case, the essential elements constructing a spell would be missing, even with the assistance of an AWR. While young Magicmasters were expected to have a flexible way of thinking and pose bold questions—unlike the teachers stuck in the old ways—that question was enough to astound Alus. “If that was enough to cast spells, things sure would be easy.”

Alice’s face turned red as Alus sent an exasperated and somewhat cold glance her way. “In the process of constructing a spell, casters need to have a clear understanding. That’s why, while the AWR renders assistance, you need to decide the power, scale, and so on of the spell you want to use on your own, alongside the multi-stage construction process.”

It was a bit like an intricate jigsaw puzzle. In exchange for the AWR’s assistance in creating the pieces of the puzzle, determining their shape and color, the caster had to put them in their right place. And once the spell’s picture had been filled in, it could finally be used.

“If you can do that, then you won’t even need one second from construction to manifestation.” That was something that often decided one’s fate in the Outer World.

“Then what we’re doing right now is pointless? It won’t make a difference in live combat?” Having lost the string a little, Tesfia looked down at her textbook.

“That’s why you’re stupid. Think about it a little, will you?” To Alus, Tesfia was like the embodiment of those caught up in the notion that modern magic was no better than the old. It was proof she hadn’t properly understood the blessing of the AWR.

No matter how much Alus’ research contributed to the world, if it wasn’t properly used it would go to waste. He felt like he could see a dark future where humanity’s situation didn’t change for the better in the slightest.

What a troubling matter.

That said, neither Tesfia nor Alice were defensive or angry at his words. They were sincere students enthusiastically listening to the lesson with closed mouths.

“I pass my eyes through magic formulas as well. However, the constructional components involved are combinations of existing ones. As long as you have a grasp on what’s generally needed, such as attribute, shape, power, direction and modification, the assistance of your AWR will deal with the rest.” That didn’t require the memorization of character strings, but the knowledge to read the structure of magic formulas.

“But I don’t understand a single character.”

“Me neither...”

The biggest flaw was that the Institute’s curriculum didn’t include lectures on how to decipher magic formulas. Alus seriously contemplated making a direct appeal to Sisty. “How much do you grasp, Loki?”

“I only know my own attribute.”

She’d probably learned the patterns through repetitive practice. By using the exact same spell, it was possible to remove any lag time using reflexes. However, learning through repetition had the disadvantage of not being able to adjust power or shape depending on the situation.

If even Loki was only at that level, most Magicmasters probably learned through repetition, but as Alus’ partner she could only be described as incomplete.

“You take a seat over there too...”

Thus Alus’ special lecture began, with Loki included among the students.

It was unrelated to the test at hand, but he determined it was necessary for Tesfia and Alice striving to become Magicmasters, as well as Loki, who needed to have combat capabilities as his partner.

* * *

The time for the exam, which would determine the outcome not only for Tesfia and Alice but all the students, had come in the blink of an eye.

Today was the third day of the semester exam that everyone from first to third year took part in. It was also the last day of the exam, with an academic exam in the morning followed by a practical exam in the afternoon.

It wouldn’t be an exaggeration to say that most of the weight was placed on the practical exam. In fact, practical lessons took place six times per week, and three times the credit was awarded for them.

That’s why the practical exam would have a considerable impact on whether or not a student advanced in grades.

Incidentally, that was also the exam Alus struggled the most to prepare for in advance, the reason being the examiner this time around wasn’t Sisty. Then again, it was probably inevitable, considering how irregular the results of Alus’ last practical exam had been.

As for holding back, it was one of the things Alus struggled with when not using his AWR or relying on his own attribute-less spells.

Alus’ affinity was attribute-less, and while he could use advanced spells of other attributes, that was thanks to his AWR.

Either way, Alus was able to use magic at a high level, but simply couldn’t make subtle adjustments.

It wasn’t that he was weak at it. He assumed his attribute-less disposition was at fault. Due to his circumstances, the majority of Alus’ mana had a certain anomalous characteristic. That’s why he was attribute-less, and he had his AWR make up for his lack of control over magic.

However, he was reluctant to bring his AWR to the exam. An AWR attracted attention, and Night Mist’s shape brought about curious stares. It would be a pain if it drew questions from onlookers.

That said, it was no excuse to blow up a measuring device, nor could he hold back to the point of the spell misfiring and lose credits. After all, he didn’t have enough attendance days.

This practical exam didn’t have the same partitioning as last time. This was likely because every person could use whatever spell they liked. The intensity, power and precision of even first-rank spells was dependent on a person’s capabilities. As such, the skill at magic was also included in the scoring, causing Alus additional worry.

“I’m at a loss.” In the end, Alus couldn’t come up with countermeasures. The

exam had already begun, and as the students advanced one after another, he still hadn't gotten any bright ideas. The unexpected lack of partitioning on the exam grounds only pressured him more.

Incidentally, Alus had only realized the severity of the situation a moment ago.

"What are you going to do?" Loki asked, having appeared next to him at some point. Her own practical exam was scheduled to take place just before his.

"I bet the AWRs here can't handle the output." The AWRs lined up against the wall were mostly orthodox, and without any strange peculiarities, their specs were low.

On top of that, the only formulas engraved were basic attribute ones, and to Alus those AWRs lacked the ability needed. He threw a glance at the countless training AWRs and scratched his head.

"Would you like to use my AWR?"

"Hmm, lightning attribute, huh... it could probably handle the output, but the control's a different matter."

Seeing Alus so lacking in confidence, Loki's expression eased up.

"What?"

"I was just thinking that there are things even Sir Alus can't do."

"Of course. Considering who I was dealing with, I wasn't expecting this situation."

"That's true," Loki said in a cheerful voice, with a mischievous smile and her hands behind her back as she gazed at Alus' perplexed expression. With those gestures, it sure didn't look like she was worried. Though Alus didn't have the room to care about that.

However, the sight of Loki smiling attracted all the students' eyes, male or female. In place of her usual expressionless face, the adorableness of her smiling was exceptional.

The male students in particular seemed completely robbed of their senses, there in body but not spirit.

The students only returned to their senses when the next person called to the exam, Tesfia, came forward.

Tesfia used her specialty, Icicle Sword. Perhaps due to her confidence from the extracurricular lesson, or maybe her daily training, the spell's vivid appearance, now sharper than ever before, brought about loud cheers.

"She sure loves to stand out," Alus said disinterestedly, to which Loki glanced over at Tesfia and the cheering students before looking back to him.

While Alus was still thinking, Loki's turn finally arrived. Once she stepped up, all the students gulped, as they had with Tesfia, and observed her every move.

"‹‹Lightning Bolt››"

Her reason for speaking the spell's name out loud was because the exam required it.

Of course, as even the name alone was an incantation, it had the effect of strengthening the casting process so it wasn't a fruitless effort.

If the student used an attack spell, they were instructed to target the sandbag-like training dummy in front of them.

Loki's Lightning Bolt manipulated a sphere of lightning. Responding to her voice, three spheres appeared, suspended in the air around her. Swinging down her knife like it was a conductor's baton, she set the dummy as her target.

The spheres were sent flying at high speeds, and before long they created electric fields forming a net of lightning.

As the attack struck the dummy, a thunderclap rang out while an electric discharge bright enough to dazzle a person wrapped around it.

The dummy was charred black, while Loki struck a beautiful pose.

An atmosphere of mute amazement filled the area, with the only one able to speak being the female examiner. "Well done, Ms. Loki."

"Thank you very much."

In terms of rankings, Loki was above the examiner, but their standings were different in the Institute. Loki, being faithful to order and regulations, was well

aware of the relationship between teacher and student, and kept up appearances with her thanks.

“Amazing!”

“In an instant!!”

“A Fiend would die instantly if it got hit by something like that!”

The students let out voices of amazement, and the training grounds were in an uproar for a while.

Loki walked back proudly with a cool face, puffing up her chest. Eventually, she arrived back at Alus and looked at him with expectant eyes.

“You’re looking stable. I see you’ve improved.” Sensing what she wanted, Alus gave her some praise. But internally, he sighed in exasperation.

Before long, her face was full of delight... her normally emotionless expression only changed for him. “Thank you very much.”



After she'd thanked him with a truly happy bow, Alus' name was called. In the end, his turn had come without him managing to think up a countermeasure.

His classmates gave him all kinds of looks. Most of them seemed to be evaluating his strength, but some of the male students looked at him with scorn, convinced he wouldn't be able to manage anything impressive.

Aware of those looks or not, Alus called out to the silver-haired girl before stepping forward. "Loki, can I borrow one of your knives?"

"Of course." Without wasting a breath, she reached for her waist and in an instant, more than ten knives were held out before Alus. "Let's use this one. Yes, this one will do. This is the only one." She specially selected one of the knives.

To Alus, the knives didn't look all that different, but Loki seemed to have clear criteria in mind that only she understood.

"Yeah, thanks." Taking the knife, Alus moved to the designated spot.

The dummy that Loki charred black had already been exchanged for a new one. "You may begin," the examiner said in a stately voice.

Alus normally used magic casually, but this time he was starting to get strangely nervous. *As long as I slowly and gently trace through the formula, there won't be any problems.*

He shallowly gripped the knife, his index finger resting on the spine of the blade. As he poured mana into it, the formula began glowing.

Alus slowly went through the steps to construct a first-rank spell in his mind. Very thoroughly going through power, shape, directionality... once everything was done, he activated the spell. That took all of a fraction of a second.

"‹‹Lightning Arrow››"

The spell he spoke aloud without hesitation was the most basic of basic spells in the lightning attribute.

Hearing that, his classmates snickered and any tension they'd felt disappeared. Alus had been an unknown in the class, but now his evaluation had been decided.

However...

Due to an oversupply of mana, Alus' Lightning Arrow forcibly compressed the mana to its limit, and hovered in the air in an unstable state.

"Ah..." Alus let out an exclamation that sounded like an *oops*, as the power and propulsion built up in the Lightning Arrow were set loose, and it disappeared in an instant. At the same time, a burnt smell floated in the air.

One beat later, everyone turned their eyes to the dummy.

A large hole had opened up in the middle of it. The edge of the hole was completely charred.

Beyond the dummy was a wall that now had marks of the Lightning Arrow on it, but fortunately it hadn't taken any serious damage. Being the wall of the training grounds, it had been built to be very sturdy.

Alus wordlessly shrugged. The knife in his hand was still sparking with remnants from the spell. "I'm sorry. I messed up. I'm ashamed to not be able to handle a spell on that level," he turned around and said, as if to point out that the outcome was a coincidental accident caused by his own ineptitude.

"T-That's true. It was a little unstable."

Once the examiner said this, Alus bowed to her and left the training grounds.

He knew there was no way it could be covered up as an accident. If the examiner took the time to calmly think about it, she might be able to figure out what was behind what just happened.

But as for now, it was safe to say Alus had pulled it off. Probably.

Meanwhile, as for his classmates... Some of the students were saying, "He failed like I thought he would."

If only everyone was that simple.

"But can you go straight through like that if you failed...? In fact, can you even call that a failure?" There were other students that still hadn't processed what happened before them.

In the end, it seemed that Alus' evaluation temporarily settled on a conclusion

of, *I don't get it, but he's weird* and was put aside for now. Or rather, it was more because of how unsettling it was.

To the students, a failure meant magic not manifesting. In Alus' case, however, the spell had manifested but he'd been unable to control it, and it had far more power than the first-rank spells the students knew of.

After that, the exam continued as if nothing had happened, and students were called up one after another until it was finally the last person's turn—Alice.

The problem was that Alice used the fire attribute spell Fire Arrow for her exam. That was probably because there were no arrow spells among first-rank spells in the light attribute. But because she didn't have the affinity for it, Alice's spell was weak and her control wasn't good.

The examiner seemed to be aware of that, as she simply gave Alice a "Good work" and left it at that.

Alice's face was pale as she left the exam with slumped shoulders. That was only obvious, as the spell she used was even weaker than a five-digit Magicmaster's spells.

That said, the physical exam had been exciting despite the tension, compared to the written exam.

* * *

After the exam came the holidays, also called the exam break. While they had a few days off, it only meant there were no classes, and students often studied of their own accord.

Incidentally, while the exams were being scored, the main building was off limits during the holidays.

Today, Alus visited the training grounds together with Tesfia, Alice and Loki. Since they'd made the reservation yesterday, they were able to get to training from the morning onward.

The training menu for today was a practical one, focused on the application of magic.

As for Tesfia, she was desperately trying to activate Mistlotein. She wasn't going to use all of her training time on it, but whether her efforts would be rewarded was still unknown.

Meanwhile, the steady Alice and the logical Loki were taking turns sparring with Alus.

Unlike the exam the other day, the partitions were back. But without any restrictions on who could enter, Tesfia and Loki would normally be stared at by curious onlookers. However, Loki's special circumstances enabled them to darken the partition to prevent anyone from seeing inside.

The reason was because Triple Digit Magicmasters and above were allowed to conceal their spell training. Taking into consideration the fierce competition between high-ranking Magicmasters, very few chose to put their abilities on display.

By contrast—the magic of four-digit Magicmasters and below was mostly well-known, and it was an unspoken rule that there was no need to conceal it.

"Haaaa!!"

Dealing with Alice's slash, Alus kicked the handle end of her naginata's shaft, sending the weapon flying out of her hands.

"Ah!!"

That created an opening, which Alus used to drive a roundhouse kick to her abdomen. Alice was sent flying backwards, but managed to recover in midair and land on one knee.

"Don't stop moving just because you lost your weapon."

"Yes!" A hint of frustration was mixed in with Alice's forceful reply. Against Alus, not even her Reflection had much meaning. With the skill gap between them, Alus accurately aimed for the minor openings in her naginata-swinging where her Reflection wouldn't help her.

Alice was vexed, thinking she'd be able to put up a better fight and use more varied tactics if she knew more spells.

"Next. Loki."

Without even a signal to begin, Loki took off running.

Putting her speed to use, her hands dragging behind her, she zigzagged freely in an attempt to confuse Alus with her erratic movements.

However, he easily dodged the knife thrown from his blind spot without even looking. The AWR Alus currently used was an inferior training weapon, but it was more than enough since he wasn't going to use magic for real.

Using the wall as footing, Loki jumped up high above Alus.

In the next moment, five knives stabbed into the ground around him. A magic circle appeared with him at its center, lightning surrounding him.

Staring at Loki in the air, Alus let loose the sword in his hand.

Of course, it wasn't aimed at her. His target was the edge of the magic circle, flicking the knife in the ground away with the sword and nullifying the circle.

"—!" Loki was shaken for a moment, but swiftly threw more knives from the air.

Alus easily caught them between his fingers, and threw them right back just as he'd done before.

"—!!"

And sure enough, with no way to escape in the air, Loki had no choice but to block them. She wasn't able to do it unharmed either, though the damage taken was converted into mental damage by the training grounds' system.

Loki landed on the wall on the other side, her face distorted in pain from the converted damage. With her stance broken by Alus, she was unable to kick away from the wall, and landed on the ground.

And at the same time she landed—

"Don't jump around for nothing. You should have read three steps ahead," a cool-headed voice said from behind her.

"I give up."

Before she knew it, Alus had recovered the sword he'd thrown and was now pointing it at her from behind.

“But that’s a Triple Digit for you,” Alice said in admiration, having recovered from her fatigue.

“No. I’m still inadequate as Sir Alus’ partner.”

“Well, you won’t get strong that fast,” Alus said, but it was directed more towards Alice than Loki.

“That’s true...” Aware that she was definitely lacking something, Alice’s eyes wavered for a moment.

“It’s not good to be too biased towards magic... like her,” Alus said with exasperation, pointing to the side of the training grounds.

Over there was Tesfia repeatedly firing off magic at the wall. However, she was simply wasting her time, as she wasn’t seeing any improvement.

Alice put on a bitter smile, while Loki didn’t even bother looking at Tesfia.

“In the Outer World, running out of mana leads to death. But, unfortunately, that’s something that happens. That’s why, in the end, stamina and close combat skills can have the final say in critical situations.” That was the simple truth, and Alus didn’t mean it to be a comfort.

“Yes...”

“Then again, magic does completely change situations. The way you are right now... I’m sure I don’t even need to say it, do I?”

Alice raised her head at that, the bitter smile still on her face, but she looked like she felt cornered.

“Don’t beat yourself up over it. I said I’d make it so you can fight Fiends. I’ll watch over you, including your spells.” Perhaps out of habit in dealing with Loki, Alus put his hand on Alice’s head.

When Alice’s eyes turned moist, Alus realized what he’d done. “Oh, sorry. It’s just a habit,” he said, pulling his hand back. It was at times like these when Alus thought he was becoming too easily moved. He found it easier to deal with a giant Fiend than when someone as cheerful as Alice had tears in her eyes.

“No, it’s not that...” Alice used a finger to wipe away the teardrop, but her tears didn’t stop coming. “T-This is strange... why won’t they stop. It’s so...”

But after she said this, Alice realized why. She'd had a flashback to when she was young. Yet despite knowing that, the oncoming waves of emotion wouldn't stop, making her feel strange, even though she'd already come to terms with that time.

"Hey!! What did you do to Alice?!" Seeing those tears, Tesfia ran over, and pushed herself in between Alice and Alus.

Having a third party who'd been busy firing spells at nothing misinterpret the situation was vexing, so Alus took the necessary precautions. "I haven't done anything."

"Yes. It's not Al's fault. I don't really get it either... Sorry, but I'm going to take a little break."

"That's a good idea. Go calm down," Alus said.

Seeing Alice that worked up about something, Alus had an unexpected thought. Because he was someone who had more than enough, he'd faintly begun to realize the truth of the world—that he must be overlooking something.

Those who had a lot were oblivious to the hardships of those who didn't.

That brought about a big misunderstanding, but nobody aside from Alice knew there was another reason for her tears.

"I wonder what happened," Tesfia muttered, as Alice left the training grounds to take her break. While she'd stopped suspecting Alus thanks to Alice's testimony, she was still worried about her in her own way.

"She seems to be worried about it too... Well, the path should open as long as she tries. I'll need to proceed with my own research to figure out her strange affinity, too."

"To think you'd concern yourself with other people, Al. I was sure you were indifferent to me and Alice."

"I don't care what you think, but I said I'm going to take care of you, so I can't just abandon you."

Tesfia intentionally opened her eyes wide as if to show her surprise. "I see. So

you’re worried... Good!”

Alus looked at her with furrowed brows as if to ask what that was supposed to mean, but she responded with a happy-looking expression.

And as if she’d come up with something, the edges of Tesfia’s lips curled up. “Then, while you’re still being nice, teach me how to use Mistlotein... please!” Tesfia said, begging with her hands put together in front of her face, and sticking her tongue out a little in a cute manner.

Suddenly, a quick soft thud rang out on Tesfia’s head.

“Ow.”

“I told you it’s still too early for you,” Alus said, in as dignified a manner as he could, having landed a chop on her.

Mistlotein was about on the same level of difficulty as Niflheim, the perfected version of Freeze. And being asked to help her be able to use that all of a sudden was nothing short of reckless.

“If you don’t take the right steps, you’ll never be able to use it.”

“No waaay...”

Loki nodded behind the disappointed-looking Tesfia, to which Alus let out a sigh and began explaining. “Fine, try casting Freeze.”

Tesfia did as she was told and stuck her katana into the ground, after distancing herself a little. She was able to do it without any incantation, but in order to improve the effect of the spell, she shouted out its name.

“‹‹Freeze››!!”

“That was awful...” Alus said, completely by reflex, upon seeing her spell.

“Hey! I’ve gotten a lot better, you know,” Tesfia said unhappily, as she pulled her katana out of the ground, undoing the spell and turning it back into mana.

“Your setting of the effective range is too naïve. I’m amazed you think you’d be able to reach the heights that are Mistlotein with skills like that. Frankly put, it’s laughable.”

“Wha-! Don’t you know that it’s common sense to encourage someone

through praise nowadays? ... I did my best, too...”

Well, taking into account that she was still a student, it was well done, but she was far too carefree if she thought she could use Mistlotein with that. Hearing her weakly peter out at the end of her complaint, Alus sighed and answered her, “Sheesh, well, I’ll give you that you tried... I’m sure you’ve gotten better. But you’re still far away from trying Mistlotein.”

Tesfia’s shoulders drooped. *Where did her usual competitiveness go?* Alus thought. But he did feel she had grown, and he’d conveyed that to her as well. Though the fact that she was inadequate remained unchanged. By telling her that, she was finally able to begin her journey.

Alus had no intention of giving her comfort by saying she’d be able to do it one day depending on her efforts. At best, she had a possibility if she followed the right procedure. That depended on Tesfia’s talents and senses as well, but all of the training she’d done so far was on mana control. And this was the first time he’d instructed her on the use of magic itself.

“... If you still want to learn, you should start off by mastering Freeze.”

“...!!” A light of hope started burning in Tesfia’s eyes, as if she’d found her way out of the pit of despair. Her dispirited look went away, a passion flared up inside of her and in the end she pushed him to continue.

Alus was now routinely overlooking these lightning-fast changes of pace of hers. But at the same time, he realized how easy she was to handle.

“You should think of doing that in stages, too. If you can freeze more targets simultaneously, your effective range will naturally increase, and once you’re able to do that you’ll finally be at the starting line.”

“Hmm, I see.”

“...”

She looked like she might bring out a notebook at any moment. Being passionate was fine and all, but when Alus thought he’d need to look after everything, he suddenly started feeling fed up. “Either way, I’m going to make you first-rate Magicmasters capable of fighting Fiends. For starters, I’ll check out the results of your training, so get ready.”

“...?! Uhmm.” Surprised, Tesfia’s eyes opened wide, and she looked off into nowhere. She must have seen Loki and Alice fight Alus, and get completely beat up. She wasn’t so much averse to losing face as she was being timid.

“Don’t worry. I’ll hold back.” He walked to the center of the field, turning around as the edges of his lips curved into a smile.

“O-Of course you will!!” Tesfia, following behind him, nervously shouted back. In her mind were the memories of his cold stare when she saw him up on the roof, and his fierce fighting in the Outer World.

That cold-eyed boy was now smiling at her sarcastically, yet somehow cheerfully.

Just which was his real face? As she thought about that, her chest felt painfully tight.

“What’s wrong? Time’s not going to wait for you to decide.”

The voice brought her back to her senses. He was right, she didn’t have the time to waste. She’d decided to see things through. So she would slowly climb up the stairs before her.

Reaching her resolve, she shook her head to clear her mind and stepped into the center of the field with serious eyes.

The sparring continued until the training grounds closed for the day.

Partway through, Alice recovered and came back, and they had all kinds of mock battles, including two-on-one and three-on-one.

Once they left their partitioned space, Alus and the other three were the only ones there.

Alus walked down the darkened street some steps behind Tesfia and Alice. Loki was with him as well, but today he was escorting them back to the girls’ dorm, surprisingly. While it was unusual, that was mostly because he usually didn’t get the chance to.

“Fia, will you be going home for summer vacation?”

“That’s right... bringing my report card with me,” Tesfia said with a bitter smile. The two good friends casually chatted, walking ahead of Alus and Loki.

After the semester exam and exam break came summer vacation. During that time, many students took the opportunity to go home, while the other students remained at the Institute and spent their vacation there.

Normally a summer vacation was something to look forward to, but the students weren't overly excited. It was like the other days off; in other words, they would be studying on their own, as there were no lectures being held.

Incidentally, Alice was looking forward to summer vacation the most out of the entire student body. While not everyone was going home, many were, and the Institute would be a lot calmer. Especially with Tesfia leaving.

"I see. Then I'll finally have the time to focus on my research."

"Uhm, Al? I'll still be here." Since he sounded so happy, Alice felt a little awkward about announcing her plans to stay.

"That's fine. I'm sure I'll be able to make progress with the noisy one gone. Besides, I wouldn't want my test subject to go anywhere during the precious time I have for research."

"Urgh..."

As tears appeared in Alice's eyes, the redhead walking beside her began to stir. She turned around on the spot and shouted, while pointing at Alus, "What's that supposed to mean?! Just so you know, if you use your research as an excuse to do strange things to Alice, you'll pay for it!"

"It's for Alice's sake too. Well, partially. Besides, she has an interesting affinity that has a lot of possibilities. I'd like to grab some more measurements and samples if I can." As Alus said this, his stare happened to fall on Tesfia's chest. His sharp eyes had only spotted some dirt that showed up under the moonlight.

"...!!" "...!!"

However, the timing was most unfortunate.

A short pause occurred, like the calm before the storm.

"T-That's some courage you have there." Tesfia's hands automatically reached towards the katana at her waist. "You pervert Magicmaster!" The blade peeking up from its scabbard glinted in the moonlight.

But before the Fable family's treasured sword could be drawn, another bomb dropped, freezing Tesfia.

"Uhm, Sir Alus... if there's something you're not satisfied with... you could just tell me..."

"Huh?!" Despite the dim lighting, Loki's cheeks were so red that even Tesfia could see it.

But Alus tilted his head as usual. "No, I think you're doing enough."

"I-I see..." Loki's words gradually grew weaker.

"...!"

"Don't tell me you even made a move on Loki..."

Who knows what they imagined, but Alice was red in the face, and Tesfia had a stern look like she was staring at a criminal.

Shortly thereafter, they quickly moved away from Alus. Alice even went as far as to grab Loki and hold her tightly, as if protecting her from something.

Alus wasn't sure what that 'even' was supposed to refer to, but he vaguely realized that a misunderstanding was giving way to more misunderstandings, and things were headed in a disturbing direction. "Just so you know, I'll only be taking measurements on affinity and blood samples. As for Loki, I am satisfied with her daily work."

"That had better be true." Tesfia was still on guard and, following her lead, the girls distanced themselves from him and continued moving while huddled up. Loki glanced back from time to time, but Tesfia urged her to move on.

All the while Alice looked his way, as if to say that she wanted to believe him, and Tesfia stared right through him.

Alus walked towards the girls' dorm, thinking to himself that being treated as a suspect was probably going to continue for a while. He wondered if this kind of conversation was considered normal for students.

Tired of their strange treatment, Alus plodded behind the girls.

However...

“Okay, it’s fine. I can put up with being Loki’s replacement...” Alice said, having made up her mind after mulling over something.

Though that remark only made the situation worse, and the strange mood would go on for a little while longer.

* * *

The exam break lasted three days, and attendance was taken on the fourth day. That said, there were no lessons. It was pretty much just for announcing the exam results.

Information on the top scorers for every subject was displayed on the screens all over the Institute.

The report cards for the semester weren’t handed out by the teachers. Instead, they were given out when you placed your license on a device. More precisely, two pieces of paper were printed out with the information.

The students lined up in the hallway, waiting for their turn. The devices were installed in three classrooms. Students would step into the classroom in an orderly fashion, get their results, and go back out.

In the hallway were students cheering at their results, and students with slumped shoulders.

Alus feigned composure, as if he wasn’t worried in the slightest, as he grabbed his results.

He had just barely passed.

The written exam aside, with his questionable practical exam and low attendance, he’d actually been nervous. At the very least, he was relieved to see that he’d gotten credits for all subjects. To be honest, he found it pathetic that he’d only just grazed by. As doing too well would attract attention, he’d taken the exam while adjusting his score. While he’d made an unexpected mistake during the practical exam, he’d still passed.

Following the crowd into the hallway, he was greeted by a lively Loki. “How did it go, Sir Alus?”

“I managed.” He didn’t ask how it went for her. If he had gotten full credits, it

was hard to imagine that Loki would drop any.

But Loki still would've wanted him to ask. She already held the papers showing perfect scores against her chest.

As Alus gave the disappointed Loki a puzzled look, the screens in the hallways and classrooms changed. The screens that had been showing the high scorers all sounded a loud fanfare. Having grabbed the students' attention, a notice appeared that the top 10 scorers were going to be announced again.

The names of the top-scoring students began to be displayed from bottom to top.

Alus wasn't very interested, and began walking with Loki. But with so many screens in the Institute, they caught his eye no matter where they went.

Third place brought up Alice Tilake. Second was Tesfia Fable. The difference was likely because of their practical exams, meaning that Alice had likely scored above Tesfia in the written portion. Alus knew this, having taught them himself. He guessed the result was due to Alice knowing few offensive spells, since there was no real difference in their capabilities.

That aside, it was surprising to see they were only second and third. They should have been at the top of their class year.

So there was someone even better than them.

The screens changed again, displaying the words TOP SCORER in big letters, and the name Loki Leevahl was written below.

"...!!" As with his own test, Alus had convinced himself that he wasn't particularly interested in Loki's test. So he instinctively stopped at seeing the result.

She doesn't mess around, he thought to himself, realizing why she'd acted so strangely before. She'd been able to tell she was first by looking at her own report. So that was why she had a strange expression when he'd ignored her results.

"That's impressive." It wasn't until now that he turned around to put his hand on Loki's head.

“Thank you very much.” The somber expression on her face disappeared, and was replaced with a smile.

Her reacting this straightforwardly makes it hard to praise her, Alus thought, but he didn’t find it all that troublesome.

But thinking about it, his action would clearly attract attention. The Institute’s top scorer was having her head patted by some guy not even in the top list. Moreover, with Loki’s bashful rejoicing, suspicious stares and indignant expressions were turned their way due to their lack of understanding.

The two moved along, unfazed by the stares, until someone called out.

“How about it!!” the voice said, just as they’d started walking again.

Ever since Alus saw the announcement, he’d had his apprehensions. However, he couldn’t help but want to complain at this boorish world where those expectations so easily came true.

A report card was held out in front of Alus’ eyes by Tesfia with a triumphant look and pose. As she was shorter, it was held slightly above her head.

Even Alice, who held her report card against her chest, smiled with pride.

Being second and third in their class year was a praiseworthy result. Perhaps having accepted that Loki coming first was unavoidable, they had bright yet somewhat expectant expressions.

With this following Loki’s act, Alus felt like saying a cynical thing or two. “Sheesh, you girls... what do you want me to say?”

“You can praise us for doing well,” Tesfia told him, a little embarrassed... but managing to hold back her self-consciousness was a sign of improvement. Her fixation with her score before the exam was partly due to her pride as a noble. Either way, she was likely excited to come out of the exam—her greatest worry—with the second-best result. As could be seen from her cheeks that were redder than usual.

In an attempt to cool her hot head, Alus sarcastically said, “That’s wonderful. So you *can* do it if you try,” and patted her on the head like he did with Loki. He was sure she’d object to this treatment.

Tesfia's expression loosened just a smidge. However, with the reaction from the surrounding students stirring, she snapped back to her senses. Her face exploded into a blush, she knocked Alus' hand off, and backed away from him. But the lack of her usual shouts of abuse made it feel anticlimactic.

She's not used to being praised, is she... Though exasperated, Alus smiled as if he'd found a fun toy.

Meanwhile, Tesfia put her hand on her head in a daze, as if to confirm the sensation. She then stared at Alus with a red face. Next to her, Alice still held her report card, as if waiting in line.

"D-Do... don't get full of yourself... w-w-who do you think you are?"

"And who the hell do you think *you* are? Besides, you're the one who brought it up." Using a sound argument, he shut Tesfia up.

That's when Alus heard their surroundings turn even noisier.

With the three top scorers gathered in one place, students would naturally start flocking around them. There was Loki, the Triple Digit Magicmaster, the first year's rising star, as well as Tesfia and Alice, both objects of envy.

And with an unmotivated male student who barely showed up to class mixed in... all of the students staring at them was inevitable.

Alus started walking, trying to get away from there. While he had Loki with him, he was doing his own thing, but the other two girls just tagged along without saying anything.

Alice seemed to be full of expectations, as if to say that she hadn't gotten her turn yet, but unfortunately for her that wasn't going to happen.

Having gotten out of the building, Alus dropped his pace a little and called out to Tesfia, "When are you leaving?"

"Could you not say that like you want me to leave as soon as possible?"

That had been precisely Alus' intention, but rephrasing himself was a pain, and he had no reason to fire her up. "Well, I don't mind you leaving anytime, but make sure you don't slack on your training."

"I know."

“It was a week starting tomorrow, wasn’t it?” Alice said, giving Tesfia a helping hand.

“Yeah. That’s the plan... but...” Tesfia’s expression suddenly clouded over, and she turned her eyes away. She seemed to be hinting at the possibility that her plan to go home might fall apart.

“Well, Fia’s mother is very strict.”

Tesfia sighed. “That’s true...” Her energy from before was gone.

Seeing that, Alus once again realized how dramatically her expressions always changed. “You know her, Alice?”

“Yes. I’ve visited their house a couple of times.” Those words must have made Alice remember something she’d rather not, as her face twitched and her eyes trailed off like Tesfia’s.

“I’m sorry about that time.” Tesfia’s sudden apology was likely because she still felt indebted about something.

“Ah... it’s fine, it ended up being beneficial, actually,” Alice replied with a bitter smile, but Alus honestly had no idea what they were talking about.

“What happened?” Alus instinctively asked. Loki, who was walking next to him with her eyes down and feigning ignorance, cast a meaningful glance his way.

“I went over to play... but Fia’s mother really worked me over.” That bitter smile was probably all Alice could muster. She’d chosen to leave the details out, but Loki seemed to get it right away, and Alus smiled dryly too.

Tesfia’s mother must be a true woman of the Fable family. The two of them must have received some rather strict guidance.

“She sounds like a strong-willed mother,” Alus said.

“When my mother was active, she served as an academic advisor. Even now that she’s retired, she still seems to have some influence in the military.”

In other words, she was former military personnel. And with her noble status, she must have had a high position. Hearing that, Alus felt like he’d heard the Governor-General mention the Fable name, but couldn’t remember when.

“I see, so when you go home your mother is going to work you over.”

“Urgh...” Expectations and unease suddenly appeared on Tesfia’s face, as she must have recalled some unpleasant memories.

However, she didn’t really have any resistance to receiving guidance. As it was something she’d received since childhood, she was used to it. And her result as the second in her class year was likely enough to be acknowledged.

In fact, Tesfia wasn’t hopeful that her mother would praise her over her results, but she at least wouldn’t get mad at her... probably.

Her fear was that her magic skills were sure to be tested when she went home, and that fact made her dejected. *Grades are one thing, but I’m sure she’ll get angry over that.* Tesfia was aware that no matter how much she improved, her mother would never be satisfied. When she mastered Icicle Sword, her mother had told her it was something anyone in the Fable family should be able to do.

After her second sigh, Tesfia found her resolve, knowing she couldn’t avoid it either way. “I have to pack for tomorrow, so begin without me.” As she said that, she began running toward the dorm as if to shake off her doubts.

“See you later.” Alice waved goodbye to Tesfia, who certainly didn’t look cheerful as she ran off. But there was a tinge of envy in her expression. Going against her family’s wishes, Tesfia attended the Institute as a self-supporting student, and she had her own struggles, but Alice didn’t even have a place to return home to.

Alus stared at Tesfia’s back disappearing into the distance and muttered, “Make your preparations ahead of time, will you?”

With no lessons scheduled, the day was over once they’d gotten their report cards, and it wasn’t even noon yet.

Alus, along with Loki and Alice, headed toward the laboratory. Holding off on training until Tesfia returned, he would take the time until then to use Alice as a test subject.

He had her change into a thin hospital gown, then readied the state of the art equipment he’d ordered from the military. And with Loki serving as an

assistant, the examination proceeded smoothly.

Finally, when he was about to draw her blood...

“W-Wait...” Alice suddenly stopped them.

Alus figured she might be scared of needles, but her face was abnormally pale. “Are you okay?”

“I’m sorry... I’m just feeling a little sick.” She didn’t look like it was something so minor. Alice’s face was practically white, like she would pass out any moment.

In terms of research, cerebrospinal fluid was more certain, but this laboratory didn’t have the large-scale equipment needed for that. Lately, just a blood test was enough to get detailed data, so Alus had been relying on using that.

Either way, a blood sample was inevitable, but seeing Alice’s reaction he had no intention of forcing it. “Does it hurt anywhere? I can request a healing Magicmaster from the army.”

“You don’t have to do that...” Alice shook her head. Either she was traumatized by needles, or she was afraid of examinations themselves.

“So what now? Want to stop? You’re looking the worse for wear.” Before, he’d jokingly called Alice a test subject, but he wasn’t going to force her to do something she didn’t want to do.

However, Alice answered firmly, “I’m all right. Please continue.” But just looking at her complexion, she seemed like she might collapse any minute.

“Then that’s what I’m going to do... Loki, put your hand over her eyes.”

“Understood.”

“Huh?”

“You’re probably better off not seeing your blood get taken. And having someone else cover your eyes should be easier than closing them yourself.”

“Ah?!”

A calm flow of mana came from Loki’s hand covering Alice’s eyes. The mana only covered the surface, but it conveyed Loki’s warmth through her hand.

She'd decided that her body warmth would help ease Alice's fear.

That said, due to their different kinds of mana rejecting each other, Loki couldn't pour it directly into Alice's body. It didn't have any medical effect, but it gave her peace of mind.

And then—"It's done."

"Really?"

By the time Loki's hand covered her eyes, the needle had already stabbed into her.

Alus continued the examination in a familiar manner.

After noon, the examination was done, and only the analysis of the results remained.

"I've got everything I need, so I'll handle the rest from here," Alus told Alice, as they sat down at the table. Loki was in the middle of preparing lunch. Alice had offered to help, but Alus stopped her, having her sit down so he could explain things.

"Just so you know, the information that can be extracted from your mana is related to your mana factor's structure. So don't worry about any personal information being exposed."

"All right."

That was Alus showing consideration to prevent any ethical problems from arising. "And the various data will be securely stored. On top of that, I'll restrict my research to your affinity and to help enhance light attribute spells. Once this goal has been reached, the collected data will be erased. The same goes for you, if you want to stop at any point."

"..." Alice stared at him with her jaw dropped.

"What? If you're fine with it, then sign this." Alus had already prepared a document with a checklist and place to sign, and he casually pushed it towards Alice.

"... I get it, but isn't this a little formal...?"

“What are you talking about? This is only normal for magic research with test subjects.”

Alice seemed impressed, and smiled.

Magical technology was making advancements in all kinds of fields, including the medical field, and because of those developments many medical treatments had improved. But even then, some treatments or experimental research couldn’t be performed without the subject’s consent. There were some who operated illegally without such consent, and leaking personal information gained through research was subject to punishment under law, a result of the laws keeping up with the advancements being made.

While how strictly they adhered to those guidelines depended on the researcher, it was common to draw a clear line at violating professional ethics. As for Alus, he was excessively thorough.

By the time Loki finished preparing the food, Tesfia was done with her packing and joined them for lunch. She rejoiced at her timing, and relished Loki’s cooking before it was time for afternoon training.

Thanks to their continuous training, the two girls were finally starting to get the knack for mana control. That said, since there was still mana leakage, they needed to take regular breaks.

Moreover, Loki was doing her own training as well, the goal being to extend her detection range. She wasn’t getting substantial results, but detection training was a little special, and Alus wasn’t expecting any improvements right off the bat.

Alus was analyzing the data he received from testing Alice. Normally Loki would assist him, but with Alice’s privacy being a concern, he couldn’t have her help him.

When he glanced Loki’s way, he saw her eyes were closed, focused on her training. She’d had a composed expression at first, but the more she focused, the worse she looked for wear.

“Loki, you take a break, too.” Seeing his chance, Alus ordered Loki to rest. If he gave her a choice, she’d definitely choose to continue. But training wouldn’t

be meaningful if it forcibly continued under exhaustion.

“Yes.” With an order, Loki had no choice but to nod her head. Alus also took the opportunity to take a break himself.

Even though he’d told her to rest, Loki was faithfully making tea. Since she probably wouldn’t listen even if he stopped her, Alus let her do as she pleased. And considering she was bringing cups for Tesfia and Alice, her treatment of them must have eased up a little.

Aware of that change or not, Tesfia and Alice sipped on their hot tea. Alus also thanked Loki and brought his cup to his lips. Having confirmed that, Loki finally followed suit.

It was a moment for relaxation. In the corner of his eye, Alus saw the automated program he’d set up to analyze Alice’s data was wrapping up. It’d only be a few minutes now. And as expected, a short time later, the screen was filled with characters showing the result.

Cup in hand, Alus scrolled down the text, going through it all.

The mana factor in her genetics is probably the cause. So this is the reason that affinity for the light element is inborn, huh.

Alus’ conjecture was nothing short of a confirmation. According to previous research, an affinity for the light attribute was formed in the process of the DNA of the two parents being mixed together in the child.

However, the conditions for that were unknown, and nobody knew the trigger for giving birth to someone with the affinity for light. While there were theories, there wasn’t enough research to consider any of them reliable.

Next, Alus analyzed the mana data he’d gotten from Alice’s blood sample. Mana occurred from objects in the blood known as mana spheres. Unlike red blood cells, it was the human heart that created these mana spheres, the heart of course being an extremely vital organ keeping the person alive.

Ironically enough, it worked very similarly to Fiends and their cores. That was also the reason why some people shrank away from magic, criticizing it as something evil.

I guess I should try to figure out why her mana reacted to attribute-less magic, Alus thought, and got to work.

Thus, the brief break came to an end. Alus devoted himself to his research, Tesfia and Alice worked on their training, and Loki trained on her own. A typical day at the laboratory.

Ninth Chapter

Fomenting Darkness

Several days later, at midnight, when most people had turned in for the day...

Darkness, often seen as a symbol of fear, covered the region.

There weren't many places as dark as this in the human sphere of influence. This was a great forest some distance from the highway within Alpha's borders. It had been left in remembrance of their former territory, their past glory.

And it wasn't just Alpha. The original symbolism of the seven nations keeping nature as it had been was because the small area they had as living space now wasn't all that they should have.

And, as if to recall that fact, the forest was alive and well within the barrier even now, to keep that memory fresh—so that humanity wouldn't completely forget the splendor of the world they should strive to return to.

The great forest in Alpha, as a representation of that, could even be mistaken for the massive sea of trees in the Outer World. It was so deep that a single wrong turn could leave you stranded, and as such, without permission from the government, entry was forbidden.

Because of the thick veil of tree leaves, the shadows that fell were exceedingly dark. Moreover, shadows weren't the only things in that forest.

In reality, all of the inhumane research once performed in the past had been disposed of inside, and it was dotted with facilities that had researched shady technologies. It was a dumping ground for a negative legacy.

And now... the light from the false moon in the sky shone down on the dark curtain of the forest.

In that eerie night, nobody would notice the irregularity that couldn't even be seen with a bird's eye view of the forest. One would need to have very sharp senses or excellent hearing to pick up on the faint trembling of the atmosphere.

Voices were exchanging words. All members in their positions, just barely out

of detection radius, focused on the Consensors in their ears.

“I expect a swift judgment as always. Don’t leave any traces behind. I wish you the best of luck, Silencers.”

In the darkness, once the transmission stopped, they shifted their focus off their Consensors and to their own duties.

However, that’s when a private transmission reached the ears of one of the members. “Feli, don’t overestimate your abilities... and don’t chase too far either. I’m glad you’re more passionate than usual, but...”

“You don’t have to worry about me. I know my place, Captain Vizaist. Well then, I will begin my mission.” The confident voice replying belonged to a young woman.

The transmission ended with the man she called ‘Captain’ sighing.

Transmissions were only allowed when necessary. Moreover, the previous transmission had been a consideration shown to family. Normally, that was unnecessary before Felinella Socalent began a mission.

Eventually, the members cast camouflage magic on themselves to blend in with the darkness, before heading toward the points they’d been assigned. They would be searching through all of the facilities that had been abandoned in this sea of trees.

Near the front of the group was Felinella, advancing while blending in with the darkness. The spell cast on the outside of her robe wrapped her in a dark mist, making her meld perfectly with the night.

Once she reached her third point after the mission began, she jumped up to get a full view of the area.

Using the densely-packed branches to jump higher, moving upwards as if unaffected by gravity, she looked beyond the gaps in the grove.

The structure ahead looked just like what she’d seen during the briefing. It was a building that had once been used to study a certain kind of magic. Just one look at the peeling wall was enough to tell how deteriorated it was, and it wouldn’t be strange if it were to fall over at any moment.

I'd like to find it soon...

Felinella's black hair fluttered as she disappeared into the dark mist. She'd already been to two points, but they were both busts. A feeling of wasted effort washed over her, but she quickly collected herself and narrowed her dark red eyes.

Her excellent intuition picked up on a minor sense that something was out of place. The building was strangely short at only two floors. A portion of the wall had fallen down, revealing the interior.

There were no signs of life, but she felt a faint tingle at the nape of her neck—that strange sensation that something was off—and could intuitively tell something was there.

Felinella licked the tip of her finger and stuck it up in the air as her hair fluttered in the wind.

"This is a nice wind..." Her red eyes had a bewitching look as the moonlight fell on them.

In the research building Felinella was gazing at, the exposed steel girders rose up from the ground in heaps. The ceiling was unnaturally low, blending in almost perfectly with the trees of the forest.

Taking a look inside, the things that were left had clearly been there for a long time, as they were crumbling away. The only thing that stood out was the refuse. The materials had deteriorated and there were glass shards everywhere. Other than that, there was just dust, puddles of water, and leaves that had blown in. The moonlight shining in from the ruined walls lit up the dust in the air.

It was impossible to imagine what the facility had been researching just by looking at what was left behind. There were few who knew the reason why the items had been discarded and left to begin with.

This was an abandoned building that shouldn't have seen life in a long time. Being abandoned by the world, everything inside had fallen silent as if it had given up.

The two figures leaning against the wall in the corners faintly lit by moonlight

were no exception. They were positioned on the first and second floors as if guarding an old tomb.

Based on their hair lengths, one seemed to be a man and the other a woman. However, their stained cloaks covered their bodies, making it difficult to tell. Their strewn-out limbs were limp, with no signs they would move anytime soon. And their slightly-opened eyes likely wouldn't blink even if dirt got in them. Considering their appearances, they must be vagrants or the like. Or they could have come here in their last moments of life.

Their bent-over postures covered up their facial features, but their puppet-like silhouettes had a sense of mass to them. At a glance, their limp hands were holding blades that gleamed in the moonlight. These machetes seemed to be the only things rejecting the general deterioration, as they were still sharp.

Suddenly, the two figures' hair began fluttering in a wind that had come in from somewhere. Next, the muffled sound of glass being stepped on echoed in the building. It was very faint, but in this silence, it reached far and wide.

That's when the fingers of these lifeless figures twitched. Their dried eyeballs began moving about, looking in the direction of the sound. The figures stood up, arms above their heads, and now firmly grasped the handles of their weapons, to the point marks were left in their palms.

The figure on the second floor moved, followed by the figure on the first floor. Dragging their feet across the ground, they made their way to the origin of the sound. The wind that had unnaturally blown into the building turned around and headed back out. As if lured by the wind, the figures recklessly moved their withered legs.

The two figures met at the first floor, lowering their heavy-looking weapons. When, suddenly, a voice came from the entrance.

It was a young woman's voice. Hearing that, the two that looked like corpses became filled with hatred and let out beast-like growls. More and more strength was poured into their legs as they headed toward the voice, stepping over the glass shards with bare feet.

The silhouettes of the man and woman jumped outside with dexterity that was impossible to imagine based on their appearance. Running toward the

voice, they once again raised their weapons.

But in the next moment, the two figures, their eyes filled with hatred, began wandering around the darkness like they'd lost interest. At their feet was a single Consensor. The woman's voice appeared to have come from it.

That somewhat muffled voice wasn't very clear. If one were cautious enough, one could tell something was wrong, but the two dispirited figures had no way of recognizing this.

"Oh my. It seems I even got two of them." This time, the woman's shrewd voice didn't resound from the Consensor but from nearby. The camouflage spell dissipated, revealing the young woman, Felinella, and her charming smile.

The feeling she'd gotten was from these two figures. By using a wind attribute detection spell to search the interior, and then creating an unnatural sound by controlling the atmosphere, she'd easily gotten them to move.

The smile on her face was in part due to relief that she'd finally be able to get some information. "Well, if they're only at this level they're just decoys... but if they were positioned here, it must mean I'm close," Felinella said in a faux innocent tone. However, her smile didn't budge a bit.

This is a big catch, she told herself. The covert forces dispatched to these woods were small in number, so going through each and every spot in this sea of trees was a job that required a lot of effort.

Counting the two figures as fighting capabilities was ridiculous, but having found what were clearly decoys proved their conjecture was correct. Their main goal was somewhere in the area.

But before that, she needed to confirm something. "I don't want to think it, but they're not civilians, are they?"

"Agh... urgh, found... i-intruder. Kill... KILL."

Felinella's expression brightened at the answer that was unlikely to have come from an ordinary human. She quickly put her hand in front of her mouth, elegantly hiding her face that had turned to a joyful look. "I'm glad. I don't hate drudge work, but being sent out each and every night is bad for a girl's skin. There are a lot of things I'd like to ask you... but, well, that doesn't look like it'll

be possible.”



The smile was still on her face as an ominous light appeared in her eyes. Flipping away her robe, she drew the AWR hanging off her waist.

Before her were the two figures, the pair wearing shabby cloaks. Their cheeks were scrawny, their hair so tangled it'd take more than a simple comb to get through it. Their hoarse, madness-filled voices were hard to hear, most likely because they couldn't properly move their lips.

They dragged machetes with black blades behind them. Felinella's sharp eyes saw the flickering of magic formulas on those wide blades.

"Kill... the stranger..."

"Bury, bury... whe-when she stops moving... bury, bury."

"My, how scary." As if coming across a friend on the street, Felinella acted calm but surprised. However, the two figures showed no reaction. Like she'd thought, it seemed impossible they could come to a mutual understanding. Though she was already aware of that, she couldn't help but give it a try.

She'd already finished preparations for battle. The faintly-glowing rapier-like weapon was her baton used to conduct the wind, as well as being her AWR. However, it didn't have an edge for slashing. Only the sharp tip could be used to attack. It was a custom-made AWR specialized for her affinity, and the black magic formulas wrapped around the thin silver blade in the form of a spiral.

The wind blowing around Felinella made her robe flutter as if it was playing around. The next moment, she stripped her robe off and hooked it on the tip of her AWR. In response, the wind whisked the robe away like a faithful servant.

She took elegant steps forward in the sudden breeze. Her steps were as light as a feather, as if she was riding the winds.

Finally, the spark to set the battle off in the dark forest came.

From an onlooker's perspective, everyone's AWRs must have appeared as fireflies crossing paths.

The two figures unleashed their first attack, a charge that relied on their abnormally high physical abilities. They came at a speed you'd never see at the Institute, completely ignoring the strains on their bodies, as if they were Mana

Chariots with broken brakes.

Meanwhile, Felinella opposed them with slow, dance-like steps. The tip of her AWR was pointed, not at the enemies, but at the ground.

With the first attack being easily sidestepped, the pair attacked again in turns. They repeatedly lunged at Felinella with their black machetes. In terms of pure power, she'd likely lose, but she stood in the center of their attacks, stopping all of them with her AWR.

The two machetes' blades never even touched Felinella's AWR. A few centimeters before touching it, they clashed with an invisible wall of wind.

Haphazard physical attacks weren't going to be able to get through an AWR wrapped in a highly-compressed wall of air.

Next, after blocking an attack, each of the figures had an arm that bent at a strange angle. The wind Felinella controlled wrapped around the arms like a large snake, forcibly bending them. A magical wind wasn't something you could resist with just physical strength. If they let their guard down for a moment, the wind would snap their wrists. Even if they moved away, the arm holding the machete wouldn't budge.

"If you don't let go of those dangerous-looking things..." Felinella warned in a soft voice. At the same time, the two unleashed kicks in a pincer attack. They were essentially abandoning their wrists with this desperate attack.

What a bother.

The whirl of invisible wind wrapped around her AWR could rotate in two directions. By rotating towards her hand, it would turn into a twisting force unleashing its power at whatever was caught in the whirl.

By rotating it the other way, however...

The moment before their kicks were released, the machetes were blown away and the two figures that had been freed from the wind had their bodies sent flying.

As Felinella pulled her upper body back, the toes of the two passed by her face, just barely scratching her porcelain white cheeks.

The two enemies were spun around and slammed into the ground. But they quickly sprang up, not giving Felinella a chance to breathe.

Their twisted wrists hung down, but they stared at their useless hands before using their functional ones to take hold of them. Before long, they'd forcibly turned their wrists and shoved the dislocated joints back in with a grotesque noise. In the opening created from Felinella's surprise, they picked their machetes back up.

The wind from before had been unleashed from a snap judgment, intended to avoid the attack. However, the enemies' decision to attack while sacrificing their arms ended up being the best option, and they took the least amount of damage thereby, merely dislocating their wrists.

It was unclear if they had deliberately made the best choice, but the smile disappeared from Felinella's face.

It was said that the most decisive factor in battle wasn't the difference in magic or physical abilities, but determination. The words of her father, Vizaist, an expert in the path of a shadow, were close to being an absolute truth.

That held true in the Outer World and elsewhere. It was a type of gamble, where strategies were put together based on how much you were prepared to sacrifice for victory, be it an arm, a leg, or even your life.

Only those who could decide that without hesitation would be able to use their determination to build a path toward victory. It wasn't a line of work for people who got cold feet from high stakes.

That was the first thing she'd been taught, and had drilled into her when she began helping her father with his work.

Vizaist himself had probably gone down the same road in his younger days. That's why Felinella made a choice swifter than the wind. She'd use her AWR and magic depending on the situation, walking down a different path from her father.

Breathing out, she brought a hand to her chest, while taking an elegant pose. "I will now be a little more rough and unrefined, but please do be lenient." In contrast to her words, Felinella politely apologized. Being rough was something

that was normally unimaginable for her. However, in the next moment, contrary to her best smile, a cruel light began shining in her eyes.

The dense movements of the wind encircled Felinella.

Then the machete in the woman's hand began glowing, a sign that the magic formula on the blade was activating. As if to cover her, the man stepped out in front.

And suddenly a ball of light appeared in the thrust-forward hand of the woman being protected. The ball of light was sent flying without hesitation.

Felinella, unperturbed, lightly swung her AWR. It was a nimble movement, and a slashing wind came flying from the tip.

Yet despite their proximity, the man managed to avoid it in the last moment. As a result, only the ball of light was cut down by the attack.

Light attribute...

The instant Felinella said that to herself, the slashed ball of light didn't dissipate, but rather burst. Black smoke bellowed forth from the explosion, covering the man and flying toward Felinella. But the cover wind around her immediately brushed away the fumes from the explosion.

However, the man who appeared from out of the smoke should've been at least somewhat injured.

But he didn't seem to have taken any damage. His movements weren't impaired, and he was ready to swing his machete. He closed the distance before the smoke had cleared, showing no hesitation or emotional disturbance over killing somebody.

And despite being hit by an explosion from so close, the man's face remained composed. The clothing around his flank had been blown away and a portion was burnt, but there wasn't a single change in his expression.

Mana ran through the man's machete, creating a sharp blade and making its way toward Felinella's neck in a flash.

As if unaware of the threat, Felinella didn't even move her eyes, let alone her head. But before the blade reached her, she bent backwards like a bow and

evaded the attack. The lethal weapon, dragging mana along its path, passed by above her head.

While in the sphere of influence of Felinella's spell, so long as the two figures were in contact with the wind around them, she could easily read their next move. She had clearer recognition with that than relying on her sight.

With his swing missing, the man abandoned the machete. Instead, he spread his arms wide to capture Felinella. She didn't miss the ball of light, just like the one the woman used, in the center of his chest. He was going to hold onto his target and blow up the ball of light. It was a suicide attack.

The man leaped toward Felinella with his arms outspread, closing to less than a few centimeters of her. But when he was one step away, his feet suddenly weren't on the ground.

Having lowered her stance, Felinella swept the man's legs just before he landed. His posture destroyed, the man was about to hit the ground.

That's when Felinella fluidly stood up, and with gallant steps passed by the falling man. Without even looking at him, she held her free hand over his chest, just over the ball of light, and her five fingers formed a circle.

"‹‹Tempest››" Felinella whispered.

The ball of light exploded. The man was caught up in a gale exceeding the shockwave in force. With a wall of wind preventing the explosion from going anywhere but in the man's direction, he was blown back at an intense speed.

A trail of black smoke followed him as he flew at the speed of a cannonball and crashed into the wall of the research building. As the building was already on the verge of collapse, the man's body broke through the wall and disappeared, rubble falling along the path he'd flown.

A very vivid, blunt sound rang through the night.

Exhaling, Felinella looked at the building the man had disappeared into. The wall he'd crashed through had fully collapsed, and the rubble kicked up a thick cloud of dust.

"Well, it looks like you are the one who was buried."

In contrast to her bright voice, her expression wasn't the slightest bit cheerful. Felinella sported an expressionless look, with no hostility or intent to kill in it. Despite her bold strategy, her heart didn't waver in the slightest. It was the perfected appearance of a covert force operative, her five senses sharp and her heart composed.

Felinella wasn't relaxing her guard in the slightest. That's why no matter what kind of ambush or surprise attack the enemy might spring on her, her response would be immediate.

Only one enemy remained. Felinella's focus was turned directly towards the woman.

The next moment, she launched a thrust from her elegant stance, reaching her target. A vast amount of blood poured out from the woman's right arm. A dark hole had been drilled into it.

However, the woman didn't even try to protect herself as she attacked Felinella with the same agility as before. She was unable to move her arm properly, and should be in excruciating pain, but she seemed to be only slightly weighed down by her injury.

Holding the machete with her left hand, the woman let out a growl and lowered her posture as if she was a beast.

It was hard to believe a slash so quick could be performed by a badly injured person.

"Kill... bury..."

"It's like you're a puppet. Unable to think of anything other than what you've been told... an empty puppet without feelings. So is your friend, no? It really is a shame. I only needed to talk to you."

As expected, Felinella's words didn't seem to reach the woman. Instead, the woman began breathing heavily.

She howled, seemingly desperate, and her black blade approached Felinella. But for some reason, the sharpness in her movements was blunted. Her strike was dull, with no trace of the quickness of her previous attacks, and Felinella chose to block it with her AWR.

“I played around a little with the pressure.”

With those words, the woman was instinctively able to tell that the air around her hand had changed. She acted like a creepy puppet, but it appeared she was still human, recognizing a clear change as living creatures do. The rapid change in pressure caused her blood vessels to expand, and pain in the form of a headache assaulted her. As she was out of breath, having exerted herself, that sensation only grew worse. She was likely feeling the effects of vertigo, too. That was the reason why her attack had been so out of form.

On top of that... she also had a wall of wind surrounding the area, keeping out all sound, so even if the woman did have more allies, they couldn’t get in the way.

Even the sounds of the wall the man crashed into, the rumbling noises of the falling remnants, couldn’t reach outside this barrier.

This was the usual measure Felinella took in her work, and it was that kind of tactic she had referred to as being unrefined.

Moreover... Felinella unleashed the whirl of winds around her AWR at the woman, who was trying to brute force her way through.

“‹‹Libera››”

Receiving that order, the AWR released the dense wind at close range, bursting at the woman.

The gale, which was like a compressed tornado, turned into countless blades of air.

The woman had expected it, but didn’t even guard against it. The merciless blades of wind chopped the woman up without even letting her scream.

Under the pressure, her body was lifted up from the ground. But the intensity of the wind blades increased, despite the blood being thrown up in the air. Her muscles and weapon were cut to pieces, and all that was left was for her body to powerlessly fall to the ground like a rag... yet she responded with a monstrous force of will. Her body moved again like it was manipulated by invisible strings.

She waved her machete covered in her own blood, and thrust it at Felinella at lightning-quick speed.

The control of the winds, even the wall of wind around them, was temporarily dispelled during the activation of Libera. And the lethal weapon approached Felinella, not even giving her time to create a barrier.

Despite the unexpected attack, Felinella's reaction didn't show any delay. Getting a read on the length of the woman's arm and the machete, she moved her body with the minimal amount of movement to skillfully dodge the attack. It seemed her cold, dark red eyes had completely seen through the attack.

However... "!!"

Her eyes opened in surprise. She saw the woman's dexterous finger movements around the machete, that caused her reach to extend past Felinella's expectations. The woman held the handle at its end with two fingers, forcibly pushing it forward.

Felinella bent her body, placing one of her hands on the ground and doing a backflip. Her legs moving at high speed, she kicked the woman's wrist, knocking the machete upwards.

By the time Felinella landed her backflip, the woman, having lost her balance, fell to the ground. At the same time, the machete's blade slammed into the dirt, its rotational movement keeping it going, gouging through the soil by a tree's roots, burying itself up to the handle.

Then there was the fallen woman. A pool of blood was spreading out from her due to the cuts all over her body. She'd lost so much blood that she shouldn't be able to move anymore.

At last silence fell, and it wasn't just due to the magic isolating the area. Felinella finally dispelled the magic. An invisible veil of wind dispersed into mana remnants, signaling the end.

She looked over at the fallen woman once more. As she stood next to the abandoned building, a shadow appeared across her face, perhaps a moment of grief.

"The location was a decoy, but I have secured some who I believe to be

related...” Without even bothering to look for the Consensor she’d used to lure the two out, Felinella took out a spare and spoke as she walked toward the building, before the man she’d blown away was completely buried in the rubble.

“...!!” Suddenly, dread sent a chill down her spine. Not only was someone behind her, but she’d also lost the initiative. *But the area was soundproofed by magic, just who could...?!* Felinella thought to herself, as the situation far surpassed her expectations.

She could tell without looking. It was the woman who stood behind her. With that kind of blood loss, she surely had to be on the verge of death. Even if she was still alive, she shouldn’t have the strength to move even a finger.

So her standing there meant her tenacity exceeded the limits of life. Felinella’s preconceived notion that she was facing humans had been the blunder of a century.

She immediately turned around, but the woman standing there was unmoving. Meaning that she’d missed her big chance.

“...”

Her arms were limp, red fluid dripping down from her fingers. It was hard to imagine her standing up by her own will. It seemed more likely that something had unnaturally driven her body back up. Her appearance even seemed sorrowful.

The woman’s half-open eyes weren’t looking at Felinella. Instead, they were pointed towards the ground. She was instinctively maintaining her sense of balance, though she swayed back and forth.

She was like a balancing doll. Felinella could no longer see anything resembling a consciousness in her. It was a frail existence that would fall over flat if she was so much as pushed. They’d been fighting to the death just a moment ago, but seeing her stand up despite her serious injuries made Felinella reluctant to finish her off.

Really... talk about depressing... it’s like she’s just a tool. Felinella knew those kinds of feelings were out of place for a mission in the shadows. Despite that,

they filled her inside.

“I’m sorry. But you’re going to have to come with me,” she said, focusing on her Consensor again.

Then she ignored the voice coming from it, staring at a point in the forest. *I guess they did notice. Reinforcements... and considering the speed they must be pretty good.*

She had just a few seconds to think. While the soundproofing spell she’d used was a low level one, it covered a wide area and thus consumed a lot of mana. That’s why she’d unraveled it as soon as the fighting was over, but reinforcements were coming, possibly strong ones, leaving her with only one choice.

Calmly calculating the time she had, Felinella put on a rarely shown unfortunate expression when she reached her conclusion. “Well, if you insist,” she whispered, in place of a sigh. With newcomers approaching, it would be difficult to escape with the woman who would be a valuable witness if she could regain her sanity.

Even if she put her hopes on grouping up with her allies in the covert forces, that choice carried a high risk. If she didn’t know when to call it quits, the intelligence gathering they’d been doing up to now would go to waste.

Felinella briefly spoke into her Consensor one more time. “I’m falling back.” Her supple legs danced in the wind, and she disappeared into the darkness of the forest.

Left behind was a lone figure... the woman lying on the ground once more. Her bleeding had been stopped by a needle made from mana, pushed into an acupuncture point, sparkling in the moonlight.

Felinella’s cautiousness and ability to make snap judgments were some of her good qualities, and as she’d been especially proactive on this mission, she already had an escape route and means of confirming her position prepared. She had the knowledge necessary to be able to escape under any circumstances.

The more information, the better. Or course, greed could pull the rug from

under someone, but she'd already taken her limits into account. She was calculating at all times, ending it just before things turned for the worse. That's why she pretended to escape, putting the real ability of the covert forces on display, as she chose to pull off one last job.

Concealing herself at the top of the densely packed trees, Felinella quietly watched over the area.

The false moonlight shone down on the fully-collapsed research building.

As Felinella expected, a robed figure appeared from out of the trees. Considering the slim legs and narrow shoulders, it didn't appear to be a man.

The figure suspiciously stared at the woman, whose bleeding had been stopped, lying on the ground. Determining that it wasn't a trap, she grabbed hold of the woman's ankle and headed for the abandoned building, dragging the woman along.

Without hesitating, she then stopped at a certain point in the rubble, moving it away with a single hand, and pulled out the man.

At first glance, she didn't look like she had the kind of strength to do these things. But her pace after she'd shouldered the man was incredibly light. It was hard to believe she was carrying two adults with her.

It looked like the female figure was about to leave with the two in tow, but she suddenly stopped. Her head, hidden by a hood, turned to the side.

She looked straight at the top of the tree where Felinella was hiding.

"!" She must have sensed her faint presence. Felinella also had a hood on, so even if she was found out, her features were almost completely hidden in the darkness.

Their eyes met... just who was watching, and who was being watched?

Suddenly, the woman looked away, and with an adult under each arm, she disappeared into the grove of trees.

The moment had safely passed. That aside, based on the slender chin and length of the hair peeking out from the hood, Felinella was sure that the figure was a woman. Of course, she didn't overlook the two knives at her waist.

But she hadn't risked staying behind just to confirm something like that. That would be too reckless. In fact, if she couldn't bring the information back it would all have been pointless.

Moreover, this kind of large-scale information gathering normally never took place in Alpha. The top brass giving the go ahead despite that, meant they were expected to perfectly complete their mission and quickly resolve this incident.

Seeing the woman walk into the woods, Felinella deliberately drew her AWR. The magic formula engraved on it began its work on preparing the next spell.

For some reason, the woman had found the man in the rubble without difficulty. She must have a method for finding the figures.

Which meant there was a high chance of Felinella being tracked down if she'd taken the injured woman with her. And that could have meant even more reinforcements coming after her.

As I thought, leaving her behind was the right move.

She exhaled, letting those thoughts escape her mind, and softly spoke out her spell's name.

"‹‹Air Map››"

Wind spread out like ripples, with Felinella in its center. The new wind chased past the natural wind and blew through the entire vicinity.

In the next moment, the wind detected everything it came in contact with, and conveyed it to Felinella's mind. At the same time it picked up the mana needle she'd placed on the woman, letting her know where she was.

The needle wasn't just meant to stop the bleeding, which was why she'd put it in an acupuncture point to keep its existence hidden for longer.

"Looks like I made it in time." In the end, the needle was made up of mana. However, the mana deteriorating was inevitable, which meant it wouldn't be active for long. That's why it wouldn't leave any traces once she was done with it, making it perfect for this kind of work.

Before long, Felinella picked up on her target. All she had to do now was wait for the woman to be taken to the hideout she was looking for. Even if the

needle dissolved, she could still get an idea of its location based on the path it had taken.

* * *

At the same time, late at night in Alus' laboratory...

Tesfia and Alice had already gone home a long time ago. Loki had waited for Alus while working on her detection training, but as she started dozing off, he had put her to bed after careful consideration.

Characters on the monitor screen scrolled past at an amazing speed.

Without so much as blinking, Alus restlessly moved his serious eyes back and forth.

"!!" Rather than finding a portion that caught his attention, he found a character string that was unnatural. He used the virtual keyboard to scroll back up.

What is this...?

He'd turned the mana information he'd gotten from Alice into code, displaying it on the screen. That's why he could tell right away. This disorderly character string hadn't occurred because he'd changed the data into simple code. What the several blotted-out lines showed was the existence of irregular data, very similar to bugged output from a program.

Alus immediately looked around for the reason. He brought out the information on Alice's body and compared it to her internal mana factor information that he'd scanned. He shifted his attention to the analysis results.

A few hours later... his work continued into the wee hours of the morning, but it hadn't been for naught.

"So that's how it is..."

Thanks to the analysis results, the reason for why the attribute-less magic formula had reacted when Alice's mana came in contact with a ring in Night Mist's chain had finally been made clear.

Normally, one would feel refreshed over finding an explanation to a problem. But, in this case, Alus was feeling bitter. As expected, once the results were

clear, that strange character string revealed the reason.

Talk about depressing.

The sleepiness Alus was feeling had already completely disappeared. He wondered whether to become more involved or not. First, however, he'd need to make sure. He also felt a responsibility as a researcher. But the headache he felt from that surely wasn't just from his lack of sleep.

In the end, Alus was unable to get a single wink of sleep, and he was still sitting down in front of the monitor looking at evidence corroborating what he was more or less convinced of, when Loki woke up sometime past 5 a.m.

"Good morning."

"Morning." Alus was a little impressed, thinking Loki must always wake up around this time, but he acted normally so she wouldn't catch on.

Her voice was clear, but she still seemed to be a little out of it as she rubbed her eyes. Suddenly, she realized a certain truth and her eyes shot wide open as she shouted, "Don't tell me... you haven't slept?!"

"Yeah," Alus said in a worn-out voice.

"You can't. Please go to sleep right away. I will take care of all of your duties for today, so please."

"No, I don't think I'll be able to rest today," Alus answered. He'd already turned his head back to the monitor.

"... I understand. Then perhaps some coffee will do?"

"Sorry about that." Alus stopped for a moment and moved to the table, while pinching the area between his eyebrows. His lack of sleep was giving him a minor headache, but it wasn't a big deal.

Warm sunlight came shining in through the window that Loki opened up. The cool breeze brought with it the fragrance of flowers, but it didn't ease Alus' feelings.

Today was technically a day they needed to attend at the Institute. Simply put, it was the day of the end-of-term ceremony.

However, Alus had reached the required number of days before the exam, and he'd already received his report card, so he felt attending would be nonsensical. But he still decided to drop by.

The principal appeared on the massive monitor in the classroom, going on about what frame of mind the novice Magicmasters should keep while on their summer vacation, and to remember that they were humanity's hope and so on.

In total, it took less than an hour, but... "I shouldn't have come," Alus mumbled in class, while holding back the urge to yawn.

"That's true." Loki, seated behind him, had an amused smile. The way he looked right now was just like a normal first-year student. To her, the sight of Alus living an everyday life was very refreshing.

"You don't look well today, so maybe we shouldn't come? We can train in our room, anyways."

"It's fine. I bet he just stayed up all night. You're always so unhealthy. Doesn't Loki get angry?" Unlike Alice, Tesfia was a little harsh with her words.

Based on her expression, she seemed to be convinced Alus had spent the night playing games or something, but it was true he hadn't slept, so he had no objections. Or even the energy for it.

"Well, even if it's for your research, I would prefer it if you took more care of your body..." Loki said, while peeking over at the two girls that had appeared next to Alus. Rather than refuting Tesfia like always, she was unable to defend Alus this time.

She had her worries, but he wanted this for himself. And she wasn't sure she could rob him of his valuable time for the sake of looking after his health. That conflict always made Loki uneasy. Most of all, she couldn't compare the current No. 1 Magicmaster, who was also a first-class researcher, to an average person.

Alus was aware he was causing concern for Loki. But he also thought this kind of extreme act was necessary to make up for the time he'd lost. That said, a lack of sleep might have made things pretty ineffective, or so he told himself.

"If you're living with him, you'll need to harden your heart, Loki. This kind of guy just keeps on going until he collapses once he gets into something. It's a

sickness, I say!”

Tesfia’s way of speaking was even harsher than before, but after hearing Loki’s words, she realized he hadn’t spent the night playing. In fact, her expression made it clear she was worried about him, regardless of what she might say out loud.

“Alice, I don’t mind going on as usual today. And aren’t you going home today, Tesfia? Are you sure you can just waste time here all day?”

“I still have time. It’s not like I need to hurry. But I have a lot of luggage, so I don’t think I can make it over there before I leave...”

You don’t have to come over just because you’re going home, Alus thought to himself. This redhead tended to be strangely sincere. Of course, she’d get angry if he said that out loud, so he kept it to himself.

Finally, the four of them left the classroom. Once they reached the entrance to the research building, Tesfia and Alice parted ways with the other two and headed for the girls’ dorm. Alice would be coming back once she’d seen Tesfia off.

As if waiting for the moment Alus entered the room, the alarm sounded, signaling an incoming call. He showed no signs of hurrying, however... in fact, he prayed for the ringing to stop, as he took his time moving to the display to press the button.

“Loki, you don’t have to do anything.” Loki had been about to leave, planning to show consideration, but there was no need for that. Instead, he wordlessly gestured for her to lock the door.

The terminal was a video phone, rather than the basic kind you put against your ear. Even seeing the other party face to face, Alus did things at his own pace.

But he had a bad feeling about this. After all, only Sisty and a few in the military knew of this line. And with this being a video phone call, it surely had to be Governor-General Berwick.

“Pick up faster, don’t keep your elders waiting.” Accompanying that exasperated voice was the visage of an elderly man.

“Indeed, if you’re this impatient you can definitely be called an old man... Pardon me. I happened to be at the end-of-term ceremony.”

This was practically a routine for them. Alus tried to figure out his intention behind the call, but it didn’t seem like it was for fun. Of course, if it had been, he would have just hung up.

“... Hm, I’m glad to see you enjoying your studies.” At first glance Berwick seemed impressed, but that couldn’t be his true feelings. If Alus missed any credits, there was a chance he could be pressed back into service.

Berwick smiled calmly, but depending on the person seeing that smile, they could believe he hid an ulterior motive behind it. “I see young Loki managed to become your partner as well. That’s one less worry off my hands.”

How shameless, Alus thought, furrowing his brows. As the paperwork for Loki becoming his partner had already gone through, there was no way a man at the Governor-General’s level didn’t already know that.

To begin with, Berwick had already been nagging him to decide on a partner. Then again, he knew Alus didn’t need one, so he hadn’t forced it on him.

“That aside, what do you want? You didn’t use the secret line just to confirm something like that, did you?” Alus pressed Berwick to move on to the main topic.

The wrinkles on Berwick’s forehead grew deeper. In the next moment, the man in the position of Governor-General spoke in a solemn tone, with a troubled look on his face. “You’ve got work.”

It was as Alus expected. Since the Governor-General had called him, it meant that he either needed someone excellent for an important matter, or there was a job only he could do.

It was at times like these that Alus got sick of the military putting a half-assed leash on him.

While he may be a student, he was still part of the military, and he couldn’t refuse so easily. But even then—“I’m pretty busy.”

“Listen to what I have to say at the very least, Alus.”

It was only a minor show of opposition. He never had any intention to refuse, and he knew he didn't have a choice either. So Alus closed his mouth to get the Governor-General to continue.

He wanted free time, but he also owed this man a debt of gratitude he could never repay. Alus would never say that to Berwick's face... but that complex emotion was probably a big part of what still connected him to the military. It was a chain he could never fully sever. Fate, in a sense.

"The target's a scholar by the name of Godma Barhong."

"A human," Alus said in a low voice.

But the surprise on Loki's face, next to him, was minimal. Before she left the military to become Alus' partner, the Governor-General had explained the situation to her personally. Her keeping that information confidential was one of the conditions that allowed her to leave.

Having accepted those terms, Loki had said she would serve the military for the rest of her life if she didn't become Alus' partner. Of course, she'd prepared herself not to return until she did.

Geez. Alpha had a security force, but many of its members weren't Magicmasters. The military dealt with the Fiends, while the security force kept the peace inside the border. The precious Magicmasters were needed for the Fiends of the Outer World; they couldn't give any to the security force to deal with things normal people could do as well.

The army actually consisted of two armies: the Local Army in charge of inside the barrier, protecting the citizens, and the Outer Army, in charge of eliminating foreign threats outside the barrier. This formation was created shortly after the seven nations were established, but only the people who knew of those times used these names.

Currently, emphasis was placed on the Outer Army dealing with humanity's greatest threat—the Fiends—and they were prioritized for it. The Governor-General had the final say in military matters, but there were many other matters where he couldn't ignore the top brass or the ruler of the nation.

And since this mission's target wasn't a Fiend, responsibility lay with the Local

Army. So with the mission falling into Alus' hands, that meant this target was too much for them. It must be quite the criminal.

A picture of the person's face was displayed on the screen. A detailed profile began scrolling down.

The man was past 40 now, but was in his 30s in the photograph. He had a thin build, wearing rimless glasses, with short hair. His face was slender, like you'd expect from a scholar, and he looked the perfect picture of slyness.

However, his unhealthy-looking eyes had insanity and vengeance smoldering deep within. His record showed he had quite the twisted, inquisitive mind.

Alus frowned as he confirmed the details.

"He's performed quite a few ethically questionable experiments outside the public eye. A warrant was put out on him because of that, but before he could be apprehended he went into hiding. We've been unable to ascertain his location since then."

"And now you've got a lead?"

"Yes. For some reason, he was gathering children."

He must have pushed his luck too far and given himself away. Alus nodded in understanding, as two questions popped into his mind.

"Why now of all times?"

"We don't know that much, but we believe he's been continuing his inhumane experiments in hiding. We suspect he's getting careless because his experiments are in their final stages."

"I see. So, why me?"

That was Alus' second question. Considering what he heard, the matter needed to be resolved immediately, as this man couldn't be left to his own devices any longer. But Alus didn't like accepting an assignment while something vital was being left out.

Governor-General Berwick let out a sigh. His expression was bitter, but he'd expected that question. "You're the same as always."

“Thanks for that.”

“But I can’t reveal the reason.”

“In other words, when he was delving into his human experiments, he touched upon something seriously bad. And some high-ranking official in the military or government was colluding with him. And... that being exposed now would have major repercussions.”

Berwick remained silent, but that only confirmed Alus’ theory.

“... It’s a disgrace on Alpha’s name that can’t see the light of day again. Back then it had to be kept confidential, but I believe that was careless. But there are things I can and cannot do.”

The wrinkles on Berwick’s forehead grew even deeper. Him spitting out weak excuses was probably only because he was dealing with Alus. The two had known each other for a long while.

“We can’t afford to sink the military’s influence right now.”

“I bet.”

“This concerns you, too. This is an emergency. If the military’s authority wanes, there’d be a demand to reinstate you.”

“...” *So you say*, Alus thought. *Instead of ‘limited to just emergencies,’ don’t you really mean ‘at every opportunity’?* This wasn’t the first or second time he’d been threatened with reinstatement.

But even if this mission was a clean-up operation for the past government or top brass, failure would affect him as well. Alus’ current position was only allowable while Berwick was Governor-General. In fact, if Berwick stepped down, Alus had no reason to focus his efforts on this nation.

An indescribable feeling of desolation cast a shadow on Alus’ heart. Not even he was aware of where it came from. While not expecting any major changes in your surroundings sounded mature, it was kind of like a distrustful child fearing change, fiercely protecting their own place in the world.

“I’ve sent all the documents to you.”

Alus expanded a new window, and looked them over. “... I understand.”

“Good. I’ll need you to adhere to the designated date and time. I’ll leave the means to you, but try to use the best method.”

Alus nodded like he didn’t need to hear the rest. It was the same as usual. The best method was, simply put, the deletion of the target. A nasty smile appeared on Alus’ lips. This was going to be a lot of trouble. His target seemed to be the truly problematic type.

“Best of luck,” the Governor-General said, and hung up.

You don’t even mean that, Alus thought to himself. But he moved on to the material sent to him.

The separation of the element factor, huh. He might be scum, but he has interesting ideas. He at least has some intelligence in there somewhere.

While Alus was thinking, Loki muttered to herself, “... How selfish can you be?” The corners of her eyes rose in resentment. She truly felt anger. Though she’d kept quiet during the call, she’d been enduring quite a bit.

The military tried to win Alus over by granting him temporary freedom while still trying to use him after working him to the bone. She could understand it in her head when she took Berwick’s position into account, but she still couldn’t stomach it.

Alus patted the stern-looking Loki on the shoulder with a small smile, as if to say that kind of expression didn’t suit her. “Don’t say that. It’s not like this is the first time.” Though he could see it looked that way from an outsider’s perspective.

“But...”

Without touching on the confidential matters, Alus skillfully found the words to stop Loki. “Having the Governor-General owe me one would be just fine. Besides, as a researcher, I honestly have some interest in this guy.” Or more accurately, the research data he had.

Sidestepping the worried look Loki was giving him, Alus reasoned it wasn’t all downside, and had Loki stand down.

* * *

With the sudden top secret request done with for now, Alice showed up at the laboratory around lunch time.

“You should have come to see Tesfia off too, Al.”

“Talk about overdoing it. She’s only going to be gone for a week.” In reality, Alus was earnestly enjoying the silence. With the noisy one gone, he was feeling good, to the point where he began to wonder if he should set up a schedule and not offer any guidance outside of it. He also considered having the two of them work on the next stage of their training on their own.

“Anyways, that hysterical person being gone is only convenient.”

“Hysterical? That’s pretty mean, Al.” Alice had a wry smile, but she seemed to understand he was only joking. Lately, she’d started getting used to his style.

“No, I mean convenient for you.”

“Huh?”

Alus searched through a shelf and pulled out a strange piece of equipment that looked like a projector.

“Loki, sorry, but can you leave the room?”

“...!” It was Alice who was surprised by his words. Loki seemed to have expected it, as she gave Alus a look of acknowledgment and disappeared through the door with indifferent steps.

“...”

The two were alone in the room.

Sensing something, Alice let a sound escape her throat. But she soon put a finger on her cheek, tilting her head, while wondering what he intended.

Alice sometimes had a habit of trying to evade things through childish behavior when the atmosphere turned serious. She looked straight at reality, while at the same time unconsciously trying to avoid it.

She was considerate and good at reading the mood, which meant she also had sensitivity.

That said, Alus wasn’t about to talk to her about anything that serious, nor

was he going to give her a sermon. Instead, he needed to confirm something for the sake of continuing his research.

“I noticed something when I analyzed your mana. Of course, I have no intentions of prying into it without your permission, as promised. But in order to continue with my research, I need to talk with you. If you have an idea of the reason behind what I’m about to say, I don’t think either of us have anything to lose from knowing why.”

Alus tapped on the virtual keyboard projected in the air, and brought up a screen in front of Alice.

A lineup of characters scrolled past at amazing speed. After several hundred, several thousand strings of characters, Alus stopped it, giving Alice a meaningful glance.

“...?!”

Though she didn’t know what it meant, she understood that what was being displayed was unnatural.

Alus pointed to the problem line. It was data showing analysis of the structure of the mana factor, but the lines around it had blurred characters, meaningless characters, or were just left blank.

“Normally it’s possible to express the information representing the mana factor as characters or symbols, regardless of its form.”

“Yes...”

“But that transformation hasn’t happened here. In other words, I’d suspect that it’s an error—some kind of defect,” Alus said bluntly. It wasn’t a matter of deteriorating information, but instead, that it was partially missing. “Do you have any ideas?”

“...”

Before he knew it, Alice’s eyes were on the floor. She wasn’t even looking at the screen. Her face was pale, and she looked shocked.

... She did have an idea. It existed clearly in her mind. The scars of that accursed experiment in her past. She wasn’t able to speak right away, not

because she recalled how painful it had been, but because she remembered her parents.

Alus wasn't so thick-headed as to assume nothing had happened when he saw her expression change. "Like I said, if you don't want it, I'm not going to pry any further. But since it was made clear to me by the analysis, I decided that I at least needed to tell you."

"Does this mean that I'm defective as a Magicmaster...?" Alice asked fearfully. She worried for her aptitude and future as a Magicmaster with a sorrowful look on her face.

"No, it's nothing you need to worry about. Though it's not like there's no effect at all."

"Then... good." Relief washed over Alice.

Alus, however, figured that he needed to properly explain himself. "First, in regards to that small problem, a defect with your mana information has an effect on the duration of spells. Fortunately, it seems that time has passed since the defect happened, so there won't be much of a difference compared to others."

He purposefully chose to say, 'since the defect happened.' Meaning, it wasn't something she had been born with. "Of course, unlike mana capacity, this isn't something you can affect through training. It's common for mana information to become more dense with age, but in your case, you don't have any older information because of the defect."

When Alice heard there wasn't a big difference, she let out a heavy sigh of relief—though it was unclear if she understood all of what Alus told her.

"Well, simply put, it means your mana is young." It was a rather rough example, but it really wasn't that serious.

"Young...?" It would probably be the 'not so young' women who'd smile at that, but Alice took it as a compliment and didn't seem to think any more of it.

While Alus had managed to briefly explain the situation, he didn't feel any better. Because it was clear that the defect was man-made. Something like this occurring naturally was practically impossible when living a normal life.

He also knew that Alice had scars when he scanned her body. Though healing magic wasn't instant or perfect, it still existed. And unless it was something major, there wouldn't be any scars left behind after proper treatment.

However, the largest scar on Alice was something even a limited scan could pick up on. That was proof she had undergone a major operation in the past, and that it had been performed carelessly.

"Alice, this defect is really baffling."

"..."

Alice bit her lower lip, silently looking on. She didn't regret helping Alus with his research. Tesfia, in fact, knew about her past too. Of course, it wasn't the kind of thing you'd reveal to just anyone. She'd only talked about it to Tesfia once, never bringing it up since.

That said, there was nothing hindering her from telling Alus everything if it would help with his research.

Yet her words seemed to clump up in her throat and wouldn't come out no matter how hard she pushed. Her heart was unconsciously rejecting it.

The words began to feel like a weight inside her, and got in the way of her breathing. She was breathing heavily like she'd just sprinted at full speed. She didn't know what was happening.

"Alice...?!"

It was unclear if Alus' voice reached her, as she opened her mouth a little and took shallow breaths in a daze. She was hyperventilating. Without being able to speak, she desperately sought oxygen as if she were drowning.

Realizing the abnormal situation, Alus rushed to Alice's side.

"—!"

Her consciousness drifted away, her limbs were stiff. At this rate her entire body would freeze up and she'd be unable to think of anything at all.

However, as if to wrap around her sudden state of confusion, the view in front of her was quietly covered up, and at the same time she felt a mysterious warmth.

“I’m sorry,” Alus said. He put his hand on her chestnut-colored hair.

Alice’s face was pressed against his chest, and she could hear the rhythmical beating of his heart. She naturally found herself tuning in to that beat. Synchronizing with that rhythm, her own breathing gradually calmed down.

How long had she been like that? Ten minutes? Thirty minutes? Or maybe even an hour...? Alice couldn’t tell, but she felt like she’d stayed that way for a long time. Her memories of the time were vague, like in a dream.

When she came to, her hands were gripping at Alus’ clothes so hard they wrinkled them. At the same time, the side of her face was against his chest for some reason. Her ear was pressed against his shirt, wet from her tears, as if to listen in to the sound deep within.

“I-I’m sorry?!” As Alice became fully aware of the situation, she turned red up to her ears. She pushed herself away from Alus.

“I’m the one who’s sorry. So just forget about it.”

“... Yes. I’m fine now.”

Her heart was still throbbing. Be it from embarrassment or because she hadn’t recovered from the shock yet... but this feeling of her heart being moved wasn’t unpleasant at all.

“I think you should go home for today,” Alus quietly said.

“But... I haven’t...”

He made the suggestion because she didn’t look to be in the condition to train, but Alice was a little hesitant. Being as serious as she was, she didn’t want to go home without having done anything. But she knew she wasn’t in good condition too, so her insistence was weak.

“Just rest for today. Vacation starts tomorrow, so you have plenty of time.”

“Yes, okay. Then that’s what I’ll do.”

“Good. Come back when you’re feeling better.” Alus meant emotionally rather than physically.

“Yes... See you tomorrow, Al.”

A dry smile crept onto Alus' face, as he figured she'd be back right away tomorrow.

He then saw her out of the room. Since he didn't want anything to happen to her on the way back, he had Loki accompany her to the girls' dorm. He'd had something to do with this matter concerning Alice, after all.

The laboratory was quiet. Alus sat down on a chair. For the first time in a while, he was alone in here.

"Haah." Alus brought a teacup to his lips. When he noticed it was empty, he let out another sigh.

He reflected on how careless he had been. At the same time, he considered how deep-rooted it was. Seeing Alice's abnormal reaction—clearly indicating a psychological trauma—and taking into account the incomprehensible defect with her mana information and the scars of surgery, it was only natural that her mind would shut down.

While it was a private problem, he couldn't leave it alone either.

"Once Loki gets back, I'll have to have her make some coffee," Alus muttered to himself, as he pushed his cup to the edge of his desk.

His eyes moved to the virtual keyboard and screen, but he suddenly changed his mind and turned it off.

Sensing the deep darkness within, he couldn't get in the mood to reconfirm the data.

* * *

Having returned to her room, now missing her roommate, Alice fell onto the bed.

"What happened with me?" She felt embarrassed. Her face turned red just thinking about it.

At the same time, she felt melancholic. She was having flashbacks to the past she should have put behind her long ago. Perhaps she still hadn't been able to get away from it.

Thinking that she couldn't run away from it, she felt frustration she couldn't

put into words.

She wanted to become strong like him.

Alice had mistakenly assumed that she was strong enough. However, she'd been made aware of her mistake when her transient confidence was so easily destroyed.

I never overcame my past.

But she was wrong... it wasn't overcoming her past. She'd only covered it up. All she did was put a lid on it, covered with thin cloth.

That's why her wound had been so easily exposed. No, if it had only been exposed, there would have been no reason for her to get so flustered.

Back then, everything had been explained to the young Alice. What had been done at that facility, what happened to her and how her parents had died. She'd understood everything, but she couldn't accept it.

Her hatred for the person who was the cause of it all remained.

It was a dark emotion that she hid away alongside her memories.

And when she recognized it—

"I can never be free while he's still alive," Alice spoke to herself in the dim room.

The past couldn't be forgotten. And she didn't actually want to forget it, either.

At the same time, she was frustrated by not being able to do anything. That was why she would begin by facing her past.

Having decided that, her eyelids finally lost to her fatigue and closed. She suddenly felt like she'd forgotten something, but was unable to struggle against her sleepiness and fell into a deep sleep.

Alice was having a dream. Before falling asleep, memories she couldn't recall were, as expected, connected to her past. But the truth was that her past wasn't just filled with bad memories. And the meager memories of joy and happiness were thanks to her being in a dream world.

The flickering fragments of her memories invited her to glimpse an old sight.

Alice wasn't the only one in that military research facility. The moment she remembered that in her dream, a group of children appeared before her in a trance. Their ages were varied, but they were still children.

Her time in the facility was so long, dark and miserable, that the thoughts of reuniting with her parents weren't enough support to overcome it. That's why there had to be more.

Others overcoming the painful experiments alongside her. Friends that supported her... there had to be...

While she was dreaming, tears streamed out of Alice's eyes, down her cheeks and falling onto her pillow.

When she awoke from her dream, Alice would surely realize why she'd forgotten it. She'd hidden away all her painful memories of the past, alongside the few fun days and bonds she'd formed.

Her memories began resurfacing after what happened today.

"... Melissa."

Alice's lips moved, as she quietly spoke in her sleep. The name that didn't belong to anyone came out of her mouth, and disappeared into the silent room.

The next day, Alice came to the laboratory earlier than usual, or rather too early. There were very few people walking around outside at this hour.

"That's fast!"

"Hee hee... I fell asleep early yesterday, so I woke up early too." Alice playfully stuck out her tongue, as if nothing had happened the day before, and Alus didn't hide how bothersome this was to him, as always. He didn't just mean the time of day, but more that she'd been emotionally devastated only yesterday.

Yet as Alice stepped into the laboratory again, seemingly without care, her expression then turned serious as she looked at Alus.

"Wait a minute..." Alus turned off the virtual monitor as he'd already been working, and glanced over at Loki who was in the middle of making breakfast. "Loki, step outside for a moment..."

Alice said, “Wait. I want Loki to hear this, too.”

“... I see.”

Loki stopped her preparations with a surprised look. In the end, she made tea for three and they sat down around the table.

After taking a deep breath, Alice put her hand on her chest. *I’m okay,* she told herself, before starting to speak.

“It happened when I was seven...”

* * *

Alice told of her harsh past, pouring her heart out, stopping every now and then.

Alus intently listened to her, his expression unchanging. Loki also remained expressionless, but when the name of *that* researcher was mentioned, her eyes opened wide. Fortunately, Alice didn’t have the composure to notice.

Meanwhile, having finished telling them everything, Alice felt like a weight came off her chest.

“I see. I’m starting to understand,” Alus said.

“Yes. I think my mana started going weird because of the experiments back then,” Alice frowned, thinking, as she answered him. Having learned the truth, she’d decided to accept the results. And her revealing her past to Alus and Loki might have been a show of her resolution.

“The Element Factor Separation Project, is it... I don’t know what kind of use that would have,” Loki said.

“Yeah, but still, I’m surprised you agreed to participate in my research.” Alus glanced over at Loki and casually changed the topic.

Loki caught his drift and closed her mouth. But still... she thought to herself, looking at the girl before her. While Alus’ research would benefit her, it was indeed impressive that she’d agreed to it.

“I thought I had it sorted out... but it looks like I can’t handle needles... besides, taking part in the experiments was the only way to see my parents.

Thinking back on it, I might not have been that opposed to it... Oh, but it wasn't all bad. I even had a friend in the facility." Finally, Alice forced a smile.

"I see."

Alice let out feigned laughter at Alus' muttered statement.

Alus didn't know the warmth of having parents. He'd never seen their faces. That's why he didn't understand just how far a child would go to be with their parents. So to him, it was a hard-to-grasp emotion.

However, Loki had had similar circumstances. She silently stared at Alice, who'd regained her composure. While Loki hadn't been toyed around with by fate like Alice had been, she'd been exposed to the irrational, unfair world, just like Alice.

She didn't sympathize with her. But she could feel a faint empathy and fellowship. Loki had been able to live because of Alus. She figured Alice must have had support in life too. And that redhead who wasn't here now was surely an important existence to her as well. Then again, Loki wasn't willing to acknowledge Tesfia's worth all that much.

That's when Alus glanced her way, bringing her back to reality. She returned his glance in kind.

Hearing Alice's tale, Loki had also realized that the target for elimination that Alus received, Godma Barhong, was related to Alice's story.

Alus' look pressed Loki into silence, just in case.

Meanwhile, Alus was also thinking of something different. They weren't going to let Alice know that Barhong had a target on his back. He also couldn't reveal military secrets on his own accord, either.

While Alice had said she'd sorted out her emotions based on the past, her feelings toward Barhong himself were a different matter.

Even if she wanted revenge, this was Alus' job.

"Alice, your defect most likely wasn't planned."

"What do you mean?"

“That it wasn’t the point of the experiment, but a result of it. An accident, in other words. It was probably carried out sloppily, but even then, it’s likely that it only happened to you out of several subjects.”

Alice turned pale. If that was true, she was beyond just being unlucky. “No way... why just me?”

But Alus continued, as if to suppress her unrest. “To begin with, it’s impossible to cause a defect to affect a person’s mana information.” It was a change large enough to affect the mana spheres supplied by the heart. Doing that intentionally would put a life-threatening strain on a person’s body.

Then, perhaps, interfering with the mana that arose from the mana spheres was possible. But, in reality, that was even more unrealistic. Trying to rewrite mana information inside the body would, at best, result in the ego or personality collapsing, but there was also a high chance of rejection, resulting in the body being unable to sustain life. Mana information more delicately and strictly defined a person, as compared to physical information.

Before, Alus had supplied Loki with his mana, but he’d simply been pouring it into an empty vessel, and hadn’t interfered with the supply source. As such, strictly speaking, it wasn’t overwriting the information. Despite that, he’d worried that her body would reject it.

“You were unlucky, but you can also say that you were lucky.”

“—!!”

Alice was rendered dumbfounded and speechless. In her mind, she figured he meant she was lucky to be alive with that defect.

But Alus continued on as if he’d read her mind. “Well, that’s not all I mean by lucky.”

A puzzled look appeared on Alice’s face. She wondered how she could be lucky, apart from not dying. Thinking about it normally, there was nothing positive about it from a Magicmaster’s point of view.

In place of Alice, who couldn’t speak, Loki asked, “What exactly do you mean, lucky?”

“Yeah. I’d like to think about that a little.”

“Huh?!” Alice was willing to grasp at straws. If she could find a glimpse of hope in her unfortunate past... if there was any luck that could lead her to a brighter future, she’d be able to more optimistically accept her fate. It would be a big step forward for her.

But what Alus said was contradictory. When she agreed to become his test subject, he’d said it wouldn’t be fair if he didn’t tell her the process of his research.

“Can you say why you won’t tell me?”

“Of course. But if you hear it, you might be even more worried. In the worst case, you might be asked to become a test subject again in yet another project. If the nation finds out, that is.”

To Alus, that was an evasive answer. But Alice caught his drift when he mentioned the words, ‘test subject.’

He was thinking of her. When she realized that, she felt a weight lifted off of her.

“But you’re the one who has to decide, Alice. That’s why... there’s something I want you to try one more time.”

“... Okay.” Not sure if she could rejoice yet, Alice hesitated. But the option of not complying with him had already disappeared from her mind.

If Alus’ words were the truth, then receiving more detailed information would be great, but she was still a student, and it might be too much for her. There was also no guarantee that her trauma wouldn’t return. As she was still immature in a lot of ways, Alice might not be able to accept or understand what he’d tell her.

As for Alus, there was still something he wasn’t convinced of. He should probably make sure of it first, before telling her. And so he started by preparing himself.

“Wait a second,” Alus said, walking into his room, before coming out with a black case.

“What’s that?” Alice asked about the creepy-looking case, but she’d already seen what was inside it before.

“It’s my AWR, Night Mist.”

“Why your AWR?”

Alus didn’t answer her second question, opting instead to put the case on the table and pull the short sword in its sheath out from within.

Alice recognized it then, but Alus said, “Save your questions for later. For now, pour mana through this.”

He held onto the sheath, and presented the handle to Alice. As she timidly grasped the handle, Alus pulled the blade out.

Unlike the time after the extracurricular lesson, Alus pulled out the chain. Before long, a 10 meter-long chain attached to the short sword spread out across the room.

“Good, now just enchant like usual.”

“Y-Yes... okay.” With the short sword in both hands, Alice closed her eyes and focused.

Loki looked on from behind with a dubious gaze, but it would take more time before Alus revealed his intentions.

Eventually, around the time Alice’s mana began circulating around the chain through the sword...

“Okay, that’s enough.”

“Oh? Okay...” Strictly speaking, she was still in the middle of enchanting. She hadn’t covered all of the chain, but it was enough for Alus to confirm what he wanted to know.

“Sir Alus, what did you understand from that?”

“This.” Alus lifted up the only ring in the chain that showed a reaction.

“The magic formula there did seem to react. Does that mean she has that affinity?” Loki asked him.

“That’s right. And what attribute do you think this formula has?”

Alice said hesitatingly, “I have a light affinity, so... light?”

“Too bad. The elements are the only things I can’t use,” Alus said, by way of reply.

“—!!” Both Alice and Loki reacted.

Elements referred to the light and dark attributes, which were special. And Alus’ denial made it clear that this wasn’t some trivial issue. Loki and Alice were taken aback.

That said, Alus wasn’t going to let them guess until they got it right. The only ones who’d get it right immediately would be himself or the Governor-General anyways.

“So, some other attribute? But I think I’ve tried them before,” Alice said.

“Maybe that was a little mean of me... the right answer is that it’s none of the attributes. Just so you know, brace yourselves, as what I’m about to tell you can’t be repeated to anyone else.” He meant Loki, too.

The two obediently nodded. But they didn’t look like they were bracing themselves for the secret Alus was about to reveal to them. Instead, they looked very curious with straightforward interest in their eyes, like kids waiting to hear the answer to a riddle.

Alus worried over whether they actually understood that they’d need to keep quiet about this, as he continued, “Anyways, the formula that reacted to Alice’s mana doesn’t belong to any attribute. I call that ‘attribute-less.’”

“...?” Loki looked confused. “Sir Alus, what is attribute-less?”

Everything defined as magic was categorized within one of the attributes, such as Loki’s specialty, lightning, or Tesfia’s ice, and Alice’s light.

“I thought I was the only Magicmaster that could use this power known as attribute-less,” Alus told them.

“—!!” It was only natural the two would be surprised by this bombshell.

Alus had never seen Loki be so shocked. Her eyes had shot open bigger than ever.

However, she quickly changed gears—though not in the sense of calming down. “Sir Alus, why didn’t you tell your partner this sooner?” Resentment filled her words, and there were no traces of a smile to ease the atmosphere. She made no attempt to hide her indignation.

But she seemed more unhappy than angry. In fact, her entire body exuded discontent and her emotions were out of control.

“Wait, even though you’re my partner, it’s not something that easy to talk about. Up till now this has been a secret between me and the Governor-General,” Alus said, attempting to pacify her. He might not be able to completely silence Loki, but right now Alice was more important.

Perhaps having sensed that—“Then I’ll leave it at that for now. But I will have you tell me all about it tonight,” Loki said, with a strangely meaningful smile.

Alus shrugged, then said, “First of all, aside from the light attribute, it seems Alice has some affinity for attribute-less as well. There’s almost no doubt that this comes from the defect in her mana information.”

It was a silver lining. The mana defect affected the duration of Alice’s spells, but depending on how you looked at it, she got something even greater in return. Of course, that affinity was an exception, and it remained to be seen if it would wind up being a positive or a negative. Alus saw it as being an unknown potential.

“So your affinity is attribute-less, Al?” Alice asked to reconfirm.

“I just said so.”

When Alice heard Alus’ answer, joy for some reason filled her face, and she faintly smiled. She was happy to have an ‘attribute-less’ friend, but of course, Alus didn’t realize that.

Incidentally, Alus could use all of the attributes aside from light and dark, but if he were to have an affinity, it would be attribute-less. That said, due to overwhelming poor efficiency in the other attributes, his talents were backed up by deep knowledge of magic formulas and their construction.

And the reason for his disposition was different from Alice. He was born with two differing manas, which created his attribute-less disposition. Alus

conjectured that his heterogeneous manas interfered with each other, preventing them from assuming a normal attribute.

Meanwhile, Alice had received her affinity after birth. Partly because of that, she still only had a portion of the affinity for attribute-less. Whether or not she could use that power to some extent remained to be seen.

Last night, Alus had confirmed that Alice's defective mana data was not similar to his own. He'd gone through the trouble of bringing out the confidential data on his own mana, so there was no mistaking it.

It was the first time he'd seen it in a while, and as he'd recalled, it was filled with strange code indicating something anomalous. But that wasn't because the device was damaged; it was expressed that way because it couldn't be analyzed. The abnormal portions with the affinity had been made clear, thanks to the existence of Alice.

Alus' own data had been the first sample, and now Alice's was the second sample. Currently, there was too much that wasn't known about attribute-less. All the clues he could get from the mana information were unintelligible. That was because there was much that the current measuring technology couldn't analyze.

If Alice didn't just have the potential, but could actually use attribute-less magic, then *defective* wouldn't be an apt description of her mana information anymore. Instead, it would more accurately be described as an unknown potential. And if that was the case, the same could be said of Alus. It wouldn't be a defect, but rather the absence would be meaningful.

A lot of things were still left unexplained to this day. Mana information wasn't expressed as numbers or current characters, but as the ancient forgotten characters known as Lost Spells. And it wouldn't be strange for there to still be symbols that hadn't been discovered yet. There were only the analysis results that had been identified as of now.

"Like I said before, there's no doubt that Alice has some affinity for attribute-less magic. Though that doesn't mean she'll be able to do anything right now. But if she accepts it, I can come up with attribute-less spells. That's my affinity, and if Alice has some aptitude for it, then it'll save me some time."

That's where Alus stopped for a moment. He figured he needed to stress the next point. "However, in Alice's case, this only concerns a portion of her mana information's character string... in other words, only the defective portion is showing a reaction to attribute-less magic, so she can't fully use it like me."

Of course, it was because she had the ability to use it at all that he'd decided to tell her. It was possible she could accidentally activate an unnatural spell that would expose the existence of attribute-less magic to others. By instead having Alice stick with the light attribute, and only using the attribute-less to complement the portions of the light attribute she was bad at, it was possible to cover up her attribute-less magic as some strange light attribute spell.

In that regard, it was a good thing that research on the light attribute, let alone attribute-less magic, was so far behind. This kind of camouflage was only possible thanks to these details not being so well known.

"But it's a secret, right? If someone else finds out..." Alice said, worried. That was part of what Alus meant by her accepting it. She'd already been a test subject for some weird government project. The government or military top brass might set their eyes on her for some other type of research. Being as rare of a case as she was, she might attract too much interest and invite unnecessary dangers.

"You don't have to be so pessimistic about it. A rare existence can be a powerful weapon. That's what it was for me. While it's been a secret between me and the Governor-General, if it came out, nobody could make me do anything."

Of course, it was that confidence of his that enabled Alus to open up to the two. He'd been hiding it until now to avoid anything bothersome, and concealing the ace up your sleeve was normal between Magicmasters.

For starters, if anything was to happen to Alus, the current No. 1, Alpha would be unable to respond to unforeseen emergencies. If the worst threat in history, the SS-class Fiend was to return... Alpha and all of humanity would have no way of fighting back if Alus was gone.

Alice seemed to be thinking for a moment, but Alus didn't wait for her answer. "Just raise your rank. Have the people around you and the country

recognize your value.”

“But I can’t do that so fast...” Alice hesitated.

“I think you have the qualities for it.” Alus grinned, as he saw Loki put on an uninterested expression.

As for Alice, she’d stiffened from the unexpected praise, but Alus’ words had enough weight behind them to harden her resolve. She unconsciously clenched her fist.

“Besides, if something happens, the Governor-General and I can put in a good word for you, so don’t worry.”

“Really?!” Alice’s face shone. The backing of the current No. 1 and the Governor-General was more than she could ask for. The only other one that could compare was the ruler of the country. But she was fickle, and Alus personally didn’t like her, so he counted her out in his mind.

At any rate, he’d need to meet with the Governor-General, but he’d owe him a favor if Alus dealt with the top secret request. It shouldn’t be hard to get him to accept.

In fact, Alus didn’t think this would become a big deal, even if it leaked. While Alice had an affinity for attribute-less, it was only a little. And it wouldn’t be enough to use any big spells. At best, it could aid her light attribute. Of course, that blessing could be very powerful, depending on how it was used.

“So, what are you going to do? It might end up not making a big difference.”

“I’ll do it!” The answer was immediate. No one who saw Alice now would imagine she’d just revealed her dark past with a sorrowful face.

Alice felt saved just knowing that her characteristics weren’t all negative. No matter the reason, it could become a foundation for her future as a Magicmaster if she learned how to control it.

“Then it’s decided. Let’s begin with some study on attribute-less magic.”

But that was also the most problematic matter. After all, Alus was the only one who could teach her.

While it was called attribute-less, its use was rather restricted. Space

manipulation was primarily governed by attribute-less. The other attributes had the concept of manipulation as well, but that was indirect. Attribute-less, however, could directly affect space.

For example, if a fire-attribute Magicmaster were to create a fireball 20 meters ahead of them, they would of course need to set target coordinates. The magic would usually be expressed in such a manner that the construction of the spell itself was projected in a limited space. This would be done by setting the manifestation location through the magic formula.

The fire magic having an effect on the designated space was manipulating space. As for what would happen if this was used in parallel with attribute-less —it would allow the process of projection to be omitted.

Normal magic could affect space as well, but manipulation of space itself was the essence of attribute-less. Because of that, it could distort the laws of the world to a greater extent.

Just distorting space required vast energy, however, as the world constantly worked to right itself. Someday, it would be possible to use this effect for destruction.

Though such a thing would be impossible without ability on Alus' level and the massive power to manipulate the laws of the world. Alice should only be able to use more restricted means.

Moreover, Loki was joining in this study-like training at her own request. Alus assumed she was doing this out of obligation as his partner. Now that she knew he could use attribute-less magic, she must have wanted to learn more about it. He was impressed by her passion.

That being the case, Alus wanted to teach them effectively. Taking his secret mission into account, it would be a good idea to avoid spending too much time doing this. So he suddenly declared, "Alright, Alice—you're staying here for now."

"Excuse me?"

"Yes, indeed." Having heard Alice's past, Loki was surprisingly agreeable to this.

“Excuse me?!” Alice said again.

Of course, their goal wasn’t to devote themselves to debauched living during the holidays. Unfortunately, Alus didn’t have any carnal desires. In the battlefield, staying alive took priority. Instinctive urges in particular dulled logical thinking, so Alus suppressed any and all emotions. He secured the No. 1 spot thanks to his exceptional talent, on top of his thorough exclusion of anything unnecessary, so he could focus on polishing his skills and techniques.

“If I’m going to be teaching Loki at the same time, it’s more effective to do it together. Training and studying will last well into the night. It’d be a waste of time to go home every day.”

“I wish you’d said that part first...” Alice muttered with a beet-red face, after hearing Alus’ matter-of-fact explanation.

Seeing that, Alus thought she should’ve been able to guess it was for the sake of making training more effective... He felt like it was about time for Alice and Tesfia to learn the basics of how to put their minds to work.

“Then we’re on the same page. You’ll stay here starting tomorrow. Of course, I’ll only be teaching you the basics of attribute-less magic. You probably wouldn’t be able to understand anything beyond that yet. I’ve got my own research to focus on as well, so I’ll beat it into your head in the fastest way possible.”

“G-Got it,” Alice said awkwardly.

Alus was only planning on having her stay over for three days or so. He’d already taken prep time for his mission into account, and he was going to teach her all of the basics in the meantime.

Taking notes, of course, wouldn’t be allowed. Putting the information on paper carried the risk that it might get leaked, so all of it needed to be patiently conveyed verbally. They’d have to rely on mental notes.

That special training camp feel didn’t last long. Perhaps enjoying what she was studying, Alice spent the time training without any signs of the trauma she’d shown before.

However, things got loud every night as Alice and Loki bathed. While it was

called a laboratory, it was pretty much just a big room with equipment lying about. The bare necessities to live were in place, but as it had only been intended for one person to live there, the walls were thin.

Alus didn't really think the two of them had to bathe at the same time, but they seemed to have a different opinion. As saying anything about it would be boorish, he had no choice but to endure the noisy racket.

Today being the last day, the sounds were extra tumultuous. Then again, Alice was mostly the one who was frolicking loudly. Finally, it quieted down.

"Phew, that was a nice bath," Alice said, coming out and entering the dressing room with a bath towel around her head.

Her skin was smooth, and a little pinkened from the warm water.

Loki, who'd come out alongside her, used the towel hanging off her neck to dry her hair. Her translucent-looking silver hair glittered thanks to the water drops.



They were still out of sight to Alus. Only their voices reached him. In fact, this was the last day, and Alice had no need to stay here anymore. So she could have just gone home, but she'd chosen to get in the bath instead, which Alus didn't get. She was staying for dinner after this, too.

Finally, Alice bowed deeply at the door. Alus said, "Leave the rest to me, you just come back to training like usual tomorrow."

"Please do," Alice said.

Alus shrugged in response. "I got it, so just go home." In reality, the prospects of using Alice's characteristics were looking bright. Though research had stalled on both the light attribute and attribute-less magic, there were many uses for it, even if they were experimental ones. If anything, there were almost too many.

As the door closed—

"I think it's about time you talked to me, Sir Alus," Loki whispered behind him.

So she didn't forget.

Alus grimaced. The explanation, or rather justification for why he'd hidden his attribute from her had been stayed while Alice was here, but it seemed she still remembered. "Loki, like I said..."

"That's not what I mean. I'm talking about you thinking I'd let the secret slip," Loki interrupted him. Her voice wasn't angry, but more sad. "Do you really not trust me...?"

She looked like she would cry at any moment.

Alus poked her forehead, and headed for the table. "It's not that I don't trust you. It just isn't something you spread around. If I didn't think it would cause you trouble, I would have told you from the start."

"That's... but keeping it a secret was..." Loki didn't like it emotionally.

Alus didn't think it was a problem, so long as there were no drawbacks, however... "Don't you have a secret or two of your own, Loki? You're in no position to..."

"I do not."

“... None?”

“At all. I have nothing to hide from you, Sir Alus.”

It was an unexpected declaration. Seeing her confident attitude, Alus glanced away for a moment to think of what to say next. Not even the Fiends of the Outer World could make him explore a means to escape like this...

“... That aside... From now on, if I have something I need to say to you, I’ll tell you as my partner before anyone else, when the time is right.”

“Really?!”

“I don’t go back on my word.”

Loki flashed a relieved smile, as she’d just been prioritized before Tesfia or Alice.

Alus felt relief as well, but only for a moment. To Loki, this was just a warm-up. Her eyes looking up at him seemed to glow a little.

“From now on... meaning that you still have secrets.”

“...” She was too sharp. And Alus found himself keeping an *uhm* from escaping his lips.

He was thinking of the other kind of mana within him. However, that wasn’t something he could carelessly touch on.

Even he was just barely able to control it, and he had no means of researching it. So if he brought it up, he wouldn’t know what to say anyways. That power was also part of the reason for his passion in researching magic in general.

“Yeah, I do, but I can’t tell you.”

“I won’t let you get away.”

After that, Alus had business to tend to in the room; however, Loki stuck right next to him, bombarding him with questions for quite a while. During that time, in contrast with the lord of the laboratory’s sullen face, the girl following him around looked to be kind of enjoying herself.

In the end, he managed to avoid having to confess his secret.

But after lying down on her futon that night, Loki hugged her sheets and

violently kicked with her feet. *Now I've done it. I got too relaxed after becoming Sir Alus' partner. I already knew asking for more was too self-indulgent. I didn't even think about that... what a blunder!*

She reprimanded herself, but it only backfired on her. Remembering the barrage of questions, and following him around, only made her smile. It was like a dream.

"Haah..."

The owner of the room was likely still toiling away at his research on the other side of that thin wall. While Loki knew she wouldn't be able to see him, once she acknowledged his presence, she couldn't help but want to peer through the wall.

He was surely resting his chin in his hand at his desk right now. His presence was so calm, he must be very focused...

Almost an hour had passed since Loki had gone to bed. *Maybe I should bring him some tea.*

The moment she thought of it, she remembered that she should be restraining herself. *Then at least I can prepare the pot in advance.*

She shook her head resting on her pillow. *That would make it stronger than necessary, though. There has to be a way...*

The more she thought, the less she could gather her thoughts. Eventually her mind dimmed and her consciousness faded out. Only her quiet breathing filled the room.

Meanwhile, in the laboratory beyond the wall... *So she finally fell asleep*, Alus thought to himself. The rustling sound of the pillow and sheets died down after Loki stopped writhing around.

It had been a hard three days for her and Alice. She must be exhausted. Moreover, she'd always accompanied him, so she hadn't gotten enough sleep.

Guess I'll go take a preliminary look on my own.

Alus decided to let Loki get a good night's rest. He pulled out the robe he'd used during the extracurricular lesson.

After putting it on, he jumped out the window. He grabbed the edge of the roof and pulled himself up.

I'll wrap this up quickly.

Who knew what Loki would say if he wasn't back by the time she woke up? That said, Alus thought to himself, it wasn't too bad having to concern himself with timing or his location, as he gazed at a distant place from the roof.

At the frontlines were the military's defensive line and bases, and behind them, far, far away, was the Tower of Babel. In order of proximity to the Outer World was the area garrisoned with troops where the military headquarters was, followed by the industrial area, then the area where the Institute was.

Going inward from there was the urban area. There were a lot of commoners there, with the nobility and luxury residences in the area closest to Babel, the safest area.

Alus was headed to a stretch of land between the middle and upper class areas. That place was intended to serve as a buffer zone, with plenty of roads and communication lines running across it. People were rarely seen there at night. It was a bit of a no-man's land, despite the lack of Fiends.

If someone were to look at a map, they'd be able to see an invisible wall called position and status, keeping humanity from being truly free.

Nature was also being preserved there. It was a heavily forested area. In the past, the military established many secret facilities there. In other words, it was a place of dark history, filled with the ghosts of wicked research. Apart from the roads and other paths, civilians were barred entry.

Blending in with the darkness of night, Alus dashed across the ground without being noticed, moving like the wind.

Since he focused on being light of foot, he wasn't carrying anything big with him. He already had the map in his head. His preliminary look today was also intended to make sure the map matched the reality.

It wasn't like he didn't trust the Governor-General's information, but there was a lot that could be learned from seeing the site with his own two eyes. This was something he did for every request. In order to do a perfect job, he also felt

there was no one more suited than him to take a look.

Entering the middle-class district, there were still lights on here and there. People were awake even at this hour. Of course, as this was the most densely populated city in Alpha, that was only natural.

“I guess I’ll cut through here.” Alus immediately accelerated and ran across the rooftops of the houses and commercial buildings. Nobody around would be able to catch a glimpse of him.

The majority of citizens here were non-Magicmasters. Well, they could all use practical magic for everyday living purposes, but couldn’t be counted as combatants, as they lacked the technique and training to use their spells in combat.

Alus jumped across the rooftops without making a sound, before stopping and looking over the area. He could hear the hustle and bustle of the main street. The city spent a calm night, engulfed in the brilliant lights.

This was without a doubt a result of Alus’ efforts. He’d brought peace to the city by eliminating Fiends.

“This place sure is carefree,” Alus said, exasperated, but he also seemed happy at the same time.

He spotted people in restaurants finishing the day with some drinks and food. Even at this hour, there were drunkards and others strutting around the main street occupied with their own activities.

Most of them had probably never seen a Fiend. Of course, they were paying taxes to ensure they never had to face one.

To Alus, that was the ultimate form of living carefree days.

It was at that moment that Alus’ trained vision spotted something. It was pure coincidence that he happened to see what was going on in the dark alleyway off the main street.

There were five men, most likely not Magicmasters, dragging someone into the darkness. That was trouble no matter how you looked at it. Five men teaming up on a lone person, and Alus couldn’t help but feel they were

announcing their small-fry status by doing so.

It was impossible to tell if the person being dragged into the dark alley was a man or a woman, as the person was wearing a robe and hood. And as Alus was looking on from above, he couldn't see the person's facial features.

But he could see that the person was smaller than the men and had slender limbs. It was most likely a woman... taking a closer look, the men were giving her vulgar looks.

This was the kind of matter best left to the security forces, but it was night, and it was taking place in a dark alley. Moreover, stamping out this kind of crime was difficult.

However, he was currently on a secret mission. At worst, he'd just have to anonymously report it to the authorities on his way out. As Alus was about to leave—

"This should be good enough. I can't take it anymore, lady." The man closest to the woman threw away his bottle and moved his hands to his pants. Provoked by that, the other men let out crude laughs.

"Hey! You've already got a wife."

"Come on, that's no fun. Don't put a damper on things."

"You can't find beauties like this around here. Stop talking shit and wasting time!"

"You're right, my man! Anything that happens from now on is because of the booze. My memory's already gone, heh."

"Sheesh, what kind of woman keeps a man waiting... Now then, lady, you're the one who invited us, so get rid of that ugly thing." The drunkard reached out towards the woman to pull her robe off, with a vulgar smile.

"—!! Huh?"

But as the man took another step forward, he staggered. It wasn't the alcohol. He hadn't tripped over himself, but rather his sense of balance had suddenly been thrown off. Taking a second step, he stabilized himself and tried to approach the woman again.

His hand, though, couldn't grab her robe. Impatiently, feeling like something was wrong, he raised his hand to look at it.

A sudden ray of moonlight shone on the man's arm.

His hand was gone.

It was lying at his feet.

"AAAGGHHHH!! MY HAND!!" the man screamed, as blood spurted from his wrist and covered him.

Just before that, Alus had seen silver hair peeking out from the woman's hood. Feeling a headache coming on, he muttered, "That's going too far."

That extreme response would only bring about more trouble. The kind of resistance a normal woman would put up when in danger would have been enough. That way, while nobody might step up to be a hero, she would attract attention and the authorities would be alerted faster. But there was no way a normal citizen was capable of what just happened.

Either way, according to what the man said before, the woman had invited them to go with her, so why the sudden change? Alus didn't think he was obligated to intervene, but if it came up later he'd only have to track her down again. So he reconsidered, and decided to get involved before things got serious.

"What the hell just happened?"

"His fucking hand got cut off!"

Fear spread among the men. The woman held aloft a bloodstained blade that gleamed in the moonlight.

However, the drunk men only managed to let out frightened shouts as their knees grew weak, and they fell down backwards. Not a single one showed signs of running away. Their lower halves stained as they looked at the first man rolling around, holding his stump.

The robed woman readied her blade to attack the men again. However—

"—!!" Her eyes stopped on a silhouette that suddenly appeared. Having swiftly stepped in, Alus stopped her blade by grabbing her wrist.

“Just leave it at that.”

“...”

Without taking his eyes off her, Alus spoke to the men. “And you guys get out of here. Don’t forget your friend rolling around over there. If you’re fast, his hand can be reconnected.”

To think I’d have to step in to save these men, Alus thought, with a wry smile.

“O-Okay.” One of the men crawling about grabbed their friend’s fallen hand. Another two supported him from either side as they walked away. They forgot to thank him, but Alus didn’t particularly care.

“That wasn’t just a little squabble you had there. You guys should get lost before the security forces show up, too.”

Alus let the woman’s wrist go, and pushed her away. If she ran off now, he had no reason to chase her. However...

“Don’t... get i... in the way of... the test... run...” the robed woman muttered, as if groaning. Before he knew it, she was biting her lip so hard she broke the skin. She glared at him with bloodshot eyes.

And, as expected, another two silhouettes appeared behind Alus. Based on their physiques, it was a man and a woman. Their robes fluttered, as they’d jumped down from above.

“I’m saying I’ll overlook you, so why would you come out?” Alus muttered to himself, finally moving his head to look at them.

Like the woman in front of him, their eyes were bloodshot. Before long they pulled out a sword and a kunai respectively. They weren’t even trying to hide their bloodlust.

They’re serious. But I’d stand out if we do it here. Fuck, I really shouldn’t have gotten involved.

While Alus complained to himself in his mind, the three attacked him without warning.

However, he jumped up in the air before they could reach him. Landing on a nearby roof, he glared at them from above.

The three kicked back and forth off the walls, chasing him. They surrounded him on the roof.

“You’re Magicmasters, aren’t you?”

“...”

No answer. That was Alus’ conjecture based on the weapons they held... those were probably AWRs. Moreover, their response and encirclement of him weren’t bad. Their movements being better than most Magicmasters annoyed him.

“Eliminate... nuisance.” Their encirclement complete, the three figures closed in and attacked as one. Since Alus was on a reconnaissance mission, he was empty-handed, but he quickly formed mana blades with both hands and faced them.



They're pretty fast, but...

Alus dodged the attacks, blocking the sword with his mana blade and returning the favor with a kick. The enemies temporarily stopped their attacks at that skillful display, and he took the opportunity to run.

He jumped across the roof and ran through the night.

He didn't even need to look to see that they were hot on his heels; he could perceive them with his senses. The amount of mana they enchanted their AWRs with was pretty good. That alone wasn't enough to measure their abilities, but from their brief encounter he rated them at around Triple Digit level.

Eventually, he landed in an abandoned part of town. He didn't think he'd been running away so much as given the enemy the option not to chase him.

Alus had been observing their moves, and it seemed this trio was rather aggressive.

This appeared to be a rest stop, with benches and water fountains and several lights around to repel the darkness. There was still a slight risk of being seen, but there'd be no problems slinging magic about.

Following after him, the three robed figures landed beside one another. None of them were out of breath.

"I don't have time for this, you know. Haven't you heard the persistent ones die young?"

Four kunai came flying at him for an answer, and the man jumped high into the air, swinging his sword down. The woman who threw the kunai charged at Alus as well.

It appeared to be a straightforward attack, but the main attack would come from behind by the woman whose AWR glowed with the light of the magic formula. This maneuver probably wasn't arranged ahead of time. It took a lot of training to wordlessly carry out a move like this.

Alus didn't even look at the kunai, focusing purely on the two women coming at him.

He pulled back an arm, then unleashed a palm thrust into nowhere.

An invisible wall deflected the kunai and blew away the approaching woman and the one behind. Staggered from the shockwave, the caster's magic formula was canceled and the AWR's glow disappeared.

Alus then took a half-step to the side and dodged the follow-up attack from the man. With his full weight behind the sword, the man's attack only ended up destroying the ground and sending debris flying. While there was power behind his attack, that kind of simple swordsmanship was easy to dodge.

Not missing the opening, Alus kicked the man in his flank.

Landing on his ribs, the kick sent the man flying like he weighed nothing, and he crashed into one of the street lights.

He was probably too injured to move properly anymore.

Even unarmed, the three of them weren't hard for Alus to deal with. He'd rated their control of mana at the Triple Digit level, but their combat skills were nothing to write home about. Their physical capabilities were strangely good, but the skill level of their attacks was amateurish at best.

Another way to put it was that they were incredibly easy to read and lacked experience fighting people. The power and speed were fine, but there was no variation in their attacks.

"Nuisance, nuisance, nuuuuisaaance..." one of the two women blown away mumbled as she got up.

Suddenly, a sharp whistle rang out from afar. The security forces were coming. Apparently a curious onlooker must have alerted the authorities. Based on where the whistle noise came from, they probably wouldn't show up right away.

The sound had more of an effect on the three robed figures than on Alus. They all raised their heads in unison.

"Return, return, return." The group turned to look somewhere completely different, and their bloodlust disappeared as if they'd forgotten all about Alus. And they simply repeated that one word like a broken record. Their mouths opened wide, their lips moving while their eyes and expressions remained static.

The next moment, they all split up and ran in different directions.

“Now then, what do I do?”

There wasn’t enough time to catch them all. At best, Alus could nab two of them. Moreover, the effort he’d need to put in didn’t match what he’d get back. On top of that, he’d already lost more time than expected, so he decided to forge ahead on his own mission.

If he came in contact with the security forces, he’d only end up wasting a bunch of time confirming his identity as he wasn’t carrying his AWR or license. Just thinking about it brought on the start of a headache.

* * *

By the time Alus returned, the sun was just about to rise. He came in as he went out, through the window.

“Where did you go?”

And the moment he entered, he was stared down by a small silhouette with crossed arms. Loki frowned as she closely questioned him.

“I was preparing for the mission. I didn’t want to wake you up, and I was fine on my own.”

“That just means that you don’t need me.”

“I didn’t say that. I really only went to take a look. I couldn’t bring myself to take you with me when you were so tired,” Alus said, haphazardly coming up with excuses.

“Haah...”

Alus wondered if that sigh was because she accepted it.

“I understand.”

She did end up relenting. But when she pointed him to the table and poured some coffee from the pot, Alus scratched his cheek, realizing this would take a while.

“So what exactly did you do?”

“...”

She was like a nagging sister-in-law or butler, but saying that would only pour fuel on the fire. While she was good at hiding her feelings, this partner of his knew how to talk.

“I was confirming the documents I got from the Governor-General. Like I said, seeing it yourself is more reliable.”

“I’ve never done missions like these, so I wouldn’t really know.”

That made sense. Alus had practically been the only one working behind the scenes, even after Loki became his partner. “Well, this is completely different from eliminating Fiends. That’s why... it might be better if you don’t get involved,” he finished earnestly.

“That won’t do! Now that I’m your partner, I...”

He immediately cut her objection off. “Loki, you’re my partner when it comes to Fiends. This is work specifically for me. You have no obligation to tag along.”

Moreover—the target was a human being. This was fundamentally different from dealing with Fiends who weren’t alive in the usual sense.

But Loki immediately opposed this idea. “No! Sir Alus’ sins are my sins. Can’t we both carry them? ... Besides, I have plenty of... o-obligation...”

Her words tapered off at the end, and he couldn’t hear them, but Alus decided it was best not to ask her to repeat herself.

Then there was that look in her eyes. During their mock battle for her position as his partner she’d shown the same look. It revealed her unshakable will, saying that she wouldn’t look away or yield.

“I... I didn’t say I wouldn’t take you with me.” That was also why he’d let Loki listen in on the mission call before. “I’ll take you with me, but I’ll be the only one carrying the sin. You just need to be backup.”

“I have resolved myself for that!” Loki slammed the table and stood up. She drew her hands against her chest, and that insistent stare made it clear she understood the sin she’d have to carry, and that she had the strength to do so.

Alus dropped his shoulders. She wouldn’t pull back no matter what. “Okay, I got it.” He raised his hands in surrender.

He knew he'd been contradicting himself. Just taking her with him to the mission alone meant she could wind up becoming an accomplice to murder. And if she wasn't prepared for that, he might even be putting himself in danger. He'd had a feeling this was going to happen when he took her on as his partner.

But still, he was apprehensive. Alus believed that killing people was more difficult than Fiends, in a sense. It required something other than mere combat power. The ability to remain sane... one's claim of resolve could just be a bluff of the inexperienced.

Killing someone was a double-edged sword. The blade that ended a life also came down on your own heart. There was a chance that the mental trauma would prevent you from using magic again.

One might be fine with enough resolve, but Alus asked himself if it was worth the risk of losing precious combat capabilities. Of course, that was an excuse; it could be that, deep down, he just didn't want Loki's hands to get dirty. But he wasn't going to express his feelings out loud.

Either way, it was up to Loki to decide and not him. He knew that well enough.

"If you're going to go that far, then let me share the information I have. Then again, it's pretty much what the material we've got says. However, there'd be something very off if his research has shown results. If he's continuing that insane Element Factor Separation Project of his, he can't do it without human experiments. Meaning, he'll need large-scale equipment and funds. In other words, he'll have a sponsor."

"We don't have any information on that."

"The Governor-General just might not have gotten wind of it. Now then, I wonder what we'll catch."

These kinds of missions weren't just about eliminating a target. After getting a lead, they'd need to rope in their supporters and take them all down in one fell swoop. The four days he'd been given was likely meant for him to look into those matters.

Moreover, the target could under no circumstances be allowed to escape.

Careless probing could result in their cover being blown, throwing their chance away.

“We can only hope the Governor-General doesn’t mess up.”

“That’s true...” Loki looked like she wanted to say something, and mumbled, “Uhm... what about Ms. Alice?”

This mission was, by coincidence, connected to Alice. After all, the target was the man who left a literal large scar on her in the past.

Loki felt that Alus had taken that into account, after what he heard from Alice. But unless she did something, he probably wouldn’t say anything.

Besides, she’d spent a few days with Alice during their special training camp. The distance between them had closed while she was unaware of it. And her words had a tone of appeal and sorrow to them.

“We probably shouldn’t tell her anything. It’s not like she could do anything even if we did. We can’t take her with us, after all.”

“Yes... of course,” Loki muttered, and looked down at the floor. In the past she’d proclaimed her dislike of the two girls, but having trained together and learned of Alice’s past, something had changed in her. Alice seemed like she’d shaken off her past, but at the same time there were things she hadn’t been able to put behind her, and Loki hoped that an opportunity of some sort would help with that.

Alus didn’t think there was anything wrong with that. But if Alice were to face the man who’d ruined her life, she’d surely shudder in anguish. There was also the possibility that getting revenge wouldn’t remove her pain, instead bringing in a darkness that would fill her heart. And then what would happen?

It was often said that a Magicmaster needed to remain calm at all times. That was because they needed enough self-control to keep their emotions in check in order to use magic. Alice was still immature and at risk of losing that control. The trauma symptoms she’d shown the other day ran through Alus’ mind.

And even if Alice managed to overcome her trauma through revenge, that went against the way of Magicmasters. The power of magic was a weapon of possibility created to drive away the threat of Fiends. It certainly didn’t evolve

to lay down a bloody path.

Alus didn't even want to think if she seriously wanted that. At any rate, Alice had to decide on the path she took on her own, or it would be pointless. If she had to borrow someone else's help to get revenge, she'd be better off not doing anything.

That's when Alus suddenly recalled the smile Alice had often shown during the time they'd spent together.

That's right—in the end, he only had to do it himself. If Alice were to find out that the cause for her trauma was already gone... time would surely heal her wounds.

Alus decided to put his faith in that. Alice was no longer alone. By working on her studies and spending her days with friends, what she was missing should fill in, in time. Eventually, the day would come when she was whole again, like a scab on a wound disappearing, leaving behind just a small scar.

Most of all, he felt she was happy with her situation right now. That was why, for the time being—"This discussion is over."

"Yes."

"I'll be resting until noon, so sorry, but can you look after Alice's training if she shows up?"

"Of course." Loki had a relieved expression as she agreed. She'd understood that the normally curt owner of the room was caring for Alice.

As Alus opened the door to his room, he found his bed made.

He was impressed by his considerate partner and headed to bed, feeling unusually mentally exhausted. Going out of his way to thank her felt like it would be inconsiderate. It was a foolish act that wasn't as much considerate as it would make her worry more.

The light coming from the main room didn't stop him from getting his rest. Just a few minutes ago he'd been perfectly clear. But he was already prepared to rest before he saw his bed and laid down in it. This wasn't the Outer World, nor was it a military barracks. That knowledge eased his sharp senses, letting

him unwind.

He knew what would happen next. His consciousness was sinking deep under the ocean as he fell asleep surrounded by the dark colors of the sea. Eventually, his body would completely relax as he entered a state of deep sleep.

Suddenly, he realized that he'd forgotten to tell Loki about the strange group he'd encountered, but, oh well—that could wait for another time, he thought, and closed his eyes.

His mental exhaustion reached its peak. Alus had no means of resisting the overwhelming sleepiness that would wash away his exhaustion.

This all started from the day he entered the Institute... none of it was anything special compared to his battles in the Outer World. But lately he'd ended up talking a lot, and his mental fatigue had gotten bad. Even then, Alus fell asleep just a few seconds after lying down.

The bedroom fell silent, to the point that you could hear a pin drop. Being able to rest from the bottom of his heart like this was likely thanks to the diligent Loki creating the space for him.

* * *

A few hours later, the girl with honey-colored hair showed up at the laboratory.

Alice opened the unlocked door in a familiar fashion, and greeted Loki who was working in the kitchen.

"Hello, Ms. Alice... I'll put on tea right now," Loki answered back in a restrained volume. But her next words explaining how Sir Alus was asleep didn't reach Alice, having been drowned out in the sounds of her preparing the tea set.

Alice stepped into the laboratory. She scanned around for Alus with a confused look. Before long, she put her finger on her chin; and as she came to a realization a mischievous smile appeared on her face.

Like she was playing hide-and-seek with children, she made her way over to Alus' bedroom.

That said, it was only a simple partitioning with a door, just like Loki's room.

She slowly approached the door, and used her finger on the slightly ajar door to open it up, just enough so she could peek in.

Inside she saw just a bed—a lonely sight.

She found the boy lying on top of the bed. Slipping inside the room, Alice approached the bed.

Conforming to his breathing, her breathing also turned quiet and calm.

Finally, she planted her elbows on the edge of the bed, her knees on the floor, and she gently gazed at Alus.

He had such an innocent look, as if that usual stern expression was just a dream. Alice also felt his eyelashes were long for a boy.

He really was like a child, Alice giggled to herself. Considering he hadn't noticed her at all, he must have been in a deep sleep.

Her face softened as she looked at the sleeping Alus. She didn't know why, but she felt like he was extremely mentally fatigued for reasons unrelated to magic.

"Thank you." Gratitude naturally flowed from her mouth. Just as she reached her finger to move the bangs covering his eyes away...

"... Ms. Alice, please be quiet," a low voice said right next to her. It was so soft that Alice could barely pick up on it. Surprised and embarrassed, she pulled her hand back. And with a smile, she looked over.

"... Yes. You're right."

There she saw Loki standing with a lone finger in front of her smiling mouth. Realizing the meaning behind that expression she never showed, Alice tried her best not to make a sound as she rose.

"I bet he was very tired. He didn't wake up, even though I was nearby. As far as I know, he's never slept this soundly since I began living here..." It truly was distressing, Loki continued, speaking in a quiet voice with a wry smile.

That was inevitable, however. The cruel battlefield he'd been used to before

was a place where he couldn't rest his mind for even a moment. Loki didn't even want to imagine how long it had been since he'd had a truly deep sleep.

She continued, "That's why... I want to let him rest for now." *That's right, for now...* she repeated in her mind, looking away with a relieved smile.

Thus the two girls left without making a sound. Finally, Alice turned her hazel-colored eyes towards Alus.

"Good night, Al."

With that, the girls left the bedroom and closed the door. Slowly, but surely... making sure the door made as little noise as possible, the two being of one mind in this.

The door now fully closed, they headed toward the center of the laboratory. Loki stopped, and turned back to Alice with an undaunted expression. "As for today's training, I will be serving as Sir Alus' replacement." Her behavior was clearly based on Alus' atmosphere.

Unfortunately, that only ended up looking cute to Alice, who was taller than Loki. Her attempts at imitating her partner ended up leading nowhere. She'd obviously tried to mimic the atmosphere for a military instructor with the way she held her hands behind her back, but Alice didn't think she had any dignity.

She pulled herself together at being faced with this adorable display.

"Yes, understood. I look forward to it... Loki dear."

Afterword

Thank you very much for picking up this book. Long time no see, or maybe not. I think this volume came out pretty soon after the first volume.

Caution! There are spoilers ahead, so I recommend that those of you who read the Afterword first finish the volume before reading this.

With that warning, I'd like to immediately start. As those of you who have been reading this story since the web novel days realized, this volume features a new character, Melissa, as well as new developments that were not present in the web novel. I've stuffed in a lot to look forward to for the next volume this time around.

Finally, I'd like to borrow this space to give thanks to the people who assisted in the creation of this book: my assigned editor T-sama, everyone at the editorial department, and everyone else involved in this volume. I thank you from the bottom of my heart.

And thank you very much for your wonderful illustrations, Miyuki Ruria-sama. I always look forward to seeing them.

I'd love to have a long, passionate talk about the design for Felinella... unfortunately, I have no space left. Which means that I might have no choice but to do so throughout the book.

I will do my best to make all of the characters more fascinating, and the developments more heated, so please do give me your support.

Also, there is a manga version of *The Greatest Magicmaster's Retirement Plan* coming out, so please look forward to that as well!

—Izushiro

Table of Contents

Cover

Color Illustrations

Fifth Chapter: The Storm Begins

Sixth Chapter: Outer World

Seventh Chapter: Converging Turbulence

Eighth Chapter: Broken Memories

Ninth Chapter: Fomenting Darkness

Afterword

About J-Novel Club

Copyright



Sign up for our mailing list at J-Novel Club to hear about new releases!

Newsletter

And you can read the latest chapters (like Vol. 3 of this series!) by becoming a J-Novel Club Member-

J-Novel Club Membership

Copyright

The Greatest Magicmaster’s Retirement Plan: Volume 2

by Izushiro

Translated by Warnis

Edited by Jan Suzukawa

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author’s imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental

Copyright © 2017 Izushiro

Illustrations Copyright © 2017 Ruria Miyuki

Cover illustration by Ruria Miyuki

All rights reserved

Original Japanese edition published in 2017 by Hobby Japan

This English edition is published by arrangement with Hobby Japan, Tokyo

English translation © 2019 J-Novel Club LLC

All rights reserved. In accordance with the U.S. Copyright Act of 1976, the scanning, uploading, and electronic sharing of any part of this book without the permission of the publisher is unlawful piracy and theft of the author’s intellectual property

J-Novel Club LLC

j-novel.club

The publisher is not responsible for websites (or their content) that are not owned by the publisher

Ebook edition 1.0: August 2019