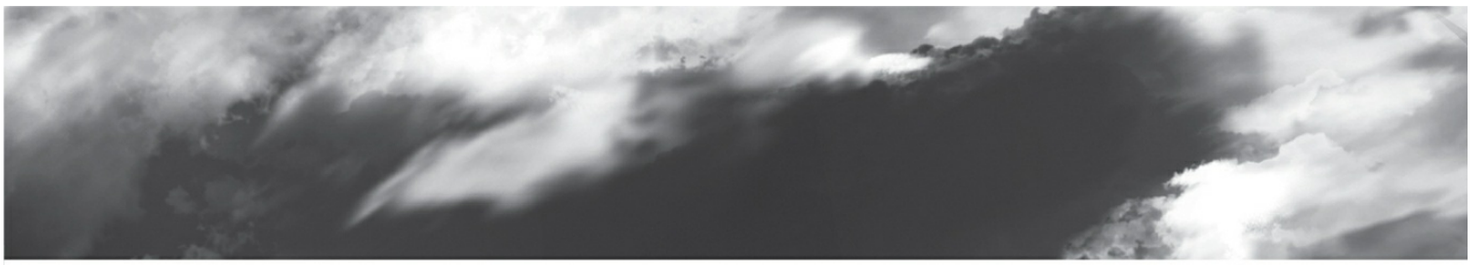

IZUSHIRO
ILLUST RURIA MIYUKI
THE GREATEST MAGICMASTER'S RETIREMENT PLAN
3


Devour,
Gluttonous
Predator
Gra Eater.
The black mana immediately headed towards the crowd of Dolls.


Tesfia Fable
An ice magic user of noble birth, as well as a sore loser. She works to support herself.
Melissa
Alice's old friend, and a beauty with a dark side. She suddenly appears in front of Alice, but...?
Alus Reigin
He stands at the top of all Magicmasters as the current ranked No. 1. A hardcore researcher, and ignorant to the ways of the world.
Felinella Socalent
A second-year student in the Institute, as well as a talented young woman serving as the girls' dormitory supervisor. She has feelings for Alus.
Loki Leevahl
A silver-haired spotter Magicmaster who adores Alus. She is his partner on missions.
Alice Tilake
A calm and maternal Magicmaster. In the past, she was the subject of inhuman experiments.


“If you can’t do it, I will.”
Her AWR was firmly grasped in her hands.


THE GREATEST
MAGICMASTER'S
RETIREMENT
PLAN



The Greatest Magicmaster's Retirement Plan

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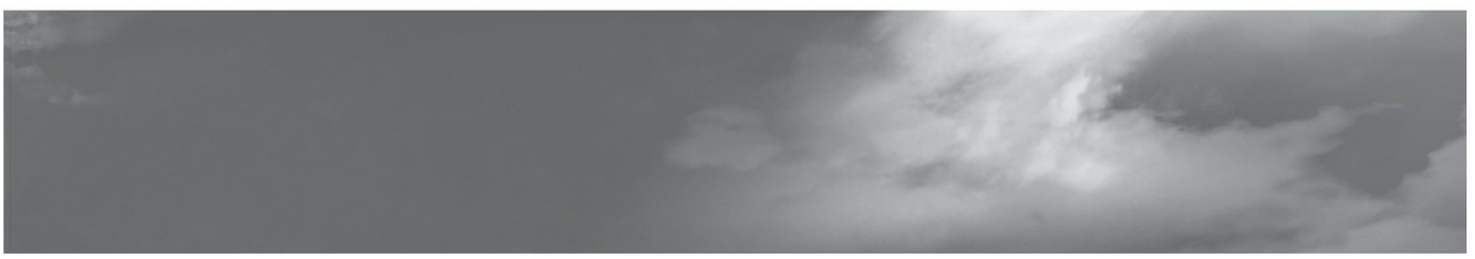
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Tenth Chapter

A Strange Attack

With the extracurricular lesson behind them, the season was already starting to change.

That said—there wasn't much that changed in the Institute. There was nothing to compare to the heat waves of the Inner World summers.

Babel's interior, inside the barrier, was filled with human ingenuity, and weather manipulation and temperature adjustment were well within the realm of possibility. The temperatures only varied by five to ten degrees during the year, allowing for comfortable living, and all the weather patterns in the false skies were just artificial images.

Even the clear skies were just vividly colored.

Then again, it wasn't overly unnatural. Those who lived before the disaster had almost forgotten what the real skies looked like, and had gotten used to their artificial environment. And those who only knew of the inside, saw the fake as real.

Ironically enough, this technology provided humanity with the means to sustain itself semi-permanently—if not for the external threats.

At the same time, it meant that interest in the Outer World was extremely weak. If the threat of Fiends was eliminated, this small world might be enough to satisfy the people forever.

Summer vacation had just begun for the Second Magical Institute that Alus attended.

Though it was vacation time, the students looking to become Magicmasters were exceedingly ambitious when it came to improving themselves. And the students were everywhere, still wearing their uniforms and studying on their own as if the meaning of vacation was lost on them. They were passionately asking teachers questions, or taking part in mock battles at the training grounds, pretty much the same way they always did.

Of course, there were also many students who visited home during this time. Speaking of passion, the noisy red-headed girl who was always dropping by

Alus' laboratory, Tesfia Fable, was also visiting her parents at home.

Perhaps that's why Alus felt a sense of freedom like he'd felt when he stepped down from the frontlines, even if it would only last one week.

Incidentally, there was yet another girl as passionate as Tesfia. Though as this one wasn't as noisy, she was much easier to deal with. But in the end, Alice was equally a handful.

While Alus had found these two to be a pain, lately he'd started warming up to teaching them techniques and knowledge.

*

Today the laboratory was filled with silence, perfect for training. It was a mixture of Tesfia's absence and consideration being shown for Alus, who was still in bed.

He had come back from a preliminary look for an assigned mission, and finally gotten some sound sleep.

In the quiet laboratory, Alice's training began with the usual: pinning down her mana. The stick she used for training repelled mana, making it perfect for practicing mana control. By now, she'd gotten used to the weird-looking stick, and she poured her entire focus into improving her technique.

Unfortunately, like Tesfia, Alice also struggled with this practice.

It wasn't like she wasn't improving at all; but she couldn't feel herself getting better at the same pace as she had at first. So, she felt she was progressing slowly.

Unable to watch anymore, Loki curiously asked, "Ms. Alice, can I borrow that for a moment? ... To be honest, the military tends to not put much emphasis on mana control. And of course, they don't have anything like that stick for training."

Alice was surprised. "Really? I thought all Magicmasters in the military could do it easily."

"That's true... While there's a bit of difference in skill, it is something they are all capable of. If not, they wouldn't be able to survive in the Outer World. That's

why there are many Magicmasters practicing it on an individual basis. That's the level of skill the two of you are trying to achieve."

It seemed even active Magicmasters couldn't do without mana control. Having reaffirmed that, Alice scratched her cheek and handed the training stick over to Loki. Apparently this wasn't something one picked up in a day's work. She was ashamed she'd thought so highly of herself, believing she would be able to do it quickly.

"I can indeed feel some repulsion just from holding it," Loki said. "Having something like this would help in becoming aware of mana, and giving direction to it."

The reason was because a minuscule amount of mana leaked from the hand. Moreover, once someone could give direction to mana they could intentionally stop that mana from leaking out. Since merely holding the stick would exert a force, mana unconsciously converged.

"Yes, I can kind of tell how my mana flows. But it's only a feeling."

"I don't think there's any problem with that. The two of you started your mana control practice by pinching each other. That's because—method aside—a sense of pain or an emotional condition plays a big part in mana control."

Next, Loki focused her mind on the stick and released her mana. The mana slowly stretched from her hand to the tip of the stick, with a destination in mind. "This certainly is..." Loki furrowed her brow.

Slowly but surely, Loki's mana made its way to the tip of the stick, unlike Alice's mana. At the same time, the mana undulated, going between being pinned down and repulsing, gradually covering the stick.

"That's Loki dear for you!" Alice let out a small cheer of admiration.

With a soft sigh, Loki quietly undid the mana. As her focus disappeared, the mana still on the stick's surface dispersed. "I'm sure Sir Alus would be able to enchant it much more efficiently..."

"Ah, yes... he showed us once before."

Loki had boasted proudly about Alus as if she were talking about herself,

while Alice nodded along. In Loki's mind, Alus was the best, and the target of her admiration and respect.

"A-Anyways, I get it now. Ms. Alice..."

"Yes!"

Loki proceeded to give Alice some instruction. This time, Alice didn't treat her as 'Loki dear,' but instead listened to her advice in earnest as her teacher. Then again, she could feel a smile coming on as Loki was being so cordial.

"There's a proper balance to pinning down mana. Why not get a grasp for that first? But this is just my idea. My suggestion isn't as appropriate as Sir Alus' would be."

"You still make sure to give Al respect, huh... but yes, in the end, my mana always runs out of strength and gets repelled. Even when I'm giving it my everything."

"That's not bad either, but the point of this training is to control mana. In other words, to learn how to efficiently handle your mana. So you have nothing to lose from grasping the directionality needed to pin down the mana."

As Alice received the stick back from Loki with a smile, she immediately tried a different approach. "You're right! But I have to use practically all of my strength to hold it down."

"That's because you're still inexperienced," Loki said, with a small smile.

Alice happily responded with, "That's true."

A somewhat frank mood filled the laboratory. Even in that atmosphere, Loki didn't forget to watch the time. It was almost time to wake Alus up.

She wasn't looking forward to it because she was uncomfortable being with Alice. If anything, she felt it would be even more enjoyable if Alus were here too.

However, there was no need for that—

"That was a terrible way to wake up." Alus peeked out from the now-open door, brushing his hair aside. His mood could easily be discerned from the bags under his eyes.

It took Loki a moment to realize what Alus meant by terrible.

“Sheesh, what kind of idiots are these?” Alus tiredly leaned over at the window and stared outside.

Behind him, Loki accurately reported the results of her detection magic. “There are five intruders.”

“Huh? Intruders?!” Alice reacted to the word. She was confused and didn’t understand what they meant right away, repeating the word to herself.

So these must be humans...?

Currently, Fiends were humanity’s common enemy. And in that situation, there was nothing as pointless as fighting amongst themselves.

The military always manipulated information to keep the existence of atrocious criminals hidden. By directing all hatred towards the Fiends, humanity’s solidarity was strengthened. Everything the military did was for that cause.

Moreover, from a practical standpoint, there were major issues with deploying competent Magicmasters inside the nations as well.

In that moment, several explosions rang out. The building rumbled.

“Did they think the Institute would be short of hands because it was vacation time? Talk about a stupid bunch.”

While it may have been a while ago, the principal was once a Single Digit Magicmaster who alone could easily wipe out a mere five assailants. There were also several other formerly high-ranking Magicmasters on the school faculty.

However, the intruders’ goal was unclear. Were they after someone? Looking to destroy the facility? Or was it something else?

A few seconds later, a shrill alarm rang out alerting the Institute that intruders had entered the grounds. The announcement told the students not to leave their dorms until the threat was eliminated.

But Alus felt it was issued a bit too late. No, perhaps the intruders’ skills should be lauded for that.

He saw a single intruder approach the research building at a breakneck speed. The worn-out black robe concealed his or her physique. With a hood covering the head, the intruder looked rough despite the brilliant display.

As the silhouette reached the building's entrance, a teacher blocked his path as if he'd been waiting for it.

"Hm?" Alus raised his eyebrows as the teacher politely gave the intruder a verbal warning, holding onto his AWR, but the way he was trying to pacify the assailant was too lax. "Idiot! You can talk after you've disabled him." He was disappointed by how poorly the teacher was handling the situation.

"The intruders are splitting up and heading to the boys' dorm, the girls' dorm and the main building," Loki told him. "Another is moving around the other side of that building. It may be a pincer attack. What do we do?"

"Hmm, well, let's leave that to Sisty. The students have been told not to go outside anyways. Besides..."

Before Alus could finish his sentence, the intruder facing off against the teacher below pulled a short sword AWR out from beneath his robe, and unleashed a spell without hesitation.

The ball of light instantly created from the weapon's blade flew straight toward the teacher.

"... Oh?"

His initiative taken away, the teacher responded, after a slight delay, by raising the ground to create a barrier. The protective wall of dirt—most likely created by earth magic—rose up just in time. When the ball of light touched the wall, it swelled up in size and burst.

A considerable amount of mana must have burst, as the earth wall was blown away by the blast. The teacher was slammed into the research building by the impact, and fell motionless.

That was the light attribute!

Having thrown the teacher aside, the intruder felt Alus' sharp glance and looked up.

They exchanged glances. The intruder then marched inside the building.

“What a pain... he’s coming. Loki, you deal with it... but incapacitate him without killing him. There’s something on my mind.”

“I understand.”

Alus gave the instruction while leaning against the wall. He was also using this opportunity to confirm Loki’s resolve for the upcoming mission.

Perhaps Loki sensed this, as she immediately got ready to fight. That said, she still looked the same as always, remaining calm and dignified, like a longtime maid preparing to welcome a guest.

Suddenly, a worry popped up in Alus’ head. The intruder’s outfit reminded him of the bunch he’d encountered in the middle-class neighborhood last night. Then again, he could just confirm that later.

“As for Alice... you can come over here for now.” Alus invited Alice to stand by him, and she obediently came, her gaze on the door all the while. She looked worried that the intruder would come bursting through the door at any moment.

“Will Loki be okay on her own? S-Should I help too?”

“No, you just watch. This is something she has to do.”

Alice found that questionable, but chose not to say anything about it.

And since Alus needed to keep the circumstances hidden due to the secret mission, he’d explained himself in a roundabout fashion.

Alice, though, seemed to be feeling some fear. She anxiously nodded.

“Well, if something happens I’ll intervene, so don’t worry. I don’t want him smashing through the door, so lure him in and intercept him.” The last part was addressed to Loki.

“Yes...”

Alus had the door unlocked, to let the intruder enter. Loki then pulled out her knife AWRs.

And while it was a trivial thing—this also meant they wouldn’t go against the

order given in the alarm. They wouldn't be going outside.

"He's coming!"

As Alice gulped, Alus and Loki spotted the intruder.

The intruder didn't seem fazed by the unlocked door, as he or she sent a killing intent towards Alus.

As if to intercept it, Loki stepped in between the intruder and Alus. "You need to know your place if you're trying to go after Sir Alus."

"Ki... kill, Rank 1... found you... sei..ze y-your body... too?"

The intruder tilted his head and inhumanely and creepily spoke these grating words. The next moment, he held his short sword and moved on Loki as if she was in the way. His movements were strangely mechanic and difficult to fathom.

"I see, you're crazy. That explains it." Loki fought back with four knives between her fingers in each hand. She used a method she hadn't shown during practice because this was a real fight. The knives were enchanted with electricity that would cause great damage if they made contact.

However, the intruder showed no hesitation and swung down his short sword.

A loud metallic *clash* rang out between Loki and the intruder. Electricity surged from the knives.

The electricity ran through the intruder's short sword and into his body. "—!!" But there was no pain in the intruder's expression.

Loki wondered if he even had any nerves from how little his expression changed, as he put even more strength behind his blade.

Eventually, Loki was slowly pushed back by that insane force. "Urgh..."

Surprisingly, the intruder broke the stalemate first. He let up on his pushing just a little, which ever so slightly threw Loki off balance as she was desperately pushing back.

The blades separated. The intruder's blade swept back towards Loki.

Seeing that, Loki quickly pulled her upper body back. Of course, it wasn't just to avoid the attack, but to counterattack. Something like this wasn't enough to create a big opening.

Loki scraped her leg across the floor. Spinning around, she used her momentum to unleash a roundhouse kick that struck the intruder in the upper arm that held the short sword.

"—!"

While Loki's body was small, that was taken into account as she kicked. With the power behind the kick, it wouldn't be unexpected if it broke the arm.



Despite that, the intruder didn't let go of the short sword. His arm and Loki's leg clashed, resulting in a back and forth pushing.

The intruder's expression under the hood remained unchanged, as he finally repelled Loki's kick with just his arm.

What ridiculous strength...

At a closer look, the intruder's physique was surprisingly slim. Just where did that slender arm hide such power...?

Loki jumped high up to dodge an attack, and threw her knives from midair. Her aim was true. The knives ran through the intruder's feet, pinning them to the floor.

After Loki landed and backflipped, she couldn't believe her eyes.

The knives had gone straight through the intruder's feet and blood stained the floor red, but the intruder showed no signs of anguish. If anything, he forcibly pulled his feet out, worsening the injury when he could have just pulled the knives out with his hands.

That abnormal behavior didn't just send chills down Loki's spine, but Alice's as well.

Then again—that wouldn't stop Loki. Before the knives were completely out, she jumped up again.

Seeing Loki's movements, the intruder brandished his short sword and constructed his spell like he had against the teacher.

Loki lightly shook her knife. A thin lightning bolt ran from the tip of the knife toward the ones in the intruder's feet.

The bolt ran through the intruder's entire body, the shock cancelling out his spell.

Picking up even more speed, Loki drove her knee into the intruder's chest. She could feel the bones crack. After confirming this, she quickly backed off to observe the results.

The force caused the knives to fall out of the intruder's feet. He fell backwards

towards the wall, next to the door. The air exited his lungs with a sound, and he collapsed on the floor, falling silent.

Loki watched suspiciously, waiting. She'd felt her attack work but it also felt strange, like she was dealing with someone who was already dead. Then again, after falling to the floor, the intruder remained unmoving.

Seeing that, Loki understood the fight was over. She glanced at Alus.

But in that instant—

"—kill, die," the intruder said in a hoarse voice. He pushed his hand against the floor and unleashed a killing intent once again.

At the same time, the magic formula on his short sword that he'd held onto till the end activated instantly.

"—!!" Shocked, Loki turned around, but what she saw was the intruder's hand crushed, and the short sword dropped to the floor.

That wasn't because of something emotional like losing the will to fight, but a physical reason. His fingers were bent in unnatural directions, the bones broken. The hand couldn't hold anything anymore. Even the palm was disfigured. It looked like something bizarre was hanging off the intruder's wrist.

Without even sparing a look at his ruined hand, the intruder tried to pick up the short sword with his other hand.

But once his fingers moved, his body was pushed into the floor as if he was being crushed. The floor creaked, and an ominous sound came from his bones as well. Pressure was unnaturally being applied to select parts of his body.

As the intruder reached his limits, he spat up blood. His eyes rolled back, and he lost consciousness.

"Don't let your guard down," a cold voice said.

Alus had manipulated space to literally apply pressure to the intruder. This was a power that even controlled gravity. It was an application of the Gravity Cliff spell, but as this was an inferior version, it didn't even have a name. That said, considering the complexity, it definitely belonged among the advanced spells.

“Forgive me,” Loki muttered, her eyes cast down. She reflected deeply on her blunder.

“Well, I still give you a passing grade.” As Alus made his way towards the intruder, he put his hand on Loki’s head as he passed her by.

Ultimately, he’d ended up finishing off the intruder. While he’d only applied pressure on parts of his body, it wouldn’t be strange if he’d broken some important bones. He’d left the arms and legs alone, but the joints had certainly been affected by the pressure. Even if he was lucky enough to escape with his life, he’d likely never walk again.

Either way—this was something Alice shouldn’t see.

But due to her military experience, Loki was quick to change gears. She knew what needed to be prioritized. “Sir Alus, this thing acted very strangely. Reaction to pain, and its reflexes seemed to be non-existent. Perhaps its nerves aren’t functioning properly.”

“Probably. Extreme excitement can let you ignore pain, but it wouldn’t stop your reflexes. His sense of pain... or rather his reaction to external stimulus in general seems to be mostly shut off. This is no normal human.”

Alus carelessly stepped next to the intruder and pulled off the robe. Hidden beneath—as he’d suspected—was your everyday slender woman in her early twenties.

Her cheeks were scrawny and her hair was tangled up, making her look weary, but that was likely because she wasn’t taking care of herself. She wore undergarments that clung tightly to her body. The robe she’d been wearing looked worn out, but it appeared to be made with magic-resistant materials.

Alus looked over her body closely before deliberately pulling up her hair, and staring at the back of her neck. There he saw what seemed to be stitches from an old wound. It was clearly the scar from a carelessly-performed operation.

“Al, is she dead?” Alice timidly asked from behind him.

“No, I didn’t kill her. Well, she’s in no position to move though.”

“... I-I see.”

Alus had felt a strange displeasure at Alice's tone of voice, and said he didn't kill her; but in reality she was on the ropes. It was possible she'd only last for a few minutes more.

Alice knew she couldn't do anything either way, but managed to stop herself from asking if she could help, as she was unfamiliar with fighting people and seeing someone so critically injured.

Crouching down next to the intruder, Alice peeked at her face. "Are you sure that she's not dead?" But carelessly getting close was a clear mistake.

"You're better off not looking."

"Huh—?!" Suddenly, Alice let out a short scream. The reason was that the intruder's rolled-back eyes rolled forward again, the pupils staring at her.

After glancing at Alice, the eyes looked around in search of something else.

Alus clicked his tongue, forcibly pulling Alice's arm. As he held Alice in his embrace, the intruder moved in a bizarre fashion, raising her upper body using all four limbs.

Using that momentum and posture, the intruder attacked a cabinet. The shelves with a glass door fell over, throwing the equipment that was inside out and across the laboratory. Documents and glass shards flew in the air, and using that moment when everyone was distracted, she charged toward the smallest of them all, Loki.

"Loki, move!"

Loki was already jumping aside by the time she heard Alus.

Behind her was a window that led outside. The intruder broke through the window with her head, and fell out.

After stopping Loki from giving chase, Alus looked down through the broken window.

It wasn't suicide. Mustering up strength from somewhere, the intruder had scraped down the wall to slow her descent before landing lightly on the ground. She took off at an incredible speed, heading away from the Institute in the same four-legged posture. She was abnormally fast, making Alus wonder if she wasn't

actually a quadruped instead.

He sighed as he stared at her running away. “That... sure wasn’t normal,” Alus said in an exasperated tone.

Meanwhile, Alice, still in his embrace, looked more amazed than scared, holding onto him.

“Sorry, Alice.”

“Ah, no, it’s fine... I was just a little surprised,” Alice said, almost to herself in an effort to calm herself down. She joined Loki at the window, and the two of them scanned the surroundings. After all, there was more than one intruder.

While Alice had her back to him, Alus picked up a test tube and collected some of the intruder’s blood.

“Sir Alus, there are still two intruders on Institute grounds. What should we do?”

“I underestimated them. If they have to go up against those things, the teachers alone won’t be enough. Sorry, but can you back them up, Loki?”

“... Understood. If that is your order.”

He had indeed let his guard down. Looking at just their skill with magic from when they’d broken into the Institute, they weren’t very impressive as Magicmasters. The only unexpected thing was that abnormal tenacity.

In person to person combat, even the veteran teachers might find the tables turned on them. If those things put their incredible stamina to work, even the most experienced Magicmaster could wind up on the receiving end of an attack from an enemy they thought they’d defeated.

As Loki stepped onto the window frame, Alus gave her words of advice. “Make sure to properly finish them this time. Loki, go for the heart or head. They won’t go down otherwise... the trick is to not consider them human.” There was a bit of sadness mixed in as he said this. He’d worried that this was something Loki would have to confront ever since she became his partner.

Normally, this was something Alus should be doing on his own, but if Loki was going to stand by his side and fight ‘humans,’ this was a necessary experience. It

would likely decide whether she lived or died.

And Loki would likely overcome it. She had the talent for it. Being able to make calculated decisions after encountering something only once before, meant she had the ability to separate emotion from logic.

Loki realized what Alus was thinking. “I will take that to heart,” she resolutely said. Completely disabling an opponent was far harder than simply killing them. She might have the rug pulled out from under her the way she was right now.

That’s why he’d said that... his advice was intended to make sure Loki protected herself.

Yet while she understood Alus’ hesitation, she was ready to push her will through. She had no problems dirtying her hands. That’s why she was sure she wouldn’t create a situation that would worry him.

She kicked off the window frame. Obeying Alus’ order, Loki headed out to aid the teachers, her figure disappearing into the distance.

Having seen Loki off, Alus expelled his worries with a sigh. For now, at least —“Alice, go check the lock on the door. I’m sure you can do it. I left it open before, but it’ll be needed for next time.”

Alice looked anxious and uncertain, but she wordlessly nodded and headed to the door to check the console that controlled the lock.

While she did that, Alus shifted his attention to the test tube from before. The intruder’s blood he’d collected would provide a clue. He already had what he wanted.

The intruder’s actions had come as a surprise, but he’d decided to let her go. It was clear she’d undergone some kind of body modification from the scar on the back of her neck.

He’d considered fully incapacitating her, but considering how bizarre she was he’d thought better of it. In the worst-case scenario, she might even do something as dangerous as self-destructing.

Alus felt something was seriously off based on the abnormal atmosphere around her and her flow of mana. Moreover, her goal was unclear. Looking at

her crazy movements, it wasn't unreasonable to assume her objective was something insane like indiscriminately killing everyone—but ultimately her true motives remained obscure.

Considering she made a beeline toward us, and the direction the other intruders went in... they even approached Sisty, so it seems they're focusing on the main building.

Looking at it from another point of view, it was possible they were targeting the stronger people at the Institute.

But even then, their behavior didn't fully make sense. Even if they used their overwhelming stamina to launch surprise attacks, anyone capable wouldn't fall victim to something like that. In other words, it seemed like the intruders were attacking just to be defeated.

Meaning, it could be reconnaissance in force to gather information.

Considering that possibility, Alus letting her escape might not have been that bad after all. With the intruders' body modifications, he wanted to avoid showing all of his cards. As there was no guarantee the intruders didn't have cameras or other information-gathering devices or spells, he didn't want to give too much away before he began his mission.

Most of all, that worn-looking robe and those bizarre movements reminded him of the strange group he'd encountered the night before. *So they're making their move.*

Alus was all but convinced of his hunch, as he told himself this in his mind.

*

It didn't take long to figure out the situation as to the rest of the attacking intruders.

Loki returned with the information. By the time she'd arrived, the intruders had all escaped. The reason they didn't catch anyone was because of their stamina and movements, and because Sisty had shown earlier than expected. Sisty, having realized how absurd the intruder making his way toward her was, had immediately decided to deal with him herself.

The only damages suffered were minor injuries to two teachers and ten of the students.

The teachers that had been unable to stop the students from getting hurt made one question their abilities, but the real reason was that the students had ignored instructions and gone outside to fight. In other words, they'd gotten their just deserts, so the teachers really couldn't be blamed for that.

Fortunately, that youthful recklessness didn't end up harming the Institute. Moreover, the students ended up with minor injuries because the intruders didn't take them seriously, as they weren't interested in them. The reason was probably because the intruders were targeting the strongest, on top of some other objective.

Looking at the results, the five intruders all managed to escape. Of course, Magicmasters had been sent out to pursue them, but the Institute already had strict security to ensure things like this wouldn't happen in the first place. As the intruders slipped through that check, it was clear who should be held responsible.

Shortly after Loki returned, it was announced by the principal herself that the situation was resolved and the threat was over.

Alus, Loki and Alice heard the broadcast from the laboratory. Details were omitted from the announcement. Instead, Sisty directly appealed to Alus to appear.

Since he'd confronted one of the intruders, Alus had expected this so he wasn't surprised, but it was still a pain. Besides, he had other things to concern himself with... so he simply put the call in a corner of his mind. He gazed at the laboratory and said, "I have to clean this mess up first, huh."

As he checked out the room, there were papers scattered about everywhere, along with glass shards from flasks and test tubes. Fortunately, none of the important machinery had been destroyed.

Alus' honest impression of the intruder was that she'd rampaged through his laboratory before running away. He was likely going to be questioned for another reason, but if things were going to end up like this, he regretted his choice of not fighting them before.

Of course, there was still something gained. He stroked the test tube in his pocket, and let out yet another sigh.

“P-Please leave this to me, Sir Alus.”

“Yes, we’ll be done in no time.”

Sensing Alus’ feelings, Loki readily offered to clean up, while Alice rolled up her sleeves.

Loki in particular got to work immediately, perhaps regretting her inability to stop the intruder. Then again, Alus had been the one to pick the laboratory as the battlefield, so he wasn’t innocent either. He joined in with a “Let’s clean this up.”

Loki was in charge of putting the documents back in place, as she knew where they were usually stored, while Alice was in charge of cleaning up the floor.

Alus already had anything he didn’t want anyone else to see locked up elsewhere, so he had no problems with this. The only problem was the skills of these two girls who would put veteran housewives to shame. With them around, Alus, despite being the lord of the room, felt like he was only getting in the way of the cleaning.

He already knew that of course, since without Loki there probably wouldn’t be anywhere to stand with equipment and papers strewn across the floor at all times.

The laboratory was being cleaned up in the blink of an eye, like magic. In fact, it was even cleaner now than before the fighting broke out. That was something to rejoice over.

As long as you didn’t look at how useless Alus felt... “Sorry for making you do this.” At best, he could only thank the girls. He was half impressed by their cleaning skills, and half guilty over barely doing anything himself. In the end, he only put a plank over the broken window to seal it up.

After that hard work, though that might just have been how Alus felt, the three enjoyed some tea as if nothing had happened in the first place.

“Sir Alus, don’t you have to go to the principal’s office? It’s been about an

hour since the broadcast.”

“Well, I don’t think Sisty will mind. She should have some paperwork to do because of this incident, and we’ve been cleaning up over here. She probably won’t complain,” Alus said in an attempt to avoid the whole thing... but it wouldn’t go the way he wanted.

A bell rang out. The signal that another announcement was starting.

“Alus Reigin. Come to the principal’s office right this instant. If you don’t, your credits will breathe their last!” Sisty was making the announcement herself in a clearly irritated tone, and for some reason there was a sound of tearing paper mixed in as well.

“Hey! What the hell!” Alus let out a shout by reflex, but now was not the time to make a fuss over abuse of authority. Witch Sisty could make all of his credits disappear from his report card with a snap of her fingers. “Can you really say ‘breathe their last’ when talking about taking credits back?”

“Of course not.”

Letting out the heaviest sigh of the day, Alus grimaced as he sipped his tea. His inability to calm down after finishing his tea wasn’t just because his credits were at risk.

Two stares focused on him, and he could more or less guess what they wanted to say.

“Sir Alus...”

“Al...”

“Ah fine, I get it, I’m going.” Alus put down his cup and stood up from his chair. “This is depressing. Well, I don’t know when I’ll get back, so can you escort Alice back to her dorm when she’s done training?”

“Understood.”

“I’ll look forward to it, Loki dear.”

Loki splendidly ignored Alice as she nodded to only Alus. Or perhaps their answers just happened to overlap by accident. It wasn’t like this was the first time he found something to be a pain. But this time, he wanted to get to

analyzing the blood sample he got from the intruder.

The elements... they're supposed to be scarce...

Alus' mind was on the magic the intruder used. Dark and light magic were special attributes referred to as the elements. Unlike the other attributes learned after birth, an affinity for the elements was something you were born with.

Yet the intruder had used it. An intruder that had undergone body modifications, at that. He couldn't conclude that this was related to his current mission.

But there was something that kept him from discarding it as unrelated.

On his way to the principal's office, Alus ran through a number of ideas, but in the end the main building came into view before he could gather his thoughts.

Damage from the attack could be seen in the form of crumbled parts in the building's walls.

Standing before the familiar office, Alus hesitated for a moment. What fate awaited him? He didn't understand the mind of someone who willingly jumped into the danger. But in reality, he had no way to escape. It wasn't until now that he understood how a student could feel nervous before facing the principal.

Anyways, he had a lot of bad memories of this place, especially with misbehaving students. At least Sisty shouldn't have any prior engagements this time around.

Alus finally steeled himself. "I'm coming in."

Inside, the elegant desk was piled with papers, and a fed-up face peeked out from that mountain. Principal Sisty's furrowed brows showed how bad of a mood she was in. "You're late!"

"I had something to do. Also, Institute-wide announcements draw unnecessary attention, so I'd prefer it if you didn't do that again."

"A principal's orders should be prioritized above all else! And if you start showing up quickly after I call for you, I'll think about changing my ways. Besides, you're..." Pouting like a teenager, Sisty began issuing a string of

complaints to Alus.

Alus gave her an insincere “I’ll do my best,” but it fell on deaf ears.

After enduring the barrage for a while, he moved to push the conversation toward the real issue at hand. “What’s that?” Alus said, pointing at the mountain of documents on the desk. They were stacked really high, and if they got knocked over and scattered, Sisty would surely want to cry.

“They’re reports on injuries, and information on the intruders. It’s all from the people who encountered them, so I still have to compile the information.” Sisty poked at the pile in a show of discontent. She was expressing her wish to push the problem away, but she still needed to report this to her superiors. It was boring but necessary work.

“And what do you want with me? I’m not going to help you with the reports, just so you know.”

“Is that so?” Sisty said, in a disappointed-sounding voice.

Did she really call him out to help with the reports? Then again, her expression looked a bit too put-on to be real.

“If that’s really what you wanted, then I’m leaving.”

“Well now. Have a seat.”

They were talking past each other, but Sisty was trying to drag Alus into her way of doing things. She’d learned that getting irritated at everything wouldn’t solve anything.

As if to escape her pile of work, Sisty got up from her chair and moved to the sofa, facing Alus. Her expression turned serious as she got to the main question. “So, who were they?”

“What are you asking me for? Weren’t they intruders?”

The principal’s eyebrows furrowed slightly at Alus purposefully dodging the question. Of course if he didn’t, she’d drag him into her pace.

She continued without changing her cheerful expression. Though she was smiling, Sisty’s pressure on him was palpable. “Are you messing with me? I’m saying they were no normal intruders.”

“So you noticed?”

Sisty glared after hearing Alus’ barefaced reply. Because she was the principal, she wasn’t going to let any more jokes slide.

“I honestly don’t know either. Did the one you dealt with use any magic?”

“Yes, he used the light attribute.”

“So did the one at my laboratory.” It seemed all the intruders had used the light attribute. Alus was deep in thought.

“No secrets, now.”

“...”

Sisty looked at Alus with a smile that left no room for negotiation.

“They’re probably some kind of experiment. Looking at the scar on the back of her neck, she probably received some body modifications. Their minds have been messed with as well.”

“And of course, they weren’t just your ordinary intruders, were they?”

“I think they had some kind of goal... From what I could tell, their routes of attack were more or less predetermined,” Alus said.

The Institute had disclosed general information about itself to the public. It couldn’t maintain itself without the support of the citizenry, so basic facts like information on the teachers and other things were readily available to anyone.

In other words, it was relatively easy to find the relevant information in order to prepare an attack. But the Institute had security. And moreover, there couldn’t be that many reckless fools that would attack a place where Magicmasters trained daily to defeat Fiends.

“And what goal would that be?”

“I have no idea. I haven’t been able to tell that much.”

“... But this was an attack from five rare light magic users. It’s very possible that some organization is behind it.”

“Who knows? If we knew that much, we would have done something before they attacked.”

It wasn't as though there was no one hostile to the Institute. There were organizations and religious groups who tried to ostracize Magicmasters. There were also cults that declared Fiends to be messengers from God sent upon them for humanity's arrogance, believing that because Fiends were born with the ability to use magic, they were more closely tied to it than humans.

There were plenty of examples of anti-Magicmaster organizations, heretics, and Fiend worshippers carrying out terrorist activities. Sisty was likely suspecting something like this as well.

But Alus still felt they were unrelated to the attack, in part because he saw a connection between this attack and the group from yesterday. "This is just my assumption, but I don't think it's related to one of those groups."

"What makes you say that?" Sisty prodded him for more information.

Alus put his hand up to stop her. "You'll have to turn to the Governor-General for any more than this. This is all I can say." This suggested that Alus' reticence was due to a military secret mission.

Knowing the military was involved helped explain things to Sisty. "So that's how it is. Got it."

"Then I'll be taking my leave."

"Yes. Good work today."

"Good luck on dealing with the aftermath. It's clear now that there's a hole in security, so I understand how you feel."

"If you do, then help me out!"

"Unfortunately, I have work to do." Going any further than this would be asking for trouble. Who knew what kinds of problems Alus would be roped into if he agreed to help? With that, Alus decided to leave, and went to the door.

As he exited the main building, students who had taken shelter indoors and in the dorms came out as well. They made a stir as they saw the traces of battle with the intruders. Alus could also hear them whispering about several teachers who'd been taken to the infirmary. Having not gone up against the intruders themselves, they felt less fear and more curiosity.

Some students with big egos bragged that they could've handled the intruders themselves. In fact, several rash students had gotten injured by ideas like this.

Alus brushed off these empty discussions and set out for the laboratory. That's when— "Mr. Alus!"

A female student with long black hair waved to him, as she made her way through the crowd of students to his side. The one politely bowing and gracefully smiling at him was second-year student Felinella.

Alus hadn't done anything to deserve this, but Felinella was well-bred enough that it could be passed off as a normal greeting.

At this overly-formal greeting, Alus reluctantly stopped. "... Feli," he said quietly, mindful of the eyes of others.

"It's been a while." It had indeed been a while, but that was because she'd said she would show her face at the laboratory, yet never stopped by.

Actually, Felinella had attempted to do it several times but always lost her nerve, using any excuse she could to call it off. Not only was she the dorm supervisor, but she also helped out with her father's business, so she hadn't had much time either up to now.

Felinella wasn't officially in the military yet, but she was always called upon when something happened. But since that was also what she wanted, she couldn't lay all the blame on her father. Lately, however, the frequency and importance of the assignments went beyond the level of just helping out. Of course, she knew her place as a noble and didn't question it.

In order to maintain her rank, she needed to contribute to the military and to the nation as an excellent Magicmaster.

"Are you all right?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, you were called to the principal's office..."

"Ah, well, it was just some light interrogation."

"Wha—!!"

In that moment, Alus saw a hallucination of Felinella's hair rising up, ignoring gravity entirely. At the same time, her smile twitched a little. "A mere former Single Digit interrogating you? That's concerning. Just who does she think she is?"

Alus didn't overlook the corners of Felinella's eyes lifting up, as she said these thorny words. Sensing this uneasy atmosphere, he felt like grumbling while also regretting his exaggeration of what had happened. With a wry smile, he tried to stop Felinella. "She only asked me some questions." That should safely put out the small flames that might lead to disaster.

"I-I see... but wasn't that stepping out of line for someone as old as her, Mr. Alus?"

It seemed the flames were still smoldering... "Well, while I'm at the Institute I have no choice but to obey the principal."

"Even if you say that—"

"More importantly, what were you doing, Feli?" Alus tried to put a stop to the discussion, and clumsily changed the topic.

"Actually, I fought one of the intruders, too."

"And then the other students caught you and barraged you with questions, I take it."

"Yes..." Felinella answered, with an exhausted voice and bitter smile. She'd grown weary of being stuck in the circle of classmates as well.

Alus figured that's when she saw him pass by and decided to kill two birds with one stone by calling out to him. In reality, Felinella just wanted to talk to him, but he had no way of knowing that.

Eventually Alus realized that he and Felinella standing around and talking was attracting stares from those around them. Wary of starting any more fires, he decided to start walking. Felinella caught on, and walked next to him.

"You don't look to be hurt either. That's good."

"... That's right!" After a short pause, a happy smile appeared on Felinella's face.

Alus' words had simply been an acknowledgment of her abilities, not out of consideration for her, but that misinterpretation didn't bring sorrow to either of them. "Did they use magic?"

"Yes. I never expected them to make a move like this. They must be getting desperate."

"...! So you know about them." Alus gave Felinella a sharp glance.

Seeing his look, Felinella's eyes opened wide in surprise for a moment. Then she understood why Alus was astonished.

Alus, at her change in expression, used magic to expand his perception into their surroundings. There didn't seem to be any third party listening in.

Picking up on that, Felinella paused for a second, then brought herself closer to Alus, their shoulders touching as she whispered into his ear. "... You mean the Governor-General didn't tell you?"

"... What?"

Felinella was dumbfounded. She smiled wryly to hide her bewilderment. "Well, you see... I'm actually involved in this case. I'm mostly in charge of information gathering."

"I see." Alus showed surprise for an instant, but he honestly thought it was brave of her. If she was involved in information-gathering missions, then there was only one person Alus could think of who was in charge of that in Alpha.

Indeed, Felinella was almost certainly under the command of her father, Lord Vizaist. That was also the only route she could take to be involved in military missions.

"Did Lord Vizaist tell you to?"

"No, I was the one who begged him."

Vizaist was at one time Alus' direct superior. Back then he was part of the temporary special forces. Now, Vizaist was head of the intelligence department, which was the department that provided the information for Alus' secret missions.

Just how soft can you be on your daughter, Alus called out his former superior

in his mind.

Felinella's sharp eyes picked up on Alus' cheek twitching. "Uhm, was there something wrong with the information you received...?"

"N-No, the information itself was well researched." He wanted to continue with a 'but,' yet when he saw that bright smile pointed at him, he had no choice but to swallow the word. "And? You said you never expected them to do something like this?"

"Yes, these intruders were without a doubt a part of Godma's experiments. It seems they have a way of escaping from our surveillance. Alternatively..."

"They've spread them out all over the place to be able to adapt to whatever happens."

"That's possible. But in that case, it would be difficult to find all of their bases. We wouldn't make it in time."

"I bet. In the worst case, we'd have to at the very least eliminate Godma, the primary offender. So what is he after?"

"I'm sorry," Felinella said. "I don't know that much... But I don't think there was much meaning in this attack on the Institute. Headquarters has concluded that he's already completed his research, and that this attack was a flashy way to show off his wares."

Alus put his hand on his chin, and thought for a bit. "What do you think, Feli?"

"I feel the same way. Godma has probably succeeded in allowing his test subjects to pick up the ability to use the elements after birth. I don't think there's any doubting that, after seeing the intruders. He's gathered orphans and turned them into element Magicmasters to sell off to nobles to raise funds."

There were some nobles who secretly adopted children that had the makings of excellent Magicmasters. They had such talent that there was a good chance they'd become high-ranking Magicmasters, thus protecting the noble family's name.

Like with the example of Cabsol Denvel, there was no guarantee that children would inherit their parents' talents.

“He probably needs a collaborator,” Felinella continued. “So I imagine his and his collaborator’s goal would be to secure funds to expand his research. He’s probably looking to sell outside of the nation... so perhaps this was just a demonstration for the sake of stirring up interest.”

But something still didn’t sit right with Alus. If Godma’s sole intent was to get money through artificially creating element users to develop the idea further, there were several things that didn’t add up.

For starters, suddenly acting out in the open and making yourself a target for the military after safely operating in secret was just foolish. If he got wiped out before siding with any foreign collaborators all would be for naught.

That’s why Alus wanted to look at it from another perspective. “You can’t say that for certain. Who knows what goes on in the heads of researchers. You can safely assume they have a few screws loose.” Since he was one such researcher, he felt a sense of self-mockery at his words.

One could say that the fate of a researcher was to spend their lives perfecting their research, and go even further beyond. There was a possibility that Godma was possessed by some kind of conviction. “It’s possible that his research isn’t perfected yet. That’s a common thing among researchers. Either way, this all ends in three days.”

Next to him, Felinella nodded. Her expression was filled with determination not to slack on information gathering until then for Alus’ sake.

“Would you mind telling me if they make any moves before then?”

“If that’s what you desire, then I’ll speak with my father.”

“No... well, I’ll leave it to you.” Alus had been about to say that it didn’t matter, but changed his mind. He felt like saying that he’d leave it to her sounded self-indulgent.

When he thought about why, he saw a smile like Sisty’s flash before him; but surely that was just him thinking too much. It was the seductive smile of a bewitching type of woman. With the principal as a precedent, he’d thought he’d have a hard time dealing with Felinella. But she was clearly a different type of woman from Sisty, with only their atmospheres being similar.

That said, while he did indulge himself with Felinella's offer, the report that was supposedly created through her efforts was well researched. Her investigative abilities were clearly quite high, so nobody should end up losing out with this.

The research building wasn't far away to begin with, but before they knew it, it was right in front of them.

"What do you want to do? Are you going to come up for a while?"

"That's a very welcome invitation, but... well, my father is calling for me." Felinella hung her head, seemingly disappointed.

"Is it about the incident?"

"Yes, I think so."

"Then Lord Vizaist will probably scold me if you're late."

"Surely not. If that happened, I would be the one scolding my father." Felinella elegantly played off the rare joke from Alus.

But she suddenly looked off to the side and softly whispered, "Why now of all times," with a frown on her face.

"What was that?"

"—!! Ah, uhm, u-unfortunately I have to take my leave now."

"Yeah. Give Lord Vizaist my regards."

As Felinella said goodbye to Alus in front of the research building, the sun was already starting to set, with the moon peeking out from the other side of the fake sky.

Loki had probably taken Alice back to the dorm when they finished training. She might have gone out shopping too, while she was at it.

A strange silence hovered in the background of the empty room. The times when day turned to night and back again were when Alus' heart was the most discomposed. It was partly exacerbated by him being alone.

But his life in the Outer World was deeply ingrained in him. These times of day, when Fiends began exerting their power, was when he felt the most

uncomfortable.

Trying to calm his heart, Alus brought the blood sample he got from the intruder over to the analyzer.

While waiting for the results to come in, he moved to the kitchen to spend the time he had on his hands. But he soon realized that he didn't know where anything was, as he rarely made tea himself.

This area was already turning into Loki's territory. He knew the tea tasted better with Loki making it.

So when he thought about asking her to make some when she came back, he noticed steam rising from a pot placed on the corner of the table.

Alus lifted the lid, though he did it timidly for some reason. The inside was filled with a liquid carrying the scent of tea. It was translucent to the point of being able to see the bottom, and it had a lustrous amber color to it.

As he removed the lid, the rich fragrance filled the laboratory in an instant. He still hadn't taken a sip, but the aroma entering his nose perfectly replicated the taste, and it spread through his body.

"This is practically in the realm of premonitions," Alus quipped to himself. It was as if Loki had full knowledge of his life's daily pace, including his stomach. Just how far could her consideration of him go...?

For the time being, he let himself experience the fragrant tea, gratefully pouring the liquid into a cup. Thanking his overly thoughtful partner in the depths of his mind, he took a sip. That alone was enough to calm his feelings down quite a bit.

He seriously thought about having Loki teach him how to make it sometime, but he felt like he couldn't make it any better than this.

After taking a break, the blood analysis results were transferred to the terminal at his desk. Alus brought the cup and saucer over and took a look at the screen. Getting a general grasp of it, he shrugged as he realized his prediction was on point.

"... I figured it was something like that." He put down his cup and scrolled

through the vast amount of mana information. Similar information was streaming over to another virtual screen. He then compared the two screens. Incidentally, the second screen displayed the results of Alice's analysis.

Alus read both screens, stopping when he reached the portion about their defects. As expected, it seemed the intruder gained her affinity for light magic after birth. Her information showed signs of the original mana factor being erased. The mana information had been overwritten with the information required to obtain the ability to use the elements.

Alus questioned if doing something this violent would really allow one to handle the light attribute. This couldn't even be called a positive achievement. Wouldn't this just keep someone from using the elements, or magic, altogether?

But in reality—the intruder had used light magic. Well, the data gathered from the intruder's blood was only usable as a reference.

Next, Alus began looking for the part that weighed on his mind the most.

Mana contained very basic information as well. The technical term for that was "Fundamental Words." Mana information gradually grew more dense as the user gained more experience and memories, so it was constantly changing. The combinations reached an absolutely astronomical figure.

However, a person's Fundamental Words would never change, which served as a definitive characteristic. As such, it was used in systems of identifying individuals, such as door locks.

Exact copies didn't exist, but some portions of mana information were still inherited. The reason why a parent's affinity so easily influenced the child's was because a portion of the DNA didn't change.

A child's affinity for the basic six attributes had already been influenced by the parents' affinities by the time they were given life. There was still room after birth for that to change, but it was usually established by the time the autonomic nervous system had developed.

The opinion that it was very likely the elements were acquired before birth was because there were many cases where the acquisition of light magic was

recognized before the aforementioned establishment.

Moreover, the relationship between Fundamental Words and the elements was still unexplained. It was impossible to decipher every single combination of symbols making up the thousands of characters known as Lost Spells.

Not a single person had found a principle or combination for the formation of elements. This was considered one of the biggest questions in the field of magic.

For starters, where the Fundamental Words were located differed from person to person. That's why even Alus had no choice but to scroll on forever to find them.

He was of course being helped by the advanced deciphering program he'd made himself, but even that had its limits. So in the end it was a battle of stamina and willpower.

"—Hm?!"

Eventually, he stopped scrolling as his eyes scanned the character strings on the screen. No, he'd instantly read all of it and grasped it, and what it meant.

Before he knew it, Alus unconsciously clicked his tongue. This was the result and effects of Godma's research.

He felt a sickening feeling as if his emotions had been thrown into a mixer. But he was sure that the starting point of this research had had a point to it. If it was possible to create excellent Magicmasters after birth, they could be expected to be a sufficient force to repel the Fiends. The focus fell on the light attribute because it could be used to inhibit regeneration.

In a sense, Godma's research had the same purpose and goal as Alus' research.

But reality wasn't that simple. Godma's research far overstepped the ethical code set by the seven nations.

Moreover, it was impeding the progress of Alus' student, something he'd devoted his precious time to. Because of those two points, Alus couldn't accept Godma's research.

He wasn't going to be influenced by his emotions. There wouldn't be any hindrances to the mission. It was just that he saw Godma's existence and research results as harmful.

Some simple addition showed that Godma's research could be beneficial to humanity. It might even be far more effective than spending the time to train people like Tesfia and Alice to be competent Magicmasters.

However, there were clear problems with the means and the process. That's what disgusted Alus.

Alus had the pride of being the greatest Magicmaster. He was also confident that this revolting research that violated the code of ethics wasn't superior to the wisdom he imparted, or the time he spent training the two girls.

Either way, Alus wasn't going to back away from this. Which was why he was going to watch over them until the end.

"I'm sorry for being late." Quietly opening the door and entering, Loki confirmed Alus was home and apologized for her tardiness.

Alus had no way of knowing if she was late or not, since he didn't know when she'd left, but he was sure she was only saying it because he'd made it home before she did. "Welcome back."

Loki, her eyes cast down, headed to the kitchen to make dinner. It seemed preparations were already made as she brought out a plate of carefully cooked food. Normally they ate dinner together, but she must have sensed the atmosphere around Alus, as she rushed out a plate.

Seeing her consideration, Alus unfamiliarly struck up a conversation to change gears. He felt like he'd go insane if he didn't talk about something. "How was Alice's training?"

"She seems to have picked up on the trick for it."

"I see. You might be good at teaching people. I see, that's good..." There was no vigor in his voice as he spoke mechanically.

"... Is something the matter?" Loki asked, suspecting something, as she continued to cook.

A question born from a trivial conversation. Her casual way of asking was another sign of her consideration. Alus smiled dryly at his partner who was so well-versed in the subtleties of men. While thinking how he was no match for her, his lips eventually curled up in a small smile. “No, it’s nothing.”

Even if the nuance of his words gave away that something had indeed happened, he didn’t mind if he gave that away.

“I see.” So even if Alus denied it, the sorrow in Loki’s heart didn’t disappear. But she still believed that this was fine and focused on her cooking, and before long a smile appeared on her face as well.

Loki piled the newly-made food onto a plate. That’s when the terminal on Alus’ desk let out an unfamiliar alarm.

It was the alert for a received message, and the focus suddenly switched away from their everyday life.

“No change, huh,” Alus muttered, having stopped eating to take a look.

It was a periodic report from the Governor-General’s intelligence department containing information Felinella had gathered. This happened every time, as such information greatly influenced missions, with detailed reports being delivered to him.

The mission was set to start in three days.

At the moment it was expected to begin in the early morning, but if the target made any suspicious moves it wouldn’t be strange to receive an order to begin the mission right away. As such, Alus always looked at the periodic reports immediately.

He had the report displayed on the large screen by the table so he could share it with Loki.

“... Does this mean that Godma’s backer, his patron, hasn’t been identified?”

“Most likely.”

The report was created from the information gathered by Lord Vizaist’s elite forces. And if there were no new developments...

“This might be a pretty big hurdle. But there’s still a time limit. We might have

to make a move even if all the information isn't there yet. It's better than letting him get away." Knowing Vizaist's skills, Alus figured that any backer, even if they were a big shot, would be discovered rather easily. But it seems they might have let the bait go.

If that was the case, then it might be difficult to seize the mastermind. Even if humanity's living area was restricted, the information on the nations outside of Alpha wasn't perfect. If the mastermind disappeared into a shady territory, even the army would have a hard time finding him.

"Will it be okay?"

"Who knows? While it's pointless if the root gets away, our mission doesn't go that far. We'll just have to leave it to them."

However, with the attack on the Institute, there was a chance that the nature and scale of their mission might expand. Since the intruders, who Felinella referred to as "experiments," had reached a viable state, they needed to plan for a way to keep them from escaping.

The mission objective was the elimination of Godma and the erasure of all research data. Moreover, based on the blood tests, the intruders or experiments had been determined to be equivalent to Godma's research results, and as such had the same value as the other data.

From what they knew, there were at least five or more... and while unconfirmed, if the group of three that Alus met in the city the other night were experiments, that meant the total was a minimum of eight.

"Phew, if there's going to be any changes I'd prefer it if they made them quick."

"That's true." As Loki nodded in response, she covered the table with plates of food.

"Isn't this a little too much?"

"...! It does appear to be too much, doesn't it?"

Perhaps because Alice had been staying with them for the past few days, there was food for one too many. "I'm sorry, I'll clean it up right away." The

next moment, Loki seemed to realize her error, and tried to take the food back with an embarrassed expression.

“No, you went out of your way to make it. It’s not like it’s too much to eat, so I’ll gladly have it.” As Alus glanced over at Loki, he could see her softly bite her lip and return the plates to their original positions.

Maybe we should have had Alice around a little longer, he thought to himself.

“I-If Ms. Alice hadn’t stayed over to begin with, this never would have happened!” Loki said strongly, as if to deny everything Alus was thinking. Once she said this, she calmed down and sat in her chair, quietly eating her food.

Seeing her blush, Alus felt like she’d had fun, regardless of what she was saying.

In the end, the extra food was put away in their stomachs without difficulty. Alus relished the thought of eating Loki’s cooking since it was so delicious, that he began worrying he might end up eating too much. “Thank you for the meal.”

“It was nothing.” After giving him an adorable smile, Loki quickly started on after-dinner beverages.

I can’t afford to stop exercising, Alus told himself, as this long day came to an end.

*

The next day, Alus and Loki took Alice with them to the training grounds.

Alus had made reservations a few days ago, but feeling that he’d been missing out on exercise recently, he felt that it was the perfect time.

It was still morning, and if not for the vacation period it would’ve been time to head to class. In fact, it would have been first period right now.

Their goal was to try out the new spell Alus had developed for Alice. Alice was astonished and exhilarated to hear it was already completed, when he went over their schedule at the training grounds.

That said, it was a bit of an exaggeration to call it a new spell. In reality, all Alus had done was taken some elements of another attribute and adapted them to the light attribute.

The base spell was the intermediate wind spell, Kamaitachi.

Alus added his own touches to the magic formula, removing the attribute portions and adjusting it to work for Alice's light attribute.

Alice worried that it would actually work for her, as the barrier activated and partitioned off the training area.

Having changed into their training uniforms in the locker room, Alice and Loki were walking together. Alice was one-sidedly chatting away in a lighthearted fashion with Loki, who remained emotionless, but Alus figured they were getting along from the subtle changes in Loki's expression.

"Normally it'd be better to directly engrave the magic formula to get you better accustomed to it, but I didn't have any material to make an AWR. That's why this time we'll slowly go through the steps in the process to beat it into your head. So here we go."

The method itself was truly simple. With a wicked smile, Alus handed two pieces of paper to Alice. One was full of the characters that made up the magic formula, while the other contained a translation to supplement her understanding.

As Alice surveyed the papers, she had a clearly nervous smile on her face. But as she read the translation, she realized it was something she'd be able to do right now. Her cheeks flushed in surprise. "Thank you, Al!"

"You don't need to thank me, let's just get to work. Just so you know, we don't have the time for you to spend several days learning that spell."

"Yes!" Alice responded without hesitation. She moved to a corner of the training area and sat down, focusing on the magic formula.

"As for Loki... you can't do your usual detection training here, so let's try a different approach."

"Yes, please."

The training Alus thought up was to have Loki close her eyes and block his one-sided attacks.

He got the idea from their mock battle in the past. Back then, she'd instantly

sensed Alus' attack from behind. The reason for that was her use of detection magic. By sending her mana out like sonar and searching her surroundings, she could see a person's general location and posture based on their flow of mana.

The idea was to make Loki able to use that repeatedly so she wouldn't need to rely on her sight in combat.

"If you can accurately detect my location, you won't have any blind spots."

First, Alus threw an enchanted rubber sports ball. The goal was for her to be able to dodge or block it with her eyes closed. However— "Urgh...?!" Loki tried to catch the ball thrown in an arc, but it slipped past her hand and landed on her head.

Incidentally, while it was enchanted, Alus hadn't imbued it with destructive energy or hardened it, so getting hit by it wasn't much different from getting hit by a normal ball. "The space between the mana sonar pulses is too long. You're not using it enough times. Don't try to perceive a vast range like normal, instead limit yourself to maybe ten meters around you and try using it 50 times a second. That way you shouldn't have any problems with the sonar's strength or accuracy."

"All right, I'll try it out."

After rubbing her forehead a couple times, Loki picked up the ball at her feet and threw it to Alus. She then closed her eyes and calmed her breathing as if meditating, focusing on her sonar.

"Oh, I can clearly tell when you repeatedly use it like that." Alus could feel faint waves of mana crashing against his skin. That was only possible thanks to his sharp senses. Aside from affinity, how much you focused on your mana also greatly affected it.

As proof of that, Alice showed no signs of noticing as she focused on her new spell, despite being within Loki's range.

Alus felt some interest as he closed in on Loki and threw a ball straight at her with more force behind it. And of course, it moved faster than before.

With a dry sound, the ball landed firmly in Loki's hand.

She immediately opened her eyes and smiled when she looked at her hand.

“Sir Alus, I did it!”

“It’s looking good. How’s the mana consumption?”

“It’s not that much... but I think three minutes of continuous use is my limit.” Aside from adjusting the range of the mana sonar, Loki was also using it numerous times a second. A trick not just any detector could pull off. And being able to do it right away spoke volumes for Loki’s talents.

“Hmm, that’s still a pretty poor mileage. For now, try to get the hang of the minimum number of sonar pulses necessary for detection. We’ll need to start off with creating a standard you can reference.”

Loki nodded firmly at Alus, as he walked over to Alice who seemed to be struggling, the ball still in his hand.

“How’s it going?”

“I don’t know what I’m doing wrong, it’s not activating at all.” Alice looked at Alus with tears starting to form in her eyes, her AWR in hand.

“Fine, I’ll watch over you, so try it again.”

“O-Okay...”

Sensing that Loki was ready, Alus threw the ball backwards at her, without looking, watching over Alice while continuing Loki’s training.

That said, Loki would need to find the optimal number of pulses for her mana sonar on her own, so he only had to throw the ball at her. Though he wasn’t looking her way, so he didn’t know if she caught it properly or not.

For the time being, Alice began pouring mana into her AWR, going through the process of constructing a spell. The magic formula engraved on the blade began glowing and she swung her naginata.

However, no spell was constructed using the mana focused on its blade—and with the misfire the mana dispersed every which way. The result was a pointless waste of mana.

“See? I can’t do it.”

At seeing Alice's blank expression, Alus felt his temple twitching, thinking, *Why are you like this*? He could tell at first glance why the spell hadn't activated. It was a learning problem.

Like he'd explained before when they were studying for the exam, Alice and Tesfia only had a faint understanding of the magic formula itself. At times like these, simply memorizing the magic formula and strongly visualizing the phenomenon they wanted to create would only give them grief.

While it was possible to activate the spell by memorizing the formula and accurately imagining the phenomenon, that prevented any fine adjustments from being made. That was because a vague image alone would make up a big part of the spell. In a sense, it would be a husk of a spell, with no traces of subtleties, depth or content.

Not only were important topics such as the spell's power, form and other factors ignored, but the bad habit of glossing over the staged process for creating spells could be seen even in the lectures. The reason for that was because there were no lectures on magic formulas, such as interpreting ancient language.

In short, the spell wasn't activating because Alice hadn't trained in perceiving the process of constructing spells. It was an easy oversight to make, but difficult to notice.

Fortunately, Alus remembered teaching Alice and Tesfia about magic formulas during their exam studying. Though in reality he'd only given them advice. Whether they understood it or not was a different matter.

"Look at the formula properly, why are you omitting details clearly written on it?" Alus pointed at a sentence on one of the pieces of paper on the ground by Alice's feet. "You're not specifying the shape at all. Well, perhaps that's because you've just used spells that only functioned when cast on your AWR, like Reflection."

Since even the novice level spell Arrow required the user to form the mana into the shape of an arrow, the vast majority of Magicmasters, even the beginners, could specify shapes in their head.

However, images like that could make it difficult to acquire new spells,

especially when it came to spells they'd never seen or experienced. As such, they needed to accurately define the spell by going through the process as specified.

"Oh! Now I get it." Alice stuck out her tongue in a cutesy way, as if to say "Whoops." At least it was suitable for her age, and there wasn't the kind of horrible incongruity like when Sisty did it. Which was why Alus pretended not to see it, even if it did piss him off a little. Then again, with Alice's personality these gestures and mannerisms just came out on their own, which was a problem in and of itself.

"I bet you don't have an accurate grasp of the magic you're trying to use. Think about it the other way. Normally you don't need an image to cast, don't omit anything from the formula, and supply the necessary amount of mana for it to activate."

"Yes!"

"Now that you know this, you won't get away with another 'I can't do it.'"

Just then Loki threw the ball at Alus, who caught it without even glancing its way before snapping with his wrist and sending it back to Loki.

Meanwhile, Alice got started on her own training. She was going through the steps of her process in her mind by now. Mana gradually transferred to her AWR, and the magic formula reacted to it.

"Phew! Here I go, Al!" Spinning her naginata around, Alice built up momentum that she then unleashed in an upwards slash.

"‹‹Shiylereis››"



The blade compressed the light to its utmost limit before a sharp slash was emitted. The crescent-shaped light ran above the ground, crashing into the wall. After a heavy impact sounded on the wall, the attack's mana was absorbed, leaving only a small ripple behind.

"I did it... I did it, Al!" Alice stared as the mana dispersed with a blank look of surprise. After a short moment, her expression turned to exhilaration. Her face melted into a smile and she couldn't hold her feelings back anymore. Rejoicing, she felt she could break out in a small dance at any moment.

Considering Alice's usual atmosphere, Alus felt that suited her perfectly fine. "I know, I was watching." Having finally seen the fruits of his research pay off, he nodded as if he'd expected this.

The light attribute had a different quality to it compared to the others, for example, with the expended mana. The combustion phenomenon of the fire attribute required mana to make up for many of the missing components, but the light attribute could use the light that existed in the world as a catalyst, meaning its mana consumption was lessened.

It was said that the sun's energy was the source of that power. The sun in the Outer World should provide an even bigger boon, but wherever there was light, the spells would require less mana even if it was just by a little.

"Congratulations on the successful creation of a new spell, Sir Alus, Ms. Alice."

"Thank you, Loki dear."

With the activation of Shiylereis, Loki stopped her training and offered her compliments with a refreshing smile. But what she was really doing was showing appreciation for Alus' hard work.

"Well, it's not like you have to be me to do something like this."

"You're being too humble."

"Yeah, this is amazing, you know!"

It might offend other Magicmasters, but Alus had only taken a spell from a different attribute and applied it to the light attribute, and it ended up working out. As anyone who'd developed a spell knew, as long as the proper theory and

time was put into the work the spells would take shape.

That said, to these two who didn't know the details of how to make spells it seemed like a great achievement.

Alice was excited to be able to put a third spell of her attribute into her repertoire. If anything, she was only getting happier.

"For now, Alice, keep practicing that spell to make sure you can use it. Just so you know..."

"Once you can make all kinds of minute adjustments, there's finally a point to the repetition, right?" Alice finished Alus' sentence for him with a smile, as she firmly held her AWR. It seemed she understood the essential meaning of the mana control training. It'd be even better if she could use it right away, but she knew that without Alus having to say it.

"Yeah. It should be pretty usable for an offensive spell. At the very least it should work against Fiends."

"Understood, Teacher!"

"That's right, it only makes sense to be able to use Sir Alus' work at the highest level," Loki proudly said in an arrogant tone, for some reason.

Her forehead was still a little red from the ball crashing into it. Alus lightly poked her forehead. "More importantly, have you gotten a feel for the number of pulses you need?" he retorted, as if to say she didn't have the time to lord it over Alice.

"Of course. I've gotten a grasp of it. Around 20 times per second is enough."

"Oh, is that so? Then let's move on to a practical exam."

"Yes! I look forward to it."

Eventually they took a break for lunch, then continued training until it started getting dark out.

In the end, Alice picking up Shiylereis was a great thing.

Normally, spells weren't something you learned in a day. Shiylereis had the power of an intermediate or advanced spell, but the density of mana

information and difficulty in activating the spell were on the low end.

For Alice, who'd already acquired Reflection, she only needed to get used to the spell and practice through repetition to fully master it. Being able to cast spells that used motion of the AWR was something she excelled at, compared to the other students.

Meanwhile, Loki's training was showing some results, too. While there was some lag, she should be able to use it in live combat soon after training some more.

Incidentally, the training ended when it did in part because it was a good time to stop, but also because Alus' license received a private message from Felinella. She made desperate excuses, saying she'd gotten his number from her father Vizaist, and wasn't getting to the point at all, so they decided to meet at Alus' laboratory.

While messaging through licenses was common, it was also susceptible to being intercepted. Alus' license had measures in place to prevent such interceptions, but it was pointless if the other party hadn't done the same so it wasn't all that effective. That was also why they'd decided to keep quiet about the details until they were in private. As such, Alus headed back to the research building alongside Loki and Alice.

They parted ways with Alice, and when Alus and Loki arrived at the door to the laboratory they found Felinella already waiting there, despite the girls' dorm being farther away.

Felinella, having arrived strangely quickly, looked a little nervous, standing like a statue in front of the door.

"Sorry for keeping you waiting."

Seeing Alus after he called out to her, Felinella replied with, "Ah, I only just arrived too... please don't worry about it." She waved her hand as if brushing off his concern. In her other hand was a small paper bag, a present perhaps.

Alus turned to the task of unlocking the door, which opened with sluggish movements.

"Excuse me," Felinella said, as she entered the room last. Once inside, she

gazed around the room.

She didn't appear to be looking for something specific, as based on how her eyes were sparkling she was observing the room as if it were something sacred. She seemed to be immersed in ecstasy.

"What are you looking at? There's nothing that interesting here."

"N-No... that's not true. What can I say... I'm just really happy."

"You're a strange girl."

Felinella flashed an embarrassed smile, and after a polite bow, she stepped deeper inside the room. "R-Right... This isn't anything much, but please accept it." Inside the paper bag were high-quality snacks neatly bundled together.

"What did you even come here for?" Alus was sure this was about the mission, so he felt the wind go out of his sails. However— "For the mission, of course," Felinella answered, with a blank look of surprise.

So this really was about the mission, Alus thought, and passed the tea snacks over to Loki. It seemed they weren't quite seeing eye to eye.

Felinella was nobility, she didn't bypass courtesy, she was constantly polite and even roundabout at times. Alus on the other hand was strictly logical and wanted to finish up important matters immediately. Moreover, Felinella was being strangely meek today, throwing Alus off his pace.

Eventually Loki came out with tea for three, along with the snacks Felinella brought, and the group sat down at the table.

Alus had thought this before, but just the motions Felinella went through when she sat down made her look more like nobility than any other noble lady. "Alright, let's get down to business."

Felinella's expression turned sharp as Alus spoke. "Yes. The other day, the top brass concluded that the group that attacked the Institute was indeed part of Godma's experiments. As a matter of convenience the group of experiments have been named the Dolls. The supreme commander, Governor-General Berwick, has settled on a change in policy. From now on, the mission is no longer merely the elimination of Godma. The mission is now to annihilate

Godma and his Dolls.”

“I guess they don’t have a choice.” It seemed there was no doubt the attackers were moving under Godma’s orders. And there was a good chance Alus knew what they were up to. Doing something as extreme as attacking the Institute made it clear Godma had no intention of hiding anymore.

“What about the goals of the Dolls’ attack?” Loki interjected. This also happened to be on Alus’ mind.

“The General Staff Headquarters has reached a conclusion about that. They believe it very likely that it was some kind of demonstration, maybe a performance test of the Dolls. Taking into consideration the existence of supporters, their success can only be confirmed through a demonstration. Taking on the army itself might have been too risky, but the Institute has future military Magicmasters as well as those retired from duty, making it an optimal location to test their strength.”

“That does make sense...”

“Sir Alus?”

“Is there something on your mind? If you have any suggestions, I’m sure the top brass would take it into consideration...”

“Yeah, I know. The deadline’s approaching after all... no, forget I said anything.” Alus had a feeling something was off, but didn’t have anything conclusive to point to. Besides, even if he made a proposal based on his worries and the top brass said yes, there wasn’t enough time to get it ready.

Something just didn’t feel right. Like they were overlooking something.

“In reality—the attack hasn’t changed the mission at hand that much. At best, Godma’s sensed that something’s up and made the first move. In fact, in that attack the enemy revealed their hand, giving us a lot of information. However, the pursuers the principal sent out lost sight of them.”

“Considering how fast they ran off, I don’t blame them.” Pushing his sense of discomfort aside, Alus urged Felinella on. “What about the plan?”

“On that day, the security forces and the military’s Magicmasters will encircle

the area. Your objective remains the same, but now it's a group annihilation instead of a single assassination."

"In other words, we're not letting any one of them get away."

"I'm sure it will be a lot of work, but scraping together some Triple Digit Magicmasters is the best the military can do." Felinella, serving as the messenger, cast her eyes down apologetically.

"There's no reason for you to apologize, Feli. This is how it always is... This is what the Governor-General has decided on. I would have made the same decision. And with Lord Vizaist taking charge, I won't have to worry about an unexpected defeat if something happens."

"I will let my father know."

"You don't have to go that far. It'll only confuse him."

Felinella held her hand over her mouth and giggled.

Alus continued with, "It was only a joke," as his lips curled up into a smile, while he took another sip of tea.

"Will Ms. Loki take part in the mission too?"

"Of course I will. I'm Sir Alus' partner."

Seeing Loki's resolute attitude, Felinella directed a pleasant expression her way. "Let's do our best," she said, gently smiling at her.

While she said that, on the day of the mission Alus would be the one doing most of the work, so the others might actually wind up with spare time on their hands.

After that, Felinella and Alus went over the details. The more he heard, the more Alus realized how capable Felinella was at gathering information. Almost all of his questions were answered. She was very well prepared.

Eventually, they lapsed into small talk. "I recall Lord Vizaist having an affinity to wind, is it the same for you, Feli?"

"Yes. He's beaten wind spells that would be useful for intelligence gathering into me."

I see, Alus nodded to himself. The wind attribute had a lot of spells for searching an area or gathering information. That said, it didn't mean they got lumped in with the same category as Loki as a detector. They did, however, provide a wide selection to choose from, be it for serving at the frontlines or as auxiliary personnel. It was more apt to describe them as all-purpose.

"Are you aiming to be at the top of the intelligence department, Feli?"

"That's the plan. So I hope to be of some use to you someday, Mr. Alus."

Loki reacted to Felinella's cheeks turning red. "Sir Alus already has me as his partner, so you can focus on your information gathering, Ms. Felinella."

"Oh my, Ms. Loki, you can't get overconfident," Felinella replied in a slightly condescending tone, trying to pacify Loki like a graceful older sister. After smiling softly, she elegantly brought her tea to her lips.

"It's not overconfidence, it's necessity!"

Alus didn't really get the underlying conflict, but he could tell the atmosphere was turning threatening as he shifted his eyes between the two. With nowhere to run, he simply took one sip of tea after another. Finally, his cup was empty, and he unfortunately had to put it down on the table, letting out a sigh.

"That doesn't matter. It only means Feli is suited for information gathering, while Loki is suited for dealing with Fiends. I don't know what's going on between you two, but if this is going to affect the mission I'm leaving you behind." Alus had stepped in to mediate, but his tone was cold.

But it seemed to work, as the two of them realized they were getting their priorities backwards. Each brought her cup to her mouth at the same time as if to signal a ceasefire.

"Look at the time, Feli, don't you have to return to the dorm? We can't have the dorm supervisor breaking curfew."

"Oh, you're right... Time sure does fly." Felinella seemed to have enjoyed the time they spent together, as she had a joyful look on her face. They'd only been idly chatting in the end, but she had still enjoyed it.

That was fine. Spending time like this wasn't all that bad. After all, Alus didn't

feel like much time had passed during their get-together.

Felinella, somewhat reluctantly, stood and gave Loki thanks for the tea. “Thank you, Ms. Loki, the tea was truly delicious. Why don’t we have a tea party in my room so I can pay you back?” On her face was a carefree smile.

Loki seemed to have her guard up, but as she hesitated to answer Alus gave her back a push. First things first—they needed to form a friendly relationship, Alus thought. Loki had a tendency to keep everything bottled up inside her. That was probably something only Alus could resolve.

With no more time to hesitate, Loki spoke out after being urged on by Alus. “If Sir Alus comes with me, then I would certainly participate.”

“Come on, this is a personal invitation for you.” Alus was dumbfounded, as Loki continued to drag her feet. He felt like he was watching his past self. Governor-General Berwick might have felt the same way he did. “Loki, this is one of our bad habits. Why not take her up on her good intentions?”

“Okay... then I will accept, Ms. Felinella.” Loki exaggeratedly bowed deeply.

But Felinella maintained her bright smile. “Then, leave it to me. Mr. Alus, you can join us too if you like.”

“I’m fine. Some other time, maybe.”

“Yes, I’ll look forward to it. Then I’ll take my leave here, Mr. Alus, Ms. Loki.”

“Yeah, thanks.”

“I can prepare tea for you anytime. Ah, please wait a little.” Having remembered something, Loki went to the depths of the room before returning with a paper bag containing an expensive-looking present for Felinella.

With a rare blush, Felinella graciously accepted it.

Alus gazed at the two, seeing their height difference and feeling they looked a bit like siblings, and smiled a little. But if he said that, he imagined Loki would grumble.

By the entrance, Felinella gave the two a very noble and polite bow. The sight of her glossy black hair sliding off her shoulders was dazzling, fixating the eyes of everyone present. She didn’t have the same kind of otherworldly beauty Loki

had, nor the teenage girl cuteness of Alice.

As for a certain redheaded noble, they couldn't even be compared. She had practically none of that elegant and perfect feminine beauty, and the difference between her exterior and interior was quite extreme.

Of course—that was part of Tesfia's charm.

"If anything else happens, let me know."

"Please leave it to me."

Alus offered to escort her back, which she politely declined. It still wasn't that late, and she felt bad about making him walk all that way and back again. With that, Felinella left with a strangely happy smile on her face.

*

Two days remained until the mission.

A very in-depth investigation had been carried out for this one. The military was being exceptionally careful. But in the end, the fact that anything could happen was the same as in the Outer World.

The biggest causes for worry were Godma's eerie movements and the lack of high-ranking Magicmasters.

Estimates for the experiments put them on the same level as Triple Digit Magicmasters in terms of physical capabilities. If Alus were to go up against a lot of them, there was a good chance some might get away.

Since the number of experiments was unknown, they were an uncertain factor. In the worst-case scenario, Alus and Loki might not be enough to deal with them all. That's why there would be an encirclement.

Alus wanted two Double Digit Magicmasters just to be sure, but with preparations and missions going on in the Outer World it'd be difficult to get hold of any. Like Felinella said, this was realistically the best they could do.

While this was an annihilation mission, they couldn't make such big moves that the citizens would notice. After all, Alus' secret missions couldn't really be made public.

The next day, before noon.

The weather inside the human domain was artificial, and it was generally excellent. Neither too hot nor too cold, making it comfortable—but it was set that way by human hands. The temperature was average, with gentle breezes. The sky was almost disgustingly clear.

But in Alus' laboratory, a girl stood wordlessly with a clouded expression.

"And why are you here?" Alus asked bluntly, but the girl had heard about the attack on the Institute and rushed back a few days ahead of schedule, out of worry for her best friend. That said, to Alus her return was poorly timed.

Having enjoyed her vacation, Tesfia was currently wearing a cool tunic and lace-decorated shorts. Despite her short stature, her long legs were put on display. She had her AWR inside a bag with her. Her ponytail was tied higher than usual but was sagging, making her look like a dejected puppy. Her face looked exhausted, in contrast with her outfit.

Alice's name being missing from the injured list should have eased her worries, but Tesfia's worries seemed to have another source.

"Welcome back, Fia."

"Alice, thank god!" A big smile bloomed on Tesfia's face when she heard Alice's voice. "I went through some things, too... but don't ask anything right now and let me hug you." Her bag looked much lighter than when she left the Institute, and she embraced Alice with a crying face.

The fact that she said not to ask, yet looked ready to tell Alice everything was quite amusing.

Alice patted Tesfia on the head like she was a discouraged pet. That she was strangely good at doing this spoke volumes for how long they'd been together. "That doesn't matter, just make sure you take that luggage home."

"Of course I will! I have underwear and other embarrassing things I wouldn't want you rummaging through," Tesfia said to Alus, her red face peeking out from Alice's chest.

"Why the hell would I do that?!"

“Well, Al’s a teenage boy, after all,” Alice said mischievously, her finger on her chin. “Besides, that’s all the more reason not to...”

“Yes, I’d throw it away,” Loki declared, interrupting Alice.

“Uhm, but it’s mine, though...?”

“I’d throw it away.”

“But I might just accidentally forget it...”

“Yes, and I might just accidentally throw it away,” Loki continued without hesitating, a smug smile on her face. It appeared Tesfia’s luggage wasn’t making it past her harsh inspection.

“That’s not accidental. You’re actually declaring that you’d throw it away!”

“The trashy items inside are the last things Sir Alus needs to see. You’re taking it away, right?”

“Y-Yes...”

Thus the attempt at lumping together the greatest Magicmaster with your run-of-the-mill boy in puberty was tragically cut short. That said, Alus already lived with Loki and was skirting the line of ethics.

Picking up the bag she’d put down, Tesfia made sure to put it where she could see it.

“Now I get how you see me,” Alus said. “But fine, it would get thrown away anyways all the same.”

“You can’t! I finally found some cute clothes. I also have a present for Alice.”

“Oh Fia, you only went home for a bit. You didn’t have to do that.”

“It’s fine, I bought it because I wanted to. Ah, I got something for you too, Loki. I’m positive you’ll look good in it, so look forward to it.”

“...” Loki had called it trash before, but Tesfia’s unexpected consideration left her speechless and puzzled. It was a complete surprise to her and she didn’t know how to react. “I-I’ll reconsider throwing it away.” All she could do was rush those words out.

“Yeah, thanks,” Tesfia replied lightheartedly—and the atmosphere in the

room softened up.

Loki felt a little awkward, and Alus, a few steps away, had a gentle glint in his eyes.

He thought to himself that things like this were important, too. He wasn't able to put it in words, but that only made it seem all the more precious. If he were to try to explain it, a portion would surely be lost in translation anyway. It might make it stale, or even dull the recognition of its value. And most of all, just speaking of it was uncouth.

"You better not have spent all your time at home playing around," Alus said jokingly, the edges of his mouth bending upwards.

"Of course not!" Tesfia responded immediately.

Alice and even Loki smiled a little. This exchange seemed nostalgic to them.

Before she knew it, Tesfia's clouded expression was starting to break up in the soft atmosphere. "I didn't go home to horse around... and of course, I didn't skip out on practicing my mana control." Pulling out the training stick, which had been slightly sticking out of the bag, she got in position.

Before long she began coating it in mana. While slow, Tesfia's technique was stable and it covered the surface without breaks. It seemed she had indeed kept up with her training. However...

She really is easy to read. Her flow of mana still remained a little unsteady.

Looking on, Alus realized it wasn't a problem with technique, but was rather due to hesitation, unease or concern. It was a problem in her mind. Mana definitely had a connection to the mind and emotions, but it was rare for it to be this obvious. In a way, it was a very honest manifestation of her mana, just like her. Even if she could temporarily distract herself from it, there was probably some kind of concern in Tesfia's mind.

And it was Alice who brought it up. "Fia... Did something happen? There shouldn't have been any problem about your grades, so was it your magic?"

"That was okay, too. In fact, Mother even praised me." Tesfia gave an awkward and embarrassed smile, but her eyes looked down at the training stick

in her hands, then she looked at Alus. “So, uhm... Al. My mother found me when I was training at home.” She flashed a wry, uncomfortable smile.

Seeing that, Alice saw she probably had an even deeper worry, one that Tesfia herself would prefer not to touch on. But she pretended not to notice, saying instead, “And you wouldn’t be able to make any excuses to her...”

“Hm? Was there a problem with that?” Alus asked. There shouldn’t have been any problems with her family seeing her training. But there was something Alus had completely forgotten.

Alice was the first to say it. “You said so yourself, Al. That stick is made of a precious material and only two exist in the entire world.”

“—! Right. If I recall, your mother was a capable Magicmaster.”

“She was in the military and went to the Outer World a lot. So she’s interested in magic and knows a lot about it.”

“Of course she would...” A first-rate Magicmaster would be able to tell what kind of thing the training stick was just by touching it. Conversely, its appearance was only that of a creepy-looking piece of wood. “And then your mother said something.”

“Y-Yeah... she asked me who I’m getting guidance from... and just who that person is.”

“I bet she would. I honestly would have felt the same way.”

Tesfia looked away, embarrassedly scratching her cheek.

Seeing her best friend like that, Alice could imagine Tesfia’s mother barraging her with questions, and a bitter smile appeared on her lips. “I bet that was tough. Fia’s no match for her mother, after all.”

“Urgh...”

“Geez, you only bring problems with you, don’t you?”

As if embracing Alus’ exasperated words, Tesfia hung her head down. But she’d still done her best to protect the secret. “I thought you would find that bothersome. That’s why I never told Mother who was teaching me, no matter how much she asked.”

“Well, it is a bother, but it’s also a blunder on my part.”

Tesfia meekly raised her head to look at Alus, who realized it was partly his mistake. He was aware that considerations like this needed to be taken into account when teaching the two.

“Good luck, Fia,” Alice said, pampering Tesfia, as if to say that her mother would come around eventually. She succeeded in further taming the redheaded girl who was now as meek as a critter.

Next, Tesfia looked at Alus with a guilty expression. “Al, I didn’t say your name or rank, but I think Mother suspects something. I couldn’t...”

“What does it matter? If she’s a former soldier, then there’s a chance she’ll figure it out sooner or later. Especially when it concerns her own daughter. Isn’t that all right?” Alus had the preconception that that was just how parents were, and he wasn’t all that wrong.

That said, since he didn’t know Tesfia’s parents, it was just a presumption on his part. If biological parents and foster parents acted the same, then Berwick or Vizaist would be useful as examples of how Alus would be treated.

But even if he thought about that, the situation wasn’t going to improve; so he changed gears to something more realistic. “Right, now that the noisy one is back, the two of you should get back to training. I’m going back to my own research.”

Tesfia slowly raised her hand, for some reason not reacting to being called noisy. “Uhm... should I help too as an apology?”

“Oh? Are you trying to cause me even more problems? In fact, how do you think you’re going to help me with my research?”

“That’s right.” Loki didn’t miss her chance to throw in a sharp retort of her own. She didn’t need to wait for Alus to say something to know his research was exceptionally advanced. If not, Loki would have long since been his research assistant as well as his partner.

But this time, she relented on stepping in any further, and left the explanation to Alice. “Tell her, Ms. Alice.”

“Uhm... o-okay.” Alice was taken aback by having the topic suddenly thrown in her lap, but did as Loki asked and explained it to Tesfia. “Fia, thanks to Al’s research I’m able to use another spell now. That’s the kind of level it’s on... so I don’t think you’d be very useful.”

“... Aren’t good intentions enough?”

“Hmm, I think you’d only get in the way.” Unlike before, Alice had had several opportunities to look at Alus’ research process. When she saw the complex character strings and books on advanced magic theory that were lying about, she just felt overwhelmed.

“That’s too bad... let me know if I can do anything.”

“If you have the time for that, get to work on improving your own skills.”

“Geez... I get it... I’m going to get much stronger before you know it.” Tesfia reflected on her remark before saying it out loud. Her tone of voice made it sound like she was trying to convince herself, and behind that was yet more anxiety.

As if to shake free from those feelings, Tesfia forcibly changed the subject. “... Anyways, isn’t that great, Alice! Congratulations on acquiring a new spell! That’s always been on your mind, after all.” A joyful look appeared on Tesfia’s face as though she was happy for herself, and she took hold of Alice’s hands so quickly that she threw her balance off a little.

“Y-Yeah. Thank you, Fia. Thank you again, Al.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Alus simply accepted her thanks. Since he didn’t feel like he’d done anything special, he actually felt a little abashed. “Anyway, you get it now, don’t you? I’m not doing the kind of research you’d be useful for.”

“What’s going on in your head, anyway? Being a Magicmaster and a researcher at the same time is a little extreme.” Tesfia’s way of thinking was common among Magicmasters. To her, Magicmasters were purely people who put theories into practice, leaving research of magic to the specialist scholars.

Behind the explosive development of magic was an orderly division of labor, and a pursuit of logic. Which was perhaps also why the system was so rigid and unchanging.

“This is the problem with people who don’t think things through. Why don’t you study up on the magic you use a little more?”

“Hrk...” Having had a sound argument thrown her way, Tesfia stumbled for words. But she quickly got herself together and said, “Your sublime research has left a deep impression on me. If possible, I would ask you to impart your teachings on the depths of magic to this unworthy mind of mine.”

Tesfia held the hems of her tunic, putting a leg back and bowing, a considerable contrast to her ironic smile. A backhanded compliment, it seemed.

“...” Her intentions aside, Alus felt like this was the first time he’d ever seen her behave like a noble. But since he knew what she was normally like, it felt horribly wrong, too. Normally, one might be captivated by her appearance, but Alus couldn’t imagine it. “That’s what I’m calling shallow. Talk about shrewd.”

“Urgh... t-that’s right... I have a present for you too, Al! I’ll give it to you later.”

She can be clever in the strangest ways. But she’s shrewd either way, Alus thought.

“The ice attribute has a wide variety of spells. Once you’re able to put those to use, we can move on to the real thing.”

“Got it!” Tesfia’s mischievous smile was replaced with an innocent one.

“Also, if you’re going back to the dorm, make sure you eat there. I don’t want you mooching off of us.”

“Who’s mooching here! You don’t even prepare the food yourself.” Tesfia childishly stuck out her tongue in a meager show of revenge.

After that, Tesfia and Alice returned to the girls’ dorm to change and eat. The training grounds had been reserved so Alice could more quickly make minute adjustments to her new spell. However, they had a brief period of free time before then, due to the time of their reservation.

Additionally, Tesfia had shown up with so little luggage because she’d had most of it shipped back, and it was just about time for her to pick it up.

Finally, Alus and Loki were left alone, and silence filled the laboratory after the selfish storm had passed.

Alus sighed, muttering, “Geez, talk about noisy.” But for some reason it didn’t feel as unpleasant as he thought it would. Then again, if it would continue on forever, that would be a problem in itself. His mind would break down from the mental fatigue.

Either way, now was a good time for a break. Just as he was about to ask Loki for some tea, he noticed that something strange was still here.

“... Is she really an idiot?”

Tesfia had gone and left her luggage behind, just after all they had discussed.

Maybe it really was intentional. At the very least, that present of hers should be inside. Which was why—“Don’t throw it away, Loki.”

“I know. That was a joke.” Loki frowned and muttered, “What a hopeless person,” as she glanced at the bag that contained a present not just for Alus, but for her as well.

Eleventh Chapter

Garden of Madness

In Alpha, when one said the word “nature,” the first thing that came to mind was the huge forest situated between the middle-class and upper-class districts.

But at the same time—its grand appearance was also being used as a cover, concealing the ruins of unspeakable deeds.

After humanity had its living space taken away, there was a time when it deeply invested in magic research. And the militaries of all the nations spearheaded inhumane and unethical research projects.

Alpha was no exception. The remains of that stain on its past still lay abandoned in that forest.

While it wasn’t true of all the research, there were still a lot of research projects the nation would have to take responsibility for if they ever came to light. Because of that, entry into the forest was strictly forbidden. Right now, that black mark on the nation’s past was being managed strictly through the law.

The forest was green during the day, but as the sun set, the shades of red dyeing the leaves gradually turned darker. Eventually the forest became dark as night, making the shadows cast by the grove of trees even blacker.

In the depths of the forest—the faint silhouette of something artificial could be seen.

Hidden by the dense canopy of trees were the remains of a secretly-constructed research facility. It had probably been a four-story building, but had deteriorated with the passage of time. The top floor had completely collapsed, leaving the remaining three floors barely standing.

Its insides could be peered into, thanks to all the holes in the walls. The only reason the building still stood was because of the now-exposed steel beams.

The desolate atmosphere gave it that characteristic abandoned building feeling. Only the most eccentric explorer of ruins would want to approach this eerie building draped in darkness.

In a room deep below the building...

Staring into several screens, a man pushed his grimy glasses up with the tip of a finger. His gray hair was crudely tied up, and he wore a dirty lab coat. He had his hands in his pockets as he stared fixedly at one of the screens flickering with lights.

Godma Barhong.

His many cruel human experiments had been exposed, and living life on the run, he'd been offered this place as a hideout.

Noise filled the screen he was staring at, and in the next moment a video call appeared. As one-sided as it was, there was only one person who would contact him like this in the past few years.

"What is it, Enouve?" Godma asked the person on the other side of the screen, in a low voice that was hoarse and grating to the ears.

"The military is putting their plan into action tomorrow. You better not screw up."

But on the screen wasn't this Enouve person. Instead, lines of text appeared as if to add subtitles to their voice. The voice was garbled, but Godma could just barely make out enough to presume it belonged to a man.

In fact, Enouve might be a fake name that was being used for convenience's sake.

In short—Godma had no clue as to Enouve's identity.

"You've received this much support. You better show some results."

"Oh, I know." Not only had Godma, on the run from the military, received a hideout and funds for his research, but even the early stages of a full set of equipment. That alone was enough, and he had no reason to pry further.

Besides, Godma only expected backup from Enouve. Having abandoned the world, and having the world abandon him back, Godma's sole desire was to fulfill his research. "Understood. Then let us meet at the foot of Andel as planned."

Along the border of a nation, two nations north of Alpha, was the Andel mountain range. Once the dust settled, Enouve and Godma were to meet there.

That said, Enouve was being cautious and seemed to have arranged for a representative.

In exchange for providing Godma with a place of rest and supporting his element factor separation research, Enouve wanted more from Godma—his additional research on the ability to acquire the elements after birth, as well as the mental manipulation that created living combat dolls. Enouve also wanted an explanation for the elements and how they occurred.

To Godma, who'd been out of options, this secret meeting and the accompanying proposal had been a shining beacon of hope.

However, after several years, the deadline was almost here; and at the same time his research was finally reaching the practical stage. At the very least, he'd reached the standard Enouve was asking for.

But that wasn't enough for Godma. In order to use the light attribute, mana information needed to be overwritten with an excellent element factor.

That much was fine. But the experiments created that way weren't actually able to use light magic. The reason for that was to be found in the self. The mana information that constantly changed with accumulated experience was rejecting the element nature that had been transplanted as a shallow layer.

Godma dealt with that by filling the mana information, including the Fundamental Words, with the element factor. The result of that was the collapse of the self, but to him that was within expectations, and he actually preferred it that way. After all, he was able to make puppets that obeyed orders by taking control of their brain waves.

The biggest flaw was in the details of the element factor used to overwrite the mana information—it was overwhelmingly lacking. The replication of the factor itself only resulted in an inferior version that didn't have the same strength of the original.

When he made his escape, he'd only managed to get away with some documents and the small number of blood samples that had been drained and put in test tubes.

The experiments with the replicated factor written into their mana

information were only able to use around one light attribute spell.

But seeing the enormous amount of data that was written in as knowledge inside the brain, Enouve pushed the project on to a practical stage: namely, remaking the minds and bodies of people to create augmented humans. That was a little different from the goal of Godma's research, but it was an accomplishment in its own right.

Godma had no problem with operating on young boys and girls that were either orphans with nowhere to go, or had been kidnapped from somewhere. In fact, he felt something akin to pleasure in creating Magicmasters that rivaled Triple Digits with his own two hands. And now he could see the further heights of his research.

He carefully held up an old crumbling book like it was a treasure for Enouve to see. "Even I was surprised by this. An original first part of the Four Books of Fegel. It's completely different from the copied versions. I can see why Alpha didn't even want to let the copies out into the world. If this is just the first part, what is in the rest...?"

"Don't bother thinking of anything unnecessary. All you have to do is bring results. If you can do that, we will be generous. Eventually we might even consider meeting in person, rather than through a representative, and even allow you to touch the other books."

"Now that is a very enticing offer. Don't worry, no matter who you might be, you won't regret it. I'll shave away at Alpha's power. After all, they're even preparing a sacrifice for me."

"We're sure you're aware of this, but they have the current No. 1 on their side."

"Alus Reigin. I just confirmed it on my end as well. He might be No. 1, but he's only human. The power of an individual is no match for my works."

Not even Godma had expected that a young man stood at the top of the hundreds of thousands of Magicmasters. Moreover, his being at an institute for novices was nothing short of a joke. At first he'd thought he was a fake, but according to Enouve's information the young man was without a doubt the current No. 1.

Backing up that information further was the encounter between him and Godma's experiments that he'd dispatched to the city as a test. It had only been a coincidence that they'd run into each other, but Godma's calculations told him that 30 or so experiments would be enough to deal with him. While he didn't go so far as to consider him a mere child, he was still more or less making light of him.

"... That would be nice. But what we demand is results from your research. Whether they will be of use in combat or not is all that matters."

"If I follow the escape route, I should arrive in four days." This was the last stage of a carefully laid plan. According to the plan, Godma would be able to show off the results of his research, throwing Alpha into chaos while he made a leisurely escape.

But Enouve's muffled voice coming from the screen replied without any intonation. "Fine, as long as you bring results with you. But still, all you magic researchers being insane is a big help. I wish you the best of luck, Professor. Next time we meet will be at the foot of Andel," he concluded, and hung up.

If you asked Godma who was more erratic, though, he'd firmly declare Enouve to be far more insane than him. Not only had he brought with him the Four Books of Fegel, whose very existence was questionable, he also supplied Godma with raw materials for the creation of augmented humans, and sometimes a guinea pig or two.

Moreover—"I even got a magic formula that was supposed to have been erased... Hm, hm, hm, I'd say you're just as insane as me."

Enouve, however, was still cautious. He never gave Godma any critical information. Enouve alone could never have been responsible for the vast funds and more that Godma had received. Some sort of massive organization was behind him.

It wasn't like Godma had never considered who it was, but whenever he did, it was just a passing thought. Something as trifling as that wasn't a problem to him, so long as he could continue down his path of lunacy.

But while he wouldn't say it out loud, Godma, with his intelligence, already had a good idea of their identity.

The experimentation on augmented humans, a black mark on the past, was one of the things the seven nations had declared to be illegal. In the past, however, the seven nations each had their characteristic research, and several nations had had a fixation with augmented humans. Then again, that was something Godma had only managed to learn after hacking into the military's database.

Or perhaps it was a nation that had suffered at the hands of Fiends repeatedly breaking through Babel's barrier in the past. The nation of Balmes, situated to the north on the opposite side of Alpha, was one such nation, as its Single Digit Magicmasters were inferior to those of other nations. Perhaps they wanted something to bolster their forces as quickly as possible for the sake of survival, even if they were still just experiments.

It was also possible that it was some kind of anti-Magicmaster organization. It could also be an organization that worshipped Fiends, as being above humans. Dark cults existed even before human dominance of the world was overthrown. With the appearance of Fiends, they were given a clear direction for their worship, making them more radicalized. It wouldn't be strange for a group such as them, constantly oppressed, to choose to fight fire with fire.

Either way, all Godma had to do was to erase every trace of the research he'd done here and bring the data with him.

While the owner of the room stared at the screen that had filled with static once the call was ended, the other screens still displayed the recordings the experiments had brought back. That's when a clear voice came from behind Godma.

"That's the last of them. This one took severe damage and died on the way back."

The voice belonged to a girl wearing a robe, with a hood covering her eyes. The chestnut-colored hair peeking out from the hood was clearly not being taken care of, as it hung over her face. At one point in time she'd had pretty facial features, but now her complexion was awful and she looked haggard. She grimaced with chagrin, and had a scar on her face.

The flickering screens lit her up as she spoke. Her voice was robotic, but there

was obvious pain in it.

She'd set out to pick up the experiments Godma had sent out, collecting one of the experiments that had barely managed to escape but didn't have the strength to make it all the way back. It must have been seriously injured during the attack on the Institute.

She held it in both arms. It had passed away with its eyes slightly open, turning into a real puppet.



“Good work, Melissa. Too bad about that one, but let’s dispose of it. I sent out five of them, and three have been completely put out of business, huh. Well, I suppose they tried their best.”

His words of appreciation were shallow, and his tone was cruel. He’d only bothered to glance in the experiment’s direction, and having lost interest, his gaze drifted back to the recordings playing on the screens. Truth be told, he didn’t care. He’d only lost a few pawns.

The girl called Melissa easily held the female experiment in her arms, but when she heard his instructions, she began walking. Before long she put the expired experiment down on what looked like a stretcher, alongside the others. An automated scan began running right away, sending the recorded data to one of the screens in front of Godma.

Once he finished watching the recording, he finally turned back to the three experiments. Pushing the stretchers, he moved them to the corner of the facility, speaking out to the silent experiments.

“Unfortunately, I’ve decided to dispose of you. You can’t keep failing like this, you’re setting a bad example for the others... nor is it fair. But don’t worry, I still have plenty more to replace you.”

Having arrived at his destination, he used his wrinkled hand to operate a panel on the wall. As he did, the floor below the stretchers opened up, revealing a huge hole.

Next, Godma pressed a glowing blue button on the sides of the stretchers. The stretchers began to slant down, with a quiet humming noise. Eventually, the bodies of the three experiments fell down into the hole.

Just like that, Godma finished disposing of the three like they were toys he’d gotten sick of playing with.

The remaining two that had returned from the attack didn’t seem the least bit concerned with the treatment of the other three, as they simply directed their cold stares at the ceiling. Even when they blinked, their movements were mechanical and without vigor.

Incidentally, this made six experiments dumped into the disposal chute,

including some lookouts around the base.

Unlike Godma who went through the process in a familiar fashion, Melissa behind him turned her eyes away, staring at a wall until the job was done.

When he was finished, Godma turned his eyes to a different experiment cowering in the corner of the room. This was one of the experiments that had returned from the town the other day. A dirty hood covered the woman's face as she tremblingly bit on her nails, despite her thin fingers no longer having any nails left to bite on.

As he coldly observed her, Godma thought to himself, *I suppose now's a good time.*

After shaking his head, he softly spoke to the experiment. "If I recall... you were one of the first-born ones."

This crude experiment's emotions had all been stolen and she wouldn't move without Godma's orders. As time passed, her body began to quiver and withdrawal symptoms started to appear. Eventually, she'd become unable to even remain still.

I've gotten more than enough samples, and it's been about three years. Before long, Godma stopped walking and sat down in front of the shaking experiment. "You've done well to last this long. But a failure is a failure. It wouldn't be fair to the others if I gave you special treatment. You understand that, right?"

As expected, there was no answer. Not even his orders could reach her. The experiment couldn't stay quiet, as she let out a groan.

Godma lifted the thin girl's body in his arms and slowly headed for the disposal chute.

A sound reached his ears. It was a scream from Melissa who was watching him. "What are you doing! Stop, she's still alive!"

"No... she's done more than enough. We should let her rest now."

"Wait! Wait!!" Melissa raised her voice in desperation, but by the time she weakly grasped at Godma's lab coat it was already too late. "A-Ah... no..."

Godma dusted off his hands over the hole like he'd finished a job. When he turned around, he noticed Melissa's hand on his coat and raised his eyebrow questioningly. "What are you doing, Melissa? They're not family anymore. As the eldest, how do you not know that? Now, how long are you going to be going on like this? Even though there's so much of what you wanted here!" he scolded Melissa with anger in his voice.

He mercilessly swung his hand and gave Melissa a slap.

"—!!" She closed her eyes and accepted the blow, her body trembling.

Godma's angry slap had a surprising amount of force behind it for his thin body, but the pain dealt was emotional rather than physical. "Don't make me regret leaving your emotions intact. You're the oldest sister of this family, don't make me deem you a failure!" He pulled out a small device from his lab coat's pocket.

And when she saw that, Melissa forgot about the pain in her reddened cheek as she clung on to Godma. Her eyes glistened with fear like a young girl. "No, please... anything but that... I'll do anything... but that scares me... I can't take not being myself anymore." She desperately squeezed out the words from her quivering throat, pleading with Godma. Crying, clinging onto Godma's lab coat, she sought for a means to escape her fears... begging him for mercy.

Because of the light above, the shadows cast on Godma's face as he looked down on her made it impossible to make out his expression. Perhaps taking pity on her, he bent over. He then smiled gently at her before grabbing hold of her hair and pulling her head up.

"Aaaaahhh—!!"

"You had the ability to use the light attribute, but were crushingly lacking in talent for a Magicmaster. I'm the one who made you usable!"

Melissa was one of the test subjects Godma gathered from the Element Factor Separation Project. But she didn't have the qualities to make full use of the elements. Not everyone could become a Magicmaster by earnestly studying and trying.

A construct domain in the mind was something used to cast spells, and was

one of the fundamentals of a Magicmaster's power. However, a portion of the population wasn't born with the ability to put this domain to proper use.

That only closed their path to becoming a Magicmaster. It wouldn't impact their ability to lead a normal life. They could still have a family and be surrounded by happiness, plain as it might be.

But as an orphan, Melissa had no relatives. She had nobody she could call family, unable to find tranquility in that.

"Oh, poor Melissa. That Alice you met at the facility was quite attached to you... but you still parted ways with her. Even after losing her parents, she still had her talents to fall back on. Do you understand what I mean? Melissa, you have nothing. That's why this is the only place where you'll ever belong. In exchange, I'll prepare people for you to love."

Giving her a smile like a loving father, Godma let go of Melissa's hair. He then pulled a comb out of his pocket and began carelessly fixing up her messy hair. He slid the comb through her hair, ignoring any strands getting caught and torn off.

Melissa bit down on her lip to keep her groans of pain from leaking out. Once Godma saw a bunch of hair unable to withstand his forcible approach lying on the floor, he took a break. "There, now you look beautiful." With a satisfied look, he shoved the comb, still covered in hair, back in his pocket.

Godma had a gentle look on his face as he stared down at Melissa, but an insane sadistic streak could be seen in him as well. He pushed his finger into her chest and instructed her. "Don't worry, Melissa. Alice will always be at your side, quite literally inside of you... You may have treated her like a substitute for your family, but you have a bond that runs stronger than blood. How ironic that you would be a match for her factor."

"... Stop..."

Don't say any more than that, Melissa pleaded in her head, proof of the guilt she felt. She'd parted ways with Alice of her own accord, yet even now she was looking for someone to fill the hole in her heart. It was because of that miserable side of hers that she'd distanced herself in the first place. Indeed, she hadn't changed at all since then.

“—!”

Suddenly, Melissa held her breath. Her eyes opened wide. Her stare was fixated on one of the many screens in front of Godma.

On it was a girl with honey-colored hair.

Alice!

There was no doubt about it. She’d grown a lot since they last met, but Melissa would never forget her beautiful hair and hazel-colored eyes.

Her innocent smile looked just like she remembered seeing once in a while at the facility. She really was the same as back then... Melissa was frozen on the spot, captivated by Alice. The only thing different was that there was no longer any sadness hidden in her expression.

Melissa was shocked. To think she would ever see Alice Tilake again...

She quietly held back the feelings welling up inside of her. She couldn’t let Godma catch on.

Not to this, and not to a certain plan she had...

Melissa tore her eyes away from the screen with painful reluctance. That’s when Godma walked up to her and softly whispered something into her ear.

She silently listened without budging an inch. But if he paid close attention, he would be able to see her trembling fist.

With a satisfied smile, Godma backed away from Melissa and pulled out that small device again. It was just big enough to fit in his palm and had several buttons on it. “And I believe you’ve reflected on your actions enough as well. Now it’s time for you to go to sleep.”

“Please, stop it!”

Ignoring Melissa’s sharp scream, Godma smiled and pushed a button on the device.

With a click, Melissa’s consciousness sank. She felt like she was falling into darkness, at the same time as she felt something else floating to the top. Something that wasn’t her was filling up her now empty shell.

That’s what she feared more than anything. The thought of asking herself who she was, was a scary prospect.

She didn’t even know if she’d ever be able to make it back to the surface again. And the fact that her body would move while she was unaware made her question her very reason for existing.

Eventually, when all strength left her body and the light faded from her eyes, Godma quietly gave her instructions in a gentle voice.

Having become an obedient puppet, Melissa’s body moved mechanically, carrying out the order she’d been given. Her body left the room, returning to the ‘house’ where she’d be surrounded by her big family.

Reaching her designated location, she stopped and remained motionless.

Indeed, she was standing in one of the lines of experiments filling a vast room. The way they were lined up, in such an orderly fashion, made them look like weapons of war before an attack.

There was one more experiment standing at the front with Melissa, guarding the silence. This one had a peculiar feature in that its eyes were different colors. One appeared to be an artificial eye with a transparency that made it look like glass. Despite the short hair, its slender jawline made it apparent that it was a woman, as did the bulges under the robe.

Godma slowly followed after Melissa, walking up to the other experiment. He lightly tapped her shoulder, as if to show his deep affection.

As he did, the experiment with the rare odd-eyed affliction slowly blinked her eyes.

“You know your role, don’t you? That’s also why we attacked.”

The lips of the peculiar experiment—Odd Eyes—trembled for a moment before moving. “R-Run... Deliver.”

Godma nodded at the satisfactory answer, and returned to the other room to look over the screens again.

His eyes fixed on one of the recordings that had played before.

His thin lips twisted into a smile, and his dark eyes seemed to be enraptured.

“It’s a near unscientific possibility, but this isn’t bad for a coincidence. Don’t you think... Alice?”

*

The time was just past noon, shortly after Tesfia had taken Alice with her to the girls’ dorm.

A silence, and slight melancholic feeling filled the room as if the party had just ended. Training was next on the schedule, but since the girls would eat before returning, Alus had some time on his hands.

Yet when they left and Loki headed for the kitchen, she would end up having to prepare four cups of tea.

The moment of quiet was soon broken by the appearance of a rude visitor.

“Come in,” Alus said in an exasperated tone, urging the person in, having picked up on a presence.

Just then, the bell sound signaling the existence of a visitor rang out. The sturdy door slowly opened, and the person in question could be seen loitering with a dejected expression.

“Principal. Sorry for keeping you waiting.”

That was of course sarcastic, but the person in question didn’t seem to mind. “Oh no, no need to worry... actually, could you not call me in before I even ring the bell? You scared me. In fact, I feel stupid for even using magic to hurry over here.”

What was with that manner of speaking when she’s the one who showed up unannounced? Alus felt a little fed up, but still answered apathetically. “So what would you prefer I had done?”

Sisty cleared her throat and straightened her posture. She then pressed her finger on an imaginary doorbell and said, “Ding dong.”

The thought of having to participate in this farce bothered Alus, so he decided to get out of this in the fastest way possible.

As a result—“... Come in.”

“Thank you for having me!”

In the end he’d followed Sisty’s lead, which seemed to alleviate her snit a little. After nodding in satisfaction, she suddenly realized something. “This is less of a place to live and more like a laboratory. Do you even need such a thick door?”

“That’s something the Governor-General did on his own. The equipment here is pretty expensive, and the materials are even more precious. It’s only natural that it’d be strictly secured.”

Sisty had a look on her face that said nothing here seemed that expensive... or rather, she didn’t have a grasp on it. She’d read everything related to the textbooks they used for studying, but she had no interest in boring research material that wasn’t directly related to magic. However, all the materials here were valued pretty highly.

No matter how much Sisty looked around, this certainly didn’t look like a Magicmaster’s room. It was much more like a researcher’s room. Even the equipment was on a par with military equipment. But after gazing around the room once, she lost interest in it.

“Uhm, don’t you have anything else to do?” Alus had no idea why she’d even shown up, and seriously wondered if she was just here because she had a bunch of time on her hands.

“... How rude. There’s nothing strange about the principal inspecting a student’s room, is there?”

“No, that’s definitely strange.” His chin in hand, Alus was already finding it troublesome to deal with Sisty’s behavior. This was without a doubt his home ground, yet he felt like Sisty was seizing the initiative.

Eventually, Loki spotted an opening and brought out two cups of tea.

“Thank you, Ms. Loki. It’s like there’s nothing more I can ask for.” Taking her cup, Sisty headed not for the table, but towards Alus’ desk.

“I’d prefer it if you didn’t hang around here too long, just so you know. I have to watch over that sloppy pair after this,” Alus said, referring to Tesfia’s and Alice’s training.

“I’m not free enough to hang around. After all, it seems my students are hard workers that are energetically taking part in activities even outside of school.”

“Wouldn’t the principal be proud to have a group of hard workers? And as students like those gather at the Institute and grow, you’ll be able to take it even easier. I feel envious just imagining it.”

Having had her sarcasm met with sarcasm, Sisty flashed a brief smile before deliberately sighing. Taking a sip of tea, she sat down at the corner of Alus’ desk and looked down at the documents on it.

Despite being raised in the military, Alus wasn’t boorish enough to bring up manners over Sisty’s behavior, but he was still worried that she might knock over his mountain of papers.

“So you really do remember,” Sisty sighed.

“You should have complained to me back then.”

Of course Alus and Loki remembered the large Fiend invasion that happened several years ago. After all, they were at the frontlines of what could be considered one of the three greatest threats in history to the nation of Alpha.

“You haven’t changed. Anyway, once you reach a certain status it’s hard to take it easy,” Sisty said.

“Yes... you’re right about that.”

“But you still haven’t given up challenging the impossible. You’ve already realized it, haven’t you? The fundamental problem... that it’s impossible because we’re only human.”

Alus’ excuse for wanting to take it easy was that he could then focus on his research. And that was indirectly caused by something unnecessary that Sisty had once brought up. “Of course. Five years have passed since I began my research, but I realized that in my first year.”

“But you’re still continuing.”

“As a researcher, you realize that there’s value in something precisely because it’s impossible. I seem to be possessed by the impossibility of that notion I heard from you. I have no qualms about making it one of my research

themes.”

“You really are strange,” Sisty said in a dumbfounded tone, and looked at Alus like he was some kind of eccentric. She quickly covered her lips with her cup, but she probably had a calm smile underneath.

That’s when the bell to the laboratory rang out again. Another visitor was waiting for permission to come inside by the open door. The reason it was open was due to Sisty’s consideration.

“Principal, you’re here.”

“Yes, I was waiting for you, Ms. Felinella.”

And with that, Loki’s four cups each reached their destination. She had probably scanned her surroundings once the principal arrived, and noticed another would likely show up soon.

Apparently, Sisty had chosen this time to appear so that she could listen in on Felinella’s report.

Bothered by Sisty’s problematic statement, Felinella gave Alus a questioning look. The reason, of course, was because Alus’ mission was classified and not even the principal was privy to the details.

Felinella received her cup from Loki and waited for Alus’ decision.

Alus spoke to Sisty, convinced of something. “I see, so you went ahead and talked things over with the Governor-General.”

“Of course. It would be negligent for the principal to not be aware of the whole story when my students are involved.”

“And will you be taking part in the mission?”

“Unfortunately, I still have a ton of work to do. But since the Institute was attacked, I wanted to at least hear what you had to say. Nobody has a clearer picture of the incident than the people concerned, right?”

Alus had expected that she wouldn’t take part in the plan, but he objectively decided to agree to have Sisty hear Felinella’s report. Especially so if she had the Governor-General’s permission.

He urged Felinella on, but she still looked a little hesitant.

She excused herself to Sisty and slowly stood up. The cup was still in her hand, but the surface of the tea didn't move in the slightest as she elegantly made her way to Alus' side. After putting her cup and saucer down on Alus' desk, she leaned over to whisper in his ear.

"... Are you sure this is all right? The principal might have deep connections with the military, but she's no longer a soldier. She has no need to fall under their command. In fact, if she moves on her own she might risk the entire mission... huh?!"

Felinella's surprised intake of breath reached Alus' ear. As her hair fluttered, an elegant fragrance different from tea reached his nose.

She was surprised by his actions. He had put his finger against her lips to silence her. "Say no more. There's no problem, I guarantee it. The reason being the circumstances for her standing down from her seat as a Single Digit... that's right, the Witch only ever moves for Alpha," Alus said, referring to Sisty's past.

But Felinella was even more surprised by how he'd silenced her, and she was taken aback with her eyes wide open.

After a few seconds she managed to calm down. Felinella's lips curled into a smile under Alus' finger, and after pulling back a little, she spoke out again. "I-I understand... I may have been overstepping my boundaries." A faint rosy color appeared on her cheeks.

"Ahem! Excuse me," Loki blatantly cleared her throat and apologized for interrupting. Her brow furrowed, showing her displeasure.

Next, she violently brought tea to her mouth and glanced over at Felinella to keep an eye on her under the guise of drinking. It was clear that this was just a demonstration, as in reality the tea only touched her lips, never passing down her throat.

Enjoying this, a mean smile floated up on Sisty's face. "Heh, it's certainly not easy... in fact, it's a handful. But what you just said was problematic. I appreciate the consideration... I'm not sure where you heard about it, but I ask you not to say a word to anyone about it."

“Understood... so Feli, with the Governor-General’s permission, this isn’t something I can interfere with.” Of course, the Governor-General might just have been cajoled as well.

Alus wasn’t sure if that was the truth behind Sisty’s moniker of Witch, but she wasn’t the principal of the Institute for nothing. She was a former Single Digit, but she still had a political and diplomatic existence matching that rank.

“Yes, I understand. Then I’ll briefly summarize the current report.” Felinella’s expression suddenly turned into that of a dignified soldier’s, and she moved in front of the desk.

Sisty leaned against the wall, listening.

As for Loki, she put her cup down on the edge of the desk and positioned herself next to Alus.

After a short pause, Felinella began her report.

During the previous report, a concern regarding the lack of Magicmasters in the encirclement had been brought up. At the moment they had a big enough number for the encirclement, but there was a problem with the quality of them.

There were few Triple Digit Magicmasters or higher, meaning that it was an encirclement only in theory. If they came into combat with the Dolls, it was very likely that the enemy could get the upper hand.

As of now, the Double Digit Magicmasters still hadn’t returned from the missions in the Outer World. Moreover, Magicmasters were being divided up for other purposes as well. With the Institute having been attacked, important facilities had been assigned Magicmaster guards.

Incidentally, Godma’s hideout had already been located thanks to Felinella purposefully letting the opponents she had fought escape, and tracking them with a mana needle.

“Feli, how many Dolls are there?”

“I’m sorry. At the moment, we’ve only confirmed 17, but... it will likely be difficult to get an accurate count before the day of the mission.” Supposedly there were too many uncertain factors to specify the enemy numbers.

There was also the attack on the Institute, where the Dolls could have just as easily been destroyed. If they were few in numbers, such a plan would have been nothing short of stupid; but the fact that they went through with it meant they had plenty to spare.

“Well, since we know their hideout, we could use a powerful detection spell to get a grasp of their numbers,” Sisty said.

While that was a possibility, there were exceptions to everything. When it came to detection magic, it was possible to counteract it to a certain degree as long as you were aware of it, something Fiends might not do but humans would.

The target, Godma, wasn’t a Magicmaster himself, but he had a mysterious backer that allowed him to complete the Dolls. It wouldn’t be strange to assume that they were prepared for something like detection magic.

“Lord Vizaist should be aware of the limits of detection magic. He’s most likely concluded it would be difficult to fully grasp the situation after considering all possible methods,” Alus said.

Loki nodded. “Something like an underground facility will make it difficult for a user of something like mana sonar to pick up the reactions. It would be even more inaccurate from afar, and there may be countermeasures in place too... meaning that I wouldn’t rely on the results too much.”

Having finished her tea, Sisty put her cup down next to her. “I see. Then I have to ask, at what kind of numbers would they start posing a problem for the mission?”

Realizing what Alus was trying to figure out, Sisty was essentially asking him the upper limit of what he’d be able to deal with, in order to tell how big of a hurdle he could handle before the mission would be in jeopardy.

Alus didn’t hesitate to stick up the five fingers on his hand. “Well... about 50.”

“My, what a modest estimate.”

“I’m sure you experienced it for yourself. They can take a lot of punishment and keep going. You can’t assume they’re normal. And since I don’t know what’s going on inside their hideout, I can’t just blow it up with magic. There’s

no guarantee there aren't any innocent civilians there, after all. However..."

Having said that, Alus proposed the quickest solution he could think of. "If I take out Godma, who's likely at the top of their chain of command, their numbers won't matter. With the head gone, they'll just be fumbling around in the dark. The only problem is that I don't know how they'll act after that. I don't even want to imagine it if they all followed their master and self-destructed, and if they scatter and escape, Loki and I won't be enough to stop everyone. Meaning that would be left up to the Magicmasters encircling the area... but it would probably be too much for them."

Felinella added on to Alus' suspicions. "At the moment, we've gathered around 500, but the majority are four digits or lower. The security forces have also sent some squadrons in, so there's some non-Magicmasters involved, too. If there are more than 50 of them... that could be a problem."

Alus estimated the Dolls' combat capabilities to be around the same as a Triple Digit Magicmaster, meaning they could very well break through the encirclement. He racked his brain. In order to make an informed decision, he needed to know the forces' chain of command. "And who's in charge?"

With over 500 taking part and plenty of enemies, unless an experienced commander stood at the head of their forces, the encirclement would quickly be broken through. There was even the chance that the encirclement would have a lot of holes. Just keeping them reined in would be difficult.

It had already been decided, but Felinella was slow to explain. "T-That would be, uhm... my father..."

"Lord Vizaist, is it? It's rare to see him take command of a larger force, but if it's him then I have nothing to worry about." Alus trusted Vizaist so much because of his personality and because he recognized his capabilities.

While he was now head of the intelligence department, Vizaist was once a renowned Magicmaster active in the Outer World. He was also Alus' former superior officer and had achievements as a commander.

Meanwhile, Felinella let out a sigh of relief. She knew Vizaist's opinion of Alus, but not the opposite. As his daughter she felt she had a good grasp of his abilities, but she couldn't help but worry how the current No. 1 would see him.

She'd had her concerns as family, but hearing Alus' praise, her opinion of her father rose.

However, there was one person present who didn't know much about this mission's commander. "Sir Alus, I only met Lord Vizaist once, but from my impression he's not as much a commander as a..."

"Well, that's probably what it would look like to you, Loki. Witch Sisty, one of the three leaders that built up Alpha's splendor, is more knowledgeable about this than I am..."

Sisty glared at Alus, sick of hearing him use her Witch moniker over and over again. It wasn't an alias she was fond of, but there wasn't a more fitting second name that described her better.

"Among the wind attribute users, Lord Vizaist is very well suited for information gathering," Alus continued. "He can get a grasp of the entire battle situation with detection magic."

In other words, he was able to do what Loki did during the extracurricular lesson all on his own. Just that alone would have been enough to surprise her.

"I've learned a lot from him, too."

"Even you have, Sir Alus?!"

"It's not like I could do everything from the start."

Vizaist himself might never have considered himself as teaching Alus anything. Meanwhile, Felinella knew about it. Her father had brought it up a few times. To her, Vizaist was her father but also her master. Which was why her opinion of him again went way up.

No matter how competent Vizaist was, the security forces joining in made the situation more complicated. Out of the 500 member force, fewer than 40 were Triple Digits.

When dealing with an opponent that was underground, the standard was to have a tight, thick encirclement. The forces would be deployed with the powerful individuals set up at certain intervals, and the situation would get stirred up with the Triple Digits acting as the main line.

“Will you be taking part in this too, Feli?” Strictly speaking she wasn’t a soldier, but a student at the Institute. If she became even more invested in this mission, she’d be far exceeding her role as auxiliary personnel. Lord Vizaist likely wouldn’t agree to put his daughter in a dangerous position so easily, either.

“I offered to, but I was harshly scolded—being told that it was a job for soldiers.” Felinella shrugged with a wry smile, suggesting that she knew what would happen when she asked.

That would indeed have been overstepping her boundaries. No parent would send their beloved daughter into a life or death situation while she was still just a student. Involving a student could even put the principal of the Institute under fire. Even if she was a noble that had a duty to uphold, and would eventually join the military, she was still a student at the moment. Vizaist’s decision was objectively correct.

“... But I was allowed to join on one condition.”

“Huh?” Alus exclaimed, in a rare surprised tone.

“And what condition would that be?” Loki asked in Alus’ place. She must have been anticipating something, as her expression was stiff and more curt than usual.

“I was given permission as long as I help you, Mr. Alus,” Felinella said in a carefree tone. She was wearing the brightest smile he’d seen today, as well as exuding an atmosphere that wouldn’t accept any answer other than yes.

Finding himself at a loss for words, Alus averted his eyes from her smile in an attempt to escape from reality.

Meanwhile, Loki glanced at him, looking worried.

“Oh my,” Sisty laughed. Thinking this was the perfect situation for alcohol, she headed for the kitchen while humming. After Loki called out to her to steer clear of the spirits, Sisty began preparing tea on her own.

Alus ignored the older woman, and scratched his head, trying to conjure up a solution for his biggest problem.

What is Lord Vizaist thinking? It'd be one thing if Felinella was in the rear providing support, but Alus was all but guaranteed to get caught up in the fiercest fighting.

On the other hand, she'd dealt with one of the intruders during the attack on the Institute, and she led her team through the extracurricular lesson without letting them get hurt.

And most of all—her soft yet firm willpower showing through her smile made Alus suspect he no longer had a say in the matter.

"... Well, I suppose it's all right." That was the best he could muster. It wasn't like Felinella would be holding him back. And since they were already lacking numbers, having a Triple Digit's help would be a big boon.

The worst situation could be avoided as long as she was with him, but Alus dreaded the thought of what Vizaist would say if she got hurt.

Unaware of how Alus felt, Felinella bowed with a spring in her step, and thanked him profoundly.

It was rare for someone as reserved as Felinella to be so energetic, and at the same time, Loki looked like the world was ending. Her hands trembled, and her shoulders and head drooped. She was feeling so down that one could almost see the dark clouds gathering above her.



After glancing Loki's way for a moment, Alus decided to lay down the law. "... But I'm not going to babysit you. If you look like you'll get in the way, I'll send you back."

"Of course. I have no objections to that," Felinella answered immediately without any hesitation. Her joyful expression had only lasted for a moment, and was now replaced with intelligence and calm. She already knew that doing something unnecessary, or not doing anything at all could bring trouble to everyone.

Hearing Alus push Felinella away, Loki felt a little relieved. Serenity returned to her eyes as she stared at Felinella, and she started to focus on the mission again.

With a sigh of relief, Alus thought of yet another concern. While their opponents might be experiments, they looked just like normal humans. So he worried over whether Loki and Felinella could be cold-hearted when dealing with them.

Though he could give them some cover, this mission required that they have the resolve to do what was asked of them. Dealing with Fiends was much simpler mentally.

Vizaist probably gave his daughter permission to go, in order to let her gain more experience. In any event, Alus wanted her to—at the very least—be able to protect herself. That said, to Alus the condition that she only was coming along if she helped him, sounded a lot like Vizaist was saying he would never forgive him if something happened.

As Alus recalled that giant's hearty laughter, that man who doted so heavily on his daughter, his worries had no end in sight.

*

Tesfia and Alice left the girls' dorm around the time that Felinella and Sisty left Alus' laboratory. That was because they'd taken a short break after retrieving Tesfia's luggage from home and had lunch at the cafeteria commons.

They'd changed out of their uniforms for the training, but the conversation between them was more distant than normal. From an onlooker's perspective

they still looked like good friends, and there hadn't been any awkward silences during lunch either.

But it was mostly Alice bringing up things to talk about. She was especially passionate about hearing what had happened when Tesfia went home. When she asked about it, it was as if she was trying to get away from something... in fact, there was something she would rather not think about.

Something felt off about her, something only her best friend Tesfia would notice. There had been times when Alice forced a laugh, or had been strangely talkative. It seemed to happen whenever Alice's family or past was touched upon. When it happened, Alice would always try to change the topic to something lighter and act cheerful, but that only made it look more forced and her behavior more awkward. It was the flip side of her considerate nature, and an attempt to distract herself from her loneliness.

There were plenty of students that didn't go home during vacation. But that was ultimately because they'd chosen not to. Alice, on the other hand, didn't even have that choice. Without any relatives, and with the small amount of money her parents left behind, she literally had no place to go home to.

During the summer season she would always act cheerful in an almost manic fashion. At the same time, traces of loneliness would mix in with her expression.

In the past, when she'd come to play at the Fable family home, she had a line she wouldn't cross. That happened so many times that Tesfia's mother eventually told Alice to think of it as her home. But that wasn't enough to overcome her feelings of loneliness.

Right now, Tesfia was brightly joking about things that had happened at home. She actually had worries of her own to think about, but her best friend took priority now. Alice might still be trapped in her past... that's why Tesfia focused on being merry and optimistic.

That was something she'd decided on in secret, as she and Alice lived together—so that she and her irreplaceable best friend could continue walking forward while they were at the Institute, and beyond that time as well.

But she was starting to doubt herself now. Despite her attempts at cheering

Alice up, there were still traces of gloom in Alice's answers and expressions. This was the first time that had ever happened.

After hesitating for quite a while, Tesfia stopped in her tracks.

Alice had a puzzled look, as she stopped and turned to face her.

Tesfia gazed at Alice, took a deep breath and began speaking. Being as awkward as she was, she'd told herself that this was the only option she had.

"Alice... Do you have something on your mind? It's okay if you don't want to talk about it, please don't force yourself."

"... Yes, I'm fine. Thank you, Fia."

Alice's eyes opened wide for a moment, realizing that she couldn't hide it. She acknowledged the conflict inside her, and at the same time she was grateful to her friend, who had seen it.

She felt a slight weight drop off her shoulders, but she was still undecided on whether or not to tell Tesfia everything. It wasn't like her anguish would disappear if she talked about it.

Thus the two girls ended up quietly walking along the wide path.

Alice's feeling that things couldn't go on like this had only gotten bigger. But she couldn't undo what had already happened, or take back what had already been lost. And she was made to realize that she was still looking for a means to that end. Or perhaps she'd already realized that deep down, long ago.

That contradiction sparked a fierce conflict inside of her. Like blood still poured out of an unhealed wound in her heart.

Another contradiction was that Godma Barhong, the man responsible for Alice's dark past, was still alive.

That was something she'd heard from that soldier that saved her from the facility. He'd looked and sounded frustrated when he told Alice that the mastermind had gotten away.

Her dark feelings for Godma had almost faded away into the depths of her memories, but they now were screaming over how unfair it was. That project had led to the untimely deaths of her parents, and ruined her life.

Yet Godma was still walking the world unpunished. Was that something she could ever forgive?

However, yet another person appeared from her memories. Perhaps she would know the right answer... that idea was always in Alice's mind.

Alice was thinking of the girl who had gently smiled at her, and given her a warm embrace when she was hurt and lonely. That girl was like a sister to her, but she had left Alice. Maybe that somewhat dark expression she'd had when they met for the last time, meant she was trying to tell Alice something.

Alice silently continued mulling that thought over.

Tesfia had started walking closer to Alice, silently waiting for her to speak again.

As the strong sunlight of the early afternoon shone down on them, they slowly made their way toward the laboratory.

That's when Alice suddenly stopped.

They were almost at the laboratory, and when Tesfia looked at Alice questioningly, she saw that her hazel eyes were wide open.

Following the astonished Alice's stare, Tesfia saw a lone woman with chestnut-colored hair making her way towards them with a smile. Because of the sunlight, she couldn't get a good look at her, but she seemed to have a similar atmosphere to Alice.

"... M-Melissa?"

The name leaked out from Alice's lips, her eyes tearing up as her memories reawakened. It was as if her mouth had moved on its own.

The woman answered back, "Alice." Her voice sounded like it was gently caressing Alice's ears. That nostalgic voice soothed her tense nerves.

Tesfia was a little surprised as she looked at Alice's change in expression. When she glanced over at the person responsible, she figured it must have been an old friend or the like.

So even Alice had someone like that. Tesfia's surprise eventually turned to relief. Though it was a shame that she wasn't the only one special to Alice,

Tesfia knew that wasn't going to be a problem.

Which was why she smiled as she saw Alice wipe away her tears. She wasn't alone. She had someone precious to her.

Before long, the redhead was gradually filled with happiness and her chest felt full of it. That didn't feel bad. It was like she was being wrapped up in a golden light. It felt like her best friend was finally being rewarded.

As such, what Tesfia should be doing wasn't crying alongside Alice... instead, she softly pushed her back, in the direction of the young woman. "I don't really get what's going on, but I'm happy for you, Alice. Go to her."

"Y-Yeah... thanks, Fia. She's my old friend. So I'm going to say hello." Alice wiped away what remained of her tears and flashed a dazzling smile.

"I'll tell Al, so take all the time you want to talk. And if you want, could you introduce us later?"

"Y-Yes..."

There was a slight hesitation in Alice's answer, but that was just due to her wondering what to say to Melissa. A trifling problem compared to the happiness she felt from this unexpected reunion.

With a gleeful expression, Alice began running, as if to make up for the long, long time they'd been apart. Her anguish had completely disappeared, and she had a jump in her step.

Tesfia gently watched as Alice's back receded into the distance, and the black-robed woman gave Alice a slight bow.

"What, it's just you?"

Tesfia had shown up at Alus' laboratory on her own. "Yeah, Alice had some sudden business to attend to. Ah, is my present in one piece?"

So it really was on purpose, Alus thought to himself, but he still thanked her and then asked what happened.

After hesitating for a moment, Tesfia gave him a vague smile, as if to say *that's a girl's secret*. That woman showing up at the Institute must have had something to do with Alice's past. Seeing Alice's reaction, there was no doubt

about it, which was why Tesfia wanted to treasure her best friend's privacy. "Well... it's probably a really good thing. And I think it's going to take some time until she's done, so why don't we do mana control today?"

"If Alice isn't here, then what else can we do? Let's stick with that until she gets back."

Tesfia nodded and picked up her training stick, pouring mana into it to show off the results of her training.

"It looks like you didn't skip out on your training while you were away."

"Of course not! I can't waste my time on this forever."

While her attitude was admirable, this kind of training was something any active Magicmaster looking to master mana control needed to perform regularly. The few years Tesfia would spend at the Institute wouldn't be enough to master the essence of it. But telling her that would only negatively affect her willpower, so Alus decided to keep quiet instead.

The mission was set to start tomorrow, but Alus acted the same as he always did. Tesfia catching on was highly unlikely, but there was no harm in being careful. And if he were to let something slip to her, it wouldn't be long before he got the retirement he wanted... in a way he didn't want.

"Loki, why not look over her training a bit?" Alus said to Loki, who was hard at work on her detection training. It would make for a good break.

Hearing his voice, Loki softly exhaled and opened her eyes.

"It looked like you were able to give Alice some good advice the other day, so don't you think it would be unfair to leave Tesfia out of it?"

Though it sounded cynical, Alus had said it out of consideration for Loki. If she got too much into her detection training, she might end up too tired for tomorrow's mission and maybe even risk its outcome.

Loki, of course, picked up on his intention. "I understand."

"Huh, you're going to watch over me?"

"Loki seems to have found an unexpected talent, you see."

“Please don’t tease me,” Loki said with a frown, trying to hide her embarrassment. That said, she didn’t look all that unhappy as she walked over to Tesfia. “Well, Ms. Alice seemed to pick up the trick for something.”

“Really, when I was gone...? Hurry up and teach me, Loki.” Feeling like she was being left behind by her best friend, impatience filled Tesfia’s expression.

A few minutes later, Alus was watching Loki teach Tesfia. There was a lot for him to learn as well, including thoroughly going through parts that he’d personally never had trouble with. He’d overlooked that.

Finding an equilibrium for your mana while you’re controlling it is definitely more efficient.

Either way, the goal was to do away with waste, and adapt to the situation by using the bare minimum amount of mana. That’s why it was logical to learn how to adjust the amount of mana being expelled. The point of the training stick was ultimately to focus mana. By smoothly enchanting the AWR with mana its conductivity for magic increased, and when used as a weapon its power was thereby increased.

Eventually, Alus began to feel that he wasn’t suited for teaching people. When he thought about it, the training he’d been assigned deviated from what Magicmasters normally went through. Which was why he couldn’t really understand how to overcome the common walls Magicmasters came up against.

By the time he was aware of his surroundings he was at the frontlines; and having grown up in a place where he’d die if he couldn’t do something, he’d interpreted training differently to begin with.

But he never had any intention of training all kinds of Magicmasters, so Tesfia and Alice would just have to try their best to keep up. It appeared that more difficulties than Alus had imagined stood in the way before the girls would be usable.

“Ah, this is so irritating!” Tesfia’s sudden shout broke the silence.

Her focus from before was all gone. She raised her voice and seemed to be throwing a tantrum as she began expelling mana.

As expected, she wasn't suited for minute control. Simply put, she was very clumsy at mana control. She was short-tempered and wasn't the kind of person who was good at work that required patience, such as threading a needle.

Alus wanted her to at least be able to do the basics, but now might be a good time for a break. She was desperately trying to catch up, but it was clear that she wasn't going to achieve anything if she didn't take breaks every now and again.

The moment Alus told her to take a break, Tesfia unbuttoned the top button of her blouse to let off steam.

He didn't particularly care, but it definitely wasn't the kind of thing a well-bred young lady should be doing.

"Ms. Alice sure is late, is she not coming today?" Loki asked, as she handed a glass of iced tea to Tesfia.

Tesfia received it with thanks, and thought for a few moments before answering, "I'm not sure... the truth is that an old friend came to visit her."

"Is that so?" Loki was a little surprised, and Alus was somewhat disgruntled.

"Sorry, Al. It looked like special circumstances, so I thought to keep quiet about it... but they looked like old friends so I wanted them to spend some time together. Besides, Alice seems to have been worrying about something lately."

"I see," Loki replied.

Tesfia was honest. Another way to describe her was simplistic, and keeping quiet about this was apparently a burden for her.

A cold drop of water slid down her glass as if symbolizing the weight dropping off her shoulders. "Ahh, this feels good," Tesfia said with a slack look, as she pushed the cool glass against her cheek.

"But who would visit Alice at a time like this?" Alus asked Tesfia.

"She looked very kind and beautiful... Ah! Just because she's a beauty doesn't mean you can go interrupt them out of curiosity, okay?"

"Who'd do that? There was an attack here just the other day, I don't care if she's a beauty or what, but the security here sure is lax. But anyways—I guess I

can overlook her skipping today.”

As he said that, Alus recalled something. “Oh yeah, I guess we didn’t tell you. While I was researching Alice’s constitution and light attribute, she talked about her past. Loki was there too.”

“So she told you. Then I guess it’s okay. It was rough, but she’s done her best up until now. If she trusted you enough to tell you, then you have to live up to her expectations, okay?”

“What are you on about? You’re the ones who are supposed to live up to my expectations... but don’t worry, because they’re not that high.”

“Hmph, speak for yourself!” Tesfia cheekily flashed her white teeth, but in contrast to her behavior she seemed to be in high spirits.

With the break over, Alus decided to put the free time he got from having Loki teach Tesfia to use by returning to his research. His goal was to develop another spell for Alice.

There were several methods for creating spells, and the most common one was done through combining Lost Spells to create a magic formula.

However, in order to find an effective and working combination out of the countless possible combinations for formulas, one had to have the deep knowledge necessary to accurately understand the hundreds to thousands of characters.

A magic formula that created a single phenomenon was a combination of basic formulas. Moreover, the origin of spells came from the detailed deciphering of the structure of common spells used in daily life. The combination of the magic that branched out from that was what led to the modern magic structure.

However, Alus was looking to create a completely original spell. That would be of help to Alice, as well as being research worth doing. For that sake, the first thing he needed to do was understand it.

The more one experienced and understood the reason for a phenomenon and its results, in other words, the closer one got to the essence of a spell—the easier it was to activate and the more subtly it could be changed.

Other things to consider included what kind of spell was important to reach a goal, and whether or not the mana used was worth the effects of the spell.

In this regard, a Magicmaster's experience, practical intuition and creativity came into play. He'd have to imagine, to determine and choose well over 200 topics. Just the designation of coordinates alone had a vast number of combinations of methods and elements.

If one were to compare it to a jigsaw puzzle, he would first have to decide on the picture, the entity that would become the spell. Next, he'd need to accurately design the hundreds or thousands of pieces that would make it up, gather the materials needed, and then build them. With that, the framework for the spell would finally be complete.

The next part was even more difficult. Even if all of the pieces were determined, there were hundreds of variations of materials. If he didn't make it capable of adapting to any situation and take the caster's mental state into account, it wouldn't work as a spell. A single flaw would spread through the circuitry, affecting the entire spell.

The construction of advanced, and expert—which stood above advanced—spells in particular was extremely delicate, with only one possible answer out of billions of permutations. Putting something like that together from scratch was frankly the work of gods.

As such, creating an original spell around the fundamental Lost Spells was the kind of work that would drive one insane. That's why creating a completely original spell of intermediate level or above was a massive project that took a full team of researchers several years to create.

Incidentally, when using the more common combination method, a spell was determined to be original depending on the ratio of well-known combinations to the creator's own combinations. If the existing combinations were less than 30 percent of the total, the spell was considered original.

And because there were so few light attribute spells, almost any spells made would be considered original.

Alus felt that Alice was lacking in offensive spells. Right now, he was in the process of picking out the topics necessary for that.

The old books in his lab were very useful for determining the spell's phenomenon. Their ancestors' research may have been absurd and reckless, and their ideas and concepts unpolished, but there was much valuable knowledge to be had from it.

Whether other researchers noticed it or not, Alus, with his vast knowledge, was able to find great value in the old research by looking at it from a different perspective. And the spells they'd created were all worthy of being called original.

Alus was extremely focused, as if in a space where only he existed.

However, as he was putting together this new spell, that focus was suddenly interrupted. The reason for that was...

"Sir Alus!!"

"I know. They should learn when to give up."

Loki had shouted out to warn him. A few seconds after that, an alarm rang out across the Institute. The robotic voice exclaimed that this was a threat level V. The next thing the voice said was to go to the shelters that were on the Institute grounds.

Tesfia exclaimed, "Huh, wai... What's going on?!"

"You're so loud. You came back because you heard about the attack, didn't you? It's probably the intruders from then, they were easily repelled last time, but it seems they didn't learn. Revenge for that time, maybe? Either way, we don't know what they're after."

"Why would they be after revenge? Why would they come back to the same place they lost at? Do they have a grudge against the Institute, or something?"

Leaving the confused Tesfia aside, Alus' eyes were fixed on the virtual screen. But next to him, Loki also had a confused expression. That was because she'd already sensed *that*.

"Sir Alus, get ready to intercept... t-this is...!"

That had a presence so large Loki didn't even need to use detection magic. It was a vast amount of mana that gave even the flustered Tesfia goosebumps. As

far as Loki knew, this wasn't the amount of mana a single Magicmaster could muster.

Alus sent out his vision with magic to confirm something, before reassuring the two. "Loki, who do you think is at this Institute? She might be modest and use the word 'former,' but she's definitely still worthy of the title of Single Digit. I'm sure this Institute has the greatest protection of them all."

Loki's anxiety eased up a little at this strong statement from the top of all Magicmasters. But she still had her worries. Based on the mana she sensed of the spell being activated, it would be classified above expert level.

It was practically on the level of myth.

Magic was normally categorized as one of four levels: novice, intermediate, advanced, and expert.

That was merely what was made public and used for the levels that humans dealt with, but magic that exceeded this definitely existed as well. In the world of Magicmasters, that kind of magic was referred to as Apex magic. A Single Digit might be able to use one or two spells at that level.

The spell Loki could feel aimed at the entirety of the Institute definitely had the presence of such a spell.

Alus could also feel the abnormal presence of the mana rapidly gathering above the Institute.

A taboo, huh.

He dug through his memories, and when he recalled a spell that matched the activation pattern he unconsciously clicked his tongue.

A taboo always came with a price.

Just what had been sacrificed to cast a spell of this level? *And it's a remote spell... so the last attack must have been for a preliminary investigation.*

Casting a spell like this remotely required extremely accurate coordinates for the origin of the spell. Meaning that the previous attack was just for scouting, all in preparation for this moment.

The principal's personality was one thing, but Alus did trust in her abilities.

And if the Institute were to take this attack head on, it would be destroyed, and she would lose her position.

But even so... Alus slightly braced for impact, and gently brought Tesfia and Loki closer.

*

Just before the attack.

The sun was finally starting to set, and the Second Magical Institute's principal Sisty Nexophia had finished dealing with the mountain of paperwork on her desk. It was mainly gathering reports to be sent to the top brass, but it also included damage reports.

Sisty pulled the curtains back from the window. The warm afternoon sunlight streamed in, but the principal's office remained at a comfortable temperature. There was no air conditioning in sight. Based on the traces of mana in the room, she'd used a spell for it.

The intruders from the other day managed to infiltrate the Institute, engage in combat, and retreat in less than ten minutes. Sisty had to expend well over ten times the amount of labor just to clean up from that, and she frankly felt it wasn't worth it. "Can you spare me from having to do any more work, please..." she said to no one, sighing.

As should be expected—Sisty immediately noticed the sudden, unusual event. She furrowed her brows and swiftly stood up, throwing open the double doors leading out to the veranda.

A gust of wind blew in, sending the papers flying.

Sisty didn't give them a glance, as she stepped out on the veranda and looked up in the air, as the alarm rang out.

The sky was filled with a vast amount of red light from mana. A massive magic circle was being constructed in the air.

Unlike Loki, who'd also sensed that amount of mana, Sisty had a fearless smile on her face. "Hmph, they're looking down on me."

The last time, they'd needed to take down the intruders that had split up one

at a time, but things were different if the assailant used a spell against the entire Institute. There were still guards around due to the attack the other day, as well as defensive equipment, but it was actually Sisty who was the crux of their defense.

She quietly thrust out an open hand. As she did, her staff hanging on the wall floated up on its own and slid across the air into her hand.

It was a staff-type AWR made of a mysterious white material. It had a metallic feel, but with a peculiar luster to it. Grain-like ripples faintly covered its surface that was filled to the brim with magic formulas.

The top of the staff was shaped like a quadrangular pyramid, its tip sharp, with a mystical jade-green stone slotted in at the top.

Sisty tapped the staff against the floor. A bell-like sound rang out.

The next moment, she rose up into the air and landed on the roof of the building.

“Well, holding onto my ace forever would be a waste.” She’d gone up to the roof to confirm the details of the spell’s construction and scale. The school’s grounds were vast, but she could just barely survey it all from the roof.

And right now—a massive magic circle big enough to cover the Institute was floating in the air.

Sisty narrowed her eyes as she identified what kind of spell she was facing. It had an ominous presence that was very similar to several spells she’d witnessed during her days in the military.

To think I’d come across an abominable spell like this again... this must be fate. Oh well, that just means I don’t have to hold back.

Next, she let go of her staff. It floated and stopped in mid-air. As Sisty poured mana into the AWR, the magic formulas on it began to glow.

The jade-green stone at the top of the staff reacted, with what looked like clouds stirring inside of it.

As she poured more mana into it, Sisty held her hand above the stone.

Suddenly the air trembled. The ground rumbled. She could see a huge

cylindrical shadow stretch up into the air in front of her.

A mana tower... it was a vast structure, similar to a water tower, that supplied mana.

But it wasn't just one. Upon closer inspection, the shadow consisted of several pillars linked together. The towers formed a ring surrounding the outer circumference of the Institute, each and every one of them exuding huge amounts of mana.

They were the several hundred spires built underground to protect the Institute.

Sisty was adding their mana onto her own. And now that they'd all been released, her mana filled the entirety of the Institute grounds.

Meanwhile, the red magic circle in the air pulsated. In the next instant, it unleashed a light of destruction towards the Institute below it. The red pillar of light had so much energy it could have been a small vermilion star, and the heated air was enough to even cause a disturbance in the barrier that covered the human domain.

It rained down like the hammer of god, bringing overwhelming destruction with it.

But without a moment's delay, translucent mana light filled the air surrounding the Institute's main building.

Sisty softly spoke the name of that spell. *"‹‹Ligra Litas››"*

The power expanded in an explosive chain reaction. The slightly jade-colored golden winds spread out to cover the Institute. The winds overlapped in several layers, turning into a defensive barrier against the red light of destruction.

The whirl of fantastical winds spread out again and again, layer after layer, becoming new barriers.

Those winds were so dense that they covered the entire Institute like a thick carpet without gaps.

In the next moment—the red spell of destruction assaulted the Institute.

However, the golden winds stood in its way.

One spell destroyed all in its path, and the other protected all. They clashed and bit into each other, cancelling each other out as they created a whirlwind. The fierce sounds of their clashing could be heard all across Alpha.

That high-pitched shrill sounded like the skies themselves were screaming, or perhaps it was the painful screams of souls taken in sacrifice. The bizarre sound engraved itself in the ears of all who heard it.

Light poured through gaps in a portion of the barrier that had begun to come apart, and every so often, blinding light filled the skies.

Sisty was well aware of the taboo spell that had been unleashed upon the Institute. Out of the many taboo spells that had been birthed in the fierce fights against Fiends, this one had been created as a last resort in order to stop a large-scale invasion, and was even referred to as a 'forced offering.'

The Apex spell was a taboo that had no way of being used by a single Magicmaster; and as such required human life as a catalyst.

And the spell being unleashed towards the Institute was made exactly for that forced offering, using the light attribute instead of its original attribute.

They're even using Senas Requiem... just where did this leak from? But compared to back then, the non-taboo spells have evolved too.

While stopping the fierce radiation of red heat up above, Sisty sighed inwardly. Even her defensive barrier wasn't going to last forever against a spell with this much output.

The two forces appeared to be struggling for supremacy, but the outer layer of Sisty's Ligra Litas was gradually being melted away. They looked to be balanced for now, but it was evident that a hole would eventually open up in the barrier.

However—

"Protecting the Institute is the principal's job. I still have lots of work left to do, so let's finish this."

Sisty manipulated the glowing staff in the air, and firmly grasped it in her hand.

A magic circle had formed at her feet. She gave it a light tap with the end of the staff. The mana light enveloping the area turned golden and began to swirl.

And as if to deliver relief—it began spiraling upwards toward the barrier in the skies that was starting to thin out.

Sisty was going to mend the barrier until she ran out of mana. By thickening the weakened portions, the barrier would be able to last for several more hours. That was just how much mana was being injected into Ligra Litas.

The thunderous roars from before no longer reached Sisty's ears. All she heard was the comfortable sound of the golden winds blowing across her surroundings.

Then—a change happened. The red pillar of light that had looked like it would go on forever—weakened a little.

Not missing the opening, Sisty reached her arms into the air and began another incantation. At the same time she transformed all of the mana around her into power to support the barrier, and pushed it upwards.

The golden winds around her turned into a maelstrom, heading up to the red light. And then the golden wind barrier grew thicker, pushing the red light of Senas Requiem until it was eventually swallowed up in a golden light.

Unable to maintain the amount of power necessary to resist it, a crack formed in Senas Requiem's magic circle.

Finally the magic circle let out a last scream across the skies, as Ligra Litas in its spiral form pierced and destroyed it.

The spiral continued rising up until it collided with Babel's barrier, and the winds withered like a flower, dispersing into the air.

With the red magic circle completely destroyed, the golden wind barrier draped over the Institute crumbled and disappeared.

A few minutes later, the Institute was so quiet that it was hard to believe anything had happened at all.

Babel's barrier still seemed affected, as a buzzing noise could be heard every now and again, but on the surface the artificial sunlight shone down on the

citizens as always.

“That was exhausting... maybe I’ll go have some more of Ms. Loki’s tea to relax.” While Sisty put proper attention on taking care of her skin and figure, she still felt an age-appropriate fatigue. That said, she spoke the words in an innocent-sounding tone.

While she might have overcome this difficult situation, Sisty’s work was only going to increase. That’s why she hoped some minor escape from reality would be forgiven... especially so after that massive battle just now.

Either way, as long as she was the principal, the Second Magical Institute would still be considered as having the strongest security.

In reality, she’d stepped down from active service to make room for Alus.

There was a limit to Single Digit Magicmasters, and in order for the seven nations to maintain a political balance they had an unspoken rule that each nation would have one Single Digit.

At the time, Alpha wasn’t on top yet, but they had two Single Digit Magicmasters with Alus and the other one being Sisty. Because Sisty was the oldest among them, she made the decision to leave the frontlines. But she still had her power that rivaled other Single Digits.

Before she knew it, the alarm across the Institute had stopped sounding. And having confirmed that the situation had settled down, the teachers along with the military guards led the students out of the shelters.

Sisty watched from the roof, but something felt off to her. They’d neutralized a dangerous situation, but ever since the attack the other day she felt like they were falling behind their foe.

It was like everything was proceeding according to a plan, and even she was dancing in the palm of their enemy...

It seemed to Sisty that Godma and his Dolls were focusing their attacks on the Institute a little too much, even going so far as to use taboo magic.

Godma likely knew about the extermination plan. But if he had spells like this at his disposal, then it would make more sense for him to target the military

headquarters, or at least one of their facilities.

And though Sisty didn't like to toot her own horn, everyone in Alpha knew that she was the Institute's principal. So Godma's actions didn't make any sense.

The first reconnaissance in force was one thing, but why would he attack the Institute a second time in a contest of strength?

Is the goal to make us wary of an attack on the Institute or other facilities to draw away the military's attention? But we've already taken plans like that into account. In fact, the military had sent out some personnel in response to the first attack.

But even if that was Godma's intention—his next target should have been somewhere other than the Institute. Yet he had launched another attack at a place that had its guard up, even using a taboo that came at a great cost.

The feeling that something was wrong stressed Sisty out, and she bit her nails. "I don't like where this is headed." Unable to let go of that feeling, Sisty slowly descended from the roof and landed on the railing of her veranda.

There was one thing for certain. And that was how a remote spell like Senas Requiem had been aimed so accurately.

Such delicate coordinate designation required preparation in advance, and Sisty could faintly sense it. It was something she could grasp having been directly involved in the battle, probably some kind of mark that transferred specific coordinates to a location, and had been left behind by the Dolls during the first attack.

"Those children sure are a handful. But I don't want them trying to play any more tricks on the Institute, so I should make sure to clean it thoroughly."

After swinging her staff, Sisty could feel some faint noise in her mana filling the Institute. Perhaps the remnants of mana in the air were still unstable...

No, this was the sensation of a foreign object. The next moment, she picked up on the precise location of the cause of that sensation.

With a slight smile forming in her fearless expression, Sisty narrowed her eyes

as she looked in that direction. “I see...”

*

Sisty’s skill when she repelled the attack was more than enough to shut Loki up, who had harbored suspicions about the principal.

That barrier spell Sisty used wasn’t even listed in the spells encyclopedia. Meaning, it must have been a national secret. Storing vast amounts of your own mana in the Institute in preparation for an attack wasn’t something your average Magicmaster could do.

In order to ensure the Institute’s safety, the Witch had pretty much restrained her body to a single location. But not even Alus knew if that was something she’d wanted for herself, or if someone had told her to do it. All he could say for certain was that no matter how big the Institute might be, it was far too small to chain up a former Single Digit.

Either way, order had now returned to the Institute, and the situation was back to normal... but in Alus’ laboratory things got noisy again far too fast.

Having calmed down and returned to her senses, Tesfia screamed, “Alice!! Alice should still have been outside!”

When she remembered that she couldn’t stay still and began looking out the window, scanning for Alice. In the next moment, she raised her voice again as if she’d had a flash of brilliance. “Loki! Can you detect her?”

“Unfortunately, no,” Loki said. “There’s still too much remnant mana in the air...”

“I’m sure she’s fine. There was an alert to evacuate, and there wasn’t any actual damage to the Institute, either.”

Despite Alus’ reassurances, Tesfia still looked uneasy. Her bonds with Alice must be far deeper than he could imagine. Because of the harshness of the Outer World, Alus had learned to distance himself from others. That’s why those two had something he didn’t. “Ahh, you’re so noisy. Just go out and find her on your own.”

Seeing how awkward Alus was, Loki couldn’t help but smile wryly behind him.

Then, as if remembering something, Loki ran into the kitchen and picked up a beverage container and some tea snacks and handed them to Tesfia. “I know that the Institute was just attacked, but feel free to tell Ms. Alice to enjoy this with her friend. It got pretty hot out there during that exchange, and anxiety eats away at your stamina.”

Alus couldn’t tell from Loki’s expression, but it was possible that Tesfia’s present was having a small effect on her. At the very least, she was showing some consideration. Of course, if he were to bring that up, she’d immediately deny it.

“Yeah, I’ll let her know. Thank you, Loki!” Despite her flustered state, Tesfia accepted the gift with a bright smile and thanks. The beverage container rattled, but that must have been because of the ice inside. Even fully opening the door must have seemed to Tesfia to take too long, as she squeezed herself through the opening and dashed out of the laboratory.

“... Still, it’s pretty ballsy of them to attack during the day. Now let’s see how the military moves after losing face. It’s been a while since I last saw the Governor-General’s face red with anger.”

“Sir Alus, the mission is tomorrow. Won’t we just have the burden pushed onto us?”

“Hmm... I’d rather they didn’t,” Alus said, furrowing his brows.

Either way, the time limit was closing in by the hour. *Yeah, having necessary military personnel taken away from the mission is a problem for me. I guess his goal was to divert some forces away by pretending to attack these novice Magicmasters.*

No matter what his goal, there was no way that Godma had used that taboo spell on his own. He was making a show of force, having gotten his hands on a great power. In other words, he and the organization behind him were openly putting their hostility on display. They were even making an enemy out of the nation of Alpha.

After thinking that far—Alus came upon the same question that Sisty had.

But... why is he so fixated on the Institute? It was Sisty that blocked that taboo

spell. Moreover, Feli and I fought against those Dolls in the last attack, so he should have the impression that the students are pretty tough, too. So wouldn't an attack on another military facility be more logical?

It just didn't make sense, Alus thought.

A little worried at his behavior, Loki called out to him; but he was too focused for her voice to reach. Sensing that, she simply watched over him.

The next moment, Alus returned to reality, having seemingly realized the truth. His expression was exceedingly bitter. "We've been played... our premise was wrong. Godma's research isn't complete yet."

"—!! W-What do you mean?"

At this point, Loki didn't think it mattered if Godma's research was finished or not. The plan would be executed tomorrow either way. But her doubts were interrupted by Alus' voice.

"Loki, use your detection right now. Find Alice! Force yourself if you have to!"

"Y-Yes!"

However, the result was obvious. "I can't! ...the mana is too dense, it's disrupting my mana sonar."

"Same here. The influence from the mana remnants is preventing me from getting any information around here. We just walked right into it." Alus clicked his tongue in frustration. "Tesfia's likely wasting her time, too. That friend that came to visit Alice is suspicious. I'll ask around about it, but..."

"Sir Alus, do you mean that Alice was Godma's target this time? I heard a little about her past, but why would he do something now? She was at the facility, so he should already have enough data from her. At the very least, Godma's experiments are able to use the light attribute already."

"No, that's not correct. The act of extracting the light attribute factor itself is difficult. Godma, who was one of the researchers back then, must have noticed that Alice's mana information is defective. The damaged parts included the core of the element factor, the Fundamental Words."

"..."

Alus manipulated the virtual screen with a serious expression, as Loki listened to him. “The reason for her defect was the extraction of her factor. It might have been an accident, but as a result Godma succeeded with his experiment and at the same time Alice’s mana information was damaged. Or more accurately, the information was stripped away.”

But because it was an accident, he couldn’t repeat the results with another test subject. Which was why Godma had no choice but to retrieve his only successful example.

A notice popped up on the screen. Alus immediately ran his eyes across it. “It’s security... as expected, they never let anyone that matched Tesfia’s description of the woman in.”

“Then, Ms. Alice has already been...”

“Yeah, there’s no doubt about it. Those two attacks were all for this. Talk about a flashy diversion.”

Alus felt he’d been played for a fool. He quickly gave Loki an order to get in touch with Felinella. “Loki, we’re moving the mission forward. Tell Feli that we don’t have time to wait around till tomorrow. And keep the information sharing short.”

Loki nodded, and easily caught the license he threw to her.

Alus spent that time getting ready, but it didn’t even take a minute. When he came back out after changing, however, he clicked his tongue in his mind. He should have just jumped out the window.

With the worst possible timing, Tesfia returned to the laboratory. Her breathing was ragged, her trademark red hair a mess, and she looked like she might start crying at any moment. “What do we do? I can’t find Alice anywhere!”

The next moment, she saw Alus’ outfit, and realized something must have happened while she was gone. He wasn’t wearing his student uniform, nor was he wearing casual clothes. Instead he was wearing his military uniform. The other side of him had surfaced.

“Where are you going? Did something really happen to Alice?!”

“...”

Tesfia wasn’t normally this dim. Especially not when her best friend was involved—but she quickly grasped the situation.

Alus hesitated for an instant. He didn’t have the time to explain, and the mission was top secret.

Time was of the essence. Alice was probably taken away just before the taboo spell was unleashed. Since not even Loki could detect her, the pursuit would be difficult.

That’s why the only choice was to break into Godma’s base and take Alice back. And it needed to be done as quickly as possible.

Loki was in the middle of explaining the situation to Felinella through the license’s communication feature.

Clicking his tongue at the reality they faced, Alus gazed into the red-haired girl’s eyes. “That’s right. Alice has most likely been taken away. I never expected they would use a taboo spell as a diversion... This is my mistake. So I’m going to bring her back.”

Tesfia responded by staring right back at him. She then reached out to grab his robe, putting everything into her fist to keep him from leaving. “Tell me what’s happening.”

Alus glanced across the room. Loki’s call didn’t seem to be over yet. “Sorry, I can’t tell you everything. But a man named Godma is the key to all this. He’s also the one who took Alice. I’m headed over to where he is now.”

“—!! Wasn’t Godma Alice’s...”

“So you know about him.”

“Yeah, Alice told me about her past a long time ago...”

“Then this will go faster. If you know that much, there’s not much to keep secret. I never expected that he’d come after Alice after all this time.”

“But why come after Alice again...? Ah! Then, maybe that other girl was also...”

“Yeah, I’ll bet it’s true she’s Alice’s old friend, but she’s probably connected to Godma. The army was keeping an eye on him, but he still outfoxed us.”

Tesfia’s eyes opened wide from shock, but as she gathered her thoughts, determination filled her expression. The next words she would say were predictable.

To Alus, that was a form of beautifully innocent foolhardiness. She had the eyes of someone prepared to walk down a stern path. Seeing that, Alus coolly opened his hand and gathered magic force in it, ready to knock her out if he had to.

While it might be a secret mission, it was still an official military one. He couldn’t bring Tesfia, a student, with him. This was Alus’ job from here on.

“I’m going to save Alice too!!”



I thought you would say that. What can I do with you? Alus thought to himself. At the same time, he resolved to put Tesfia to sleep. By the time she woke up, everything would be over. And he was prepared to have her abuse and criticize him once it was done.

However— “But I’m sure I’m not strong enough to save Alice on my own. That’s why...”

Tesfia let go of Alus’ robe, taking a step backwards. Her red ponytail bounced around. She then bowed deeply. “That’s why, please lend me your strength.”

The words leaving her mouth were more than just, ‘take me with you.’

Taken aback by that, Alus eased up on the magic in his hand. As for the real intention in her words... “You’re requesting my cooperation.”

“I know that the Governor-General is normally the only one with the authority for that. But please...! I’m begging you, despite knowing that I’m being unreasonable!”

Tesfia hadn’t forgotten about the knowledge Alus had once used to show up a teacher. In fact, she’d asked him, knowing that it was against regulations.

However... she’d thrown away her flippant behavior, her noble heart truly shining through.

Alus could feel an incredible soul power, something indescribable, from the girl in front of him. Either way, Alus was going to save Alice even if it meant going against the mission plan, so he didn’t have the right to reproach her for her unreasonable request.

“Do you know what you’re asking? Even the Governor-General’s requests come with recompense. That’s what it means to move a Single Digit. The reward that the nation pays out to Single Digits is massive,” Alus said heatedly, but that wasn’t how he truly felt. As a Single Digit Magicmaster he wasn’t short on money.

But Tesfia took him seriously. She bit her lip. “I-I can’t promise you everything... but I swear I’ll manage something!”

“You’re working to support yourself, you know.” Alus recalled hearing from

Tesfia that she was attending the Institute without financial aid from her parents.

At this point Tesfia gave up on trying to reason with logic, and simply spoke out her true feelings. “I’m willing to give up my AWR if you would accept it as your reward! Please, I’ll do anything that I can!”

She wasn’t very persuasive, but she sounded serious about giving up her AWR. Would she have been able to be this bold in the past?

The logic in the conversation had already broken down, but something in her words moved Alus’ cold heart. Having noticed that, he wondered what it was as he stared at her desperate face.

“Besides... I’ve been together with Alice since forever. Ever since, and ever after... We decided to walk down the path of Magicmasters together! That’s why I want to save Alice! If she’s hurting over her past then I want to help her overcome it. If her past is still binding her, I want to be the sword that cuts those bonds. Alice will forevermore be my only best friend.” While Tesfia may have been illogical, there was no hesitation in her eyes.

Is that so? The future... that was probably something that had just appeared in Tesfia’s mind, something she hadn’t really put much thought into.

But after hearing it, Alus sighed, exhausted. Tesfia’s straightforwardness far exceeded Alus’ imagination. It was a simple honesty that Alice lacked. And at the same time, it was still one possible future.

Right now, Alus found himself on the fence. The hand he’d opened to charge up so he could knock her unconscious still didn’t close.

He was still hesitant. His mind was warning him that it was a reckless gamble. A possible future sounded nice, but it could also be written off as a mere hunch. His mental brake was too strong for him to rely on something that vague as the basis for his actions.

Alus had a hunch that his decision would definitely have an impact later... be it as a huge boon or a massive liability. He didn’t know which.

At the same time, he realized that his past self never would have hesitated like this. Alus felt like he was being tested... could he fully entrust himself to this

fundamental change?

The recompense he'd asked Tesfia about before was just to test her determination. She'd passed on that end... but even then it wasn't quite enough.

It was overly foolish to decide on things based on temporary feelings. Alus' sharp senses developed in the Outer World were ringing an alarm over the decision. There was doubt in his inner feelings, which came out as noise in his mind. "..."

Alus had seen how harsh and merciless the world was, to the point of getting sick of it, but his heart dyed by reality was starting to feel heavy. What else would be needed in order to come to an understanding with himself?

Perhaps interpreting his silence differently, Tesfia hurriedly added, "That's right, about that reward, could I repay you later...?"

"What the hell?" A wry smile appeared on Alus' face.

Tesfia had a panicked expression as she continued, "Oh, and one more thing! I don't know how helpful this is... but I know a little about the person who was with Alice." Even she thought this was a weak basis. Her voice dropped in volume as she timidly stared up at Alus' face like a scolded puppy.

"You mean the experiment... was it not an intruder?"

"Hmm, I don't really know... but she called Alice out by name. She was smiling, and looked a little sad."

That sounds different from the Dolls I know. Was she Godma's ally? Either way, if it's not Godma himself or one of the Dolls, maybe she's related to the situation that's backing him? This might actually be a useful clue, Alus told himself, and he also let out another wry smile at what sounded like somewhat forced reasoning. That's because he realized in the end, the only thing that caught his interest was how this woman was an old acquaintance of Alice's.

Regardless, there was no time for indecision. He considered the die thrown.

"Well, that's pretty good for you. But if you know how the person that took Alice away looks, then you might be useful. Either way, if you have that much

determination, then you won't complain if you end up dying, will you?"

"T-Then..." Tesfia's face lit up with joy.

Alus nodded, before giving her a reminder. "Yeah... I'll take you with us, so make sure you're useful at least. And I'll say it as many times as I have to—but you'll have to protect yourself."

"Thank you, Al. And Loki too... once again, I'm very grateful." Tesfia gave the two a deep bow and thanked them again.

As the atmosphere was starting to go soft, Alus brought the discussion back on topic with a warning. He had something he had to say. After all, they were about to thrust themselves into a fight that was fundamentally different from fighting Fiends.

This was a fight between humans. A fight to the death. If they jumped into something like that, they would inevitably have callousness imposed on them.

"You haven't seen them directly... but these experiments look like humans. Can you still swing that thing for Alice's sake? Can you kill the enemy?"

Tesfia's shoulders trembled for a moment at those words. By 'that thing' Alus was of course referring to the proof of a Magicmaster, and their pride, the AWR. Ironically, hers was a katana, a weapon originally made for the sake of killing, with the form of a tool for slaughter.

As in Alpha, the other nations put a blackout on information on the criminals within their borders. Their battle against Fiends was tough enough, and they needed to stand together to oppose them. As such, they needed to keep quiet about the criminals to prevent any needless chaos.

Because Magicmasters were too precious, their attention needed to be put toward the Outer World. Even in Alpha, Alus was often called upon whenever they were dealing with a criminal that was too much for the average soldier or Magicmaster to handle. All of them were dealt with secretly, the missions never reaching the public's eye.

That's why Tesfia must have discarded the idea of having to fight against other people, somewhere deep inside her.

It was a fact that detestable criminals shared the world with decent citizens. Nothing bad would result from not having to step into the dark side, but looking away from it this time would make rescuing Alice difficult.

Moreover, a world under the threat of Fiends helped form a stronger sense of kinship between humans.

That's why Alus was concerned if Tesfia would be able to handle herself against the Dolls. Or rather, Tesfia probably didn't understand the true terror of pointing a weapon against another human. So it was possible that she might fall behind in the middle of battle, as her determination was put in question.

But as long as Tesfia didn't hesitate to swing her blade to protect Alice and herself...

"... I can do it. I think. Well, I can't say for certain, but I'm not going to hold back against the people that took Alice, and I won't hesitate if it's to save her!"

"I see... then make sure you remember one thing. You won't be able to protect anything as long as the enemy is still alive. Give up trying to protect those precious to you while keeping your hands clean. If you cling on to naïve thoughts like that, that katana in your hands will one day be pointed towards your friends... or yourself."

"I'm okay. I'm definitely going to save Alice. Until then... I won't let my guard down."

Seeing Alus' dark, cold-hearted eyes, Tesfia gulped and gave him the best answer she could muster. She thought to herself that the cold face he'd show from time to time was also a mask for him, so he could devote himself to being merciless.

"Sometimes you have to kill someone to protect someone. In battles like those, you don't have to kill just the enemy, but yourself as well."

"... Yeah."

Alus' eyes returned to normal. At the same time he looked to be carrying an unending sadness to Tesfia and Loki.

Tesfia meekly nodded. Suddenly she narrowed her eyes in surprise, as Alus

reached out with his hand to ruffle her red hair.

He then turned around and called out to Loki. “There you have it. You’re involved in this too, Loki, so I won’t listen to any complaints. We’ll be moving on our own. And let Feli know that we’ll cooperate with her mission.”

“I understand... and that’s what he said, Ms. Felinella.” Loki returned to the call, and after some more discussion, she hung up. She couldn’t just throw his license back at him, so she neatly held it in both hands and returned it to him. “It seems the military is planning on pushing the mission forward because of this attack, too.”

“That’s convenient. Let’s have them match our movements. If anything happens, my client, the Fable family, will take full responsibility.”

“Wait a minute!! You’re wrong, it’s my own personal request!! My family has nothing to do with it, okay?”

“Well, we don’t have time for this. Let’s get ready to move, Loki.”

Loki had already finished preparations when Alus rushed her. Of course, in her case she only had to change into her military uniform.

Tesfia adjusted her grip on her AWR, and nodded as well.

Alus already had the data on Godma’s hideout in his head. He also felt something was wrong with his own actions from before. In the past, he would’ve knocked Tesfia out by force before even considering taking her with him.

Making up for your lack of strength was just an excuse of the weak. A squad where everyone had an assigned role made sense, but the truth of the matter was that he still hadn’t found a convincing reason to bring Tesfia with him.

However, he felt like his reason wasn’t just to save Alice, but for the sake of something further beyond. Tesfia had coincidentally used the word *future*, and as the strongest, Alus felt like it contained something he himself didn’t possess yet.

As he smiled to himself, Tesfia hesitatingly asked him something. “... Say, Al. If you decided I was just throwing a tantrum, what would you have done?” She

averted her eyes from him, perhaps finally realizing how conceited interfering with a military mission was.

Alus expressionlessly answered her as he adjusted his robe. “I would have knocked you out. Bringing a brat that’s only a hindrance on the battlefield is what idiots do. So if someone dies, it’s my responsibility.”

Tesfia nervously swallowed. Hearing his reply, she realized how thin the ice she’d treaded had been. But it was too late for that now. She’d made her request knowing the risks. And there was nothing that exceeded her desire to save Alice.

So she reaffirmed her conviction to walk alongside that girl, regardless of what shame she had to endure or what dangers she’d have to undertake.

That’s when Alus knocked on the now serious-looking Tesfia’s head with a fearless smile. “So try to be useful. Also... it was you who overturned the decision I made. That’s why I’m letting you onboard this small but valuable ship. If you hesitate for a moment—this ship will lose its chance and easily sink. This ship won’t be carrying just me, but Loki and Alice as well. So don’t let it sink, got it?”

“... Okay!” Tesfia touched the katana at her hip and nodded, taking his words to heart.

With his great power came a great responsibility. So far, Alus had held that responsibility by himself by doing missions on his own.

No, maybe he’d abandoned it. He didn’t think he could protect everyone. He’d learned that lesson repeatedly in the Outer World... that kind of thinking was arrogant.

Alus believed that there was a chance he wouldn’t even be able to fully protect his allies around him. A single human was nothing before this cruel and merciless world. He was lauded and praised as the greatest Magicmaster, the current No. 1, but that result only came after slaughtering Fiends.

The mission this time had a fundamentally different meaning from that. He would be fighting only to protect. It wasn’t a hunt, but a battle to protect those close.

The goal was different, but the means were the same... but Alus felt like there was an absolute difference in that. *I'll at least protect those of you within arm's reach. I might not have wanted it, but we're in this far... it doesn't matter what happens to anyone else.*

With a dry smile on his face, Alus imposed that single objective on himself.

"Well, I'll take care of the fighting. Fia, you just think about saving Alice. Loki, try to keep an eye on her... it wouldn't be funny if we stumbled over her corpse."

"Hey!!"

"Understood." Loki calmly nodded. As expected, she was more reliable than Tesfia. When the battlefield turned chaotic, her detection would prove effective. Even if remnants of mana covered the area during the brawl, her detection should still work fine within a limited area.

"Sorry, can you wait a minute? I'm sure this will be necessary..." Tesfia, having suddenly remembered something, told Alus that she wanted to stop by the training grounds.

However—"Who's going to wait? Your legs are too slow."

He'd already gone this far, so Alus swiftly lifted Tesfia up and decided that going out through the door would take too long, and jumped out the window instead.

Loki made sure to follow suit.

With big leaps, they made their way to the training grounds where there was something Tesfia wanted to pick up. She hurried inside, while Alus and Loki waited for her.

"Are you sure this is okay, Sir Alus?"

"Yeah, it's fine. I'm the one who made the call," Alus immediately answered Loki's sudden question. His eyes looked off into the distance. "Of course, I'd never have brought her along if I was only thinking of the mission."

"Then... why did you?"

"I wonder why. Maybe I've just gotten sick of killing Fiends and humans."

As Alus muttered this, the fleeting and nihilistic glint in his eyes disappeared. His expression was sparse as always, but Loki could see a mysterious feeling she'd never seen before in his eyes.

"Then that's good..." Loki smiled and stared in the same direction as Alus. A sudden gust of wind blew away her words, keeping anyone from hearing them. But a joyful relief filled her chest as she felt a conflict inside of her ease up.

"Did you say something?"

"No... it was just the wind."

Waiting for them was a harsh mission. Despite that, Loki had a sweet smile on her face as she answered Alus.

The next moment, Tesfia returned with what appeared to be Alice's naginata AWR. It had a new appearance as it was telescoped down to a fraction of its usual size.

"So that's what you wanted. Now then, let's go get revenge on those fools that dared to kidnap Alice from under my nose. Loki, don't fall behind. As for you, you get the seat of honor." Alus received the shortened naginata from Tesfia, before turning around and crouching down.

Tesfia was bewildered for a second, but that was it. Being pressed for time, she couldn't afford to hesitate.

With a "please," she wrapped her arms around his neck and leaned against his back.

Twelfth Chapter

Visit From the Past

Shortly before confusion beset the Institute...

With afternoon training looming ahead of them, Alice was making her way back to the laboratory after lunch with Tesfia.

The sun was right above them, and while the temperature was being artificially manipulated, it was likely going to get warmer today.

Lately, Alice would repeatedly recall her past and lose spirit. Because of that, she didn't have much of an appetite either.

When she saw Tesfia, who'd returned from her home, her heart was shaken. In the past she'd have a warm home to return to, and a welcoming family, and remembering that gave her a sense of grief she had no way to release. Physically she was perfectly healthy, but mentally she was in a horrible state.

But there was a saving grace.

Alice still had vague memories of that person. That girl who had been like a sister to her back then. However, she couldn't clearly recall those memories.

That was especially tantalizing to Alice... Why couldn't she remember? And what did the girl say to her when they parted ways?

She couldn't accurately recall what exactly had happened due to her chaotic memories. In her memories, the girl had always shown her such a warm smile.

Alice was currently in a daze, and she'd even forgotten that Tesfia was walking by her side.

As she dug through her memories, she could see the girl's smile turn into a heartrending frown, and it suddenly stopped short as if her memories had run out of film.

These past few days, Alice had spent all of her time, waking and sleeping, thinking of why that was. The girl in her memories... her expression was full of grief, and it felt like she was begging for Alice's forgiveness.

It never happened in reality, but in Alice's memories a sad look appeared on the girl's face as her smile disappeared.

But Alice didn’t know why she’d show such an expression. After all, she had saved Alice.

In that facility filled with adults in lab coats, she was the only one who’d gotten close to her. It was thanks to her that Alice hadn’t been filled with nothing but hatred. Which was why she couldn’t allow herself to forget her.

What filled Alice’s mind wasn’t the present, but the past. Her feelings were running amok with nowhere to go, dragging her down into a bottomless swamp. In order to crawl out, Alice desperately tried to imagine that girl and the happiness she had felt to supplement her hazy memories. Even now, pain suddenly ran through her eyes, and she covered one of them with her hand. She’d had plenty of rest, but it appeared her mind was never at ease.

Suddenly, she recalled Tesfia was by her side, and removed her hand from her face in order to pretend like everything was normal... and that’s when it happened.

It was like she was dreaming.

Like she’d been granted a miracle.

Because when Alice removed her hand, she saw a young woman. *It can’t be*, she thought to herself, and held her breath.

In front of her was exactly what she’d been looking for... the girl from her memories was standing there.

She had a calm smile, just like in the past, as she gazed at Alice.

There was no way Alice would mistake that chestnut-colored hair and curiously-colored eyes.

Her bangs were longer and covered half her face, and she looked a bit haggard, but Alice’s intuition told her that this was without a doubt the same person.

She wasn’t an illusion. She was standing right in front of Alice now. As proof of that, she was taller than she was in Alice’s memories, more adult, with a calm atmosphere to her.

“... M-Melissa?”

Alice had struggled so much to recall how the girl looked. But when she saw her, she could easily remember her name and connect her current appearance with the past.

Alice spoke her name with conviction. And the young woman in front of her moved her mouth, muttering her name, backing that intuition up.

In that moment—Alice froze and her eyes opened wide. The fragmented memories that she'd been unable to differentiate quickly formed a vivid image, reviving her memories.

All the suffering she'd been through, and the small amounts of joy. Among the countless painful experiences, that small happiness had definitely existed. Her nostalgic memories took physical form as tears came to her eyes.

She wanted to run to her right away, but she recalled the images of the girl looking sad. But most of all, it was just too sudden... she didn't know what she would say to her.

That's when a hand gently pushed on her back.

It took a second for Alice to realize that it was Tesfia. However, it gave her an opportunity, and she stumbled her way forward. Once she had momentum on her side, the rest was simple.

Alice wiped the corners of her eyes, giving thanks to her best friend before taking off running. Her body was driven ahead by her heart, and her legs made a beeline for Melissa.

After hesitating for a moment—Melissa gently held Alice's shoulders after she'd embraced her.

"... Sis."

The word Alice unconsciously spoke made Melissa tense up for an instant. She suddenly poured strength into the hands that embraced Alice.

Assuming Melissa's reaction was due to surprise, Alice blushed and corrected herself, calling her Melissa instead. She then looked at her again. When she did, the strength in those hands was gone and the smile on Melissa's face was exactly the same as it had been in her memories.

“Alice... we finally meet again. You’ve gotten so big.”

“And you’ve become so beautiful, Melissa. You’re already an adult...” Alice took a step back and scratched her cheek. “You really were like a sister to me back then.”

“Heh, that’s true... but it really has been so long, Alice.” Melissa’s soft smile was simply beautiful, and she gently patted Alice’s head, taking care not to mess up her hairdo. “Your friend left... was that okay?”

“Yes, it was fine. But if possible I’d like to introduce you to her later. She’s called Fia... I mean Tesfia. She’s my very kind and precious friend,” Alice said with a big smile, and Melissa responded with a beaming one of her own.

“Yes, gladly,” Melissa said, before a serious expression appeared on her face. “... If we ever get a chance.”

“What did you say?”

“Ah, it’s nothing.”

Alice tilted her head in confusion, which Melissa smiled at, bringing their discussion to a temporary close.

As the sun shone down on them, the two made their way to a bench on a slope in front of the Institute’s main building.

On the way, Melissa explained what had happened since they last saw each other, and what she was doing here.

Alice listened, and talked about what had happened to her as well. Eventually the conversation became one-sided with Alice continuing to speak, even more so once they sat down on the bench.

Alice talked about all of her encounters and what she’d experienced. No matter how much she spoke, she didn’t run out of things to talk about. That was probably because she wanted Melissa to know everything about her. When she thought about it, Melissa was practically family to her.

She spoke of the joys and feelings she’d experienced during their time apart. And Melissa warmly listened to all of it like a sister.

Alice thought to herself that there was no time that couldn’t be made up for.

There was no way that a few hours would be enough to describe several years of experiences. But Alice still desperately tried to share a condensed version of it. She spoke of how she'd met Tesfia shortly after getting out of the facility, and how she'd met Alus and Loki after enrolling at the Institute. Of course, there were a lot of things about Alus that she couldn't reveal.

"Ah!! I'm sorry. I've been doing all the talking." An hour must have passed by now. There was still so much Alice wanted to talk about, but she wanted to tell Melissa this one thing before she wrapped up. "But you know, I'm really happy now. Every day is so much fun."

"I see. That's great, Alice... I'm happy for you."

Alice had a smile so bright it rivaled the afternoon sun, seeing that Melissa looked visibly relieved and was happy for her from the bottom of her heart. "Say, Melissa. What happened to you after that? You gave me a summary before... but can you tell me the details?"

So much time had passed since they parted ways at the facility. There was so much she wanted to hear, and so much she wanted to tell.

But instead of answering her immediately, Melissa hung her head down. In the process, Alice saw it. As a breeze passed through and lifted her hair, she saw the scar underneath.

Why hadn't she noticed it before? Or maybe she had, and had just pretended not to see it.

Suddenly Melissa returned to her senses and gave Alice a somewhat awkward smile. That smile reminded her of the sad expression she'd seen Melissa wear in the replay of her memories. Alice felt like the distance between them was growing larger after having shrunk, making her swallow, and clench her fist.

"... Alice, make sure you listen to what I'm about to tell you."

With a serious expression, Melissa turned her head back to face Alice. She held Alice's smaller hand with her own. Alice wasn't sure what was going on, but nodded at her words.

"Alice, go to the military and have them take you into custody, okay?"

“—!! What... Why would you say that?” Anxiety appeared on Alice’s face at those ominous words. At the same time, the afternoon sun dimmed as clouds blocked out the sun.

“Godma Barhong... he hasn’t given up yet...”

When Melissa mentioned that name, the lid on the dark and unfair memories of Alice’s past was lifted. She could clearly feel her heart beating faster.

“Nooo!”

Her body trembling, Alice let out a short scream as if she was rejecting her past itself.

She then covered her mouth with shaking hands. But Melissa put her own hands over hers. The warmth in them didn’t just cover her hands, but embraced even the pain in her heart. If she wanted to shake them off she could easily do so, but Alice just barely managed to restrain the urge.

With trembling lips, she spoke to Melissa. “Can we not... Let’s talk about something more fun... we haven’t seen each other in so long.”

She simply wanted to escape from reality. After all, they’d finally met again and had a chance to talk. Yet the person in front of her was trying to drag her back to the past. Why would she do that? Alice just didn’t understand.

Melissa sorrowfully shook her head, looking straight into Alice’s eyes. “It’s okay... I’m going to end it. Bring all of it to a stop. And I’ll protect you, Alice, so please listen to what I say. Hurry to the military and have them take you somewhere safe... okay? Then we can be...”

She didn’t finish her sentence. She could feel some strange noise in her mind. Her sight grew hazy and, though she didn’t know it, she’d gone completely pale.

Alice came back to her senses, squeezing Melissa’s hands and worriedly peering at her face. “What’s the matter, Melissa...?”

As the noise ran through Melissa’s mind, she was forcibly made aware that she could no longer live in the light like Alice. She could only ever watch on as people were turned into experiments. Her weakness was her sin. She could never leave them behind to save herself.

There was only one way to save the boys and girls that had been turned into experiments after all... She shook her head, covered in cold sweat, trying to tell Alice something important.

She knew the military would move tomorrow. That's why Alice should wait there... while it all came to an end. It wouldn't be long now. Just a little more, and she would wake up from this nightmare.

She was convinced of that, once she reunited with Alice and saw her smile. Melissa would live up to her words, and protect Alice. She'd already made her decision to start over, so that she could stand by Alice's side.

Alice was puzzled by her strange behavior. "You won't leave me alone, right? We'll be able to stay together, won't we? We can meet whenever we want... right, Melissa?"

Melissa wanted to nod at Alice. But not yet... she desperately struggled to get her words out. "It'll be fine. It won't be long before we can see each other whenever we want. That's why I want you to stay somewhere safe until then... entrust yourself to the military. I'm sure that man from the facility would take care of you. Do you still remember his name?"

Alice nodded. She didn't know anyone in the military as helpful as him. He'd taken pity on her small self and explained the entire situation to her, despite it being forbidden to do so.

She'd never once forgotten about him. So she nodded once more with a serious expression, because she felt like if she didn't, Melissa would disappear somewhere far away.

"I'll do what you say. But before that... can we discuss this with Al, the boy I told you about, first? Besides, he might be able to help you with your circumstances too. No, I'm sure he'll help."

"I see. So you trust him."

"Yes, and I'm sure that Fia... that red-haired girl that was with us before, and dear Loki will help too. That's why..."

However, this time Melissa wordlessly shook her head. "I'm sorry, Alice."

Alice responded with sorrow at her answer. “Melissa, please. Try talking with Al at least once... Please?”

She felt like an unavoidable separation was approaching. In order to stop that, she desperately spoke out and deeply bowed. Honey-colored hair landed on Melissa’s hand, and Alice rested her forehead there.

Melissa felt time slow down, as she let out a sigh. She suddenly embraced Alice’s head, resting her own head on Alice’s shoulder. “... I’m sorry, Alice. And thank you.”

Alice slowly raised her head, as Melissa gently whispered that in her ear. “T-Then...?”

“I understand. But I really don’t have much time because I secretly snuck out... I’m sure I’ll be found soon.”

“Then let’s go right now, Melissa!” Alice got up from the bench in a hurry, pulling at Melissa’s hand as she did so.

Melissa peered at Alice’s face and realized what a strange turn things had taken. She’d come here to warn her, to tell her to run away. After that, she would leave Alice’s side.

Yet when she was finally face to face with her, her determination was thrown for a loop. She knew it in her head, but she couldn’t keep the feelings in her heart down... her lingering attachment kept her legs locked in place.

She’d been the one who had really been saved in that facility. Not being able to do anything was painful. And now Alice was trying to save her again. Which Melissa was ready to rely on.

The hand pulling on her hand was soft, yet powerful. Like it was telling her that it would never let go again.

I decided to protect her. But now Alice is trying to save someone like me again...

The next moment—

An alarm rang out across the Institute.

When the order to evacuate came, the Institute grounds got very busy.

“—!!”

That was a sign that some kind of danger was approaching the Institute. And its identity was soon revealed.

Light was pouring down from above, that was without a doubt born from mana.

When the two looked up, they saw a red magic circle in the sky. Its size was far bigger than anything they’d seen before.

With the emergency announced, Alice pulled even harder on Melissa’s hand. “Let’s hurry!”

However, Melissa remained motionless, her wide-open eyes fixed on the sky. “Senas Requiem!! Why here?!” She’d heard from Godma what kind of spell this was. After seeing the recording of Alice, he’d gloatingly told her about his plan. When the military attacked his base, he was planning on fighting back with Senas Requiem, using the hearts of the Magicmasters he’d captured to pay the cost. After they attacked the military around them, the encirclement would crumble, and in that opening they’d launch an attack on the Institute to capture Alice.

That’s right—Alice, who Godma had let go of once, was the real key to completing his research.

When Godma realized that, he’d smiled ever so happily. In his own words, the past he’d lost was what would lead them to the true future.

In the next moment, Melissa shifted her focus back to the moment at hand. “The target wasn’t supposed to be the Institute! And I never knew it would be this large... ahh, h-how many children is he using for this...” she muttered incoherently.

She could see her allies—the other experiments, the ones in the same situation as her—in the magic circle in the sky. As the activation of Senas Requiem required vast amounts of mana, the most important catalyst and the origin of mana, the heart, was needed.

In other words, the phenomenon in the sky that was created through the lives of a number of experiments was a horrible spell of mass destruction.

“Why did this happen...?”

As Melissa was frozen in place, tears dripping down her cheeks, Alice shouted out to her. “We have to hurry and run away! Al’s laboratory is close, so let’s go there!” She pulled on Melissa, forcing her to take two, three steps.

But in the next moment—

Alice felt Melissa’s hand grow heavier, and turned around. “... Melissa?”

Before Melissa knew it, the tears in her eyes had stopped. Instead, the only thing reflected in her eyes was the magic light. It was like her consciousness, and even her soul, had been drained, as every trace of emotion disappeared from her visage.

Alice didn’t even have the time to be surprised as Melissa grabbed hold of her arm. “That hurts! What’s wrong? Are you all right?”

Melissa’s head tilted to the side, and her unfocused eyes turned toward Alice. The dried tears had left two lines down her cheeks, like she was wearing a spooky mask. “A...lice...” she said clumsily.

But her words were covered up by the explosive sounds happening up above them. The powerful spells were beginning to clash.

Alice cowered at the sight of it, but Melissa stared emotionlessly at her. Her eyes were completely empty now.

The next moment, an impact shook Alice’s entire body. A mana-enchanted fist struck her abdomen and then the back of her neck, robbing her of her consciousness.

Without even letting out a groan, Alice started to pass out, the strength leaving her body. As her vision faded, the only thing she saw was Melissa bathed in the golden light from above.

As she passed out, Alice suddenly recalled the question she never got to ask.

Why did Melissa leave her... and what was the last thing she had said to her as she left?

Falling on her knees, Alice lost consciousness.

Melissa used one hand to easily put Alice on her shoulder. The evacuations were finished and the principal's mana filled the air. All the eyes of the students and teachers were focused on the light show up in the sky, the clash between the two powerful spells.

Because of that, no one noticed the intruder quietly carrying Alice away.

Thirteenth Chapter Appalling With Alice abducted, the three quickly went into action to retrieve her.

The group made their way toward Godma's hideout in the forest with Alus in the lead. Tesfia was being carried by him, with her arms wrapped around his neck. Behind those two was Loki.

On the way, Tesfia shared what she knew about the girl that had met with Alice, giving as many details as she could, including tidbits Alice had told her before.

Melissa, which was the name Alice had muttered when they reunited on the Institute grounds, was a girl who had been in the same facility as Alice when they were young. Both were test subjects that had been gathered there to research the light attribute. Alice had always longed to meet with her again.

But as time passed, Alice locked away her horrible memories of her time in the facility deep inside, and her memories of the girl had been locked away with them.

And when Alus began to research the light attribute, that caused Alice's memories from that time to surface.

When Alus heard about those circumstances, the first thought he had as for why Melissa had appeared and taken Alice away was because she was one of Godma's Dolls. Since she had a connection to Godma from being a test subject in the past, the chances of that were high. He didn't know why she'd ended up by his side again, but it was possible she was being forced in some way.

Behind them, Loki listened in, with no expression as always, but Alus could see her biting her lip from time to time as Alice's loneliness was revealed.

Either way, the situation was constantly changing. And the plan for Godma's extermination was now no longer recognizable from the original one.

Loki had spoken to Felinella, and according to her the plan was set to start once Alus went into action; but the details were unclear, the reason being that

Felinella couldn’t make such a decision on her own.

Soon, the license in Alus’ chest pocket rang out as he got a call. “Take it,” Alus said, looking at his pocket and then at Tesfia.

“What?! How am I supposed to do that at this speed?!”

“If you can’t do it, I’ll just throw you off and take it myself.”

“Fine, I’ll get it.”

Alus jumped to avoid an obstacle, causing the bouncing from his running to momentarily abate. In that opening, Tesfia pulled out his license and used her thumb to make it project a translucent screen. She then set it to audio only, so the only thing on the screen was the symbol for a call. She held it against Alus’ mouth.

“Feli, how’d it go?”

“That’s awfully sudden, Alus. You really are lacking in manners and sociability.”

“—! So it was you, Lord Vizaist.” Alus now slightly regretted not checking who the caller was first.

The voice on the other end was deep and well-articulated. “Isn’t this the first time you’ve screwed up?”

“I’m sorry about that, but your investigation was lacking as well. A student at the Institute, Alice Tilake, was once one of Godma’s test subjects. Now another test subject from back then has infiltrated the school and abducted her. On top of that—it seems neither the Institute nor the military’s security noticed her infiltration, despite what happened just yesterday. Does the name Melissa sound familiar to you?”

“—!! She was one of the ones Godma performed human experiments on, and was taken into custody. The details about her are unknown as she was supposedly an orphan, but her real name is Melissa Laness.”

“It appears she’s still under Godma’s control. Moreover, I believe Godma’s research is still incomplete. I don’t know why Alice would be necessary to him all of a sudden, but either he didn’t know her whereabouts, or he missed her

qualities and has since realized it through some means. At the very least, it's clear that Godma needs Alice for something."

"So the taboo spell unleashed on the Institute was a diversion. One of the Institute's students might have been abducted, but she's still a civilian, so she'll be a high priority for us. We might be a bit delayed, but preparations have been made ahead of time, so he won't be able to escape that easily."

"I appreciate it. There's also one more thing on my mind."

"I assume you want to know how that Melissa infiltrated the Institute."

"Yes. There's no sign of security granting her access. There's a chance that there's a big hole in the Institute's security. And if she came from Godma's hideout, she must have broken through the encirclement somehow."

"We've got eyes on Godma's hideout round the clock, and our surveillance is perfect... he doesn't seem to have any allies or another hideout. Maybe they've dug a hole through the ground," Vizaist said jokingly, but Alus furrowed his brows.

"In that case—the entire plan might be pointless," Alus said, but Vizaist likely already had an idea of what was going on, and since he didn't have any solid evidence he didn't want to give Alus any mistaken preconceptions.

Alus believed he had a good grasp on his former superior's personality. And since he trusted him, he didn't pursue the matter any further.

"It seems this'll be a night battle, then." That was Alus' second worry. Light attribute users had an advantage during the day, but the military wouldn't fall behind in a magic battle.

However, ambushes were an effective means of counterattacks in a dark forest. Considering the physical capabilities of the experiments, the average Magicmaster would be hard pressed to stand against them.

"Don't worry about that, we've got the numbers for it. It likely won't even be a battle. Even if something unexpected happens, this is a battle of extermination. The procedure is simple."

"I understand." Just having his worries acknowledged was good enough for

Alus. This was a battle of extermination... in other words, all the experiments were to be destroyed.

Suddenly, Alice's old friend appeared in Alus' mind. He didn't know if she was one of the experiments based on Tesfia's description, but... he might have to confirm it. Either way, he felt a heavy weight when he thought about Alice's feelings.

"Besides, it's not like the enemy will be the only one with an advantage at night."

"By which you mean...?"

"*You're* stronger at night!"

"Only by a little."

"Ha! You're full of crap."

From Alus' experience, if Vizaist was acting like this, he had nothing to worry about.

"The encirclement is 70 percent complete. It'll be done in another thirty minutes."

"—! That's Lord Vizaist for you." They'd only contacted Lord Vizaist around thirty minutes ago, so this speed was worthy of applause.

"There were some strange movements, after all. Preparations were made ahead of time in case something like this happened." He said it like it was simple, but this reaction speed was nothing short of incredible.

"Well then, let's meet again after the mission," Vizaist continued.

"After the mission..."

This was a pair of catchphrases they'd used when Alus was in Vizaist's squad. It was meant to replace "best of luck." Supposedly, it was intended to be a prayer for the safe completion of the mission, and that everyone would be able to meet face to face again afterwards.

Thinking the call was over, Tesfia moved to hang up.

"... Also, I'm entrusting my daughter to you, Alus." Vizaist spoke out again, not

as a military commander this time but as a father.

“I’ll borrow her for a while.”

“Good. Make sure to work her hard.”

In reality, Alus had already asked Felinella to take care of something else. And with that, the call ended.

“That’s that for now.” With this, the responsibility would fall squarely on Alus’ shoulders if the mission were to fail. The military would almost certainly demand his reinstatement.

Eventually, Alus and the others reached an undeveloped area in the middle part of the nation. The sun was already starting to set. Not only did *undeveloped* refer to a lack of human touch, but it was also a way of saying an area where inhuman experiments had taken place.

“We’re speeding up. Loki, from here on it won’t matter if the enemy finds us out.”

“I understand.” Loki was already running out of breath, but Alus showed no concern as he sped up even more.

When they reached the part of the forest they were heading toward, they gradually slowed down until they stopped right before their destination.

They hid in the darkness, scanning their surroundings.

The abandoned building up ahead was Godma’s stronghold.

Alus had already memorized the terrain in this area. It was at times like these that a preliminary look came in handy. “No traces of fighting. I guess it hasn’t started yet.”

He approached the abandoned building. As he landed, he put Tesfia down, and Loki quietly came to his side. “There’s nobody inside the building. They’re probably underground.”

The effectiveness of Loki’s detection was drastically decreased if the target was underground. If there was a corridor there she could send her mana sonar into, she could get a more accurate reading, but it was due to this that not even the intelligence department had an accurate count of the experiments.

That said, it seemed certain that the elimination target was lurking underground like the information had said.

This building was rather old, but according to the blueprints it didn't originally have floors underground. Godma must've expanded the facility for his research. Or maybe the underground floors had already existed as part of an illegal laboratory that was hidden from the public.

Steel girders were exposed on the building. Glass shards were scattered across the floor, and the entire place was caked in a layer of dust.

Unlike the route Alus used on his preliminary look, they went in through the front, their guard high, because of the lack of time.

Tesfia and Loki held their breaths and looked around themselves, as they followed Alus, who was searching for an entrance to the underground floor.

"Here it is," Alus declared before long, as he stood in front of a section of wall.

At first glance it was just a normal wall. "What's with you and this wall? We need to find the stairs."

"Are you stupid? If the enemy was that straightforward, this mission wouldn't have come to me," Alus replied, curtly brushing aside Tesfia's doubts.

"I see. It's magic." It seemed Loki saw through the spell upon touching the wall. However, surprise showed on her face. The reality aside, it felt just like any other wall.

"It's well made," Alus noted, and pushed with his hand.

This kind of elaborate spell required a high level of technique. It was similar to Real Trace, which Alus used to expand the chain for his AWR, Night Mist.

But it was difficult to create something this accurate. One idea Alus had was that it used the dark attribute to influence the mind. Alternatively...

For now, he put his hand against the wall to perceive the actual coordinates. He put the information in a space in his consciousness, and overlapped the coordinates with a mock Real Trace.

It was a brute force move, but mana would likely bounce back at the user if the spell was undone normally.

Soon, a lightning-like crack formed in the wall, and mana light leaked out from the gap. The next moment, the wall dispersed like mist as if it had been a hologram all along.

“—!!” Loki and Tesfia both had their breaths taken away by the sight behind it.

“... He sure is good at desecrating life.”

Facing them was a single woman sitting in a wheelchair. She had been put in white clothes similar to a straitjacket. Her hands were clasped together as if in prayer, and she was secured to the wheelchair.

Her closed eyes showed no reaction to Alus and the others.

When the spell that made up the wall completely disappeared, the strength left her neck and her head bent down, causing the wheelchair to shake from the recoil.

A fragment of wall stained red fell through a gap in her hands. At a closer look, the woman had scars from an operation on her neck.

“It must have been light attribute magic, using this woman’s blood as a catalyst.”

“Wha—?!”

Alus reached out with his hand to check on the woman, and found a thin tube on the back of her arm. It was probably used to slowly gather the blood used as a catalyst.

“So it’s a taboo,” Loki said with a sorrowful voice, looking with downhearted eyes at the woman.

“Is this person... dead?” Tesfia timidly asked.

“She’s still barely... no, she’s dead.”

Alus hesitated because—while she was still alive—it was already too late for her. Not only was she weakened, but she’d also been drained of blood, meaning she could no longer be saved. Having served as the source of a semi-permanent spell, now that it was gone she was forced to pay its price. That was how taboos worked.

He sympathized with the woman whose life had been used for the sole sake of concealing a door. It'd be better for her if she passed away quickly instead of regaining consciousness for her final moments. "Let's move on, we've got to hurry."

Beyond the woman was a straight path leading underground. It appeared to be slightly offset from the abandoned building.

As they arrived at a somewhat bright open space, they could smell the thick scent of drugs.

The space was large, and it was packed full of scientific equipment. The ceiling was high, and despite the machinery it seemed more like a storage room. White lighting illuminated the room, and while that was like a research facility, it gave off a desolate and cold impression.

"Alice!!"

The instant Tesfia looked towards the wall ahead of them, she saw a sight that made her scream out loud.

Amidst the devices, there was a clear area, and Alice was there. Her head drooped and two experiments, Dolls, were holding her up, which barely kept her standing. She seemed to be passed out, with the Dolls forcibly keeping her up. Tesfia's voice didn't seem to reach her.

There was someone next to Alice. A slim man wearing a lab coat. He had a syringe in his hand, and seemed to have just finished his work as he stepped away from Alice. The syringe was dyed a deep red color, which appeared to be blood.

Ignoring Alus and the others, the man held the syringe up in the light to admire it. His lips curled upwards, and he flicked at the syringe with his fingers.

With a self-satisfied smile, the man finally looked at the group through his glasses. Even Tesfia could tell from his atmosphere that this madman was Godma Barhong.

"I thought you'd show up, Alus Reigin... you fucking army dog." He narrowed his eyes and stared at them, as he spoke out with an irritating voice.

“Let go of Alice!!” Succumbing to her fury, Tesfia drew her katana and made a beeline for Alice. Making her way past the equipment in the room, she was just one step away from Alice as Godma grinned at her reckless charge.

Tesfia had made a sudden move, but even that had been taken into account. At the very least, it served as a signal to start the battle.

“Sir Alus! There are four of them in the shadows.”

“It really was a trap. She served as a good decoy. I’ll deal with them.”

As Tesfia leapt upon the Dolls holding Alice captive, more Dolls hiding in the shadows of the machinery sprang their ambush from every direction just as she raised her katana to strike.

“—!!”

In the next instant, Alus, who’d made it to Tesfia’s side, grabbed hold of her collar and pulled her down to the floor, evading the ambush.

The Dolls around them numbered four in total. In their hands were thin swords.

The moment Alus identified this, the Dolls launched their attack at him in the same moment without any kind of signal.

“—!!”

Alus’ reaction was a moment late. He pulled Night Mist from his waist and slashed in a circle. Chains followed after his blade, and stood in the way of the Dolls’ swords. But he didn’t intend on knocking them away with the blade itself.

The next moment—the chains stopped in mid-air, their coordinates fixed in place by space manipulation.

It was some quick-wittedness on his part. At first, he was going to use a spell on the ground to lock the four Dolls in place. But having recognized the materials that the surface of the wall was made of, he changed the spell he was going to use in a split-second. That was the reason for the minor delay in his reaction.

Three of the Dolls had their swords blocked by the chains, but the fourth one slipped past due to Alus’ delayed reaction and sliced at his shoulder.

“How interesting,” Godma said, adjusting his glasses, having repositioned himself somewhere safe to observe the fight.

It was a bizarre sight, as the swords stuck in the chains’ rings couldn’t move, as if they had hit a wall.

Alus swung his short sword once more, cutting deeply into three of the Dolls.

Red blood stained their dark clothing an even darker color. But they still jumped backward to distance themselves as if nothing had happened, readying a new attack with their swords that they’d pulled out of the chains. Once again, their swords were pointed toward Alus.

Seeing Loki making her way towards him in the corner of his eyes, Alus casually threw Alice’s shortened naginata to Tesfia who was getting up.

By the time the sound of metal clanging against the floor rang out, Alus had already jumped over to one of the Dolls holding Alice and delivered a knee blow to its chest. The Dolls were tough, but he could feel and hear that the blow had an effect.

He then grabbed the Doll’s head, as the Doll started to lift up from where it had fallen down, and mercilessly slammed it against the floor.

At the same moment, Loki threw her knives at the Doll on the other side of Alice. The knives bore through the Doll’s shoulder. As its hand holding Alice eased in its grip, Loki spun in the air and unleashed a heel kick on top of the Doll’s head, knocking it down to the ground.

Without the Doll’s support, Alice began to crumple down, but Loki caught and supported her.

Tesfia was captivated by Alus’ and Loki’s movements, before returning to her senses and getting up, picking up the shortened naginata Alus had thrown her way. She ran to Alice. “Alice, are you okay? Are you hurt anywhere?”

“... Fia?” The light finally returned to Alice’s eyes. “Why are you here, Fia?” She was still a little out of it, but didn’t appear to have any visible injuries. She spoke in a frail voice, but that was because her consciousness was muddled.

“We came to save you! I was so worried!”

“...!!” It was then that Alice finally realized that Alus and Loki were there too. “Al... and Loki...?” Still sitting down, Alice looked at Alus with a worried expression and somewhat vacant eyes.

“... You don’t seem to be hurt. Probably because you didn’t struggle, because you were unconscious.”

“... Yes.”

“I’m at fault for being duped so easily, but you shouldn’t go allowing yourself to be abducted so easily, either,” Alus said.

Alice instinctively flinched as Alus’ hand came down from above; she was sure that he would hit her. However, he only somewhat roughly put it on top of her head. “You can make up for it by helping out.”

Alus exchanged glances with Tesfia, prompting her to nod and return the naginata to its usual length.

The sound seemed to bring Alice fully back to her senses. Receiving the naginata from Tesfia, she took a deep breath and stood up. At the same time, her memories from before she’d passed out came back, and she bowed with a serious expression.

“Al... Loki dear... Thank you for coming to save me.”

“A-Al... I’m sorry too,” Tesfia said. She understood that she’d be dead if Alus hadn’t stepped in.

“Hmph, how about you say thanks before you apologize. And just so you know, that’s the last protective move you’ll get. You bothered to come too, so next time try to do a little better so you can get some experience, Fia.”

“Y-Yeah... thank you.” Tesfia nodded with a bitter smile. But there was some happiness mixed in with her expression. She... No, *they* were actually a little happy to be counted as useful to Alus in this fight. But that was something probably only she and Alice would understand. It was a difference in recognizing and being recognized.

After that back and forth, Loki called out to Alus. “Sir Alus, are you hurt?”

“I’m fine.” He’d taken a stab, but he’d moved his body so that only his robe

got cut.

Loki still had a worried look on her face, but that was because she was wondering why Alus hadn't been able to evade an attack on that level. She worried that he might be feeling off.

But Alus' next words revealed why his reaction had been delayed. "The walls in this facility are made of a similar material to the training grounds at the Institute, but only more developed... they absorb mana."

In other words, there was a restriction on what kind of spells he could use. The entire facility was probably affected. It was very possible that there was a device set up somewhere that buffered the mana that was absorbed.

Considering that the speed of mana being poured into a spell needed to outpace the speed at which the walls absorbed mana, magic would also be very ineffective in terms of mileage here as well. Tesfia's Freeze might not even activate at all.

"That explains why it was so difficult to get any decent results from detection-type spells. He might be crazy, but he's not stupid."

"Of course not. Failure is an essential part of research. This is also intended to deal with any accidental rampant mana. It's been designed to put an additional burden on any attributes that are not part of the elements."

Godma's grating voice interrupted Alus. He spread his arms wide and continued in an exaggerated fashion, "I'd expect nothing less from the one called the greatest Magicmaster. That was an interesting move you showed just now. Noticing the properties of these walls and expertly changing the spell you were about to use was very impressive."

He'd started off in a sarcastic tone, but it quickly changed to an excited one, as he pointed with his finger. "But that aside... I'd like to have that back. It still has uses," he casually said, indicating Alice.

Having Godma direct his attention at her, Alice's shoulders trembled in response.

"Well, I'd be able to go on for a while with this, of course." Godma had extracted the blood from the syringe and inserted it into a test tube.

It was clear that Godma had composure and confidence beneath his dramatic behavior. However, Alus forcibly put an end to this farce. “Sorry, but I don’t have time to play with you. There’s an order for your elimination.”

“Unfortunately, it is you who are going to die,” Godma quipped, and grinned again.

“Sir Alus, the total number of Dolls is...” Having caught on to Godma’s intentions, Loki spoke out, but before she could finish— Godma put the test tube down on a large desk, and quickly pressed the button for the lights.

As the room grew brighter, hidden partitions of the walls came loose. Eventually the entirety of the large facility was lit up.

“—!!” Tesfia and Alice gasped.

“There’s 100, 150... No, almost 200!”

“...” Alus saw a number of Dolls that far exceeded the estimates, standing in orderly lines.

The three girls were astonished, but seeing Alus looking unfazed, Godma furrowed his brow, unamused. He began speaking as if trying to push them into the depths of despair. “That’s 200 exactly, little lady. I prefer to keep my numbers and data round. I doubt the military expected this kind of number, did they? Alus Reigin, you might be ranked No. 1, but not even you could take on more than 30 of these in a room like this where magic is restricted. Your chances of survival... are at zero percent!”

Godma’s body trembled, as he tried to hold his laughter in. That was due to a sense of superiority and pride born from the conviction that his research results far exceeded the power of the greatest Magicmaster.

“Is that so,” Alus said shortly, with no emotion in his voice.

He had not even the slightest amount of interest in Godma’s pride. There had never been anything to gain from human experiments to begin with.

When Alus first realized what Godma was researching, he’d thought of it as twisted, but justifiable, even thinking it had some meaning to it... but now he considered himself short-sighted for having thought even that.

Alus had no worries. He'd protect Tesfia, Alice and Loki.

His only cause for concern was the situation outside the facility. If this number of Dolls were to face off against the Magicmasters outside, where it was quantity over quality, the Magicmasters would get massacred. Moreover, darkness was the Dolls' ally.

Alus whispered to Loki, telling her to contact command headquarters, and he got an immediate answer.

"I can't connect to them. We're being jammed."

The encirclement might not even be complete—meaning that Alus had no choice but to lower their numbers.

"The military won't amount to anything no matter how much they try. I'll make my escape with leisure... I have no further need for this nation that can't even appreciate my superb research."

"You call that superb..." Alice said, not able to let those words slip by. She firmly grasped her AWR in her hands. "Your research could never be called superb. All you've done is brought misfortune upon people for the sake of your own desire. Something like that could never be accepted as research."

"Alice..." Godma's smile turned into a frown, and he coldly spoke while rubbing his neck. "*Things* don't speak. You are nothing but a vessel that happened to contain the factor necessary for my research."

"...!" There was no longer any trace left of the faintly kind impression he'd shown Alice when she was young. This was probably the true form of the insane researcher.

A crude grin appeared on Godma's face as he snapped his fingers. A silhouette jumped out from the orderly line of Dolls.

"—!! Melissa!!"

Melissa didn't react to Alice's voice. Her eyes were empty and she walked forward with robotic movements. And of all the things she could do—she moved to Godma's side.

Seeing Alice frozen in place and at a loss for words, Alus knitted his eyebrows.

The young woman called Melissa had two knife AWRs at her waist. It was clear that her self was disintegrated like the other Dolls, and that her mind was under Godma's control.

"Melissa, Melissa!!"

"..."

Alice's sorrowful voice echoed through the room, but Melissa didn't so much as move a muscle in response.

Perhaps in an attempt to work Alice up, Godma scooped up Melissa's hair and moved it behind her ear. "She's a failure from the early days, but I thought you'd remember this one. Alice, I believe this one should be good enough to shut you up. Melissa really was a miserable little thing. But even something like this, with no family and abandoned by the world, has an affinity to the light element and can be used like this. The world truly is full of mysteries."

"What did you do to Melissa?!"

However, like a real machine, Melissa showed no reaction. The girl that Alice knew would never want to stay by Godma's side, the man who'd stolen everything from her. She'd gone through such horrible things after all, and Alice believed she and Melissa had overcome it together.

"Hah, haha, you really don't know anything. Even an onlooker could see the two of you got along abnormally well. It was like you were true sisters."

Alice strengthened her grip on her AWR as Godma sneered at her. However, his next words made her grip weaken.

"You really are an amusing one, Alice. Melissa never even had a shred of love for you. She would have been fine with anyone. As long as she could play house, she'd settle for whoever happened to be there. Truly, how passionate could one be towards someone unrelated by blood? How disgusting," Godma scornfully laughed at Alice.

And Alice raised her voice at him in response. "That's not true! It can't be! She was always by my side, protecting me! Melissa... Melissa is special...!" She couldn't be anything else. Driven by her feelings, Alice spat out the words of how she truly felt.

She'd raised her voice so she could drown out the words she didn't want to hear or accept. When she'd heard Godma's voice, her heart had started hurting as dark memories resurfaced. She shouldn't have had a clue of what he was talking about, but when the two had parted ways, Alice hadn't heard what Melissa said at the end. The unease from that started to cast a dark cloud on her belief, and shook her mind.

Seeing Alice's resistance, Godma triumphantly continued, as if looking down on her, "But it IS true. That's why Melissa returned to me, desperate for a sense of family. Even after leaving my side, there was no place in the world for this thing. Did you know that she has a condition of being dependent on someone to the point of it being an abnormal attachment? In other words, an extreme fear of loneliness. Alice, you were only ever used to fill up Melissa's loneliness. All I had to do was make some Dolls to help with that loneliness, in exchange for messing with her body."

"No..."

"Melissa leaving my side and heading over to you was all accounted for. I purposefully showed her some footage of you before explaining your importance and my goals... though she seems to think I hadn't noticed. Well, I figured that you'd gladly follow after her."

"No, that's..."

"I'm a cautious man. It was because she has those uncertain things called emotions that I constantly monitored her with the device I secretly implanted in her. And once I saw my chance after your heartfelt reunion, I flipped the switch. All so I could have you kidnapped without anyone getting in the way. And the two of you looked to be enjoying yourselves so much, too... feelings really are nothing but harmful. This thing was driven by emotion to the point of even trying to betray me, after all."

With her heart beaten, Alice's grip on her AWR slackened. The naginata fell to the floor with a dull sound.

"You scum!" Tesfia shouted out, her body tingling with anger as she ground her teeth.

That's when Godma turned to face Tesfia and loudly mocked her. "Ha! What

does some little brat know? I've managed to take these failures of Magicmasters that only had the affinity and make them this strong. They feel no pain or fear... they'll far more effectively take care of Fiends than the likes of you ever will. You'll never see any research contribute more to humanity than this."

Her anger having reached its limit, Tesfia didn't say another word. Instead, a torrent of mana flowed out from her body.

Alus, who'd been keeping quiet, finally retorted, "Hmph, those are some big words for research you haven't even completed yet. I can't imagine puppets without a sense of self could ever best humans. Isn't that why you're so desperate for Alice's factor now, after all this time?"

"So you noticed. Don't you think that was a good plan on my part? Nobody would imagine that a taboo spell would be used as a diversion. That said, I expected that abominable Institute to be destroyed. Well, not that it matters, Melissa did some fine work for me... haha. I wonder what kind of expression she'd make if she finds out that she's the one who brought Alice back to me. Not that I'd give her sense of self back ever again."

Godma trampled on something with his foot. It was a device that had fallen out of his lab coat pocket, and no one apart from him had any way of knowing this was the mental manipulation terminal used to return Melissa's sense of self.

Seeing how proud Godma looked, Alus called out to him in a sarcastic tone, "You seem to be quite happy with yourself, but your separation of the element factor was just a coincidence, wasn't it?"

Alice's lack of factor wasn't because Godma had tried to take it out. It was definitely the outcome of some kind of attempt, but the result had been more of an accident than anything. That's why he hadn't been able to repeat the success again and had come for Alice.

"You're even destroying your experiments' sense of self so that there's no transplant rejection."

"Hmph, and thanks to that I was able to create Magicmasters that are absolutely obedient."

“You’re wrong there, they really are just dolls. Seeing how you’ve even cut off their nervous systems, there really was a rejection issue, wasn’t there?”

“...!!” Godma gritted his teeth.

Having battled one of the Dolls, Loki recalled how they moved seemingly unperturbed by their injuries. “What do you mean, Sir Alus?”

“It’s an impossible prospect to begin with. Mana is what dictates affinity, and that’s generated by the heart. That won’t change even if you overwrite the factor. There’s no way that there wouldn’t be a rejection when a body is forced to use a contrary attribute.”

A Magicmaster’s affinity was determined through their disposition, or what kind of information they had the most of inside their body. By forcibly overwriting that, it meant that, for example, despite the heart creating mana that leaned toward the fire attribute, it would immediately afterwards be forcefully converted toward an affinity to the light attribute.

There was no way that wouldn’t cause a massive strain on the body. It was a system that was unstable and chaotic.

“But in the end, it becomes possible to use light magic... though an extreme stress is put on the body because of the overwriting process. Just thinking of how many have been sacrificed for an insane experiment like this makes me sick.”

“They were a necessary price to pay. It’s only natural that the completion of research comes at a great cost,” Godma said proudly, with no trace of regret in his voice.

“It’s not completed. Your research is faulty. You shut off their nervous systems and destroyed their sense of self because you couldn’t control the rejection.”

“That’s true. I didn’t turn off their sensations for the sake of battle. It was simply needed to create element Magicmasters. And their minds needed to be limited so they wouldn’t recognize the rejection, and so that I could give them absolute orders.”

“Then...” Alus could understand why Alice was biting her lip in frustration.

“Indeed, these experiments are a fragile existence. Once the symptoms for transplant rejection appear, they don’t have long to live,” Godma confirmed coldly.

“No...!” Alice put a hand to her mouth, her shoulders shaking. Realizing how much Melissa was a victim of this evil made her eyes tear up. She looked ready to collapse at any moment, when Alus touched her shoulder.

“Alice, let me confirm something. Did she, Melissa, lack her conscious self like the other Dolls from the very beginning?”

Alice didn’t even need to think about the meaning behind the question, as she shook her head. “No, we were even talking at first, and she remembered about our past, too.”

If she had a sense of self, even if it was temporary, that made her different from the other experiments. Perhaps she’d avoided the collapse of self due to her having an affinity for the light attribute.

If Godma had destroyed the experiments’ sense of self to make them capable of using the light attribute, then it might not be too late for her. But Alus didn’t say this out loud.

“Either way, there are no problems. As long as I have you, Alice, I can elevate my experiments to the next level.” Godma shoved his face, with a sadistic smile plastered on it, toward Alice.

“Godma, it’s impossible for you... no, for anyone,” Alus said coldly.

“Oh, that’s not true. In reality, the nobility crawl to me to get their hands on my experiments... now, everyone can equally get their hands on power. Even the powerless can become useful. It truly is a joyful thing to be able to bring forth power surpassing that of high-level Magicmasters. Surely, there’s no pleasure that’s greater than this, right, Alus Reigin?”

That was the theme of Godma’s research. Anyways, now that Alus understood just about everything he wanted to about this man, he had nothing more he wanted to hear. Nor did he need to buy time.

One thing was clear—the two were decisively different.

Alus whispered to the three girls to close their eyes. As they were in a hostile situation, they were apprehensive about this... but when he ordered them to once more, they resigned themselves and closed their eyes. “Don’t open your eyes until I say so.”

He thrust his arms forward. A gloomy, dark mana began seeping out from his body for the first time in a while.

Soon it had taken shape, making it easily visible to the naked eye. It compressed itself, like smoke with a will of its own, gradually increasing in volume, coiling around itself in the air. The way it wriggled was too unnatural to call it mana.

The atmosphere changed, giving the three girls goosebumps. They were taken aback, but forced their eyes to remain shut. Closing one’s eyes before the enemy was abnormal, that much was clear. But the girls felt that it wasn’t the many Dolls that were the biggest threat, but Alus.

“W-What the hell is that...?!”

Godma had stayed behind to see just how Alus would struggle to survive, and it was only natural that he’d goggle at what Alus had done. Even a veteran Magicmaster wouldn’t be able to understand the phenomenon before him.

The dark mana around Alus began crawling like worms. They looked like jet-black serpents, and at the same time felt like unnatural existences—demons—given form.

Meanwhile, the eyes of the master that had brought them forth reflected nihility and the endless abyss. Before long, as if his entire consciousness had been transferred to the wriggling mana... he muttered its name.

“Devour, Gluttonous Predator *‹‹Gra Eater››*”

The black mana immediately headed towards the crowds of Dolls.

The rounded end of it opened up into a creepy mouth, with mana pouring forth from there, which in turn opened up yet another mouth. In order to fulfill its desire of predation, it would continuously extend its body toward its prey until the poor victims were devoured.

“—!! Scatter!!” Godma shouted out at the same time as Alus’ mana was unleashed, and he ordered Melissa to protect him. Of course, by then it was too late.

The gigantic mouth swallowed the Dolls trying to evade its charge, one after another. Dolls that touched the black mana fell flat onto the floor. Their eyes rolled back, as if their souls had been drained from them.

Several of the attacked Dolls took to flight in an attempt to escape, but that too was pointless. Appendages extended out from the body of the black mana like branches, and when they touched the Dolls, the Dolls lost their strength and slammed onto the floor with the others. Even the ones that safely managed to escape were in no condition to counterattack.

“What the hell is going on?!” Godma struggled to understand the phenomenon that was happening before his eyes.

Its identity was Alus’ second type of mana. It had a mind of its own and it devoured the target’s mana. Indeed, it could devour a Magicmaster’s mana just by touching it.

The mana born from the heart was in a sense a person’s life force, and having all of that drained in an instant would leave anyone on the brink of death.

Normally, Alus could make the absorbed mana his own, but right now he was using this power for another purpose.

If he wanted to take out the Dolls he could have used another spell, too. However, he didn’t know how the mana-draining wall would influence the spell, and if he used too flashy of a spell underground there was a chance he might bring the ceiling down on them.

Moreover, this was a sort of mercy for the victims of Godma’s experiments, and out of consideration for the three girls. Making them witness body parts exploded in every direction, or burnt to cinders, or the entire room covered in blood would be too cruel.

While Alus showed no mercy to his enemies, he didn’t want the three girls with bright futures ahead of them to see that kind of scene. The reason he’d chosen Gra Eater was because he suspected it would be rather effective. It was

the first time he'd used it on humans, but it seemed to work just fine.

That said, he had the girls close their eyes because he wasn't sure this could be considered brutal or not, and because he couldn't let anyone witness this ace up his sleeve.

"... Rest in peace."

In the end, Gra Eater crashed into the wall and burst into pieces, once almost nothing was left moving in the room.

Despite its head being cracked open, the black serpents kept looking for more victims, until Alus used his full focus and managed to bring them under control. The black mana faded away and disappeared.

"It's over. You can open your eyes now."

"—!!!"

The three opened their eyes at his words, and immediately made the same expression.

When Godma and Alus had been talking, they could hear the Dolls moving. But after that, they didn't hear any sounds of battle, only the quiet sounds of bodies collapsing onto the floor. The collapsed Dolls seemingly had no external wounds, looking as if they'd inhaled a poison gas that took their lives, their souls ripped away from them.

"What happened?!"

"..." If Alus could answer Tesfia's hysterical question, he wouldn't have had them close their eyes in the first place.

Loki realized that, so she suppressed her urge to ask the same question and held her tongue.

In total, about 100 Dolls had collapsed, around half of them.

"Did you kill them...?" Alice cautiously asked Alus from behind him. She wasn't asking out of disgust or fear, just to confirm the truth.

Only Godma and Melissa seemed to have not been targeted by Gra Eater, as they were left unharmed.

He'd left Godma alive so that Alice could face her past and overcome it. Melissa happened to be next to him, leaving her alive... moreover, she was Alice's friend, so Alus was hesitant to take her life. She was also clearly different from the other Dolls.

To Alus, any Doll, aside from Melissa who was capable of having a conversation with Alice, was just a puppet made of flesh. They'd been stripped of their emotions, and with no way of getting them back, the only way to save them was to end their lives.

Alus had seen Magicmasters who were brain-dead or suffered mortal injuries on the battlefield. That's why... "Yeah, I killed them." He didn't bother to mince his words as he reported on the results.

"..." Alice didn't touch on the matter any more than that. Seeing as how there didn't seem to be any blood spilled, Alice had an idea of what kind of intentions Alus had when he'd made that choice.

"A... Aluuuss Reiiigiiin... What did you dooo?!" Godma screamed at Alus, spittle flying out of his mouth everywhere, his face distorted with fear. His shriek was a mix of fear from the attack he couldn't understand, and a loss of composure from his overwhelming advantage having disappeared in an instant.

"You were talking about me not being able to handle 30, but not even 100 were a match for me," Alus said, acting casual, but in reality the attack had taken a toll on him mentally.

He'd started his training on how to suppress his own mana for the sake of being able to control Gra Eater. This condensed form of mana with the desire to predate was like a primitive magical being with its own instincts and sense of self. That's why it would devour anything with mana if it couldn't be controlled, just like a Fiend.

Alus had spent quite a lot of time trying to control this double-edged sword, but at best he could only keep it from raging out of control for a short while. It wasn't the kind of trump card that could be used two or three times a day.

Moreover, because it had a sense of self, it could get too powerful from absorbing all the mana and not only refuse to give it to Alus, but even oppose him.

Even now, it was converting the mana it absorbed into its own, making it overflow, which induced pain in the back of Alus' eyes. That's why the spell also had the restriction of having to wait for the absorbed mana to disperse before being usable again.

Alus forced away the exhaustion he was feeling through sheer willpower, and grinned as if he was trying to provoke Godma. "What's the matter? Are you done playing with your Dolls?"

"Fuck!!" Godma grinded his teeth, his true nature on full display.

With Godma so shaken, around 60 or so of the Dolls that evaded Alus' attack were now running rampant and trying to get outside, leaving only some 40 Dolls that he barely managed to control.

There's still a lot of them.

Roughly 500 Magicmasters were outside, but Alus had heard that many of them lacked strength. So he wanted to hurry up after them, but there were still plenty of Dolls left here as well. It would be one thing if it were just one or two, but there was no way Loki would stand a chance against 40 of them.

"It's not over yet! I can still kill you all!"

That was just a calculation based on the numbers. Even though Alus had proven that Godma's calculations were pointless and overly optimistic, Godma foolishly clung on to them.

"Don't let him use magic!"

Responding to Godma's scream, the Dolls began heading towards Alus with robotic movements. "Kil... Kill..." "D-D-D-D-D... Die?" "All? Him... them..."

Tesfia and Alice were frightened by the unnatural bloodlust coming from the army of Dolls, but that only lasted for a moment.

"Here they come! Hesitation will get your friends killed, so brace yourselves!"

Steeling themselves, the two ran mana through their AWRs and nodded at Alus' words.

After a short pause, Alus said one more thing. "Alice, you won't be able to protect something without abandoning something else. Keep that to heart,

because a choice will come to you eventually. And when that time comes, you might not end up being the only one to pay the price. But it's not like there aren't ways to protect everyone. So don't look for the right answer. It might be hard, but you'll have to pick your own path... Can you do that?"

Alice nodded at his admonishment. She'd braced herself since the battle began... so she could more or less understand what he was saying.

Saving Melissa meant putting her friends in danger. But Alice's feelings were still pulling at her. That's why Alus had told her to choose. That's why he'd told her not to hesitate over the possibilities of her choice, and to steel herself to seize the outcome she desired.

"Tesfia, Alice, you two fight together. Don't even think about moving on your own."

Tesfia had the tendency to move on impulse, so Alus had said that as a warning, but also to make sure the two kept cool. Taking their combat capabilities into account, the two of them could likely only take on a single Doll at best. Attempts at using magic would be weakened by the walls, and they weren't fighting the kind of opponent that would be so easily hit.

"Okay!!" Both girls responded in the affirmative.

"Loki, don't stray too far away from those two."

"Understood."

The Dolls that had spread out had no waste in their movements. Alus figured that Godma wasn't controlling everything they did, but instead that he gave them general instructions and left them to carry them out with some degree of autonomy. Perhaps that was why they weren't moving as a unit, but each seemed to have a grasp of the others' positions, giving them flexibility and preventing friendly fire. It was clear though that those movements weren't due to experience, from looking at them.

"Don't hate me for this," Alus said. He wouldn't be able to go as kindly on them as before.

In an instant, the color disappeared from his eyes, being replaced by a deep nihility. That was the signal of his mind switching into combat mode.

That said, it wasn't like he was going into a frenzy. Cold, rational thinking dominated his mind, and his thoughts turned logical, choosing the most optimal way of eliminating the enemy.

Alus threw Night Mist at one of the Dolls coming at them, piercing its chest. The experiment fell forward, blood pooling on the floor.

That made one.

He pulled on the chain to take out the blade, and poured mana through the chain. Countless coordinates were fixed in space, replicating as many Night Mists through Real Trace. The mana-draining walls had an effect on the spell, but for a Magicmaster on Alus' level it only slightly increased the amount of mana required.

Small distortions appeared around Alus. Suddenly, another Night Mist made from mana appeared from nowhere, its peculiar black blade on full display. And then another... and another...

They were magical copies of Night Mist without the chain. It was a composite spell used in parallel with space manipulation.

"‹‹Oboro Hien››"

The thirty or so black blades around Alus flew in straight lines toward their targets.

Perhaps due to a lack of a developed sense of self, or perhaps Godma's instructions were late, but not a single Doll threw itself down to avoid the attack. Instead they readied their AWRs to block the blades.

However, each and every one of them were crushed by the sheer force of the black blades. The Dolls that had their chests pierced all lost their lives, despite having their nervous systems shut off.

Not paying any heed to their fallen allies, the remaining Dolls continued to close the distance to Alus.

"Amazing!" Tesfia said, seeing Alus' attack.

Alice's jaw dropped to the floor, and Loki being Loki was captivated by his excellence.

That’s when Alus saw the shadows that had broken through his line of defense in the corners of his eyes.

Turning in a ninety-degree angle, the Dolls charged at Alus from either side with short swords in their hands. The tips of their blades were accurately aimed at his neck, and they had him in a position that was in the center of their attacks.

In the moment before they hit, Alus dodged with the bare minimum of necessary movements, and the short swords passed in front of his nose.

The swords ended up clashing with each other right in front of him.

But in the next instant, Alus chopped at the Dolls’ wrists with a mana-infused fist, crushing them. Of course, he knew they wouldn’t flinch from something like that.

So he followed up by cutting the jugular of the Doll to his left, and kicking it in the abdomen. Its body bent in an unnatural shape, and moments later slammed into the ceiling with tremendous force. As a result, debris came falling down.

Not giving them time to recover, Alus swept the legs of the Doll on his right, unleashing a palm strike at its chest. Its body was sent flying in a straight line and slammed into another Doll.

As if chasing after the Doll sent flying, Night Mist pierced the chest of the Doll it crashed into.

However, the remaining Dolls didn’t so much as glance at their killed allies, and moved to attack Alus.

“‹‹Auto Chase››”

Suddenly, the Night Mist embedded in the chest of a Doll began shaking. Working itself free from where it had gouged into the now-dead Doll’s chest, it began chasing after the other Dolls targeting Alus, dragging the chain along with it.

The short sword stabbed them from behind one after the other, like a hunting dog attacking a pack of wolves that were chasing its hunter.

However, some of them didn’t seem to have been after Alus. A couple of

them slipped past him on both sides.

“They’re coming your way,” Alus said to Alice and Tesfia, while dealing with the ones Night Mist hadn’t taken down.

Fourteenth Chapter

Sorrowful Arrival

The two Dolls coming at them wielded short swords.

Tesfia and Alice had already found their resolve to fight. However... or perhaps despite that... was more accurate.

Many of the Dolls weren't much older than them. These two were still young. In other words, their slight hesitation was due to their lack of experience. Aside from the extracurricular lesson, they hadn't had any real experience on the battlefield.

Alice snuck a glance at Melissa, who still stood at Godma's side.

"Alice!"

"Yes, I'm fine."

The girls exchanged looks and readied their AWRs.

After finding out her Freeze required an excessive amount of mana due to the peculiar walls, Tesfia got an idea and coated her katana with mana. The magic formula engraved in the blade reacted to the mana and glowed faintly. She limited her Freeze to just her blade, as the mana turned to ice.

Next, she imagined the ideal form for this situation... strong, hard and sharp. She was making use of the training to keep her mana under control.

A thin layer of ice covered the blade, skillfully taking shape. This was an enchantment spell known as Ice Blade. It was a type of magic widely used in many attributes. The fire attribute version, for example, was called Flame Blade.

The Ice Blade blocked the Doll's short sword, the ice eroding the short sword's blade, throwing it off balance and dulling the sharpness.

"—!" Tesfia hadn't expected that kind of effect, so she pushed the enemy back and distanced herself from them. "H-How do you like that!"

It was unclear who she was boasting to, but since it was a result of Alus' training, perhaps it was aimed at him.

Alus was fighting while keeping an eye on them, so he'd heard her voice, but ignored it.

Of course, Alice didn't have the time to do anything else, either. She was busy intercepting the second Doll.

Compared to the opponent's abnormal toughness, their weapon handling wasn't anything special. With a weapon in her hand, Alice wasn't going to fall behind them with her naginata skills.

Despite making use of her long-range weapon, it was still a struggle for supremacy. She was putting cut after cut into the Doll's body, but was still unable to gain the upper hand.

The reason for that was obvious. It wasn't just because of how tough the opponent was, but mostly because Alice hesitated to kill people. She couldn't take that final step. Her fear and reluctance to harm a person kept her from it.

Alice was pretty much screaming in her mind at her opponent to stop. However, minor wounds weren't going to make someone who was unable to feel pain flinch; they would continue attacking until their last breath.

As a gap formed between Alice and the enemy, the enemy thrust their short sword forward and used magic.

A ball of light appeared at the tip, steam rising from it. Just from looking at it, it was clear that light energy was being compressed.

As the mana-absorbing walls used the light attribute, they had a special characteristic: spells that didn't use physical phenomena such as combustion or freezing—like light attribute spells—weren't all that affected. Godma, using these walls, had taken this characteristic into account. That also applied to Alice.

Alice stared at the enemy preparing to launch their spell, and took a deep breath as she tried to measure the timing.

The next moment, the ball of light left the tip of the short sword and flew towards Alice. The Doll chased after their spell, abandoning their defense on a reckless assault.

Alice muttered with trembling lips: *"‹‹Reflection››"*

The naginata's glowing blade received the ball of light, and sent it back at an

even greater speed.

Alice could see the Doll's eyes open wide. She gritted her teeth, as she could easily foresee the gruesome result. And she herself had been the one that made it happen.

The ball of light crashed into the Doll's chest and burst, sending a shockwave across the room.

"Eek!" Having been so close, Alice was caught up in the blast. She quickly picked herself up and looked in front of her when—

"Argh... ack."

The Doll was standing upright, unmoving, as if time had stopped. A big hole had been torn in their clothing from chest to abdomen, their white skin charred black. The stench of burnt flesh reached Alice's nose.

Before long, a red liquid dripped out from their mouth and they collapsed, falling flat on their face.

"No way!" It hadn't been her intention but the results were obvious, since the Doll had abandoned their defense and taken the attack from so close. Realizing that she'd stained her hands, Alice blankly stared at the unmoving Doll.

"Alice!"

Returning to her senses thanks to Tesfia's voice, Alice saw another Doll brandish their short sword. She was still crouched, but she blocked the attack by swinging her AWR sideways.

Because of her posture she couldn't put any strength into her block. She was quickly knocked off balance from the clash, and the enemy's blade was rapidly coming toward her face.

Suddenly it became much lighter, and she was able to push the blade away with just a little bit of force.

The reason for that was—

"Haaa... aaa." Tesfia, breathing heavily, was right next to her. Her katana had pierced the heart of the Doll attacking Alice. The Doll's back was stained red, the blade that had pierced them sticking through.

“Fia!”

“Are you okay, Alice?!”

“Yes...”

Having dealt the Doll what was surely a fatal blow, Tesfia timidly pulled out her katana. Her feelings of disgust were quickly replaced by the relief of having saved her friend. Not even glancing at her bloodstained sword, Tesfia stretched out her free hand towards Alice.

“Thank you,” Alice said, as she stood up.

Standing back to back, they faced off against the enemy.



The next moment, Alice saw a small ball of light fly at Tesfia from her blind spot. “—! Fia!”

It was the doll Tesfia had stabbed, not dead after all.

Her hand moved by reflex, pushing Tesfia away as she desperately poured mana into her AWR. She slashed her AWR diagonally upwards, its magic formula glowing brightly.

“‹‹Shiylereis››”

The diagonal slash unleashed a white beam of light, splitting apart the ball of light about to burst and deeply cutting into the enemy beyond.

The ball of light exploded, sending the caster who happened to be close to it flying. Moments later, they slammed into the wall.

Large amounts of blood poured out of the Doll’s flayed-open chest.

The silence that ensued was proof that their life had ended.

“Haah... haah...” Her naginata still raised, Alice couldn’t take her eyes off of the fallen enemy drenched in blood.

Before her sense of guilt and remorse could well up— “Thank you, Alice.”

Those words brought Alice back to her senses, and this time it was Tesfia—who’d fallen down and was trying to stand up—who pulled on her hand. “So that was your new spell, huh...” She rubbed her butt as she observed the power of that new spell. “I want one too,” Tesfia said, in a voice seemingly devoid of tension.

That was the best bold front she could put up. She was speaking frivolously in an attempt to not think too much about having taken a life.

“... Fia. Are you hurt anywhere...?” Alice could feel her throat quivering. Her clothes were dyed red with blood, proof of her sin. She’d used magic and wielded a lethal weapon, a tool that reaped lives.

She’d been resolved for this. But she still felt her heart breaking. She was scared of her power. She was now aware that a new spell meant a new means of killing an enemy.

“You saved me, Alice.”

“Eh...?!” Alice let out a dumbfounded voice, as she got thanked seemingly out of nowhere.

However, Tesfia was giving her a refreshing smile. She should have been scared too, but she was forcing herself to appear calm. Alice could see that Tesfia’s frivolous words from before had been born out of consideration.

Alice had defeated the enemy and taken their life. Tesfia might have been in danger otherwise and suffered the same fate. She would have done the same thing no matter how many times it happened. Compared to the thought of losing her friend forever, the regret and remorse she’d have to carry wasn’t all that much.

That’s why she already had her answer. “Thank you, Fia.”

The girls nodded at each other. They weren’t out of the woods yet. They had only defeated two out of all these Dolls.

Firmly gripping their AWRs in hand, Tesfia and Alice glanced toward the boy taking on the majority of the enemies on his own.

Meanwhile, that boy, Alus, had watched over their fight from the corner of his eye.

He had no choice but to admit he’d made a fortunate miscalculation. After all, they’d defeated two enemies.

The girls had grown without a doubt. But hardships still lay ahead. They would definitely get cornered in the coming battles.

At that time, they’d need determination and resolve to crawl out of the chaos... they’d be pressed to make a decision.

*

Tesfia and Alice stared at Alus, who was fending off several enemies at once with his singular Night Mist. Seeing that fierce, one-sided fight, the thought of going over to help him never occurred to them.

But the weapon he was using now was far too big to be called a short sword. Mana extended from its blade, changing its shape. And using that weapon and

the chain skillfully, Alus deflected and blocked the enemies' attacks, defeating Dolls without taking a single hit. Their differences in ability were evident.

Loki stood behind Alus. The knives she threw accurately pierced the chests of her targets. These knives could pierce the thick skin of Fiends, so the Dolls were no match for them. As such, they fell one by one.

Alus wasn't particularly happy about Loki taking lives, even if it was for the sake of a mission. He firmly believed that he was the only one that needed to stain his hands.

However, the results spoke for themselves as Loki's resolve was vividly put on display. He also couldn't deny that her aid was helping him. That's why, at least for now, he needed to accept her deeds. Tesfia and Alice had had no other option but to make that choice as well.

Seeing the girls' resolve, Alus steeled himself. Of course, not in the sense that he'd resolved not to dirty his own hands. He'd dirtied his hands starting a long time ago.

Instead, he'd have to swallow the bitter pill of Loki, Alice and Tesfia stepping onto the bloodstained path he was on. The path had already been chosen. He'd have to reproach himself later.

If they were ever to kill someone outside of self-defense... then that would without a doubt be his responsibility.

After deciding that, Alus' movements became more streamlined. Every swing killed at least one Doll. By the time the astonished Tesfia and Alice noticed, there were already fewer than ten Dolls left.

He was surrounded by them, deadly blades plunging toward him from every direction, but Alus blocked them all. And then— Before anyone knew it, the chains were running across the room, and Alus had escaped the Dolls' encirclement. With a single step, he'd disappeared from their view.

Not even Tesfia or Alice had been able to see it. And when they noticed, the chains surrounded the brawl going on in the room.

Alus casually grabbed the chain coming out from the scabbard. When he poured mana into it, the chain began moving at extreme speed. The short

sword at the end of the chain turned into a merciless killer, tearing through the vitals of the Dolls that had lost sight of Alus.

Their necks, their hearts were torn asunder... their lives put to an end so they could never fight again.

There was no righteousness or justice in that kind of attack. That's what everyone observing it felt.

At the very least, Alus' perfectly composed face as he trampled down the enemy was unacceptable.

He killed and reaped lives as if it was the most normal thing in the world, while breathing shallowly and normally.

When she saw his face, Tesfia gripped her katana even harder than before, perhaps in anger. Using her other hand, she grabbed at her chest as if to squeeze her heart. This was Alus' other face that she'd seen glimpses of before.

That unnatural, expressionless face discarded everything as if it was trash, especially these Dolls that were more machine than human, calmly cutting them down.

Trying to control her now ragged breath, Tesfia inhaled deeply through her trembling throat. Despite that, she couldn't calm her racing heart.

Alus, who'd been coldly watching over the battle, turned to his partner. "Loki!"

Having just finished off a Doll, Loki quickly reacted to his voice and threw a knife his way.

Dolls were attacking Alus in an opening after he'd killed several of them. He slashed at one of them with Night Mist. Next, he caught Loki's knife between his fingers, carefully twisting it so as not to disrupt the mana enchantment, and sent it into the skull of the Doll attacking him from the other side.

Their brilliant combination was marvelous. All Tesfia and Alice could do was stare on in amazement.

Even if they were doing it to protect themselves, they wouldn't be able to replicate what he'd done. They would probably never be able to reach the same

state of mind to take a life without any hesitation like he could.

But they also wondered how much help they could be to Alus if they could move like Loki.

“Loki, you were 0.1 seconds late.”

“Forgive me. I will do my best to improve.”

But even she was criticized.

“Haha...” All Tesfia could do was let out a dry laugh. But she was still barely able to keep up her morale by engraving Loki’s movements in her mind and making them her next goal.

A few minutes later... a mountain of corpses lay before them. It was a horrible scene, and there would definitely be something wrong with anyone who wasn’t disturbed by it.

However, the person responsible for it, Alus, gazed at it coldly without giving it much thought. These were the enemies... that was the only thing he recognized.

When he saw Tesfia and Alice stop for a moment when they saw his expression, he became aware that he was lacking something, or perhaps that he was too familiar with this. However, he wasn’t overtaken by excessive emotions, and the thought remained in his head for just a second.

Brushing that aside, Alus turned to face a certain person.

“Why...” Godma’s face was full of astonishment and dejection over the fact that his calculations had gone awry. His lab coat had blood on it that had splattered on him during the battle.

“I’m just too strong.” Alus’ harsh words rejected Godma’s research at its root. Dolls, these emotionless puppets, would never reach the heights he was at. Alus had proven that merely with his body.

Without having to look around, Alus knew the only ones left were Godma himself and Melissa. “I heard from Lord Vizaist that there might be a secret escape route. At least you didn’t use it to run away... I guess that’s worthy of praise.”

Even if such a route existed, escape was no longer possible. The Dolls that had run amok and gone outside were facing terrible odds, at 60 versus 500.

Godma might have realized this as well, but he was no longer listening to Alus. “Did I fail...? No, that can’t be. I’ve had people evaluate me highly. Nobody could complain about my results,” he muttered to no one in particular, in the now silent research facility.

“No... It doesn’t even count as a failure. The moment you touched someone with a scalpel, what you were doing could no longer be called research.”

“Shut up!!”

Godma raised his voice at Alus’ remark, as the current situation spoke volumes as to the reality. Overcome with anger, he swept up the materials on a nearby desk. Among the many pieces of paper fluttering in the air, an old book fell to the floor.

When Alus saw that distinctive cover, his eyes opened wide. *One of the Four Books of Fegel?! And that’s the original? Why does he have this?!*

There were many rare tomes in the world that delved into the heart and secrets of magic and Fiends, and some of the best among them were the Four Books of Fegel. Copies of the books were among the materials Alus had requested from the military, but he didn’t have the originals. In fact, some people questioned if the original books even existed.

Alus had an interest in it as well, but he’d never owned or even read the originals. There were unreliable rumors that the Four Books of Fegel weren’t made using the kind of paper commonly used in the world, and that was why they still existed to this day without crumbling away.

The old book in Alus’ sight had a thick cover made from a dark red material, with cracks like cobwebs spread across it.

Can it really be?

It was called a strange series of books because of their shady history, and the many forgeries that were around. Since not even Alus had had a chance to see the originals, a normal person stood no chance of being able to evaluate the authenticity of it.

And if Godma possessed it, it wouldn't be strange at all for a crazed collector to have a forgery at hand.

Holding back his curiosity, Alus glanced at Godma, keeping his focus on the mission.

Godma's bloodshot eyes no longer showed the same willpower from before. "That's true, it is as you say... it's awful in terms of results." He hung his head low, not resisting anymore. He might have had a brilliant mind, but he'd lost all his Dolls, and being a simple researcher with no Magicmaster abilities he was no threat to Alus and the others.

His shoulders slumped, and he had an aura of pitiable grief to him as someone who'd been bested.

However, no one here had accurately understood yet what kind of person he was.

An undying fire still smoldered within his heart. It wasn't hatred. Nor was it enmity. Strangely enough... it was curiosity. It was what a researcher possessed, the last significant reason for their inquiries.

"However... Only when speaking of results. It is still too early to call it all pointless." Adjusting his glasses, a fleeting expression appeared on Godma's face as he looked at Alus. "Before, you said that my research was incomplete. Let me correct you... that isn't an established truth. Perfection is still in the process of being made. That's why I decided to move on to the next step. As expected, a weak-willed human won't be able to overcome anything."

Godma spoke out in his most tense voice yet. "At this moment in time, my research will present a new challenge."

He raised his previously hidden hand, and they saw he was holding something. He then swung his hand against his chest.

"—!!!" Loki, Tesfia and Alice reacted.

"You fool...!" Alus spat.

In Godma's hand was a gun-shaped syringe, now pressed to his chest. It had a receptacle in place of a barrel, with dark red, blood-like liquid inside. With a

short burst, it was forced inside of his body.

“This is all thanks to Ms. Alice over there,” Godma said, managing to retain some composure, his eyes calm.

Alice felt like she’d seen him show that look in her past.

“Sir Alus—”

“Yeah, this is the worst kind of useless resistance,” Alus said, with a slight amount of pity, perhaps because he sympathized with the fellow researcher in Godma.

However, regardless of what kind of liquid it was... seeing as how he was injecting it directly into his heart, he was throwing his life away. Alus wouldn’t mind if Godma threw his life away, but he had a hunch that it wasn’t going to be that easy.

“Agh!! Ahh—Aaaaaaaa... Grrkk, ahh...”

Tripping on his feet as he struggled, Godma fell to his knees and scratched at his chest. His glasses fell off as his nails dug into his skin. Discolored blood began seeping out of his wounds. Stepping onto a fallen Doll, a thick vein ran across his forehead. His complexion was turning darker.

“Huh?! What’s going on...?”

Tesfia couldn’t be blamed for not understanding this absurd scene. After all, a human was transforming into something else before her very eyes.

“...” Alice quietly looked on, but there was no hatred in her eyes. If anything, she felt pity, misery... even sadness.

Godma’s shoulders twitched. He stopped walking and crouched down as his body swelled up. His right hand morphed into something completely unidentifiable, far from that of a human.

Unable to withstand Godma’s growth, his clothes tore and his skin stiffened as it became used to the new body.

Godma quickly raised his head and glared straight at Alus and the others, a dangerous glint in his eyes.

Loki, Tesfia and Alice looked on in horror.

The pupils of his now golden eyes were long slits, like those of a reptilian.

“Is this that result you were talking about?” Just what was that liquid? Alus didn’t know all of the components, but he was sure it contained Alice’s blood... as well as Fiend blood.

Godma had undergone a total transformation, obtaining a new form. This was the ruins of what had once been a researcher. That’s why, as a fellow researcher... this was Alus’ fight to take. “So turning into a monster is the end of the road of your lifelong research.”

There was no doubt that Godma was a prodigy. If he hadn’t taken the wrong path in life, he would have truly been able to contribute to humanity. What a waste, Alus thought.

“Is this... a Fiend?!” Tesfia asked in astonishment over Godma’s unbelievable transformation.

Alice simply bit her lip, while Loki cautiously observed him.

Godma’s body had turned a deep green color, which definitely looked like a Fiend’s body. Coupled with his gigantic right hand, he no longer had any vestige left of his humanity. His body stood at over two meters tall, and his sharp claws screeched across the floor.

“Gigigigigigi Gwah?!” Godma’s mouth split open as if he was sneering at them. An unsettled sound escaped his throat. His thick neck gradually transformed, and when it finished he spoke out in a hoarse voice while he checked over his body.

“Pardon me... I was just trying out my throat. Hmm, it seems my brain, my vocal cords and even my tongue are fine. So this is the evolved form of humanity... not bad!”

“—!! So you still have your mind,” Alus calmly observed, but secretly he was amazed.

There had been no prior examples of people turning into Fiends. And despite this unprecedented transformation, Godma had kept his human intellect.

Suddenly a thought popped into Alus' head. "I see. The light attribute."

Godma laughed creepily. It was a horrible hoarse voice, but his words had clear thinking behind them. "That's right. You're quite knowledgeable, Alus Reigin. Melissa maintaining her sense of self wasn't because she originally had the light attribute, but because she had Alice's element factor put into her. I'm glad to see that it's adapted to my own body as well." Vapor poured out of his mouth as he spoke.

"And what of it. Even if you're conscious and kept your wits, you're still a monster. At best, you have some points in common with humanoid Fiends."

Among the variety of Fiends, humanoid types tended to be of a high classification. There were plenty of theories for why Fiends could have a humanoid shape, such as they were a form of convergent evolution and mimicry of humans was one of their abilities, but there was no conclusive evidence for that yet. Which suggested that Godma, as he was now, possessed equal power to a high-classed Fiend.

Seeing that a fight was brewing, Tesfia and Alice firmly gripped their AWRs, having shed their fear. That was in part thanks to their experience in the extracurricular lesson.

However, Alus raised his voice as if to reprimand them. "Don't butt in."

Facing the transformed Godma, any trace of mercy was erased from Alus, just like in his battles in the Outer World. He decided he was facing off against what was in effect a high-classed Fiend.

"Wait, we can...!"

While Tesfia spoke out, Alice eyed Melissa who stood next to Godma. What was she thinking, now that her master had transformed? But Alice couldn't tell if Melissa's glazed-over eyes were even looking at her. Her eyes were no different from the other Dolls.

Amidst the chaos, Godma's shrunken pupils fearlessly stared at Alus. He could feel vast power overflowing from within his body. What greater joy could there be in the world than to experience the results of your research with your own body?

“We don’t know what Godma would class as a Fiend, so I’ll do it. Loki, you —!!”

As if taken back, Alus interrupted himself. He hadn’t taken his eyes off of him —but Godma was gone.

Tesfia, Alice and Loki were shocked. They’d been staring at Alus’ back, but a massive Fiend had gotten in between Alus and them in an instant.

Godma was standing there before they realized it. The human eye wasn’t able to track those kinds of speeds.

“—!!” When Alice blinked, Godma’s unsightly face was right in front of her. His repulsive face peered at her, the snake-like golden eyes drawing closer. “Huh?”

After taking a sniff, the Fiend exhaled a dark vapor, twisting his big mouth into a smile.

But in the next moment, his large build trembled as he sensed a presence, and his golden eyes moved.

The next moment, the Fiend’s repulsive face disappeared from Alice’s view. Instead, she could see the tip of Alus’ Night Mist slashing toward the Fiend’s side.

The sword moved so fast that it looked like it would cut at her, but the black blade stopped just in front of her nose.

And by the time she realized, Godma was back in his original position. Considering the claw marks on the floor, he must have used his massive arms as brakes.

Alice’s blood was mixed in with the Fiend’s blood. Perhaps he’d felt an attraction to Alice’s heart and body, the source of that blood.

Curiously twisting his great mouth, he spoke: “I really should kill you. I can feel a great hatred.” His tone was hoarse.

“Are you okay, Alice?”

“Ah... yes.” She had no injuries, but the hand gripping her naginata was shaking. That huge creature had moved that fast. She couldn’t imagine being

able to oppose him.

This is the worst, Alus groaned to himself.

Due to the nature of Fiends, the principles behind their actions were generally extremely simple. They moved by instinct. But in Godma's case, his human self-restraint and intelligence appeared to be mixed in with a Fiend's instinct and intuition. Despite his Fiend-like traits growing stronger, the reasoning behind his actions was fickle and chaotic, making it difficult for Alus to predict what he'd do next.

"Kuhyiiii!!" Those scrutinizing golden eyes were no longer on Alice, but on Alus.

"Now you get it, right? He's not something you can beat, so get back. However, you'll have to deal with *that* on your own... it seems he's come up with some very unfunny entertainment for you."

In the direction Alus indicated was Godma with his massive claw tearing off Melissa's robe, as he solemnly ordered her in that hoarse voice of his: "Whatever, I have a good enough grasp of this body... Melissa, you kill Alice. Now that my experiment's successful, your friend is unfortunately no longer necessary. Cut your lingering attachments on your own. Got it?"

"Kill. Alice..."

Melissa's wide-open hollow eyes fixed their gaze forward as she slowly twisted her neck. She crossed her arms, drawing the knife AWRs hanging from her hips, and pointed the tips toward Alice.

"Melissa...!"

Despair filled Alice's eyes, yet Melissa's expression remained unmoved.

"Haha, the two of you can just kill each other. Now go ahead and enjoy yourselves!" Godma's shrill laugh filled the room.

Tesfia courageously ran to Alice's side with her AWR at the ready, but even with two of them, they'd likely struggle to deal with Melissa.

Alus glanced over in that direction, while still keeping an eye on Godma, and called out to the other girl present. "Loki, I'll deal with him."

Before long, the battle over there began as well. The metallic sound of Tesfia's katana rang out as it clashed with Melissa's knife.

"More importantly, I'll leave that side to you. It looks like it'll be too much for just the two of them to handle."

"...!" Hearing that, Loki let out a small sigh. This kind of consideration was something Alus hadn't shown before. Feeling that small change in him, joy started welling up inside of her. That's why she wasn't going to question the role she'd been given. She was prepared to do anything he wanted. "You can leave it to me, but please don't push yourself."

"I'll be fine. Like I said, it seems he wants to settle things with me, too. This is my first time dealing with a Fiend that can talk, so I can't pass up this opportunity. Well, we're both scientists, so I'll at least see him through his last moments."

Loki nodded at his words. Either way, considering the speed Godma moved at, she couldn't keep up with him; meaning there'd be a big chance of her getting in the way, even if they did fight together.

Even from behind him, Loki could tell that Alus' focus was completely on Godma. That was a sign of his trust in her. Entrusting your back to someone in the Outer World was the same as placing your life in their hands.

If that's what Sir Alus says, I'll do everything I can to protect those two.

Indeed, things would be simpler if it was just about protecting Alice and Tesfia. If that had been his priority, Alus would have eliminated Melissa immediately. And since he didn't, that was just how it was.

He'd brought Tesfia with him, and given her enough time to grab Alice's AWR from the training grounds. It all seemed illogical if it was just to protect Alice, but it had all been taken into consideration.

Because of that, Loki understood her role. She'd support the two as much as possible, and if it looked like they were at their limit, she'd take on the job of dirtying her hands.

It was a dreadful role, but Loki gleefully accepted it. Since she knew Alus from the Outer World, she liked this seemingly illogical choice of his.

And thus—Loki quietly readied her knives.

*

“GAAAAAAAAH!!!”

“...!”

The battle suddenly restarted. Godma’s grotesque mouth opened wide. Sharp teeth could be seen in that inhuman mouth, and he swiftly moved to attack.

“Fuck!” Seeing a faint light in the depths of that mouth, Alus sensed condensed mana, and immediately bent two fingers upwards.

It was space domination magic. This spell affected space itself, and had been streamlined so that a single motion could activate it. As it was made for speed, it didn’t have much power, but it could be used in case of emergencies.

A colorless and transparent wall was created in the form of a rectangle, and moving in synchronization with Alus’ fingers, it slammed into Godma’s chin.

Having his neck suddenly twisted, Godma’s mouth lifted up toward the ceiling. In the next moment, vast amounts of condensed mana streamed from his mouth in the form of a beam.

The beam easily drilled through the three underground floors, carving a big hole up to the surface.

“...Loki!”

“—!” Loki quickly understood why she’d been called. And in the next moment, Alus’ license flew through the air.

She caught it between her fingers and quickly opened the channel, confirming that it functioned. “The channel works now.” Thanks to Godma opening a hole to the surface, the interfering effects of the room had weakened.

“Alright, then tell Lord Vizaist that it will take a little longer for me to complete the mission. As for the reason, let him know that a Variant A-class Fiend has appeared.”

“—! I understand.”

Alus hesitated for a moment as to whether he could call Godma a Variant, but

decided to go with it as he clearly wasn't a normal Fiend.

Variants were usually born from a Fiend cannibalizing another Fiend, and assimilating the information within them. That didn't just increase their mana stores, but there were also many that took on a unique trait or developed some kind of specialized power.

This was considered a form of evolution, meaning the usual procedures for dealing with Fiends wouldn't be enough. Flexibility was called for in order to handle them.

In that sense, a Variant class was a Magicmaster's natural enemy, usually putting them one rank above their normal brethren.

But that was one less thing to worry about. If Godma were to try to make his escape, they could make preparations for the worst.

However, Godma wasn't going to give Alus any time to breathe. Having had one of his trump cards defeated, rage burned in his eyes as he turned his head down and glared at Alus. His pupils were narrowed, like a beast that had found its prey.

Once again recognizing how easy it was to identify hostility in a Fiend, Alus readied Night Mist again.

He focused on the Fiend in front of him.

Alus could feel his head cooling off... a byproduct of his thinking of the most efficient way to kill a Fiend.

Throwing off his robe, he closed in on the Fiend in an instant. They were likely equal in terms of speed.

The first thing that left a deep impression on Alus was Godma's speed compared to the Fiends he'd met thus far. He hadn't expected him to be this fast, which was why he'd been careless before. But now that he knew of his opponent's speed, he wasn't going to get caught off guard again.

Not even missing the opening in Alus' initial response, Godma closed in at a speed unimaginable for his size.

Alus swung Night Mist, covered in mana, as well as a second blade made of

mana.

Godma dodged the attack, but Alus kept up the chase to prevent the distance from increasing. As long as he could read his movements, it didn't matter how fast he moved. His headache from using Gra Eater to demolish the army of Dolls was already fading. In return, Alus could feel a cold, dark something well up from his chest.

Trying to distance himself from Alus, who was hot on his heels, Godma suddenly began to zig-zag.

Seeing his enemy stop for an instant, Alus threw Night Mist, but Godma repelled it with his right arm as if he'd seen it coming.

That surprised Alus a little. Godma's foresight exceeded the natural instincts of a Fiend, and despite his Variant classification, it wasn't something a regular Fiend could pull off. "Oh? You'd get to die easy if you moved like a monster should."

Godma began moving again as Alus was muttering. His gigantic right arm was monstrously powerful, and could easily pulverize a person with a single swing. Meanwhile, his much smaller left arm had razor-sharp claws.

Having once again closed in on Alus, Godma swung his massive right arm down towards him.

The arm clashed against Night Mist, but the heavy impact resounded through Alus' entire body, putting immense pressure on his legs.

Having withstood the strike, Alus instantly pulled Night Mist to try and cut the giant arm. But as expected, the skin was as tough as it looked, and not only did it not cut the arm off, it didn't even leave a scratch.

Godma also didn't pull his arm back. He kept his arm in place, as a ball of light formed in the palm of his hand.

Sensing it, Loki glanced over in shock.

His target wasn't Alus. It was the two girls fighting Melissa. It was an underhanded move meant to create an opening by distracting Alus.

"You're facing me!" Alus opened his hand, then made a crushing motion with

it as if squishing an invisible apple, slowly closing it.

And as if his hand was linked to Alus' hand, Godma's hand, which had been about to unleash a spell, forcibly closed as well. He tried to keep it open, but something else was controlling the Fiend's hand.

Alus followed up by using gravitation based in space domination magic to increase the pressure on Godma's hand. He drove a mana-infused kick into the Fiend's abdomen, sending him flying. Once he was some distance away, Alus fully closed his hand.

As Godma flew back, his hand was forcibly closed with immense pressure, but because of his thick skin it wasn't crushed.

But that was all according to plan... the spell that hadn't been launched now went off in Godma's closed right hand, blowing it away.

The explosion gave Godma's huge frame even more momentum as he flew, and he slammed into a wall. Green blood poured out of his wrist. The hand was completely gone.

"Sir Alus!!"

Loki had been turned his way to prepare for any attack that came towards them, and she raised her voice. She'd seen the injury Alus had taken.

Blood was flowing out of his shoulder. When he'd kicked Godma away, one of his claws had torn up his shoulder. The claw that had gone in through his back had been forcibly pulled out, and the injury was deeper than expected.

However, Alus showed no signs of concerning himself at Loki's panicked voice. Once he was in combat mode, he wouldn't lose focus until his enemy was completely eliminated. It wasn't like he couldn't hear her, but it had a lower priority so he pushed it back for later.

Wordlessly, he approached Godma, one step at a time. Once he was close enough, the Fiend raised his injured right arm high and swung it down towards him.

"So you can even do something like that? You really are a monster."

Alus' eyes opened wide—the reason being that Godma's crushed right arm

healed instantly and his hand had grown back.

If it was just his right arm, it'd be a powerful blunt weapon, but that alone wouldn't be much to worry about. But it was a different story if the hand could regrow and cover itself in vast amounts of mana.

A Fiend's body was the perfect conductor for mana and could sometimes even surpass an AWR in performance. As such, enchanting a fist with mana made it far more powerful than your average weapon.

Alus instantly jumped back, but even more mana focused in Godma's palm and turned into a light attribute spell.

The next moment, an explosive shockwave was unleashed, completely erasing the spot where Alus had stood a moment before.

"How wonderful! So this is the true power of magic. Expecting a human body to handle something like this would be cruel."

"... Despite turning into even more of a monster, you can still speak, huh," Alus spat out sarcastically.

Unlike everyday magic used by ordinary people, the most prominent theory about the kind of magic that Magicmasters used was that it came from Fiends. In fact, the conceptual idea behind the AWR was the same as how a Fiend functioned.

So in a sense, one could say that Fiends were born with the optimal system needed to use magic. That meant that magic was not only the sole way to oppose Fiends, but also that humans were fundamentally inferior at using it as compared to them.

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While Alus was locked in a deathmatch with Godma, Alice and Tesfia were squaring off against Melissa.

Unlike the other Dolls, though her movements were straightforward, she was overwhelmingly fast. In terms of pure physical capabilities she rivaled Loki. Her combat skills exceeded those of an average Doll, and she might even be close to a Double Digit Magicmaster.

As Melissa rapidly approached her, Alice's body was frozen stiff. Her hands holding the naginata looked like they might drop it at any moment.

Melissa stared at her with cold, emotionless eyes. She was no longer the Melissa that Alice knew.

So Alice held her AWR against her chest. Despite the knife closing in on her, she showed no signs of using it. Her wavering eyes betrayed how she truly felt. She wanted all of this to be a lie.

"Melissa." That name, which had escaped from her lips, couldn't be used anymore to describe the girl in front of her.

Melissa meant compassion in flower language. It was the name of a small white pitiful flower. In spite of that, she was mercilessly swinging her knife down at the unresisting Alice.

And in the moment all would be lost—Alice heard a metallic *clash*.

"Alice! Keep it together!"

In front of Alice was Tesfia, who'd caught Melissa's knife with the back of her katana. Even as Tesfia focused on her, the katana was being pressed down on.

But even then Alice remained unmoving. She had a lethal weapon in her hands, and had even used it to rob Dolls of their lives. But she was terrified of turning it against her friend.

Melissa was strong, and Tesfia didn't look like she'd be able to hold on for much longer, but Melissa was the first to break the stalemate.

The sound of clashing weapons stopped, and as Melissa pulled the knife back, the knife in her other hand swiftly came down.

"—!!"

Tesfia stepped back on instinct, but then recalled Alice behind her and hesitated to retreat any further. The next moment, the knife slashed at the back of Tesfia's right shoulder after she'd moved her upper body to dodge.

"Urk?! You little—!"

It was a minor injury. She could handle it. If she couldn't, she wouldn't be able

to protect Alice. Having decided on that, Tesfia swung her katana down even as her face contorted in pain.

Melissa moved out of the way of the rough swing, with rhythmical steps.

“Fia!!” Alice instinctively called out. She was overtaken by a fierce internal conflict. Both Tesfia and Melissa were irreplaceable to her. She didn’t want to see either hurting the other. Her eyes were on her injured best friend, her guilty conscience weighing her down.

“I’m fine. I know how you feel, Alice... but you’re the only one who can save her!”

Readying her blade again, Tesfia stared down Melissa, now at a distance from them. She was reluctant to point a weapon against someone who was like family to Alice. But Alice was her one and only best friend. There was no way she could ever allow anyone to hurt her. As such, she somewhat timidly kept her katana pointed towards Melissa.

Any indecision would get Alice killed. Though she couldn’t fight without hesitation, she felt she could understand what Alice had been saying now. She felt a dull sense of pain, alongside the danger to her life.

Readjusting her grip on her katana, Tesfia brandished her AWR with new determination. Mustering her fighting spirit, she gave orders to her own mana.

Before long it wrapped itself around her blade like a faithful servant. A chilling ice took on the shape of her weapon, becoming an Ice Blade.

Seeing that, Alice recalled what Tesfia had said—that only she could save Melissa. Thus Alice readied her naginata, as she took a deep breath.

There had to be a way. But for now, she’d fight alongside her friend... keeping a faint hope in her heart.

Alice lined up next to Tesfia. “Thank you, Fia. Let’s save Melissa.”

“Yeah, together I’m sure we can do it.” Her expression was stiff, but Tesfia still forced a smile for Alice.

Alice choked back her tears as she stared at Melissa, who’d completely changed from what she’d been. Right now her arms were limply hanging down,

and her body swayed.

She's coming!

Like Tesfia's sharpened senses had predicted, Melissa made her move.

But she moved even faster than before, and by the time she noticed, Melissa was already right next to them. She thrust her knives forward.

And trying to block the attack—the two placed the back of the katana and handle of the naginata in the way, just barely managing to parry.

Yet Melissa continued pushing the knives forward. She had an inhuman and overwhelming strength.

With a single push, Alice easily went down, and Tesfia's Ice Blade wasn't freezing the knife. If anything, her blade was being shaved away. Mana must have been passing through Melissa's knives as well.

Soon the knife slid off the back of the katana and traveled toward Tesfia's body, having picked up momentum.

Tesfia had been knocked off balance, but she swung her katana to the side immediately in a counterattack. "—!!"

However, Melissa crouched down and dodged the desperate attack as if she'd seen right through her. She slipped in up close, staring emotionlessly at Tesfia.

Tesfia felt cold sweat trickle down her back. Melissa reversed her grip on the knife and let momentum carry her attack to Tesfia's neck.

The knife traveled in a clean arc. Tesfia relied on intuition to twist her neck to dodge it. Several strands of crimson hair fluttered through the air.

But that wasn't enough for Melissa to let up on her attack, as she spun her hip to attack with the knife in her other hand.

Unfortunately for Tesfia, she wasn't able to pull back the katana she'd just swung yet. She couldn't due to the pressure she was under.

Melissa attacked with skillful knife handling, not letting up to allow Tesfia to catch her breath. For every one attack Tesfia could make with her katana, Melissa slashed two to three times with her knives.

It didn’t look like Tesfia would be able to dodge the next attack. Because she’d thrown herself off balance to avoid the last one, her leg was lifted up from the floor. With the approaching knife in her eyes, she threw her gaze downward and forcibly invoked Freeze.

She lost a lot of mana because of the absorbing walls, but she managed to activate it through brute force and froze the bottom of Melissa’s foot for a moment. With that, she’d managed to prevent Melissa from getting that one step closer to make her life-threatening attack.

The knife passed right under Tesfia’s chin. One moment later, Melissa forcibly ripped her foot free from the ice and kicked her in the abdomen.

Even in anguish, Tesfia used the kick to backflip, and distanced herself.

Her face twisted in pain as she dropped to one knee, using her katana to support herself. She brought up a hand to check her neck, but she only had a scratch. Catching her breath, she hurriedly stood back up.

Melissa was using the time to check on her leg that had been frozen. Her composure spoke volumes about the gap in their abilities.

Melissa lightly adjusted her grip on one of her knives. Its magic formula glowed as mana passed through it. She moved her lips, muttering an incantation.

The next moment, a polyhedral barrier appeared before her.

It was reminiscent of Alice’s Reflection, but unlike Reflection which only worked on the blade itself, this worked on a far bigger scale.

The polyhedron was in the shape of a cut jewel, and if anything it strongly resembled Reduction, the higher-level version of the spell. It was primarily used as a counter toward attacks, so of course there was no point in using it before the opponent made their move... or so Tesfia thought.

“—!”

But Tesfia found herself staring in amazement, realizing she’d misunderstood. It wasn’t something that Alice had used. Indeed, having an affinity to the light element, Melissa could use it too.

Tesfia didn’t know what she was thinking, but Melissa swung her knife down on the spell and smashed it, sending fragments of it flying.

She was astonished for a moment, but it wasn’t like the construction had been broken... she instinctively realized that this was the complete version of her spell.

Fragments floated around Tesfia. And they shot towards her like buckshot. Just a quick glance was enough to tell her that she couldn’t block all of them.

As she used her katana as support to stand up, her face twisted in pain and her knee buckled a little. She’d dodged a fatal blow, but had taken a slice to her calf without realizing it.

But Tesfia could only be stunned for a moment, as soon thereafter the fragments of light cut through the air and rained down upon her. She quickly covered her head, but it wouldn’t be near enough to protect her from harm.

In the next moment, Tesfia felt someone covering her. That person threw themselves over her to protect her.

Eventually, the torrential shower of light fragments stopped.

Tesfia moved her arms away, slowly opening her eyes. She could feel some cuts, but she’d avoided anything lethal.

When she turned around, she saw Alice smiling in relief. She was still trying to protect Tesfia, and let out a sigh, “Thank god.”

But having taken Tesfia’s place, she had some fragments stabbed into her back. The next moment the fragments disappeared as in a haze, but her gruesome injuries remained.

“Alice!!”

“I’m fine, Fia. This is nothing... Loki dear protected us.”

Loki had landed in front of them, a knife AWR squeezed between her fingers. That small back looked so reliable right now. However...

Her arm suddenly slumped down, and the knife fell out of her hand. At the same time drops of blood dripped down from her fingers.

“Loki!” “Loki dear!”

She turned around as if to answer their voices. There was blood on her face, and she wore a bitter expression. “To be honest... I don’t know why I did something like this. Maybe I was influenced by someone,” she said in a self-ridiculing tone, but there was no regret in her voice. If anything, she seemed surprised.

Of course, Alus’ order to help the two was her motive; but when she thought about it now, she hadn’t had any expectations in the instant that she moved her body. She was used to pain, but it had been a while since she took an injury this severe.

Alus was one thing, but why had she used her body to shield the two—?

This is such a strange feeling. Loki was sure that Alus felt the same thing, but she’d save her question for later, once this mission was over.

There were so many irregularities with this mission... starting with the redhead who was with them.

“So I lost the use of an arm. A spell where the only option is to dodge everything sure is problematic, though.”

The essence of the spell was reflection. As it belonged to the highest rank of light spells, any magic used to combat it likely would come flying right back at the user.

“... That’s probably Phasm Clasma,” Alice said, naming the spell. As it was part of her own attribute, she had committed it to memory.

“... I hate the light element,” Loki said with a frown, holding her temporarily unusable left arm. “Well, unfortunately I won’t be of much use to you in battle, but will you continue?” she asked, but she was sure Alice wouldn’t give up.

While Loki had proclaimed herself as not being of much use, that was simply in terms of fighting while protecting them. If she fought against Melissa seriously, Loki had a good chance of winning.

“Yes. I’ll pull myself together and continue. I’ve made up my mind... So thank you, Loki dear, Fia.”

Enduring her pain, Alice stood up. And took a step forward towards Melissa.

“You don’t have to be so reserved. I might not be of much help, but I think I can do something.” Tesfia checked her leg, and lined up next to Alice. Considering her injuries, it was questionable if she could put up much of a fight. Despite that, she wanted to support her best friend until the end.

Loki wordlessly watched over the two. Since she’d devoted herself to the cruel battles of the Outer World, the atmosphere between these two was strangely dazzling.

Most of all, she felt like she was looking at an ideal that had slipped out of her hands. No, Loki wasn’t even allowed to hold such an ideal, so that didn’t quite make sense... but if she’d not been herself, if she’d led a different life in another time, she might have been in their shoes.

However... as long as something didn’t fundamentally change, Tesfia and Alice had no chance of winning. Loki decided to continue watching over them.

Ignoring their pain, the two quickly began their clash with Melissa again. If they let their guard down for a moment they would lose their lives. That was just how big of a difference there was in capability.

Unexpectedly enough, however, Melissa’s attacking wasn’t fatal for the two. Nor did it even deal that much damage at all.

Something’s strange...

Loki steadily gazed at the battle, feeling something was off. Melissa’s movements were growing duller. There was a delay in her movements. And that delay in reaction was gradually creating a large opening.

Melissa was retreating from the range of Alice’s speedy spearmanship.

Alice’s expression wasn’t just filled with a grimace of pain. There’d been a period of time where she and Melissa knew nothing of each other. And Alice was literally giving it her all, as if to show what she’d learned during that time.

The mana covering her naginata showed a strong, refined light. While they both used the light element, Alice’s mana had a brighter sheen to it.

Her next attack aimed at Melisssa’s weapon had failed to knock it out of her

hands, but combined with the momentum, Alice succeeded in sending Melissa's knife and arm backwards.

Having had her balance thrown off, Melissa immediately swung her knife against the red-haired girl approaching her from behind. Of course, with her balance ruined, her attack didn't have the same speed as before.

Tesfia calmly used her full strength to hit the knife. That strike with all of her force behind it managed to knock the knife out of Melissa's hand.

Melissa was left defenseless for a moment.

"Alice!" Not missing their opening, Tesfia gave Alice the signal.

Alice nodded and held up her naginata, ready to swing, when her eyes met Melissa's.

Suddenly, her mouth began to tremble. All she had to do was swing her naginata down, but she remained motionless with the tip of her blade in the air.

"I-I can't do it..."

The voice that escaped her lips was full of grief. Large tears fell down her cheeks.

Loki, watching on, narrowed her eyes. Missing that chance was a major blunder, and it made way for a fatal opening. It was now Alice who was defenseless in front of the enemy.

But something else changed before Loki could rush in to help.

Recovering from her off-balance posture, Melissa once more brandished her knives... the tips, however, stopped. Her eyes were as empty as before... but a tear ran down from one of them. The movement of her arms seemed restrained.

"... Melissa?!"

"A... lice... Alice..."

Melissa awkwardly moved her mouth in response to Alice's timid voice. A tinge of emotion began filling her expression as well. As tears fell, the smile on her face gradually began looking like the one Alice knew.

But her next words made Alice's heart constrict in pain.

"A... lice... Kill me."

With a smile still on her face, Melissa said something that made Alice doubt her ears. And Melissa's arms were trembling as she said it. Part of her was trying to swing the knives, while another part of her was trying to stop them. It was like two sides of her were vying for control of her body.

Tears streamed down Alice's face. "I can't... I can't do it, Melissa."

The light in Melissa's eyes flickered, and in the next moment she slashed with her knife.

Tesfia jumped at Alice, pushing her down just in time.

"—?!" But Tesfia felt a searing hot sensation on her back as if she'd been cut. Sweat gathered on her forehead. And tears began flowing out of her eyes as well.

Those warm droplets fell onto Alice's cheeks. "I'm sorry, Alice. I'm really selfish..."

Tesfia didn't bother wiping her tears away as she stood and faced Melissa, her AWR grasped in her hands. "If you can't do it, I will. She might have been the only one you had back in the past, but you have me now. And I worry over you and treasure you as well. If you can't fight, then I will for you. I'm your friend too, Alice..."

The katana in her hand trembled slightly. She didn't want to kill someone either. Especially not someone so precious to Alice. They'd been friends who'd shared joy and pain together in the past. And it was surely thanks to Melissa that Alice was who she was now.

But Tesfia still chose to do it. Because Alice was so precious to her.

No matter how much she tried convincing herself, her racing heart caused her hands to shake and her vision to distort.

It was a strange thing... for whose sake was she crying? But no, that wasn't it. Her tears were Alice's tears. And they were probably her old friend's tears as well.

In her hand was a katana, a deadly weapon. Tesfia stepped out in front of Alice, who'd broken down in tears... it was her attempt to keep her from seeing what would happen.

Meanwhile, Alice's tear-filled eyes stared at her best friend. She couldn't put anything into words because of the hesitation in her heart. She just couldn't bring herself to end Melissa's life. Just imagining it was enough to bring up an overwhelming sense of refusal.

But Alice had no will to fight or run. At this rate she would do nothing while her best friend dirtied her hands... or rather, she would make Tesfia dirty her hands.

"Are you sure about this?"

Suddenly, Alice heard Loki's voice in her ear. Her voice was quiet, having traveled some distance, and her words slowly sank into Alice's heart. It was a simple question, neither blaming nor resenting her.

Alice's shoulders trembled, and she slowly hung her head.

Seeing that, Loki used her right arm to pull out a knife. If Alice entrusted *that* to Tesfia, she'd make her move. It wouldn't make a difference who was the one to actually kill Melissa. And Loki had already used her body to live up to Alus' command before.

Loki didn't know how it worked, but she calmly considered that Melissa's consciousness returning was only a temporary thing. If she missed the opportunity, someone would die. And she still wasn't convinced that Tesfia could make that decision, either. It wasn't something that could be done just by slashing with no thought.

Sensing this change in Loki, Alice meekly turned around to look. Her long lashes were wet with tears.

"Like Sir Alus said... if that's what you've decided, then that's fine. But won't you regret it if you leave *that* decision up to Ms. Tesfia?"

Loki continued calmly, "Both Sir Alus and I think about the right choice when pressed for a decision. No, I'm sure everyone does. Living in this world requires you to pile up decisions like that. But I'm sure Sir Alus knows that there is no

right choice. So I'm sure that in the end, what you decide for yourself will be correct."

"Loki dear..."

Some bitter emotion was mixed in with Loki's gentle-looking eyes. That wasn't aimed at Alice's hesitation, but rather at herself.

She'd spoken from having experienced regret that begat further regret. The last stop for those who failed was a state of mind filled with egotistical self-satisfaction. Like shadows followed light, as long as one was alive they would experience regret. But those who didn't choose at all would never see the best outcome.

Alice turned to look at Tesfia's back. That small but reliable back was desperately trying to protect her, that familiar red hair swaying in the air. That back reminded her of Melissa's when they were young.

Then, all of a sudden—Alice realized it.

She wanted to become like an older sister, respected by everyone, strong enough to not just be protected but to protect as well. Just like she had once been saved, it was now her turn to save Melissa. If she stayed like this, she would surely only disappoint her.

"Thank you, Loki dear." Alice wiped her tears away. She firmly gripped her naginata and stood up. With steady steps, she walked forward and called out to the red-haired girl.

"Fia. I made up my mind, so leave the rest to me."

"Alice..."

Alice looked like a weight had fallen off her shoulders. She put her hand over Tesfia's trembling hands. Taking a long breath, Tesfia slowly lowered her blade.

Melissa was able to resist her body moving against her will. And a relieved smile appeared on her face as she saw Alice stand before her.

"I'm sorry that this is all I can do." After shedding more tears, Alice wiped them away with the back of her hand, and tried to smile as best she could.

"... Alice, please." Melissa smiled back at Alice when she saw her readying her

naginata.

In that instant, the last of her strength seemed to slip away, as she lost control of her hand and sharply thrust her knife toward Alice, the smile still on her lips.

But as if she'd seen it coming—Alice swung her naginata in its trajectory, slashing at the knife and the sickly white hand holding it.

And with fluent footwork she raised her naginata. The only thing left to do was swing it down.

Melissa let all the strength leave her body, quietly waiting for the end to come with closed eyes. She had wanted to stay by Alice's side to see her grow up... but even that desire was now falling into a deep slumber.

She wanted Alice to look to the future rather than the past. To look at those who would support the future, not at those meeting their end.

So giving one final glance at the redheaded girl behind Alice, Melissa let a natural smile appear on her face.

But what came next wasn't an attack to end her life, but the soft impact of an embrace.

The naginata held high slipped out of Alice's hand, and instead she hugged Melissa with everything she had.

"Wha—?!"

"—!!"

Alice's action surprised Tesfia and Loki, and neither were able to even speak. Nobody was able to react to the completely unexpected move.

Her decision was illogical, and seemingly even self-sacrificing, as she gave up on the battle itself.

While Tesfia was astonished, she realized that it was just like Alice.

However, her decision was a gamble that wouldn't even make for a good story. Unable to brace for the impact, the two fell over.

Before long, in complete disregard of Alice, Melissa's hand moved

mechanically and without her intention, the knife closing in again.

Whether Alice was aware of that or not, she spoke. “This is the only thing I could think of. This is the only way for me to have no regrets. So I’m sorry, Melissa.” Alice had a bright smile on her face.

And in response... the stab approaching from behind suddenly stopped, and the knife fell out of her hand. In its place, Melissa gently put her hand on Alice’s back. “You haven’t changed at all, Alice.”

“—! Melissa! Are you okay? Are you conscious?!”

“Yes. I’m a bit hazy, but... I’m fine, thanks to you.”

Melissa gazed at Alice with a haggard expression, one of her eyes closed. The feeling that she could disappear at any moment was unchanged, but the light in her eyes was back.

Seeing that the threat had passed for now, Loki immediately raised her voice. “Sir Alus!!”

Alus was still in the midst of a fierce battle against Godma, but he swiftly responded to her call and pointed the palm of his hand their way.

The next moment, a magical barrier enclosed the four girls.

With that, Alus could go all out. At the very least, he didn’t have to worry about them getting caught up in it.

Meanwhile, inside the barrier, Tesfia slumped down as the strength left her legs.

As she looked around her surroundings in surprise, Loki proudly called out to her. “This is Sir Alus’ magic.”

“... Aw geez, what is this? If he could do something like this, he should have done so from... oh, right.” Having grasped the situation, Tesfia looked at Alus with a gentle expression.

The fierce fighting moved too fast for her to see. They’d reached the end with every single one of them still alive. Lifting her lips up into a smile, Tesfia decided not to say anything more.

*

In the midst of his battle against Godma, Alus glanced over towards Alice and the others inside his barrier.

Bringing Tesfia along was the right choice.

Now that he was a Fiend, Godma's reaction speed and physicality were on a par with Alus' own. Of course that was because Alus was avoiding using spells and fighting up close.

If anything, he'd been waiting for the girls to wrap things up on their end. The barrier he'd cast around Alice and the others was out of consideration for them so they could take a breather, as well as to prevent Godma from doing anything unnecessary.

Like Tesfia noticed, he could have done so at any point; but taking Alice and Melissa's intertwined fate as well as Tesfia's feelings into consideration, he'd kept from doing so. But there was no longer anything stopping him from doing it.

Also, while their physical strength was on par, there was a clear difference in endurance. Godma's body, especially his outer shell, was quite resistant to blows. Alus on the other hand was flesh and bones, and he had injuries all over, including the big one on his shoulder.

Because the weight of the blows from Godma was greater, Alus would be at a disadvantage the longer the fight dragged on.

Dodging Godma's gigantic arm, Alus repeatedly thrust at its joint with Night Mist. But as expected, each stab hit shallowly on that shell-like skin. Moreover, he was unable to fully dodge the claws, and they cut into his shoulder and tore at his flesh.

Alus clicked his tongue, and spun around his AWR that was still stabbed into Godma's joint. While upside-down, in the middle of his swing, he unleashed a kick at Godma's neck. Yet his sturdy body didn't budge, and his neck only tilted slightly.

He pulled out Night Mist and then kicked off of Godma's body to get some distance.

Godma stared at Alus as his head slowly moved back into place. His pupils narrowed even more. He'd completely locked onto his target, but then he shifted his eyes to look towards Melissa inside of Alus' barrier. "As expected, I shouldn't have left her sense of self intact. Or perhaps it was Alice's factor that brought her back. Hm, hm, hm, either way I guess I couldn't have predicted it."

Letting out a beast-like laugh, Godma gazed at Melissa as if he was staring at prey. He used his still somewhat human-looking left hand to cover his face. "I should have tampered with her a little more when I had the chance. It's unfortunate, but I guess I'll have her be useful one last time..."

With those words, mana gathered in Godma's fingertips, drawing a geometrical magic circle. The circle was as red as blood.

Godma stabbed his finger into its center. "Repose embraces sacrifice, and invites the ancestors—*‹‹Senas Requiem››*"

A scream came from a different direction from Alus, who stood on guard.

It came from within the dome-shaped barrier.

Melissa was screaming, an eerie light rising in her chest. She clutched at herself, unable to bear the unimaginable pain.

"Aaaaa—Aaaaaaah...!!"

"Melissa! Melissa!!"

Alice embraced her. But Melissa showed no signs of calming down, and because of her strength her nails dug into her chest. At this rate she might even tear herself apart.

Her pain wasn't the effect of Godma's use of a taboo spell, but rather the cost of it, and it didn't matter if she was within a magical barrier or not.

In the worst case scenario, staying in the barrier could result in Alice and the others getting caught up in it as well.

Godma realized this, and his lips lifted up in a disturbing smile. "Hurry up and die, and face your punishment, Melissa. I can't expect something on the level of the attack on the Institute, but in return, I won't need to make any complex adjustments to the aim... as long as I can use this taboo, I can defeat Alus Reigin

and prove the worth of my research!”

“Al... please, save Melissa! Please, I’ll do anything!” Alice begged him in a crying fit, throwing everything at Alus’ feet.

“...”

However, Alus remained silent, not giving her an answer. He couldn’t.

Melissa was looking straight at him, weakly shaking her head. She was earnestly imploring him not to intervene. She’d understood everything, and she would resolve it herself. That’s what her eyes were telling him.

In fact, all Alus could do was rely on a single awkward method; something he’d done countless times, salvation through death. Unlike that time with Loki, he’d experienced this spell twice now, and he knew that this taboo didn’t have an external catalyst.

The taboo spell known as Senas Requiem used the heart as the catalyst.

Her heart had been tampered with by Godma, so that just using the activation formula would force the spell to be constructed. The only way to save her was to pluck out her heart. Of course, that would end her life as well.

This was a taboo because of the cruel nature of the spell. The sacrifice would die no matter what.

“Why, why...?”

Alice was being supported by Tesfia, as despair washed over her. Her face was distorted in anger and tears when Melissa suddenly reached out to stroke her cheek.

“It’s okay, Alice. There are things even he can’t do. Besides, I have to face my punishment. So please forgive me, Alice.”

Alice lovingly held the white hand stroking her cheek. “You don’t have to say that. You’re going to be fine. We’re going to save you.”

Godma’s laughter echoed through the room in anticipation of the spell’s activation.

Melissa gave Alice a fleeting smile. The same geometrical shape that Godma

had created was already engraved in her chest, as she breathed heavily. Bringing her fast, shallow breaths under control, she squeezed out the last of her willpower.

And directed a pitying sneer towards Godma. “I won’t let this go as you please, Godma! I won’t be killed by the likes of you... that’s right, I won’t let there be anyone to blame for this end!”

She removed her hand from the surprised Alice’s cheek, and raised the knife in her left hand... before plunging it into her chest.

Silence fell over the room.

The magic formula engraved in Melissa’s heart stopped working, and the taboo spell that looked to activate at any moment fell apart, disappearing even as Godma shouted out in anger.

Alus quietly watched over the sight. He’d somewhat expected this ever since he accepted her silent plea. And the reason he hadn’t taken action to stop Godma’s taboo spell was because he didn’t have to.

Alice cried out with heartbreaking sorrow. Loki cast her eyes down, and Tesfia stood next to Alice with a mournful expression.

“Melissa, why...?! I never wanted you to go away ever again...!” A never-ending stream of tears poured out of Alice’s eyes. She desperately pressed her hands against Melissa’s chest, trying to keep any more blood from coming out of the stab wound. But nothing she could do would change anything now.

“Thank you, Alice. I’m so glad I got to see you before the end. Please just keep looking forward from now on. Don’t look back, and don’t stop... because your happiness is my happiness. And I’m happy... that I was able to let you know.”

Melissa’s exhaustion was obvious to anyone. It wasn’t clear if her eyes could even see Alice anymore.

Suddenly, her hand drifted through the air. She weakly grabbed Tesfia’s hand and spoke to her. “Please take... care of Alice... please, take care of her...”

Her gradually weakening voice echoed through Tesfia’s heart. Tesfia nodded repeatedly at her in response. Because of her wet eyes, tears scattered across

her face.

Melissa realized that she was dying, and she called out to Alice, asking her to tell her a story that she could listen to until the end.

Alice choked back her tears, and began to speak. She didn't have anywhere near enough time to tell her of all that had happened since they'd parted ways, so her story was incoherent and fragmented.

But it still seemed to satisfy Melissa, as a peaceful smile appeared on her face.

Just as the end was about to come, Alice recalled something that she had to ask Melissa. "Say, Melissa. Do you remember what you said when we parted ways at the facility?" She feigned calm as she spoke. She wished she could speak with Melissa forever so that she wouldn't fall asleep, if it was at all possible...

Finally Melissa opened her mouth. "... I remember. Back then, I said, 'let's meet again.' And it came true."

She didn't even have enough strength to change her expression, as she muttered these words with her bloodless lips to her beloved little sister.



... Melissa had told one final lie at the end. With that, the selfish promise she'd made would no longer remain in the world.

The truth was that she'd asked Alice to someday call her "Sis" again. She had implored her out of weakness. She was scared to be on her own. She wanted family, and she had cherished Alice for that sake. Thinking back on it now, she couldn't forgive herself for it.

It was Melissa who had been saved from those hellish days back then. So she had prayed... that Alice would see her as a big sister again if she ever got another chance to protect her.

Melissa was recalling those days when she'd been together with the young Alice. She was satisfied just thinking about the small happiness they'd shared back then. Her world was growing dark now, but she wasn't scared. If anything, she only felt fulfillment.

She couldn't even move a finger now. Not her lips, nor her eyes, not even her eyebrows. Even that distant voice in her ear was growing faint.

"Sis... Sis."

Ah, Alice. My beloved Alice... thank you.

A lone tear ran down from her closed eyes, and her time came. And the hand that Alice held onto lost all strength, letting her know that she had passed on.

*

Having watched Melissa's end from start to finish, Godma spat out his disdain. "This is what happens when a pet disobeys its master. Talk about a defective puppet. You could call this the greatest stain on my—"

Before he could say *record*, Godma felt a bone-numbing chill behind him.

Swinging his arm around as he turned, his blow was stopped by Alus' arm, sturdier than a thick wall. The fist that was bigger than a man's head had been easily stopped by what appeared to be a slender boy.

Without any time to even be taken aback in surprise, Alus' face was right in front of him. Behind those bangs were cold eyes, seemingly filled with madness, staring right at Godma. "Just die already."

Godma raised his arm out of reflex, gathering mana in it to defend against the next move. But before any spell could activate, his giant frame was frozen in an instant.

Mistlotein. Alus hadn't even said the spell's name.

By the time Godma recognized the spell, his body was already a statue of ice.

Of course, that alone wouldn't do anything to him. In the next instant, he used his mana to forcibly break the ice. It only took a second for him to do it.

Once he was free from the ice, Godma looked up, and saw *it*. With a face filled with fright, he screamed, "W-Which one of us is the monster...?!"

Before the glowing orb-shaped spell activated, Alus took cover some distance away inside of a barrier like the one covering Tesfia and the others.

"‹‹Astral Sun››"

It was huge and powerful. And the orb grew another two sizes larger, and its flames even more intense after being given a seemingly infinite amount of information.

This was a spell that only looked similar to the beginner spell Burning. This one featured extreme temperatures, as if it was a shrunken sun. And it was among the top of the fire attribute spells.

"Gaaaaaahh!!"

The area immediately heated up. The barrier Alus hid behind began to distort. It would only last a dozen seconds or so more. The white walls of the barrier began to turn red and melt, as the very composition of Alus' barrier began to collapse.

Sensing the temperature's steep climb, he undid the spell. If he messed up in a sealed room like this, everyone might burn to death.

As Alus undid the spell, Godma appeared from out of the black smoke, down on one of his knees. Because of the extreme heat, parts of his outer shell had been badly burnt, and the floor around his feet was orange and on the verge of dissolving.

That he'd only sustained that degree of injury was likely because he'd

hurriedly used his gathered mana and expelled it to create a protective shell around him.

Alus walked up to Godma and looked down on him expressionlessly.

Then— “—! Aaaahhh!!”

A downwards swing, and a grotesque arm was cut off at its base. Punishment was handed down by the black blade of Night Mist.

Godma swung his other arm in response, but the moment it moved, Alus applied gravitational pressure to his elbow, crushing it, making it fall limply to his side.

Having shaved off the dangers of the Fiend, Alus diagonally swung his blade towards his torso.

Green blood spurted out. Godma slumped back unsteadily against a wall.

It was an overwhelming conclusion. However, Alus didn’t end him.

Seeing that, Loki ran up to him. “Sir Alus, I’ll treat your injuries...”

“...! It’s nothing serious.” Not hiding his surprise, as if he’d just now realized, Alus looked at the timid Loki.

Alice slowly walked over to Godma. Tesfia stared at her back as she went, glancing at Melissa.

Godma’s appearance no longer had any similarities to when he’d been human. Parts of him were decaying and falling off. His grotesque shell was peeling off on its own.

The blood dripping out of his mouth was still green, but his body now started gradually turning more human again. His swelled-up remaining arm was starting to look more human. But the golden color of his eyes didn’t change at all.

“Phew... looks like it was no good,” Godma feebly said with chagrin, his body still leaning against the wall. Regardless, it was only a matter of time now.

Alus looked down on the loser. Then—“She’s here.”

A woman jumped down the hole Godma had opened before, and silently landed. Before long, her long fluttering black hair settled back into place. “Is it

over already?”

“Feli, what happened up above?”

“You don’t have to worry. The extermination of the Dolls that escaped outside has already begun, and... there’s only a few of them left. Would you like to see?”

Vizaist was good at using a spell to get a grasp of the situation at hand as well. But the term “see” made Alus give her a perplexed look.

Felinella responded by asking him to wait a moment. She walked up to him, and as they faced each other, she sandwiched his head between her hands. Her cheeks turned a slight red, and she pressed her forehead against his.

“‹‹Airmap Link››”

A vision of the surrounding area popped into Alus’ mind, as well as red and blue dots being scattered across it. The red dots were the Dolls.

“Wha?!” a shocked voice cried out, without a doubt belonging to Loki.

“To think you could do something like this, that’s amazing, Feli.”

“Thank you!” A huge smile appeared on Felinella’s face.

“But... I haven’t seen the commander do something like this.” Feli’s spell was something that Vizaist should have taught her.

“Well... you have to touch foreheads, so...” Felinella blushed harder.

Alus caught on to what she meant. Just the thought of pressing his forehead against an old man in his 50s made him feel depressed. And if his cheeks turned as pink as Felinella’s were now, it would be a traumatic experience he’d never forget. “... Anything but that.”

“Agreed.” Felinella rejected the idea of Alus and her father touching foreheads as well.

In the silence... Alice was looking down at the dying Godma.

And a cold voice called out to her from behind. “I’ll leave the rest to you. Hand him over to the army, or finish him off yourself, do what you want.” Alus had already lost interest in that man’s fate.

Godma weakly looked up at Alice. “T-That was a miserable end, Alice. Melissa acted like a big sister even here, treating the Dolls like her little sisters instead of you. She was no different from how she was back at the facility...”

He was scoffing at Melissa’s death. But Alice gritted her teeth and kept quiet.

“Kill me, Alice. I’m the man who stole everything from you. Do it, and you can cheer up and feel satisfied,” Godma continued, as if trying to enrage her.

Alice silently stared at his face. Frankly, she hated and despised him. The reason her life and her past were such a mess was lying powerless right before her. It was the perfect chance for revenge.

But as she stared at him, she could feel her hatred fade. Alice realized why that was. If only she could have realized it in the past. “What did you want to do... even going so far as to harm children? We weren’t your dolls to play with,” Alice muttered in a heartrending tone.

The past couldn’t be changed, and for some reason she felt pity. Despite the mountain of soulless Dolls that spoke of the cruelties Godma was responsible for.

“No, you’re Dolls, every last one of you were. Alice, your parents even sold you off for money! Everyone is the same. They readily accept some convenient excuse about it being for the sake of humanity as they line their pockets with gold.”

Perhaps becoming desperate, Godma began to rain abuse down on Alice to provoke her. Like he was trying to gouge at her, to bring out the hatred within her.

However, Alice’s heart remained unchanged. “You’re wrong,” she said in a calm voice, and shook her head. She held her hand above her chest. “Because my mother and father came to visit me every day. They treasured me until the end...”

Tears began streaming down Alice’s cheeks as she remembered. Those bright drops reflected nothing but happiness. She couldn’t forgive him, but she already had.

And now she finally understood the meaning behind what her parents had

done at the end. “They had bought a big stuffed animal for me.” Alice had a nostalgic smile on her face, through her tears.

Her parents had lost their lives in a robbery. Even after they’d been stabbed, they clung on to that stuffed animal until the end. They couldn’t let it get taken after they’d bought it for when Alice would come home. Even though there was no way that robbers only looking to steal money would take it.

She’d only heard it secondhand, but she could easily imagine them behaving that way. As her parents passed away, their thoughts remained on their beloved daughter.

“One thing follows another. What my mother and father left behind, the feelings that Melissa carried on, and right now when I’m being saved by so many people... That’s why I don’t want to let go of the now... of the future that carries on alongside our bonds.”

There had never been any reason to hesitate. And finishing off Godma would surely be a betrayal. And Melissa had taken her own life to prevent that, putting an end to any grudge that might result from someone killing her, with her own hands.

If Alice were to kill Godma here, she wouldn’t be able to remain where she was now. The now that she’d built up and treasured so highly, was far too happy and precious for her to throw away.

Her reunion with Melissa was the ultimate proof of that. After all, there was no way that her bond with Melissa could be denied.

Thinking back on it—harshness really hadn’t been the only thing she’d felt. No matter how much she doubted it, it never faded. Whether or not Melissa had truly concerned herself with Alice, and what her real motives were wasn’t a big deal.

Because ultimately... what really mattered was how Alice herself felt about it.

The bond she formed with Melissa connected to Tesfia, Alus and Loki, leading to a bright present. And Alice couldn’t stain that with something as unsightly as revenge. If she did, she could never take their hands again. And she couldn’t face her parents who’d raised her with love. So that’s the answer Alice chose.

“Don’t be stupid... so what? Are you seriously saying that you don’t hate me for toying with you, Melissa, and countless other experiments?” Taken aback in amazement, Godma raised his fading voice. His tone sounded vain, yet somehow amazed. He was overwhelmed by these irrational and absurd emotions. There wasn’t a single trace of the hatred and anger that he’d expected in Alice’s eyes.

“Yeah. If that’s what Melissa wanted... I’ll forgive you,” Alice said in a quiet voice, as she wiped her tears away with the back of her hand. “That’s why... I won’t let you stain my past any further!”

Having said her piece, Alice took a deep breath and turned her head to reveal the refreshed expression on her face.

“Are you fine with that?” Alus asked.

Alice nodded firmly. “Nothing would be changed by it, and I won’t let it be changed, either. It won’t bring Melissa back, so I don’t want pointless revenge to ruin the now that leads to the future...”

“Well, if you’re fine with it, I won’t say any more.”

There was no right answer, but the choice Alice had made on her own was in no way wrong. She had chosen not to dirty the road that Melissa had shown her. In the end, Alice might have ended up protecting so many precious things.

And maybe the reason Alus had taken Tesfia with him was because Alice’s bonds with him and Loki wouldn’t have been enough to make her choose the future. Tesfia surely made up one of the threads that Alice would use to weave her future.

Alus had a vague feeling that he’d made the right decision. It was a kind of premonition that might have been connected to the truth of the world that was surely something that didn’t rely on reasoning or rationality, but something far beyond it.

He was frustrated that he couldn’t see the logic in it, but he felt strangely happy when he looked at Alice’s back.

Alice was unaware of his stare... but she suddenly turned around to speak to him. “Besides...” She stopped to put a mischievous smile on her face. Her

honey-colored hair fluttered in the air, and she wore a beaming smile. “Besides, you looked like you didn’t want me to kill him.”

“Did I look like that?” Alus answered her bluntly, but with an element of surprise in his tone.

“... You did, your face was all, like, sad and stuff,” Alice laughed again, holding her hands behind her back and gazing at him with upturned eyes. In contrast to her bright voice, she deliberately twisted her face in a blatant grimace.

Realizing she was teasing him, Alus narrowed his eyes before calmly answering, “I see.”

Then the next moment: “Who’d make an ugly face like that?!” he shouted out loudly, in a hammy fashion.

If she kept this up, Alice would completely get over it someday. And that hunch put a lightness in Alus’ steps. Of course, he himself was unaware of that.

“What do you mean ugly...? You really aren’t being honest,” Alice said happily, as she stopped the grimacing look. She then added, more seriously, “... That’s right. You really don’t understand yourself at all, Al.”

*

In a windowless white room.

Godma, who was just barely clinging to life, was strapped to a bed and mumbling to himself. “... I-I might have lost to you bastards... but that won’t put an end to my research. I fulfilled my promise to him after... all...”

Perhaps it was thanks to having once turned into a Fiend that he was still alive. Because of the thinking of some of the higher-ups, the elimination order on Godma was temporarily put on hold.

“This was a facility near Godma’s base that had been constructed for the encirclement.” Strictly speaking, it was one of the rooms in the temporary medical facility set up to treat the wounded... but because of the circumstances, it had also become a simple interrogation room.

It was an abandoned building that had been quickly repaired, but once upon a time it had been a research facility, which was perfectly ironic.

Loki stood next to Alus, covering her left arm. Tesfia and Alice were being treated for their injuries in the next room, but Loki had only received the bare minimum treatment.

She had an anxious look to her, but after a quick glance at her, Alus turned to Felinella who stood some distance away. The battle was over, but there were still things left to do... Alus was beginning to long for his own laboratory after all that had happened.

Felinella had her license against her ear, receiving a report from outside. Before long, the call ended, and she calmly reported, “It appears to be over. They’ve finally eliminated all of them.”

Even after Godma fell, the 60 or so Dolls that escaped outside had continued to rampage.

And Felinella then received a report that the last remaining one had finally stopped moving. “There was one more... just as expected. A Doll with different-colored eyes. We captured that one too, and they seemed to have had data embedded in their eyes.”

“Impossible!!” Hearing that, Godma shouted out loud from his bed.

“I expected as much,” Alus said.

Since Godma had support from somewhere, he must have provided for some insurance that his research data would reach the outside. He had 200 Dolls with him. That was enough to call a private army.

But Felinella and the others received information that Godma’s supporter wasn’t just a lone person or organization, but an entire nation.

Balmes, the nation with the fewest Magicmasters in its ranks, also had Magicmasters of low quality and there were rumors that it lacked the ability to defend its borders, and even that its ruler was being dismissed.

Then there was Hydrange, which had the No. 5 ranked Magicmaster, but its number of Double Digit Magicmasters was a fraction of the other nations.

Godma’s research that artificially created light element users was something that would fulfill the needs of both of these nations.

They could have just gotten the name of Godma's patron from Godma himself, but it appeared that he wasn't aware of their identity. He had simply devoted himself to his research without caring who he was dealing with, or where the money was coming from. Unfortunately, Alus could imagine himself doing the same.

Godma was a man who'd taken up insane research, so it wasn't hard to guess that he wouldn't bother himself. Moreover, the representative of Godma's patron must have been quite cautious as well.

That aside—"So, where was that Odd Eyes captured?"

"... At the Institute. It appears they used a simplified transport gate."

"I see, so they left some kind of device behind during the last attack to allow transportation from the outside. They must have struggled to make something like that work, a quasi-version of a transport gate."

"I didn't think things like that were at a practical stage yet, though... when did he manage that?" Felinella said in surprise.

Alus answered her. "It just means that Godma was pretty competent. Like Lord Vizaist expected, they had a way out of the research facility, but to think they were headed for the Institute..."

"That choice was a bit bold," Loki said in an exasperated tone.

"Yeah, it takes a lot of guts to try to do that under the nose of a former Single Digit."

Godma had ultimately underestimated Sisty. She'd caught the intruder by detecting a slight change in the mana of the Institute that was under her control. Melissa's infiltration had made her aware there was a hole in security to begin with.

Alus took a look over in Godma's direction.

"I see... so it's all fallen apart," Godma murmured in a hoarse tone. With that, he closed his eyes and lost consciousness.

"But still, what a terrible situation," Alus mused.

Tesfia's and Alice's injuries were considerable, and Loki's left arm was badly

hurt as well. They hadn't lost anyone, but none of them had made it out uninjured, not even Alus.

"I'm going to head over to Lord Vizaist and give a report about this incident. Feli, can you request some healing Magicmasters? Once that's done, Loki, take the others back to the Institute with you."

"But you're heading out before the healing Magicmasters get here, Sir Alus? At least have them stop the bleeding."

"Nah, you're the one who needs their bleeding stopped first, Loki."

Loki was surprised at first, but she was eventually convinced by Alus saying he'd go get himself treated later, and reluctantly pulled back.

Tearing his own robe, Alus wrapped up Loki's arm. This was just an emergency measure, as not even healing Magicmasters could restore lost blood.

In the meantime, Loki cut off a piece of her uniform sleeve in order to get some cloth she could use as a bandage for Alus. By the time Alus thought to himself that there was no reason to go that far, it was already too late. "I could just use my own."

"You can't! You had direct contact with Godma when he transformed! What would you do if some weird bacteria infected the wound? Mine isn't dirty."

"... Loki, let's replace the scraps bandaged around your arm right now."

Loki immediately covered her mouth, as if she'd said too much. She hesitatingly said that she was fine with the scraps, which perplexed Alus to no end.

Behind them—Felinella began tearing up her own robe. That was a waste as well, but it was already too late.

Alus had at least wanted to bind his wounds with his own robe, but based on Loki's and Felinella's looks, that wouldn't fly. If there had been any spare medical supplies remaining, none of this would be happening, but there had been more injuries than expected and Tesfia and Alice had been prioritized.

"Mr. Alus, at least let me stop the bleeding."

Alus sighed, as Felinella began to wrap the cloth around his shoulder in a

familiar fashion.

Felinella did confirm first with Loki that Loki's bindings were all right, perhaps out of consideration, and received Loki's answer in the affirmative.

Loki frowned for a moment, but she had no choice but to step down after being told it was for Alus' sake. "I understand, I'll accept it... but at least use my cloth, please. And—"

Her expression turned more severe. "—Is pressing those useless sacks of flab against the back of Sir Alus' head also part of the treatment?! I'm not sure what to think about that!"

"Ah!"

Having been so invested in wrapping up Alus' shoulder, Felinella had unconsciously pressed her bountiful chest against him. When she came to realize this, she jumped back with a blush on her face.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Alus. It was an accident, I didn't mean anything by it..."

"Yeah, I don't mind."

"I do!" Loki immediately retorted. The incident seemed to particularly upset Loki, as she launched into a barrage of complaints.

Sensing that things might go on like this forever, Alus decided to put a stop to it. "Just leave it at that. Feli said it was an accident. It wasn't on purpose."

"She'd just be a slut if it was," Loki said, taking another stab at Felinella who firmly denied those words, still furiously blushing.

They had a report to make, but with the lack of seriousness in the air, it sure didn't feel like it to Alus.

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With Felinella leading the way, Alus made his way to the control room that Vizaist was in.

He hadn't noticed because he'd been underground, but it was already nighttime outside. Unlike the free-spirited atmosphere of the Outer World, however, he felt nothing for the fake night sky.

If not for the mission, this area would have been wrapped in an eerie silence. But right now people were everywhere, and there were lights spread out here and there that repelled the moonlight.

After walking for a while, they arrived at their destination. It was awfully plain for a control room, and if anything it had the kind of rustic appearance only Vizaist would take to. After all, it was just a big tent put up in a clearing in the forest. The medical facility from before was better than this.

On the other hand, it had been camouflaged with magic, and would go unnoticed unless someone was being vigilant.

Vizaist's magic was suited for getting a grasp on information, but it was the type that required him to be on-site. But since it had a range of several kilometers, there was no one better suited than him when dealing with a large-scale mission. He had countless achievements, and the blood of one of the most powerful noble families ran through his veins.

The first thing that caught Alus' eye as he stepped into the tent was the decorations on Vizaist's chest. Lined up in an orderly fashion on the left side of his chest, they were things that Alus had only ever seen him wear at official functions. He was the kind who preferred to lead on the ground, so he wasn't the type to enjoy displaying such flashy decorations.

The reason he wore them today was likely because he was leading security forces who were unaccustomed to the Outer World. In other words, the medals were for making the people from other departments listen to what he said.

Well inside the tent, Vizaist faced Alus, as Felinella came to stand at her father's side. "I've brought him over," she reported, keeping her position in mind.

"Ahh, you're here. It's been a while," Vizaist said in his deep voice, seated in his chair.

While he'd made his fame through commanding, his well-trained muscles revealed his true colors as a martial artist. Despite being in his fifties, his body was still very muscular. He was a powerhouse who was as imposing as ever.

In the past, he'd bragged about making a name for himself as a Double Digit

Magicmaster. Anyone who found out that this hardy man, who once ran wild in the Outer World, now specialized in detection and gathering information, would be unable to hold back their laughter.

And partly because of his lighthearted and amiable personality, those who knew of his character and capabilities made sure to refer to him with respect. But since he'd risen through his own powers, his first name was more widely used than his family name.

And the respectful name they used was Lord Vizaist. However, only Alus and the Governor-General ever said that to his face.

His short hair with gray strands mixed in was the same as when Alus first met him. That was when he was assigned to Vizaist's unit at the startling age of ten. That was six years ago, but it hadn't actually been long enough to call it 'a while' since they last met.

Though they hadn't met face to face for some time, Vizaist was pretty much always in charge of the information gathering on any secret missions Alus was assigned to, so they ended up speaking quite frequently.

"I'm glad to see you're still the same, Lord Vizaist," Alus said with respect. Considering the speed at which the encirclement had been completed, his skills were as unchanged as his appearance. And the casualties among the forces used had likely been kept to a minimum.

"I'm sorry about that. We didn't expect that Godma would have such a big force with him. That was our mistake."

"I don't think that could have been helped. I believe both the number of Dolls he'd prepared, as well as him using a taboo as a decoy, was well beyond anyone's imagination. In essence, there was no way to know."

"But we still needed to prepare countermeasures." Vizaist was the kind of man who didn't take anything lying down. Even if it was a taboo spell, he'd do everything in his power to find a solution. "But still, that damn Berwick. I never heard that you were attending the Institute."

All Alus could muster in response to that was a dry smile.

Vizaist was probably the only one who could refer to the Governor-General so

bluntly. The two were old acquaintances, and while Vizaist had devoted himself to missions in the Outer World, Berwick had risen to his position through political intrigue and his achievements as a commander.

As Vizaist aged, he spent less time at the frontlines, but he'd landed his current position because of his insistence on remaining on active duty. He was skilled at detection to begin with, but his temperament would never allow him to pull back. That's why he was still willing to step up to the front and fight himself if need be.

"Still, you seemed to have had a rough go of it."

"... You could say that." He must have heard some details from Felinella already.

"If you'd failed... oh, I guess that wouldn't happen."

"No, I was pretty scared."

"Ha ha ha... then I guess it was a good experience for you," Vizaist laughed heartily. "However, I almost didn't recognize you."

"Really? I haven't changed at all."

It hadn't been that long for the difference to be apparent. Of course, Alus was unaware of his own change.

"You've become more human."

"...!!" Alus fumbled for an answer, as he wondered if that was supposed to be a compliment of some sort.

"Well, I'm happy that you're enjoying yourself," Vizaist said. "I was shocked when Berwick told me that you wanted to retire."

"I'm sorry for making you worry, but that wasn't a lie."

Vizaist's expression then turned serious, as befitting a military officer. "I wasn't worried. Whether you like it or not, you belong on this side."

"..."

Alus understood what he meant.

An oppressive atmosphere filled the room. He wasn't trying to pin Alus down,

but he was using pressure, as if he'd seen straight through him. And his words seemed to suggest as much, too.

"You just need me. If an S-class invades, Alpha will suffer serious damage as it is now." After a short pause, Alus spoke bluntly in a sarcastic tone, melting the freezing atmosphere. This kind of discussion was actually commonplace between them.

"You always have something to add."

"That goes for both of us."

Vizaist smiled, showing his teeth, and he said, "I'll overlook everything this time. All's well that ends well. If not, my own neck would be on the line. I'll let Berwick know."

He'd take all the responsibility. But being the Governor-General's right-hand man, he probably wouldn't have to. And his reassurance to Alus was said in a joking tone.

"Thank you very much. But I have business with the Governor-General anyways."

"What, did you do something again?"

Alus ignored the unjustified accusation implied in that 'again.' "It's private business."

Hearing that, Vizaist rested his head in his hand, as if unamused.

With everything that had happened, Felinella finally opened her mouth to speak. She was exasperated, seeing as how they weren't moving on to the next point. "Commander, I think it's about time to move on to the main topic..."

Alus was impressed to see Felinella refer to her father so impersonally, a sign that she understood her position. Well, while they might be related by blood, they didn't look anything alike. Even if she called him 'Father,' it wouldn't have felt right, even though he knew of their relationship.

"Right. Alus, because of your instructions to Felinella, the battle on the surface was able to proceed to our advantage. And Sisty captured the Doll trying to carry out the data and handed it over to us. So we've managed to

prevent Godma's research from leaking... however." This pause meant that they were troubled as to how to handle it. "Our top brass has taken an interest in this research. The attack on the Institute made this into too big of a deal."

"That's..." Alus suspected that the top brass wasn't interested in the literal meaning of the word, but rather that they may be directly involved. Since Vizaist hadn't been able to figure out who stood behind Godma, Alus believed there was a possibility Alpha's top brass was a part of it.

Vizaist, however, seemed to see through his misgivings. "No, we've investigated them, and the top brass is clean. But I wanted to ask you... what do you think about this research?" The way Vizaist put it made it clear he could be trusted on this. The top brass must have really only taken an interest in the research.

Since the Dolls were equal to Triple Digit Magicmasters in physical capabilities and had the ability to use the light element, they were perfect for missions in the Outer World.

But Alus hesitated. It was true that it would be a waste to just throw everything away as if it was worthless. The research on the origin of the light attribute should be put to use, but— "I think it should be discarded. It's too dangerous and alluring."

He didn't think that the foundation of the nation, the military, would take to taboos or inhuman experiments as they were now, but Godma's research was a temptation that could lead them astray.

"Understood. Felinella!" Vizaist answered him immediately. That was because he respected Alus' research and opinions. Any further words were unnecessary, and after an elegant salute, Felinella left the tent so that she could carefully dispose of the materials in accordance with the implied order.

Vizaist, Felinella and Alus were probably the only ones that knew the Odd Eyes Doll they'd captured was Godma's way of transferring his research to his supporter. Sisty wasn't directly involved with the military, and she read Vizaist's intentions and likely wouldn't disclose anything. Though Alus found it unexpected that Vizaist would make Felinella do that much.

Of course, since the mission he'd gotten from Berwick included the erasure of

the research data, he didn't think there would be any problems. Letting that research leak could lead to an unprecedented situation, and either way it was too alluring and poisonous. There was also a high chance that Godma himself would be disposed of, considering what he'd done.

"I'd like to make some requests."

"Hm? Is this about your on-site call to speed up the execution of the mission? Nobody is going to blame you over that. We were already moving to do the same after the second attack on the Institute."

Alus shook his head with a serious expression. "I'd like you to treat the woman called Melissa well."

"Of course. We can't make it public, but I'll take responsibility for it." Vizaist almost looked disappointed when he understood what Alus meant, but he quickly readjusted his seated posture and made his declaration.

But this was the first time that Alus had made a request like that since they met... Vizaist muttered to himself that his impression that Alus had become more human had been spot on.

"Also..."

"Hey now, you're making a lot of extra requests here."

"No, this is about who was behind Godma."

Vizaist shook his head with a rarely seen bitter scowl. "We don't have any leads. We were working against a strict time limit this time around."

"So not even you know, Lord Vizaist."

"Yes, there's something suspicious going on."

"About that, do you know of the Four Books of Fegel?"

Vizaist took a moment to gather his thoughts, before finally recalling something. At the same time, he furrowed his brows as he realized how ominous it was. "You mean those prophetic writings? I hear that they are valuable research material and that it will still take time to prove the authenticity and validity of their theories... I hear that even a written copy of it is considered top secret."

“Yes, but from what I’ve seen of a written copy, it goes beyond the realm of prophecy. And Godma had something like that in his possession. At first, I thought it was just a well-made fake.”

“...!”

“But it’s the undeniable truth that Godma managed to turn himself into a Fiend, and that only further fuels my suspicions. Considering our current level of magical technology, it’s too big of a leap. There’s a lot of obscure expressions in the written copy, which makes many people ridicule it as a fabrication, but I’m pretty sure they’re not unrelated.”

The unusual book, seen as nonsensical, was starting to take on a clearer picture. One reason for that was Godma’s transformation. It was hard to imagine that him having one of the Four Books of Fegel was a mere coincidence.

“If it really is the original, where it came from is a mystery.”

“People question if the originals even exist anymore, and all nations treat them as top secret... I don’t want to imagine it, but it’s possible that someone big is behind Godma. But could you tell that it was an original?”

Alus confirmed that nobody was around to hear them, before replying, “It’s being called a book, but it’s not even made from paper. I haven’t seen an original, so I can’t confirm that it was one of them, though. I also feel like the handwriting was something different. But under the circumstances, I couldn’t manage to get my hands on it.”

If Godma was using the original book to advance his research, then it was possible that the contents differed from the copied version. Alus was of the mind that the copies had been intentionally altered. Of course, saying that out loud wasn’t a hornet’s nest he was willing to poke.

“Well, fine. Its authenticity aside, we’ll make sure to retrieve it right away.”

“I used a slightly flashy spell, so it might have been destroyed during that.”

With a light nod, as if to say he was fine with that too, Vizaist used his license to give orders to his subordinates, and then hung up.

Convinced he was done for now, Alus took a deep breath to shift gears.

“By the way...” Vizaist suddenly said, glancing at the tent opening that Felinella had left through, “how was Felinella?”

This was a sudden question, but when Alus thought about it, he remembered Felinella being permitted to take part in the mission on the condition that she serve as Alus’ support. So surely that was what Vizaist was talking about.

“I think she’s talented. She’s pretty well trained. Did you send her to the Outer World too?”

“But of course. I’ve beaten everything I know into her.” That proud face of Vizaist’s was that of a father rather than a military commander. He’d made sure to distinguish between carrot and stick in raising her.

“I haven’t seen her fight, but her detection is convenient enough as it is now.”

“Indeed, she has the talent to surpass me.”

“Oh? Are you retiring?”

“Don’t be stupid, I’ll stay on active duty until I die,” Vizaist declared resolutely, as he leaned back in his chair with a *harumph*. “I was much worse than she was at her age.” He was proud of his daughter, who was currently at the level of a Triple Digit.

Alus had heard this time and time again. Vizaist bragging about his daughter was the same as always. “She appears to be a very bright student, and she’s very popular. I look forward to seeing how her future turns out.”

Vizaist didn’t respond to Alus right away. He furrowed his brows with an agonized expression. “That’s not what I meant, though... Alus, I’ll give her to you.”

“Huh?”

All Alus could do in response to those unexpected words was to raise his voice out of reflex. Though he wondered what the hell Vizaist was thinking... “I don’t really understand what you mean...”

“There are a lot of inconvenient things about being a noble. Men are one thing, but women are expected to marry young. No, I know I need to resolve

myself for it one day.”

No wonder Vizaist had a daughter that young, at his age. He’d married late for a noble, and he must have been pressured into it for quite a while.

“I believe you told me that you weren’t going to cling to the title of nobility.”

“Of course, I wouldn’t mind giving it up. Not me, that is. But that won’t do if she were to join the military and go out into the Outer World.”

Noble families had all kinds of benefits going for them. Not only did they have a say in military and national matters regardless of status, they also had the right to set up residence near the Tower of Babel, as well as other privileges. The more noble a lineage someone in the military had, the better they were treated. They were also allowed to employ a personal force of Magicmasters. At present, there were few traditional nobles granted land like long ago.

Vizaist boasting about how he’d never retire was also for Felinella’s sake. By building an unshakable foundation within the military, he’d built a foothold for the future. Considering his daughter, he couldn’t let go of his rank as a noble.

“But I have no intention of handing my daughter over to just any run-of-the-mill Magicmaster.”

And that’s where Alus came in. They were familiar with each other, and moreover, Alus was the greatest Magicmaster for now.

“I would have hesitated back when you were serving under me, but I’ll allow it as you are now.”

Leaving aside why things were taking a turn in this direction, Alus realized Vizaist had been thinking about this since Alus was around ten years old. He was astounded. He might have understood if he considered Vizaist’s position as a noble... or well... he didn’t.

“Lord Vizaist, I have no intentions of getting married.”

“—!! Are you saying you’re not satisfied with Felinella?!” Vizaist said, directing an almost-menacing look and pressure at Alus. “She’s a peerless beauty, like my wife. And I’m saying that I’m willing to swallow the bitter pill and give her away.”

Calling her peerless wasn't just Vizaist showing favoritism toward his beloved daughter. Even Alus thought she had an attractive face as well as excellent proportions. He wasn't against admitting that she was a beautiful young woman.

Add on to that her graceful behavior, and he could agree that her charm had a firm grasp on the male students at the Institute.

Alus didn't flinch in the slightest as Vizaist abruptly stood up. It wasn't that he was unsatisfied; marriage would simply be harmful to him now. He was in no way normal, lacking the dream or thoughts for the future that the average person had.

"That's not what I mean. I have all kinds of confidential matters... even some that you are unaware of, Lord Vizaist."

"...!!"

Because of that, he hesitated to marry. He had little interest in matters like that until he could unravel the secrets behind his unusual abilities. Or rather, he wouldn't be allowed to until then. The Governor-General, who was aware of these facts, was unlikely to grant permission.

"Berwick, is it?"

It was a confidential matter, but Vizaist likely wouldn't be convinced unless Alus at least mentioned his reasons.

Although if Alus were interested, he probably wouldn't be rejected. So it was all up to him... which was why he couldn't accept it right off the bat.

He didn't want to leave something unexplained as it was. After all, he had an unusual power in his mana that had a mind of its own. And it had properties that were very similar to those of Fiends.

"Besides, it'll come back to bite you if you decide on something and ignore your daughter's opinion."

"There won't be any problems in regards to that," Vizaist said, very sure of himself, as he stroked his chin.

Alus couldn't really brush off the implications of that, but Vizaist seemed to

already think of it as a done deal, so he put it on hold for now. “Let’s save it for now. It doesn’t seem to be an easy problem to solve.”

For now could be said of Alus, too. Early marriage wasn’t just limited to nobles, but that wasn’t just because it was a common trend. Those with high rank would end up having to marry.

As for the one ranked as No. 1, it was practically an unspoken law. Many thought of it as the responsibility of those with power. That’s why engagements were such a commonplace occurrence.

On the other hand—polygamy wasn’t something that was recognized. While the population had dramatically decreased, humanity didn’t want to see it surge right back up immediately. The nation had a lot of policies in place to assist with raising children, and because of that, taking a mistress as virtually a second wife was something the nation tolerated.

While a talent for magic wasn’t something easily passed down through the genes, there’d been research some decades ago that showed genetics and talent weren’t completely unrelated. Which was why there were high expectations for high-ranking Magicmasters. And as such, the current trend was to rush high-ranking Magicmasters into marriage. In short, to have children. Cold looks were directed toward those who declared they would spend their lives single.

“Maybe you can’t tell at your age, but your strength is something that should be left behind for those who come after you.”

Alus struggled to approve of that sentiment. “Aren’t you pinning your hopes a little too high? Even if some mana information is inherited, it’s only a slight amount. There’s no guarantee that the child would become a Single Digit.”

“I understand that well enough.” But Vizaist couldn’t help but hope anyway. He couldn’t resist, knowing that it was thanks to Alus’ achievements that Alpha was in the position it was today “It’s not like I’m planning on spending life as a bachelor,” Alus said vaguely, with a wry smile.

He couldn’t deny how false that sounded. But that was because he believed that current magic knowledge wouldn’t be able to explain his powers.

“You’re still so young. Perhaps that was why Berwick put you in the Institute.”

You’re going to say that to my face? Alus thought to himself, but he didn’t say it aloud.

“Then how about an engagement?”

“Oh no, I think I’d only cause trouble.”

“Tsk!! No matter, you’ll change your mind eventually.”

Alus could only answer with another wry smile. Almost nobody in Alpha would dare reject marriage talks with the Socalent family.

That said, this would normally be a welcome offer. While it didn’t take Alus’ feelings into account, having a woman show affection for you was something a man enjoyed.

But Alus only recognized that as superficial knowledge. He was adult in that way, in a bad sense. Since he didn’t have a normal childhood, it wasn’t that he was dense, but more that he prioritized reason too much. He devoted himself to the study of everything magic. He had no clue about love.

“I guess I’ll wait for you to be seduced by her.”

“Enticement, is it? I can’t say that I approve.” Alus figured Vizaist would be shocked by this line.

But Vizaist laughed out loud instead. “That is how I fell for her mother, after all. Felinella carries that woman’s blood, so you should brace yourself.”

“Then I will meet her with a robust fortress.”

“I can only hope that it’s made of paper.” Recalling something after saying this, Vizaist put on his best fatherly grin. “If that’s the case, you’ll end up with a lot of trouble after this.”

“Why is that?”

“It’s about time for that event.”

Alus scanned his memories for any events going on, but he was very much a stay-at-home type. “What are you talking about?”

“The friendly magic tournament held between the seven nations.”

“That has nothing to do with me.”

“I wouldn’t say that. Berwick is getting fired up about having you participate.”

They were talking about a magic tournament held between the institutes of the seven nations once a year. Students competed with the magic they’d polished at their institutes, and while it was called friendly, it was also a political battle where each nation scouted out the others.

It was also a good opportunity to show off national power through how well trained their Magicmasters were.

Of course, Alus didn’t expect that he would participate in a tournament between students. “What is he thinking?”

“Don’t be like that. Alpha is the nation that’s achieved the most of the seven nations. So of course you’ll participate as the key figure behind those achievements.”

“And you’re telling me to play along with that farce... you have to be kidding. I’ll make a direct appeal to the Governor-General.”

“It wouldn’t be an overstatement to say that the nation’s dignity is at stake. I don’t think you’ll get anywhere with your appeal.”

Alus sighed from the bottom of his heart, and rubbed his temples with his most fed-up expression this year.

“If you participate, those looking for a groom won’t stay quiet.”

Those who achieved fantastic results at the tournament had expectations of greatness placed upon them. That applied to both men and women. In that sense, the guardians who came along to watch were all looking for a partner for their son or daughter.

Vizaist wore a more villainous smile than usual. “That’s why, if you were to get engaged now, you could easily brush off any further trouble.”

“I simply don’t have to participate. And I’ll brush off any trouble myself.”

“Hmph, what an uncute brat,” Vizaist said sarcastically, as if he’d expected this answer. But there was no ill will in his tone, it was just something that left his mouth by reflex.

“You say that, but your own daughter’s going to be in high demand, too.”

“Don’t be stupid, something like this isn’t enough for me to measure who I’d let have my daughter.”

Talk about a doting father. Alus felt that he was being an idiot about this, but that’s what made him unlikely to give up on Alus.

“Besides, it’s the Socalent family’s education policy to always respect the daughter’s will!” It appeared that this calm commander, past his middle-age years, had a firm conviction.

Felinella returned shortly after Alus and Vizaist were done talking about the matter. Her timing seemed almost planned, and her eyes looked especially mild. “Fath... Commander, many tasks have been completed.”

Just what was the reason for her unusual slip of the tongue? Alus didn’t think too deeply about it, and decided it was something that just happened once in a while.

“Well done. I hesitate on how to deal with the other Dolls.”

The majority of the research data had been successfully erased, but the nearly 100 dead Dolls lying about weren’t so easily handled. Their very existence spoke of Godma’s research. With Felinella’s return, the discussion naturally turned towards clean up.

“I think it should be fine. You can probably only make superficial observations of the Dolls. It was incomplete research to begin with. There are too many uncertain elements for the nation to decide to take the initiative.”

“Well, it’s not like worrying will accomplish anything. If that’s what you say, then we should be okay.”

The army should avoid taking an interest in the first place, but nothing would change from saying that now. But all they had to do was keep the research data from being seized for nefarious purposes. Though there was no way the top brass would come to the site itself. At most, they only held the reins.

“Right, the rest is our job. You can go home now, Alus. Felinella, you don’t have anything more to do either, so have him escort you.”

Alus didn't know if this was the plan all along, but he shrugged at the thought of the level of support Felinella had. If he were to have his fortune read right now, he'd surely be warned of his ill fate regarding women.

Talk about a well-crafted trap... there was no way Alus could refuse to escort Felinella. Moreover, 'escort' sounded misleading. They were only headed back to the Institute together.

"With that, the mission is complete. A detailed report will be delivered later."

"Understood," Vizaist said, with the vigorous voice of a soldier.

Alus had already turned to leave when some callous words were thrown at him.

"Alus, be careful of making any moves on her. Hm? ...I guess in this situation, you should watch out for any moves being put on you!"

"..."

"Father!!" Felinella blushed, and glared at her improper father. She pulled on Alus' hand to hurriedly take him away.

Alus quietly let Felinella lead him as they headed for the middle-class district's Circle Port.

Darkness was starting to properly settle in by now. It was near midnight, about to turn into a new day. Blue leaves were bathed in the moonlight, reflecting a different color from the daytime. Despite it being false, the forest at night was covered in a fantastical veil.

"I-I'm sorry." By the time her head cooled off, the two were well out of sight of the operations headquarters. Realizing that they were still holding hands, Felinella hurriedly let go and slowed down. "Uhm, I'm sorry about my father," she said meekly, her head lowered.

"You don't have to worry. Lord Vizaist always takes good care of me, and we're not so distant that something like that would bother me. Though I still can't understand the customs of nobility." Alus smiled and winked.

"Ah, uhm..." Felinella hesitated to speak, and Alus quickly realized why...

"Oh, you were listening in."

Felinella had eavesdropped on Alus' and Vizaist's discussion partway through. Though that was a bit of an exaggeration. It was more accurate to say that she happened to return while the two were discussing this sensitive topic, and she hesitated on when to step in.

And when they were talking about her, she struggled to walk away even though she felt bad about it.

Moreover, marriage with Alus had been discussed between Felinella and her father before.

"You knew?!" Felinella stared down at the ground, and her face turned red out of embarrassment. Her bashful appearance looked even more bewitching under the moonlight.

Vizaist had probably also noticed she was listening in from outside. Maybe that was why he'd brought up the topic to begin with.

"Well, frankly put, yes."

"I know that it's rather sudden. But Father is insistent that it's best to do things like this early..."

"Yes, that's something Lord Vizaist would say."

"I'm sure it's nothing but trouble for you...?" Felinella asked in a timid and sorrowful tone.

"No, it's something that I'd have to think about eventually, so this was a good opportunity for it."

A chance like this likely wouldn't show up for quite a while again. Felinella was at least a little relieved to hear that. But she also decided to throw in a correction.

"Uhm... this wasn't just my father's decision."

Alus had figured as much from what Vizaist had said. But he'd never had any experiences like that since he joined the military.

Well, everyone around him was an adult while he was a young boy. If he'd had any such experiences, that would have been a problem in itself. This was why he didn't know what to say when looking at Felinella's red face.

“It’s disgusting, isn’t it? Falling in love after hearing tales from my father and meeting just a few times...”

“... Isn’t that just how it happens?” Alus had no way of understanding love. He didn’t even know what was normal and what wasn’t.

But there was one thing he was sure of—and that was if the male students at the Institute were to hear Felinella’s confession, they would faint from the shock.

Felinella probably hadn’t expected to hear something so naïve, and after recovering from the surprise, a gentle smile appeared on her lips once more. “Oh, who knows how common that is.”



“...”

She’d completely regained her composure and looked like she might start giggling at any moment.

Seeing her smile, Alus felt like he was being made light of, but considering she was back to acting like normal, it wasn’t all that bad.

“Well then, perhaps I should listen to my father and... try seducing you?” While seduction suited her appearance, Felinella wasn’t the proactive sort, and she was a little embarrassed at her own words.

“You can try.”

Of course, Alus was ready for her with his fortress, just as he’d said. But he didn’t thoughtlessly reject her by saying that he had no interest in that sort of thing until the mysteries surrounding him were resolved.

He carried too many secrets that Felinella was unaware of. And he was certain that his sturdy fortress wouldn’t collapse.

As they made their way out of the copse of trees and onto the road connecting the middle-class and upper-class districts, Felinella bombarded Alus with questions.

What his favorite food was, what were his hobbies, how he spent his weekends, how he relaxed and when, and so on... knowing of his long record of combat, she also asked about missions he’d struggled with, and his achievements.

Alus found himself stumped by the barrage of questions halfway through, but he sincerely answered all of them. Apart from confidential matters, he didn’t see a need to hide anything.

As they neared the transfer gate—“What kind of woman do you like?” Felinella finally mustered enough courage to ask.

Alus remained silent for a moment, lost in thought.

They stepped into the transfer gate, specified their destination, and a magic circle appeared at their feet, copying all of their information.

And just before they were transferred—“A woman who’s useful.”

“...!!”

Some time had passed since the question, but it wasn’t a carefully considered answer. It was only the result of his lack of knowledge.

Alus faced forward, so he didn’t know what kind of face Felinella made when she heard him.

In the faint light, a slight blush appeared on her face, and her lips curled up; all the while thinking of how she’d never be able to reach his heart if she didn’t step into that fortress of his. If she didn’t beat at the gates every now and again, its ruler would stay closed away forever.

She didn’t know what to do; but if there was one thing she could say, it was that nothing would change if she didn’t make the first move.

Even if they were wed through her father’s influence, there was nothing more painful than a loveless marriage. Moreover, there was nothing more cruel than being forced into a one-sided love. Though it was a common story for nobles.

In reality, Felinella was very popular not just in Alpha, but throughout noble society in the seven nations.

The only saving grace was that her father wasn’t sticking to such stiff customs. Which meant that the choice Felinella had to make might be surprisingly easy.

Under the faint moonlight, she thought to herself that she needed to transform fickle affection into unchanging love for as long as her feelings burned bright.

Fifteenth Chapter The End of the Horrible Dream The incident with Godma was wrapping up for now.

For now referred to the fact that Alus' mission changed from the assassination of a single man, to what was practically the massacre of an army, so not even the top brass could fully conceal the matter. Things were far from a perfect ending.

The majority of the aftermath consisted of rumors from unknown sources, and would have a lasting effect. But its spread remained limited to whispers within the military.

It was normal for Magicmasters in the military to keep their focus toward the Outer World. The other nations had the same tendency, and keeping their nations unified against the threat of Fiends was an effective strategy. Because of that, crimes and incidents within the borders were usually kept under wraps. Especially when the military's Magicmasters were charged with dealing with it.

By staying at the level of a rumor within the military, even the name of the Dolls born from inhuman experiments would disappear soon.

The military headquarters was located within the human realm, but it was right next to the barrier to the Outer World.

Inside the headquarters was a room, in a section Magicmasters weren't easily allowed access to.

There were other prisons as well, but only criminals whose existence was being covered up were accommodated here, or rather, were being imprisoned here.

The man lying down on a simple bed inside this room had several tubes going into him for the treatment of his injuries, and he had shackles on top of that.

Considering there wasn't a single window in sight, it was clear that this was an isolated room underground. The room itself was a simple square with plain white walls, and medical equipment in every corner. The bed was fixed in the

very center of this desolate room.

And the man, Godma Barhong, was tied down and in a sleep so deep one might suspect he was dead.

Even if he woke up, whether he needed shackles or not was questionable. He'd already lost his consciousness, any human will long gone, and he could barely move his eyeballs let alone his remaining arm.

Even as someone entered the dim room, Godma showed no response. He probably didn't even register it.

His body was gradually turning back to that of a human being after his transformation, but he was horribly weakened, and was only being kept here as a unique sample due to his singular experience. The fact that he was alive was ironically enough thanks to his being unable to write or even talk anymore.

It wasn't yet time for a guard to check on him, but the door opened quietly all the same.

One could just barely make out the military uniform the person wore in the faint light of the room.

The echoing footsteps grew louder until a shadow fell on Godma's face. The intruder leaned over and looked down as if they were staring at a doll that continued to exist for no reason.

"Hello there, Doctor."

The voice was strangely high-pitched, which felt off to hear in an isolated room like this. With their dark brown hair hanging down, the person smiled complacently.

But by the time they actually took a look at Godma's face, their clothing suddenly changed. They were now wearing a thin white gown like a patient's gown, with two knives hanging off their waist. Just when had they changed? There wasn't any spare clothing in the room either.

The voice continued whispering.

In the next moment, a strange phenomenon occurred.

Godma, who'd lost his sanity and become an invalid, opened his eyes wide.

While he couldn’t raise his head, his eyes moved busily, seeking the person who’d forcibly woken him from his slumber.

His wide-open eyes spotted a woman smiling at the side of the bed. Godma stirred ever so slightly, a muffled sound escaping his throat. The woman was holding an old book, showing it to Godma.

That book... it was one of the Four Books of Fegel.

Finally, *she* smiled again. Or rather, probably smiled was more accurate.

She didn’t have the look of a person who was lovingly thinking of someone, nor did she have the empty eyes of a person who’d lost their sense of self. On her face was what could only be described as an uncanny smile. As if someone who didn’t understand the concept of smiling was trying to mimic it. There wasn’t a trace of emotion in it, not the usual joy or delight, nor was there sarcasm or mocking in this smile. It was like wearing a mask with a smile on it.

Suddenly, Godma’s lips began to tremble, limply moving to form a name.

He let out a noise that wasn’t quite a shriek or a scream at the woman that couldn’t possibly be there.

The woman gave him a high-spirited smile.

The sound of sliding metal rang out. Before he knew it, the woman was holding a knife in a reverse grip.

However, the restrained Godma’s focus stayed on the woman’s face instead of shifting to the knife. A hoarse sound that couldn’t be described as a voice continued escaping from his mouth.

The next moment— The knife was swung with resentment, sinking into Godma’s chest, without any hesitation. Again and again the knife plunged down, gouging out the wound, as Godma’s body shook with each swing.

He could no longer form human words as he either groaned or vomited blood. But they were all terribly faint sounds, and he gradually fell silent.

The woman licked off the blood splatter that had fallen on her lips. Her distorted smile grew bigger.

Afterword

Thank you very much for purchasing volume 3 of *The Greatest Magicmaster's Retirement Plan*.

Continuing on from the second volume, this story detailed Alus' secret mission as well as Alice's fateful past. If I were to add a subtitle, I'd call it 'Drama Dolls.'

Well, this series doesn't use subtitles, so that doesn't matter.

Then, let's leave the introduction at that. This will be a quick one as there's not much space to work with, so let's get right to it.

I would like to thank my editor-in-charge for all of the advice given this time as well.

And I'd like to extend a big thank you to Miyuki Ruria-sama for the many wondrous illustrations. Melissa's design was absolutely fantastic, and I can't thank you enough.

Moreover, thank you very much to the designer and printers for the creation of a lovely book.

Finally, I would like to give special thanks to all you readers who picked up this volume.

Also, Uonuma Yuu-sensei's manga version of *The Greatest Magicmaster's Retirement Plan* is being released at the same time on Comic Fire, so please do take a look.

Now that's about all I have time for, but I believe we'll meet again in the Afterword of volume 4 in the not-so-distant future.

Please do continue supporting this series from now on as well.

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The Greatest Magicmaster’s Retirement Plan: Volume 3

by Izushiro

Translated by Warnis

Edited by Jan Suzukawa

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ILLUST RURIA MIYUKI
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