
IZUSHIRO
ILLUST RURIA MIYUKI
THE GREATEST MAGICMASTER'S RETIREMENT PLAN
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Phoenix
It was as if something was trying to be reborn from the ashes. The seemingly uncontrolled flames gradually took shape.


Lettie Kultunca
One of Alpha's Single Digit Magicmasters. She has a sisterly side.
The Mysterious Man, Ulhava
The mysterious Magicmaster participating in the magic demonstration as Alpha's representative. He wears a mask and robe.
Alus Reigin
The current ranked No. 1, and the world's greatest, genius Magicmaster. Due to the machinations of the top brass, he ends up having to participate in the Friendship Magical Tournament as a student.
Loki Leevahl
Alus' partner on missions and a first-year student at the Institute.
JOKER
JOKER
Felinella Socalent
An upperclass student who adores Alus. A noblewoman gifted with both intelligence and beauty.
Jean Rumbulls
One of Rusalica's Single Digit Magicmasters. He is old friends with Alus.
Fillic Argan
A student at Rusalica's First Magical Institute. He deeply respects Jean.
Alice Tilake
Always calm, and Tesfia's classmate/best friend.
Tesfia Fable
A first-year student attending the Second Magical Institute. A beauty with an unyielding spirit.


!?
"You're pretty good if you're coming to the baths, and especially the magical bath at this hour."
.....
!



The Greatest Magicmaster's Retirement Plan

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Twenty-Second Chapter

Selection Matches

The Seven Nations Friendship Magical Tournament.

It was a large annual event between the magical institutes of all the nations.

Students who would be future Magicmasters represented their institute as they competed with their trained techniques. And as the institutes were supported by taxes, the tournament also served to show off their excellent students and national power.

Of course, the main idea was a competition between nations with their dignity at stake.

As the tournament was meant to be a competition of skills between novice Magicmasters, it took the form of simple matches. In other words, battles. But considering the purpose of a Magicmaster, it should have simulated fighting Fiends.

In reality, the contestants were urged to consider the matches as battles against Fiends in accordance with regulations—but politics were involved in everything.

And this tournament was no exception. Ultimately, as a tournament between students, it became a place for the nations to compete against each other.

The results of the tournament didn’t just add to national prestige. It also helped to advertise the winning nation’s institute to those looking to become Magicmasters, and all nations worked energetically to raise their value in the eyes of the people.

The winner of the tournament received glory and all kinds of bonuses, which had a tendency to get flashier as the years went by.

Visitors attending the tournament increased with each year, and furthermore, it was broadcast in all the nations, making it an entertaining and festive event

that citizens everywhere looked forward to.

During the rulers conference, the nations held different kinds of motives when they officially announced their recognition of the tournament opening. But almost none of the regular citizens had any idea of this. They were simply excited over the annual event.

***

Leaving the world's hustle and bustle aside...

Once Alus returned from the rulers conference, he immediately got to work on the research he'd left behind. Summer vacation was coming to an end, and he had to put the remaining time he had before the new term to good use.

During the day, he trained Tesfia, Alice, and Loki in live combat. And then he devoted himself to his research late into the night.

Toward the end of August, Alus often traveled to Folen to advise Budna on the new AWR.

At best, he was getting three hours of sleep per night. And even Alus could feel his mind dulling.

Then there were the selection matches. In the name of fairness, the students battled each other for one of the remaining spots to compete in the tournament, and the matches were held over two days as the new term began. The other spots had already been taken up by the students with the best grades.

Roughly 400 students competed, and selecting the few contestants out of that crowd required quite a bit of time.

The battles were also fought under different rules from the tournament. Specifically, each match consisted of ten people fighting at the same time. In other words, it was a battle royale, with the last person standing moving on to the next round.

This kind of match required not just skill, but clever planning based on the other contestants. With Alus' skills there was nothing to worry about, so he pushed all of that into a corner of his mind as he busily went about his days,

until it was finally the day of the selection matches.

“If you’ve got enough free time to come watch, how about focusing on your training?” Alus furrowed his brows and told Loki. The selection matches were just about to begin at the training grounds. He wanted to get this over with as soon as possible and was not in a good mood.

“As your partner, I can’t do that. Besides... watching your match is yet another form of training, A-Al...” Loki struggled to stop herself from saying ‘Sir Alus.’

A battle against a first-rate Magicmaster would be one thing, but Alus couldn’t imagine what there was to learn from a battle against students.

But he couldn’t reject just Loki. Shifting his glance a little, he could see two familiar people seated at the training grounds. Having already been chosen as representatives, it was only natural they would want to know who would fight alongside them as soon as possible.

That said, surely there was no need for them to arrive this far ahead of time and intently stare his way.

Alus gave up on trying to send Loki back, but he couldn’t help but feel exasperated.

In the meantime, the selection matches were finally about to begin.

“Al, good luck,” Loki said with a blush. Considering the way she was smiling, Alus felt like this had been her goal all along. In fact, the scene looked like a wife seeing her husband off. The young girl appearing more mature made Alus feel perplexed.

At the same time, a stir spread among those—almost all of the male students—who saw Loki look that way.

The first-year students were allotted five partitions within the training grounds. There was a lot of activity in the training grounds, but it calmed down as the time for the matches closed in, and replacing it was a chilling silence.

As that was going on, Alus exchanged a few final words with Loki. He then gave her a short wave and headed over to one of the partitions, within which

were nine other students already waiting.

With so many contestants, the matches took the form of a battle royale, as previously stated. Once Alus was inside, they were ten, and everyone for the match had gathered. The entrance behind him silently closed.

The ten students distanced themselves from one another, and gripped their AWRs with tense hands. When it was confirmed that all students in all five partitions were ready, a buzzer signaling the start rang out.

Alus decided to evaluate the other students in his partition.

They're no good.

After just a glance, he'd seen through them, and let out a sigh.

All of the contestants carried themselves like you'd expect from an inexperienced novice Magicmaster. Because of their focus on magic skills, they didn't learn practical body movements.

Reality was different from training where you aimed for an unmoving target, Alus grumbled to himself. The way the others carefully stopped in place and took their time to cast a spell was like they were asking to get hit. The magical battle had already begun, but Alus seemingly paid it no heed.

Incidentally, he had another reason for observing the other contestants instead of immediately wiping them all out. Felinella had asked him to pick up on any talented contestants in the middle of the match, if possible.

Just going up against Alus in these selection matches was pretty much a guaranteed loss, so it would be too bad if a capable student lost without their chance to shine.

Alus knew this too, so his actions would be deliberate. This was the bare minimum consideration needed to raise Alpha's overall strength at the tournament.

Without letting anyone catch on to his true abilities, Alus observed the other nine contestants and slowly went into action. He wasn't carrying an AWR with him this time, so he couldn't use any flashy spells.

Alus purposefully walked to the center, where all kinds of spells were flying

about. The idea was that there was no risk if the contestants just repeatedly cast spells over and over again, without learning.

“‹‹Flame Burst››” “‹‹Ice Arrow››” “‹‹Wind Thrust››”

Before long, concentrated fire rained down on the reckless Alus.

There was no need to consider what a person making a target out of themselves was thinking. Moreover, said target wasn’t carrying an AWR, so it was only natural they’d be taken out first.

But that didn’t happen this time.

Alus suppressed his mana to its very limits, enchanting his hands with the bare minimum necessary. It was like a sparkling, thin film that an inexperienced Magicmaster wouldn’t even be able to notice.

Without even blocking or erasing the fireball, ice arrow, and wind slash, Alus lightly touched them, and they easily moved out of the way. With his far superior skills, he used his mana to guide the incoming spells and they simply curved away.



And as for the reactions—

“...!!” “...!!” “...!!”

“Huh? No way!” The only remaining contestant, a female student, let out a voice of surprise.

From an onlooker’s perspective, it appeared that eight students had splendidly taken themselves out.

Only a handful of people in the training grounds were able to pick up on what Alus had done. Or more accurately, since it was just students here, only Loki and Felinella noticed.

While he didn’t send the magic back at its caster like Alice’s Reflection, Alus could easily alter the course of the students’ clumsy spells to hit the other contestants. Of course, that was because the ‘targets’ surrounding him weren’t moving skillfully.

He then followed up by gently striking the remaining girl, who stood spacing, and with that it was over. The only reason she had made it out of the first exchange was because nobody was standing opposite her.

The buzzer signaling the end of the match rang out, and as Alus stepped out of the partition, he could hear remarks such as “What a lucky guy” and the like. But he took no notice of it.

It appeared the other groups were still battling. Tesfia and Alice, sitting on the upper level of seats around the training grounds, blinked in mute amazement. Even for those two, it would take some time to recognize that the unnatural finish to that match was because Alus was there.

“Good work out there. I could only just barely see what happened at the beginning,” Loki said, handing Alus a towel.

“Thanks. It wasn’t anything impressive, though.” Alus wouldn’t work up a sweat over something like that, but he’d feel bad if he disregarded her goodwill, so he accepted it anyways.

Loki could tell he’d deflected the magic, but didn’t see how he had done it.

The first step was to use an enchanted palm to guide the flow of magic using

the bare minimum amount of strength. Ultimately, she'd seen him move the first fireball, but was unable to perceive the speed at which he'd handled the other seven spells.

"You'll learn how to do it yourself too, eventually. The trick is mana control. All attributes have an ideal mana density. By maintaining that, you can touch the flow of mana itself without obstructing the spell. From there, you can adjust its aim without overwriting the spell."

"... Would I really be able to do that?" Loki asked with a wry smile. It wasn't until Alus mentioned it that she realized he had altered his enchantment. But it made perfect sense. Touching magic was the same as getting hit by its power. Being able to deflect it unharmed meant that some kind of spell or mana control was at play.

However, being able to do that level of extremely delicate mana control would require a maddening amount of training. Thinking about it made Loki sigh in her mind.

Meanwhile, the other person around Loki's skill level was sitting in the middle of the people already selected for the tournament, and let out a sigh as she rested her chin in her hand.

So there wasn't anyone then...

The words she thought referred to the evaluation she'd asked Alus to perform. In the end, that meant that there hadn't been anyone in the group that caught Alus' eye. The extremely short match time was proof enough of that. After all, it was over in less than a minute after starting.

Felinella's head started to hurt as she thought of the difficulties she'd be facing in the future.

An hour passed.

While Alus wasn't participating in his own matches, he glanced over at the other matches, judging the other students' abilities.

Is he seriously trying to compete in the tournament with that level of skill...? Alus looked at a male student clenching his fist and raising it high in the air to

celebrate his victory. He was aghast at the sight as he grumbled.

He could feel a headache coming on, but had no idea that he was feeling the same way as Felinella had a while ago.

Finally, they reached the last of the selection matches, with only 21 remaining first-year students. The students that made it all this way would be randomly put into groups of five, fighting it out in a battle royale as in the previous rounds.

The only difference was the number of contestants. With four groups of students, the winners of those groups would move on to the tournament. Moreover, with there being twenty-one students, Alus' group ended up having six contestants.

But to Alus, these contestants weren't much different from the others he'd fought, as he let out his umpteenth sigh. Even he began to worry for Alpha's prospects of winning the tournament.

From his observations, he had an initially favorable impression of those who fought without relying purely on magic, but it appeared the reason for that was because they couldn't properly use magic to begin with. Their close combat skills were amateurish, and they couldn't use magic unless they actually stopped moving.

The students casting spells at each other while standing still were frightening. But the fact that they'd made it this far like that meant they must have some guts.

As magic was flung around, Alus touched the side of the Fire Arrow flying his way and changed its trajectory. The arrow of flames accelerated to twice its speed, striking the back of a student fighting in close quarters.

Letting out a pitiable groan, the student was hit by a follow-up attack and knocked out of the fight.

That's one. The situation was ever changing even as Alus analyzed the battle.

Having advanced this far, everyone at least had a basic sense of danger. And they were vigilant against Alus, who didn't even have his guard up.

He hoped they would take each other out, but all of the contestants instead began working together to take out the biggest threat.

The other students came to surround Alus, calmed themselves down, and looked for an opening.

I guess I stood out too much. Alus rubbed the back of his neck as he sighed.

After confirming all of the spells coming his way, he made his move. He altered the course of the small fireballs flying toward his face, sending them toward the other contestants.

However, the contestants this time around were on a slightly higher level, and he had no choice but to destroy the final fireball with the enchanted palm of his hand.

“‹‹Mud Hand››”

After he crushed the small fireball, someone else followed up with an earth attribute spell. A massive hand made out of a lump of earth crawled out of the ground.

The next moment, the hand was fiercely swung down toward the ground as if to crush Alus.

However, he was no longer positioned between the hand and the ground. Instead, he’d already closed in on the male student who’d cast the fireballs.

He’d done it pretty slowly too, moving at the same speed as his opponent. But the student’s eyes shot wide open as he swung his AWR down by reflex.

Since he’d gone through the effort of swinging the weapon at this close of a range, Alus found himself bored.

The male student put all of his strength into the swing but hit nothing but air. In fact, before the weapon could even hit the ground, Alus had struck him on the back of his head with his palm. And that was all she wrote.

Leaving the student knocked out with a single strike, Alus stopped for a moment, mumbling, “Oh, so you dodged that?”

Of course, the male student was still unconscious. Alus was instead referring to the female student who’d evaded the small fireball he’d sent her way.

The female student who'd cast Mud Hand was clutching her staff-shaped AWR, standing stock still. She stared at the scorch mark from the fireball she'd just barely been able to throw herself out of the way of. Considering she'd been attacked immediately after casting a spell of her own, she shouldn't have had any leeway to dodge it.

The girl didn't think she'd be able to dodge it either, but she seemed to understand now that she'd jumped out of the frying pan and into the fire.

Realizing that she'd noticed him deflecting the magic, Alus glanced at the girl who was fearfully staring at him.

The female student quickly readied her AWR. She hadn't consulted with the remaining male student beforehand, but it was only natural that they'd both focus on Alus.

This was a little unexpected to Alus, but it only served to delay the end of the match a little longer.

He started off by walking towards the male student, gradually picking up the pace to running speed. It was still the kind of speed a normal student could pull off, but the male student panicked and thrust out his double-edged blade AWR.

"F...‹‹Fire Blast››"

The magic formula engraved on the sword hurriedly lit up, as if answering its owner's panic, creating a fireball as large as a human head.

The blazing fireball appeared in front of Alus and shot out.

The female student followed suit, tapping her staff against the ground and calling out the spell name.

"‹‹Rock Net››"

Waves of hardened lumps of earth attacked Alus from both sides to seal his movements.

He caught a glimpse of the girl from the corner of his eye. *Binding magic, huh... it's well made.*

The information for magic construction was accurate, but because of how careful she was in creating it, it wouldn't be fast enough to catch up to Alus

when he was being serious. Getting out would be simple, but he'd stand out too much.

Just as the waves of earth were about to hit him, the fireball came flying at him.

After the fireball was enveloped in the earth—an explosion occurred.

Seeing fire leak out of the cracks in the mound of earth, the two Magicmasters let out sighs of relief.

And it wasn't just those two who thought it was over. Everyone thought that Alus was down for the count.

After the fire died out, the dome of earth returned to mana particles as the field was covered in dust.

"—?!"

Indeed, the earth spell should no longer be in effect.

And the flames should have died out long ago.

However, smoldering embers could be seen within the smoke... or rather, it was burning far too much to be called embers. And it grew stronger as smoke billowed out.

The flames visibly changed shape, taking on the form of a huge, crimson serpent that slid across the ground toward the two students.

The next moment—they were swallowed whole by the torrent of flames.

There really is a limit to how big of a spell I can rewrite without my AWR. My processing can't keep up with it.

As the flames moved onto the students, Alus appeared from the same spot where he'd been before. He'd altered the structure of Fire Blast and remade it into his own spell.

I didn't bring my AWR with me because I figured they were just students, but I guess it was a misstep.

He'd purposefully turned the altered fire spell into a sloppy intermediate level spell, but when it hit the two students, the male student stopped moving.

As for the female student, however...

Oh? Not bad, not bad at all.

She appeared to have immediately made a wall of earth, pushing herself against it to survive the onslaught of fire. As the completely burnt wall collapsed, she appeared from behind it, coughing. But there was still the will to fight burning in her eyes.

What just happened could have looked like the male student's fireball exploding one more time and its aftermath sweeping over the two students as well, rather than being Alus' spell.

Alus had been the one to alter the spell, but he was aware that he was pushing it, and could sense as much from the spectators stirring in their seats.

For the time being, he walked up to the male student and picked up his sword AWR, giving the magic formula engraved on it a look.

Just the basics of the fire attribute, huh. That was only natural considering it was Institute property loaned to him. This kind of cheap, mass-produced AWR wouldn't be able to handle Alus' output. So all he had to do was enchant it.

Alus slowly walked over to the remaining female student.

And the female student in question, despite her frozen expression, still had an unyielding look in her eye. That much could be seen from the mana flowing into her AWR as well.

So she's more decent at magic combat than the others, but what about close combat...?

Alus dashed towards her and recklessly swung the sword AWR with his momentum. Just the thought of throwing out such a sloppy attack embarrassed him.

He also reduced the quality of his enchantment to a level that wouldn't come off as unnatural, but since proper technique had been drilled into him, it took a lot of focus to do it imperfectly.

The female student, while not at Alice's level, managed to firmly block his strike.

Multiple dull metallic sounds rang out, and after a couple of exchanges her eyes seemed to have adjusted to his attacks, as she predicted the trajectory of Alus' sword and moved her staff to get ahead of it.

At first, she relied on brawn, pouring a degree of mana into her AWR as she swung it, but as time passed her movements began flowing more smoothly. Still on the defensive, she began to ward off the attacks.

Quickly realizing she was at a disadvantage in skill, she turned her focus to evading his attacks. As she did, she kept up her flow of mana, and the magic formula engraved on her staff began to glow.

She worked through the process of casting a spell, one step at a time, as she dodged Alus' attacks. The amount of mana she'd poured into her AWR was quite considerable as well, and just as she was ready to cast—

The female student took a step back as Alus' attack barely grazed her. She then drew a straight line on the ground with her AWR while taking another step backwards.

Alus could easily keep up with her retreat. However, spotting the line in the ground, he chose to let her finish.

And she used that opening to strike the ground with the handle of her AWR.

"‹‹Thorn Pierce››"

The line in the ground symbolized the spell's invocation coordinates.

In front of Alus, a thorn of rock sprang out of the ground, threatening to pierce straight through his chest. If he'd been taken by surprise, it would have surely hit him.

And even the female student felt like she'd done it. Instead, the scene that next played out before her eyes was completely different from what she'd imagined.

She'd activated her spell with perfect timing. But as the Thorn Pierce shot out, Alus switched his grip on his sword to a reverse grip and stabbed it into the ground.

The speed of his movements far surpassed what a normal person could do. As

a result, the sharp tip of Thorn Pierce was split in half, with each part flying left and right as if to dodge Alus.

The spell had been easily cut through after it had materialized as a phenomenon. After stretching through the air, the two halves of the Thorn Pierce returned to mana particles.

"... No way."

The female student stared at the sight that had played out before her with her jaw dropped. She was no longer able to think up another move. After all, the spell she'd just used was her ace up the sleeve.

By the time she came back to her senses, the distance between them was already gone.

"—?!"

The first thing that came to her mind was a token resistance in the form of a thrust thrown out by reflex. It was a sluggish attack. The tip of her staff was flung out towards Alus' abdomen, but he deflected it by striking the staff with the sword's handle.

A sharp metallic *clang* rang out.

The female student crouched down to pick up her AWR, but against an opponent like Alus, that wasn't going to fly.

With the tip of a sword pointed at her pale neck, she could do nothing but admit her defeat.

Thunderous applause for the two erupted from the astonished audience.

The first to clap their hands was either Felinella or Loki. Either way, an emotion akin to worship for Alus was mixed in with the applause, and either way, it was an ovation for the two combatants.

Alus disregarded the excited audience as he looked toward Felinella. He didn't need to say anything for her to joyfully nod back at him. The female student had put up quite a bit of resistance against him. He was telling Felinella to take her ability into consideration.

With this, Alus had now qualified for the tournament. As he moved to leave

the training grounds, he realized that all eyes were still fixed on him.

He hadn't really been aware of it before, but a lot of people at the Institute had begun paying attention to him. Especially since he was always hanging out with the three top scoring first-year students.

So far, there had been suspicions and malicious rumors of illicit relationships, but now many that accepted his abilities were wondering how much Alus had trained during vacation.

"I knew you were strong, Alus." A refreshing voice came from behind him. It belonged to the female student he'd been fighting moments ago. "I feel like I can understand why Fia, Alice, and even Ms. Loki gather around you!"

Turning around, Alus saw the female student smile. No trace of frustration in her defeat. "That's not true. My grades are average."

"If you're going to say that, then mine are about average too."

"Even though you can use magic that well?"

It was clear that she had an affinity for earth magic. In terms of characteristics, earth magic tended to be looked down on compared to the other attributes. Or rather, moving and hardening earth required constant focusing on the spell, and it used up a lot of mana. Even novice level spells required quite a bit of information in their construction. In other words, casting earth spells required more time.

As Alus thought about this, it started making sense to him. Considering how the people around her reacted, it appeared she was the one who had actually made progress during the vacation. She hadn't been picked due to her grades, so she instead decided to take part in the selection matches, and the amount of effort she'd put into it was clear.

And as if to back up Alus' suspicion—"I worked very hard for today, but I guess it can't be helped. A loss is a loss. So, congratulations."

Alus had a doubtful look for a moment, but he soon caught on and tried his best not to sound sarcastic. "Thank you, but I think you will be chosen too."

"Huh?! What do you..."

“Ciee-eell!” Tesfia waved at them as she ran over, taking the girl called Ciel by the hands. “That was amazing! Being able to use magic so well!”

“I trained extra hard during vacation, after all,” Ciel said, puffing up her chest and standing on tiptoes to appear as tall as possible despite her small size.

Alice arrived, and happily praised Ciel as well.

“Hm? You guys know each other?” Since they’d called out her name, Alus figured they were at least familiar with one another.

“Are you serious? Aren’t you being too rude?” the redhead said with a sigh, and stared at Alus.

As she did, Loki, who’d appeared at his side at some point, pulled on Alus’ sleeve and whispered, “She’s Ciel Faleno, in the same class. They’re also in the same group during the practical class.”

Alus wasn’t sure what she was talking about, and looked Ciel over once more.

Ciel put on an awkward smile.

Gazing at her, Alus could faintly remember someone moving about like a small animal.

Unable to take his trying to remember her any longer, Ciel hurriedly raised her voice, putting a hand in her hair and playing with it a little. “W-Well, I cut my hair, so maybe you just can’t tell... uhm, Fia and Alice help me study after class or during free time.”

“No wonder I can’t remember, then.”

“Uhm, you were there too though...”

Alus felt the awkwardness in the air as a discouraged Ciel looked up at him. “Oh, yeah, of course. Yeah.”

Tesfia facepalmed at Alus’ blatant lie, while Alice said, “You really pay no mind to anything that doesn’t interest you, huh, Al?”

He was aware of that himself, but the way she put it didn’t sit right with him.

“I’m getting used to it, but you could at least remember the names of your classmates!”

Unusually enough, Alus had no retort for Tesfia's sound argument. He looked at Ciel again. He had no memories of her previous hairstyle, but now her chestnut-colored hair was in a short bob that curved in under her chin. Because of her sweat, the tip of her hair was clinging onto her a little.

Her large eyes made her resemble a small animal, and her body type was not so much slender as it was petite. She had fresh bruises here and there, which were probably due to the training, and had a very delicate-looking figure.

She really did give off the impression of a small young girl, to the point that people probably questioned if she could really become a Magicmaster.

Regardless, looking at the size of her chest moving up and down in accordance with her still rough breathing, Alus could see why she was on such good terms with Tesfia. Like birds of a feather, as they say... though considering her friendship with Alice, he reconsidered that maybe that wasn't the case. Either way, he wasn't going to say anything out loud. He'd only bring down thunder on himself.

"Anyways, I more or less remember you now. We're both going to participate after all."

"Alus, what is that supposed to mean...?"

However, before Ciel's question could be answered, the buzzer signaling the end of all the matches echoed across the training grounds.

"With this, the first year selection matches are over. The following four winners of each block will move on as contestants in the tournament..."

At some point, Felinella had descended to the training grounds and spoke as she looked at the virtual screen in front of her. She then went on to read the names of the winners of each block, including Alus.

"Moreover, considering the content of the matches, one more has been chosen by the selection committee. And that person is..."

There was room for one more first-year student. Hearing that, the students' gazes locked on to Felinella.

"... Ms. Ciel Faleno. These five are the ones that have qualified through these

selection matches.”

The eyes on Felinella turned to Ciel as one.

“Huh?! Meee?!”

“Congratulations, Ciel. That’s amazing!” Alice said.

“Of course! Ciel was the strongest one among those guys.” Tesfia followed up on Alice’s praise with a remark seemingly full of conviction. She was, of course, excluding Alus, who was practically already chosen beforehand.

“I did lose to Alus though, so I wouldn’t call myself the strongest. But thank you, Alice and Fia.”



Seeing how the female students were gathering around Ciel in droves, even Alus, who'd conveyed her abilities to Felinella, felt like there was something unique to her. That was surely because they knew of the effort she had put in.

Alus gently smiled, looking at the lively gathering around Ciel, as he realized how different the lives they lived were. In front of him was a tranquil world that he could never step into.

Turning his back on the festive group that seemed to have no end in sight, Alus left the training grounds with Loki.

Twenty-Third Chapter

Live Combat Training

All the tournament contestants gathered two days after the selection matches. Technically, vacation was over, but lessons hadn't begun yet, so the majority of the students were done for the day before noon.

On the third floor of the community building where the cafeteria commons and such were located, was a large multipurpose room featuring a long curved table used by the selection committee with a podium in the middle. It was big enough to fit the thirty tournament contestants without feeling cramped.

And right now, Felinella was going over the details of what was to come.

It was at this point that she was chosen to be the tournament representative, but that had more or less been decided when she became the committee chairperson. Strictly speaking, she was the highest-ranking student in the Institute excluding Alus, so there were no objections.

"Due to tournament regulations, there are no restrictions on bringing in AWRs. They were originally intended as a means to train for battle against Fiends... moreover, as the tournament is meant to display individual abilities, use of weapons other than AWRs is forbidden. However, certain equipment is allowed as long as its sole purpose is not for attack. The main points of what is prohibited are written in the pamphlets before you, so please read through them."

Felinella stood on the platform, eloquently explaining the details. "Last year's results were not all that good. So let's all come together and bring the Second Magical Institute the honor of victory this year."

Vigorous shouts and applause came from those present.

However, Alus and Loki weren't among the ones raising their voices. That was simply because as former military personnel, they didn't really understand the

merit of winning, nor were they on the same wavelength as the other students, so they missed their timing. In that regard, the two still weren't used to Institute life.

That said, Alus couldn't say anymore that he didn't care if the Institute won or not. Now that he was one of the contestants, the Governor-General and others were expecting him to win. And he couldn't really ignore the Governor-General's will.

Next, Felinella put on a somewhat serious expression. "You have all been chosen as representatives of the Institute, so do try not to behave shamefully. And of course, taking Chemical Boost or other illegal drugs that would drag the Institute's reputation through the mud will not be tolerated. Not only will you be immediately disqualified, but you will be taken into custody and your license may be revoked."

Even Alus knew what Chemical Boost was. It was an illegal pill that served as a mana stimulant.

Mana stimulants were generally outlawed due to the risk of mana running amok. But considering how much attention the tournament garnered, it wasn't unthinkable that some would take to drugs. One of the contestants instinctively gulped as they thought of how strict the punishment was.

After a short pause, Felinella started speaking again. "Next, as for the training until the tournament, contestants will receive priority on reserving the training grounds. However, I don't want you to just train as normal. I also recommend that you train under the instruction of a coach. You can, of course, ask the teachers or your upperclassmen. However, there are many among them that lack actual experience, so the selection committee has taken to speaking with those suitable to coach. Considering the numbers, it won't be possible to have one on one guidance, but there will always be four teachers at the training grounds. Despite that, there are always some who are unable to find a good instructor each year that end up wasting precious time on inefficient training. If that happens, I ask for you to help each other out. Please don't forget that all of you carry the honor of the Second Magical Institute."

Those powerful words made Felinella's presence stand out even more to the

contestants, since they could not only use teachers but also upperclassmen. She was already adored by the students, so many were hoping for guidance from her. Many expectantly held on to that desire, boys and girls alike.

“Also... the principal has agreed to coach when she has time to spare. I believe she will show her face at the training grounds from time to time.”

Suddenly, a stir spread through the contestants. That had come as a welcome surprise. Sisty, as a former Single, was practically worshiped by the students.

The room felt afire with excitement, aside from Alus’ and Loki’s frigid expressions as they knew what the principal was really like. The students seemed even more excited now than when they were selected.

“You will be able to reserve the training grounds from today, but please start by finding a personal coach first. You can train under their guidance, set clear goals and work through them together.” These words were intended for the first-year students.

For the time being, the multipurpose room would serve as headquarters for the contestants. Whenever there was a notice regarding the tournament, the headquarters would let the contestants know through an Institute-wide broadcast. On top of that, there was a detailed schedule written in the pamphlet the contestants had been handed.

Alus indifferently flipped through the pages and found a single page that caught his interest.

As he put on a dubious expression, Felinella touched on the subject. “On the very last page of the pamphlet there is a list of names, as well as their position and contact information, of those who are instructors... students, teachers, or otherwise. Please try to find an instructor suitable for your affinity. However, unless the situation truly calls for it, try to keep in mind that a student instructor will only be allowed to instruct two at a time.”

I see, Alus thought to himself, as he looked at the pamphlet again. As far as he could tell, they hadn’t been chosen purely due to their ranking.

However, the names of Loki and Felinella, who were among the top students, were there. Contestants had been asked to help each other out, so that much

made sense.

But... why was the name of Alus Reigin there too?

Alus furrowed his brows, as he had a bad feeling about this.

Felinella should know that he hated this kind of thing. So perhaps someone was working behind the scenes. Regardless, she had probably tried to be considerate with her previously-stated rule.

Tesfia and Alice would be receiving guidance from him anyways. Loki was a special exception, but as each student instructor could coach two students each, Alus' spots were already filled.

That was also more effective. If Tesfia and Alice were to go to some other instructor, who knew what kinds of things they'd be taught. It was possible that all the results from Alus' training would go to waste.

Well, even though his name was written down, he was a first-year student and from an outsider's perspective he was just an ordinary student that nobody knew much about. Moreover, although the other instructors had an affinity listed next to their names, it had been left blank for Alus.

Since that was the case, Alus figured that there wouldn't be anyone reckless enough to turn to him for guidance. But if things did turn out to be a pain, then he'd just come up with a reason to turn them away.

"The selection committee has received consent from those on the list, so they shouldn't refuse."

I didn't hear anything about this, Alus said in his mind, and he stared over towards the podium in hope for an answer. That's when his eyes met with an apologetic Felinella.

"Contestants are also included in this list, and like I said before, let's help each other out. But considering personal circumstances, please come speak to me first... Now, if there are no questions, I would like to end this meeting." Felinella's voice echoed through the room.

Alus wasn't fully satisfied, but if he could avoid any troubles that was fine. Surely there wasn't anyone that would come ask for his guidance...

Once Felinella had finished speaking, most students moved to leave the multipurpose room. With how fast their steps were, they were likely scrambling to find an instructor.

There were still students left in the room... however, most of them were asking to be coached personally by Felinella.

Alus practically gloated as he stood up and tried to leave with Loki...

“Alus?!”

... When a cute voice called to him from behind. He turned around with furrowed brows. In front of him was a female student with a chestnut-colored short bob.

“... Ms. Ciel, wasn’t it? What is it?” Even without Loki’s prod, Alus wouldn’t forget her in a few days. He’d fought her during the selection matches and recommended her to Felinella even.

“Actually, I heard that you look over Fia’s and Alice’s training, so I thought...”

Seeing Alus’ expression, Tesfia and Alice were standing on either side of Ciel as if to back up their friend. He narrowed his eyes and stared at them, but it seemed they were planning on feigning innocence.

“It seems there’s a misunderstanding. I’m only looking after them on paper, but that’s so that they can train on their own without anyone butting in. I actually need a teacher to look over my own training... just between us, those two have some dirt on me, and I’ll go through hell if I cross them,” he whispered in a low voice, wearing a dry, cynical smile, prompting Ciel’s eyes to open wide.

“Fia and Alice... have dirt on you?” Ciel could hardly believe it, and confusion filled her face.

Tesfia was about to open her mouth to clarify things, while Alice had a troubled look. Alus flashed them a spiteful smile as if to get back at them.

After a pause, he shrugged in an exaggerated fashion. “Now then, jokes aside... Sorry, Ms. Ciel, but even if you want my guidance, there’s not much I can do. I have my own training, and since I am both a student and contestant, I

don’t think watching over more than two students will be accepted. I think it would be better for you to find a teacher to coach you instead of having someone like me.”

“I see... but I would like to hear the opinions of as many as possible, so do you mind if I at least come ask for your opinion?” Ciel seemed satisfied with Alus’ explanation, and gave him a shy smile, a steady will shining in her eyes after having seen a portion of Alus’ strength. It was a strong gaze, somewhat different from what Tesfia and Alice had.

He’d become painfully aware of the cold darkness hidden in the world, and lately he’d felt like he was weak against those kinds of earnest eyes. Despite feeling fed up, he also felt like he couldn’t just flat-out reject her. Even as he ignored the two girls that had put Ciel up to it and were silently cheering her on.

Alus acknowledged Loki’s worried look and opened his mouth, aware of the troubles he might bring on himself. “Well, if you’re fine with just advice... You have a good sense for things, so you should probably focus your training on improving the accuracy of your spells and the speed at which you cast them. You could abbreviate some earth attribute spells to cut down on the casting time. You should also look over the process of construction of the magic you use. Also, you seem to be biased toward the image of the spell in terms of your composition.”

Ciel was completely engrossed in Alus’ words, nodding after his every point.

“Because of that, the strength of your spell drops. So you should go through the construction process in order. The direction is one thing, but the biggest problem is that the spell’s origin coordinates are very sketchy. So I think you should really review the construction.”

“How can you tell that much?”

“That’s a trade secret. Anyways, the training itself is up to you, so do your best.”

“Y-Yeah...”

Ciel bowed in thanks to Alus, and made sure to thank Tesfia and Alice as well before leaving the room in search of another instructor.

Alus sat back down in his chair and let out a sigh.

Loki also sat down next to him, wearing a complex expression, but she didn't say anything. Upon closer inspection, there was a slight smile on her face as well.

She was, of course, happy that he hadn't been dragged into doing more work, but she was even happier that another person who recognized his greatness had appeared.

That was when the two girls spoke up.

"Sorry, I thought you would be able to look after three people in your spare time. Ciel is a hard worker, so I couldn't help myself..." Tesfia said.

"Yeah, I was sure that you would be okay with it, Al," Alice added.

"Keep talking. I might have time but I don't plan on breaking the rule to stand out even more. Besides, I'd rather focus on my own research than do that. Just so you know, you two don't have the time to worry about others. Especially not you, Fia. After what I said to your mother, my dignity will be in tatters if you don't produce any results."

"...!! Y-Yeah... right. That's true."

"A wry smile's not going to save you. You can drop out for all I care, but since I'm going through the trouble of teaching you, I'm not going to accept disgraceful performances. It's because you bungle things up that I have to focus on just the two of you." Regardless of what he said, Alus was looking after Tesfia and Alice, as well as Loki, for special circumstances.

The room was beginning to grow sparse with students, so Alus scratched the back of his head and moved toward the podium, though there were still some students asking for Felinella's guidance.

Felinella, in the middle of the group, looked troubled as she held her hands up and shook her head in an attempt to restrain the excited students. Surprisingly, many of them were female students, with the male students timidly standing some distance away.

It was a pitiful sight, but Alus had his own business to attend to, so he didn't

have time to care. “Do you have a moment?” he said to the person in the center of the tumult.

The voices of the female students asking for Felinella’s guidance were rather noisy. Despite that, she didn’t miss Alus’ voice. “Yes! ...Can I help you?” Her choice of words was a little formal due to the presence of the other students.

“I’ve taken up instruction for two students, so...”

However, Alus showed no signs of being concerned at this. Because of that, the female students surrounding Felinella stared at Alus. Some even glared at him. Nobody said anything out loud, but their eyes were pretty much saying, “What’s with that attitude? Who do you think you are?”

But Felinella didn’t seem to mind. “Ah, I understand... so you wanted to report that. Please don’t force yourself,” she said, immediately responding to him, with the last words directed to him personally.

Alus had only made sure to follow the rules, so he lowered his head and excused himself.

As he got further away, the eyes staring at his back became fewer and fewer. When he glanced back, he could see Felinella once again surrounded by students respectfully looking at her and requesting her guidance.

That really looks like a pain, Alus thought once again, like it had nothing to do with him, but he did pick up his pace a little as sharp glares turned his way once more. He didn’t want to get caught up in any more trouble.

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About an hour had passed since Alus and the others got to training at the training grounds. They had priority on reserving the training grounds, but the partitioning was still darkened to prevent anyone from seeing in.

Loki’s training was to improve her ability to keep track of things in her blind spot by using her mana sonar. More specifically, it started with catching a ball with her eyes closed. However, the ball was gradually exchanged for something harder, and by now it had changed to a knife.

The training had pretty much turned into her doing battle with her eyes

closed. But thanks to Loki's talent and efforts, she was making it through this training. Even her movements were practically unchanged despite wearing a blindfold. In fact, since she had eliminated her blind spot, she was even able to deal with attacks from behind. By using her mana sonar to keep track of the enemy's movements she was even able to react to their spells before they were cast.

However—

Her senses were beginning to lose focus. Now that feints were mixed in with Alus' attacks, she was barely able to evade.

She immediately moved to counterattack, but by that time Alus' fist was already flying toward her abdomen. With no time to defend and dodge, she had no choice but to brace her tiny body.

The merciless fist sent Loki flying. By now, her body was unable to keep up with her senses.

And with that—"Three minutes, huh. Not bad."

"Thank you very much."

Having been blown away, Loki managed to recover and gracefully land. She twitched a bit at the mental damage taken but answered Alus sincerely.

"Take a break for now. You've used up a lot of mana, and you'll only exhaust yourself if you push too hard."

No, I can still... Loki tried to retort, but Alus shifted his glance to the other two in the middle of training instead. Realizing that leaving those two on their own would be ineffective, he felt like it was about time to give them individual menus, though Alice was still in the middle of working on hers.

She'd put down her AWR and focused some distance away. Normally the user was in contact with the AWR when using it. Mana transferred more smoothly that way, and the AWR was able to read the information more accurately as well. But AWRs could also function even at some distance.

Alice had more or less built up a spell ahead of time and was now working on trying to input coordinates from a distance. There wasn't much point in using

the training grounds for that, but if she succeeded there was a risk of wayward magic, so it was safer here.

As for Tesfia... Her future rested on the results of the tournament, and Alus thought she might have a little too much emotional attachment to that fact.

Alus carried some of the responsibility for putting her up to it. Normally, a person's way of thinking was more restricted if they trained when at their wit's end. And Tesfia showed an especially strong tendency for that. That's why he felt he needed to take some measures.

Right now she was in a corner of the training grounds, creating lumps of ice in the air with magic. She wasn't just shooting the lumps out either. Instead, she was controlling them. In other words, she was giving direction to the mana and ice lumps, overwriting the coordinates one after another.

Tesfia was pretty bad at delicate work, but this technique was something she couldn't skip if she was to aim for the top. Especially if she was going to put Icicle Sword to full use.

Alus believed that there was no spell more suitable to show Frose her daughter's strength. After all, Icicle Sword was a spell handed down in the Fable family. In the spell encyclopedia it was listed as an advanced spell, but there were no details on it. Its essence apparently wasn't in the difficulty of casting it, but in the molding of the sword of ice.

He had seen through the magic formula engraved on Tesfia's AWR. Through intuition and his vast knowledge of magic, he'd realized that the Icicle Sword Tesfia was using was only the first stage of its form. From what he could tell, Icicle Sword had further room to evolve.

But the truth wasn't even recorded in the spell encyclopedia. That's why Alus believed that the true Fable family heritage spell wasn't what Tesfia was using, but something beyond it.

Unfortunately, there were too many unknowns for him to move on to the next step. So he decided to rely on Tesfia's memory. More specifically, Alus asked her about the Icicle Sword that her mother had shown to her in her childhood.

It was quite a while ago, and a portion of Tesfia's memories were iffy, but after hearing what she had to say Alus was sure of one thing. Icicle Sword's truth lay in its form, and Tesfia particularly excelled in the sculpting of magic.

So he figured that in order to move on to the next step, she should be focusing on altering the information after the spell had manifested. In other words, the ability to manipulate a spell after casting it.

In fact, if you thought about it... if you were just going to shoot the blade at the target, there was no reason for it to be a sword, nor did the form need to be so complex.

At first, Alus had misunderstood it as being a way to display the composure and power of nobility, but by changing his perspective he could see a new meaning. Thinking of the shape as necessary, its true form was very simple.

However, how close Tesfia could come to that true form before the tournament would depend on her talents and efforts.

"... That's why I think there's a step beyond to this spell. That said, I don't believe you'll learn it even if you clear all the tasks I give you," Alus declared.

"But there's less than a month left before the tournament, right? I want to clear all of the tasks you give me at least before then."

The drops of sweat on Tesfia's forehead seemed to reflect her impatience. Having said her piece, she put on a serious expression and tried to return to her training, when—

"Urk?!" Her head was suddenly pulled back, leaving her bewildered.

Alus had lightly pulled on her red ponytail. "You'll just end up getting nowhere like that. Nothing I teach you will stick the way you are right now."

"—?! Then what am I supposed to do?" Tesfia asked with a frown, as she redid her ponytail.

"Hmm... well, let's switch things up. If you want to self-destruct that's up to you, but I won't come out unharmed if you mess things up. My pride in particular."

"I'm glad we share an interest in my succeeding, but will we make it in time?"

“Ultimately, that’s up to you. In fact, expecting delicate spell construction from you was probably a mistake.”

Tesfia pouted over the cold words, but she managed to hold back and keep herself from complaining.

“Trying to teach you too much will just end up going over your head, so let’s start with learning an advanced spell. I think Ice Bullet would be a good choice.”

“Wait a minute, won’t an advanced spell like that be even harder to learn quickly?”

Tesfia’s complaint would generally be correct, though to Alus that was just a preconceived notion. “It doesn’t have to be exactly as recorded in the encyclopedia. Do you know the details of Ice Bullet?”

“If I remember it correctly, you create several lumps of ice that split up when you fire it in a rain of ice bullets.”

“That’s right, but it’s only considered an advanced spell because the lumps of ice are built up in two steps. Trying to learn the complete version will take time. In other words, you only need to get to a usable level.”

The first step in learning a spell was having an image of the results when using the spell. Having a preconceived image of what the spell was like in your head was one of the pitfalls of current magic studies.

If you had too strong of an image of the completed spell, it was easy for it to have a negative influence on the spell at earlier stages. And as a result, not only did this make learning the complete version more difficult, but it made it tricky to spot other ways the spell could be applied.

“You can do something like that?” Tesfia asked in a suspicious tone, but there was a glint of expectation and hope in her eyes.

Since this presented a good opportunity, Alus brought Alice and Loki over and began to speak.

When a Magicmaster used magic, they had an image of the phenomenon that would manifest. This was taught even at the Institute. This was because the merits of an image when casting a spell were significant. And by accurately

doing it, you could simplify several steps in the process of casting.

That said, you couldn't just do anything as long as you could imagine it. An individual's techniques and aptitude, their mana stores, and more needed to be taken into consideration. Trying to accomplish something beyond their abilities would result in a misfire or imperfect spell. That's why it was necessary to accurately trace the magic formula and go through each step in the process.

When two people using the same attribute clashed, the ability to control the information in spells made a big difference.

Yet current education relied too heavily on the image, and didn't push the students to properly go through each step. As the quick learning of spells would lead to higher ranks, Magicmasters had begun to prioritize learning spells.

Tesfia was the type to rely on her feelings, and she was rather sloppy when it came to using logic. Though that only spoke more for her qualities as a magician.

Suddenly, Alus held up a single finger in front of her. He then created a lump of ice the size of a fist above his finger. Its uneven features were only part of its charm. "By changing the spell configuration in the middle..." he said, and pointed his finger down.

Obeying his will, the lump of ice flew straight forward like an arrow.

However... just before it crashed into the wall, its trajectory curved.

"Huh?! What was that? Did you make it so that it would turn like that from the start?"

"There wouldn't be any point in that." Alus created a couple of lumps of ice and altered their trajectories at will. "Start off by at least being able to do this. It's fine if you start with just one lump of ice."

"O-Okay." Tesfia immediately passed mana through her AWR and attempted to replicate Alus' examples.

Seeing her flow of mana, Alus shook his head and firmly declared, "This is no good. Take a rest for a while. You guys seem to be thinking that you'll get better if you keep training."

“But I want to try it now while it’s still fresh in my memory!”

“This is what I mean. You’re trying to build magic by relying on an image.”

Tesfia reluctantly agreed to Alus’ orders, and a short while later Alice and Loki joined in, and they all took a break from training.

Twenty-Fourth Chapter

Anguish of the Matchless

Alpha's ruler didn't have an official residence. However, that was because Cicelnia il Arlzeit lived in a place too luxurious to be called a mere official's residence. In other words, it would be more accurate to describe her home as being fit for a king.

It was located beyond the upper-class district, the closest to the Tower of Babel. Of course, it could only be teleported to by use of a secret code, so it wasn't somewhere just anyone could visit.

The grounds were surrounded by several kilometers of iron fencing, with the mansion itself located in the very center. The security forces included several high-ranking Magicmasters.

It was a majestic and splendid palace that seemed out of place in this day and age, and evoked awe in those who saw it.

There was a grand corridor supported by several massive pillars, and the decorative lighting looked like it had been set up for a huge party.

Paintings adorned the walls. Chandeliers hung down from the ceiling at even intervals. Then there was the sublime sculpture with excessively ornamental armor and a sword decorated with jewels.

This was the pinnacle of luxurious living. All of these treasures wouldn't even make a dent in the palace's total wealth, as in the basement there was a massive vault that nobody had even seen. And very few knew of its existence.

All things considered, it was truly fit to be called a royal palace. Despite its fantastical appearance, however, it was also a place for diplomatic affairs, so there was currently a fierce atmosphere filling the palace.

And right now—a lone elder was running down the magnificent hallway. He was rushing so fast that he ran the risk of knocking over one of the many

expensive vases that were lined up and having to work the rest of his life to pay it off.

Normally, anyways. This man, Senator Fouriva, wouldn't receive any punishment over something like that.

At any rate, as the person who managed both domestic and foreign affairs under the ruler, there must have been a really good reason for him to be in such a rush.

He was scheduled to attend an audience in the meeting hall between a guest and Cicelnia shortly. But he wasn't headed there now. Instead, his goal was the office, and as such he was running down the long, familiar hallway.

The distance between the two rooms was quite long, and he was pushing his old body quite a bit to let Cicelnia know that the guest had arrived. This wasn't normally his job, but this matter had been left to him personally by Cicelnia, so it couldn't be helped.

By the time he finally arrived at the office, the hem of his gold-embroidered clothes had darkened from all his sweat.

In front of the door were brawny men in armor standing guard. One of them cast a glance at the other, who respectfully knocked on the door in place of the exhausted old man, announcing to the owner of the room that the man had arrived, and asking for their intentions.

The next voice was a young woman's, in place of the room's owner. Her voice was one that everyone in this palace knew. It was Cicelnia's aide, Rinne Kimmel. "Sir Fouriva, please enter."

When his name was called, the elderly man straightened his clothes in order, stepped into the room, and bowed. "Lady Cicelnia, the Governor-General has come to see you."

In front of him was a massive desk. And on top of it were vast piles of paper. Countless documents awaiting approval. No, knowing how competent this ruler was, he thought she might already have finished dealing with them all.

Cicelnia slowly raised her head. Her hair, which was the color of night, fluttered and a faint smell of high-quality ink mixed in with the sweet fragrance

coming from her hair. “Thank you for coming, Fouriva. I understand. So, I am sorry, but can you go and bring Governor-General Berwick here?”

“What?” Fouriva’s face turned pale at the ruler’s innocent request. He wasn’t sure if he could make another round trip. Besides, the Governor-General had already arrived at the meeting hall. If he didn’t want to keep them waiting, he would need to hurry even more than before.

“Lady Cicelnia, I believe that would be too hard on Senator Fouriva. Moreover, there doesn’t appear to be a need for it.”

Without a moment’s delay, Rinne gave him a helping hand. She’d treated him like an old man, but instead of getting angry Fouriva wanted to thank her for assisting. Though he did believe that saying there was no need to get the Governor-General was a little disrespectful, and he cast a doubtful glance her way.

“I see, and how much longer will it take?”

“Around two minutes.”

Hearing Rinne estimate the amount of time jogged Fouriva’s memory. Rinne was an excellent spotter, known as Alpha’s Eye. And as if to prove that—two minutes later, another knock came on the door as the guards informed them that a guest had arrived.

Rinne responded, and in the next moment the guest, the person at the head of the military, showed his face. Seeing this, Rinne put down cups of tea on the table.

Berwick slowly walked up to Cicelnia and deeply bowed. His unfaltering and dignified appearance showed no openings. He was already at the age where it wouldn’t be strange for him to retire, but his straight posture and perfect salute were that of the model soldier.

“Thank you for answering my summons, Berwick. I could have come over to you as well, though.”

“And I’m sure there would be an uproar if you did. But if you called me over here, it means something has happened, no?” Seeing the senator was also present, Berwick sensed the severity of the situation and braced himself.

“Yes, it is pretty bad. As I am sure you are aware, the Friendship Magical Tournament was approved the other day. However, this time Balmes put on a condition to relax a certain restriction... or rather, he forced through an annulment.”

“By which you mean?”

“An agreement to overlook the recruitment of students of other nations.”

“—!!”

Hearing this, the two men gasped in surprise, though Fouriva was the most shocked. “Princess, if our talented students were to be taken from us, it would lead to a decline in Alpha’s military strength... we have put a lot of funds into the Institute, too.” Fouriva was so taken aback by the news that he didn’t even realize he’d called Cicelnia by her old title.

“Sir Fouriva, I believe Lady Cicelnia is more concerned about something else.”

Fouriva managed the nation’s finances, so he couldn’t immediately put his finger on what Berwick wanted to say. He gave him a questioning look.

Berwick took a deep breath and turned to look at Cicelnia again. “This is about Alus, isn’t it?”

“Yes. He is a student right now and can possibly be recruited as well. Alus himself said he has no interest in that, but we don’t know what means other nations might use, so we can’t let our guard down. To be frank, as long as we have him, Alpha’s military forces will still be superior even if all of our other students are taken.”

Having heard this much, even Fouriva understood the situation. Even compared to all other contestants this year, Alus’ contributions through the years were worth more than that of thousands of regular Magicmasters. And considering what wasn’t officially credited to him alone—such as the reclaiming of the continent—just comparing them felt foolish.

But as a human, he could lose his life in the Outer World at any time. And Fouriva understood that the Outer World was a terrifying place where such a possibility couldn’t be denied. That’s why he couldn’t help but feel that quantity would ultimately be more effective than quality.

However... the ruler and Governor-General showed no signs of sharing his sentiment.

Is this Alus really that powerful? When I last saw him he was just a child... Then again, he didn't act like one in the slightest. In other words, I couldn't even see through that, the elderly man thought to himself, but of course he couldn't say that out loud to these two.

"I find it hard to imagine Alus leaving Alpha, but he could if he wanted to. As you are aware, Alus has already requested retirement once."

"That is why I am worried. Can you not do something as the Governor-General?"

"I'm using rare books imported from other nations as a reward. Why not use that again?" Berwick suggested, though he suspected it wouldn't work. The level of knowledge recorded in those books wouldn't satisfy Alus for much longer.

In fact, the books in Alpha no longer satisfied him, which was why he was importing some from other nations. And he worried that if they continued using this method, the same would apply for the books from other nations.

"I believe that would be difficult. And it would be hard to collect books a Magicmaster of Alus' caliber would want." Cicelnia answered like Berwick expected she would. He imagined she wanted some absolute insurance. "The truth is that I heard something interesting about Balmes' movements. And so I called you out here to discuss how to handle it."

"By which you mean?"

"Why did Balmes have to go so far as to lift the restriction on recruiting students?" Cicelnia asked, referring to what Alus had let her hear in a roundabout fashion when he spoke to Jean in the carriage after the rulers conference. "... And that is why I want you to pick one of your elites to investigate Balmes."

Cicelnia was wondering if it was possible to weaken a nation's ability to recruit students before it could begin. The nation they needed to be the most wary of was Balmes, the one that had suggested the entire thing. Other nations

might approach Alus too, but as long as they could pin down Balmes' movements, they could warn the other nations from making any moves as well.

That's when the elderly man watching on from the side interrupted, aghast. "You mean to have one of our men illegally enter their nation...? There would be huge repercussions if they were found out."

"It will be okay, Fouriva. Balmes will have invested a lot of Magicmasters in their operation, so an elite Magicmaster should be able to get through unnoticed. Rinne will help too, will you not?"

"Understood."

Berwick said nothing, but he believed the chances of success were high. Like Cicelnia said, if a small nation like Balmes had spent over a month on this operation, it had to be a very large-scale one. At the very least, the guard presence on their borders shouldn't be as high. "Lady Cicelnia, what will you do after the investigation? If Balmes really is struggling, will you offer to help?"

"Yes. Alus would have no problems dealing with it, would he?"

"He wouldn't, but whether he would accept the mission or not is a different matter."

"...! He would not?"

"Most likely. Even I have a hard time reading what he really thinks... it took me promising ten books to get him to agree."

"... That is true. In the worst case, I will have to find a reward from the vault. Surely there would be something there."

"Are you sure, Lady Cicelnia?"

"Yes, sometimes a sacrifice is necessary. By the way, what promise did you make with him, Berwick?"

"That he participates in the tournament... though he likely anticipates that victory is one of the conditions as well."

"That is true. I would like for Alpha to secure a victory this time around."

"The tournament is one thing, but taking on the elimination of Fiends in place

of Balmes is quite another.”

“I just hope a reward from the vault would do. Actually, will a monetary reward not do...?”

“If it did, there wouldn’t be a problem.”

Sensing Berwick’s mental exhaustion on the topic, Cicelnia realized that he was right and grimaced.

Fouriva, who had been listening to the ruler and Governor-General in mute amazement, posed an obvious question. “Sir Alus is one of this nation’s Magicmasters, isn’t he? Then why not just order him?”

The next moment, everyone aside from Fouriva sighed.

“A normal Magicmaster is one thing, but Alus is not one to move on a sense of duty. Upon completing his service he immediately requested retirement. He’d only obeyed orders during his service because he knew it was just until he retired. If we tried forcing anything on him, he would, worst case, retire on the spot.” Berwick had no way to hide the bitterness appearing in his expression.

He continued, “That said, he’s far too valuable to let go. I had him enter the Institute so that we could use him in times of emergency. The reason we can send Lettie to the Outer World without concern is because Alus is still here. It might not sound good, but being able to keep him active with bait is better than nothing.”

Fouriva let out a “Hmm,” and reconsidered his perception of Alus. It appeared that Alus’ value far exceeded his imagination. As someone who was old-fashioned, he was sure that all Magicmasters fought for the sake of humanity and their nation, but it seemed there were exceptions to everything.

“For now, let me turn to Vizaist for the infiltration,” Berwick said.

“I see. Lord Vizaist would be able to handle it.”

“Yes, Lady Cicelnia. I believe he would be the best choice. And if we have Lady Rinne’s help, then there’s nothing more we can ask for.” Berwick valued Rinne’s ‘Eye’ and abilities highly. And those weren’t just empty words. With her help, the success of the investigation was all but guaranteed.

That's when Cicelnia seemed to recall something and turned to Rinne. "Oh, Rinne. I heard that Alus has taken an interest in your 'Eye.'"

"Huh?! Uhm, well... yes... but..." Rinne sensed something worrying from Cicelnia's smile, but all she could do was agree.

"A Magic Eye, was it... that does sound like something Alus would take an interest in. I see." Berwick followed the ruler's lead and smiled as well.

"What... what are you talking about...?" Rinne asked timidly, but Cicelnia completely ignored her.

"Yes, Alus should be fine. I am sure," Cicelnia said.

"Indeed, Alus would be able to handle it. I'm sure," Berwick added.

Seeing the ruler and Governor-General grin only made Rinne's confusion worse.

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A week had passed since Alus and the others began training for the tournament. And they were beginning to see results, as a lot of the training now took on the form of mock battles. Tesfia's and Alice's opponent wasn't only Alus, but Loki and all kinds of matchups.

Right now, Loki was facing Tesfia and Alice with Alus watching from the sidelines.

The more they fought, the more Alus thought that Tesfia and Alice rated among the top of the nation. Worthy of special mention were their latent senses, or rather their ability to absorb things.

Their adaptability was frighteningly high. The way their breathing was synchronized and the way they cooperated without having been shown how to do so were things to be amazed by.

The more matches they fought, the more injuries Loki was taking, though they were mere grazes.

Alice would also time her Reflection well to reflect the attacks back. This Reflection spell was very helpful in battles against people. However, when the difference in ability was too great, using it was difficult. The more powerful the

attack, the more mana it took to reflect it.

Moreover, Alus wasn't just observing Tesfia and Alice. Loki was improving considerably as well, and her potential was returning to the levels she was at when she was in active duty.

She was making instantaneous decisions as her senses grew sharper to sway the match further in her favor. The speed of her series of actions was improving at an accelerated rate. In other words, her battle senses and selection of magic was growing more refined. That was also in part because of her sparring with Alus.

Loki was overwhelming in terms of speed, and now she instantly disappeared from in front of Tesfia and Alice to get behind them.

A beat later, the two girls turned around, and Loki muttered the spell name in a *gotcha* moment.

"‹‹Flash››"

A ball of lightning floated before their eyes. The white light from the flash filled the room, dazzling them.

While they covered their eyes, it would take a few seconds for their vision to return. Tesfia and Alice blindly swung their AWRs, but there was no way they could make contact.

That said, this was training, so Loki didn't attack them. When their vision returned, they hurriedly searched for Loki. Finding her some distance away, they saw Loki was smiling.

Despite the prickling pain in their eyes, they ran toward Loki, who pulled out a knife from her waist and held it up high.

Seeing this, Tesfia and Alice looked down at the ground with cold sweat running down their backs.

"Oh no?!"

"—!! Not this pattern again..."

The two realized they'd been lured in when they saw the seven knives stuck in the ground around them.

The next moment—Loki mercilessly swung down her AWR.

Each knife handle had a hole in it, which a bolt of lightning passed through to form an electromagnetic field in a circle that then surged up into the air.

Looking up, they saw lightning hanging in the air, and—

“‹‹Lightning››”

In the blink of an eye, light filled the area as the lightning crackled.

The lightning discharged, and the electricity ran across the ground, knocking the fight out of the two girls in an instant.

Being on the training grounds meant the damage was converted, but it was still a shock.

Tesfia and Alice fell on their bottoms and held their heads, scowling from the dull pain.

“Triple Digits really are on a different level. I don’t think we could ever win even two against one,” Tesfia said, admitting defeat, as she pressed her temples with her fingers.

“Right? I thought we were becoming able to put up a good fight, but you’re getting even stronger, aren’t you, Loki dear?” Alice noted, standing up by using her naginata for support.

“I wonder,” Loki muttered, and turned to look at Alus in hopes for an answer.

“She was close to a Double in abilities, so perhaps her senses are just coming back to her,” Alus observed.

“So it seems,” Loki said, now with a spring in her voice, as she smiled at Tesfia and Alice.

Tesfia sighed. “I’m already used to it, but it’s still frustrating.”

“I know, right?” Alice said.

Getting used to defeat was one thing, but seeing the girls’ wry smiles, Alus sighed and spoke out. “If you’re used to it, then stop falling for your opponent’s traps. Besides, blindly attacking after losing your vision is foolish.”

In the Outer World there were plenty of Fiends that used light, mud, venom,

or other underhanded moves to blind people. And when that happened, it was common for novices to panic and act recklessly.

Against Fiends it was possible to work together and cover for each other's openings, but against another human they would be attacked while they couldn't see. So during times like those, it was smarter to get away and wait for your vision to recover.

"It might be two of you now, but when you fight one on one it's better to choose a spell that would buy you time to recover your vision," Alus said.

"You're as knowledgeable on fighting as always." Tesfia was sloppily sitting on the ground, and she tilted her head backwards to look at Alus upside down, not minding that her hair was touching the ground.

"This is just common sense. If you pick up some knowledge, it will help you in your time of need."

"Hmm, I see... then, sorry, but we'll take a break here, and you can go next. It's pretty pitiful to admit, but training with Al should be better for you too, right Loki?" Tesfia said.

"Yes," Alice said, as she came up behind Alus and pushed him from behind.

They were right on that point. A person's mana stores didn't increase that fast. And the two girls still didn't have enough mana to keep fighting without rest. They astutely figured that Alus could take their place while they rested. Besides, just being able to observe a match between Loki and Alus would be a good lesson for them.

"Go on, go have Loki work you over," Tesfia said with a mischievous smile.

That's when an unfamiliar voice intruded on the harmonious atmosphere. "Hmm, Alus and Ms. Loki, huh? This will be a show. Actually, how strong is Alus exactly? Everyone else seems to rate him pretty lowly, but isn't that strange?"

"That's because the principal told us to keep it a secret so that he wouldn't be exposed. Unfortunately, not even Loki will be able to take on Al," Tesfia answered the question casually thrown her way.

When she did, the questioner's voice asked in confusion, "Huh? Why would

you bring up the principal?”

“Why, because... huh?!” It wasn’t until now that Tesfia finally realized who she was talking to. “Ciel?!” she shouted out in surprise, and as she was still looking backwards, she saw Ciel crouch down with a perplexed look, upside down.

Alus planted his face in his palm.

Loki looked over to Alus to try and calm him down, but she could see his eyes twitch.

When Alice saw this, she looked away and feigned ignorance.

Even though the partitioning was darkened for the sake of secrecy, as long as the ones training inside were students, it couldn’t be locked. That said, not many would carelessly enter. Even if they were to enter, they would use the bell outside first, but Ciel seemed to have heard that Alus and the others were training and had come in without warning, out of curiosity.

Tesfia was the only one that hadn’t caught on to that. Alus had tried to be considerate by keeping the training content a secret, but she had just thrown it all down the drain. She fell silent with an awkward smile frozen on her face.

“Hm? Was I not supposed to come in?” Ciel asked in a cutesy manner.

With her smile still frozen over, Tesfia’s gaze slowly drifted to Alus’ sullen face, and seeing that, she panicked and tried to follow up. “Uhm, actually, Al has some pretty complicated family circumstances... and the principal and all of us thought it would be best to keep that a secret...”

“Hmm, do training and family circumstances really have something in common? And what do you mean that not even Ms. Loki would be able to take him on?”

When Ciel asked this, Tesfia knew that she had no escape. She grabbed hold of Ciel’s shoulders and shook her with tears in her eyes. “Please forget everything you just heard!! I’m begging you!” She had to avoid exposing that Alus was the ranked No. 1 no matter what. Even the principal had forced her to keep quiet about it, and seeing as how she used to be a Single Digit Magicmaster, that fact put an immense pressure on Tesfia who was a mere

student.

With Tesfia's eyes getting moist, Ciel was practically forced to agree.

Alus felt another headache coming on. However, he'd had a hunch this would happen after the selection matches. Or rather, he hadn't accurately read Ciel's abilities, and ended up showing too much of his own.

"I guess I revealed a little too much. Ms. Ciel..." With a soft expression and smile, Alus slowly walked over to Ciel.

He bent over a little to lower his line of sight to more closely match the small Ciel's, and Ciel had an expression of blank surprise.

Alus whispered into her ear, "Sorry about this, but I want you to not say a word about anything you've seen today, especially not anything about me. If you do, you might even end up losing your place in this Institute in the worst case. You just got chosen as a contestant, too. I'd feel bad about it if something like that happened to a classmate."

"Uhm, am I being threatened? Seriously?" Ciel asked in a frightened voice. Her smile had gotten stiff due to the strange intensity in Alus' voice.

"Who knows? But I'm sure you'll benefit more from not saying anything, Ms. Ciel. How about if you keep quiet, I'll give you some more advice on your training?"

The surrounding air seemed to freeze over. Alus wore a friendly smile, but his eyes were narrowed, and he could see fear in Ciel's eyes.

She trembled and nodded, as if she was prey being stared down by a predator.

He patted her on the shoulder with a now normal expression, and then let out a sigh. Alus was partially responsible for showing too much of his hand during the selection matches, but he would make sure to remember that Tesfia owed him.

"Now then, let's begin... or so I would say, but I don't have an AWR with me." Alus purposefully glanced over at Tesfia.

"Okay, I get it." And as he did, she reluctantly surrendered her precious

katana.

Alus took it and spoke in satisfaction, “Good. This should be able to handle my mana output. Loki has an affinity for the lightning attribute, so taking her on with a different attribute should work fine. Well, it’s not like it’s mine, so I’ll have to manage even if it’s hard to use.”

“Don’t break it, okay? It’s a family heirloom, you know!”

“I’m not going to screw up like that,” Alus retorted, as he turned around to walk to the center of the partition.

“Huh?! What about Fia? Is it really going to be a one on one against Ms. Loki?” Ciel had a dubious look on her face, unable to accept this. Just looking at the rankings, Loki was at the top of the Institute, an exceptional existence. And while she might sense something undefinable about Alus, she still questioned it.

“Just come over here, Ciel,” Tesfia said, inviting her over to a corner of the partition.

“Why not just watch from a little closer...?” Ciel asked, confused.

The other two must not have heard Ciel muttering, as they showed no signs of taking this lightly. In fact, they were intently staring at the center of the arena so as not to miss a moment.

Ciel felt guilty about getting in the way, seeing how serious they were, but she still asked the two about Alus’ previous threat. “H-Hey. That expulsion thing was a lie, right? I was so... surprised... I...”

“...” “...”

She felt the silence from the two girls said it all. It was hard to believe, but it appeared that she was somewhere where the peaceful Institute atmosphere didn’t exist.

“Well, you’ll understand when you see it,” Tesfia said, which prompted Ciel to gulp.

The next moment, a thin magical barrier covered them.

“What is this?!” Ciel exclaimed in surprise, looking around her.

“It’s Al’s barrier. We wouldn’t be able to watch safely without it,” Alice explained, and poked the barrier from the inside. When she did, a ripple spread across the surface.

Ciel tried touching it as well, but she had no idea how it worked. She felt like it was similar to the training grounds walls, but she also felt like she was being protected by a mysterious force.

The three stared at the center of the arena from behind the protective barrier. In front of them were Alus and Loki facing each other down.

“Thank you for this opportunity, Sir Alus.”

“It’s just training as usual, so do what you always do. I’ll be using the ice attribute though.” Alus pulled at the katana in his hand and showed a glimpse of the blade sticking out of the sheath.

“Huuuh?!” Suddenly, Ciel let out a bewildered voice. And that was only natural. When Alus did that, the scenery before her turned into a snowscape in an instant.

The ground was growing ever colder and freezing over; even the air was freezing over. If not for the barrier, Ciel and the others would surely be encased in ice.

Just how cold was it on the other side?

But that thought only lingered in Ciel’s head for a moment, as lightning bolts struck the thin ice lining the ground, creating a white smoke.

Two silhouettes could be seen moving inside the smoke at speeds difficult to even perceive. Ciel couldn’t imagine herself ever reaching that level of expertise. Witnessing the battle taking place in front of her, she understood what Tesfia had meant.

Alus cut across the frozen ground, and wherever the blade passed, sharp icicles popped out. A line of icicles ran across the ground like a fissure, heading straight for Loki.

“Ice Pillars!!” Tesfia shouted with sparkling eyes. Her voice was full of excitement, as if she’d forgotten her previous misstep. “If only I could do

that...!” While she sounded frustrated, her heart leaped with joy over being able to see such a wonderful ice attribute spell.

“You’ve gotten faster at evading by not relying on your eyes,” Alus noted.

Loki easily dodged the spell, and Alus analyzed her dodging speed. It was probably the result of her mana sonar eliminating any blind spots. Because she quickly recognized the coordinates for the spell, she was of course able to take evasive maneuvers early on.

That said—those maneuvers were exaggerated. If she wasn’t up against Alus, they could even be called overly cautious. Because of her continuous use of her sonar, Loki’s mana stores were running low.

“For now, let’s keep up the battle. And you should try to get the hang of when to use the sonar to get the most use out of it.”

“Yes!” Loki answered in a lively voice, in between her rough breaths.

“Now then, what will you do next?” Alus pointed upwards.

Loki had been well aware of it, but since it had been set up while she was evading, she didn’t have the space to do anything about it.

The three girls behind the barrier followed Alus’ finger and looked up. The training ground ceiling was packed full of massive icicles that had seemingly appeared from out of nowhere.

“What is that?!” Ciel reflexively screamed out at the sight of a spell she’d never seen before. She glanced over at Tesfia, hoping for an explanation.

“That’s Despair Execute!” Tesfia cried.

What would happen to the person below if all of those icicles rained down at the same time? The image of it was truly despair-inducing. Certain death. A perfect fit for its name.

But as she said the name, Tesfia realized that it was somewhat different from the spell she had knowledge of. The ceiling was full of sharp icicles, but it was a step short of perfect. At the very least it seemed somewhat inferior to the Despair Execute she knew. Alus must have left gaps in the icicles and kept the power low.

Though she realized it, Alus' next move made Tesfia close her mouth before she could say anything.

Alus swung down the katana, and all of the icicles fell down at the same time.

The sharp tips rained down onto the training grounds. Loki immediately tried to fight them off with electricity surrounding her body. Though she managed to destroy some of them, she was far from getting all of them.

A terrific sound rang out as the countless icicles slammed into the ground, creating a white smoke that filled the arena. Before long, the icicles that had done their job crumbled and dispersed.

At some point, Alus had disappeared.

A torrent of remnant mana flew about, and the three were concerned about Loki who had disappeared in all the smoke, but they soon realized that she was safe.

The reason they knew was because they heard the metallic sounds of AWRs clashing in the smoke. But even the sound of exchanges stopped soon enough.

And the three girls caught a glimpse of Loki defeated on the ground.

"You ran out of mana," Alus said.

"I'm sorry."

Alus reached out with his hand, but Loki's eyes were downcast as if she was ashamed.



“No way?! He won against a Triple Digit!” Ciel rubbed her eyes, and even pinched her cheeks at the sight.

“Now do you understand why Al is training us?” Alice said with pride.

Ciel’s jaw remained dropped for a while, until she came back to her senses and pleaded with Tesfia and Alice that she wouldn’t tell anyone. She’d realized that the gag order from the principal as well as Alus’ threat were very real.

“Yeah, I’d be happy if you didn’t. My own position would be in danger if Al’s abilities were exposed before the tournament,” Tesfia said with an uncomfortable expression. It appeared she still felt responsible for what happened before.

“Ciel, it’s not just us asking you to keep quiet about this. This is what the principal wants too,” Alice said.

“Aaaaaahhhh, I can’t hear anything, I don’t see anything!!”

Alice’s pushing the point made Ciel realize how serious the situation was, and how far beyond her it was. So she covered her ears by reflex.

Some time passed, and as Alus was getting ready to do more training, he looked around. “Where’d the little one go, by the way?”

“That’s an awful way to refer to her as soon as she’s gone. She said she didn’t want to know any more and hurried off,” Tesfia told him.

“That’s because you blurted something out without thinking. If she ran off, then keep watch on her. What if she leaks it to someone else?” Alus said, but he felt she’d gotten it after he threatened her. She wasn’t dimwitted enough to not pick up on Alus’ bottomless strength after seeing his mock battle against Loki.

“She didn’t run away, she ran off to get her AWR. She wanted you to teach her,” Alice said.

“What?” It appeared Alus had misunderstood. Ciel wasn’t dimwitted, but greedy. “Well, whatever. I think I remember hearing her saying something like that. There’s only a little time left before the tournament, so I might as well give

her some advice.”

There was a hint of gloom mixed in with his words, and Loki quickly called out to him in a cheerful tone. “Sir Alus, she might not be very useful, but the tournament is a team event. If she takes your teachings to heart, she might be able to contribute to a victory.”

Having gone this far, they had at least managed to stop Ciel from spreading Alus’ secret. Loki imagined that Alus giving Ciel advice was not so much because of their compromise, but because of good will after having acknowledged her efforts. She felt like he was searching for a reason to convince himself.

“Wow, you say such mean things as if they were nothing, Loki dear,” Alice said with a bitter smile. But Loki looked like she wanted to say she’d only told the truth.

“That aside,” Tesfia interjected, “I have to ask... how can you use other attributes freely like that? Even advanced spells.”

“Don’t lump me in with those second-rates. The two elements aside, the affinity is not all that important. Even the bare minimum level of what you could call a Magicmaster can at least manage to cast a basic spell of any attribute. It’s just stupidly mana inefficient.”

That said, Alus hadn’t used a novice level spell. Even those with an affinity for ice magic struggled to cast a spell of that kind of power with such ease. It was only possible to cast spells with that kind of firepower if you had vast amounts of mana, combined with mana control skills on par with it.

“You guys can cast a novice level Arrow spell of any element too, can’t you?”

Alus’ example caused the girls to object. “Even then, its power is only half of what it usually is. And when it comes to intermediate spells, we can’t use any other attribute. In fact, I’ve never seen a Magicmaster that could, aside from you,” Tesfia said, and Alice nodded in agreement next to her.

“That’s why I’m telling you that mana control is the important part. I believe that Magicmasters should focus the most on perfecting mana control rather than learning a bunch of different spells at random. That said, that alone won’t let you freely use other attributes.”

Alus was almost happy to see that Ciel wasn't back yet, and continued his lecture. "An affinity means that your mana's nature is leaning towards one direction. So Fia, in your case, because of that tendency your body's mana is more suitable for ice magic. So you could say that your body has been optimized to use the ice attribute."

Tesfia committed Alus' words to memory, her fingers twitching like she was using a non-existent pen to write them down.

Of course, Alus ignored her gesturing and went on. To him, these were the very basics. "This might be something only I can pull off, but you should at least know about it. Everyone has an affinity, but I'm attribute-less after all. The reason you guys can't use other attributes is because you're pretty much trying to use fire magic with mana suited for ice magic. In other words, as long as you can control the nature of your mana, you can get a grasp on all the attributes."

This felt like the kind of moment when they should've let out an impressed *wow*, but the girls did no such thing. That was because they couldn't imagine themselves reaching that level. Though Loki gazed at him in admiration as always.

"In my case, I trained on controlling the mana's nature as part of my mana control training. So I can't say that you'll never be able to do it, though it's just a possibility." Alus had become able to use magic of all kinds of attributes, but the only successful example he had was himself. He had no foundation on which to make certain statements.

That said, Single Digits and other capable Magicmasters were able to use advanced spells of attributes that were closely related to their own. Either way, mana control was something that would help any Magicmaster throughout their entire life.

Realizing that this topic might have been a little too unproductive, Alus prepared to move on and discuss something else.

In that moment, the sound of footsteps rang out through the training grounds. Looking over to the origin of the sounds, he saw Ciel. Her breathing was ragged, and her cheeks were flushed as if she was really excited, as she stood clutching her staff AWR.

“S-So sorry this is so sudden, but can you tell me where I should start, Alus?” Ciel asked, full of drive, her eyes sparkling.

Alus took a deep breath and scratched the back of his head. He reasoned to himself that there was no difference between teaching two and teaching three. Besides, he’d already fought Ciel once before during the selection matches, so he had a good idea of where to begin. In a sense, he was killing two birds with one stone.

“Ms. Ciel, let me just start by saying that the earth attribute has few attack spells, so you should begin by perfecting Thorn Pierce.” Ice Pillars was pretty much an application of Thorn Pierce. Alus could immediately tell that the Thorn Pierce Ciel had used during the selection matches was far from perfected.

“So you noticed, huh. Also, you don’t need to add the ‘Ms.’ Just address me like Fia or Alice! You’re probably being considerate, but you really don’t have to, okay? You can just act like normal.”

“Then I’ll start right away.” Alus switched gears so fast that one had to ask if he’d been feeling stressed by faking it. “So to cut straight to the point, during the selection match you drew a line on the ground, right? Meaning, you’re probably defining the coordinates in your vision, and using that information to construct the spell. That’s proof that you’re relying very heavily on an image when constructing a spell. That’s why your spells are shaky.”

Alus’ remark was spot on, and Ciel struggled to say anything back. “But... that’s intermediate magic. If I don’t do that, then there’s too much information for me... even if I start training now, I’m not going to manage to perfect it before the tournament.”

He would have loved to not have to go into an explanation, but it was the Magicmaster education system that had omitted this, so he couldn’t blame her for not knowing. “The complete version is an intermediate spell, but you can lower the difficulty to reach it. Do you even know what kind of spell Thorn Pierce is?”

Ciel puffed up her chest and delivered her answer in high spirits. “Spiky things like shoot up from the ground a la *dadada*, and like, attack right away!”

“Huh?” Alus couldn’t help but exclaim in surprise. It appeared this girl relied

on sensations even more than Tesfia. He worried if he was even going to be able to explain it, and though he didn't say anything, it showed on his face.

Tesfia and Alice, knowing what kind of person Ciel was, must have anticipated her answer. They showed no surprise, only dry smiles.

Even Loki had a wry smile over her simplistic answer, though she hid it behind Alus' back so nobody could tell.

"Eh? Did I get it wrong?"

"Well, you're not entirely wrong... probably." The 'dadada' part probably referred to the many sharpened rocks springing up, so that shouldn't be a problem. At this point, Alus felt like the theory he lived by wasn't going to get through to her. Trying to forget this, he continued on regardless. "Well, anyways... One might think that Thorn Pierce is multiple sharp rocks flying out, but it requires the same kind of shape designation like the Ice Pillars I used. But it doesn't actually need to be that many of them. So don't focus so much on numbers, and try to properly define one or two of them."

"O-Okay."

"In fact, you should start in the classroom."

The moment Alus gave his verdict, a look of despair appeared on Ciel's face.

And so a few more days of training passed with Ciel showing up now and again. However, Alus didn't tag along with their training every day. That was because he was getting to a good part in his research.

He was also heading over to Folen to check on the progress of the AWR he'd ordered from Budna more often, and was coming home in the morning most of the time.

Whenever he couldn't be at the training, Loki was there as his representative. Nobody found it strange that the student after Felinella in the rankings was serving as an instructor.

As a digression, Ciel's parent had used her AWR before her. Alus had thought it was quite old when he saw it, but that explained it. That said, it had seen a bit of customization over the years, and it suited Ciel more than the AWRs the

Institute lent out.

Like Alus had expected, her training wasn't taking much time. If anything, things had gone in an unexpected direction, as a certain someone was also showing their face.

This girl was someone he knew, and he couldn't flat out reject her. In fact, he even owed her.

"Can I ask you today again, Mr. Alus?" She would sneak in just before the training grounds closed for the day and show her face. Her expression looked half apologetic and half happy. Though the constant smile on her lips made it clear she looked forward to it every time.

"Feli, huh. Good work helping out until this hour."

"Everyone's going out of their way to rely on me, so I'd at least like to watch over the prescribed number of students."

"Is that so? I wouldn't be that considerate." The prescribed number was only supposed to be two people, but he didn't want to bring that up.

That said, when Felinella first showed up, Tesfia, Alice, and Ciel all nervously showed off their enthusiasm. It appeared they had mistaken her appearance for an inspection, but that had been a needless worry.

In the end, the reason Felinella had shown up was because she wanted to ask Alus to look over her own training. So she would appear thirty minutes before the training grounds closed and train in live combat whenever Alus was there.

Ciel was completely amazed when she saw Alus deflecting Felinella's spells without breaking a sweat. In fact, he was even lecturing her while he did it.

Just who is Alus, really?

Every time that thought entered her mind, Ciel shook her head to chase off any unnecessary thinking. *No, no, I can't think about something unnecessary*, she told herself, and continued observing the battle. After all, it wasn't a sight you could see any day.

Right after Felinella and Alus' sparring ended...

"Feli, can I go next? I want to try as many different opponents as I can," Tesfia

said.

“Me too, please,” Alice said.

“Felinella... if possible, can I...” Ciel timidly raised her hand.

Only Loki showed no real reaction as she looked on.

“Uhm...” Felinella glanced over to Alus with a troubled look, as the girls pushed themselves on her. She felt bad that they were flocking to her when the overwhelmingly stronger Alus was right there. But the reply she got was a single nod that showed he didn’t seem to care.

Seeing this, Felinella glanced back to the three girls and smiled. “Okay.”

“However, Feli is here to train herself, so make it one person per day.”

“Yes! That should do. Thank you very much.” A big smile appeared on Felinella’s face after hearing Alus’ suggestion. She always acted like a model student, so the three girls were a little surprised at her animated expression.

Alus tried to reply with a wry smile, but because he wasn’t used to it, he failed splendidly.

Since the tournament was against other people, he wanted them to spar against as many different attributes as possible. There was a limit to what Alus could do; besides the gap in their abilities was far too wide.

While no attribute was absolute, each had its strengths and weaknesses. Water and ice had a disadvantage against lightning, with fire being superior. That’s why training with that in mind would be effective. So Felinella’s help was the best thing Alus could ask for.

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When Alus wasn’t at the training grounds, Principal Sisty seemed to show up as if to take his place, not that she intended to. And on the afternoons that she showed up, she would be showered with the enthusiastic voices of the students.

As a former Single, their words of admiration filled the training grounds every time.

Compared to the noisy students, the teachers minded their manners far more. That was because they knew the reality of what she'd achieved, and because they feared her.

One day, the principal watched over the training until the end of the training time, and the students were understandably excited. Out of the ten partitions, eight were left open, and in most of them contestants were training individually. And Sisty was going through and inspecting all of them.

Some were doing combat training, and others were practicing spells. But the one thing they all had in common was the tension in their faces.

Yet Sisty was going around showing her appreciation for the students with an encouraging smile. She called out to them and politely gave them guidance in a gentle voice. Looking at her now, she seemed more a saint than her alias of Witch.

As she did her rounds for the day, Sisty spotted some unexpected faces. "Oh, you girls are here, too? Where is Alus?"

"He's out on personal business today. Then again, today's training is something we can do without him... Ms. Loki is also watching over us," Tesfia told her.

"Now that I think about it, Al did say we should have the principal look us over too," Alice added.

Sisty had furrowed her brows at Alus' absence, but it had been needless worry. At the same time she noticed the presence of one more girl. "Oh, you are Ms. Ciel, aren't you? You're here, too?"

"—! Yesh!" With the principal addressing her directly, Ciel stood at attention with a blush on her face.

"I understand. So what should I look at?"

Ciel demonstrated her Thorn Pierce as if to answer Sisty's question. While it was imperfect, Sisty was impressed by the ingenuity that went into it.

I see. An intermediate spell is difficult for a first-year student, but if she uses it like this... She was surprised by this unexpected use, while also wanting to

commend Alus.

As a former Single, she could easily imagine the meaning and effect his advice would have for Ciel. She felt like she still had much to learn at this age, which made her a little happy. *How many of our teachers could guide the students to these kinds of ideas... well, it's probably impossible for this lineup.*

Sisty pushed those thoughts away and gave Ciel advice to strive for further heights. She wasn't quite on Alus' level, but she could pick up on points of improvement after seeing Ciel's movements just once.

With that, Ciel's turn was over, and it was now Tesfia's and Alice's turn.

Sisty was surprised by how much Ciel had improved, so she was looking forward to what had become of these two.

"So, uhm... we would like it if you would look at our mock battle," Tesfia politely said.

Sisty nodded, but she realized Loki was here too. So she glanced her way as if to ask if she would also join in.

Loki answered, "I am fine, so please watch over those two."

"What? You're not going to join in, Loki dear?"

Seeing her say no, Tesfia and Alice exchanged glances, wondering what to do. "Then, should we do it, just the two of us?" Tesfia asked.

"Yes!" Alice responded.

The two were on the same wavelength and quickly figured out what to do. They entered an open partition alongside Sisty. When they did, they could feel the eyes of the other contestants of all class years on them. It was a mock battle between two beauties, with the principal herself inspecting them. It was only natural that they'd grab everyone's interest.

That said, the students didn't come too close, restraining themselves due to Sisty's presence.

Sisty herself was filled with expectation and curiosity over how Alus' personal students had developed. However, her expectations were quickly blown away. "No way!"

Having seen Tesfia's and Alus' first fight, Sisty could immediately tell by pure intuition at the start of the match that Tesfia was incomparable to how she'd been back then. It was like she was a completely different person.

Her footwork and other movements were all suited for combat, having evolved into the movements of a veteran. The spells Tesfia used were still clumsy, but Sisty could tell that effort had clearly gone into them. Moreover, she was continuing to fight while maintaining the advanced spell Icicle Sword, the result of a high level of skill in mana control.

She was also not expending too much excess mana, so there were no signs of her running out like she had at the beginning of the year. In fact, it looked like she still had some leeway despite using this much.

Then there was Alice's slash of light. That truly surprised Sisty, as it was a spell she had never seen before.

It was similar to the wind spell Kamaitachi, but its power and effects were quite different. She'd exceeded the level of a top scoring first-year student and should be more quickly found when looking at the top of all the students. She particularly excelled in complex mana control.

Sisty felt exalted. As a teacher, there was nothing more delightful than this. At the same time, it was like their growth reflected Alus' own.

"To think he did this..." Sisty found herself softly mumbling. It felt like witnessing an uncontrollable delinquent becoming a parental figure.

She'd been the one to set him up for it. She felt a little bashful, but couldn't hide her joy.

A refreshing smile appeared on her face, as she realized that putting these two girls under Alus' wing was the right choice.

Twenty-Fifth Chapter

The Seven Nations Friendship Magical Tournament

The annual Seven Nations Friendship Magical Tournament was popular not just among Magicmasters but the common folk as well.

It was being held in the eastern nation of Iblis, the nation that had the largest surface area. The neighborhood around the tournament stadium was a massive sightseeing district built by the seven nations together.

The stadium could seat 50,000 and had been repurposed from a huge building that was built before the international collaboration, with fitting decorations attached to it.

Nearby were all kinds of commercial facilities, as well as hotels and other accommodations dotted about.

It was standard for the tournament's contestants and staff to reserve an entire large hotel. The hotel also had dedicated facilities that did not accept regular guests during the tournament.

Finally, it was the day before the tournament.

Alpha's contestants gathered at the Institute's front gates early in the morning. Every year, they would arrive at the hotel a day before the tournament began.

Considering the crowd that had gathered, there was no way they were all contestants. In fact, it was mainly supporters, with large flags and banners here and there.

Although today was a holiday, the students weren't allowed to see the contestants off. Because of that, the line of people related to the Institute who were seeing them off was surprisingly short. And at the front of the line was the principal herself.

Alus and Loki hadn't arrived yet. It wasn't until after the farewell that they

came to join the rest. By that time, the other contestants had already loaded into the two large magic buses prepared for them.

Alus was carrying something long wrapped in cloth. It was about the length of his arm and looked like a massive matchstick.

“You’re late!” Tesfia shouted, poking her head out of a window.

Alus answered with a big yawn. Of course, this was just by instinct and not meant to provoke her. If he were to redo it so as to not invite misunderstanding, he’d say that he made it in time for the gathering itself, which was true so long as one ignored that they’d just barely showed up on time.

“I knew we should have gone to wake him up.” Alice, sitting next to Tesfia, also stuck her head out the window.

“Just hurry up and get on,” Sisty rushed them in a scolding tone.

Alus couldn’t exactly say, “It would be faster to run there, so go on without me,” considering the atmosphere.

Most of the luggage had been sent to the hotel ahead of time, but quite a few contestants were holding onto their AWRs out of enthusiasm.

As Magicmasters, it wasn’t strange for them to always be carrying their precious AWRs with them. Tesfia had of course brought hers, and Alice had brought the one she’d borrowed from the Institute, leaving them in the space made for them at the rear.

Though Alus wasn’t one to talk though...

“Oh? What’s that?” Sisty, who’d just rushed Alus, asked him this before he could get on the bus.

The students inside the magic bus also looked out the windows in curiosity. Even Felinella, who’d been waiting outside the bus as the contestant representative, had an interested look in her eyes.

They all stared at the huge matchstick-like item that Alus was carrying. The primary reason for the interest was because it was covered in white cloth. Because of that, it was impossible to determine any fine details or guess how it

was used.

“That’s a secret. I was late because of this, but you’ll find out soon enough,” Alus said with a cool face, as he entered the magic bus with Loki.

Once aboard, he looked towards the very rear of the passage. Seated on the five-seat row against the back were Tesfia and Alice, patting the empty seats next to them. It wasn’t like all the other seats were full, but Tesfia had a patronizing look like she’d done them a favor by reserving the seats.

While it didn’t sit well with Alus, he and Loki sat down next to them.

Seated on the row was Alus by the window, followed by Loki, then Alice, with Tesfia sitting by the window on the other side.

Ciel apparently got motion sickness easily so she was sitting at the front, and Felinella sat next to her with a worried expression.

“What is that?” Tesfia asked, as soon as they sat down. She was of course looking at the item wrapped in cloth in Alus’ hands.

It was a pretty rude attitude, but since it had been the reason he and Loki were late, he decided to tell her. “It’s Alice’s AWR.”

“—!!” “—!!”

Tesfia and Alice gasped in surprise, while Loki, who’d been with Alus the entire time, already knew what it was and looked uninterested, if not even a little unhappy.

“Huh? Uh, but...” Alice waved her hands in a fluster, and while happy, she hesitated to accept it.

AWRs were especially expensive things. Alice didn’t have her own AWR and was borrowing one from the Institute, mostly due to financial reasons. There were also quite a few other students borrowing AWRs from the Institute.

“Well, if you don’t want it, that’s fine. But know that you’re the only one that can use this.”

“Uhm, I’m happy about that... but I don’t have any money.”

“Don’t worry about the money. It’s partly an experiment too.”

Even though he said this, Alice knew that Alus had no sense for money and couldn't help but worry. The more she thought about how much it must've cost, the harder it was for her to accept.

On a side note, the AWR had cost an astounding 34,000,000 Deld.

Seeing Alice be so reserved, Alus pondered what to do. "It's an apology for something? ...Or rather, a birthday present."

"Uh, but my birthday was in June."

"If it's already past, then that's all the more reason. Sorry your present is late." Alus thought a little more and then decided to make the final push. "Alice, you really are the only one that can use this. So if you don't accept it, all my efforts will have gone to waste."

"... Are you sure?"

"Well, just consider it an investment in the future."

That prompted not only Alice, but also Tesfia to smile wryly.

Thinking about it, this was all so Alus could take it easy in the future. And he honestly felt 34,000,000 Deld was a cheap price to pay for that.

"Thank you, Al." Alice finally accepted it. However, it was only about as long as an adult's arm, about the same length as Tesfia's katana, and it was quite different from the naginata that Alice specialized in.

"Don't worry, it has a new kind of mechanism that extends it, it'll get longer. Besides, I think a spear suits you better than a naginata. Also, if you're going to thank someone, it should be old man Budna."

"Yes!" Hearing that, Alice gave Alus a smile of gratitude.

"I'm just glad it made it in time for the tournament. I also need to explain some things, so keep the cloth on for a while as you listen." Alus pointed to the space for putting belongings at the rear of the bus. Tesfia's katana and Alice's naginata were already there. Of course, the naginata's blade was covered by something similar to a scabbard.

"Well, it's a little flashy to show here," Loki noted.

“A little, is it?” Alus tilted his head at Loki’s words.

“I would say it’s sublime.”

“I guess... anyways.” But before he could continue, gravity closed Alus’ eyelids. He looked like he was about to nod off.

“Are you okay?” Alice asked.

“The tournament’s tomorrow, and you’ve skipped out on sleeping again?” Tesfia said.

Both girls looked concerned.

“I’m fine... is what I’d like to say, but I guess that won’t work.” Alus wanted to surrender to the drowsiness that was relentlessly assaulting him. This was exhaustion from having finished his job, and the bags under his eyes said the same thing. Loki had accompanied him for most of it, so her exhaustion was on a similar level.

“You can save the explanation for later. So why not just get some sleep, okay? We’ll be all right, so just take a rest,” Alice said.

Alus was already dozing off as Alice spoke, and he gave her a feeble answer, “Sorry.” He then leaned against the window next to him.

The first leg of the trip was estimated to take four hours. On the way, they’d be using a transfer gate and change over to a different bus. There was more than enough time to catch some Zs.

Also, since the magic bus floated above the road, there was next to no shaking during the journey, so nothing would get in the way of his sleep.

Or nothing should have...

“By the way... my birthday is in October...” A soft whisper reached Alus’ ears. Perhaps it had been aimed at slipping her message into his subconscious as he was falling asleep.

Based on the distance, or even the tone for that matter, Alus could easily tell who the voice belonged to, and his eyes snapped open. “What kind of a person makes demands like that herself?”

“Hey! I wasn’t really making any demands, I was just letting you know in advance so you wouldn’t forget!”

“That’s what you call a demand. In that case, I’ll get you an extra-heavy textbook as a present. I can already imagine you crying tears of joy as you study.”

“What? A textbook?! ...Well, if it’s a heartfelt present from you then I’ll gladly try to put some effort into it.”

“Effort, is it...”

Tesfia was putting up a brave front, but she couldn’t hide her disappointment, and Alus himself sounded fed up with it.

Loki smiled wryly as she listened to the two. She would be overwhelmed with emotion no matter what if Alus gave it to her... While entertaining that thought, she touched the pendant hanging down from her neck. However, she could also understand how Tesfia felt, albeit just a little.

She shouldn’t expect anything more. She’d already tasted enough happiness. Asking for any more would be greedy. But she couldn’t help but think *what if*. Expectations and restraints... two contrary emotions whirled around within Loki. What would happen if—

“Oh yeah, Loki, when was yours?”

Loki felt like her heart would leap out of her chest at Alus’ sudden question. “M-Mine...?! It’s... in October too.”

“Really? When?” Alice immediately jumped onto the birthday topic.

“The 20th...”

“That’s close to Fia’s!”

“Mine is on the 16th!” Tesfia said.

Loki found herself exasperated by her brazen attitude.

Following this, Tesfia carefreely threw another question at Alus. “When’s your birthday, Al?”

That was something Loki could never ask, so despite her surprise and panic,

she strained her ears to pick up what he said.

“What? ...Are you going to give me something?”

“W-Well, I can at least do something like that! Besides, a birthday is a wonderful day celebrating when you were born, and it’s a means of showing gratitude for the people you’ve met and a way to experience the joy your parents felt when you came into this world.”

“... And who taught you that?”

“I’ll get angry, you know.” Tesfia had tried to say something nice, only for Alus to put a damper on her, and while she looked mad on the outside, surprisingly, she was thinking about something else.

Though she was simplistic, she hadn’t posed the question without thinking. She felt like Alus’ birthday would be a good opportunity to show her thanks for everything he’d done. Or rather, considering how awkward she was, that was about the only time she could be a little honest about it.

The truth was that she actually quite liked events like that. Ever since childhood, she’d gone to a lot of birthday parties for noble families that also served as debuts into noble social life, but they’d all felt a bit empty and boring.

Meanwhile, the small birthday party for Alice with just the two of them had been incredibly fun. Of course, that was in part because Alice was her best friend.

Alus was unaware of those kinds of feelings, and he furrowed his brows in hesitation. He had never once in his life had anyone ask him about his birthday like this. He didn’t have to go out of his way not to tell her, but he didn’t really have any reason to say it, either.

When he’d been in the military, he had memories of his birthday being celebrated, but he had felt like it had been a waste of time that would be better spent on research.

To Alus, a birthday was something the adults around him forced upon him for their own purposes. To put it bluntly, it was a day for the adults to play with him like a toy.

Eventually, he made his decision. “It’s on the second of April...” Or at least that’s what had been decided, but Alus kept that bit to himself.

Next to him, Loki gulped as she furiously committed the date to memory.

Tesfia, meanwhile, smiled and said, “Okay, I got it. Let’s make it a grand celebration!”

“It’ll be next year, but let’s all celebrate together. Okay, Al?!” Alice followed up, and it appeared that it was a unanimous vote that a birthday party would be held.

A single glance at Loki made it clear that she was in agreement as well.

Alus sighed as he thought about it. It might be a little troublesome, but it was something that accompanied a peaceful life. To be honest, he’d forgotten all about his birthday when he enrolled at the Institute, but now it had come back again.



“I’ll think about it.” With that, Alus closed his eyes. Having already fallen asleep, he had no way of knowing what kind of expressions the girls had.

Next to him, Loki was blushing, and while she felt it was unsightly, she couldn’t help herself. She knew it was still far off in the future, but her expectations were ever growing. Seeing this unexpected result, she reconsidered her opinion of the bold redhead.

Meanwhile, Tesfia felt something similar, as she smiled and reflected on what he’d said. As someone who enjoyed giving presents, she immediately got to work on secretly considering what to give him. Ignoring price and usefulness, she found joy in thinking about what to choose, and it even made her feel giddy.

Strangely enough, Alus seemed to have touched on an unknown part of a woman’s emotions. Though it wasn’t like he’d done it on purpose...

Eventually two hours passed.

Alice was having a conversation with Tesfia in a quiet voice. They’d been concerned that they wouldn’t be able to sleep last night because of their nerves, but it had been a needless worry. The reason they were whispering was because Alus and Loki were sleeping next to them.

Alus was leaning against the window with his arms crossed and eyes closed. The position he was in looked like it would be uncomfortable.

The silver-haired girl was leaning against him, asleep, with her head resting on his shoulder.

Hearing Loki’s soft breathing, Alice lowered her tone a little more.

Tesfia was enjoying the idle chat when she suddenly turned to look at the AWR behind them. “... That’s bothering me a little.”

“I know, right?” Alice’s answer was immediate. Of course she would be very interested in it as well.

The two were overcome with a child’s curiosity to want to see something that was forbidden. They exchanged awkward smiles.

Alus had fallen asleep without explaining the new AWR, but with it being

within arm's reach, it was only natural that they'd want to take a peek.

"Say, why don't we just sneak a look..." Tesfia said.

"That's true, if it's just a quick look..." Alice said.

As they whispered, they felt a little guilty as they looked over at Alus. He wasn't moving a muscle, still fast asleep. They'd never been told they couldn't take a look at it, but they still moved cautiously.

Without making a sound, they turned around, kneeling on the seats and unconsciously gulping as they looked at the rod covered in a white cloth.

Tesfia had been the one to suggest it, but it had been given to Alice, so she was the one that reached out towards it.

"I'm opening it, okay?" Alice said, still feeling a little guilty.

The redhead nodded in response.

Alice took the cloth and slid it to the side to remove it.

"—!!" "—!!"

She slid the cloth back in reflex, hiding the AWR behind it once more. After taking a deep breath, she moved the cloth away once again.

At the same moment, a dim light began to overflow. Like Alus said, just looking at the handle made it clear that it was a spear. It wasn't bright, but it had an impactful golden sheen.

The handle had grooves in a mesh pattern for an easy grip. The two girls stared at it with wide-open eyes. They also understood now what Loki had meant by 'flashy.'

Alice gave up on sliding the cloth off any further, and put it back where it had been with a relieved sigh.

Once they'd properly sat back down in their seats, they started talking again.

"T-That looks expensive, doesn't it?" Tesfia breathed.

"Y-Yeah..."

Alice was happy, but she felt even more nervous about accepting it now. "It

can’t be made out of that ingot he bought in Folen, right?” She recalled the price of the ingot and shuddered.

“SSurely not...” Tesfia tried to play it off, but there was a tremor in her voice.

Alice recalled Alus saying it was a special kind of metal that could be used to make an AWR. And that memory began turning her suspicion into conviction. “But if it is... then this is definitely custom-made.”

“Probably...”

At this point, just thinking about its worth gave Alice a headache. The pressure would crush her if she thought about it anymore. She’d feel a lot better if she was just borrowing it, but as a Magicmaster she still felt elevated over handling an AWR like this one.

Unsure of what to do, Alice ended up repeatedly telling herself that it was just an experiment.

The magic bus continued on, and they passed Alpha’s border and entered the neighboring country of Clevideet.

The road along the way wasn’t fully maintained, so the magic bus couldn’t head in a straight line but instead had to take a large detour. Because of that, they passed through several transfer gates, and at Iblis they switched to another magic bus.

The students didn’t reach their destination until evening was almost upon them.

At the hotel parking lot were several magic buses already. By now the hotel was no longer accepting regular guests, so they must have belonged to the other contestants.

The hotel looked luxurious and gorgeous, as Alus gazed up at it. Around the six-story hotel were seven buildings, one for each nation, as a means of keeping contestants from different nations from running into each other. This was intended to stop any fights from breaking out between overzealous contestants, and also to prevent them from spying on each other.

That said, the tournament consisted mostly of one on one battles, and since affinities played a big part in it, the nations were going to gather information on the promising Magicmasters of other nations. This time, Felinella, who excelled at gathering information, should have made her move so that Alus and the others could take it easy.

Incidentally, these kinds of investigations were considered part of allowable strategy, so the tournament headquarters made no moves to stop this.

In the hotel lobby were a number of guests from foreign nations. While the lodging areas were split up between the nations, the lobby itself was a shared space. Positioning people here would only let them confirm that the contestants had arrived, but all the same, appraising stares passed over each contestant.

There was an unspoken agreement to overlook any magic being used to investigate others, but surprise attacks went against the point of the tournament and were forbidden. If someone was discovered even attempting to do so, they would suffer massive penalties, so nobody went that far.

Ignoring the stares from people in the lobby, Alus headed for his own assigned room, Loki following behind him as usual.

“Just so you know, we’re not sharing a room, Loki.”

“What?!”

Loki froze on the spot and tried to conceal her shock with a vague smile. At the Institute they’d been living in the laboratory together, and Alus had a lot of say, but this was a hotel in a foreign nation. As an official event, the rooms needed to be separated between boys and girls for the sake of appearances too. It was also unavoidable as this was a gathering of educational institutions.

“Loki dear, you’re in the same room as us on the third floor,” Alice called out to the frozen Loki with a gentle smile. She then grabbed hold of Loki’s hand and pulled her away.

“Apparently there’s a big public bath, so let’s go together,” Tesfia joined in, and along with Alice, she had a firm grasp on Loki.

“Sir Aluuus.” Loki looked at Alus with puppy eyes crying for help.

“This is a good opportunity for you to enjoy yourself,” Alus bluntly said, and used his key card to step into his room as Loki was dragged away.

The higher-ups must have shown some consideration, as it was a room for one. The other students had three-person rooms. Inside was a single bed, and a compact table and chair set that could serve as a small study, though it was at least as large as a double room.

In the corner of the modern room was the luggage that had been sent ahead. That included the black attaché case that contained his AWR, Night Mist.

Other Singles could rather easily hold back against students, but Alus’ strength was extraordinary. Mock battles were one thing, but if he was going to fight in the tournament he’d need his AWR in order to hold back.

For the time being, he lay down on the bed and reconfirmed the schedule. If he recalled correctly, it was free time until dinner. After dinner was a strategy meeting, but since Felinella was in charge of countermeasures against the other nations’ contestants, it would be less of a meeting and more of a briefing.

“Now then...” Perhaps it was because he was alone, but the room felt oddly too big. Alus lounged around on the bed and smiled wryly as he wondered when being alone had stopped feeling normal.

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The Seven Nations Friendship Magic Tournament used a slightly odd match-up method.

The 70 contestants in the first-year classes were divided into four blocks where they would fight one on one. What made it special was that the contestants for each match were decided just before the start. The only thing determined ahead of time was the allotment of each block and which institute they would go up against.

In other words, Alpha’s Second Magical Institute with its ten contestants would have ten slots. At the moment, they only knew the name of the institutes they would be up against.

Since the victors of each block would advance to the main tournament, each student was planning for how to get the most slots over to the main

tournament.

The strengths and weaknesses of attributes in a battle between Magicmasters played a big role in the results. Those who lost even a single match also lost the right to participate in future matches. That was why all of the institutes actively gathered information on promising Magicmasters from other nations. Information was just as important here as it was in real battles.

It wasn't an exaggeration to say that Felinella making her move, as the leader of the Second Magical Institute contestants, meant that the battle had already begun. At times like these, the more famous the students were—such as nobility—the easier it was to pick up on their affinities.

After dinner, the contestants gathered at the strategy headquarters decided ahead of time.

Inside the briefing room, Felinella stood in front of the screen, with the contestants' serious eyes fixed on her. The tournament was starting tomorrow, and the contestants were tense, aside from a certain couple of them.

Alus received the same documents as the others, but he didn't really bother looking through them.

"Make sure to rest properly tonight so that you're ready for tomorrow. Now allow me to explain how the tournament will work moving forward one more time, for good measure." It was all in the papers they'd gotten, but with people like Alus around, Felinella decided to explain it anyway.

She stepped to the side so that everyone could see what was shown on the screen. "The tournament will have contestants in each class year go through a preliminary round before the final round. For each class year there are four different blocks, and those who continue to win will go through four or five matches per person. The winner of each block will move on to the final round of the tournament, and those four winners of each class year will fight. This way, the first through fourth places will be decided for each year.

"Moreover, each nation's rank will be calculated by using each class year's ranking points, as well as each individual contestant's cumulative winning points."

As Felinella said this, a first-year student raised his hand and asked a question. “How are the points calculated?”

“A match win is 5 points, while in the final round a total of 100 points is required for the championship. Second place is 75 points, third is 50, and fourth place is 35 points. That might fluctuate a little depending on penalties or special circumstances, but it’s important to win as many points as possible.”

As Felinella paused, the names of all of the Second Magical Institute’s contestants were displayed on the screen. “The match-ups look like this, so please confirm it and try not to write it down. Please commit this to memory. On the day of the tournament, the waiting room assigned to our institute will serve as our headquarters. And once more, please make sure you look over the match-ups.”

In total there were three screens, one for each class year, and the pathway of the grid was displayed for each of them.

Felinella deciding who would fight and when was something that was accepted when she was made the leader. Since the contestants could be chosen just before each match, with the same applying for the opposing nations, most match-ups were pretty much random at this point. But if they continued winning, it was clear that Institute contestants would have to fight each other.

That said, everyone was ready to represent the Institute, so no one was complaining about that.

Alus confirmed that his name was in the middle of Block 3, meaning he’d probably be fighting in the third match of the block.

“Matches for all class years will be held on the first day. After the opening ceremony, assume that you will have to fight at least once. And since only contestants can enter the venue, it’s not over even if you lose. Please look over each block, and check on the matches to gather information. Let’s all work together to ensure the Second Magical Institute’s victory.”

Felinella had been gathering information on her own, but so far had only obtained information on the nobility and the already famous contestants. It was very likely that each institute had an ace hidden up its sleeve, and the true information war wouldn’t begin until the tournament did.

The deeper into the tournament they went, the fewer contestants there would be, and the institutes would actively select contestants with an affinity advantage.

Alus nodded to himself, remembering what Jean had told him. So this was what he'd meant when he noted that Alus was just one person. It was a little late for that now, and he'd never really bothered to listen or look it up.

Regardless, the biggest hurdle came at the start. If they could rack up more victories in the first stage, it would greatly influence how many points they would end up getting. If everyone won their first match, that was 50 points secured right there, half of the points needed to win the tournament.

"The greatest threat right now is Rusalca's First Magical Institute. They've won three years in a row, so I'd like you all to focus on gathering information on them."

The briefing now over, Alus called out to Alice who was looking down at the table. Something seemed to be on her mind, but he chose not to pay any heed to that. "Alice, come to my room later."

"—!!" "—!!" "—!!"

Alice, as well as Tesfia next to her, opened her eyes in astonishment.

As did Loki, who looked like she might faint at any moment.

"If you don't want to, I'll come to your room. I have to tell you about your AWR."

"Oh, r-right."

Oh, so that's what he meant, the three girls thought and sighed in relief, and so it was decided that it would take place in the girls' room, which was bigger than Alus' room.

"Then let's get going," Alus said, and headed for the third floor where the female contestants were staying.

Just because that was where the girls were staying didn't mean it was off-limits for the boys, and it wasn't even nighttime yet, so there were no issues with Alus boldly entering the floor.

“But to think we’re going to fight in a tournament between institutes,” Alice muttered on the way to their room.

“It’s also a place for nations to put on a show of force,” Alus said.

“The first years have Al and Loki, and besides we’ve been training all this time, so we should be able to move on to the final round, right? It would be fun to fight against friends without any fear.” Tesfia put on a brave front, trying not to think about her promise to her mother, but she knew that matches wouldn’t be decided by ability alone.

That said, Tesfia and Alice had quite the skill advantage over most novice Magicmasters in the seven nations, and that went double for Loki. But Alus knew that it wouldn’t be that simple.

“That would be nice. But Rusalca apparently has a first year who’s equivalent to a Triple Digit. And according to the Governor-General, they have a very solid lineup.”

“No way! Equal to a Triple Digit? So, like Loki?” Tesfia exclaimed.

“That’s right. Supposedly their rank is even higher, but you should assume they’re at least on Loki’s level.”

“How are we supposed to beat that?” Tesfia was praying that she wouldn’t come across that Magicmaster early on.

“But to think there is someone like Loki dear elsewhere...” Alice said.

“Well, you guys are skilled, and depending on the strategy you can probably win. In other words, it depends on how you fight. Alice in particular is skilled at fighting people, so you have an advantage and might be able to pull it off,” Alus said to motivate the two girls, but since Jean was involved, then it was possible that the opponent wouldn’t be simple-minded enough to overestimate their own power. Either way, he should at least warn them.

Alus wanted to take it easy and win his way through the tournament, but if he wanted to win the tournament overall, that wouldn’t be enough. He was sure Loki could win with her wealth of experience in the Outer World, but he couldn’t say for certain as he’d never seen the opposition fight or even what they looked like. “You’ll just have to be perfectly ready so you’ll manage no

matter what when you face them.”

“That’s obvious,” Tesfia answered with a frown. Though Alus just wanted to present the winner’s trophy to the Governor-General, so he didn’t particularly mind.

“I will deal with anyone who would stand in the path of your victory, Sir Alus.”

“Don’t you launch any sneak attacks on them, okay?”

Loki put on a sour face when she heard Alus’ warning. “It’s a matter of enthusiasm. I’ll defeat them in an instant!” she declared with an unconcerned expression. She never doubted her victory, but she wasn’t overestimating her abilities either.

“Anyways, Felinella is the one who’s deciding the match-ups. So just prepare yourselves so that you don’t lose no matter who you’re up against. And an explanation on Alice’s new AWR is necessary for that.”

After a short time, they were in the girls’ room, and Alus placed his hand on the cloth wrapped around the AWR. He removed the clamp around the handle and the cloth fell off.

Alus worked the mechanism, extending the handle and causing a split spear tip to appear. In his hand was now a golden spear saturated with a bronze color. Even he had felt like the spear would look too flashy as pure gold, and he’d had Budna tone the color down a little. It wasn’t dull, but it no longer reflected light.

Tesfia and Alice were too busy admiring the AWR to remember to act surprised.

Noting this, Alus had a hard time believing this was their second time seeing it. He had of course observed them sneaking a peek at it on the bus. Though since he’d given it to Alice, he let them be since he didn’t really have a reason to stop them.

“That golden color really stands out,” Alus said.

“That’s true, but it feels less so now than before,” Loki noted.

Alus and Loki ignored the dazed girls and gave their own impressions.

If one were to describe Alice's new AWR, they might say that it looked like an upside-down khakkhara. However, it was still a spear, and the sharp tip was double-edged, and at the bottom of the handle were three bracelet-sized circles. But unlike a khakkhara, they were firmly fit so that they wouldn't jingle.

"Go on, give it a try. It might be a little sudden, but you should be able to use it."

Once Alus urged her on, Alice finally took the AWR in hand. When she did, she felt the hefty weight of the metal. That sensation made her realize that she'd finally gotten her personal AWR that she had only dreamed of.

The same magic formula was engraved on both sides of the spear tip. Moreover, the three circles had a different magic formula engraved on them.

"The magic formula has the basics of the light attribute, but I've messed with it a little. Well, simply put, it's for advanced users now. But with your skills you should be able to handle it."

Alice had no way of knowing what he meant by 'messing with the formula,' but being told she was an advanced user put a smile on her face.

"Mana will pass through it far easier than the AWR you've been using so far, so you should end up using less mana when casting spells. There's also a couple of special traits, but it would be more fun if you found out about them in the midst of battle." Alus had an evil smile as he explained this, but nobody raised any complaints.

If anything, Alice wanted to hurry up and try it out, so it was almost like his voice didn't even reach her.

Tesfia sighed. "Don't tell me a gap has opened up between us..." She sounded worried. Her katana was a fantastic AWR that was a family heirloom, but Alus had made this one, so perhaps it was unavoidable.

However, it was said that an AWR's performance wouldn't explosively increase a Magicmaster's ability. There was a slight difference in the two girls' ranks, but lately they'd been evenly matched in mock battles. Though now they both had personal AWRs, so one could say they were more evenly matched.

Though Tesfia was envious of her best friend, she didn't hold any negative

feelings. For better or worse, this redhead was simplistic, and she rejoiced that her best friend had received her own AWR. These girls were able to share each other's joy.

Alus looked at the two and continued, "And one more thing. This has a certain secret, and it's related to the material that was used. That's why I thought about using the material in an AWR."

He walked up to Alice and removed the clasp on the rings, causing a metallic sound. "These rings are actually an AWR on their own."

"—!!" Alice was astounded.

Considering the rings had a magic formula engraved on them, it had been clear that they weren't just for decoration. They weren't just parts of an AWR either, but individual AWRs, which was something nobody had expected. That said, the girls didn't know what that meant. Alice, Tesfia and Loki all had questioning looks on their faces.

Finally, Alus got to explaining the material that had been used to make the AWR. As they had expected, the strange ingot Alus had bought from Budna had been used. Unlike other materials, it had traits that were unique to it, making it worthy of the name of meteor metal.

For example, Alus' own AWR was made using meteor metal as well, which was why his AWR could be engraved with formulas of all the attributes. Normally, AWRs were engraved with only the basics of an attribute. However, engraving different attributes would cause them to interfere with one another, affecting any spells cast. The unique structure and material of Alus' AWR had resolved that problem.

Alus had a fearless smile as he explained that the mechanisms in this new AWR were very elaborate, and that he was confident it was a masterpiece.

His calling the AWR an experiment when he gave it to Alice wasn't all that wrong. A more common material with similar characteristics to the meteor metal he'd already used did exist. So while this AWR was special, it was possible that technology that used the same ideas could come into existence in the future. For that sake, this tournament that gathered interest from the entire world as well as Magicmasters with all kinds of affinities was the perfect testing

ground.

However, like Alus had said, this AWR was very much meant for an advanced user. Generalizing the technology so that any Magicmaster could use it would require a lot of work.

Alus got rather passionate as he went through the explanation, but he himself didn't notice this. Moreover, the only one that intently listened to his long explanation was Loki.

Not even Alice fully understood the explanation full of technical lingo. But even then, she could tell how much time and passion Alus had put into making this golden spear.

Alus wrapped things up by telling the girls the name he'd given the AWR: Shangdi Fides.

He puffed up his chest as if to boast, but Alice and Tesfia thought he might be going a little overboard, though he was able to push the name through after telling them it had Budna's approval.

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At the massive stadium where the Seven Nations Friendship Magic Tournament would be held, the contestants from each of the nations were lined up with tense expressions.

They were currently in the middle of the opening ceremony. As festive music played, a single contestant took the podium and stated an oath. Based on his name and place of affiliation, he was the representative of Rusalca's First Magical Institute, last year's winner.

Alus was at the very back of the line of the Second Magical Institute's contestants, yawning.

Looking up, he could see that the spectator seats were filled. At this distance it would be extremely difficult to make out any faces, but for a Magicmaster at Alus' level it wasn't impossible.

At the top above the spectator seats were seven VIP rooms that protruded out towards the center of the field. Covering their front windows was

reinforced anti-magic glass. It was clearly very thick, speaking volumes of its high level of defense. The area surrounding these rooms was cleared of seats, instead being replaced with a heavy guard detail. Considering the security, there had to be big shots in all of them.

It's like they're asking for someone to notice.

Alus glanced to the right and furrowed his brows at the mana leaking out from the VIP room. There was no hostility in it, but it was like they were trying to tell everyone their location.

After staring through the thick glass, Alus turned his eyes back to face forward, feigning ignorance. He hadn't seen his face, but he noticed his presence and that he was waving at him. That physique and flowing blond hair were very familiar.

That's Jean all right. The mana Alus was picking up was pretty much Jean's way of saying hello. *Which means the ruler's there too... And if Rusalca's big shot is here, then our princess will be too.*

Talk about being passionate about her work... Of course, Alus felt no urge to live up to her passion. *I just hope nothing bothersome happens.*

Alus had his misgivings, but he was more or less aware that it was because he had chosen to participate in this tournament.

Of course, he knew the true meaning behind Balmes' proposal to recruit students during the conference. It was intended for them to secure future outstanding talent. It wouldn't be strange for not just the nations' rulers, but those of the rank of Governor-General to be present.

That said, unlike at the rulers conference, Singles weren't plentiful enough to accompany them here, aside from Rusalca and Alpha who had two each. Alus couldn't help but wonder what the point of Singles was, if they couldn't move freely when something happened.

Incidentally, Alus wasn't the only one to notice the tense atmosphere. There were plenty of whispers wondering about the heavy security. Even so, the enthusiasm coming from the spectator seats seemed to reach the center of the field where the contestants were lined up.

However, the ceremony was dragging on in spite of their expectations. Alus couldn't think of anything more boring than a speech by someone important, and it seemed he wasn't alone in this. A couple of the other contestants were clearly bored as they fidgeted in line.

Once the long, long speech finally reached its end, Alus let out a sigh.

And the start of the 40th Seven Nations Friendship Magic Tournament was declared.

As the contestants began to leave, massive displays descended in all four directions. On the displays was the tournament bracket that showed which institutes would face off in the first round.

The same table was also displayed on the monitor in the Second Magical Institute's waiting room and headquarters. Felinella and the other contestants were staring at it with extraordinary intensity.

"The matches will start with the first years, so please get ready... second and third years, please scout the other institutes," Felinella ordered, and the contestants all turned to look her way.

They sighed, in recognition of their leader's overwhelming abilities. Even Alus felt like Felinella had the qualities of someone who stood above others. Once she joined the military, she'd surely lead a squad of her own and earn plenty of achievements. As expected of the apple of Vizaist's eye, even when working under someone, one could expect much from her.

Alus needed to go prepare as well, but he had something he had to do before that. And that was to give final advice to the girls he'd been instructing. That said, it was clear that he was going to attract unwanted animosity when he said anything. He already tended to stand out, and got envious glares from a number of the boys.

Loki was already at his side, so he waved Tesfia, Alice, and also Ciel over and spoke to them. "I think you guys already know this, but make sure you think things through when you're fighting. It'll take three days to work your way to the top of the bracket."

"You mean to adapt to the situation?" Tesfia asked him.

... Prompting Alus to sharply criticize her. “Are you an idiot?! You should always be adapting to the situation. I mean that you should pace yourselves against someone below you and not shoot off any spells pointlessly. Your mana will recover within a day, but spells will drain you mentally. Once you’re exhausted mentally, it won’t be easy to recover from it. If you’re up against someone strong then you don’t have a choice but to go all out, but against some weakling, make sure you finish them off quickly. But don’t get me wrong, I’m not telling you that you should underestimate anyone.”

To the girls, nobody in this tournament was really a weakling. Tesfia and the others couldn’t immediately accept his advice, but ultimately nobody objected because they realized that if they thought about it, Alus was probably right on the mark.

“Contestants in the first round, please gather at the match venue.”

A feeling of tension filled the waiting room as the announcer’s voice rang out. The same applied to the three girls in front of Alus. To him and Loki this tournament was a spectacle, but that feeling wasn’t shared by Tesfia, Alice, or Ciel.

“Okay everyone, get to your positions. Contestants that will be scouting, don’t forget to report between matches,” Felinella finished with vigor. This seemed to influence the contestants, as their fighting spirit could be seen on their faces.

And so the curtain rose on the Second Magical Institute’s battle.

In the center of the massive stadium, the area formed a big circle, and on it was a stage for matches. The way it was covered in a special magical barrier was reminiscent of the Institute’s training grounds, but its scale was on a different level.

The stage was split up into four divisions, one for each block of the tournament.

Alice’s first match in Block 1 came up right away. The order of contestants had already been submitted by Felinella, so there weren’t going to be any changes now. Well, even if she wanted to change it, she wouldn’t be allowed to do so just because she was nervous.

She sighed. “Why am I first?”

Her golden spear, Shangdi Fides, was in its short form, kept within a scabbard at her waist. She had to make her way over to the first block from the waiting room, feeling a big lump in her stomach.

“Whether you’re first or last, nothing’s going to change ,” Alus observed.

“Don’t be like that, geez,” Alice retorted.

Tesfia was also nervous, but she felt she was holding up better than Alice who was trembling next to her. “You just got a new AWR, so now’s your chance to try it out!” she said with a mischievous smile, then continued, “And while you’re at it, you should go grab a bunch of attention, too.”

It was clear what Tesfia meant. Not only was Alice’s AWR custom made, but it had a deep golden color that stood out whether she wanted it to or not.

She’d be barking up the wrong tree if she complained, but Alice couldn’t help but smile wryly. “Isn’t your match the second one, Fia?”

“Yeah! So I can’t watch your match, but we’ll win our first matches. We’ve done a lot of training in the best circumstances possible.”

There was no guarantee of victory, but Tesfia’s words sank into Alice’s mind. They would beat anyone when it came to the amount of training they’d endured.

At the same time, the pressure of having to win disappeared, and her steps became lighter, despite knowing that it was pretty much just self-suggestion.

“The time to put our training to the test has come. If we lose, then let’s go complain to him!”

“But if you say that, he’s just going to work you over again.” Alice gave Tesfia an exaggerated shrug, but the grin on Tesfia’s face didn’t go away. It was clear that she hadn’t truly meant it. In other words, she was trying to get Alice to relax. Her attempt was awkward, but her intentions reached Alice.

“It’s fine. It’d just be a waste of energy to worry,” Tesfia said, and pushed Alice’s back.

Alice recalled all the hard training she’d put in. She was sure that she would

put it to good use in the upcoming matches. She was resolved to display her abilities to their fullest extent.

She then turned back to Tesfia and spoke in a slightly subdued tone. “Let’s both win our matches and aim for the final rounds of the main tournament.” She had given them both an ambitious goal, and Tesfia answered her with a fearless smile.

Alice figured that two guys would probably bump fists now, but she reconsidered this as Fia would probably get too embarrassed.

The next moment... “—!”

Instead of a fist, Tesfia held her katana in front of her. The suddenness of it made Alice give her a perplexed look. “Come on, you too, Alice...”

Thinking it was some kind of ritual, Alice did as Tesfia said, and held up her AWR. When she did so, Tesfia did indeed turn red and look away.

They clanked their weapons together.

“L-Let’s do this!” Tesfia said.

“Excuse me? Is this some kind of ritual?”

“T-That’s right! It’s a ritual to fire yourself up!”

“Wow, I didn’t know there was a tradition like this. Did your mom teach you?”

“Uhm...” Tesfia hesitated. “I plan on introducing it to my future squad.”

“Hm? ...Fia, don’t tell me...”

“Yes! I just thought of it, okay?!” Tesfia turned beet red and desperately made excuses. Alice couldn’t take it anymore and covered her mouth with her hand. But even then her laugh leaked through.

“What’s wrong with it! I thought it was pretty good... are you seriously laughing?”

“It’s not like you’re a boy.” Alice wiped away the tears that had formed in her eyes with her finger.

Tesfia puffed up her cheeks like a child and turned her face away as if showing how upset she was. She looked adorable, but at the same time, Alice was

grateful for her consideration.

She did her best to try and figure out how to show her thanks, and quickly used the simplest and fastest method... “Thank you, Fia!” She hugged Tesfia from behind, no longer caring if anyone was watching.

Tesfia blushed as she looked at the arms around her neck. “Geez... Alice.” She shrugged, and Alice gently looked at her.

The other contestants couldn’t take their eyes off of the two beautiful girls.

Having parted ways with Tesfia, Alice made her way to the first block’s match venue with steady steps. She told the official her name and institute and was allowed to pass.

Once the match began, it would be shown on the screen hanging above them, but until it actually began the screen only showed the time left until the match. The time was getting ever closer, and there was no longer any sign of anxiety on Alice’s face.

As she sat down on the waiting bench, she removed her scabbard and belt, taking out her AWR. She wouldn’t need her scabbard. She was going to fight with her AWR drawn from the beginning. She wanted this match to be as close to her usual mock battles as possible.

Alice took a deep breath, and let out a long sigh.

Tesfia had already gotten rid of everything holding her back, leaving behind only a proper amount of tension.

Taking a look at the grounds, it stretched 50 meters in every direction and was covered in a magic barrier.

Alice confirmed the start time once more, and closed her eyes to calm her beating heart. She then opened them with new resolve and lightly swung her golden spear. Matching her movements, the handle extended and the blade popped out, transforming into a spear the same length as the naginata she usually handled.

“Contestants, please step forward,” the official said, and Alice finally headed for the stage’s entrance. When she got close enough, the door slid open.

The moment she stepped in, she could feel countless stares. She could hear the commotion from the audience better than she'd expected. But perhaps because of the barrier, when she calmly stepped up onto the stage she didn't particularly mind the noise.

The cheers she heard were almost certainly directed towards the golden AWR in her hand. Perhaps it was being shown on the big screen right now. Reaffirming her grip, Alice glanced at Shangdi Fides again. Even she had had her breath stolen away by its mystical appearance. If told that it was a sacred spear from a myth or fairy tale, she might have believed it. That was just how dazzling this spear was.

Before long, the sound of another door opening caused Alice to return to her senses. Looking up, she could see a male student in front of her wearing the uniform of the Sixth Magical Institute. This was a novice Magicmaster from Hydrange.

Alice closely observed his equipment while moving up to her starting position in the center of the stage. She figured that Alus would be able to immediately tell what his affinity was based on the engraved formula. But that was something only he could do, and she had no chance of copying him.

In his hand was a drawn double-edged sword. Alice noticed something and frowned. In the handle of the sword was a large red gem, and more confusing, despite his stepping up onto the stage with his sword drawn, the adorned scabbard was hanging off of his waist.

The boy had a medium build, and his hair was neatly arranged. He had dignified facial features, but with traces of youth in them. His manner of walking was less graceful than disciplined.

A noble, maybe? Alice thought.

Her opponent was observing her as well, but he suddenly looked at her with ridicule. Seeing Alice so peaceful, he must have underestimated her, as he clearly saw her as inferior.

But his expression turned bewildered when he got close enough to see her AWR. He'd brought in a fine AWR of his own, but seeing that sublime AWR, his self-respect as a noble was hurt. His scornful attitude completely changed,

being replaced by frustration.

Eventually both parties reached their assigned positions.

Alice lowered her hips, getting ready to fight. The few seconds of waiting until the buzzer sounded off felt like an eternity.

One second, two seconds... the signal wasn't coming no matter how much time passed.

Just when Alice started to feel strange about it, a different sound rang out, and the word WARNING was written out in red on the screens in the center.

"One point penalty to the Sixth Magical Institute. Undo your mana and prepare for battle," the announcer said.

But it was the male student who was more surprised by this. He had already started pouring mana into his AWR. Considering how panicked he seemed, that must have been an unconscious action. In other words, he'd had a false start.

Unbeknownst to Alice her shoulders had gotten tense, but this event helped her relax again. She felt like she finally understood what Alus meant by being able to measure an opponent's abilities through their enchantment.

Through her mana control training, she'd come closer to its essence. Unconsciously letting mana leak like that was a sign of the opponent's inexperience. It wasn't uncommon for mana to leak out when excited, but not even being able to control that in the tournament was careless.

Her opponent was going back to square one and took a deep breath.

Meanwhile, Alice was perfectly calm, having seen through his abilities. She was neither underestimating him nor fearing him. She simply stayed cool.

Finally, the starting buzzer rang out, a little later than the other blocks.

Alice swung her spear around at a high speed as if to warm up. She felt the AWR cling to her hands, kicking up dust from the sharper swing than usual.

Even her opponent recognized her skills as worthy of that AWR. He no longer looked at her with ridicule, and instead carefully watched her with his sword at the ready.

Before long, the tip of the spear pointed downwards and stopped. Alice fixed her eyes on her opponent and attacked at a high speed.

“Here I come!”

The opponent looked shocked for a moment, perhaps because of the speed at which she was stepping. He hurriedly cast a spell. The magic formula on the blade weakly lit up, and an exaggerated fireball formed in his free hand.

Normally, the fastest and most effective way would be to create that at the tip of the sword. Of course, you could specify the coordinates and have it appear at your hand, but why not use your AWR when you have it?

Alice suspected he might have some ulterior motive, but what he fired was a normal Burst. But as expected of a contestant chosen for the tournament, he fired off one Burst after another without a break.

As Alice saw that it wasn’t some form of trap, she used Reflection to fire them all back. If possible she wanted to avoid wasting mana, but she wanted to get a proper feel for her new AWR during this match. And she was sure Alus would agree with this.

“—!!”

She began feeling that something was wrong after reflecting the third Burst. There were no problems with her accuracy, and Reflection was working properly as well. Yet she wondered if she was using an excessive amount of mana.

Moreover, the area covered by Reflection wasn’t just the tip of the spear like usual. Instead, it spread out, leaving afterimages and drawing a trail of light after it.

I’ve never seen it be this effective when using the same amount of mana!

In other words, if she had tried to do something similar before it would have used far more mana. At this rate, her common sense telling her that Reflection required more mana than the spell it was reflecting might be turned on its head.

Alice was getting increasingly excited. She knew that being overconfident and

proud of her AWR was foolish, but she still felt that she'd gotten stronger.

The tension she'd felt before the match was already long gone. In its place were confidence and focus. Not even the thunderous cheers reached her ears.

Seeing his fireballs so easily reflected back at him, the opponent jumped backwards with an astonished expression, and Alice used that opening to close in. She swung down her AWR from an overhead position.

The opponent managed to block it with his sword, but a metallic screech sounded, along with a creaking noise.

To think the difference in mana control was this big... It was clear from the opponent's face that he'd only just barely been able to block that exceedingly sharp swing. His face turned red as he desperately tried to fend off the attack using both hands.

Even during her attack, Alice measured their difference in abilities and concluded she was sure to win as long as she didn't let her guard down. At the very least, she wasn't going to lose in close combat, and even if a distance opened up, Reflection should deal with most of it.

She hadn't seen all the spells her opponent could use, but looking at his mana control, any ace up his sleeve couldn't be all that powerful.

Putting his back into it, the opponent was able to knock the tip of the spear away, but Alice skillfully used it to attack from overhead once more.

Her opponent got flustered, easily fell for feints, and was stuck completely on defense. Eventually he began getting scratched up.

However, Alice didn't have any interest in tormenting her opponent. So she retreated for a moment.

Her opponent's face was pale, and he seemed well aware that he was losing. The contempt had already disappeared from his expression, and instead Alice could catch glimpses of anguish from all of his efforts to win ending in vain. He must have been making a desperate calculation of how high his chances of winning would be if he went on the attack here.

Meanwhile, Alice fixed her clothing that had gotten rumpled after jumping

backwards and landing.

Seeing her be so composed, the boy gritted his teeth. And he squeezed the AWR in his hand hard.

He still had a stubborn will to fight in his eyes, but his sword was pointed downwards, and he showed no sign of counterattacking. While he looked frustrated, he wasn't moving, and he even seemed to have stopped observing Alice. But that was all the more unsettling since it didn't look like he'd given up on the match.

For a few moments, Alice cautiously raised her spear. What was he planning?

Suddenly, she noticed the clumsy flow of mana to his AWR. It lacked any accuracy, but it was a large amount of mana. She was still cautious of the AWR pointed downwards, but when she looked up, she could see the edges of his lips rise.

"...!"

Alice immediately looked back to his AWR.

In the next moment, as if to show off his trick, he'd purposefully only shown one side of his sword, and now turned it to show the other side. The magic formula was glowing red.

A shiver ran down her spine. She hadn't tried to let her guard down, but she realized her mistake in accidentally giving him the time he needed.

I have to dodge... no, he's still doing something!!

Alice felt heat coming up from the ground, and she saw that it had turned glowing red and was rising up. Something was about to be spat out.

"You're too late!! *‹‹Burn Pillar››*!!" the male student declared.

Using the AWR pointing downwards, he'd set the coordinates so that Alice was in the middle of it. With his preparations complete, he unleashed his fire spell.

Alice immediately concluded that she had no way of evading the attack unharmed. *Reflection... won't be as effective beneath me!* That's why she moved by muscle memory rather than any deliberate consideration.

She kicked off the ground and jumped into the air. Turning around in a somersault, her eyes fixed downwards, she swung her spear at the ground as hard as she could.

“‹‹Shiylereis››!!”

The crash between magic spells caused an explosion that shook the ground.

The slash of light split the pillar of flame and carved out the ground, as a thunderous sound rang out. It was a rather forceful method, but with this much difference in the power of their spells it became possible.

The fire grew visibly weaker and the split pillar shrank in size.

The light had blown the fire out.

“What?!”

Alice could see her opponent standing still in a daze, but even she was astonished by what had just happened. She stared at the scar in the ground that her slash had left.

I did use my full strength, but this is...

The bottom of the tear was shrouded in darkness. It clearly ran deep. In fact, it might even reach her own height in depth. Rather than feeling joy from the power, she was feeling a little worried about it.

Her opponent was still spacing out from the power of her attack. The attack he was so confident in had been destroyed.

Alice had enough composure to recall how something similar had happened to her before. But thinking about it right now was pretty dangerous, and she felt a chill run down her spine. *Al probably said to finish things up quickly because he knew something like this might happen.*

It appeared that everyone at this tournament had an especially strong spell that could turn the tables as the ace up their sleeve. And keeping that hidden for as long as possible was another part of the strategy.

But cornering an opponent and leaving them no other choice wasn’t a wise idea. Especially when two opponents were on a closer level.

“Then I guess... I should go all out.”

Alice smiled at her opponent. She hesitated whether she should use it here, but thinking about the future, she realized that getting a grasp of it now would be for the best.

She removed the clasp on the handle, and set the three circles free while recalling what Alus had said. *First, all coordinates should be in parallel... instead of trying to set them in detail, I position them relative to me... and then fix them in place!*

First, the freed circles were fixed in the air around her. Then she used her senses to make minor adjustments to their positions.

Before long, they stopped as if to protect her, with the circles pointed towards her opponent. Thinking back on it, this must have been the point behind Alus training her to recognize coordinates and set them in greater detail from time to time.

The three circles, one to each side of Alice and the third above her head, moved with her, automatically adjusting their positions and directions slightly. These circle AWRs used the synchronized reaction from the special magnetic field created by meteor metal properties for their movements.

The problem was the next step in the process... Trying to keep the flow of mana clear in her mind, Alice thrust her free hand forward.

The three circles shook, and then transformed, increasing their diameters. But in the next moment they snapped back to their original size like a rubber band.

They’d been given the property to change their shape to a certain degree by passing mana through them. That didn’t apply to the spear itself, but the circles were making full use of the meteor metal properties.

“I can’t maintain the shape the way I am now...” Alice kept an eye on her opponent with a vexed expression. With no other choice, she passed mana through the spear.

The magic formula glowed faintly. It linked with the circles floating in the air. Mana flowed through the spear and circles. Alice lowered her center of gravity, pulled the spear back, and readied her attack.

Her opponent was blankly staring at her, wondering what was happening, when he suddenly realized he was being cornered. With a frightened expression, he hurled a fireball at random.

However, Alice no longer needed to use Reflection. She made her run up and swiveled her spear around while saying the spell name.

“‹‹Shiylereis Quartet››”

A slash created from the blade scattered the fireball. Another three more slashes were unleashed around Alice.

The circles had perfectly replicated the same magic formula, casting Shiylereis in parallel to the main slash. The circles being able to trace magic and cast it individually was another reason Alus had called them distinct AWRs.

With his fireball easily cut apart, the opponent covered his face with his arms by reflex. The next moment, all the slashes assaulted him. Without so much as a moment to shout out in anguish, the male student collapsed, and—

“The opponent is unable to fight. The winner is the Second Magical Institute, Alice Tilake,” an announcer said.

Shortly after the announcement, the audience that had fallen silent due to the powerful attack gave Alice a standing ovation.

Finding herself the focus of the crowd’s attention, Alice’s face turned red from embarrassment and she hurriedly walked out of the arena with her eyes cast down. Seeing her blush and make her exit as she hunched her body up after such an intense fight only added to her charm and fired up the audience.

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Alus’ turn wasn’t until later, so he was currently scouting out the matches from the spectator seats. On the surface he was observing his future opponents, but he actually had a different, personal reason.

“Well, it was more or less a success,” he appraised, after Alice’s match ended. She still couldn’t make full use of the circles, and he found himself amused as he discovered new homework for her. “... I suppose I should give Alice more work on space manipulation.”

This match had been something of a practical run for the new AWR. All tests on its performance had already been made, and he hadn't been worried that it would malfunction or anything. He'd even scrupulously checked Alice's flow of mana, after all.

But he had been unable to do any tests on the light element, so Alice had to actually use it herself as a test. There shouldn't have been any problems, in theory, but Alus still let out a small sigh of relief over the results.

"Oh, Alpha's on a pretty high level." Carefree words of praise suddenly came from the side.

Alus flat out ignored the voice, letting Loki respond to it instead. "Those two have been trained by Sir Alus directly, after all."

"What? Seriously?!" The blond young man, Jean Rumbulls, a Single from Rusalca, was the one speaking. He was someone known to Alus, and at some point he'd left the VIP room to come down to the spectator seats. "So did you give her that spear AWR, Alus?"

Alus looked over at Jean and affirmed it with his eyes. As it happened, the AWR he had given to Alice had similar properties to Jean's own AWR.

"Ms. Loki, was it? To think Alus would accept a partner. He never mentioned a word of it at the rulers conference. And you're such a beauty, too." Jean wore an honest smile and stuck out his hand to Loki with a "Nice to meet you."

Loki quietly shook his hand.

After finishing his greeting, Jean leaned on the railing and looked down at the girl wielding the golden spear who was leaving the arena. "As expected from someone Alus is teaching, she's pretty good... I'd want her to come over to Rusalca if you hadn't called dibs on her already."

"I don't mind. I've only taught her the basics, but I'll gladly let you take her."

"I think I'll pass. I'm scared of what would happen if I did." Jean flashed a wry smile as he rested his elbows on the railing, glancing over at Loki again. They'd only just met, but Jean couldn't help but wonder about it.

When Alus was in the military, he'd always seemed like a lone wolf. That

hadn’t changed much now either. “To think that Alus would take a partner. I still can’t believe it... Did the Governor-General put you with him? Well, I guess everyone is constantly changing. I’ll need to watch out so you don’t overtake me.”

“Oh, surely not. Sir Jean has been chosen as the ranked No. 3 Magicmaster, and...”

“Who are you kidding? The higher-ranking Singles don’t change ranks that often. How many years have you been at it?” Alus cut Loki off, speaking to Jean in a curt tone. The upper half of the Singles, Jean included, hadn’t shifted in their rankings for over two years. The bottom ranks aside, Jean had held onto his ranking for more than three years.

“I can’t take it that easy. I told you, didn’t I? Our institute has someone promising.”

“Hmm, so who’s this hope of yours?”

“You’ll see. I’ll introduce you sometime.”

Alus sighed inwardly. He’d hoped Jean would just blurt out their name, but he wasn’t going to tell him that easily. Since it would be a student from Rusalca’s First Magical Institute, he’d wanted to be able to switch up the match-ups and take care of this person as quickly as possible. He and Felinella were in agreement on that... then suddenly Loki poked his back.

“Sir Alus, I think you should return to the waiting room now.”

Looking at the screen, Alus could see that the second match in Block 3 had come to an unexpectedly early end. The matches were proceeding faster than anticipated overall. Which meant that Loki had a good point.

As for Alpha’s contestants—once Alice’s match was over, Tesfia was already standing on a different stage ready to go. Considering how Alus’ turn might come up soon, he wouldn’t be able to see all of Tesfia’s match.

He glanced over at her opponent. At any rate, she probably wasn’t going to struggle against someone on that level. With just a first glance, he could tell that Alice’s opponent had been stronger. He didn’t know if this one had an ace up their sleeve, but there was probably nothing to worry about.

Talk about a lot of unnecessary work, Alus thought to himself, and sighed.

Seeing this, Jean smiled at him and called out to him jokingly, “What’s the matter, Alus, not in top shape? I’d warmly welcome it if you had to give up on the tournament!”

“Keep talking... that said, the possibility is there.”

“...”

Jean wasn’t sure how to interpret that statement. For a moment he looked at Alus with a serious expression, but quickly returned to a more gentle one. He patted Alus on the back. “That’s good to hear. But try not to drop out in the first match. Now, get going,” he added, with a wink at Loki.

Alus headed towards the waiting room, and carefreely waved his hand. He didn’t know how Jean reacted, but he was probably smiling dryly.

Jean moved to make his way back to the VIP room where Lithia was waiting, but he stopped dead in his tracks. He could feel something from the audience... the adoring eyes of many of the women seated there.

Since he’d been speaking with a rude Magicmaster, he didn’t know how many had held back from calling out to him. The truth was that Jean, with his good looks and strength, had many passionate fans. And it appeared they weren’t just limited to Rusalca.

With Jean stopping in place, the crowd began to murmur. “Oh, it’s Sir Jean.” “It’s Jean Rumbulls!” “There’s no doubt. How dreamy!” Many such excited statements were coming from the women in the audience.

Jean turned around to see a couple of them starting to stand up. At a closer look, they all seemed entranced. It was only a matter of time now. Once someone worked up the courage to call out to him, the ladies would come in droves.

“I suppose my own match is about to begin,” Jean muttered to himself, and scratched his cheek.

He reached into his uniform pocket and pulled out a pen with special ink that he skillfully spun around in his fingers. As it used mana as a catalyst, it wouldn’t

run out of ink that easily, or at least that was the shady catchphrase that he'd been sold the item on, and he was glad he'd brought it with him just in case.

Jean then put on a service-minded smile, and elegantly spoke out with a refreshing voice. "Okay, form an orderly line, please." As expected of a veteran, with just that one line he seized control of the situation.

That said... he was secretly astonished by the length of the line that immediately formed, and noted that he should wear a disguise the next time.

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Alus' footsteps were heavy.

Unable to let that pass unnoticed, Loki pulled on his hand. But upon closer examination, there was a slight smile on her face.

The truth was that she wanted the general public to acknowledge Alus. So far, information about him and his achievements had been kept secret. So while Alus' existence was kept out of the public eye, Loki was a little proud that the time had finally come for him to step into the limelight.

There was no longer any point in standing by in the waiting room, as it was only a short time before the announcer would call Alus' name out. According to Alus' calculations, he would just barely make it in time, but that carefree calculation would be frowned upon by those around him.

When they reached the waiting room, Loki dashed into the locker room and returned with a black attaché case in hand. A small girl like her carrying it made it look quite heavy.

She pulled at Alus' hand and they headed for the venue. His slightly bent over posture was because of their difference in height. Passing by the other contestants, they finally arrived at the arena where two girls were waiting for them.

"You're late!" Tesfia roared.

Like Alus had predicted, her match had ended quickly. And from the looks of it, it had been an overwhelming victory.

"Oh dear," Alice greeted them. She had wrapped her AWR in cloth so that it

wouldn’t stand out, and smiled softly.

“Why are you complaining when I made it in time?”

“Because you made us worry for nothing!” Tesfia replied.

“A... Al, you will need to speak with the official.” Since they were in public, Loki spoke to Alus like they were just classmates, but she was beside herself.

“Good luck! We’ll cheer for you too,” Alice said at the end, and Alus headed for the passage leading to the stage.

“Take care,” Loki resolutely said to his back, and Alus responded with another carefree wave.

Before long, the buzzer signaling the start of the match rang out, and the three girls rushed over to the seats set aside for those with a connection to the contestants.

“Aaaargh!!”

Suddenly, they heard a scream alongside the cheers. Tesfia and Alice flinched, and looked around, but they didn’t see anyone that could have screamed. “What was that...?” Tesfia asked.

It was too extraordinary a sound for them to have misheard it, and while they gazed around, Alice noticed that Loki had stopped. “W-What is it? Is it some kind of incident...? Like terrorists?!”

“No...” Loki muttered. She then turned back the way they had come.

“Huh? What? Where are you going?” Tesfia shouted.

Looking at the entrance, they saw a familiar face come back out, and everyone stared at him in wonder.

Tesfia ran over to him and timidly spoke. “D-Don’t tell me you didn’t make it in time?!” she said, her face turning pale. Alice covered her mouth in shock.

But the boy in question carelessly replied, “Of course not. I’m back because the match is over.” Alus pointed at one of the screens above the stage.

It clearly displayed the Second Magical Institute as the victor. However, the problem wasn’t with the result, but the process. More specifically, the timer in

the bottom right of the screen.

A 00:05 time was displayed.

A match finishing in five seconds was completely unheard of.

So the only thing the audience expecting a fierce fight got to see was the opponent being immediately blown away. And the scream Alice and the others had heard belonged to said opponent. However, nobody had been able to tell what happened, and the audience fell silent for a moment.

At some point, someone quietly said, “F-Five seconds...” but because of the silence their voice carried far.

Following that... “Seriously, five seconds?!” a different voice exclaimed.

And that excitement spread like a wave across the audience.

The speed of Alus’ match would be a hot topic, but Loki’s match would be another one worth watching.

The people watching didn’t see much more than a flash on the stage. And after the blinding flash, the sound of thunder rang out. And then they could see a fallen opponent and Loki turning around to walk away.

Seeing that, Alus honestly regretted his own match. He felt like he should have at least given his opponent a chance to show off.

To reveal the trick, he’d simply shot out a bullet of mana to blow his opponent away, but defeating his opponent in an instant on the big stage made him stand out too much, and the mental damage he caused his opponent might be bigger than when fighting normally.

He couldn’t just tell his opponent that he’d had bad luck, so he decided that he should at least win the entire tournament in the end.

After the match, Loki grouped up with Alus and they wordlessly returned to the waiting room. With the second years’ matches coming up, they were in the waiting room preparing for battle, but with the victors returning the atmosphere flipped.

The waiting room had screens where those waiting could observe all the matches taking place, so Loki and Alus were showered in congratulations. Of

course, the ones aimed toward Alus were a little awkward... but a victory was a victory.

Incidentally, Tesfia and Alice weren't there, but that was because they had been sent out to gather information.

Alus and Loki headed over to Felinella to report, but as the leader she was already aware of what they'd done. "Good work out there. Those were wonderful matches worthy of the Friendship Magical Tournament!"

The two awkwardly cast their eyes down when faced with Felinella's bright smile. Had they really lived up to the audience's expectations with those instant battles? And rather than showing 'friendship,' they might have given their opponents serious traumas. Thinking about it that way, they had been a little immature.

That's when Felinella turned to the second-year contestants and spoke out as if to encourage them. "The first years have brought us excellent results. As their seniors, we can't let them down. So let's brace ourselves."

The second years responded with cheers, and any pressure they might have been feeling was replaced by a burning fighting spirit.

"Phew, I somehow managed to win." A slack voice that threatened to extinguish the excited atmosphere spoke up.

Felinella kindly called out to the girl who had appeared, using her staff AWR as support. "Good work, Ms. Ciel."

"What, did you struggle that much?" Alus asked with a surprised look, after seeing how she'd just barely managed to secure a win.

Ciel scratched her cheek with a troubled expression, and slumped down onto a chair. "I was too nervous to cast spells... when it turned into close combat I was able to fight like usual, but it was close."

Frankly, it wasn't something to make light of. Not being able to cast spells was a failure as a Magicmaster and a sign of her inexperience. So her victory was nothing short of a lucky one.

That said, aside from Alus and Loki, who else could claim that they wouldn't

make any mistakes from the pressure they felt? Any kind of upset was possible. So with that in mind, while Ciel's victory might have been due to sheer luck, it was still a precious win.

"So five out of the ten first-year contestants moved on to the next round," Alus whispered, but that was actually wrong. He'd made full use of the screens around the stadium and had gathered information on most of the matches. It was a mistake he'd made on purpose to remind the contestants of the situation.

Felinella picked up on what he was doing and politely corrected him. "Actually, Mr. Alus, there's still one more match among the first-year students, and they've secured eight wins so far."

"Oooohh!!" someone cheered. And the realization that they might actually win spread among the contestants. They all shared a sense of unity.

Suddenly, a strange silence befell the waiting room.

The reason... was Ciel.

Because she'd worked up a sweat, Ciel was pulling down her shirt and fanning her chest, exposing her white skin. Her out of place innocence made quite a few of the male students swallow nervously. As a result, a different kind of excitement was mixed in with the waiting room's atmosphere.

"Ms. Ciel, why don't you go wash off for now."

"Huh? Ah, okay!"

Felinella had spoken to Ciel in an admonishing tone while looking around, causing a couple of the male students to jump.

"Will the upcoming contestants please get ready?" the announcer said, making the atmosphere in the room turn on its head again.

Once there were fewer contestants in the waiting room, Alus took the opportunity to approach Felinella. "So, have you found them, I wonder?"

Felinella put on a forced smile at Alus' out-of-character polite question. But she knew that it was just because of their current positions, so she quickly changed gears. "No, not yet..."

“So I guess they haven’t come out then? Maybe they’re saving them for the seeded position.”

They were of course talking about Rusalca’s so-called hope. Suddenly, the image of that blond-haired man’s refreshing smile popped into Alus’ mind, and he cursed him under his breath.

During these tournaments, it was standard to send in the most powerful contestants with the highest chances of winning to score as many points as possible. Moreover, as last year’s winner, Rusalca had a seeded position. But it was common to leave that seed for a weaker contestant.

The problem, however, was if Rusalca figured out that there was a powerful contestant like Alus around. In those cases, a more promising contestant would be given the seeded position to keep them from being eliminated early on.

Unless they were really pressed for options, they’d do what they could to keep them from facing the Second Magical Institute. That was all the more likely since the contestant Alus had immediately eliminated was from the First Magical Institute. Of course, there was no way that had been Rusalca’s hope; it was probably just some sacrificial pawn. In other words, it was very likely that the First Magical Institute was aware of Alus’ existence and was keeping their promising Magicmaster away from him.

“I guess it can’t be helped, but they should appear from the second round onwards,” Alus said.

“We will be counting on you when the time comes,” Felinella said.

Alus, of course, had a say in the match-ups for the first years.

With no more scouting missions for the time being, Alus took Loki with him and left to put his free time to good use. In other words, he had somewhere to go.

The two used the stairs to climb up to the top floor, before going through a passage behind the spectator seats and climbing up even further.

Alus was heading for a rather large private room. At the end of the passage was a door with two skilled Magicmasters guarding it. He wasn’t exactly expecting that they’d recognize him and let him through. So before calling out

to them, he pulled his license out in advance and waved it in front of them.

“Go ahead.”

Perhaps because they’d heard about him before, they let him through with tense looks on their faces. There was a bit of fear mixed in with the reply, but that was likely because of Alus’ reputation in the military.

Lettie was another Single, but she was known for her amiability, a clear difference between her and Alus.

Alus lightly waved Loki over.

Climbing up another set of stairs, a sturdy iron door now stood in their way. Like before, there was another guard outside, and after he confirmed Alus’ license, he knocked on the door. Shortly thereafter, a plucky voice responded.

The door opened, and beyond it... was a VIP room somewhat lacking in beauty, but a red carpet had been laid down, and it had been reinforced with anti-magic glass.

This was one of the seven rooms surrounding the stadium. It was possible to observe all the matches from here, and the results were likely written in full on the massive screen here.

The atmosphere in the room was rather refreshing. There was a world of difference between this room and the heated lower floors.

Four waiters stood by at the wall, with two high-ranking Magicmasters standing tall nearby. Both of them were familiar faces to Alus, subordinates of someone he knew in the military.

Finally, there were three leather-covered chairs positioned in front of the glass. And of all things, a person was dozing off in one of those chairs, its backrest thrown back, her braid hanging off the side of the chair.

Alus felt she was being a little bold, but he had to admit that was just the kind of person she was.

“So, you’re here.” A dignified, yet somewhat hoarse voice called out to Alus. It was a sturdy voice he was very familiar with. He was the reason Alus had come here.

“You didn’t come here to spectate, did you?”

“Well, that was out of the blue. Here I came to watch your valiant fighting...” Alpha’s Governor-General Berwick jokingly said, with a slight smile on his lips.

It had been a while since they last met, but Alus spoke to him in his usual manner. Even though he was the Governor-General, Alus would only ever use a respectful tone when he was being cynical. “I doubt you have the time for that. And if she’s here, there’s something big going on,” Alus said, and kicked the chair, but the person in it showed no signs of waking up. He walked up to her then and flicked her forehead with his finger.

“Whoa?! What?” The woman finally woke up, and blatantly rubbed her reddened forehead with tears in her eyes. “That’s just mean, Allie.”

She stood up, bending over a little and rubbing her face against his abdomen like a small animal. That said, she was far too tall to be called that.



“Cut that out, Lettie.”

“Oh, come on. It’s been a while.”

This was Lettie Kultunca, one of Alpha’s Single Digit Magicmasters. Loki was silently burning with jealousy at Lettie’s bold actions, noting that there was also another person present that should be treated with more respect.

“Hello, Alus. How unusual for you to come here on your own,” said an unrivaled beauty with long, flowing black hair. Alpha’s ruler, Cicelnia, had her mouth covered by a thin fan, but her eyes were narrowed, and you could tell that she was happy even with the fan in the way.

Alus figured she was up to something again, but he had no way to know that the smile on her face was purely from joy.

“Allie’s here to meet me, you see,” Lettie said.

“Not even close,” Alus coldly declared.

However, the atmosphere in the room remained loose because of Lettie’s personality. The two guards by the wall were even stifling a laugh with trembling shoulders. But when Lettie glared in their direction, they hurriedly straightened their posture.

“Oh? So this little shrimp is the girl who won the position of Allie’s partner.” Lettie then carefreely came over to Loki and crouched down a little to get a good look at her face.

“I-It’s a pleasure to meet you, Lady Lettie. My name is Loki Leevahl.” Loki’s expression didn’t change much, but she spoke in a stiff tone that conveyed how nervous she was.

“Li’l Loki, is it? Yeah, you’re a cute one, aintcha. You have a kind of indescribable adorableness that might put the geezers in a strange mood. Don’t do anything weird to her, okay, Governor-General?”

“Don’t be stupid... if anything I’m old enough to be her grandfather,” Berwick said with a dry expression.

“Loki, you don’t have to bother being respectful towards her.”

“That’s just going too far, Allie. I’m older than her, you know? I have my dignity to protect here...” Pushing her braid that had shifted forward back to where it belonged, Lettie stuck out her chest in a somewhat pretentious pose.

Seeing this, the two guards’ shoulders trembled with laughter again.

“Yeah. Sajik, Mujir... why don’t we take this outside?” When she noticed their laughter, Lettie turned serious and stuck her thumb out.

The two guards’ faces paled. They frantically shook their heads, and immediately straightened their posture again. And this time they made sure to not budge a muscle.

After letting out a sigh, Lettie put on a small smile and dragged her thumb horizontally in a gesture for the two. It was a warning as to what would happen if they did it again, not that it would be necessary.

“Let’s leave the farce there, Lettie.”

“Geez, Allie, you’re always such a tease.” Lettie’s expression turned into a childish frown in an instant at Alus’ words. It was hard to believe she was Alpha’s other Single, but in the Outer World she was worth a thousand Magicmasters. Those who knew of this gap felt awe and fear.

Her pushy attitude could still be brushed off with a wry smile considering her age. Though there’d be a different reaction if she was Sisty’s age.

At times she gave off the atmosphere of a gallant Valkyrie. And because of her personality she was very popular in Alpha. It wasn’t an exaggeration to say that everyone would find it an honor to go on a mission with her. In short, she had a personality that was easy to like.

Moreover, the number of people that returned from missions she was assigned to was exceedingly high.

Sajik and Mujir, the two guards, who happened to be her subordinates, also clearly idolized her.

Alus put that aside and instead focused on the question on his mind. “Lady Cicelnia, I thought Lettie was meant to be on a mission in the Outer World, so why is she here?”

“Oh? I thought you came to see me.”

“You’re right in the sense that I came to see you.”

Cicelnia’s voice sounded quite happy as she smiled behind her fan.

But sensing that she was trying to feel him out, Alus completely overturned the mood. “I came to ensure that you don’t get me caught up in some troubles. Well, I hope that’s just some pointless worry on my side.”

“Oh dear, there are no troubles... I simply came to witness your valor. Not to mention all of the important higher-ups from other nations that have come to see you.”

“...”

“Well, don’t be in such a rush. I can understand how you feel, but we are just here to enjoy the matches.”

Seeing Alus start to get annoyed, Berwick stepped in to calm him down. “That said, even I pitied your first opponent. I can agree with not letting your guard down, but you could have at least let him cast a single spell to keep him from losing face.”

“That’s true, but he seemed to enjoy talking over casting, and I wasn’t in the mood to listen to his complaints. But that’s nobility for you.”

“Oh, that. I could hear him scream from here. Hehe,” Lettie said.

Alus didn’t have the time to spare to listen to his opponent give a speech before they fought. In fact, after learning his opponent was nobility, he didn’t feel the need to hold back. “So what about you, Lettie, did you wrap up the mission in Vanalis?”

“Not yet. I even spent so much time making preparations too, but I was still summoned here. If things go awry here, are you going to go out there yourself, Governor-General?”

“Don’t be unreasonable. But if it comes to it, I’ll put in more men.”

“There’s only going to be more deaths the more weaklings you send in, you know...” Lettie looked over towards Alus. “But it will be over in an instant if Allie joins. Right? Please? I think it will be worth it for you. I’m pretty hot, you

know!” She looked at him with upturned eyes, and stroked his chest with her thin finger.

Having decided to ignore her actions, Alus spoke out in a fed-up tone. “If I do that, your squad will never shut up about it! How do you think they’d feel if I showed up after all that preparation and swiped most of the rewards?”

“They won’t complain. They’d accept it if you took 20% and we took 80%.”

“Who’d do it for that cut?”

“But I’m tiii-rrred. Then how about this?!” Lettie had a mischievous smile full of confidence as if she’d just had a brilliant idea. She looked at him with alluring eyes and wriggled her body, putting her arms around his neck. “I’ll pay with my body. That way you’ll jump at the offer even if you got 0 percent, am I right?”

Loki’s face was turning redder and redder, but that was because of the overly strong stimulation.

As two Singles they would make a suitable couple. Though there seemed to be a bit of reality mixed in, so it was impossible to say if Lettie was just teasing him.

For an active Magicmaster who frequented the Outer World, Lettie had a surprising lack of scars. That was partially because she had the abilities of a Single Digit. Moreover, she never slacked on maintaining her good looks.

She looked simplistic, but she’d sharpened the weapons needed to seduce a man. She had supple limbs, breasts that were neither too big nor too small, and wore a rather exposing outfit. Her lips were glossy, her skin almost translucent, and her big eyes gave off an innocent impression.

Lettie had her quirks, but she was incredibly attractive. At the same time, she had a sense of innocence and naivety to her.

“Why the hell would I accept zero percent? You’re the one who would jump at that offer. And I’d of course take 100%.”

“Wait, seriously?! I can jump you if I give you 100%?!” Lettie acted surprised, and drooled. She was fully ready to keep Alus from taking it back, eyeing his body like a predator.

The unexpected development made Cicelnia lean forward in her seat.

But Berwick dispelled the current atmosphere. “Ahem! Leaving jokes aside...” he said, clearing his throat. He frowned a little, but remained calm, and indifferently thought that this would be fine as well.

While he couldn’t endorse seduction, letting Alus make a child would be a useful method. And when it came to someone like him, you could expect plenty from his child, and if he had a wife and child, he wouldn’t be able to live as freely as he did now. The risk of him leaving this nation for another would also be reduced.

That said... *Well, I suppose it would be impossible for right now, considering that special ability of his... but it might not be all that bad*, Berwick thought, as he imagined Alus walking down the aisle with a bride, forming a happy family with a cute child... The image made him smile a little.

When Berwick realized it, his expression turned to a bitter smile, and he stopped his pointless fantasizing as he turned to give Cicelnia a signal with his eyes.

“Incidentally, Alus... Are you aware that an interesting side show was added to this tournament a few years ago?” Cicelnia gave Alus an intense look as her long, black hair fluttered.

“You mean the magical martial arts demonstration held by seven active duty Magicmasters?” If Alus’ memory served him right, it was an event that took place after the preliminary matches. Excellent Magicmasters from all the nations gathered to show off their spectacular spells. That said, it was just a sideshow, so there was no concept of winning, but he’d heard that it was still an exciting event.

Alus, if anything, was interested in the AWRs that would be used during the event. They were unique, made using meteor metals, and packed full of all kinds of techniques from a civilization long gone. For that reason, they were left under the cooperative care of all seven nations, and there were few opportunities to see them. He had always thought about getting a close look at them.

Cicelnia nodded and snapped her fingers. When she did, one of the waiters

brought over a black case and left it by Alus' feet. "This demonstration uses active duty Magicmasters from all the nations. And as I am sure you have figured out, I would like you to do it this year. Inside this case is a mask and robe... items you will need to disguise yourself."

Alus narrowed his eyes and stared at Cicelnia, who threw troubles his way without a care in the world.

When he did, she seemed to be shocked and awkwardly averted her gaze. She hadn't forgotten about Alus' temperament, but she'd pushed matters along like she usually did out of sheer habit. And of course she would. With her unrivaled beauty and position of power, she could get her will through anywhere in Alpha. The only exception was with the extraordinarily powerful Magicmaster, Alus.

Realizing her blunder, she bit her lip and blushed before exchanging looks with Berwick who was somewhat desperately sending her signals.

After a few moments of silence, Alus sighed inwardly and held back his urge to complain. "And what would you like?" he bluntly asked. Now that he'd come all the way to participate in this tournament, he may as well *go* all the way.

Relief overtook Cicelnia, and her expression brightened in an instant. "Completely overwhelm them!" That line didn't suit the usual intelligent atmosphere she had to her, and instead reflected her innocence.

Loki, keeping to the side, looked expressionless at first glance, but she'd ever so slightly furrowed her brows. Alus could more or less tell what she was thinking, so he didn't ask about it.

"That should settle that. By the way, how are you on time?" Berwick moved to wrap things up before Alus changed his mind.

"Well, I'd prefer it if you didn't pawn off anything more on me, so I think I'll take my leave. Rusalca's ace up the sleeve is probably not going to show up because of Jean's scheming either, and the second and third years should be fine if left up to Socalent's daughter."

Lettie frowned as Jean's name was mentioned. Alus had heard that the amiable Lettie would lambast Jean from time to time, so he understood that

they had a complicated relationship.

“Hmm, Rusalca is it... however, they won’t be able to be so full of themselves this year,” Berwick mused with a pleased smile. He rarely showed an expression like this. So it appeared that all of the bragging Rusalca’s Governor-General had done must have gotten on his nerves.

“And we will be able to deal a blow to Ms. Lithia as well,” Cicelnia added. A grin appeared on her face, hidden behind her fan.

It was unusual to see those two share a common goal, and work together towards it.

Alus himself only saw this as work, so he had no strong feelings on the matter. That said, he would be going through a lot of effort, so he expected a fair amount of recompense. For example, having them gather data to adopt and spread the technology that had gone into making the AWR he’d given to Alice.

He was also expecting the reward promised to him by Berwick, and he’d even be able to lower the number of credits demanded of him by the Institute. And while he was at it, he also had an interest in the trophy that was made out of mithril.

“Anyways, we just have to beat Rusalca, right? In the matches or the demonstration or both,” Alus asked to confirm, and Cicelnia and Berwick nodded. “I understand. Then I’ll do what I can... oh, and Governor-General?”

Berwick gave him a questioning look, and Alus bluntly asked him, “Did you really come here just to enjoy the matches?” Alus’ stare was so cold that it felt like the temperature dropped by several degrees.

But Berwick’s reaction was calm. “...” Complete silence, neither an affirmation nor a rejection.

Nobody present knew how Alus took it. “Well, no matter. I’ll just pray I don’t have to come back here again,” he said with a sarcastic smile.

“You’re going so soon? Why don’t we enjoy the matches together? You know, we’ll move away from here, just the two of us,” Lettie asked in an inviting tone, while placing her hand over his. And despite Loki’s worried look, Alus didn’t try to brush it off.

In contrast to her joking tone, Loki picked up on how earnest Lettie's eyes were.

Eventually, Alus looked towards the door and gave Lettie a signal by nodding. "Then, I'll be taking my leave."

"Oh, I almost forgot. Alus, have you received invitations from anyone?"

"Not really, no. I only just arrived yesterday, nobody's going to be that mannerless."

"I see," Cicelnia said, satisfied with his answer.

As far as Alus knew, recruitment tended to happen after the matches. It was especially common for recruiting agents to make their move during victory celebrations for the winning institute.

Seeing the conversation was reaching its end, Lettie gently grasped Alus' hand.

"Then, if you'll excuse me..." Alus said, and attempted to leave.

"Alus, let Alice know that I'm cheering for her. And Lady Tesfia from the Fable family as well."

Alus casually waved his hand at Berwick.

"Aww, you could stay a little longer. Oh, I know, I'll see you off!" Lettie abruptly said. She ran up to the departing Alus' side and wrapped her arm around his arm, an innocent smile on her face all the while as she paid no heed to Loki's bewilderment.

Alus and the others stepped out and were welcomed by the hustle and bustle of the stadium once more. The guards at the door saw them off, and after walking some distance, Alus spoke out to Lettie who was quietly accompanying him. Having come this far, Loki also picked up that there were some underlying circumstances.

"So, what is it?"

"Wait a sec. Sorry about this, li'l Loki, but '*‹‹Silent Veil››*.'" Lettie manifested a spell simply by saying its name rather than using her ring AWR, but that wouldn't surprise anyone present.

A transparent magical barrier was formed in an instant. Like the wind spell that Felinella used, it kept sound from entering or escaping its confines.

Lettie gently removed her arm from Alus' arm. "You haven't heard anything, Allie?"

"Heard what?"

"You get it, right? Vanalis is the final resting place for a lot of my underlings. If we can reclaim the region from the Fiends, they can at least rest in peace. But if I'm stuck here for too long, the Fiends will spread again... if that happens, we're back to square one. And I don't even want to imagine how many will pay the price if we do it again. I can't let their deaths be in vain... no matter what."

A serious expression was on her face. Her pride and sense of responsibility as someone who led others was the reason for that.

However—"That's nothing unusual. But I get what you want to say."

"Maybe it isn't, but there are things I can't compromise on."

Perhaps that's why people take a liking to Lettie, Alus suddenly thought. She was hard to get a grasp on, but she had an unyielding strength and chivalrous spirit. And that was probably why Alus couldn't hate her. "So you want to know why?"

Lettie silently affirmed her answer with her eyes. Thinking about it, it was a strange situation. She probably hadn't been told the reason why she'd been taken from the middle of an important mission to be here.

Alus felt he was better off not talking about something he wasn't sure about, but he gave up on that idea when he looked into those earnest eyes of hers. "I don't know the details myself, but it looks like Balmes has run into some problems. You've probably been called over here because of that."

"... Is it a Fiend problem?"

"I'd bet on that. And did you notice that despite Cicelnia being here, the person who should be with her wasn't present?"

"... Rinne Kimmel. That did bother me, now that you mention it."

"That's right. No matter how you slice it, it's unnatural that the ruler's aide,

Alpha's Eye, isn't with her."

"And I doubt she's out on a pleasure trip."

"Considering the worst-case scenario, they'll need your power. Although, considering that Berwick looks calm, it's hard to imagine that the situation is that pressing. It's also possible that they still haven't gathered enough information to form a solid plan. In fact, how's the clean-up in Vanalis going?"

"It's about 70 percent done. We were closing in on the territory the Fiends are using, too. Though our observers are picking up an abnormal number of weaklings. One S-class and two A-class are supposedly running things."

Alus shrugged. If they'd gotten that far, reclaiming Vanalis wasn't far off. Having spent half a year on this, Lettie wasn't willing to let it go.

He didn't really sympathize with her. This kind of thing happened all the time. If a retreat order came, you had to let a Fiend that killed your allies go as well. When acting as a unit, personal feelings only got in the way. But even then—

"They must have decided that this has higher priority. But if you still can't accept that... well, I wouldn't mind working enough to cover for all the ones who died during the Vanalis operation when the plan gets put in motion again."

"—!! Really?! You're the best!"

In the next moment, darkness covered Alus' eyes. "Allie!" Lettie had embraced him and pushed his head against her chest. Alus could feel a softness as his face was buried in her breasts. He tried to get away, but Lettie wasn't letting him until she suddenly seemed to realize something and pushed him away herself.

With a broad, mischievous grin, she said, "So you do want my body. Not that I hate lechers."

Loki, outside the still active barrier, froze as she looked on. Eventually she began moving awkwardly, putting her hands against her own chest as if to compare herself with Lettie. With the way she was closing her eyes, maybe she was trying to escape from reality.

Leaving her aside, Alus grimaced. "What are you playing at...?"

“Oh, come on, it was just a cute little joke. But are you sure about going to Vanalis with me? What about the Institute?”

“That’s not a problem. Once I win here, I have an agreement with the Governor-General to lower the number of credits needed of me.”

“Haha, what a monster student!”

Baited by Lettie’s carefree smile, the edges of Alus’ lips also curled up. “Well, I just hope things work out.”

Then the spell’s effects ran out, and the two could hear the cheering crowds again.

“Allie, do your best at the tournament. I don’t like Rusalca either... especially not that creepy blond bastard!”

It was clear that Lettie was speaking about Jean. They weren’t on the worst of terms, but they didn’t get along. They’d also had a lot that happened between them that further complicated their relationship.

“Of course I will. I’m not going to get any reward or reduced credit requirements if I don’t win.”

“That would be a problem. So you do your best too, li’l Loki!”

“Y-Yes!”

Lettie pulled at Loki’s hands and spun her around like she was a princess at a ball. Then she hugged her from behind like you would a stuffed animal.

Alus thought it looked familiar, and that was because Alice did the same thing all the time. The only difference was that Loki was blushing right now. She was usually like a doll, so this difference was because she looked up to Lettie as someone truly strong. It might also be because she was looking at Alus as she was being hugged.

Considering how the tournament was progressing, Alus decided that it was about time for them to return, and exchanged looks with Lettie. Lettie realized what he wanted and somewhat reluctantly released Loki.

“I-If you will excuse me, Lady Lettie...” Loki ran up to Alus’ side before bowing once to Lettie with her cheeks still red.

“Feel free to show your face whenever. You too, Allie.”

Alus simply raised his hand and continued walking.

“Lady Lettie is a wonderful person. But she appears to be a little too kind for someone who leads.”

“Well, she’s an excellent superior officer in her own right. If you think she’s kind, then I guess she is.” When Lettie stepped out on missions in the Outer World, she was kind, but when she had to kill then she was someone that could suppress her emotions.

Alus was well aware of this, and even felt like he should take after her at times. He didn’t find that side of her to be coldhearted or cruel. She had the resolve to inherit the feelings of those who died and still move forward. Her true strength was to use those prayer-like feelings she had gathered to push her onwards when the time called for it.

He thought back as to whether something like that had ever happened to him... *Nah. I don’t feel anything when I kill. That’s what I strove for. So I can’t become like Lettie.* That was why he had chosen to be alone.

When Alus scanned the depths of his memories, he found a dark haze. That was probably the linchpin that bound caution, resolution, determination, and regret together for him. And for each time something like that was driven into his heart, some part of him was cast away.

Since when had he stopped feeling anything regardless of what happened...? But as he dove through his memories, he did recall something.

There was one thing that I had to cast away no matter what.

It wasn’t anything to get sentimental about. Compared to back then, his current state was completely different... but there was a reason why he’d stopped feeling anything towards death.

Twenty-Sixth Chapter

Bath, Maidens, and Chatting

With the first day of the Friendship Magical Tournament over, the contestants from the Second Magical Institute returned to the hotel for dinner.

However, the atmosphere wasn't all that cheerful. They weren't enjoying their meals so much as they were simply trying to eat their fill for tomorrow. Before dinner began they'd been told the results of the first day of the tournament, and the disappointing results of the second-years and third-years still put a damper on everyone's mood.

The only saving grace was that the gloomy mood didn't hang over the first-years. But with their seniors being so down, they couldn't exactly celebrate on their own.

The first-years had secured nine wins in the first round. Even taking Alus and Loki into account, as well as Tesfia's and Alice's quick growth, it was almost miraculous.

The second-years had won five of their matches. However, the contestant they'd been sure would make it to at least the third round had been eliminated in the first match. That said, they still had enough leeway to make a comeback.

The problem was with the third-year students. It was just one misfortune after another, and they barely managed to scrape together two victories, failing to reach their goal of five.

Overall, the results put the Second Magical Institute in third place, which was a decent start. But from what Alus could see, morale was plummeting and would negatively influence the coming matches. If they were active duty Magicmasters that stepped into the Outer World in this state, they would get wiped out.

"Hey, what are we going to do about that?" Tesfia asked, pointing over to the

deathly quiet table where the third-years were gathered.

In truth, Alus had nothing to say to losers, but he did bring up the thought that came to him. “If it bothers you, why don’t you two try and cheer them up?”

“Hmm, won’t that just upset them instead?” Alice mused.

“I would imagine that two beautiful girls pouring them drinks would cheer them up... well, we only have juice though.”

Alus had only said it as a joke, but Tesfia and Alice stopped eating and stared at him, dumbfounded.

“Wait, you mean us? W-Well, I guess you could call us beautiful.”

“We’re supposed to be modest here, Fia. I’m embarrassed too...”

Both girls blushed. Loki, who had been left out, had an unamused expression, but Alus paid her no heed as he brought a cut piece of meat to his mouth.

He hadn’t particularly lied to them, either. While he wasn’t confident in his own sense of beauty, he was aware that the male students’ gazes were primarily focused on those two.

That said, Alus having no strong personal feelings about it was one of his characteristics. And being able to ruin the mood he’d unintentionally set up himself by saying something unnecessary was just like him too.

“Oh, too bad. Looks like you won’t be necessary.” Alus stuck his fork into another piece of meat as he watched Felinella walk up to the third-years’ table and cheer up each of the contestants. She was fulfilling her responsibilities as their leader.

That’s Feli for you. She knows what’s up. Not that my stance is going to change... even if it did, I’d probably say something that would piss them off more, Alus thought, and decided to leave everything to Felinella as he got back to his dinner.

The truth was that he had more to think about. After meeting and speaking with Lettie, there was something in the corner of his mind that he’d been speculating about.

That’s when a certain first-year student interrupted his train of thought.

“I didn’t get to see your fight, but is it true that it ended in five seconds, Alus?” Ciel carefreely asked him. Seeing as how she’d put down her utensil to ask, she wasn’t going to back down even if he tried to brush her off. Moreover, considering her enthusiasm, she probably had her reasons for choosing this topic.

Alus giving her a detailed explanation would probably go over well with all the first-years sitting at the table. Telling them about the frame of mind they’d need to continue winning through the tournament was important... especially when considering the potential possibility that might be born after this.

When he realized it, Tesfia, Alice, and the others had all stopped eating and were looking at him with interest.

“I heard that it was the tournament’s record time. Beating the previous record by a wide margin,” Ciel said.

“It’s a battle of magic after all, a preemptive strike is pretty basic. And in a fight between two first-years, I figured that it would be better to attack immediately than to try to suss out the opponent. I never expected him to go down on the first hit, though. I probably just got lucky.” His talk about frame of mind was true enough, but the ‘luck’ he mentioned was a barefaced lie.

However, nobody was able to dismiss his win as luck. The first-years, aside from Alus, Loki, Tesfia and Alice, believed that there was no real difference in strength between them and the first-years from the other nations. But the students that didn’t know Alus’ secret were starting to think that he was stronger than they had thought. After all, nobody had ever seen him properly practice. If he was actually strong though, they probably believed it was because of Loki’s guidance, and training with Tesfia and Alice.

Alus stopped there, because he figured that if he was going to hide his strength he should leave it at that.

Sensing this, Loki quickly changed topics. “I see. That happened to me too. I attacked to keep them in check, and it just happened to hit true and they fell over,” she said, taking a sip of the tea she’d ordered.

Ciel smiled wryly at her composure.

“But like Feli said, won’t this mess up the preliminary estimations?” Tesfia spoke up, as if to give voice to the first-year contestants’ worries.

“That’s right,” Alice joined in. “Our chances for winning are pretty much beyond recovery.”

“Don’t be stupid. For the first day, this is pretty minor,” Alus declared, and all the eyes around the table once again gathered on him. He realized his slip-up, but as everyone was looking at him, he continued on anyways. “The first day, it was estimated that only five first-year students would win. And seeing the result of an additional four wins, we can make up for the losses of the third-years to a degree. But as we’ll end up facing each other as we progress, and with there only being four slots for the main tournament, each defeat is still pretty costly. But all that means is that we just need to maintain this number for tomorrow as well. In fact, we probably can’t aim for victory if we don’t, so we’ll probably want three of us to reach the main tournament... the rest is up to Feli, I guess.”

“What was that about me, Mr. Alus?” the girl herself asked, having finished her rounds at the third-year and second-year tables.

Or rather, Alus had sensed her coming and said it on purpose. He spoke in a forced polite tone, “Oh, I was only speaking about how the second-years have a higher hurdle.”

“That’s true. I’d like at least one of the class years to earn a lot of wins!” She looked into Alus’ eyes, full of expectation.

Alus’ response was to close his eyes and keep quiet, but that wasn’t because he had full confidence in himself. He wasn’t thinking of winning the tournament but rather of that certain possibility. If it was correct, something regrettable might happen to Felinella.

However, Felinella must have taken that as an agreement, as she looked at all of the first-years. “Good work today. I’m surprised at how well things went. This is all thanks to your diligent training. I’m proud of all of you!”

She honestly commended the first-years for their efforts, but the way she started getting embarrassed at the end was charming. Her expression was soft, but the way she straightened her back showed her enthusiasm for tomorrow.

While the students were getting fired up, Alus offered a cold opinion from a different perspective. “Feli, wouldn’t the most realistic option be for you to win the second-year division and earn the necessary points?”

“I wonder. It’s not that simple, but I’m of course looking to win too.”

Alus didn’t know this, but Felinella had actually won the first-year division last year. Though her words sounded like modesty to those who did know. But as last year’s victor, the other institutes would of course keep a careful eye on her, and they would have an easier time forming plans against her. Because of that, it was pretty difficult to win multiple years in a row. With that in mind, it was still likely that the first-years would determine the overall outcome.

Once the contestants finished dinner, they went to their rooms. Those who’d lost had already been cheered up by Felinella, and even their steps were relatively light.

Alus wrapped up dinner, having eaten a moderate amount as well. It wasn’t like luxurious food didn’t suit his tastes, but it didn’t feel as satisfying. When he thought of the reason, the words slipped out of his mouth. “I prefer Loki’s cooking and seasonings.”

A smile blossomed on Loki’s face when she heard this. “Then I’ll borrow the kitchen and make your meals from tomorrow on, Al!”

Seeing that her enthusiasm was heading in a strange direction, Alus put a stop to it with a wry smile. If he made one of the most promising contestants do that, he could easily imagine all the other contestants giving him cold glares. No matter how much Alus did his own thing, he wasn’t willing to go that far.

“Still, you never know what will happen. But it is true that a quick strike can be effective,” Tesfia said.

“Tomorrow, we should go all out from the start,” Alice replied.

The two girls’ voices came from behind them. Loki shared a room with them while Alus had one to himself, so they’d eventually go their separate ways, but Loki looked reluctant.

As they approached the staircase, Alus sensed that something was off. There

was an oddly large number of Magicmasters gathered near the stairs. And they weren't students, but were related to the military.

He immediately guessed the reason. He'd heard that VIPs from Alpha would be staying on the top floor. In fact, he'd met Cicelnia, Berwick, and Lettie earlier in the day, so it wouldn't be strange for them to have stayed over. This kind of guard detail was to be expected for the ruler and Governor-General, but considering that Alus was staying here, it was definitely the safest place to be.

If she's there, I want to at least avoid Cicelnia.

With the magical martial arts demonstration and Rinne's absence, the situation was quite suspicious. And who knew what other troubles she might drop on him?

In the meantime, the group reached the stairs.

"See you tomorrow," Alus said.

Loki gave him an overly considerate suggestion. "Al, should I prepare tea before you rest? I brought a spare teapot just in case."

"That's appreciated, but you don't have to go that far during the tournament. And your room's not this way, so go back." Alus stopped and turned around as Loki was following behind him like it was natural. He called out to her while looking over at Tesfia and Alice who were waiting for her.

"But..."

"I'm planning on getting to bed right away. And this is the only time when you can take it easy."

"..." Loki peered into Alus' face. Was he getting ready just for tomorrow's match? She felt like he had been acting strangely since meeting Lettie. He wasn't absentminded, but it looked like he was thinking of something other than the tournament... While Loki didn't know what he talked to Lettie about, she was sensitive to changes in him.

Seeing that Loki was still staring at him, Alus changed the topic. "By the way, are those two properly training in their room?"

"Yes, not for long though."

“I guess that can’t be helped. Tell them to at least keep at it for a moderate amount of time.”

Loki nodded, and Alus added, “That includes you, too.” Considering her serious personality, it was hard to imagine Loki slacking on her training. If anything, she might push herself too much. Her twitching brow was likely a sign that he’d been right.

“Go on, get going.” Alus grabbed hold of Loki’s slender shoulders and spun her around, pointing her in the direction of the other two.

“You’ve spent a lot of time talking. If you don’t hurry, it’s going to close!” Tesfia said.

“Yes, if you don’t hurry, we’ll have to enjoy it by ourselves,” Alice added with a smile.

“Hm? I thought you were going back to your room.”

When Alus said that, Loki decided to ask him. “A-Al, there’s a large public bath on the first floor. Why don’t you come too?”

“Huh? Me?” Alus preferred showers, and while he didn’t hate baths, he wasn’t one to stay in for long. That was in part because he’d been in the military a long time. Because of his nonstop work, he never picked up a habit of soaking in a bath.

“I-Is that... a no?” The hope in Loki’s eyes began to fade, as did the redness in her cheeks. Alice had been the one to bring up going to the baths, and while Loki was fine with going by herself, she wasn’t too excited about going with others.

Of course, that wasn’t because she lacked confidence in her own body... absolutely not... but she at least wanted to invite Alus. Having that small hope shattered was enough to leave her disheartened.

Alus almost felt like he was looking at a poor critter. And once that happened, it was frankly impossible to dodge it anymore. “Alright. I’ll be there after I get ready,” he said, having been resigned to his fate.

“Then let’s meet at the stairs!” Loki immediately beamed.

Perhaps it was because she was doing something out of the ordinary like taking part in the Friendship Magical Tournament in another nation, but Loki's expressions seemed ever-changing. Well, Alus figured that it could at least be a change of pace.

Eventually, the three girls returned to the stairs with a change of clothes and other items five minutes after Alus got there. Incidentally, he had finished his preparations in seconds.

Moreover, Tesfia's cheeks were somewhat red. While she understood that it was inevitable due to the circumstances, she couldn't help but object to being with a guy.

The public baths were apparently in the back of the first floor. Alus hadn't noticed when he arrived at the hotel, but upon a closer look, he could see that there were directions to it on the walls. There was even a small recreational center near the baths. And not only was there a souvenir shop, but they also had catalogs detailing AWRs that were found across all the nations.

Alus was more interested in that, which wasn't unusual considering his personality. As they walked past, his attention turned towards the catalogs.

Alice put on a strained smile as she noticed. "You really are passionate about research, huh, Al? Not only can you make amazing AWRs, but you're even interested in this kind of thing."

"Of course. Each nation's AWRs have their own quirks and characteristics, and there's even a slight difference in how they're made. Besides..." Alus' explanation was about to heat up even further until the entrance to the baths put a stop to it. "Well, I'll take a look after the bath."

"So you're going after all?!" Tesfia retorted, but Alus' attention was already focused on the cloth banners covering the entrance.

Just what culture were those from? The words "Men" and "Women" were written in strange characters on top of the deep green banners that were hanging down. To the people from Alpha it was a strange sight. Due to the shrinking realm of humanity as the Fiends advanced, all kinds of cultures had mixed together.

“How exotic,” Tesfia murmured, and Alice nodded in agreement.

“Apparently it’s called a noren.” Alus knew what it was, but this was his first time seeing one. Which was to be expected, as he’d only used a personal shower room or simple bathing facilities in the military.

For the time being, Alus and the girls split up and passed under their respective norens.

When he was ready for the baths, and faced the sight before him, the words instinctively escaped his lips... “This is pretty nice.”

The sight of water flowing out of the mouth of a strange dragon gave off a unique atmosphere. There was an impressive mural on the wall, and inside this bath wasn’t just a normal hot tub but also a medicinal hot spring, a citrus bath, an ice bath, and even a sauna.

Alus wrapped a towel around his waist and started by washing his body. His hands started to move faster as he figured that he might as well test out all the baths, with a childlike curiosity.

As he sat down in the warm bath, heat wrapped around his body. He exhaled with an “Ahh” as if he was discarding everything that was bad in his body. His head was in a daze as a mysterious sensation ran through him. And he struggled to come up with the words to describe his experience. It was like all of the impurities in him were melting away.

Once his body was warmed up, he got out of the hot tub and moved towards the ice bath, enjoying a duet of warmth and coldness.

The next thing before Alus’ eyes was a wooden door that led outside. “So they even have an open air bath...”

An explanation of the open air bath was written on a nearby sign, and seeing that it was named a magical bath, once Alus opened the door he no longer had a shred of doubt left. As he brushed up his wet hair, he draped his towel over his shoulder and almost felt like humming a tune.

Shortly thereafter, the open air bath came into view. Looking up, Alus saw the stars on full display. A wooden fence surrounded the bath that worked in harmony with the trees that had been planted there. It gave off a sense of

freedom despite its somewhat confined setting.

Finally, Alus found the magical bath he was after. The water had an almost poisonous green color to it, but it didn't smell strange, so he tentatively dipped a foot into it.

The next moment, a champagne gold color spread out like a ripple. "...! Ohhh." He felt a slight tingling sensation, as well as his leg being pushed back by something like a magnetic field.

His body slowly sank into the water, and the same feeling spread throughout his entire body. It felt ticklish, but also like something he could get used to, and at the same time he felt his muscles relax.

"It seems there's mana in the water that makes up this bath. I guess that's why the color changed in reaction to my mana."

Surprisingly, when he scooped up the water, it didn't return to its original green color, and he could hear the water bubbling. He didn't know how it worked, but the comfort he felt easily overpowered his suspicions.

At that moment, he could hear two familiar voices from the other side of the fence.

"Whoa?! The name alone is shady!" Tesfia's voice.

"A magical bath, huh. I wonder if it's safe..." Alice's voice.

Alus was exasperated at how noisy they were even when bathing, but even that didn't get in the way of the ease he was feeling right now. In the face of this refreshing experience, the memories of his own suspicion of the waters were long gone.

Meanwhile, at the women's bath...

The three girls, mainly Tesfia and Alice, timidly came out to try the magical bath. They'd been excited about it even before getting into the hot tub.

That excitement of theirs was because they didn't think there was anyone else around, but beyond the steam they spotted the silhouette of someone bathing under the moonlight, and the girls then remembered their manners.

The person was soaking in the water, arms resting on the edge of the bath. As

this was the women's bath, the person was of course a woman, but her behavior was closer to that of a man. Though the way she'd bundled up her long braided hair and rested it on her head was very feminine.

Eventually, she noticed Alice and the others, and turned around with a "Hm?"

"S-Sorry for being so noisy." Tesfia took the initiative to apologize, as a gust of wind blew away the steam.

She and Alice instinctively caught their breath at the sight of her beauty.

Loki alone remained silent, but her eyes were opened wide in surprise, though her reason was different from the other two. After all, this was the second time she'd laid eyes on that beauty.

Seeing that the girls had become quiet, the woman raised her hand and spoke to them in a friendly tone. "I don't mind. It's not like it's reserved or anything. But you're all students, huh? You're pretty good if you're coming to the baths, and especially the magical bath at this hour." She then put her towel on her head and moved to make space for the three girls. "This bath works wonders, so go on, get in."

At the woman's request, the three girls got in.

Eventually, Loki finally spoke up. "Lady Lettie, I wasn't aware that you would be staying here... excuse me."

Tesfia's and Alice's jaws dropped when they heard Lettie's name.

"W-Wait? You mean... THAT Lettie Kultunca?!"

"You know each other, Loki dear?!"

"Now now, this is the baths, let's take it easy here," Lettie said with a smile to ease the tension, but the two weren't bold enough to do that right off the bat.

All they knew was that some VIPs from Alpha would be staying at the hotel. But they never expected that one of them would be Alpha's other Single Digit Magicmaster.

As a noble, Tesfia in particular couldn't afford to be rude, so she asked Loki to introduce them.

With no other choice, Loki cleared her throat. “By the way, Lady Lettie, these two are my and Sir Alus’ classmates.”

“Nice to meet you, Lady Kultunca! My name is Tesfia Fable!” Tesfia introduced herself in a quivering voice.

“I know about you. You’re Frose’s daughter, right?”

Tesfia, overcome with emotion, frantically nodded at Lettie’s carefree answer.

Next was Alice. “I-I’m Alice Tilake...!”

“Nice to meet you two. I’m Lettie Kultunca, feel free to just call me Lettie.”

“I wouldn’t dare!” Tesfia shot up from the bath, and the towel around her chest came loose, causing her to blush and dive right back into the water.

Alice had been impressed by how Tesfia was acting, before she smiled wryly as her lack of noble manners was exposed.

“Well, you really don’t have to worry about that right now. And it’s not like it’s your fault if you didn’t immediately recognize me. Names aside, it’s not like we step out in public very often.”

There weren’t many opportunities to see high-ranking Magicmasters that spent a lot of time in the Outer World like Lettie, outside of official functions. In that sense, Rusalca’s Jean, known throughout the nations for his good looks, was an exception.

Incidentally, Alus’ existence was hidden from the public, and not many in the military would know him by name. Though it wasn’t like information was being controlled that strictly. The reason why the top brass didn’t spread the word about him was to stop people from prying into his background. Now that the leaders of the other nations had started to become aware of his existence, there were plenty of things they wanted to keep hidden, aside from his current status as a student.

“I saw your matches. You’re pretty good.”

“T-Thank you!” “Thank you very much.” The two girls replied to her in high-pitched tones, but Lettie didn’t seem to particularly mind, as she let out a soft breath and turned around with her eyes closed.

“That said, I’m sure you’re tired after all that fighting. So why don’t you really soak it in? This stuff’s pretty good, you know. Iblis is pretty impressive to be able to develop this kind of magical bath.”

“Lady Lettie, how long are you planning to stay?” Loki asked.

“Until the tournament is over at least. I’ve got to watch over that person too, after all.”

“... I see.”

Cicelnia il Arlzeit. Even Loki had been taken aback by her beauty at their first meeting and struggled for words. It was enough to make any woman shrink back.

Alus had acted composed, but those who saw Cicelnia were entranced by her beauty. Her hair—the shade of night—and the atmosphere she gave off were truly mystical. Despite that, her behavior wasn’t that of unapproachable night, but a refined elegance. Those who came in contact with her were more likely to associate her with the sensation of soft black velvet over hard ebony.

That differentiated her from Alus. She was like the sheath of Alpha’s finest sword. And if she was the sheath—Loki knew who the finest sword would be.

He really is too good for her... Changing gears from her gloomy mood, Loki scooped up some water and splashed her face with it. The tingling sensation felt a little painful on her skin, but that was rather for the best right now.

Still... Knowing that it would be pointless, Loki looked over at the others in the bath.

From one side to the other it was Loki, Lettie, then some open space, then Tesfia, and finally Alice. They all seemed very comfortable soaking in the water... and at the same time certain somethings were floating.

In order, it went like this: flat, float, flat, float.

Though there was nothing she could do about it, reality was harsh and merciless. If she had something that floated, she wouldn’t feel so inferior.

Sensing Loki’s stare, Lettie asked her a question. “By the way, is Allie here too?”

“Yes, he is. But I don’t think he’ll be in the open air bath... Actually, he is.” Loki activated her detection magic by reflex to confirm.

“That’s pretty convenient. But isn’t that like peeking?”

“Ah!”

The realization made Loki dive into the water, leaving only half of her face above the surface, and she looked over at Lettie. “B-But I’m only detecting him by mana... is that not okay?”

“I think it’s fine. If not, then Ms. Rinne would be peeking nonstop. It has a weakness too, anyways.” Lettie laughed like a dirty old man, and shouted over to the men’s side like a child that had just thought up a prank. “Allie, are you over theeere?”

“...” Alus remained silent.

“Talk about perverse,” Lettie mumbled, and stood up.

She then walked over towards the fence separating the men’s and women’s baths, her towel hanging over her shoulder, completely brushing off the stares from the other girls. “By the way, what’s your type, Allie?”

“That came out of nowhere.” A blunt reply came from the other side of the fence.

Silence fell over the women’s side, as if they were all straining their ears.

“I recall someone asking me that before,” Alus said.

Lettie interjected with a carefree, “Oh?”

The other girls gulped as one. They put on composed expressions, as if to say that they weren’t particularly interested, they only wanted to hear what a Single’s ideal woman was like.

But the reply was simple. “Anyone’s fine as long as they’re useful.”

“What’s up with that? It’s like there’s no love!”

“... You might be right,” Alus said in a self-deprecating voice, and the conversation stopped.

Lettie simply shook her head. Only those who really knew the Outer World

could pick up on the true meaning of those words.

Loki let out a sigh of relief, sitting back down in the water and gazing down at a certain part of her body. At the very least, size had nothing to do with Alus' preferences. She even felt a weight drop off her shoulders.

Keeping Loki in the edge of their visions, Tesfia and Alice wore uncertain expressions.

Lettie, who could always understand what Alus was feeling the best, put on a wry smile and replied, "You're the same as always. But in that sense, I'm pretty useful too, you know."

The shock from Lettie's answer made Loki swallow some of the water, which she coughed up. While it had been said in a joking tone, it was still very effective against her.

"..." Alus was reduced to silence again.

"Hey. You listening, Allie? By the way, I'm free right now, so... hah!"

In one moment, Lettie lowered her hips, and in the next she jumped up the fence that was much taller than an adult, grabbed ahold of the edge of the thick board, and climbed up.

With her upper half sticking out, she peeked into the men's bath.

"—!!" "—!!" "—!!" The three girls' jaws dropped at the extremely bold move she'd just made.

"Aww, looks like he got away." Lettie scanned the men's side, and then dropped back down the fence without a sound, clicking her tongue as she turned around.

"Lady Lettie, I don't believe it's very proper for a Single to peep..." Loki timidly chided.

"That's true," Lettie said with an innocent smile—but someone at her level should be able to grasp the presence of those around her without relying on sight.

The very earnest Loki had a hard time telling if she was joking or being serious.

“But still, Allie has no desire. Not that I can’t understand that.”

“Huh? What do you mean...?” Alice asked, representing the group. They all followed Lettie with their eyes as she got back in the water.

“Hmm...? Well, I’m sure you’ll get it one day, but I recommend that you think about it yourselves first.” Lettie glanced over towards Loki. When their eyes met, Loki seemed to realize something, as she blushed and cast her eyes down.

She felt like Lettie might have purposefully made a move on Alus for her sake. But despite the realization, she was too embarrassed to say thanks.

A tempest of emotions was raging within Loki. Shaken by unrest, and blushing, she couldn’t help but pray that she wouldn’t have to experience any more anxiety.

Perhaps having realized how Loki felt, Tesfia suddenly brought up a different topic. “By the way, what was it like for you when you were a student, Lady Lettie?”

“You mean the tournament?”

The redhead nodded in response.

Lettie had a nostalgic expression, as she began to answer Tesfia’s question. “Hmm, when I was at the Institute, I only won once in three years. There were several times I wished that blond bastard, Rusalca’s Jean, you know, just didn’t exist.”

“You mean... Sir Jean?” Loki recalled the refreshing smile of the handsome Magicmaster who had called out to Alus at the stadium, and thinking about it, he looked to be pretty close in age to Lettie.

As she ran through her memories, Lettie must have clearly remembered the past, as she leaned against the bath’s stone edge with a sigh. “Back then, he was the only one who was extraordinary.”

A current Single was describing Jean as extraordinary. Tesfia and Alice had of course heard about Rusalca’s ranked No. 3. Despite being a high-ranking Magicmaster, he was famous for being one of the few whose face was well-known. Out of all the Singles, he appeared the most in the media, serving as an

advertisement for Rusalca as his achievements were widely publicized.

“But I did beat him in my third year. That was the year I won,” Lettie said, flashing the vee sign with a proud smile. “Well, winning a single time is nothing to brag about, but I had no chance when it came to battle sense, so I took the only ability I would have a chance of winning with and trained it to the best of my ability. Of course, its identity is a secret.”

Nobody present was insolent enough to pry into that matter any further. Besides, if not for Lettie’s friendly personality, it would be unthinkable to get this close to a Single Digit Magicmaster. Normally their presence was so overwhelming that Alus would have to personally step in if something were to happen. Then again, it was because of Alus’ existence that they were even speaking to begin with.

“Anyways, tournament results and abilities are different beasts. I won’t claim that I got lucky, but strategy can alter the outcome against a superior opponent.”

The three girls took their senior’s advice to heart.

“Well, you just have to not lose against Rusalca,” Lettie added in the end, her own feelings definitely being mixed in. It even sounded like she held a grudge.

“Sir Jean is here watching the tournament too, though.”

“Huh, seriously?!” The atmosphere immediately changed at Loki’s remark. “If we don’t cross paths, that’s fine, but in case we do... it will be the perfect chance to exact my revenge.”

Whether Lettie was serious or joking remained unclear. There probably wouldn’t be a duel between two Singles, but it wasn’t hard to imagine Lettie picking a fight.

“Uhm, I have a question...” Alice timidly raised her hand. “Will Alpha be sending you as their participant in the magical martial arts demonstration?”

Hearing this, Tesfia looked on in excitement. There were very few examples of Single Digit Magicmasters participating in the demonstration. But if Lettie were to participate, the Second Magical Institute’s sinking morale would shoot up, and she would love to witness that spectacle herself.

“I see you’re being unexpectedly serious... Sorry, but I have a different mission right now, so I’m not going to be in that demonstration.”

Tesfia and Alice looked a little discouraged at her response, so Lettie continued, “But... I’m actually looking forward to it. After all, it’s definitely going to be way more interesting than if I did it.”

The two girls looked a little uncertain as to what she meant by that.

Loki knew the truth, and her body trembled for a moment, but she feigned composure to the best of her ability.

“How long are they going to take?” Alus said, as he perused the inside of the shop that displayed AWRs next to the public baths. He’d stepped in five minutes ago, and had already lost interest. None of the AWRs here would be useful as references for him. They’d done some work on the magic formulas, but all of them were inferior to what the craftsmen in Alpha did. If anything, he felt like teaching them himself, wondering how they’d arrived at these kinds of magic formulas.

Feeling like he was wasting his time, Alus considered going back first when he finally heard the girls’ friendly chatting outside. With their long bath over, he left the shop to meet up with them. He felt like giving them a piece or two of his mind, but decided to keep quiet when he saw the person in front.

“Looks like we’re late!” Lettie said.

“How long were you planning on soaking in there?!”

“More importantly... you’re not a kid, Allie, your collar’s all wet,” Lettie said in an exasperated tone like a mother dealing with a troublesome child. She walked over to Alus. “You really are a kid.”

“Al, did you dry yourself properly?” Tesfia asked. Alus’ hair was still wet, and his collar was damp. That had nothing to do with his military life, but rather it was because he was careless.

“It’ll dry on its own. But don’t tell me you actually dried your hair while you were keeping me waiting.”

“That’s only natural for a woman!” Tesfia declared.

Hearing that, Alus struggled to come up with a response. He knew that women enjoyed long baths, though mostly from hearsay and minimal experience, so he couldn’t understand the logic, nor did he have anything to rebut with. So he had no choice but to swallow his pent-up frustration. His words got caught in his throat, and he made a mental note that that was just how women were.

The next moment, as if to wipe his mental note away, his vision turned white as a soft towel covered his head. He smelled the faint scent of shampoo. He could also feel that it was a little damp.

“Hey! Don’t use your own towel to dry my head, Lettie.”

“What’s the big deal? Besides, it’s gonna take forever if you let your hair dry on its own when it’s this wet,” Lettie casually said, and firmly grabbed hold of his head. She pushed the towel down and then somewhat violently wiped his hair.

Loki enviously looked on, and Tesfia and Alice blushed a little. They must have imagined using their own towels to wipe down his hair.

“Besides, if you leave it be, it’ll drip down on the floor.”

With that, Alus had no choice but to resign himself to his fate. He sighed at Lettie putting too much strength into her wiping and ceased his resistance.

Once Lettie had finished drying his hair, she looked it over in satisfaction.

Next, Loki used a comb to fix his messy hair. In the end, his hair wasn’t completely dried, but most of the moisture had been wiped away. “It’s done, Sir Alus,” Loki reported, and while it didn’t sit right with Alus, he still thanked her.

“Anyways, why didn’t you use your authority to reserve the bath?” Alus asked, with an unamused expression.

“You just don’t get it. The bath is meant for everyone,” Lettie responded.

Alus had a hard time understanding other people’s feelings, so he struggled to follow what she was saying. His sense for those kinds of things was hopeless, to the point of him almost asking what was so good about that, but he did manage

to stop himself.

“Allie, you don’t pay attention to your surroundings at all, huh?”

Tesfia and Alice recalled what had happened when they’d first visited his laboratory, and nodded in agreement.

“You’ll want a woman that can take care of you, Allie.”

“That’s nothing you need to stick your nose—”

“That’s my job,” Loki cut Alus off, as if to say that she wouldn’t compromise on this.

“Really?” Lettie said, feigning surprise. Then she stared at Loki with a smile.

Waiting hand and foot on your partner was beyond the scope of duty. Lettie herself rarely met with her partner outside of missions. That wasn’t because they were on bad terms or anything; that was just how the job was.

Moreover, as someone in charge of a squad, her partner didn’t so much directly support her as they worked as the squad’s spotter.

Lettie triumphantly chuckled to herself. “I see. How cunning.”

“Well, if I needed someone to take care of my personal needs, I could just hire a maid. Though I guess I wouldn’t be able to use the laboratory at the Institute anymore if I did.”

“Maybe you should’ve just accepted the rank of nobility during that ceremony, then?”

“Not a chance. I’m not suited to be nobility, and if I’d fallen for that kind of bait, my retirement would’ve been flat-out rejected.”

Lettie smiled wryly at Alus’ blunt statement. She knew that the rank of nobility brought with it its own troubles. So she understood that it would be pointless to push that topic any further. Accepting the rank of nobility meant being chained down by the nation.

Silence filled the air for a while. The party was quietly walking with Alus and Lettie in front, followed by Loki, Tesfia, and Alice.

Tesfia didn’t have it in her to step in between two Singles, so all she could do

was stare at Lettie's beautiful long hair swaying back and forth.

Because of the time, they didn't see any other students on the way. They were lucky in a sense, as students would have flocked around Lettie if they saw her.

"Well, I'm this way." Lettie waved in front of the stairs leading to the second floor, casually saying goodbye.

She moved around to a back door on the first floor. Over there were elevator-like contraptions with metal floors rising up and down. This was a direct line to the upper levels of the hotel reserved for VIPs. A transparent wall blocked the path, keeping anyone unauthorized out. They were called floating machines, and they were powered by mana generators.

Tesfia and Alice said that they would see her off, and Alus and Loki ended up tagging along.

Eventually she got one of the floating machines, pushing the only button, causing the transparent wall to close behind her. Lettie waved at them, to which Tesfia and Alice responded with a bow.

Alus figured that most people would do the same. Lettie was popular in the military because she never looked down on others despite her rank. That was typically how she acted around most.

Though he wasn't particularly envious, he couldn't bring himself to hate her. That's why he lightly waved his hand as she rose up towards the upper levels.

We'll probably meet again, Alus thought to himself.

Twenty-Seventh Chapter

The Puppet's Orchesis

At the same time as Alus and the others were taking their baths...

To the west of Iblis' stadium was one of the seven hotel buildings surrounding the stadium. This one belonged to the nation of Rusalca.

The contestants of the First Magical Institute were gathered in one of the rooms, holding a discussion. It was already night, but the lively talk on how they would win the tournament was still going on.

"It's not Alpha we need to worry about. In terms of point totals, Iblis is on our heels, and we need to take some measures right away," said a male student, offering his opinion.

But a female student rebutted him. "You're overestimating them. Like we figured out during our investigation, this is about as far as Iblis' Fourth Magical Institute's advance is going to go. They should be dropping in numbers from the second round onward. Instead, it's Alpha's Second Magical Institute that is making certain steps towards victory."

There were also those who offered completely different opinions, with supporters of the various opinions flipping back and forth, and the discussion showed no signs of reaching a conclusion.

And of course it wouldn't. All 30 contestants from Rusalca had gathered to talk about what they could do to bring victory to their homeland.

While they were currently the top scorers, they couldn't relax with the slight lead they had. If they were careless they might lose their lead by tomorrow.

"Still, to think nine of Alpha's first-years would win their first round... that was completely unexpected!" The contestants' leader, second-year student Karia Ferrard, bit his nails in frustration and furrowed his brow. "At this rate, their first-years will secure most of the tournament slots. Our strategy of leaving

affinity match-ups for later backfired on us.”

They could see possible paths to victory, but unfortunately things weren’t going entirely to plan. The third-years would at the very least have two contestants with plenty of chances to win, but the second-year division would face last year’s winner, Felinella Socalent.

Karia himself had suffered a bitter defeat at her hands last year, so he’d taken measures this year, but she would most likely make it into the main tournament. After all, she would already anticipate that they would take her wind attribute magic into account, and she hadn’t faced the First Magical Institute in the first round.

And there were two more problematic students from the Second Magical Institute’s first-year division. “Two of them ended their matches in a flash,” Karia continued. “The details are unknown because there wasn’t enough time to gather information, but Alus Reigin, who beat the record time, didn’t even use his AWR. We honestly have nothing on him...”

“Should we at least move to crush him early?” the male student asked.

“We should probably avoid doing that.” Karia rejected that idea, and the male student looked at him, wondering if he’d lost his nerve. “I know I called it five seconds, but the truth is that his opponent collapsed just two seconds after the signal. It took more time for the verdict to be rendered.”

“—!!” The male student was astonished.

“We just have nothing to go on. Throwing our strongest card at him will be too risky,” Karia concluded.

“Then what do we do?”

All of the contestants turned to Karia at the male student’s question. As Rusalca’s First Magical Institute was looking to secure another victory, they should be worrying about Iblis’ Fourth Magical Institute. But just before they’d held their first meeting they received information to keep their guard up around Alpha’s Second Magical Institute.

They immediately got to work investigating potential threats, and they came up with the daughter of an upper noble, but that was it. Having also gathered

information on Iblis and the other nations, they'd concluded that Alpha wasn't all that threatening and hadn't paid much attention to them.

Karia was said to be without peer in the First Magical Institute, and after considering everything with his eyes shut for a few moments, he slowly opened his eyes. "We should keep our guard up against Alpha's Second Magical Institute for the time being... we'll focus on their third-years. Their scores are catastrophic. If they had secured as many wins as our institute in the first round, it might already be over."

They could still manage at this point in time. They still had cards to play. After all, they still had *him*. He was still a first-year student, but everyone acknowledged his talent and skills, treating him as the nation's hope.

As long as he can make it to the main tournament... no, I guess that's a pointless worry, Karia thought to himself, as he looked over at a certain male student.

The other contestants followed his eyes to stare at this student as well.

Karia then slowly asked him, "Fillic... How do you think Alpha's Second Magical Institute will move?"

This first-year student, Fillic, was leaning against the wall with his arms crossed and eyes closed, seemingly deep in thought.

Yet... "... Fillic? Fillic Argan!"

"Huh?!"

Karia finally received a bewildered response from him. At the same time, Fillic looked at Karia as if to ask, 'what were we talking about again?'

Despite everyone discussing in lively tones, it seemed that he hadn't listened to a thing they'd said. It was a very arrogant attitude to take, but nobody here would reproach him for it. That was because not only was he a Triple Digit as a first-year student, but he was also receiving direct guidance from Rusalca's famed Single.

But the biggest reason of all was his placid expression. That guileless look left people dumbfounded, taking away any anger they might have felt.

While he looked innocent, the atmosphere around him was just the opposite in battle. He turned aggressive and impulsive, and his mental brakes would disappear in a moment's notice, sending him on a rampage. The transformation would send chills up observers' spines.

However, normally, he had the demeanor of an ordinary student, and even now he sported a carefree smile beneath his characteristic reddish-brown hair.

Karia sighed and repeated his question. "I said, how do you think Alpha will move?"

"Alpha, is it? It's pretty simple, they're going to work to crush us. It appears they have an ace up their sleeve... and they're a first-year like me," Fillic said, and it just so happened that the person that set the record time was a first-year student. If Fillic was right, there was someone very powerful in Alpha's first-year division.

As far as Karia was concerned, if Fillic was making an assertion like that he must have a basis for it, but he didn't ask about it. Fillic had his own thoughts, and Karia respected that. Put another way, Karia trusted in Fillic's strength.

So the next question he asked Fillic was exceedingly simple. "Can you win?"

A fearless smile appeared on Fillic's face at the question, but the answer he gave was vague. "I wonder... but I would love to fight him."

Everyone was a little surprised by that answer. His rank was in the 400s as a first-year student, and senior students were one thing, but it was hard to imagine that Fillic would fall behind someone his own age. They all estimated that his skills were actually higher than his rank, and were unable to even imagine how much stronger he'd gotten since his rank had been judged the last time.

While the room erupted in lively talk, Fillic leaned back against the wall and boldly asked, "What about you, Karia, will you be able to win against that Felinella Socalent?"

"A foolish question. I've spent the last year training just for that. I've also taken measures for that sake."

"I hope you can make up for last year's loss," Fillic said with a smile, though

without hostility. He'd seen through Karia's bold front that he was putting up for the other contestants.

In reality, Karia didn't believe he would defeat Felinella without any problems.

"What are you going to do? Will you remove me from the seed slot and put me in tomorrow's matches? If we don't hurry up and crush Alpha's Second, we might not be able to stop them. If something were to happen to you, it might all be over."

"..." Fillic had stirred up Karia's anxiety. But as this team's leader, he had no choice but to be careful.

While Karia pondered the matter, Fillic rushed him on. "So? What will you do?"

If things went as Fillic expected, Alpha's Second Magical Institute would secure most of the slots for the main tournament. Because of that, Fillic needed to advance into the main tournament. If the opponent secured four slots, then they would have next to no chance of winning.

If they could at least secure one slot... the Second Magical Institute's third-years had had devastating results, so their second-years would need to earn points to make up for it. So if Karia could defeat their ace, Felinella, they still had a chance.

Having made up his mind, Karia spoke up, making his choice as the Institute's representative.

After Karia gave his decision, the long strategy meeting finally came to an end, and Fillic was walking back to his hotel room alone. He was frustrated and the arrogant look on his face had disappeared. Instead, he seemed to be brooding over something.

He was repeating the same thing over and over in his mind. *Alus Reigin... there's no way he could be the strongest. There's no way any Magicmaster could be stronger than Sir Jean. Especially not someone my age! What a terrible joke!*

Fillic had heard that name from Jean Rumbulls, the man he practically worshiped and had one-sidedly declared to be his mentor for life. It was

information Jean had gathered in the course of his bodyguard mission, and realizing that it was important, Fillic had taken it to heart.

After giving Fillic that name, Jean advised him to stay in the seeded slot so that he wouldn't be taken down.

Fillic probably should have told all of this to Karia, but his pride wouldn't allow it, so he came up with another reason so he could be put in the seeded slot.

But now—Fillic had had a change of heart. Like Jean had alluded to, Alus Reigin might indeed have abilities equivalent to a Single. But him being the ranked No. 1 was clearly questionable, to Fillic anyway, and he wondered if he was a fake.

He'd heard rumors that there were nations that tampered with Magicmaster rankings to maintain national pride. Fillic was convinced that Alpha was a nation that used these underhanded methods.

I don't know what kind of cheap trick Alpha used... but I'll expose their true colors.

Looking at the numbers alone, Fillic's ranking was in the 400s, but he took pride in his own growth. While he stood no chance of winning, he had become at least able to put up a fight against his mentor.

That's why, even if he went up against a Single, he didn't think he'd be helpless against someone who'd cheated to get his position.

And if he could expose the supposed ranked No. 1 struggling against a Triple Digit Magicmaster on the big stage... the regular folk who didn't know Alus were one thing, but his influence would plummet with the rulers and Governors-General who were surely suspecting something.

And Fillic's mentor Jean would rejoice at his growth. It was even possible that with the cheater chased out of his position, Jean would climb up the ranks.

That's why he couldn't stand waiting in the seed slot. Yet despite his attempts at provoking him, Karia had chosen to keep him in reserve.

As such it would be a while longer until he fought Alus. "Well, no matter, as long as we can fight... I'll expose him for what he truly is. I can't wait to see how

he'll react when the abilities of the true ranked No. 1 Magicmaster are put on display across the world. Sir Jean will be happy once his ranking is revised..."

Fillic's lips curled up into a twisted smile. If someone had seen the madness in his eyes, they would have frozen up on the spot.

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"Why would you struggle that much, with that much of a difference in strength?"

"I couldn't help it. Whenever I attacked, it was blocked by a wall!"

Alus and Tesfia were arguing in a corner of the venue on the second day of the tournament. Right now they were in the observation area reserved for contestants.

"It's your fault for holding back on your trump card. And in the end, you wound up expending heaps of mana. It would have been more efficient to settle it with the first attack."

Alus hit her where it hurt, and Tesfia fell silent with a sullen look.

She'd beaten her second round opponent without trouble, but unexpectedly struggled against the third, a female student who specialized in defense and used earth magic like Ciel. The problem was that she devoted herself to defense, making the match an endurance test. Walls of earth sprouted up one after another, blocking all of Tesfia's attacks.

Tesfia had panicked at being faced with a strategy she'd never seen before, and ended up wasting a lot of mana firing spells at random. She'd also stepped right into the quagmire trap her opponent set up. Having been cornered, Tesfia froze her footing to forcibly harden the ground, finally relying on the brute force method of casting Icicle Sword at full force to create two swords that tore through the earth wall, thus ending the match.

She had won, but she couldn't really rejoice as she wound up showing off her incompetence.

Incidentally, Alice, Loki, and Alus had all secured three wins. The first-year division had just ended, and the second-years were starting to get ready.

Normally, Alus and the others would be sent out to gather information, but as there were more losers on the second day, they had students to spare, so they had received permission to observe a single block together.

Right now, Felinella was walking up to the stage.

Glancing to his side, Alus could see Tesfia intensely staring at Felinella as she entered the ring. The excitement in her eyes was obvious as she snuck peeks at the screen that was counting down the start time. Felinella's opponent was a student from Iblis' Fourth Magical Institute.

"You could see Felinella's matches whenever you wanted during training. What's the difference now...? I don't really think there's a need to cheer her on."

"She's cool when she's training with you, but she's even more overwhelming when she's fighting a real match," Tesfia replied.

"I've only heard about it from Fia, but she's supposed to be amazing," Alice said. "What was the nickname she got when she won, again?"

"The Puppet's Orchesis! Feli herself hates the name, so no one in the Institute calls her that... but everyone who's seen her fight probably thinks it suits her perfectly," Tesfia said.

"So you watched the tournament last year?" Alus said.

Tesfia nodded, without removing her gaze from Felinella. Alus was a little exasperated, but it wasn't unusual for those who wanted to become Magicmasters to act starstruck at the Friendship Magical Tournament.

Loki, sitting on the other side of Alus, asked a question. "What does 'orchesis' mean?"

"She makes the opponent dance. Well, you'll understand when you see it for yourself," Tesfia answered her.

Loki wasn't the only one who was confused. Even Alus ran through his memories, wondering if that kind of a spell even existed.

Some spotters were able to affect their opponent's mind to a degree, and a few that used the dark attribute were skilled at manipulating the mind. As far as

Alus knew, however, Felinella didn't fit into either of those types. But asking the excited Tesfia about it didn't sit right with him, so he remained silent.

Either way, if Tesfia was right, he would soon be able to see it for himself. With his interest stimulated a little, Alus looked at the stage.

Moments before the match, Felinella and her opponent faced each other on the stage.

A storm of cheers rang out. There seemed to be more people in the audience on the second day. People were even standing on the walkways.

Unfortunately for the male student from Iblis, most of these cheers were surely directed towards Felinella. After all, she'd won last year.

Alus let out a small murmur as he looked at the AWR in Felinella's hand. She was wielding a thrusting type of weapon similar to a rapier. He'd seen it plenty of times during their training, but it was just as fantastic to see now as it was then. One rarely came across masterpieces like that. The blade was in the shape of a thin cone, and it was engraved with a spiraling magic formula.

Her opponent had a cutlass type AWR, and was holding it upwards. It was clear even from where Alus sat that he was taking deep breaths.

Felinella elegantly and quietly moved to her starting position, the tip of her AWR pointed towards the ground. Her movements were composed and refined.

But in reality, she was restless. Though once the match began she wouldn't think about anything unnecessary. Felinella had been trained to maintain her composure at all times, and she excelled at controlling her nerves. No matter how much attention she got, she would be able to keep her cool. But this time she could feel the sweat in her palms. That was because she was distracted by the fact that Alus was watching.

Realizing that she was no good like this, Felinella took a deep breath and exhaled.

The buzzer signaling the start rang out.

Felinella made the first move, spinning the tip of her AWR around as if she was playing with it.

Her opponent didn't understand what was going on right away, but when he felt a draft brush against his hair, he could wager a guess.

Alus could see the faint traces of mana fluttering. *At first glance it looks to be just a spell to create wind, but...* However, it picked up its momentum, and before long it was like a storm.

The opponent should have been hit by the raging winds. And he shouldn't even be able to breathe properly in the midst of all of that. In the arena sealed by a barrier, even a novice-level spell could have a bigger effect than expected.

However, Felinella's opponent wasn't faltering. Knowing that she was last year's winner, they must have at least taken some countermeasures.

The opponent muttered something, and the formula on his cutlass began glowing, water starting to flow out from its tip. It stained the ground, surrounding his footing with water that began whirling with him at its center.

Like with Felinella's spell, the torrent of water picked up momentum. In an instant it reached up to his knees, turning into a tornado of water, and he used the raging streams to create a wall.

"Flow Wall, huh," Alus said. It was an intermediate defensive spell. Its effect wasn't extremely powerful, but freely manipulating that much water was far from easy. The fact that he was managing it meant that he was quite a promising novice Magicmaster in his own right.

"But will he be able to fight with that?" Loki asked the obvious question.

Flow Wall's greatest weakness was that the higher and thicker the wall of water, the more the caster's vision was impaired.

"I imagine he'd have taken that into account." Alus could tell it was meant as a countermeasure against Felinella. As long as the wall isolated him from her, there was no need to worry about her magic.

However, it wasn't a fundamental solution. Different spells could interfere with reality to different degrees.

Both parties prepared for battle with the spells they specialized in, as their strategies were put in place.

Suddenly, the wind beating against the wall of water stopped. And Felinella began spinning the tip of her AWR in the opposite direction.

She had clearly been limiting herself before, as the raging winds returned with even more ferocity and gradually tore through the wall of water. Despite all the wind, Felinella's hair moved as if it was only being brushed by a gentle breeze.

Next, another change happened. Four small whirlwinds appeared around Felinella, a faint green light trailing after them. Rondo Raged condensed mana to the point that sticking a bare hand in its raging winds would tear it to shreds in an instant.

Seeing her opportunity, Felinella handled her AWR like it was a conductor's baton. She manipulated the four whirlwinds, sending them after her opponent, when suddenly the drops of water that had landed at her feet gathered even more water out of nowhere, creating a massive spearhead.

The spearhead shot towards Felinella without pause. The pressure from its speed and fierceness made even the audience jump in surprise.

Tesfia screamed and covered her eyes.

Yet that expected clean strike hit nothing but empty space. Without anything to hit, the spearhead of water dispersed, but Felinella was nowhere to be seen.

"That was Wind Ride."

Alus lightly nodded at Loki's remark. Wind Ride was a maneuver where you rode on wind that you created. It wasn't so much a spell as it was a technique those with an affinity to wind magic used. It was a form of magic flight.

The audience held their breath as they stared at Felinella riding through the air as if on invisible footing.

Normally, Wind Ride wasn't that flexible. But it appeared her excellent skills made it possible.

Despite the opponent's careful preparation, he was still at Felinella's mercy. After all, with vertical movement available to her, she held the advantage against attempts at surrounding her with water.

That also applied to attacking. The whirlwinds assaulted the opponent from

all directions as if to crush him.

The male student from Iblis focused on maintaining his wall of water to protect himself, but he was clearly at a disadvantage. He tried to switch tactics to attacking before his defenses crumbled, but even that was in vain. The water he shot out to attack with cut nothing but air, just barely scratching her. The wall of water limited his vision too much to be able to hit Felinella who was still freely dancing through the air.

And with his attention on attacking, the wall around him was growing weaker, until it was finally overcome by the raging winds, and scattered in all directions.

Alus could clearly see the astonished look on the male student's face. His ability to attack and defend at the same time placed him among the most capable second-year students Alus had seen. But he had no choice but to acknowledge that Felinella was a cut above.

Even if it had been weakened, it would take more time to destroy that level of defense for most people. This was why Felinella had changed the direction of the air current. Alus could see how she had used the whirlwind to accelerate the rotation of the wall of water. The speed of rotation directly corresponded to the wall's defensive strength. When Flow Wall came into contact with the wind rotating in the same direction, it was forcibly accelerated.

By speeding up the rotation without her opponent realizing it, she increased the mana strain necessary to maintain the wall.

The opponent's mana and attention were focused on maintaining the spell. But in order to do that, they needed to pour more mana into it and continuously rewrite its structure. And that required mana control more advanced than was required for an intermediate spell.

For an institute student, that was a difficult task. Because of that, the wall fell apart faster than expected, and the water was launched up into the air like a fountain.

The wall of water on the stage was sent flying, and at the same time the whirlwind rotating at a constant speed returned to a randomly rampaging storm.

Within the wind pressure that made it difficult even to keep one's eyes open, the male student held his cutlass near his face and desperately searched for Felinella. "—!!" He felt a dull impact hit his shoulder, followed by numbness, a sign that he'd taken an attack that was being substituted with mental fatigue. This sensation of numbness confused the brain as the pain was replaced through magic. It was like a form of hallucination.

He looked over his shoulder and swung his cutlass, but there was nobody there, and it passed through empty space.

The counterattack he took against his shoulder added to the sensation of numbness. The constant wind pressure limited his vision. He was unable to locate Felinella.

And Felinella's attacks continued. His leg, his arm, his waist. All kinds of places were struck by thrusting attacks.

The male student instinctively held his hand up to cover his eyes and attempted to attack with water, but the attacks were fired off in the wrong direction and dispersed into mana. Not only was he struggling with his aim due to not being able to see, but his spell was incomplete because of its need for visual information in its construction.

Fear overtook him as he swung his cutlass at random and fired off spells without any concern for his mana. Water that stood no chance of reaching Felinella was fired off, and ultimately returned to mana. He was also running out of stamina because of his constant swinging with the cutlass.

Felinella continued her attack, accurately aiming for weak spots and piling on the damage.

As he fell into a panic, the male student forgot about tactics and mana control and simply swung his limbs and fired off weak magic.

Lord Vizaist sure is thorough, Alus thought, as he looked at the sound tactics that Felinella's father had likely beat into her.

She robbed her opponent of his vision and used wind to whisper diversions into his ear. Whenever she saw an opportunity, she kept up the pressure with a wall of wind.

With the fear of not knowing where the next attack would come from, the opponent's mental state plummeted.

However, this wasn't because Felinella was playing with him. She was simply doing what she needed to do in order to ensure victory.

Felinella had started off by measuring her opponent's abilities with attacks that grazed him. Once fear began to influence him, and his attacks left him open, she used the openings to step in and pierce through him.

And as she was doing this at high speeds while riding the wind, this was quite clearly the result of all her training.

"This is it... the Puppet's Orchesis," Tesfia muttered.

Alus nodded wordlessly as he understood.

The opponent swung his AWR at random at someone he couldn't see, and flapped around with his limbs after each sharp attack he took. As a result, on the stage it looked like a single puppet dancing like mad.

I can understand not liking the nickname, Alus thought to himself, as he watched this gruesome scene. Once the puppet's strings were attached, there was no escape as you were forced to dance until your death. The sight wasn't so much spectacular as it was chilling, but those were the kinds of techniques needed for secret missions.

Recalling Felinella smiling elegantly, Alus furrowed his brows and cleared his throat in a way nobody else would hear. He felt an almost bitter taste in his mouth.

"Is something the matter?" Loki asked, but Alus only shook his head. He glanced back at the arena to change gears.

Felinella's opponent was already covered in wounds, sticking his AWR into the ground just to barely support himself. Anyone watching could tell that he was mentally exhausted. The outcome was already decided, but the fact that he remained standing was a symbol of his pride as a contestant representing Iblis' Fourth Magical Institute.

Suddenly, the color of the raging wind changed. The storm calmed and

Felinella appeared in the middle of the air. She landed on the ground without making a sound. The formula of the AWR she lightly held in her hand was still faintly glowing.

She then approached her opponent. The serious expression she wore made it clear that she wasn't being arrogant in her advantage.

Her opponent saw her approach, but there was no longer any fear or panic in his expression. He already knew that there was nothing he could do.

When they were within close combat range, Felinella enchanted her AWR and swung it through the air, which calmed the winds.

The male student must have understood what she was doing, as he pulled his AWR out and held it against his hip. He gave Felinella a silent nod and gathered what strength he had left.

He swung his cutlass horizontally, but there was no force in his blow, nor was it enchanted. That said, for him it was the greatest blow he could muster right now.

Felinella stepped forward, taking his attack on directly.

The two crossed paths for an instant.

Once she was beyond him, Felinella heard her opponent collapse behind her, and slowly closed her eyes.



At the same time, the buzzer signaling the end of the match rang out. The victor was declared on the screen, and loud applause sounded throughout the stadium.

That generous commendation wasn't just for the winner, either. The match itself had been one-sided, but the contestant from Iblis' Fourth Magical Institute was worthy of applause for his skillful manipulation of water and his guts to fight to the end.

Once the match ended, Felinella remained on stage until the healer Magicmaster took care of the unconscious student, as a sign of respect. That graceful and well-mannered attitude got the audience even more excited.

While it wasn't the main tournament, Felinella must have earned hundreds if not thousands of new fans from all the nations with just this match.

More explosive cheering came from the audience. Felinella bowed in all directions, and once she finished her final bow, her eyes were fixed in a certain direction... the seats where Alus was.

She smiled as if to ask if he understood now, and Alus raised his hand in response.

He picked up something else from her eyes. That was why she chose to fight in that way despite her dislike for her nickname. He had thought it was to ensure victory, but it appeared that wasn't all. What she put on display wasn't showing a feminine elegance, but rather certain ability and resolve in the face of battle. And giving off an overwhelming presence while she was at it.

This is related to work... is she trying to show me that she has the skills needed to get involved? Is she trying to tell me that she wants to accompany me on my jobs from now on?

In that case, Felinella could certainly be called a 'useful woman.' That said, Alus might be overthinking it, so he pushed those thoughts to the side for now. Either way, it wasn't a decision for him to make, but rather one for Vizaist and Berwick.

And honestly—he was fine with just Loki being the only person to have that kind of wordless exchange with.

“Feli really is amazing!” Tesfia’s admiration made her look like a Felinella believer.

“I could just barely see her fighting from here, and it was overwhelming. But she used a different style from when she trained against Al. She must have been keeping that up her sleeve.” Alice was also surprised, but she seemed to have her own doubts.

“That’s her strategy. It leaves a strong impression, but the opponent needs to fall into a pattern and it takes some time until the match is over. But not having to show herself is very suitable for covert operations,” Alus said.

“I see. But he really did dance... I feel a little bad for him,” Alice smiled wryly as she sympathized with Felinella’s opponent.

“It’s a battle with the nation’s dignity at stake, so it can’t be helped. Considering her position as our leader, a show of force would raise the team’s morale.”

Alice smiled faintly at Loki’s accurate description. “... I guess.”

As someone who won his first match in five seconds, Alus should have been agreeing with Loki. But he remembered that even the Governor-General had voiced pity for his opponent, and pondered this for a moment.

The tournament was a big moment for novice Magicmasters. But Alus hadn’t even given his first opponent the chance to put up a fight. In that sense, he could accurately be described as an object of pity.

Alus had then let his second and third opponents at least fire off a spell first. He decided that he would let his next opponent fire off an additional spell on top of that.

“Still, Feli has gotten much stronger than last year,” Tesfia observed.

“I bet she wouldn’t be happy to hear that from you,” Alus said.

“Well, she’s a Triple Digit, so I’m not in a position to say anything too self-important, but you didn’t see her fights last year, so what do you know? Last year’s final was really amazing!”

“Is that so...” He wasn’t going to argue with Tesfia. If she was saying that

Felinella was different from last year, then she was. Her techniques probably took after Vizaist, and when it came to battles against other people, she would probably equal Loki.

However, the reason Alus didn't really feel like Felinella had changed wasn't just because he didn't know what she was like before, but also because he had three people around him who had grown considerably. Their growth being put on display on the stage was astounding. They still made mistakes due to their personalities, but they would look completely different to those who knew how they were before.

"Right, Feli's match is over, so I guess it's time to go back," Alus said.

Everyone had finished their third matches, and there was still plenty of time until they would fight again, so it was only natural that they would help gather information. In reality, this was the kind of work that was left up to the losers, but it would be arrogant to refuse to do it on that basis.

Besides, they'd taken a break from their scouting to cheer Felinella on. The best bet to keep the group harmony was to observe the other matches and gather information properly.

Also, when Felinella was making plans she valued Alus' opinion highly, and he would feel awkward if she asked him something that he couldn't answer. So he got up from his chair with a sigh, scratching the back of his head and stretching.

"What are you guys going to do?" he asked the others.

Tesfia said, "We're going to go back to headquarters and welcome Feli back."

"Are you not going to do that, Al?" Alice asked him.

"I'll congratulate her when I report to her later. Besides, it would be bad to swarm her just as she got back, and someone has to watch the remaining matches anyway."

Another match would begin shortly. And how would he look Felinella in the eye if he got so carried away celebrating with her that he forgot to gather information?

Looking at how excited Tesfia was, it was clear that this was going to take a

while. The same went for the gentle Alice. They'd also won their second and third matches, so they'd done their best in their own way. So he at least wanted to let them do this.

Of course, Loki would accompany him as he watched the matches. For the time being, he wanted to move to somewhere where he could observe the whole stadium. After thinking about it, Alus decided to move to the regular spectator seats and sit with the rest of the audience. With an overhead view, he would be able to watch all of the stages without any problem.

But to be honest, as he began to observe the matches, he didn't think there was much difference between the first-year matches and the third-year matches. If he paid extra attention to the details, he could glean that there was a slight difference in strength, but they still seemed the same.

Theoretically, this level of difference could be made up with a few days in the Outer World. Luck alone could decide the outcome.

There were some Triple Digits among the students, but they didn't really stimulate Alus' interest. With cold eyes, he observed the stadium and spotted students from the other institutes diligently gathering information.

Alus had the same goal, but he wasn't stupid enough to write it down—taking notes like they were doing—and relied entirely on his memory instead.

"Sir Alus, should you not push this role onto someone else?" Loki quietly asked.

"I can't do that. I'm participating as one of the contestants; there's no need to stir up trouble for no reason. Besides, Feli is in the second-year division so it won't hurt to gather info."

"Are you going this far because of those brea... I mean, because she is from the Socalent family?"

Alus felt like he'd almost heard an inappropriate word for this conversation, but decided to ignore it. "Hm... well, her being Lord Vizaist's daughter is part of it. Besides, she might end up taking part in secret missions in the future."

"T-That's true. I am sorry for overstepping my boundaries." Loki blushed and apologized with a downturned look.

“Don’t worry about it,” Alus said. He thought about it for a moment. Seeing as how she was usually so reserved when it came to everything, that question was so unlike her that it might be a sign of her internal change.

He suddenly thought back to everything that had happened since he’d started instructing Tesfia and Alice. To him it had all been illogical and unreasonable, filled with choices that would have been unthinkable when he was in the military. He had been mentally exhausted by it all, but he still couldn’t tell if it had been a complete waste of time or if there had been a point to it.

But these kinds of thoughts, interwoven with daily life, made him aware of things he’d never noticed before. That’s why he didn’t think the unfocused dialogue he had with Loki and the other noisy girls was completely pointless.

Though the time might come when Alus, who couldn’t accept being unwittingly used by others, would have to force his will through so that he wouldn’t become complacent with his current situation.

That’s what he was thinking now, particularly about his feelings for Felinella that had begun to change ever so slightly. He wanted to ensure that it wasn’t some kind of excuse, that it wasn’t a form of corruption in a sense.

However—

The reason has to be that discussion we had after that mission.

In short, it was the engagement talk that Vizaist had brought up. Alus, of course, had no such intentions. Felinella’s attractiveness was completely unrelated to that. He simply wanted to avoid forming an odd bond with the Socalent family.

But it wasn’t like he hated Vizaist, and forming a closer relationship with him when he was singlehandedly in charge of the nation’s information gathering would be plenty beneficial for Alus who wanted to maintain his freedom. From that point of view, it was easy to find a reason for Alus and Felinella to get engaged.

But—

Is that really all...?

Alus groaned, deep in thought, when Loki called out to him with a concerned look. She was worried that she might have ruined his mood.

“No, it’s nothing,” Alus said, turning to her. “Loki, actually...” He suddenly closed his mouth. He was about to mention the engagement talk but then decided against it. Because when he thought about it, nothing would come from discussing it with her. After all, he’d already decided that it was out of the question. He also felt like it would be a pain if he did.

Loki gave him a questioning look as she tilted her head, but he had said it was nothing, so she kept quiet.

He felt like he was going around in circles. There was no way he would find an answer when he couldn’t understand people’s feelings. But he did feel like running his mind in circles about something was a sign of his own change.

Alus let out a soft sigh and rubbed the back of his neck as if to wipe away his concerns, before plunking his hand down on Loki’s head. “Well, it is true that she’s useful.” Even he found his expression was lacking as he put on a wry smile. He’d tried to genuinely smile, but it ended up looking forced.

That was when... a voice suddenly called out. “It’s a little late.” Despite the crowded surroundings, the refreshing voice came through clearly.

Loki turned a surprised look in that direction, while Alus wordlessly faced the two people that were approaching them.

The first was a familiar blond young man. But Alus’ eyes weren’t on that man, Jean, but rather on the unfamiliar face next to him. He had no memories of having promised to meet up at a specific time, but when he saw the boy with reddish-brown hair, he realized that Jean had meant something else. In other words, this introduction was late.



Now that I think about it, he mentioned something about introducing me to Rusalca's hope.

Looking closer, Alus could recall seeing this boy heading for the arena as a contestant in the third round. However, it had taken place at the same time as his own match, so he hadn't been able to watch it for himself.

"You've sure kept me waiting," Alus said sarcastically.

Jean, of course, picked up on the fact that Alus' words had more meaning than finally meeting with this hope of his. It was because Jean had leaked information on Alus to Rusalca that they'd kept him from fighting their promising student.

While luck would have also played a part in it, if not for Jean's interference Alus might have been able to crush Rusalca's hope early on, which would have affected the Second Magical Institute's prospects of winning.

"Oh, don't say that. You're face-to-face now, aren't you?" Jean replied with a wry smile. This was the light tone in which Jean and Alus typically greeted each other.

At the same time, the boy who had been a step behind him walked up to stand side by side with Jean. "It is nice to meet you, Sir Alus. My name is Fillic Argan. It is a pleasure to meet you. I have heard much about you from Sir Jean." Fillic held a hand against his chest and bowed elegantly.

His gentlemanly manners left a good impression, at least on the surface. But in reality Fillic Argan was one of Rusalca's students who was currently giving Felinella a headache. That was because she still hadn't obtained much information about him. Or rather, as far as scouts for the Second Magical Institute could tell, he still hadn't shown off his true abilities yet. In other words, his matches so far hadn't revealed anything useful.

In the end, he'd settled his matches using a novice level wind spell. With that level of spell, it was impossible to ascertain his affinity.

Alus looked the boy over once more. His hair hung at about eye level, with some tufts of hair sticking out. In a way the hairstyle was similar to Jean's. His narrow brown eyes gave off an earnest and serious expression.

However, a Magicmaster's looks had nothing to do with their strength. Observing the other party before exchanging words was an old trick when it came to measuring their strength. "Yeah, I've heard about you from Jean. He calls you Rusalca's hope. I look forward to fighting you."

Jean wore a forced smile as Alus spoke in a manner that was so unlike him, and Fillic put on a smile of his own when he saw that.

Alus continued, "And this is my partner, Loki. As you might know, she's also a contestant in this tournament."

Loki wordlessly bowed, pulling off elegant manners even better than Fillic, as if she was a professional maid.

"Nice to meet you." Fillic smiled. Though what he was actually thinking was a mystery.

"Yes. If we do end up facing each other in a match, I would like to fight all out... so that I won't sully Sir Alus' name."

"...!"

Loki spoke matter-of-factly, but when she brought up Alus' name, Fillic's eyes glowed with hostility, something Alus didn't overlook.

"Fillic, I've heard that your abilities are on the level of a Triple Digit, but have you gone out on missions in the Outer World?"

"Yes, but only accompanying Sir Jean on missions. I am still not in the military."

"Hmm, with Jean, huh... are you training him too?" Alus asked, turning to look at Jean. He wasn't about to say that it was unfair that a Single Digit Magicmaster was teaching students.

"Sometimes... but you're doing the same, aren't you?"

That was true. In fact, he was training two, as well as Felinella and his partner. "Still, that you're training students... to think you had the talent to train the next generation," Alus said, his tone turning a little offensive at the end.

Jean looked more suspicious than angry. Alus already knew that he was working as an instructor for various units. He'd told him about it during their

joint operation a few years ago as well, so Alus shouldn't have forgotten it.

But when he heard a grinding sound next to him, he caught on to what Alus was doing.

"Wh-What the hell do you know! Sir Jean is far greater than you'll ever... ack!" Fillic fell for Alus' provocation and shouted out with his true personality on display, but he was suddenly stopped by Jean unleashing a powerful chop on the back of his neck.

"This is why you're still..." Jean sighed, exasperated, while Fillic wordlessly looked at him in protest. "This guy's a little short-tempered, but try to forgive him, Alus."

"Yeah, I don't mind. I guess I played around a little too much, too." Alus gave him a token apology with a smile. He'd at least received a tidbit to bring over to Felinella.

His abilities aside, Alus had gotten a glimpse of his personality. Fillic had become enraged and shouted out, but something like that wouldn't have moved the calm and collected Alus. He'd also made sure to signal Loki to remain calm as well.

But Fillic flying into a frenzy like that was something to remember. He must have known about Alus' and Jean's relationship, and that they were just making idle talk. So his reaction was exaggerated.

In other words—Fillic became very emotional when it came to Jean. His strength was still unknown, but if he could be worked up into a lather that easily, it was a clear weakness.

"Well, the matches aren't over yet, so I think we'll leave the introductions at this. Sorry for taking up your time," Jean said.

"Yeah, don't worry about it. You have a very passionate pupil there. He sure is vigorous." Alus threw a cynical stare Fillic's way, which caused his eyebrows to shoot up in an ill-natured manner.

"Well, it's true that I wanted to introduce you two. And to be frank, I got orders from above too."

Alus nodded understandingly. In other words, Jean had another purpose for appearing in the stands with Fillic aside from introducing the two of them. It was also to advertise that Fillic was pretty much Jean's disciple. It was meant to prevent the other nations from trying to recruit Fillic. So Rusalca's ruler, Lithia, must have given that order.

Loki was sort of in the same situation. Unlike Alus, who all the nations would want to approach regardless of the hit to their reputations, they wouldn't be able to do the same to Loki.

"So yeah, we'll be leaving now. See you later." Jean raised his hand to say farewell.

When suddenly Fillic stepped forward. "Sir Alus... please turn your ears to this vigorous, passionate fledgling's overstepping remark. If we have the chance of facing each other in a match, and I, in the unlikely chance, were to win, would you please step down from your rank as No. 1 and endorse Sir Jean?!"

"... Hey! Fillic!" Jean furrowed his brows and tried to silence him.

But Alus listened with an unfazed expression. "... I don't mind, but that means to go all out, right?"

Fillic nodded, having already abandoned his honor student's mask, as he gave Alus a piercing stare.

However, Jean stepped in between them and said in a firm tone, "Hold up, I can't allow that. And Alus, don't casually accept things like this either. Especially not here at the Friendship Magical Tournament. So let me say this as Rusalca's Single Digit Magicmaster. Humanity should be facing off against Fiends, and not each other. So forget what this idiot just said!" Jean finished, as he lowered his head to Alus.

"Sir Jean...!" Fillic said in a sorrowful tone.

"You be quiet!" Jean scolded Fillic.

Alus called out to try and soothe Jean. "Come on, it was just a joke. Even if I give up my rank, they'll just push up No. 2. They're as hardheaded about that kind of thing as always," he said, as if he was trying to smooth things over, but the bitter look he put on his face could be interpreted as him looking down on

Fillic.

“Right. Sorry about that, Alus... we’ll be leaving now before this idiot blurts out anything else.”

Alus raised his hand to send them off.

Fillic gave Alus one last overbearing look before politely bowing. He then turned around to walk away, but the hostility in his eyes was still present. At the same time, he had a regretful look over having made Jean lower his head for his sake.

Seeing the two off, Alus’ lips lifted up as he turned back to look at the stage.

“Did something funny happen?” Loki asked.

“You could say that. I was just thinking that Jean is training someone interesting.”

“That is what you call interesting? If he continues with that kind of attitude, I won’t be able to bear it even if you forgive him, Sir Alus!” Having nothing to take her chagrin out on, Loki glared at the two from Rusalca.

Seeing how Loki was raring for a fight, Alus put his hand on her head and whispered so no one around could hear.

“—!!”

Loki caught her breath, and Alus smiled a little. “There’s plenty of people that come to challenge me despite knowing I’m the ranked No. 1. And I’ve taken an interest in him after learning that Jean has trained him himself.”

After that, Alus and Loki returned to headquarters. *We might actually end up fighting.* Alus had jokingly agreed to give up his rank if he were to lose, but he was halfway serious about it. Saying he’d go all out against Fillic had, of course, also been a joke.

Incidentally, Alus’ original plan had been to lose against Loki in the finals, or act like he’d gotten lucky and win. If he were to beat a Triple Digit without any difficulties in front of the other Second Magical Institute contestants as well as the spectators that didn’t know the truth, he wouldn’t be able to maintain his peaceful lifestyle. It would be a pain in the ass if rumors were to start spreading

at the Institute.

In the end, battles between contestants of the same institute were throwaway battles. Since they'd get the same points anyway, Alus would have loved to skip them, but without a justifiable reason to withdraw he would end up sullying the name and traditions of the Friendship Magical Tournament.

If I get the chance, I should get Jean to teach me what giving guidance is like. Geez, it's all a massive pain...! Alus complained in his mind, but in reality, he ended up smiling wryly as he realized that he didn't really hate it.

Perhaps that was because Tesfia's and Alice's growth was proof that his guidance had been right. Like with magic research, seeing the results with his own eyes wasn't a bad feeling.

When Alus came back to headquarters, the celebrations around Felinella had finally ended.

She was seated at the desk, with the atmosphere around her having shifted from victor to that of a leader. She was staring at the screen with a serious expression and wrinkled brows, which indicated that she wasn't exactly optimistic.

"It appears that the results are unfavorable," Alus said in a polite tone behind her, taking his surroundings into account.

Felinella was surprised for a moment, before realizing it was him and giving him a big smile. "—!! Mr. Alus... Yes, the situation remains unpredictable, but with everyone's hard work we still have a possibility of making a comeback." There was quite a bit of fatigue in her tone, but Alus' presence seemed to help refresh her weary mind.

"I just met with Rusalca's Fillic."

"...! So, how was he?"

"It's about as expected. He must be Rusalca's so-called hope. He seems pretty mischievous, but it shouldn't be a problem if I deal with him."

"Right. I was hoping to put you against him from a strategic point of view too,

so there won't be any change in the policy. Which means the problem is..." Felinella turned back to the screen behind her to look at the tournament bracket on display.

"Who will be sent to the main tournament."

"Yes. Considering your abilities, you and Ms. Loki will be put in for sure."

The four slots weren't all controlled by the Second Magical Institute. After the two matches tomorrow, one of the spots would fall to the First Magical Institute no matter what. That wouldn't change even if Alus did take down one of the First Magical Institute's contestants tomorrow.

That's why all they could do right now was to secure three of the slots and defeat Rusalca in the first round of the main tournament.

"Which means that we'll have to pick between Ms. Tesfia and Ms. Alice for the last spot..." That was where Felinella hesitated. As the leader, she could prevent two students from the Institute from fighting each other in the preliminaries. The other students were one thing, but these two had received guidance from Alus, and she wasn't sure who she should prioritize.

"Either one's fine, aren't they?" Alus said, but without conviction. "Tesfia has plenty of mana, and Alice has spells that are effective against people. They're still rough around the edges, so each has her pros and cons. Whoever you choose, you'll still end up regretting it if they lose."

Alus had spoken sharply to Tesfia's mother Frose before, and the gist of it was that Tesfia had the potential to become a Double Digit. The best way to show that was to stack up victories.

Tesfia had the slight edge in rank, but Alice had Reflection, which was useful against people, and her mana efficiency had improved with her new AWR, so they were more or less evenly matched.

Felinella smiled wryly at Alus' rough words.

"But, well, I will leave that up to you, Ms. Felinella. I do think, however, that you should avoid having those two clash until the main tournament."

That was a worry that Alus had in his mind, but Felinella simply nodded. "I

understand. I will try to make adjustments. There's a chance the other contestants will clash, but that will be a good learning experience for them."

The truth was that seven first-years remained after fighting their third match. This was an amazing result, but it also meant that some of them would wind up having to fight each other, which was regrettable.

But even though it was regrettable, Felinella didn't feel any pessimism. After all, this was unavoidable in a tournament. In fact, the first-years were prepared to fight anyone they faced to their full potential.

Joy filled Felinella's face, as she rejoiced at their sincerity and growth, as well as happiness from Alus showing his trust in her.

Twenty-Eighth Chapter

Magical Martial Arts Demonstration

The next day, the fourth and fifth matches were concluded, and the Second Magical Institute secured three slots for the main tournament. Things were proceeding almost entirely according to plan.

At first, they had been on guard against the Iblis contestants, but their earlier successes appeared to have been just due to luck. Following the third match, Iblis had lost most of its contestants.

Right now, Alpha's Second Magical Institute was in second place with its points. But the gap between them and Rusalca's First Magical Institute was considerable. The reason for that was Alpha's catastrophic defeat in the third-year division.

Moreover, Felinella and her assistant leader, a female second-year student named Illumina, had advanced to the main tournament.

The third-years had been unceremoniously wiped out, but aside from them, the first-year and second-year students weren't as shaken as they had been at first. The results of the first-year division had been remarkable, but the high morale was also thanks to Felinella's astuteness.

All of the matches were over for the day, but it didn't look like things were settling down. The tournament's second event, the magical martial arts demonstration, was about to begin.

This was just a sideshow with no competition over points. The contestants gathered in their designated spectator seats to get a close look at the high quality spells the active duty Magicmasters would be using.

The excitement and expectation that filled the stadium appeared to take a solemn turn when the special stage for the demonstration was revealed. With it being a demonstration, there would be no victors or losers, but those watching

understood that this was a demonstration of national strength, which made it an event with political meaning.

In the section of seats reserved for Alpha, Tesfia suddenly noticed something and looked around her.

Eventually she turned to the silver-haired girl sitting next to her with a puzzled expression. “Hey, Loki. I don’t see Alus anywhere... he didn’t get lost, did he?”

“Si—Al is out on business. He said he wanted to personally investigate the other nations’ contestants in preparation for the main tournament.” Loki knew the true reason for his absence and had thought up some other adequate reason to explain it.

Alus participating in the demonstration as a student was a secret order from the ruler. Not only was he meant to hide his identity, but the Friendship Magical Tournament was intended for the students to be the stars of the show, and during that time they were asked to refrain from making political statements or actions. Moreover, only active duty Magicmasters were supposed to participate in the demonstration.

“Hmm, it sounds like he’s surprisingly into it... well, I bet the demonstration wouldn’t interest Al anyways. He’d probably just say it was a show for children.” Tesfia even went out of her way to imitate Alus’ voice and delivery, but actually, she was a little upset.

“Oh, that’s a shame... I thought I could get him to explain things for us. But if he has other business then that can’t be helped.”

“Ms. Alice, if you don’t mind, I can explain things in his stead.”

“Really?! Please do, Loki dear.”

Loki nodded at the smiling Alice.

At that moment, the demonstration participants began to appear, and were introduced by the announcer.

There were some regulars among the chosen Magicmasters, but most of them changed every year. That was because, as they borrowed this stage for the magical martial arts demonstration from the novice Magicmasters, they

wanted to show not just their national pride, but also the abundance of talented Magicmasters they had.

Loki, as well as Tesfia and Alice, could tell that they were all powerful Magicmasters that had faced death in the past. As each one was introduced, shouting and cheers could be heard from the designated audience seats for their nation.

They hadn't heard much about the Magicmasters of other nations, but looking at them gathered as a group, they got goosebumps.

"The participant from Iblis this year is an expert on summoning magic. The Magicmaster from Halcapdia is one of the subleaders of their Single's—Galgnis'—unit."

Suddenly, a voice explaining things came from behind them. When the three turned around, they saw Felinella smiling at them.

"You're absolutely right. But the problem is..." Loki trailed off, and Felinella agreed with a hesitant nod.

It was the name announced after Clevideet's Rowan Welts. The reason for their feeling of discomfort was the female Magicmaster the announcer had introduced as Hydrange's Dakia Agnois.

Dakia had a different aura to her, compared to the others around her. It wasn't the aura of someone strong. If anything, she was less like a soldier and more like your average village girl. She very clearly stuck out.

To Loki and Felinella who had seen a lot of Magicmasters, coupled with their experiences in the Outer World, her presence was exceedingly odd.

The audience seemed to pick up on it as well... but the bizarre appearance of the man who appeared after her made them forget about Dakia.

"What is *that*?" Tesfia said, pointing at the man wearing a robe and whose face was half-covered with a strange mask. He dressed as if he was shouting out that he was someone suspicious.

"Alpha's representative... Ulhava."



The Magicmaster appearing as Alpha's representative was nothing short of outlandish.

"H-Have you heard about him, Alice...?"

"I don't think so. What about you, Felinella?"

"... I'm not so sure."

Everyone in the stadium felt the same way the girls did. The audience fell silent for a moment, before someone let out a snicker. That gradually spread around, creating an odd mood in the audience.

Most of the Second Magical Institute's contestants were stunned. Some wondered what the hell the nation was thinking, choosing someone in a strange costume to represent them. The more gossipy of them were giving up on the demonstration with exasperated expressions.

"W-Will he be okay?" Alice whispered to Tesfia.

"He'll be fine. He's the Magicmaster chosen by Alpha, so he'll give a good show... right?" Tesfia said, directing the last bit to Loki.

"There's nothing to worry about," Loki declared, staring at the masked man with absolute trust.

As for Alus... "Well, of course this would happen," he muttered to himself.

His introduction using some weird alias was fine. But he could clearly tell that a strange mood dominated the audience. Well, he wouldn't mind much once he got into his work.

There were also scrutinizing stares coming from the VIP rooms that held the rulers of the various nations. In fact, Alus' face and a degree of his abilities had already been displayed during the rulers conference, so he didn't think there was much point in the disguise. At best it was meant as a measure to keep his identity hidden from the audience and the contestants watching on.

Cicelnia's will was yet another factor. She probably didn't make him participate in the demonstration just to give the spectators a taste of Alpha's power. She'd likely done it to show Alus loyally following her orders to stop the other nations from trying to recruit him. It felt a little off, but it could certainly

help keep the other nations in check.

She's shrewd, but whatever. I only have to do what's needed of me... that said, it's not my fault if I end up attracting more attention from the other nations instead. Even if her plan backfired, Alus committed to acting like it didn't concern him.

Thus, the seven Magicmasters from the seven nations stood together on the demonstration stage.

Looking at the massive sphere floating above the stage, Alus was both interested and excited. The AWR that made use of the supposed oldest of meteor metals floated above their heads in the center of the stage.

So that's Minerva, the almighty relic.

The sphere was covered in black armor, and could calculate and process multiple formulas of different attributes in parallel. Minerva could take in all of the spell constructions around the stage at the same time and process them in place of the Magicmasters. That was why none of the participants carried their AWRs. They simply needed to unleash their spells, and Minerva would do the construction process for them.

The end result would be that the stage was about to be filled with all kinds of spells, like a colorful fireworks show.

Incidentally, the demonstration also had a contest-like aspect to it, in the sense that Minerva had a processing priority order. More specifically, it could read multiple spells at the same time, but the spells manifested in a certain order.

Because of that, by completing your spell construction first and maintaining a stable flow of mana, it was possible to occupy Minerva's function and make only your spell manifest above the stage. One could also interrupt another's spell in the process of manifesting by presenting a more stable construction.

So in a sense, the magical martial arts demonstration was a form of King of the Hill, where the player maintained their own spell for as long as possible against the others.

It's going to be interesting to see Minerva's ability to handle all the attributes

in action, Alus thought, as he readied himself. The other Magicmasters did the same. As this was a demonstration, there was no starting signal. Alus felt a sense of shared expectation alongside the other Magicmasters.

The demonstration began. To the audience it seemed sudden, but to the Magicmasters on the stage it was very natural.

First, water started to spout around Minerva like a fountain. It was a water spell cast by the Magicmaster opposite of Alus, who was able to tell from the mana light pouring through the geometric patterned gaps in Minerva's exterior armor.

Before long, large quantities of water appeared above the stage and began to spread, forming what looked like the surface of a lake.

However, in the next moment, the surface froze over. The flowing water also stopped in place, making it look like a flower of ice. This was an ice spell a different Magicmaster had cast.

The audience stirred. Then the ice began melting into water and seemed to boil before immediately evaporating, turning into steam. This was due to intense heat, and the robed man who'd originated the spell quietly muttered, *"‹‹Incineration››"*

So they'll even bring out advanced magic. Still, talk about energetic, Alus thought to himself, having decided to observe it first. This was, of course, an event meant as an enhancement to the tournament, so using advanced spells made sense, but Alus was more interested in watching Minerva work up close. *I see, so it can process multiple spells at the same time and rewrite the spell that's being manifested.*

Alus realized this was less a game of King of the Hill and more a sort of literary relay. The spells that the Magicmasters were using could be considered texts of a sort. The story began from one person's text, then someone else followed up on it, adding onto it.

It expressed something different from powerful spells used only to slay Fiends. It had an almost poetic beauty to it.

This isn't all that bad, Alus thought.

He’d considered it a mission forced upon him by the selfish princess, but it was surprisingly interesting. Of course, this was only the opening phase.

Eventually the air began feeling sultry as the heat spread out. The intense steam covered even the sphere floating in the center. It appeared that the problem of multiple spells clashing with each other was resolved by having them be processed by a single AWR.

The steam filling the air was swept up by a whirlwind of magic that appeared next. Soon, large serpents made of steam were created on all sides of the stage.

But the rampaging serpents were struck down by lightning that drilled holes in the ground, and the serpents as well as the ground itself were scorched by a sweeping heat wave.

However—a small bud sprouted up at the scene of devastation, before growing into a huge tree in the blink of an eye. It was a beautiful scene seemingly telling a story of a desolate end followed by a bright rebirth.

The story had been told in a hectic and dizzying fashion. As the Magicmasters cast their vivid spells, Alus thrust one of his hands towards the tree.

His powerful movements made everyone in the stadium sit on the edge of their seats, wondering what kind of fantastical scene would play out now.

And in the next moment—

A tremendous blast blew out from the trunk of the big tree, blowing it and its tender green leaves away.

Black smoke rose up from the remains in the center of the stage. The pieces of the tree had been blown all over the arena and dispersed back into mana. Eventually the remains would meet the same fate.

If the scene were to be considered the end to the story, perhaps it was expressing the rejection of the circle of life, choosing the destruction of everything and leaving a void in its wake instead. Though it was rather doubtful that that had been Alus’ intention.

The scene left the audience silent.

Tesfia froze in place with her jaw dropped.

Alice was equally lost for words with her eyes wide open.

Even Felinella's smile twitched, and she pressed her fingers against her temples as if to alleviate a headache.

Only Loki gazed at the spectacle with sparkling eyes.

Meanwhile, inside a special room above the spectator seats...

Governor-General Berwick had a dry look on his face, as Alpha's beautiful ruler was regretting her mistake with a glum expression. Lettie was laughing her head off next to Cicelnia, but nobody showed any signs of stopping her.

It was a mistake to demand artistic beauty from Alus in the first place. He'd been raised in an environment without any education in aesthetic sensibilities, after all. Having only used magic for battle and eliminating the enemy, his creative sense was quite literally destructive. The characteristics of his unique sensibilities far surpassed those of an ordinary person.

Alus hadn't realized what sort of magic was expected from him until he felt the stunned atmosphere that filled the stadium. There was probably an unspoken rule that everyone took turns to display a spell in the early stage. He'd picked up on that, which was why he'd tried to go for an explosive finish to get the audience excited. His choice should have met the intent of the demonstration perfectly.

I guess this was seen as distasteful...

It was already too late to try to gloss things over. The black smoke rising up from the debris was so thick it might even stain the walls with soot.

However, the Magicmasters gathered here were formidable. Using their quick wits, they were already at work constructing new spells.

In a brief moment the demonstration began again, and unlike before, it was a true competition of magic.

All kinds of spells were spun by the now serious Magicmasters, ranging from the beautiful and elegant to the brutal ones used against Fiends in the Outer World. Pillars of ice appeared, only for them to be shattered when used as targets by the next spell. The scale of the spells gradually increased, with their

constructions being more strongly defined and with more mana being poured into them.

Oh, things are turning out pretty good now! So this is the magical martial arts demonstration. Even Alus found himself impressed. You didn't often get to see spells of this caliber flying about and negating one another like this. And Minerva's ability to process all of those spells on its own was nothing short of amazing.

Now then, the last spell was a bit of a blunder, so I guess it's time I get serious too. He had gone through the trouble of putting on a mask, so there was no need to hold back.

Minerva processed one spell after another, when suddenly it gave absolute priority to an extremely stable construction. Noticing this, the other Magicmasters stared at the masked man.

"‹‹Cocytus››"

A twisted mass woven from vines of ice suddenly appeared in front of Alus. It was possible to see the small dark-red ball that served as its energy source in the gaps between the vines. The ice vines wrapped around the small ball, layer after layer. The energy source was like the seed for Cocytus.

Alus then lightly swung his hand as if to sow further seeds, causing the small ball within the vines to be pushed upward. It moved closer to Minerva, freezing the ground and the air at the same time, before coming to a complete stop in midair.

The next moment, the vines of ice stretched out radially like buds sprouting from the seed.

Once this happened, the various magic lights of the spells being cast by others that were flying toward Minerva all froze at the same time, and the lights went out.

The vines reached out and wrapped around the spells like whips of ice, freezing them along with the air itself. The constructions of the various spells were undone and engulfed by Cocytus, transforming the mana into sparkling pillars of ice. Both the mana and the pillars then dispersed.

Now then, I've created some openings to take advantage of. Cocytus would target and freeze whatever entered its effective range, magic constructs being no exception.

Spells were cast one after another as if to destroy the construction of Cocytus itself, but after clashing with it they ran out of power and were swallowed by the ice, turning into pillars and dispersing.

Just as Alus believed his control over Minerva was absolute "—!! So that's how you're coming."

The new spell was a series of massive tornadoes that—like Cocytus—absorbed mana. It was the Tyrant Hawk.

The giant tornadoes that threatened Alus' domination were like a three-headed dragon, whirling ominously. The winds blew so hard it was impossible to see through to the center, as the tornadoes attacked Cocytus head on. The tornadoes were so gigantic in size that they covered Cocytus' entire effective range.

Tyrant Hawk was one of the most advanced and powerful wind spells. Even Cocytus was devoured by the three-headed monster, icy vines and core and all.

Alus turned to look at the woman who had cast it. He received a cool smile in return. Seeing that smile, he wondered if she'd really been the one to unleash that brutal spell.

There didn't appear to be any other Magicmasters aside from this woman and Alus left who were sending new spells to Minerva. Most had lowered their arms, looking resigned.

Though there was one stubborn Magicmaster who was unable to abandon his pride. As if to retaliate for the mood dominating the arena, this one cast a spell.

The ground rumbled as the upper body of a stone giant appeared. It spread its massive arms wide as if to embrace the tornadoes. Even though the violent winds tore off some of the stone composing its body, the giant showed no signs of flinching, as it used brute strength to reject the spell from its composition.

The woman who'd cast Tyrant Hawk simply muttered "Oh my," as if it didn't concern her.

The imposing stone giant towered next to Minerva as if guarding it. This was a Rock Golem born from advanced summoning magic.

Talk about forcing it. What stuck out most to Alus was its size. Looking at the Magicmaster who created it, he could see a satisfied smile on the man's lips as he desperately maintained its structure. The man didn't appear to have fully constructed it at once, as he was adding more onto its structure and only seemed barely in control of it.

That was when—suddenly a certain sensation ran through Alus' body.

He looked at Minerva floating above the stage, and narrowed his eyes. He then glanced at the female Magicmaster who'd unleashed Tyrant Hawk before.

She looked to be doing something, probably to deal with the golem, but Alus didn't know what it was. But it was clear Minerva was responding to her will and construction.

An eerie light was emitted as Minerva began to quake and let out a strange growl. It was clear that something impermissible was being constructed. Before long, a suspicious mist covered the golem's upper body that was still sticking out of the ground. The mist seemed to devour the golem while also spreading out in all directions as if to search for more prey. No, perhaps it was taking on a specific shape...

The woman who created it had a vacant expression on her face. Her eyes were distant and she didn't even blink. Alus felt a strange atmosphere around her and an ominous power.

He immediately picked up that it wasn't just a problem with the power of the spell, but also with its nature. *Sheesh.* Who knew what kind of tragedy would happen if it affected the audience? His skin prickled.

Alus read the formula that appeared on Minerva's surface, and got to work rewriting its structure at a blinding speed into something different from what the woman intended. Just before the golem's massive body was completely devoured by the mist, he finally finished rewriting the spell.

"‹‹Phoenix››"

A raging fire engulfed the golem and the mist. All things magic were returned

to mana, transforming into a new spell, as if something was trying to be reborn from the ashes.

The seemingly uncontrolled flames gradually took shape. A bird-like shrill voice rang out, and the flames were extinguished by a flap of wings. Appearing in their stead was a towering bird made of fire, its wings dressed in flames, creating a heat wave so hot it scorched the air.

As Alus had completely overwritten the mist spell, this bird of fire was the only thing remaining. It immediately flew up towards the barrier covering the stage. And just as it looked like it was about to pierce through it, its body made of flames burst, raining down sparks all over. The sparks gradually fell toward the ground, keeping the light of the flames until the end.

Everyone in the audience was sure this was the end of the demonstration. They'd felt vaguely worried by the mist, but convinced themselves that it had been part of the act.

For a few moments the audience looked on dumbfounded at this mysterious beautiful spectacle. Then the silence was replaced with thunderous applause and a standing ovation.

In the midst of the clamor, Alus looked around and found that the female Magicmaster had disappeared.

The man who created the golem was still spacing out, but when he came to, he saw that his time on the stage was over and left.

Still, that was going too far. That took a lot of work for me to fix, but to think there was still a Magicmaster like that around... Alus hadn't expected to get that exhausted over a mere demonstration.

After giving Minerva—still floating unchanged in the middle of the stage—a single glance, Alus turned and left as well. As he listened to the still-continuing applause, he felt he'd managed to make up for his earlier blunder.

He didn't return to the audience. It would be unnatural if he grouped up with Tesfia and Alice now. But as he stepped out of the stadium to return to his room alone, someone tapped his shoulder. "Good work out there."

Turning around, he saw Tesfia with a mischievous smile. Next to her was Alice

who added, “It must have been hard,” as she smiled at him.

Looking at their pleased expressions, Alus knew that they meant what they said. Glancing at Loki, he saw a proud look on her face. But considering her expression, she hadn’t leaked his secret. Which meant that the mask and robe hadn’t been enough to conceal his identity.

Alus pondered this for a moment, and seeing his doubts, Loki gave him a reassuring smile and nodded as if to say that it was okay. Meaning, he’d likely only been found out by Tesfia and Alice. And while he wasn’t sure about Felinella, if these two found him out, it wouldn’t be strange for her to have done the same.

He did wonder, however, how they had found out, but as long as the other students hadn’t figured it out, that was fine. And so the lively group returned to their hotel.

***

After a short meeting in preparation for the main tournament tomorrow, Felinella told them to get to bed quickly.

His matches aside, Alus did feel tired after the demonstration, but the three girls gathered in his room anyway like it was natural. He’d expected this, so he wasn’t surprised, but he did find it somewhat bothersome.

Tesfia and Alice were here because of who would compete in the main tournament tomorrow. After each tried to give the slot to the other for a while, they came to Alus to have him decide.

“So we felt that we should have you decide...” Tesfia said apologetically. She didn’t have her usual unyielding spirit. Alice was the same as she nervously gazed at Alus.

In essence, they were asking him to pick who was the stronger one. They had anticipated that even Alus would struggle with that. But that appeared to be a needless worry.

“It’s not like there’s a big difference,” Alus’ answer was frank and clear. “In terms of personal circumstances it would be Fia. You still have your promise with your mother. I’m not going to say that you have to win, but if you can

show your strength in the main tournament, you'll be able to take one step forward."

"Yes, I said that to her too..." Alice said in agreement. She had tried to give up the slot to Tesfia out of consideration.

But Tesfia remained evasive. "... That's not... Right now I'm fighting for the Second Magical Institute. The person who has the highest chances of winning should be chosen. My personal circumstances shouldn't be the deciding factor..."

"Well, I thought you'd say that," Alus said.

Tesfia was surprisingly sincere and earnest. Perhaps it was because she was nobility, but she refused to accept things that didn't feel right, something Alus had picked up on after all this time together. That inflexibility and stubbornness was part of her charm, though.

She had worked together as a team with Felinella and her friends to get here. And she didn't want to prioritize her own circumstances.

Alus could understand that as well. "So, did you meet with your mother then? Not that I know if she came to watch or not."

"No, she's a very busy person... but I'm sure she's watching from somewhere." The tournament was broadcast worldwide, so that possibility was high. Frose, as a former military instructor, had an interest in talented youth, so she was almost certainly watching.

"In other words, Fia, you're putting the tournament victory ahead of your own circumstances, is that right?"

Tesfia nodded.

"Then there's no problem. There's no need for the person participating in the main tournament to be someone who can secure a victory. They simply need to put up a fight worthy of the tournament."

"Huh?" Tesfia gave him a puzzled look. Alice tilted her head in confusion as well.

"You still haven't noticed?"

The two exchanged blank looks.

This made Alus let out a sigh. “Geez, regardless of which one of you fights, you’re up against Loki. Do you think you can beat her the way you are now? She is my partner, you know.”

He then glanced at Loki. She was lying on Alus’ bed as if it was natural, rubbing her reddened cheeks against his pillow with a satisfied expression.

“...” Alus acted like he hadn’t seen anything, as he quickly turned his eyes back to the other two. “The contestant from Rusalca’s First Magical Institute is almost definitely stronger than you. They’ve kept the first-year hope in reserve in the seed slot, making sure he didn’t clash with me, and have probably made even more moves since then. If I don’t take him down in the first match, then the path to victory, points wise anyway, will be closed. In other words, if he makes it to the finals, it’s over. Conversely, if I do take him down, then we have a good chance of winning as long as the second-years advance as planned.”

“So what, even if we beat Loki, we’d have to fight you in the finals?” Tesfia asked.

“Well, we haven’t gotten a chance to fight Loki dear all out, so I think it would be a good opportunity, don’t you think, Fia?” Alice followed up, but with a wry smile.

“So you don’t really need to bother about small details like that. Why not decide it by rock paper scissors then? Also... there’s a chance that both of you will end up in the main tournament,” Alus said, muttering the last bit.

Indeed, there was a chance. That’s why Alus had asked Felinella to keep the two from clashing earlier. In other words, he’d kept them in reserve.

“What does that mean?” Tesfia said.

“... There’s no need to tell you that now. So anyways, are you going to do it or not?”

Tesfia and Alice reluctantly faced each other at Alus’ words and pulled back their arms. But there was no momentum in their movements, and they were simply doing it because Alus had told them to. With a weak call out, they threw out shapes with their hands.

In the end, Tesfia won. But she stared down at her hand with an unsatisfied expression. “Is this really okay?” she asked Alus.

In response, Alus clapped his hands. “Alright! Then it’s decided. A one-shot game without any hard feelings is really refreshing, isn’t it... Now get out!”

That reaction surprised Loki the most. Having burrowed into his bed, she was flustered for a moment before feigning that she was asleep.

“That means you too. You’ve got to get up early tomorrow,” Alus said, poking her forehead.

Giving Loki another push as she reluctantly got off the bed, he chased the three girls out of his room.

Once he was done, his shoulders slumped and he got into bed. And there, he noticed the warmth in it, like it had been warmed up by a kitten.

“...” Without a word, he turned off the light.

A few hours later in the middle of the night, Alus slightly opened his eyes.

The hotel was dead quiet, with only the sound of the ticking clock in his room.

The sensation that had woken him was the presence of someone unnaturally killing the sound of their footsteps. This presence was coming from the silent hallway, and it was approaching his room.

That was fast. Alus caught it with his detection abilities, and was able to prepare for the unusual guest coming at midnight.

Just before the visitor politely knocked, he opened the door. And standing in front of him was a slightly surprised woman. Wearing a maid outfit, looking perfectly put together with not a hair out of place, was none other than Rinne Kimmel.

After a short pause, she collected herself and spoke with her usual smile. “Sir Alus... there is work to do.”

Afterword

Thank you very much for picking up this volume.

2018 marks the release of the fifth volume of *The Greatest Magicmaster's Retirement Plan.* I am a little relieved this volume was released so soon after the previous volume.

Allow me to reintroduce myself for those of you coming from the fourth volume's afterword and for those of you who are new. I am Izushiro.

This time I have more room for the afterword, and I'd like to use that space efficiently... That said, I have a lot I want to touch on, starting with the story.

Two stories are proceeding in parallel. As those of you who have already read the volume know, the Friendship Magical Tournament is standing in the spotlight, but in the shadows...

This is of course a necessary divergence, and the two stories will come together at the end of the overall story. Surely it will become a major turning point for Alus and the girls.

Compared to the web novel, there is a bigger focus on the heroines of the story. What will wind up happening to them, and what kinds of developments will the characters go through? You will find out in the next volume.

At the same time, the series follows the story of genius Magicmaster Alus Reigin and his way of life. His change of heart will surely come to change the story as things go on. So please look forward to it.

This is a little sudden, but I would like to reveal the results of the heroine popularity poll held on Twitter in December of last year.

Fourth Place, Tesfia Fable.

Third Place, Felinella Socalent.

Second Place, Alice Tilake.

And securing First Place is... Loki Leevahl. With a landslide victory at that.

There were a lot of votes, and I can't find the words to express my gratitude.

In celebration, I'd like to take this opportunity to talk a bit about Loki. This is about how her character was born. That said, it's nothing serious, so feel free to kick back.

At first, this series was meant to feature Tesfia and Alice as the two heroines. However, as you may have picked up on, things did not go as planned. The fundamental reason for that was that they are very different from Alus.

The girls have lived in a small, closed-off world, while Alus knows of the life beyond the walls, having grown up in a harsh environment. In the first stages of the story their core values were just too different. So without having someone with similar values as Alus to serve as a bridge, they wouldn't be able to get along. More specifically, a character that understood him to a certain degree was needed.

That's when I understood the reason for Tesfia's lack of popularity. Incidentally, Tesfia was designed to represent humanity inside the walls and the innocence of youth. But behind her immaturity lies possibility, so please continue to watch over her.

I plan for Tesfia, as well as Loki, Alice, and Felinella, to have plenty of time to shine in Volume 6. What forms a person are their meetings and interactions with other people, so please look forward to the next volume.

While I'm at it, I'd like to add some supplementary information about this volume.

**Warning, there are spoilers from here on.

Specifically, I'd like to talk about why Lettie and Jean don't get along. In reality, this is a one-sided enmity on Lettie's part.

Their story takes place several years before the current Friendship Magical Tournament. At the time, Lettie and Jean were considered the top two Magicmasters. Moreover, they were the same age, but Lettie had recorded more losses than wins. She'd lost to Jean in her first and second years, until finally winning in her third year.

I'd like to touch more on that story if I get the time. Doesn't the idea of two

young Magicmasters that would eventually become Single Digits seriously battling it out sound interesting?

In terms of diplomatic relations, Alpha and Rusalca were on good terms. While individuals might feel differently, they had a traditional rivalry in a sense. The two rulers could definitely be described as not getting along, and it would be a stretch to describe the two Governors-General as being on friendly terms.

Rusalca and Alpha were both major nations that had two Single Digit Magicmasters each, and Alpha was especially strong, securing the most results in the Outer World against Fiends—and yet, they hadn't won in a while as far as the Friendship Magical Tournament was concerned.

The reason why was clear enough. Alpha's strongest trump card had kept himself out of the tournament.

Right, then that should fill up most of my available space, and I'd like to dedicate the rest to the usual thanks.

Miyuki Ruria-sama in charge of illustrations, thank you so much for going along with my unreasonable requests despite being so busy. I am so happy about these beautiful illustrations that also included Lettie's first appearance that I don't know how to express it. Not only did you supply me with plenty of illustrations and writings to color the story, but you also gave me a driving motivation. If not for this reliable support, I would have been in trouble, probably. Thank you for your continued support!

I would like to express my gratitude to the designers, printers, and everyone else involved in making Volume 5 the best it could be. This book finding its home in shops is purely thanks to everyone's hard work.

I would also like to thank my editor-in-charge, T-sama, for the good meetings and advice.

This volume is a bit on the thin side, but I'm sure it would have been a scary size if I'd been left unchecked... ha, ha, ha (worried laugh). I'm sorry the progress is always so tight. I believe this time things were busier than they'd ever been during this series.

That said, it was a very satisfying period of time for me. It was around the 5th

of January when I first realized it. I hadn't even noticed we'd entered a new year.

Finally, I would like to give special thanks to all of the readers for picking up this book. I hope to deliver Volume 6 before long.

Next time, the Seven Nations Friendship Magical Tournament will reach its climax. Moreover, the 'work' that fell into Alus' lap during the tournament will be revealed. Please look forward to it. By the way, the first volume of Uonuma Yuu-sensei's manga version of *The Greatest Magicmaster's Retirement Plan* is currently on sale. If you have the chance, please follow the adventures of Alus and the others in the manga as well.

I have one more notice. There is currently a campaign using a password and the ticket found on the paper wrap on this volume, as well as on the manga's first volume. There are some gorgeous goods on sale, so please check the wrapper out. Please be aware that the final deadline is April 2, 2018.

Thank you so much for reading, and I hope 2018 treats you well!

—Izushiro

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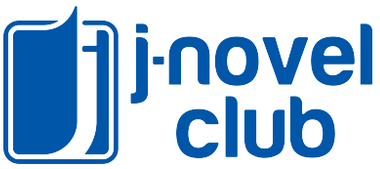
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The Greatest Magicmaster’s Retirement Plan: Volume 5

by Izushiro

Translated by Warnis Edited by Jan Suzukawa

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