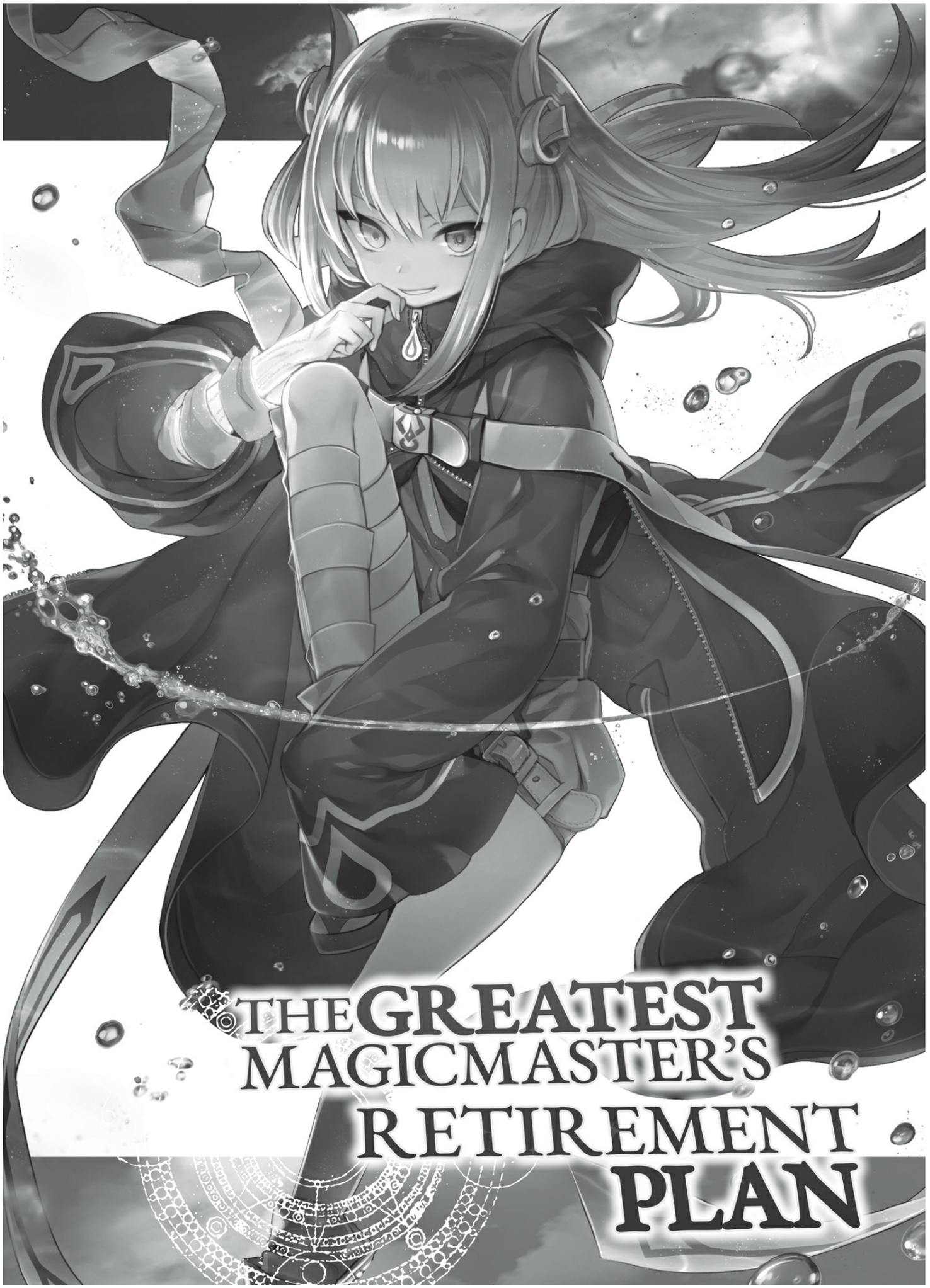

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The Greatest Magicmaster's Retirement Plan

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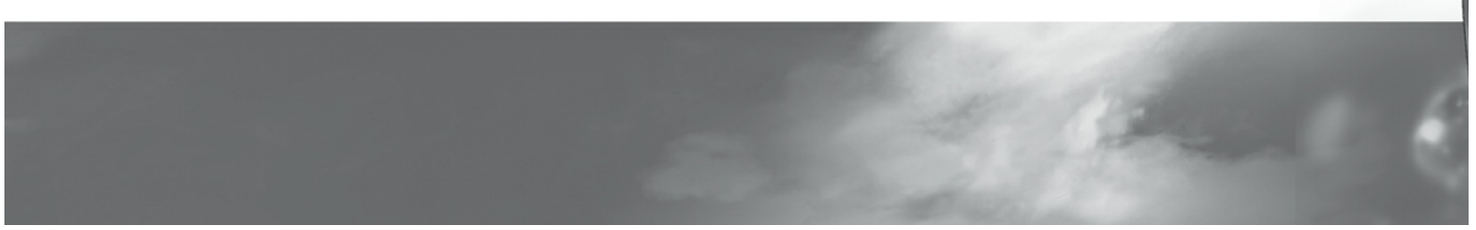
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Twenty-Ninth Chapter

Emissary

A little while before the opening of the Seven Nations Friendship Magical Tournament...

The urban area of Balmes, one of the seven nations in humanity's domain, was as lively as any other nation's urban area.

There were all kinds of shops that lined the streets, which had been bustling in full swing since morning. Of course there were stores for food and clothing, and some for precious metals, magic-related goods and more. It was said that you could get just about anything at this market center. Having all these shops gathered in one city was something you'd never see in Alpha.

However, the buildings were packed and the narrow streets were crowded. And the unpaved sections of the road stood out.

Balmes had a smaller territory compared to the other nations. Yet the difference in population wasn't that big. As a result the city was overcrowded, its populace bumping shoulders with each other as they got around. This was the kind of flavor Balmes had.

But once you stepped off the main streets to get away from the congestion, the atmosphere suddenly felt desolate and dreary.

In a corner of that part of the city was a place draped in a dark atmosphere. This was Balmes' military headquarters, located some distance from the defensive lines.

Incidentally, it was typical for the nations to build their military headquarters in the vicinity of their defensive lines. This was done in order to take the safety of the population into consideration. Unlike the other nations, however, Balmes had a thick iron wall between its headquarters and the defensive lines.

Inside that thick-walled building one could normally hear the voices of

military officials. But at present there were only a scattered number of Magicmasters. Balmes had fewer Magicmasters to begin with, but today the building was especially empty.

The Magicmasters that were in the building walked around with their eyes cast down, their expressions dyed with despair. The reason was that they were distressed over Balmes' current state. Or more accurately—they hadn't been informed of the situation, but they more or less had an idea. Unfortunately, their speculations were right on the mark.

The guards in charge of the most secure area in the headquarters would always glance at a certain door in the depths of the building when they patrolled. Everyone had a tacit understanding that the people behind that door were hard at work trying to devise a method to resolve the crisis.

A little past noon.

Five days had passed since the rulers conference. Excitement for the upcoming Friendship Magical Tournament was building in the other nations.

That was true in Balmes too, but there wasn't a trace of it within the military headquarters. Behind that certain door, two men shared grim expressions.

The room was large, but right now it felt stiflingly small. The men were seated on luxurious cushioned leather chairs with glossy finishes. This alone was sufficient to show what high positions they held.

On the table between them was a map of the area beyond their defensive lines. In other words—the Outer World.

It was relatively detailed, but a portion of it was completely blank. Aside from a small section, the map of the world hadn't been updated for almost 100 years. A dotted line in fresh ink had just been drawn across that null space.

One of the two men was the ruler of the nation, Holtal Qui Balmes. He glared at the map with furrowed brows, violently grabbing a decanter from the side table. Pouring the liquid into a nearby glass, he then drank it down to soothe his parched throat.

He had an average build, and his thinning hair was cut short. His look was the

very definition of a middle-aged man. Despite the nonthreatening appearance, at the moment he had a sharp glint in his eyes, which were staring at the man sitting across from him.

“Gagareed, I obtained the approval for recruitment at the conference like you wanted.”

“Thank you very much, Lord Holtal,” the man politely thanked him.

Compared to Holtal, the man called Gagareed looked a little worn out. But as a man of the military, his body was well-trained. The military uniform looked tight on him, and with his short thick hair and alert eyes, he was the very picture of a martial artist.

Gagareed was the supreme commander of the military, Balmes’ Governor-General. Normally, he would have had to rush to Holtal’s side as soon as the conference was concluded, but in this crisis he couldn’t afford to leave headquarters. Because of that, Holtal had ended up coming to him instead.

However, Holtal took no offense at this. That was just the kind of situation they were in. Considering what Balmes was facing, his having to travel to the headquarters was neither disrespectful nor much work.

Holtal’s mind was full of concerns. “More importantly, what happened with the reconnaissance unit? I suppose it was no use?” he asked with a bitter expression. He already had a hunch about the result, but he couldn’t help but ask.

After a short pause, Gagareed cast his eyes down and shook his head. “We don’t know. The situation is unknown.”

“What is the meaning of this?!” Holtal slammed the table, grinding his teeth. The glass looked like it might fall off the table from the shock, but he didn’t care about that. The ruler stared directly at Gagareed.

Who painfully opened his mouth to speak. “... We lost contact with the reconnaissance unit. Not a single one has returned.”

“Wha—!!”

Holtal’s glaring eyes shot wide open. A moment later, he leaned back in his

chair, thinking back over the recent past.

It all began two months ago. They had received a report from a reconnaissance unit about the discovery of a certain mineral deposit twenty kilometers northeast of Balmes. When the unit returned, they had come bearing an unfamiliar metal with them.

It hadn't taken long after comparing it with old records to realize that what they had found was mithril.

They didn't know how deep the deposit went, but mithril was extremely valuable. This discovery would have a massive impact on Balmes. However, high-classed Fiends were also reported to be in the area along with the discovery.

When they heard this, Holtal and Gagareed immediately decided to send out an extermination force to eliminate the Fiends. Taking the danger of unknown Fiends into account, they gathered a large number of high-ranking Magicmasters to form their force.

That included their only Single, Duncal, as well as the former Single and current ranked No. 20, Gileada, making it clear just how motivated they were about this undertaking.

The reason they included over 400 Magicmasters was to clean up all the Fiends along the way and in the area around the deposit. If there were high-classed Fiends as was reported, they would be a trifling matter for that number of Magicmasters.

Yet as for the results...

"Gagareed... When was the last we heard from the extermination force?"

"Fourteen days ago."

"What are the chances of even one of them coming back alive?"

"... A few percent at best." Gagareed hadn't said zero because of his own pride and sentiment. They were almost certainly wiped out, but he didn't want to put that into words.

"... Realistically speaking, what is the total damage?"

“The Magicmasters we’ve sent out are seventy percent of Balmes’ total forces.”

“...” Holtal stared down at the table, and pinched and rubbed the bridge of his nose. He brushed away his frustrations and regrets to regain his calm, trying to focus on how to come back from this situation. It was kind of like psychological first aid.

Eventually he spoke with resignation mixed in with his tone. “I suppose we’ll have to request aid from the other nations.”

“But if we do that, Balmes would be indebted to all the nations, Lord Holtal... We might even become the puppet of another nation.”

“Yet at this rate, Balmes will be in danger! Several hundred Magicmasters... No, I can’t say it’s all of them, but I have no choice but to assume the extermination force has been critically damaged. And if there are Fiends dangerous enough to do that, Balmes might not be the only nation in danger.”

“I believe we don’t have to worry about that right now,” Gagareed said. “The battle took place in the area of the deposit. That is also where we lost contact with our rapid-moving reconnaissance unit. In other words, it’s safe to assume that the Fiends haven’t moved after the battle.”

“Even then, they will move at some point. And if we’re not in a position to deal with them then...”

“I can agree with that. But I believe it’s possible to gather more Magicmasters with enough time, so we should prioritize getting an accurate understanding of the situation and restore our national power.”

“We don’t have the time to take it that slowly,” Holtal said.

“According to the last report we received before losing contact, the strongest Fiends there were six A-class Fiends. While we can’t be overly optimistic, with Duncal there they should have had a 100 percent chance of winning. So we can’t write off that there was some kind of natural disaster or mistake...” Gagareed had all but accepted the fate of the extermination force, but once more tried to escape from reality by grasping at straws.

Finally, Holtal stopped trying to hide his irritation as he literally spat out,

“Then why has nobody come back?! Why are there no reports?!”

“Perhaps they are unable to move, or...”

“How horrible!”

Gagareed finally resigned himself. He didn’t want to believe it, but it was highly likely. They would have to deal with it somehow. “Regardless of what happened, we might need to consider making a request to Kurama...”

“Gagareed!!” Holtal screamed out in a reprimanding tone at Gagareed, who’d spoken the taboo name.

“Considering the remaining Magicmasters, it is a reasonable decision. Indeed, we don’t have the leeway to keep up appearances. They are a force to be reckoned with, and they at least move with money. Even if we expose this disgrace to the other nations and have them protect us, there might only be six nations left after this.”

“But if it ever comes out that the ruler of a nation relied on a group of felons... I can’t afford that!”

There were groups of criminals and outcasts that lurked in the darkness, and the one regarded as the most dangerous was Kurama.

The known members ranged from criminals who committed large-scale magic, also known as first-class criminals, to former Single Digit Magicmasters who had had their licenses revoked, making them a very troublesome bunch. Among the many criminal organizations, they had an especially large number of members that could handle magic well.

The group was on the international black list, but the six executives leading the organization were all said to be on a par with Singles. Because of this, no nation could deal with them carelessly.

Not only that, but Kurama had its own powerful information network, concealing its true form, and no one in the nations even knew the location of their headquarters.

Another headache was how Kurama’s organization functioned. They were definitely a criminal organization, but they also accepted the dirty work from

nations in exchange for a high reward. They had connections with high-ranking people in all the nations and especially deep ones in the weaker nations such as Balmes and Hydrange. So while they were publicly denounced, they frequently operated behind the world's political scenes.

Those kinds of complex circumstances enabled Kurama to hide their headquarters, and were the reason they still existed even today.

Holtal was the ruler of a nation. While he wouldn't call himself broadminded to the point where he would associate with anyone, he had a grasp of the situation behind the scenes.

However—he found relying on Kurama to be unacceptable. It was far more risky than requesting aid from the other nations, and it was also a choice that could expose this disgraceful situation. If it only brought disgrace to Holtal personally that was one thing, but it might even linger as a dark stain on Balmes' history.

Worst of all, there was no way to know what a criminal organization might do. They might not just settle for an exorbitant reward, but might feast on Balmes as well. Even though it was a deal that would be made with money in mind, a criminal organization simply couldn't be trusted.

Yet Gagareed continued on, despite picking up on Holtal's concerns. "Please make your decision. You can't make an omelette without breaking a few eggs, as they say."

"Gagareed, you—!"

"What is the point of keeping up appearances? A percentage of the nobility already has connections with Kurama. They of course do so with Balmes in mind. I don't know if you were aware of this, but the top brass has requested help from people believed to be part of Kurama before," Gagareed said. He was in fact calmly starting to accept the situation. As he had a deeper knowledge of magic and combating Fiends, he had an understanding of just how grave the situation really was. He'd spoken up with that in mind.

Holtal stared at the Governor-General in anger, but the realization that this might be their last resort sank in. Even so, his reasoning kept him from crossing the line.

He normally carried a handkerchief to wipe away his sweat, but right now an uncomfortable trickle of cold sweat ran down his back. “I will pretend I didn’t hear that. At any rate, we should prioritize confirming our current status.”

“Understood. However, Lord Holtal, my mind won’t change. I won’t stand for Balmes becoming a puppet or vassal of another nation. And I am not the only one who feels that way.”

“I don’t wish for that either. That’s why we must confirm where we stand now, we can’t dismiss the possibility of survivors, after all.”

“Yes, that’s true. It is still too early to give up.”

The two men tried to encourage one another, but in this needlessly luxurious and large room, it sounded somewhat hollow.

As the conversation came to a pause, the communications device in the corner of the room rang out.

Gagareed showed an irritated expression as he picked up the card-like receiver, after getting Holtal’s approval. “I told you that I am in a meeting.”

“Excuse me. There is an urgent matter I must report! A survivor from the extermination force has returned. He is currently being treated in the intensive care unit.”

“—What?! I’ll be right there!” Gagareed hurled the receiver away and told Holtal that a survivor had returned.

“I will accompany you.”

“Of course. Let us go right away.”

Holtal shot up from his chair, and together they flung the door open.

“Eeekk!!”

Just as Gagareed burst out from the door, a woman who happened to be standing there bumped into him and fell over backwards. “I-I brought some more to drink...”

Considering her feeble voice, she appeared to be a food service worker, and was wearing a familiar uniform. In her hand was a tray with a decanter on top.

The liquid inside was swishing around.

“Get out of the way!” Gagareed roared.

“Excuse me!!” The woman quickly straightened her posture and repeatedly bowed.

Gagareed glanced at her and immediately took off running, not having the time to deal with her further. Holtal followed suit behind him. But as he led the way, Gagareed felt something pulling at him. That said, it was only a slight sensation that something was off, and he continued on towards the ICU instead of turning around for even a moment.

However... if he hadn’t been in such a rush, he would have surely noticed... that despite her having fallen on her bottom, the decanter remained on top of the tray. It had simply slid ever so slightly, making a small clinking sound.

The people in the hallway saw the Governor-General and the ruler running, and made way. Knowing how strict Gagareed normally was with regulations, it was clear that something serious had happened.

Upon entering the ICU, Gagareed looked down at the bed. A single man lay covered in wounds, groaning, as three Magicmasters cast healing magic on him.

While it was called healing magic, all they could really do was enhance the body’s natural regeneration. Healing fatal injuries was difficult, but with three of them, their spells were having some effect.

The survivor had several deep cuts made by something blade-like around one of his eyes. He must have been barefoot as the soles of his feet were scratched up, having gone from a bloody red to pitch black with mud.

And instead of an arm attached to his left shoulder, he had countless bandages wrapped around it.

Gagareed turned his gaze onto one of the Magicmasters. Noticing his stare, a drop of sweat ran down the Magicmaster’s forehead as he shook his head.

“Make him last.” After saying this, Gagareed bent down and asked the survivor in a strong tone, “What happened? Where is the rest of the force?”

“... Dead.”

“What?!”

The man’s voice was terribly weak, like it could fade out at any moment.

Gagareed put his hand on the bed to lean in closer.

The man mustered up the last of his strength, opened his remaining eye and grabbed hold of Gagareed’s clothing. “Wiped out by a single A... I’m sorry, Lady Gileada... let me escape.”

Gagareed bit down on his lip and muttered bitterly, “I see, well done. Leave the rest to us and focus on recovering.”

However, the man didn’t let go. His eye was wet with tears of anguish, but he kept his gaze firmly on Gagareed. “A message... from Lady... Gileada...”

“!!” Gagareed brought his ear closer to the man to not let even a word slip by.

“New species... *Devourer*.”

“—!!”

In the end, the only ones who learned of his final words were Gagareed and Holtal who heard the truth from him.

***

While Gagareed rushed to the ICU...

The woman he had bumped into outside the meeting room watched as the two men ran off. When they disappeared around the corner, she immediately looked away. At the same time she swept the hem of her uniform clean.

She put her hand on the back of her head to make sure her pinned-up hair hadn’t come loose. And then she took off walking, her long side tails swaying as if nothing had happened. There was no trace of the unrest she’d shown just moments before.



Tray in hand, once she'd confirmed that nobody was around, she focused on her right ear hidden beneath her hair. "As expected of Lord Vizaist, rushing here was worth it."

"It's all thanks to your abilities, Lady Rinne." The voice from the receiver in her ear let her know that her efforts had borne fruit. "The power of science can be pretty useful, too."

"Yes. It can't be underestimated." The worker was in fact Rinne Kimmel, who had secretly infiltrated Balmes. When she bumped into Gagareed, she'd planted a listening device on him. Of course, she'd taken measures so that it wouldn't be detected. "As we suspected, Gagareed's room had countermeasures in place against eavesdropping."

With Rinne's special eye she could peer into the room, but couldn't hear their discussion. Because of that, they'd used a simple device to listen in on Gagareed's surroundings in the ICU.

While Vizaist wouldn't have a hard time planting a bug on someone, his rugged appearance from countless experiences in the field prevented him from effectively infiltrating in secret. For these kinds of things, a service worker was a safe choice for infiltration, and a woman would have an easier time moving around, making Rinne the ideal choice for the job.

"We gathered the information we came for, so let's meet up," Rinne suggested.

"Then let's meet at the inn as planned."

With that, the communication came to an end.

Rinne elegantly walked down the hallway as a plain worker, disappearing from the headquarters as it got busy.

That night, all of Alpha's operation participants were gathered in a room at an old inn in the suburban outskirts.

The building was—unusually enough—made of wood, with an old-fashioned look of wooden grain on the pillars and walls. The hallway floors creaked when

anyone walked on them.

Vizaist and five of his subordinates, as well as Rinne, were gathered in this cheap inn, for a total of seven people having a secret meeting.

“This is a very shady situation,” Vizaist said. Based on Gagareed’s words in the ICU, Vizaist was more or less convinced that his estimation from before was correct. Unfortunately the listening device wasn’t very complex, and the returnee’s voice was so low they couldn’t hear his last words, but they’d heard a term they couldn’t ignore. They understood the severity of the situation.

Vizaist wore a solemn expression as he rubbed his chin. He focused on the room, thinking that he should hear his subordinates’ reports first.

“We’re doing well, too. There is no doubt that Balmes put together a rather large-scale extermination force. But all kinds of speculations are being thrown around as to what happened to them, making it very complicated to find out the truth,” said one member of the group.

Another spoke up. “I investigated in the suburbs and almost... or rather, practically no information at all has made it onto the streets.”

“So information is being locked up within the military headquarters. They’re covering it up from the public.” Vizaist was absorbed in thought as he put the details together. “As expected, we won’t be able to get a clear grasp of the situation like this. It’s almost certain that the outcome was bad.”

“What should we do, Lord Vizaist? Should we go confirm it for ourselves in the Outer World?” Rinne suggested.

With so few in numbers one might call it reckless, but perhaps not so much with Vizaist and his elites. Rinne was rather confident in her own abilities, and in a way, it was the quickest solution. She wasn’t overestimating her own special eye, but she was sure they’d be able to manage.

“No, let’s not. It isn’t that I doubt your capabilities, Lady Rinne, but the risk is too high with these numbers and the lack of equipment.”

“Understood.”

“That aside, I hear the deadline is until the Friendship Magical Tournament,

but are you sure about that?”

Rinne replied, “Yes. I hope to bring back some confirmed information by then.”

“That will be difficult.” Vizaist looked at one of his subordinates.

“Yes. It’s just as you expected, Captain. Security at the borders has increased, but it appears they’re not Magicmasters.”

“... Which means that they’re locking down the information so it doesn’t leave their borders. If possible, I would like for everyone to leave at the same time.” Vizaist had pulled some strings with a noble he knew to get them inside the nation, but that had only gotten them so far. Additionally, their method of entry had included illegally borrowing licenses from Balmes. It was also thanks to that that Rinne was able to infiltrate the headquarters.

He continued, “Then let us set our goal to gather as much detailed information as possible before the deadline. The highest priority goes to finding out how many Fiends there are, as well as how many of those A-class Fiends are still alive. It appears there’s a good chance that Gileada has been killed in the line of duty. The whereabouts of her remains are unknown... and don’t forget to gather information on Duncal, the ranked No. 9. Lady Rinne, please continue your infiltration of the headquarters. In the meantime, we will find a way out of Balmes.”

“Understood,” Rinne said.

Vizaist then spoke to her about a point of concern. “And Lady Rinne—contact me immediately if there are any actual moves to enlist Kurama to deal with the situation. If that happens, we withdraw at once.”

“I don’t know the specifics about Kurama, but are they really that bad?”

“Frankly put, they’re insane. They are erratic, dangerous existences. The small acts are one thing, but when they move on a national level, something will absolutely go wrong. They’re at the top of Alpha’s black list. There is no proof, but it’s possible that they’re behind many of the large-scale magic-related crimes. And their members are all first-class criminals, a truly troublesome lot. If they rely on them, Balmes might not be enough to pay the bill.”

“I will keep that in mind.”

“Whenever there is terrorism or huge magic crimes, Kurama’s involvement is always suspected. Just keep your eyes open.”

Vizaist went on to order one of his subordinates to secure an escape route. With that, he could finally breathe for a moment, and he thought to himself, *I suppose we should pray that those at the head of Balmes’ government won’t be foolish.*

He suddenly recalled something and added to his orders. “I also want to gather information on that deposit.”

“Captain, do you mean its location?”

“No, we know that there’s mithril at that spot, thanks to Lady Rinne. I want information on its size and internal structure. I don’t know if it’s a natural deposit or remains from the past civilization, but supposedly it’s a cave formation.”

Rinne quickly spoke up. “In other words, there might be Fiends lurking within the deposit. They would be undetected as it’s underground.”

“That’s right.” Vizaist had some thoughts as to why Balmes was keeping the deposit’s existence hidden. “It seems this deposit is the focal point of this incident, but there’s something that bothers me.”

“By which you mean...?” Even without Rinne’s question, everyone was already looking at Vizaist.

“Six A-class Fiends gathering in the same place is rare. Not to mention it’s a mere twenty kilometers out from Balmes’ defensive lines.”

Like Vizaist said, A-class Fiends rarely moved together. It wasn’t unheard of, but with six of them it was near abnormal. Examples did exist in history, but in those cases, there was an S-class above them that kept them in line.

That’s why—though he didn’t want to believe it—Vizaist suspected that there might be an S-class or higher Fiend among them. However, it might just be needless worry...

A few days later, they secured information that it was in fact a new species of

A-class... though a feeling that something was still off was mixed in with Vizaist's relief.

A high-ranking Magicmaster from Balmes had been the one to rate the new species, so there shouldn't be any mistakes, but it was hard to believe that a mere A-class Fiend would be able to wipe out a force with Gileada and Duncal in it.

How would he judge this situation? Vizaist thought to himself, as he imagined Alus' surly face.

He also thought of his beloved daughter. *I can only hope that Feli makes the best of this chance...*

While his daughter was brilliant, she was straightforward and clumsy when it came to matters of love. Vizaist wore a wry smile as he rubbed his chin.

He approached the window, looking out with a distant stare. That stare was directed at the neighboring nation of Iblis.

Soon, the Friendship Magical Tournament that excited all in the human domain would begin there.

Thirtieth Chapter

Exposed Truth

Cheers rocked the building even now.

The heady excitement from the magical martial arts demonstration that had just concluded in Iblis' stadium was still going strong. Traces of mana, remnants from the eye-popping magical exchange, were even now floating about.

The audience's passionate cheers reverberated through the venue. For them, it was like the demonstration was still going on. There were neither words of praise, nor voices of astonishment. There were just loud cheers like a sound explosion had gone off.

The magical martial arts demonstration was only one part of the program intended to liven up the tournament, but everyone felt the level of this year's demonstration was above those of previous years. The impressive and heated display had entranced almost everyone in the venue. And the thunderous applause continued for a while even after the seven Magicmasters stepped off the stage.

Of course, there were also some that wondered about the masked Magicmaster that had stood a head above the rest. But in the end, he was written off as being plausible for a Magicmaster from Alpha, the nation that had achieved the most out of all the seven nations. And then there was the general frenzy in the audience that swept away all of the questions.

The power of Magicmasters was the power of humanity today. And when shown magic at that level, even if one was unfamiliar with magic, the threat of Fiends felt very distant. It was a negligence born from innocence that didn't take responsibility.

Someone with a cynical point of view would say that the audience simply wanted to rely on the insurance that their tomorrow would be just as peaceful as today. That was why citizens warmly welcomed the existence of

Magicmasters who possessed power far beyond them. The audience would welcome even someone capable of such an overwhelming display of power so long as they would let them forget the threat of Fiends.

That aside... If the demonstration had a winner, most votes would go without a doubt to that masked Magicmaster. While there had been some glitches, anyone who watched the demonstration could tell that the masked Magicmaster—Alus—had an overwhelming amount of mana and precise magic construction. Moreover, it was clear who had possessed Minerva for the longest time and unleashed the most powerful spells.

However... those with a deeper understanding of magic could read a little further into what had happened.

At the end of a passage different from the ones that led to the regular stands, the top floor of the stadium could be accessed, a place where only the privileged were permitted. And right now, three people could be seen triumphantly walking through this passage. In front of and behind them were high-ranking Magicmasters serving as bodyguards, keeping their eyes open for any threats.

The beauty cheerfully walking in front was the first one most would notice. She was Alpha's ruler, Cicelnia il Arlzeit. Her long black hair gently swayed back and forth, speaking volumes of her dignity. Ever since the demonstration, she'd had a spring in her step, as if she'd sprouted wings.

Behind her was Governor-General Berwick, and a somewhat scowling Lettie.

"That Hydrange Magicmaster is bad news. Dakia Agnois, was it...? Have you heard anything about her, Governor-General?" Lettie asked.

"Only rumors. But if you're going to say that much, she must be quite skilled."

"Are you serious?! You didn't notice?"

"Do you think my senses are as sharp as yours or Alus' senses? Well, I think I'm at least fit enough for my own job," Berwick replied.

"That's just neglect, you know. You should stop doing all that paperwork and move your body around at the frontlines."

“I would just be getting in your way. I learned what I’m suited for several decades ago,” Berwick said. He looked down at his uniform, pulled taut over his excess flab, and smiled wryly as if to agree that he could stand to exercise a little more.

Despite the relaxed atmosphere, Lettie’s brow remained furrowed.

“... Was she really that bad?” Berwick asked.

“Allie managed to deal with her, but that last spell was seriously bad news.”

“That’s awfully vague.”

“What do you think I am, Governor-General? Some kind of magic nerd like Allie?” Lettie shook her head, but it wasn’t like she didn’t understand Berwick’s point. She knew her explanation was ambiguous. She relied on her senses cultivated through her Outer World missions to pick up on dangers, but it was practically pure instinct.

During the final moments of the demonstration, Lettie had gotten goose bumps from a danger she would never overlook in the Outer World. It was hard to put into words, but she tried her best to explain it to Berwick. “Well, it’s a little different from the magic I use. I guess its purpose is different. It’s definitely not a spell you’d use in a demonstration. It’s like a taboo, I guess?”

“—!! I can’t ignore that!”

“It’s just an example.”

Taboos were spells that were forbidden on a national level. Their use and acquisition were prohibited for everyone.

Looking back through history, magic had always been developed with the goal of eliminating Fiends in mind. But in the past, there hadn’t been any rules for researching magic, so it had been a chaotic, lawless field.

Back when it was difficult to test things using Fiends, the lethality and power of spells were determined by using humans. As a result, there were plenty of spells developed that indiscriminately killed on a large scale. By now, they were nearly all designated as taboo.

Simply put, taboos were spells that had the potential to be more lethal for

humans and Fiends. Moreover, spells that were deemed inhumane or that carried extreme risk were labeled as taboo. Of course, such merciless and reckless research had contributed a lot to modern magic. The present day had been built upon the darkness of the past.

Considering all of this, Lettie was saying that this Magicmaster was meddling with spells in the gray zone, close to what would be labeled as taboo.

That was why Berwick pressed her for more information with a stern look. “Tell me more.”

“It’s not the kind of taboo you’re thinking of. I’m talking about how the spell came about.”

“Your explanations are too reliant on instinct. I’m not asking you to get into the gritty details like Alus would do, just explain it so I can understand.”

“Oh, fine... the composition of magic differs slightly from nation to nation because of traditions, as well as their strengths and weaknesses. While there are differences in their tendencies, they all approach magic by trying to perfect it as best they can.”

“Yes, I know that much. By introducing your own magic formula it’s possible to alter the phenomenon that is magic to put it to various uses such as defense or offense, leading to its development for military use. And when striving for the perfect magic that will allow us to control it freely, the magic that Fiends use is one of its ideal forms. Not that that is something we can say in public.”

“I see you’ve talked about this with Allie. Well, that’s right. What I felt was a danger signal coming from that way of thinking...”

“Hmm?”

“More specifically, the spell that woman was trying to put together felt like it was built on the same basis as the spells that are considered taboo today. The construction of the spells from back then go through a unique process.”

“Even if it’s not designated as taboo, I hear that a lot of spells from that era can be useful under certain conditions. It wouldn’t be strange for Dakia Agnois to be a user of such magic.” Berwick felt it wasn’t completely impossible.

But Lettie just sighed and shook her head. “No, this wasn’t on the level of just slightly unusual. It was on the level of giving me goosebumps. Not to mention Allie using such an advanced spell to overwrite it. He used Phoenix, a spell not even listed in the spell encyclopedia. He probably chose it because it was the easiest spell that could overwrite her formula. That kind of summoning magic has very detailed information requirements, but considering that the original magic was so dissimilar, it makes sense.”

“I see. I understand what you’re trying to say. Hydrange has an ace up their sleeve, it seems,” Berwick mused.

“It’s not supposed to be possible to deliberately manipulate the rankings, but that’s only really reserved for the higher rankings. It is possible to adjust a lower rank by restricting the elimination of Fiends. That woman is probably really dangerous.”

Lettie shifted her stare away from Berwick to glance at the arena below, where the stage was being cleaned up after the demonstration.

The last object on the stage—Minerva, the almighty relic—was being taken away under heavy security.

Lettie and Berwick wordlessly watched as it left the stage. When suddenly—

“You really enjoy dangerous topics like that, don’t you, Ms. Lettie?”

Cicelnia had spoken out from the head of the party. The ruler was in high spirits, and had spun around to walk backwards like a little girl. Her steps were as light as ever.

She opened, then shut the fan in her hand, as if playing with it, and flashed a mischievous grin. “Alus is number one, and isn’t it a fine thing? You could hear the cheers for him even from here. I never imagined it would feel this good to have a Magicmaster from Alpha shine in the spotlight. I feel like I can even accept Lithia’s rude behavior with a generous heart.”

“Indeed...” However, Berwick couldn’t share Cicelnia’s exaltation. After all, this was mainly just a farce meant to cheer her up. The rulers that attended the rulers conference should already have an idea of who that masked Magicmaster was to begin with.

But by having Alus participate in that farce, she might have shown off his loyalty to her. That would put a check on those who hoped to take Alus for themselves by using the fact that he was a student.

By putting Alus' power on display, she was also able to raise the students' morale. And if that helped the Second Magical Institute to win the tournament, then it wasn't all that bad.

"Well, it is fine..." With all kinds of things to consider, Berwick's answer came out rather dull.

But with her mood soaring high, Cicelnia brushed it off with a smile... or not. "What? It sounds like you have something you want to say."

Seeing her temples twitch, Berwick cleared his throat and quickly said, "Yes, as you would expect from Alus. A demonstration it might be, but only the Singles from the other nations would be a suitable match for him."

"Of course!"

Cicelnia nodded, her cheeks puffed up with pride. She then covered them with her pale hands to keep herself from showing an unsightly expression. She might have been flushed with a sense of superiority, but her joy was far from common.

This was the first time Lettie, and even Berwick, saw her showing a cute smile befitting her age.

If it hadn't been for Alus, this wouldn't have happened, Berwick thought to himself. But having succeeded at cheering up the moody ruler, a weight fell off his shoulders.

"I should thank Alus for having him go along with my selfishness," Cicelnia noted.

"He probably wouldn't complain over something like this," Berwick said.

"I hope not..." Cicelnia toned down her innocent joy and spun around once more, wearing a disturbed expression.

Silence fell over the three for a time. When the exit came into view, Cicelnia seemed to recall something and looked that way. Before long, the silhouette of

a woman appeared in the white light filtering in through the stadium exit.

The woman flashed a smile at them. She wore a familiar apron dress. Welcoming her master Cicelnia, Rinne gave her a graceful curtsy. Waiting next to her was a black magic car.

“I heard the reports, Rinne.” A few minutes later in the magic car gliding over the ground, Cicelnia spoke to Rinne in a dignified voice.

She should have only just returned from her infiltration mission in Balmes, but she showed no signs of exhaustion. But what she spoke of in a polite tone completely changed the atmosphere inside the car.

The reality Rinne spoke of was just so aberrant that it far exceeded Cicelnia’s imagination. While it was generally what Alus had anticipated, the shock she felt at having it confirmed was extraordinary.

It sank in even deeper when Lettie grew pale at the news.

By the time the hotel they were staying at came into view, Cicelnia was racking her brain to think up plans, her expression turning to that of a realistic veteran ruler. “Berwick, the situation has already exceeded expectations, has it not?”

“Yes... though it’s hard to believe. However, the situation is indeed serious. We must make a move as soon as possible.” Berwick covered his mouth with his thick hand as he broke into a cold sweat. It wasn’t too late yet—but he could picture the despair in his mind.

“Just understanding that is more than enough, Berwick. If this is the situation, then it is clear what we must do. I will take it from here. I really am glad I took Ms. Lettie with me,” Cicelnia said in an almost strangely calm tone.

It wasn’t like she didn’t understand the situation they were in. She understood it, but the realization hadn’t quite sunk in.

To her, the Outer World was just another factor in the game. All to freely control the world, managing the nation and seizing hold of humanity’s future through the board game that was international politics.

That was a clear sign of her lack of common sense, but because of her ability

to look over everything rationally and with a cool head, she excelled as a player in that game.

The magic car carrying the four smoothly stopped in front of the hotel.

The first to step out of the door as it opened automatically was Cicelnia. Without even turning to look back, she majestically walked towards the lobby. The corners of her mouth were slightly raised, giving off a sly impression.

Sometimes not even Alus had a clue what she was thinking, and after this she would put together elaborate plans for this game in that sublime brain of hers. It could be interpreted as serious and fearless, but it would be difficult for anyone to read into the truth behind it. However, it was definitely a representation of the strange depth and complexity of her intricate personality.

“Rinne, we will be making the preparations. Make the call to the high-ranking officials from all the nations that have gathered here. We will use this hotel’s top floor. Once preparations are complete, call for Alus.”

“Understood.”

“Fufufu, it is easy to move those that have no say. The problem is how much the other rulers will butt in. But, oh well... not that I intend to let them. Lastly, is Alus. I wonder if Rinne will be enough to satisfy him,” Cicelnia said with an innocent smile. It was as if she were quietly burning with a fighting spirit, about to step into her own personal battlefield soon.

Alus wasn’t the only one about to be dragged into something no good.

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“Sir Alus... there is work to do,” Rinne, who had shown up at Alus’ hotel room, said this with slight surprise in front of the door that had opened before she could knock. “Lady Cicelnia is calling for you.”

“Give me a moment,” Alus said. He went back into his room and quickly got ready.

Not one to obediently follow after Rinne without even knowing where they were going, Alus sarcastically said, “So, how did your ‘errand’ go?”

“... I believe Lady Cicelnia will explain that herself later.”

Rinne felt her heart skip a beat. Just how much had he seen through? While thinking this, she focused on relaxing her twitching cheeks in a way he wouldn't notice.

Her magic eye—the Eye of Providence—gave her extraordinary information-gathering capabilities... to the point of earning her the title of Alpha's Eye. Yet she couldn't help but wonder if his deductive powers exceeded hers.

Rinne felt like she'd played it off well, but Alus showed no change. If anything, his sarcasm was mostly a means to vent. But venting at Cicelnia's servant was pointless.

However... Alus thought that it seemed the warning he'd given her hadn't been quite enough. If that was all it took for her to forget it, it hadn't been very impactful. He would need to give a far more shocking warning if he wanted to lock her down completely.

That said, considering the scale of the trouble she was about to pawn off on him, nobody would blame him for a few harsh words thrown at her. But nothing had been decided yet, so it was still rash to assume, Alus thought, as he followed Rinne downstairs and they headed for the lobby's back door.

Perhaps they'd cleared the people out, because there wasn't even a receptionist at the front desk. Further down the corridor were several floating machines like the one Lettie had used. They were directly connected to the upper floors where the VIPs stayed.

Rinne slid her pass across and activated the machine. Before long, the thin board Alus and Rinne stood on began rising without a sound.

Alus leaned against a transparent wall with his arms crossed. "Is the Governor-General going to sit in too?"

"Yes. Lady Lettie has already arrived as well."

Alus felt a serious headache coming on after hearing that answer. He only wished that this pain could be converted into mental damage like in the training grounds.

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“And how long are we expected to wait, Lady Cicelnia?” As Alus was making his way to the room, a man wearing the uniform of some nation’s high-ranking officials spoke out with clear irritation in his tone. He wore a bitter expression in his seat at the corner of where two tables met. In this meeting room the tables had been arranged to form a rectangle.

Seated in the chairs around the tables were the rulers of the various nations, along with Governors-General, all with a serious atmosphere hanging over them. For some nations, high-ranking officials close in position took the place of rulers who couldn’t be there.

Even if it was Alpha’s ruler who had summoned them, it was still so early it was questionable to call it morning. Of course, that made it more likely that it was a serious situation, but there had been no explanations so far.

Everyone wore their dissatisfaction on their sleeves. The man who’d spoken up was just someone who’d finally lost his patience.

“Please wait just a moment. We are still waiting for one more to arrive. It will only take more time if we start without him.” Cicelnia, who had called this emergency meeting, didn’t flinch in the slightest at the stares coming her way, as she elegantly handled the irritated man.

The topic still hadn’t been revealed, but most present assumed it had to do with the recruitment of students. All rulers and high-ranking officials with a hand in politics knew that restrictions on recruiting Magicmasters in the tournament had been loosened in the last rulers conference. It was only natural that Alpha would vehemently oppose this, seeing as how the current ranked No. 1 was now also a student, but the other nations weren’t planning on overturning that decision.

Eventually, the sound of knocking on the door rang out through the room. Seeing the greatest Magicmaster appear in the doorway, the rulers and other VIPs exchanged looks, as if they had known this was coming.

Alus, who was in the eye of the storm, simply wore an annoyed expression. He left Rinne and came to stand behind Cicelnia. “You shrew,” he quietly muttered so that only she could hear, yet she just brushed it off.

“Now then—we are finally all gathered, so let us begin.”

Alus could hear the others start to stir, and with that, he looked over his surroundings.

From what he could see, the rulers gathered were Rusalca's Lithia, Cicelnia, and Holtal from Balmes. Not all the rulers were present, but if his memory served him right, Iblis' Haorge Maizon Jecopheres was also here at the table.

Besides them were Governors-General and high-ranking officials serving in the place of their rulers. With the urgency of the summoning, Magicmasters were allowed in the room as guards. But the only Singles here aside from Alus were Lettie and Jean, who stood behind Lithia.

Lettie's usual innocent look was gone from her expression, as she simply stood there without making a stir. Even the bold—or rather insolent—Alus couldn't carefreely strike up a conversation with her.

Sitting in front of Alus was Cicelnia, and in front of Lettie was Berwick. The two had important-looking documents on the table before them, and Alus had never seen such conflicted expressions on their faces before. The atmosphere around them was also tense enough to make their faces look pale.

Cicelnia had a derisive smile on her face, but the fan on her lap remained firmly closed. After a short pause she spoke deliberately. "This is an urgent situation, so I will omit any preface. However, while the information that has come to me is all but confirmed, we still don't have a full grasp of the situation... so can I ask you to explain instead, Lord Holtal?"

"—!!"

Her demeanor was soft and graceful, but the firm will behind the words themselves was like a cold blade.

Realizing that this meeting was going to go in a completely different direction than expected, a shocked expression came over the participants as if they were struck by fear after Cicelnia's sharp opening remarks. Their eyes also turned from Cicelnia to Holtal, who sat diagonally across from her.

Seated next to Holtal was an old female general. Her eyes, wide open in surprise, slowly turned towards Holtal as if to confirm his expression. Her gesture seemed to say that she had suspected something as well, but had no

proof.

A single drop of sweat ran down Holtal's face.

Seeing that Holtal was hesitant to speak, the other participants spoke up to confirm the truth.

"What is the meaning of this, Lord Holtal? To be truthful, I don't even have an idea as to why we were called here."

"Is it like Lady Cicelnia said? Do you know something?"

"..." Faced with the stares, Holtal pressed his lips shut. Surely they couldn't know? No, this was Cicelnia; there was a chance of it. His doubts and unease were burning him up inside.

First, he'd need to suss out what they knew. Was his path of escape already cut off, or could he play it cool... Could he laugh it off? Desperately racking his brain, Holtal observed the others in silence during the brief pause.

Finally, Cicelnia, who'd grown sick of his attitude, let out a depressed sigh. "I see. Then allow me to tell everyone what I know. Perhaps Lord Holtal will be able to remember then? If I get anything wrong, you are free to correct me. Governor-General Berwick and I might just be misunderstanding things, after all."

"U-Understood," Holtal added quickly.

Without pause, Cicelnia flung open her fan, as her predatory hunting game began. "First, Balmes has begun a new reclamation operation as of two months ago, has it not? And it sent out a very large scale operation for it at that," she continued without waiting for Holtal's reaction. "From what I hear, that force included Balmes' Single Digit as well... There is no mistaking that, is there?"

"What... what about it?" Holtal carefully replied. His fists were firmly clenched on top of the table.

However, Cicelnia's next statement easily crushed the politician's crafty answer. "Have you already collected their remains?"

"...!!!" The sounds of thumps and moving chairs rang out. A disturbance in the form of noises filled the room.

Holtal, who'd had the truth pointed out to him, wasn't the only one with his eyes wide open. Lithia and the other attendees were all the same.

"What is the meaning of this, L-Lord Holtal?!"

"Just what is happening?"

Most of the people raising their voices had already lost their calm.

Holtal's face turned ghastly pale, as he tried to answer Cicelnia with a collected voice, "What might you be talking about, Lady Cicelnia? Our forces are in the middle of an operation even now. Not to mention that the mission is not just wiping out Fiends, but also reclaiming a region that is filled with them! It's not strange for that to continue over two months. As embarrassing as it is to admit, Balmes does have a lack of Magicmasters."

Cicelnia held back her smile while Holtal answered, maintaining an expressionless face as well as she could, and then she coldly spoke: "As I said... we might not have all the details, but we have conclusive evidence to back up this information. From what I hear, you have sent out additional forces after the main one. So let us hear it. When was the last contact you had with any of these forces? If you are unable to answer this, our nation may have to send inquisitors."

"Ruler or not, interfering with another nation can't be allowed..."

"But a threat of Fiends that exceeds what your nation can handle alone is? Let me make this clear, this is no longer just Balmes' problem. This can be interpreted as treason against all of humanity."

Holtal gulped. "Even if that were the case—"

Cicelnia interrupted Holtal and continued to twist the knife in. "The swarm of Fiends with at least six A-class Fiends has wiped out Balmes' forces... no, there was one survivor, was there not? But again, he's already passed away, so one returnee would be more accurate."

"How... did you know...?"

"You hurriedly arranged a reconnaissance unit, but you lost contact with them too. So far there are around 400 Magicmaster casualties... but the bigger

problem is that you haven't recovered any of their remains."

"—!! What is going on here?!" The man seated across from Holtal lost his composure and stood up. His voice was loud, with anger and fear mixed in, his emotions finally having gone beyond the boiling point.

This man with a body so well-trained he could be mistaken for a military officer was Iblis' ruler, Haorge.

Iblis shared a border with Balmes. So if the threat of Fiends went beyond Balmes alone, it would naturally reach Iblis as well. If the situation really was this pressing, they should have reported it to Iblis as well as requested aid.

If anything, after having taken two months, Balmes should have requested aid from all the nations around them. That was why there was resentment in Haorge's voice. "Don't you understand? If even a single nation is felled by Fiends, they will be able to sweep through the entire human domain with ease. Your actions spit on the international coordination and alliance in place to protect humanity. If you have any excuse—"

Haorge pressed the failure with a rough tone. However—

"Lord Haorge, now is not the time for that. We are already pressed for time." With Cicelnia's calm and correct point she managed to soothe his anger, and Iblis' ruler sat back down, though the glint in his eye remained sternly fixed on Holtal. "We still do not have an accurate understanding of the current situation. So first, we must hear the truth from his mouth. Lord Holtal, we are not after an apology. Right now we must deal with this problem, for Balmes' protection as well."

Holtal's face was sullen, and his mouth remained closed.

Now fed up with his attitude, Balmes' female general made a sudden move. She bowed so deeply she was practically rubbing her forehead against the table, and let out in a sorrowful voice, "This is the failure of a lifetime! To think the situation had gotten this out of hand! Lord Holtal and Governor-General Gagareed kept the information hidden, but... Lord Holtal, if what Lady Cicelnia says is true, then our nation is already..." She remained undaunted by Holtal's hateful stare, and made a desperate appeal with a heartbreaking expression.

Even then, Holtal did nothing, as if he was sulking.

Seeing this, Cicelnia gave him a pitying stare as if he was a child throwing a tantrum. “It appears you do not understand the severity of the situation at all, Lord Holtal.”

Several of the rulers and high-ranking officials felt that—while the situation was pressing—it wasn’t as bad as it could be. Not recovering the remains of Magicmasters after a battle with an A-class was a serious omission, though. Fiends became stronger by eating people and absorbing their mana. Even worse, Magicmasters had more mana than regular people, so the Fiends might even go up in class.

There were almost no records in history of Single Digits being eaten by Fiends. The only exception was the trigger for the great calamity fifty years ago. It was a horrifying incident, still fresh in humanity’s memory, but this situation was surely still better than that.

Compared to back then, magic technology had advanced, and there were a dozen times more Magicmasters now. Even if it couldn’t be handled at the time, in the present day there had been several advancements in AWRs and techniques.

Humanity had been pushed back by the Fiends, but lately they’d begun to strike back. That said, cooperation between the nations would be necessary... but it still wasn’t too late.

People with that kind of optimism would soon be showered with a healthy dose of reality.

“You still would have had a chance if you’d spoken up when you learned about it, Lord Holtal... Do you know about Devourers? I hear there is one among the A-classes.”

“A-A Devourer?!”

“S-Surely not!”

The shock that name engendered was on a different level from before. Especially so for those who knew of the calamity in the past. The Fiend that had caused that incident had been given the name Devourer, and was known as the

worst of the worst.

The room fell so quiet you could hear a pin drop.

In the next moment, there were some who said nothing as their faces turned pale. Others were spacing out, refusing to accept it, and some slammed the table in anger. The fear and despair at the second coming of that dark past made the meeting participants send murderous glares in Holtal's direction for his responsibility in bringing this about.

As for Alus... he would rather walk out of here. But unlike the others gathered in the room, it wasn't because of fear of the Fiend. While he had anticipated it, he couldn't help wanting to avoid this huge catastrophe that was taking shape and appearing before him, if possible. He even entertained the idea of creating a spell that would make him invisible.

One of the high-ranking officials shouted at Holtal, "You bastard! No excuses are going to make up for this!" He was so upset that he forgot to treat Balmes' ruler with the proper respect.

Another person stepped in to mediate. "N-Not yet, we don't know if this is just groundless apprehension from Lady Cicelnia. Lord Holtal, please let us hear the truth from your own mouth."

Haorge then spoke up. "At any rate, sending inquisitors will be unavoidable to confirm the truth of the situation. Though it might be too late by then." Having reined in his fury, he spoke in more of a calm, though still admonishing tone.

Balmes and Iblis were neighboring nations, and had more political interactions with each other than with the rest of the nations. The former generation of rulers had a long relationship, and they should have been able to request aid from each other.

Holtal had ended up betraying that hope, earning Haorge's ire, but as expected of a ruler he reconsidered, seeing that there was nothing to gain from it. That sturdy body and realistic, rational mind personified Haorge Maizon Jecopheres, the ruler of Iblis.

Finally, Holtal's hair and beard, which had started turning white in the past few days, swayed, and he muttered, "I... I will disclose all the information. But

as... as Balmes' ruler, I simply acted to keep other nations from intervening and making Balmes their puppet! I am aware that brought about an irreparable situation, but... even then..."

"How dare you! You've brought danger down on the other nations all for your own vanity!"

With Holtal's admission, criticism started flying from more than just one or two people.

It was Cicelnia's cold voice that cut off the heated abuse. "Everyone, I ask that you leave it at that. We can save the pursuit of responsibility for the time after the threat has been eliminated."

Once silence returned, Cicelnia turned to look behind her. "Alus, can I ask you to give an explanation on Devourers?" All the attendees followed suit and stared at Alus. "This is the current ranked No. 1, Alus Reigin. He is knowledgeable not only about Fiends, but about magic and other such topics. He will be able to explain in full detail better than Lord Holtal can."

With all eyes on Alus, not one of them showed a trace of contempt. Alpha's No. 1 had been draped in mystery until the rulers conference. By now they knew this boy had contributed to all kinds of technological developments and magic research, as well as being the current top of all Magicmasters.

However, Alus' eyes were solely on Cicelnia, seemingly asking if he could leave now instead of having to do this.

The answer he received came in the form of a silent, perfectly composed smile—a sarcastic smile asking him what kind of joke he was making.



With an entreating expression coming from Berwick as well, Alus had nowhere to escape to. He took the optimistic view that he was only called upon to supply an explanation, trying to keep his mind from being crushed by his fed-up mood.

Cicelnia and Berwick slid to the sides to make room for Alus at the table.

Alus scratched the back of his head, as he stepped forward in between them and began his explanation, as bothersome as it might be. “Well then, allow me to get straight to it. I’m sure the first thing that comes to mind when you hear ‘Devourer’ is the existence that brought about the calamity of the past. There might be some of you who don’t know the details of that, so I will briefly explain. First, when a Fiend eats a human, the purpose is to absorb their mana and add it to their strength...”

Fiends weren’t carnivores that ate humans as food to survive, Alus reminded everyone, continuing, “More specifically, this leads to the activation of their blood cells and the like. Fiends go through a more dramatic evolution the higher the quality of the mana, and the more mana they can absorb. Because of that, if an extermination fails, it is common to let the highest-ranking Magicmaster escape. But even if a Fiend is able to wipe out a unit, they can only really eat one or two at the most. The reason for this is that it takes a long time to convert the mana into their own.”

He looked around the room. “Moreover, it takes roughly twelve hours for a deceased Magicmaster’s mana to disperse. A Fiend will try to absorb as much as possible during that time. In short, a normal Fiend isn’t very well suited to digest mana. That is why they have a tendency to prioritize going after those with large amounts of high quality mana.”

Alus stopped there. The great calamity of the past had been caused by an SS-class Fiend making its way into the human domain. That Fiend had devoured the Magicmasters sent to hunt it down, and evolved at a dizzying speed, growing ever stronger. And unlike normal Fiends, it could eat more than one or two, feasting on the Magicmasters’ remains at an abnormal rate.

Ultimately, its unending appetite earned it the title of Devourer.

At that time, the human domain’s borders and regions had been vague and

unclear, turning the nations' militaries and chains of command into chaos. And the situation had gone from bad to worse when the ranked No. 1 Magicmaster died in battle against the Devourer, leading to their mana being absorbed.

The Fiends' habits were one thing, but Alus probably didn't need to explain the international situation at the time to the people in this room. Though he looked around to make sure they were keeping up. "For some reason, a Devourer's ability to feast on and absorb their prey is strangely well developed. Their equivalent of the human digestive system has undergone an abnormal evolution. The amount they can 'eat' is estimated to be several hundred times that of a normal Fiend, and while it might differ depending on the quality, they can most likely absorb over a hundred people's mana at the same time. Roughly speaking, they are estimated to go up by at least two classes after each major battle."

The faces of the attendees were shaken and pale. For most nations, an S-class was already a threat to their survival. Fiends of this class would bring about extreme casualties, and even then victory wouldn't be assured.

The problem was that the new Devourer had been an A-class when it was discovered. If it had since then eaten Balmes' Magicmasters and evolved, they would be forced to assume it had evolved by two classes.

In other words—it would equal the SS-class of the calamity of the past.

With the room completely silent, Alus bluntly continued, "Of course, we can't afford to be optimistic, but it's still too early to call the situation hopeless. The calamity devoured the No. 1 of the time, but technologies and theories on magic were still undeveloped back then, and their ranking wouldn't translate directly to a modern one. This is just a personal opinion, but the ranked No. 1 back then would probably be a Double by modern standards. That's just how much the field of magic has developed since then."

Once the murmuring of the rulers and officials subsided, Alus continued, "For now, there is only one thing that is certain. With the information we have on hand, the Devourer should be assumed to be at least an S-class. To be frank, I don't even want to consider anything higher... it would be a pain."

There was something he purposefully kept quiet about. And that was—just

like how the standard for Magicmaster ranks had changed, so had the classification of Fiends. But it wouldn't be wise to say that here.

Since the calamity, the number of new Fiend types had grown, and there were now over 500 confirmed species. At least a few dozen subspecies that differed from the usual classifications appeared every year, and information on them was shared between the nations.

Fiends were definitely evolving at an increased rate compared to the past. Whether that was because new techniques to detect them had been developed, or because the quality of Magicmasters, their food, was improving by the year—no one knew.

Some were of the opinion that there was a mysterious unknown factor involved, while others theorized it was abnormal growth due to cannibalism.

Alus had made conjectures on the matter himself, but there wasn't anything he could clearly point to and say that was it. "Anyways, Fiends with an ability to absorb a vast amount of mana are called Devourers. And there is something about that power that I need to bring to your attention. It's something that is still a theory that hasn't been scientifically proven, but it should be of use."

Everyone waited for what Alus would say with serious expressions.

"The gist of it is that—while the Devourer's ability to absorb vast amounts of mana is abnormally high, their evolutionary speed isn't all that dazzlingly fast. For now, I would like you to forget about Cronus, the Devourer this situation is reminding you of. In the process of evolution, Fiends rebuild their body and replace their mana. Pay heed to the former—the process of remaking their body. While there are differences between species, during this time a Fiend's body is defenseless against mana. It's assumed this is because the process of replacing the absorbed mana information is still unstable. For a normal Fiend it doesn't take all that long because of the amount they absorb, but Devourers take in a large amount all at once, so it takes more time."

Alus' explanation had gone deep into important information on how to recover from this situation.

At some point, everyone had leaned in and was giving the matter much thought. Vague though it may have been, they were beginning to see possible

ways of staging a comeback.

But at the same time they felt it would come at a great cost. Someone urged Alus to continue, and he nodded in response.

“The sooner a force is sent out to eliminate the threat, the better. Looking to strike while it’s in the process of resting after a ‘meal’ would be ideal. Fiends are also said to move more sluggishly during this time. The truth of it is unconfirmed, and there’s no guarantee that a Devourer would function the same way... but either way, one should aim to strike it down before it can rebuild its body. It should be possible to handle it then.”

With that, Alus brought his explanation to a close. There didn’t seem to be any questions coming his way, so he stepped back. While he was at it, he would’ve loved nothing more than to head straight for the door and leave. His leaning against the wall near the door was his way of putting up some resistance.

The reactions from the officials who had listened came in all forms. Some pinched between their eyebrows, frowning, while others shook their heads with their palms on their foreheads. All of them did their best to regain their calm. But there was no way they could relax after hearing Alus’ words.

Once things settled down, the discussions began.

“We should gather a combined force at Balmes.”

“Then we should limit participants to Double Digits and higher.”

Suggestions began popping up, but Cicelnia spoke up sharply as if to say there was still more to talk about. “Everyone, I am sure you have plenty of opinions, but first we should ask Lord Holtal to make it clear. We are better off sharing information, not to mention that Balmes has had direct knowledge since the first incident, so I am sure they have more detailed information.”

Interpreting the lack of any objections as approval to proceed, Cicelnia turned her gaze back to Balmes’ ruler. “Allow me to ask you again, Lord Holtal. Did you recover the remains of the Magicmasters who died fighting against the Devourer?”

As Holtal groaned in resignation, everyone’s eyes gathered on him in unison.

It wasn’t like they arranged it beforehand, but there was no hesitation in their motion, like it was perfectly practiced.

Of course, they were all serious. And it wasn’t just because they needed more detailed information to form a better plan. They were wishing even now that it was all just some kind of misunderstanding. Even if that wasn’t true, they at least hoped that he would say he recovered all of the remains.

However—that faint hope was easily squashed.

Holtal bit his lip in the dreary silence and quietly muttered, “There was only one returnee. We lost contact with the unit sent out to recover their remains two weeks ago.”

“Aghhh...” A despairing grunt rang out, but it was the only sound in the room. There wasn’t even anyone who attacked Holtal. Some had been thinking of how to recover from this situation, but when faced with this truth, it was all pointless.

Not to mention that most people here had little experience in battling Fiends. There were only two Governors-General present, including Berwick. But among the attendees...

A soft voice broke the silence in the room. “Incidentally, how big of a force would you send, Alus?” That voice belonged to Cicelnia, lighting up a single path in the darkness.

Alus glared at the back of her head and briefly paused on purpose.

It was a one-sided question, and she didn’t even turn to look at him. Her voice had dignity, but her tone was awfully energetic, almost as if she was enjoying the situation.

She probably wasn’t looking his way because she wanted to see the despair sink into the others’ expressions instead. They were already in a state where they had no choice but to entrust everything to Cicelnia and her voice. She seemed to fully grasp how much influence her words had on her surroundings and took delight in ruling the room.

Finally, Alus let out an exasperated sigh and answered Cicelnia. “You’ll need to gather and deploy the Singles of each nation at the very least. There’s a lack

of information on the Devourer, after all. Preferably you'd add in the Doubles and Triples to encircle the Devourer as a barrage is unleashed simultaneously, and then see how it reacts."

This was the first mention of actual measures that could be used against the Devourer, and everyone present sharpened their ears and listened closely.

"That said, there's not much time. If it gets close to the defensive lines, there will be massive casualties even if it is eliminated. You would have to prepare for Balmes to be partially destroyed. Not to mention that based on what can be expected, it's likely more than half the Singles won't return alive."

Hearing that Balmes might suffer partial destruction, Holtal was sweating profusely and unable to get a word out between ragged breaths. He'd kept things quiet out of concern for Balmes, but he never expected his actions would lead to this. He couldn't help but tremble at his own foolishness in refusing to ask for aid.

However, the other nations' officials were equally shaken. After all, even after using all of the Single Digit Magicmasters, they would possibly lose half of them. Even if they came out victorious it would shift the balance between humans and Fiends, and they'd be forced to focus on defense for the coming few years. No, there wasn't even a guarantee it would only be a few years...

Single Digit Magicmasters were indispensable to a nation. If they lost them, they might not find others on that level for the rest of their lifetimes.

Yet even in this situation, Cicelnia wore an almost abnormally calm smile. "But Alus, your example doesn't include yourself, does it?"

"..."

She took his silence as a confirmation and continued, "You would be able to eliminate it, would you not?"

"No, if it were to exceed an S-class, we'd kill each other, so..."

Berwick saw his chance and interrupted Alus, shamelessly trying to make it sound like he'd only just remembered this. "You eliminated S-class Fiends on your own during the reclamation of Zentley. You wouldn't lose so easily."

His words shook those present in the room.

“What?! That’s...!”

“You’d need at least a battalion to take on an S-class! Doing it on your own is just not...”

Several people raised dubious voices, finding it hard to believe, but they soon lost momentum. They knew that even if they had their doubts, suspecting the truth behind those statements would be the same as rejecting their only possibility.

As if representing the atmosphere in the room, one man turned to Alus. In his eyes was the earnest hope that what had been said was true. He gulped and spoke of his idea. “T-Then would the elimination not be a complete success if we have all eight Single Digits?”

Voices of support came one after the other.

“T-That’s right, if we form humanity’s strongest force...”

“We would need to form a support unit too!”

“But if he really can take down S-class Fiends on his own, why keep it a secret up until now...?”

“That doesn’t matter! We need to establish a chain of command and mission headquarters!”

The nations’ key figures nodded to one another, their eyes sparkling with a newfound hope. But in the next moment came a voice dousing that hope in cold water.

“Who said I’m participating? Sorry, but I’ll pass on that,” Alus said in a standoffish tone.

“Y-You can’t be serious?!” Iblis’ ruler, Haorge, loudly exclaimed, boiling with rage, as the other participants were equally astonished by what Alus just said.

However, Alus paid them no heed, as he appeared to mutter to himself as if gathering his thoughts, “... That said, if the Tower of Babel were to fall, the nations’ precious academic materials might get embroiled in the battles and destroyed. I suppose I couldn’t quite bear that.”

His muttering had nothing to do with the angry response he'd received. It was simply him prioritizing what was convenient and beneficial for him, through and through.

The sound of grinding teeth could be heard. His was an incredibly improper response in the moment. One should do everything in one's power for the sake of humanity, and even stake one's own life if necessary.

Alus' words differed greatly from the resolution and mindset everyone expected from Magicmasters. The rulers and figures of authority found it hard to grasp his detachment. Not to mention the severity of the crisis... They couldn't lump him together with ordinary Magicmasters. He was almost like a foreign element.

As Alus didn't apologize, or show any remorse, hostile stares began to be directed toward him. He appeared to be about to look calmly back at them, but that wasn't the case. With a cool expression, his gaze passed by them and drifted to the side, going past and completely ignoring Haorge, who'd been the first to raise his voice in anger. His eyes stopped two seats beyond him.

There he saw Jean standing behind Rusalca's ruler, Lithia. Normally, Jean would be exasperated and look to the ceiling, but his serious side came to the surface in these kinds of situations, and he managed to suppress his urge with only his cheek twitching instead.

The next person to speak was Lithia herself. "Well then, Sir Alus. Would it be possible to negotiate your participation by way of money?"

"... Lady Lithia, don't be foolish! E-Excuse me. But a proud Single Digit Magicmaster is nothing like a sellsword!"

Alus answered Lithia, ignoring the frank opinion someone had blurted out, "Lady Lithia, I have no interest in money."

"Then what would it take...?" Lithia's earnest gaze had a strange draw to it.

"Well..." Alus said, and put on a sarcastic smile, having realized that he was being dragged into a negotiation with Lithia. Or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that he'd been guided there.

Lithia stared right at him, her expression the very definition of serious, though

there was room for composure in her eyes. Those eyes firmly locked on the other party flashed with business acumen that was almost a waste on a ruler. Just one look made it clear that she had absolute confidence in her ability to negotiate anything.

That's when Cicelnia stepped in. She was able to do so, being of the same status as Lithia. "Ms. Lithia, may I ask that you leave this to us? Alus is Alpha's Magicmaster, after all." There was a smile on her face, but her mouth was hidden behind her fan. When it came to politics she always kept her mask on, so it was rare to see such a display of rivalry towards Lithia hidden in plain sight.

"This is perfect timing," she stated. "How about you leave this matter entirely to Alpha?"

"...!"

The attendees at the meeting opened their eyes wide, and Alus glared at her as if to ask what the hell she was thinking.

Cicelnia brushed his glare off and elegantly stood up. She then walked over to the surly-looking Alus and hid her mouth behind her fan as she whispered to him, "It is not going to be that bad. If you are not interested, just say so, but there will be a reward... I'm sure the Eye of Providence will be very able to stimulate your researching urges."

"...!" Alus frowned at the somewhat alluring proposal.

Seeing Cicelnia move away immediately, Alus thought she probably wasn't expecting an answer anyway. She already knew he had no choice but to take her up on her offer.

Rinne wasn't present at the meeting, but the magic eye she had would surely be of great aid to Alus' research. Not to mention that magic eyes were extremely rare to begin with, making them a very attractive field of study.

Berwick, who more or less had an idea of what kind of deal Cicelnia had offered, spurred Alus on further. "If you don't accept, the Friendship Magical Tournament will, of course, have to be cancelled."

It didn't take long for someone to criticize Berwick. "Lord Berwick, what are you saying?! We couldn't keep the tournament going regardless in this

situation!”

Berwick was well aware of how irrational he sounded. But both he and Cicelnia knew it was a valuable card to play in negotiating with Alus. Berwick had promised a rather compelling reward if Alus contributed to the tournament’s victory, after all. If the tournament was canceled, that promise would go with it.

Any person with common sense couldn’t imagine any personal reward being worth going up against the worst kind of Fiend, but for some reason it was weighing on Alus’ twisted scales.

Picking up on Alus’ momentary hesitation, Cicelnia went for the kill. “Indeed. That the tournament go on... that is the condition for Alpha dealing with this incident. I, of course, promise to take responsibility and have the Devourer eliminated. However, if you all were to disagree, Alpha will not dispatch any of our Singles to eliminate this threat.”

“You little brat, who do you think you are?!”

“There are two options,” Cicelnia said, ignoring someone’s outraged voice. “The first is the elimination of the Devourer without Alus Reigin and Lettie Kultunca. The other is Alpha handles this alone with Alus. It is not that I underestimate the Magicmasters of your nations, it is just that I believe the second option is more likely to resolve this. You are free to interpret this as the consensus of Alpha.”

After hearing Alus’ explanation and analysis of the situation, there was really only one option. But that alone wasn’t enough to quell the objections. That’s why Cicelnia decided to compromise. “However, I am sure that is not enough to dispel your worries. That is why, as insurance, let us establish a defensive line as Alpha makes its advance. And there we will have the other remaining six Single Digit Magicmasters gather.”

Perhaps overwhelmed by Cicelnia’s nonstop talking, nobody raised any objections. Instead, there were worried whispers.

“However, if Sir Alus were to be devour... no, if he were to fail at the elimination...” The whispering man almost blurted out ‘devoured,’ but hurriedly stopped himself.

But another voice spoke up. “Still, to think he would only move with the right conditions... the ranked No. 1 Magicmaster is supposed to be the guardian of humanity, but is more like a sellsword.”

“It wouldn’t be strange if he were.”

“...!!”

It was Berwick who silenced those who ridiculed Alus. He was here as Alpha’s Governor-General and wouldn’t stand for his nation’s Single Digit being mocked, but more importantly he knew what kind of person Alus was and so spoke up to defend him. “Alus was originally supposed to have retired to live life as he pleased. If he had gotten what he wished for, he would be a civilian in military employ. Though he is still kept in the military as a reserve for now...”

Alus bitterly listened to Berwick. Speaking up in his defense was a nice way to describe it, but it also reconfirmed to Alus that he was still a soldier.

“That’s why this is the best option that Alpha can offer. If Alus were to lose, it would lead to the demise not just of Balmes but the entire human domain, I’m sure. But an elimination without him would only have a fifty-fifty chance at best, and it would be over if even one was devoured. And it’s not like we’re bringing this up as a matter of simple comparison in fighting power.”

With a passion rarely seen from Berwick, he continued, “It is the truth that he succeeded in the elimination of an S-class several years ago. However, one of the reasons he accomplished it was because his fighting style is unique and centered in moving alone. Moreover, there are no guarantees that the Singles would be able to exhibit their full powers if they were all gathered together.”

Berwick briefly stopped. He wasn’t lying, but it wasn’t necessarily the truth—though it seemed to add up on paper.

Alus wasn’t exactly exuding an atmosphere of cooperation, but fortunately the rulers and high-ranking officials weren’t well versed in combat. The other Governors-General present might have their doubts, but it was hard to make any clear objections with the way things were going.

“Considering the compatibility between affinities and their coordination, there’s a good chance that the Magicmasters will only be able to use half of

their strength. We don't have much time, and aside from our own Lettie Kultunca, there is no time for Alus to get in sync with other Singles. That is why I believe it would be best for one of the nations that possess two Singles, Alpha or Rusalca, to send a force on their own. Simply comparing ranks, I'm sorry Rusalca, but Alpha is better suited. At any rate, the one able to move the swiftest to resolve this situation is neither Balmes nor Iblis but Alpha."

There was fortunately no one that objected to Berwick's long speech. That came as a relief to him. It wasn't like Alus had no experience working with another nation, but it was hard to say that it had been a good match.

Moreover, Alus' achievements were overwhelming. He had a unique quirk that made him stand out from the rest, with enough results and confidence to defeat any arguments. But they couldn't bring that up for the true reason he couldn't work with others—they didn't want to reveal Alus' special ability.

Berwick looked over the room. They still needed a push to get the others to agree, but the flow was definitely in Alpha's favor.

The suggestion Berwick needed to assure that everyone agreed came straight from Cicelnia's mouth. "Then let us say that while we gather the other Magicmasters in Balmes, we have Alpha send Alus and Lettie towards the Devourer as a scouting party. They will investigate its strength and if they conclude that they can take it down, they will change their mission from reconnaissance to elimination. I am sure Alus will be able to escape in the worst case scenario. And the information they bring back will be used by the other Singles to intercept the Devourer. Would that be fine?" she added at the end, as if to say that she had compromised that much.

It was clear to everyone that this was just sophistry. There was a very high possibility that with Alus' strength they would 'conclude' that the Devourer could be eliminated upon contact. But if they agreed, the other nations wouldn't be pressed to take responsibility.

Even without that, the other officials would want nothing more than for Alpha to eliminate the Devourer on their own. Risking their own Singles was just foolish. But on the other hand, it would also be foolish to hold back if something were to happen. There was no point in keeping strength on reserve if the world

was doomed.

The various nations' rulers and high officials were stuck between a rock and a hard place, as their two options conflicted. They still lacked information to declare one option better than the other. The nations who didn't have their Governors-General present would simply have to go along with the majority opinion.

In other words, only one person held the key. Aside from Cicelnia and Berwick, everyone stared at Alus, questioning how strong the boy—to them he was still a child—really was. That had been one of the major reasons they'd come to Iblis in the first place. They had come from far and wide just to catch a glimpse of Alus' power in the tournament.

Unlike Double Digits and below, a Single's rank represented a difference in strength. There was no ranking higher than No. 1, which was why they'd wanted to see his strength with their own eyes. Was he in a league of his own even compared to the ranked No. 2, or was the difference not all that big?

Seeing as they were having these thoughts to begin with, they were already having hopes for the future. Those present at the rulers conference the other day, as well as the officials, had heard about Alus' display of strength against Halcapdia's Galgnis.

And Alpha's Governor-General's words carried weight, so if he said Alus had eliminated an S-class on his own, he probably had.

Not to mention that Cicelnia had dragged what Balmes kept hidden into the light while they had never suspected anything, so her capabilities were worthy of their trust.

The VIPs exchanged looks, and eventually all of them firmly closed their mouths and gave Cicelnia the nod.

"Then I assume we are all in agreement."

As Cicelnia smiled triumphantly, the other female ruler spoke out without a moment's delay. "May I say something about this matter? Rusalca has Jean over here. If we add him to the scouting party, I believe the chances of success would be much higher. How about it, Ms. Cicelnia?"

It appeared to be an offer made from goodwill, but nobody knew Lithia's true intentions. According to Cicelnia's original proposal, the scouting party would make a snap judgment on site if they were going to switch to elimination mode to take out the Devourer. Exposing her own nation's Single to danger would get in the way of all the benefits the suggestion had for her.

"I appreciate the offer, Ms. Lithia. However, as Governor-General Berwick said, we need to take the possibility that they might not be able to cooperate into consideration... and not to mention, it would be a waste of time to get everyone on the same level... so I would like to decline."

Perhaps because Lithia had interrupted her with perfect timing, or perhaps because she was her rival, but Cicelnia's beautiful face distorted into a clear show of disgust. Everyone gulped at the sudden transformation, but no one dared to speak up.

"Oh? Were you not aware that Sir Alus and Jean have worked together in a joint operation before? As you might know, it was a great success. So would you not agree that there is no need to worry about their cooperation?" Lithia said in a disparaging tone, pouring more fuel onto the flames.

Cicelnia's face was frozen, but her lips visibly twitched at the remarks. She was only able to stop herself from lashing back because she saw Jean whisper something into Lithia's ear. He purposefully put emphasis on certain words, loudly enough for Cicelnia to hear them.

In the end, all it took for Cicelnia to gloatingly decline Lithia's offer was picking up on the word 'AWR' and some of the context around it. "It appears that Sir Jean will require time to prepare for battle, so why do we not end this discussion here, Ms. Lithia? We really are pressed for time."

To Alus, who remained an observer, it was a ridiculous sight. From his point of view Lithia had some thoughts on the matter, whether it be from kindness or ambition. It was clear that it wasn't just harassment on her part.

That said, it would indeed be inconvenient to have Jean accompany them, as Alus' special ability had to be kept hidden. Even an old friend like Jean didn't know about it, and he had no need to learn about it now either. Cicelnia had likely heard as much from Berwick as well.

As Alus was lost in thought, the ruler was calling for him. Looking over to Cicelnia, he saw that her dark expression had been replaced with a refreshed one, her mouth hidden behind her slightly opened fan.

“Alus, I am appointing you the captain of this mission. And... Governor-General Berwick?” Cicelnia passed the baton to the top military official as the rest went past her area of expertise.

“We’ll gather Lettie’s squad to serve as the base for your force. On top of them, we have a few dozen high-ranking Magicmasters on their way here as reserves.”

Alus still hadn’t agreed, but hearing Berwick’s words, he let out an exasperated sigh. He figured that they knew he would never say yes for nothing, and had made plans ahead of time. The research project on the Eye of Providence, the Friendship Magical Tournament proceeding as planned, and who knew what else they had in store if that hadn’t been enough. Though it was questionable if these were enough to go up against a Devourer.

As for Alus’ research, anyone who possessed a magic eye would do. But when it came to someone capable of actively helping in his research with no risk of running rampant, Rinne was likely the only good choice.

Moreover, the research on magic eyes had a higher priority than the research he was doing now. That was only natural, considering it related to his own life. Truth be told, Alus’ research on his own special ability wasn’t getting anywhere. He’d never encountered anyone that had a special ability like his own, and not only were those with magic eyes extremely rare, many of them were one-of-a-kind.

Alus unhappily clicked his tongue at Berwick, not hiding how he felt anymore. “Don’t bother, I don’t need any reinforcements. I’ll grab some from Lettie’s squad. And I’ll have Ms. Rinne cooperate, too.” This last bit was directed at Cicelnia.

“I am fine with that. Rinne’s detection abilities are the best in all of Alpha, after all. I will accept on her behalf.”

Cicelnia maintained her smile, as if this was all within expectations. Maybe even the magical martial arts demonstration had been part of her plans. If the

tournament got even more fired up, distracting the general population from the serious incident, it would be harder to cancel it. There would be no benefit to the citizens who enjoyed the peace within the walls but who panicked whenever anything happened, to learn about a true danger approaching.

Moreover, even Alus was reluctant to ruin his students' first time on the big stage. They could win or lose, but it would be unfortunate if the tournament got cancelled without giving them a chance. Not to mention that Tesfia had made a promise to Frose, the head of the Fable family. It was on the stage of the main tournament where her true worth would be tested and she could fulfill her promise by showing how much she'd grown. It was all up to her.

Aside from Cicelnia's and Berwick's suggestions, Alus was already in a position where he couldn't withdraw. Even if he was dancing to her tune, he was at least getting something for it.

Alus quickly changed gears. Though he didn't care how many strangers died, he was intrigued by a Devourer that could make such a thing happen.

The other nations' rulers and officials had left, and Alus was now in another room of the hotel that served as temporary headquarters, giving out orders. "You can't move around in the Outer World with a pointlessly large force, so we're going with the minimum numbers. We will depart in..."

He stopped there, and let out another sigh as he realized something. In the end he wouldn't be able to participate in the main stage of the Friendship Magical Tournament.

Surprised by his orders, the commanders of the reserves that arrived just a while ago stood up and spoke out. "Wait a minute. Aren't you underestimating the situation too much?"

"He's right, we've brought with us an elite force. It's only around a dozen, but please make use of them."

Their words came from goodwill, pride, and unease, but Alus just shook his head. "No, thank you. I can't bring anyone who would get in the way. A meat shield can be useful at times, but it depends on the situation. Frankly, no matter how many useless people there are, they'll just die in vain. Maybe the military

wants to cut down their numbers, but honestly, you're just a nuisance. Not to mention that Balmes' large scale operation should have reduced the number of low-classed Fiends by quite a lot. So it would be more efficient to station personnel around the defensive lines and scout the nearby areas."

Alus had cut straight to the point, but the commanders refused to back down. They fumbled for a moment at being called meat shields, but they were prepared to lay down their lives for humanity's sake.

Just as Alus was truly getting fed up, a sudden loud *snap* rang out, and the commanders turned to look in that direction.

Responsible for the sound was Cicelnia, who'd swiftly snapped her fan shut. She said in a dignified voice, "I have entrusted this matter entirely to Alus. Do you really have the time to object to that decision?"

"..." "..."

The commanders fell silent at her voice, lowering their heads and sitting back down.

Cicelnia glanced at them, and then at the rest of the room, before nodding in satisfaction when she saw there were no further objections. "I am counting on you too, Ms. Lettie."

Lettie gave a single nod, wearing an unusually stiff expression.

Thinking about it, Alus remembered she'd been called back in the middle of a mission at the frontlines. She'd told him about her discontent with that once when the two were alone. She had been so close to completing the reclamation they'd worked so hard for, with piles of her subordinates' bodies building up.

Of course, being pulled away from that was mortifying. But as for what kind of feelings she was keeping hidden inside...

Alus, who was ignorant of the female psyche, had no way of knowing.

Thirty-First Chapter

Unsettling Departure

The students participating in the Friendship Magical Tournament were staying in hotels. And before heading out on his mission, Alus quickly returned there.

He briefly thought that it was around the time for the Second Magical Institute students to wake up, but looking at the clock, he saw that it was still relatively early. Only the ones with a very proper lifestyle would be awake at this hour.

The first thing on his agenda was stopping by Felinella's room. He wondered if she was still in bed, but after considering her personality, he didn't hesitate to ring the bell.

As expected, when she opened the door, there was no sign of tiredness in her face. She had loungewear on, but even then her clothing had an elegance to it. Perhaps because it was cold in the early morning, she also had a thin cape around her shoulders. It appeared her roommate was fast asleep.

"Mr. Alus..." Upon seeing his clothes and expression, Felinella realized there was something going on right away. Her blushing expression soon turned serious as if her hunch had been right on the mark.

Alus had actually spoken to Felinella the day before about this, so he cut it short. "It happened faster than expected. I'll leave the rest to you, so put in Loki as planned. I can't take her with me this time."

"I understand. Please be careful. I will await you with reports of our victory..."

"I'm not worried, so I'll listen to that report when we're back at the Institute."

There had been a subtle pause before Alus answered. Felinella smiled and said, "Yes!" She didn't add in anything unnecessary because she understood the situation in her own way.

Alus quietly departed, as she saw him off. Her hand trembled from unease as

she pressed it against her voluminous breasts. *So it really came to this. He can't fight alongside the other students until the end... I expected as much but it's still vexing. I will definitely bring you reports of our victory, so please come back in one piece.*

She felt a prickly pain in her chest as her lonely gaze drifted across the hallway. Did her mother feel this way whenever her father Vizaist left for a mission in the Outer World? At the same time, she realized how much mental fortitude just waiting required.

Alus' next stop was Loki and the other girls' room.

Of course, his business was primarily with Loki, but he wasn't sure where to begin. He'd told Felinella that he was leaving Loki behind, but he couldn't come up with a good way to persuade her.

"—!!" However, the door opened before he could knock. He'd hesitated to peer into the girls' room with his detection abilities, so he just resigned himself to being surprised. "So you noticed."

"Of course. I am always keeping an eye on you, Sir Alus."

Alus couldn't quite be happy about that, and his cheeks twitched. Naturally he had no way of knowing the extent to which Loki did this on a daily basis. "Sorry, but I've got a sudden mission."

"Then I will get ready right away."

This wasn't the kind of discussion to have by the door, but since Tesfia and Alice hadn't shown up, they were probably still sleeping.

Alus hesitated over whether or not to enter the room, as he recalled getting an earful after stepping into their room in the girls' dorm. But they were pressed for time, and seeing the two girls asleep was an insignificant event given the bigger picture. He didn't have the time to talk for long, but he didn't think he could convince Loki at the door. Not to mention that he didn't want her to get emotional and raise her voice or make a scene outside.

"Well, let's talk inside."

Loki nodded, and took a step to the side to let him in.

The room had a lived-in feel to it, with things scattered about everywhere, though it appeared it was mostly Tesfia's stuff making up the mess.

As expected, Tesfia and Alice were carefreely sleeping in their beds.

Alice was on her side, with half her face buried in the pillow, her honey-colored hair covering her face.

Tesfia, on the other hand, didn't betray expectations. She'd kicked away most of her blanket, with some of it just barely hanging on around her waist area. It wasn't a completely unbecoming appearance, but her sleeping habits couldn't be called good by any stretch of the imagination, and her disheveled crimson red hair spread out to cover the pillow and beyond. This was a failing grade for a noble lady, but at least she wasn't snoring.

Alus quietly walked over to a chair he spotted and slowly sat down. He had an unconscious habit of always walking silently. It wasn't something he needed to focus to do. "The mission is more troublesome than I imagined, but I'll have Lettie with me, so it won't be a problem. So Loki... I want you to take my place in the tournament main stage."

"..."

Loki needed time to answer. The sound of grinding teeth could be heard behind her firmly closed lips. *Mission, mission, mission... there's always a mission...* A dark emotion took hold in her mind. She was hoping to finally be able to show her worth to Alus in this tournament. But that didn't matter now.

She felt resentment towards the top brass for forcing these difficult missions onto Alus with serious faces. And she felt a stinging pain in her chest over being helpless, not being able to go with him and help him.

"... Again?" The word escaping from her mouth expressed her true feelings.

Alus understood what Loki was trying to say. What point was there in a partner if she couldn't accompany him on missions, after all? "We'll need to split up our roles here. We need to complete this secret mission and win the tournament, so there's no choice but to split up. Not to mention that the difficulty of this mission is higher than expected. It's honestly too much for

you.”

His blunt words more than let Loki know that she didn’t have enough strength. If she was honest with her feelings, she had a ton of things she wanted to say, but she would simply be speaking out of emotion with no logic to it.

Alus himself said it was too much for her. As his partner, she knew that she should accept his decision. *But even then... even then I should at least be able to serve as a wall to protect him. Even if it costs me my life...*

“—!!” Alus picked up alarming signals from Loki and felt a tinge of unease. He didn’t know exactly what she was thinking, but he concluded that he should cut her off from that line of thought.

After a short sigh, he put his hand on her small head. “Loki, I acknowledge your efforts, but this Fiend is just bad news... but yes, your detection range is gradually increasing, so...” He considered, then spoke again: “All right, first I want you to win this tournament. If you can complete that mission, I promise to bring you along on my missions.”

“R-Really?!”

He felt like he saw a small bud blossom into a large flower in an instant.

With her eyes wide open, Loki brought her face closer to Alus’ face. As if to peer into the truth, she stared into his eyes.

He felt like he was pinned down by her intense gaze, but returned the stare without looking away.

“That’s not a lie, is it? You can’t take it back later, okay?”

“Y-Yeah, I know. I won’t go back on my word.”

“That’s a promise.”

“I swear I am not lying, and that I won’t try to pretend it didn’t happen later. But it’s not going to be easy for you to win. That Fillic guy from Rusalca’s First Magical Institute seems like he’s pretty good.”

“I am aware of that, and I know it won’t be easy... but I won’t lose.” Her declaration sounded as emotionless as usual, but deep within her eyes was an

unwavering conviction that she would come out victorious. Or perhaps it would be better described as resolve.

“I understand that you’re motivated, but don’t go too far,” Alus said, warning her not to use a taboo like back then.

But Loki turned her head away as if she took offense at this. “The situation is different from then. Besides... I won’t have to rely on a taboo.”

Alus didn’t say anything more after hearing her bold statement, and simply eased up on his stern expression.

That’s when a spaced-out sounding “Whaaat?” came from the bed.

Tesfia was on her way to waking up as she rubbed her eyes. Alice, following Tesfia’s lead, was also blinking repeatedly while stifling a yawn.

After a quick glance at the two, Alus shrugged. “Then there’s nothing to worry about. I don’t have any time, so I’ll be leaving now.”

“Yes! Please be careful. I’m sure nothing will happen, but please make sure you come back.”

“Yeah, nothing will happen. But it will take two or three days at least. You take care of things here.”

“Please leave it to me. There is nothing to worry about.”

Seeing Alus off to the door, Loki held a small fist in front of her chest.

Once he had fully disappeared from view, she spun around.

Loki couldn’t go back to sleep now. Perhaps she should sharpen her knife AWRs, or lay some plans to win the tournament...

She thought about it as she sat down on her bed. Suddenly she had a flash of brilliance, and decided she could do both of them.

That was when—

“Loki, did Al stop by? But why, when I was sleeping... You could have at least woken me up.” Tesfia must have realized he’d been here as she got her thoughts in order after waking up. Maybe she’d caught a glimpse of him and thought it was just a dream.

“It just never crossed my mind. But that drooling was probably not very pleasant to see...”

“Wha—! No way!” Tesfia wiped the area around her mouth with the sleeve of her nightwear.

Alice was absentmindedly watching the two. She had a harder time waking up than Tesfia, and was still half-asleep. Shaking her head left and right, she finally spoke up with a drowsy look to her. “Loki deeaar, why did Al come here so early?”

“He had a sudden mission. So he came here to say he would be missing the tournament, and left the rest to me, of course.”

“He sure has it rough, getting a mission now of all times...” Tesfia said, but then she suddenly realized something. “Wait! B-But what about his match; that’s really going to be rough!”

“That’s why I said he would be missing it,” Loki calmly responded to the panicking Tesfia.

“R-Right, he asked us to take care of it for him. T-Then I’ll need to do my best!”

“I was the only one he asked.”

Perhaps she hadn’t heard Loki’s response, or maybe her brain wasn’t fully functional yet, but Tesfia shot out of her bed. “Oh, I suppose so... I guess I’ll help out and do some morning training to warm up.”

“Whaaat? Can I help too?”

“Could you, Alice?” Tesfia answered her. “Alus went out of his way to ask us, so we’ll need to pump ourselves up!” She had finally grasped the situation, but Alice was still out of it.

“Ms. Alice will likely take Sir Alus’ vacated spot... so the first match will be between you two.”

“Eh?!”

“Wait, what is going on?!” Alice said.

Loki had a mischievous smile, as she watched Tesfia panic and Alice try to figure out what was going on.

Thirty-Second Chapter

Bonds and Battle

Alus' withdrawal from the tournament finals was announced just before the next match.

Tesfia and Alice were bombarded with questions, but since his absence was related to his mission, they did their best to dodge them.

His absence was a big topic of discussion at the dinner table. Alus had made his way through the tournament as a promising competitor, so some people were wondering if he'd gotten sick, but all the two could say was that they would find out later.

Based on what they heard from Loki, Felinella knew about the situation. Loki also said they would avoid pointless confusion by not saying anything, and leaving everything to her.

After changing into their match uniforms, the three showed their faces at the venue headquarters.

Five had made it to the main tournament. The third-years had been wiped out. The second-years were Felinella and the subleader, Illumina. The first-years were Alus, Tesfia, and Loki.

But the lack of Alus was a cause for concern. That's when Alice had shown up, in her uniform and ready to go, confusing the other students.

After looking over everyone at the briefing, Felinella spoke up to alleviate the confusion. "Everyone, today is the last day of the tournament. Victory is on the line, but having come this far, I have nothing more to say. Illumina and I will do our best too. And... as I am sure you may have noticed, the first-year student Alus is absent for various reasons."

Felinella's report caused a stir, with some looking astonished, and some even wondering if he'd made light of the entire tournament and was skipping out.

She continued, to curb the rumor from spreading: “Please don’t misunderstand. Mr. Alus really wanted to take part in the tournament. I can’t tell you the circumstances, but he’s not missing the tournament by choice, I want you to at least understand that. It is also in part thanks to him that we have come this far. So let’s not put his efforts to waste, and welcome him back with good news. I would like to ask Ms. Alice to take his place in the main tournament.”

There were no objections. In fact, those who’d seen her matches all agreed there was no one more suited. Some people who didn’t understand Alus’ true strength even felt this was for the better.

With Felinella’s help, Alus’ absence ended up not earning him the ire of his classmates. But there were still some who had doubts...

“I wonder what happened. Do you two know anything?” Ciel Faleno, a girl resembling a small animal, nonchalantly called out to the two girls.

She had unfortunately lost in the semi-finals of the preliminaries. The cause of her defeat was exhaustion from successive battles. If she had been in perfect form, she would’ve been able to put up a better fight. But she was still rather satisfied with her results, so she wasn’t all that frustrated.

Tesfia could only force a smile at Ciel’s innocent and frank question. “Well, I guess you could say I don’t know?” she answered, scratching her cheek and looking away.

“What’s with that? But if Alus got serious, he definitely would have won.” Ciel didn’t know about Alus’ ranking, but she had good instincts. Having watched him during the training, she was all but convinced of that. At the very least, from the point of view of someone who had made it to the final match of the preliminaries, Alus greatly exceeded the abilities of an average first-year student.

“He has a tendency to get caught up in problems, so I guess it can’t be helped,” Tesfia said, and Ciel nodded in return.

Meanwhile, Alice was unable to stand the pressure of being a replacement and complained about her situation. “Awww, hearing Ciel say that Al would’ve definitely won is putting a lot of pressure on meee.”

“Ah! Thinking about it, the two of you are going to fight first. There’s no wins by default in the main tournament, huh?” Ciel noted.

“Yeah. I’m used to fighting against Fia, so that’s fine, but in front of an audience is...” Alice let out her unease with a stiff expression.

In the main tournament, the four arenas were combined into one, and all of the audience would be watching. Of course, having the entire arena as a field would be too wide, so instead there was a circular stage in the middle. Even then, it was twice as big as the arenas they’d fought in before.

On top of that, Alice had another thing that was bothering her. And that was her new AWR, Shangdi Fides.

For better or worse, the AWR she’d been given stood out, and it put more pressure on her. Its golden color shone and she’d earned a lot of curious stares from the audience. And worst of all, she didn’t have the time now to get mentally prepared.

After all, the first bout of the day was Tesfia versus Alice. In the main tournament, competitors from the same institute would have to fight.

“Once we start, it’ll be the same as always.”

“You’re the only one it would be the same as always for, Fia,” Alice said, frowning.

Ciel agreed with Alice. “Being that calm is amazing. I’d be so worried about messing up for everyone to see... I’d blank out during the structural stage... Well, you’re amazing compared to me too, Alice.”

“I’m just surprised that you couldn’t even clearly remember that stage, Ciel. Well, that’s not something you think about. Anyways, once the match begins you’ll be fighting as normal too, Alice,” Tesfia told her. “I don’t think it’ll be any different than usual.” She had watched Alus give Alice a sermon after the third round of the tournament.

Moment by moment, the time for the match drew closer. And the three of them continued talking in the waiting room until then. They mostly talked about their matches, but Alice was thankful the time went by in a flash.

Loki sat in a corner of the waiting room doing a final check on her AWR. She enchanted it with mana, giving it a light swing. She looked to be maintaining her AWR while also focusing her mind before her round.

“Okay, it’s almost time. That’s enough talking. It’s time for you to head to the arena.” Felinella showed up and put an end to the escapism in the form of casual talk.

There was no bench at the main tournament venue, and once they left the hallway the stage was right in front of them. Because of this, Tesfia and Alice both headed for the stage with their AWRs.

Tesfia’s entrance was on the opposite side of Alice’s, so they soon parted ways.

She circled around the first floor and other competitors made way for her, while sizing her up. Of course, that didn’t mean anything to her. She experienced the same thing at the Institute all the time.

Eventually she saw a dim hallway leading into the arena. Tesfia awaited her turn in the light just before the entrance.

To be honest, she was feeling the most pressured by this match. She wanted her mother to see how much she’d grown with her own eyes during the short amount of time they had. Depending on the results, she might even end up having to leave the Institute. She’d put up a brave front for Alice and the others, but she felt a tremendous amount of pressure now.

As she shook away her idle thoughts, she realized this was also a sacred match of sorts. She and Alice had been encouraging each other to improve, and now she would be having a serious fight against her best friend.

Tesfia was able to motivate herself by thinking about this. She took deep breaths and focused her mind. After a few breaths, she could feel the unease in her heart gradually fade away.

She pressed her back against the wall and closed her eyes to calm her nerves even more. She’d always had a partner she could compete against in earnest who was close to her. Who she was now—was only here because of Alice. If she’d been on her own, the current Tesfia Fable wouldn’t have this mental

fortitude and skill.

She'd come to the Institute along with Alice so they could become Magicmasters. The time they'd spent together was surprisingly short, and they were still only at the starting point. But that was why—

"I can't lose." Tesfia had a pure desire not to lose. Just for now, she would forget about her family, her mother, and focus solely on fighting against Alice with all of her might.

And finally—

"First year division, first round of the main tournament. From Alpha's Second Magical Institute, Tesfia Fable, versus Alpha's Second Magical Institute's Alice Tilake."

The two stepped out into the arena.

Alice felt her knees grow weak when the two girls were showered in cheers.

Even Tesfia had trouble walking calmly. It wasn't so much her nerves as it was being overwhelmed by the atmosphere. At the sight of the two, the tens of thousands in the audience all erupted in unison. Based on their matches so far, the high expectations the audience had for them could be gleaned from how loud the applause was.

So far I've won a little over half of our fights. Tesfia quietly regarded Alice who was stepping up to the stage from the other side. She didn't have a perfect memory of their win-loss records, but she knew she'd won a few more times than Alice. She'd also barely hung on to win during their mock battle in front of the principal.

That said, there wasn't much difference in their abilities. In this tournament, they'd gathered more experience in each match they fought. So the records from a week ago were meaningless today.

Tesfia shifted her glance towards Alice's hands. The biggest difference of all was the new AWR she had. Alice had also learned new magic, so Tesfia's chance for victory was probably fifty percent or even less.

But a match isn't about the numbers. Trying to calculate my chance for victory

is pointless.

She shook her head to rouse herself, telling herself that this wasn't like her. Her hand unconsciously stroked the sheath of her katana.

She'd fought Alice countless times, but it felt completely different in a serious fight. Tesfia could feel herself getting excited. It was thanks to them being so close that they could go all out without holding anything back. They knew what cards the other had to play—but it wasn't like they knew everything.

Sorry Alice, but I'm going to win this! Tesfia thought, and pumped herself up.

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Meanwhile, Alice awkwardly walked to the center of the stage.

Her AWR reflected the light, making each step feel heavier. From what use she'd made of it, this new AWR was excellent. It was so high performing that she might even assume that her own abilities had greatly improved. Even from the first battle, it perfectly fit in her hand like an old friend.

While she was happy about that, she also felt vexed knowing she wasn't able to make full use of its power yet. The AWR's hidden potential made her realize her own powerlessness.

The magic that Shangdi Fides unleashed in response to mana being poured into it was rough and forceful, as if releasing the pent-up frustration that came from not having a worthy user. Having gotten the hang of mana control, Alice could feel its resistance all the more clearly. It was being very unmanageable. At the moment, with the spells cast almost ignoring the directions Alice was giving them, it was a waste of potential.

The two reached their assigned starting positions, and the only thing in Alice's view was Tesfia.

The two girls stared straight at each other.

Both were excited over getting to fight for real after all their mock battles against each other. The emotions welling up inside them made them raise the edges of their lips into smiles.

The match couldn't start soon enough. And their bodies were aching, eagerly

awaiting their chance to go all out. With their minds focused solely on one another, the cheers had begun to fade into the distance.

A defensive barrier that had been raised was part of the reason, but another was their sharpened minds that concentrated just on each other.

For a moment a tense silence fell over them.

The starting signal of a loud buzzer rang out as their focus reached a peak.

Without a moment's delay, they both built up their magic formulas and swung their AWRs.

‹‹Icicle Sword››!

‹‹Shiylereis››!

Both unleashed their spells at the same time.

A sword of ice and a slash of light clashed in the center of the stage, creating a powerful shockwave. The cold wind carried by the wave kicked up dirt, and coupled with the deafening noise, it was clear just how potent both spells had been.

The audience raised their fists and voices to cheer. This flashy opening electrified the audience.

Both sides appeared equal... but that was only how the untrained eyes of the audience saw it. The contestants concerned, however, could pick up on the slight difference even though they had cancelled each other's spells out.

"That's Fia's specialty for you. You kept it under control even after putting more mana than usual into it... maybe that's just the difference in constructs," Alice muttered to Tesfia. Yet unlike the past, she now had an AWR capable of competing with her. She should be lamenting her own inadequacy instead...

"You too, Alice. I never thought I'd lose out in a match of strength." Tesfia wasn't letting her guard down, but she hadn't imagined that her advanced spell Icicle Sword would be cancelled out.

Tesfia's chance to win lay in her amount of mana. At the very least, the first exchange had been more taxing on Alice. So Tesfia, who had more mana from the start, held the advantage in that sense.

But it wasn’t like Alice hadn’t realized that.

Even then, it doesn’t change what I have to do... here she comes! As Tesfia anticipated, Alice moved in to make it a close combat battle. Seeing that, Tesfia poured mana into her katana and thrust the blade towards the ground.

The tip sank into the ground without any resistance. *‹‹Freeze››!*

Streaks of ice radiating out from the katana moved to intercept Alice. In the past they had been thin lines, but now they were thick and complex, covering a wide area like a net. The freezing strength for whatever it caught hadn’t improved, but the range it covered had seen incredible growth.

I guess Fia saw right through me...

Both were aware that Alice had the upper hand in close combat, which was why Tesfia had stopped her.

Just before the web of ice caught up to her, Alice thrust her spear into the ground to jump high up. She spun around in the air and pulled the spear out of the ground, using the spin to put even more force into her swing.

“‹‹Shiylereis››” The crescent-shaped slash attack assaulted Tesfia while cutting through the ice.

“Kuh!” Tesfia pulled out her katana and rolled to the side. After stopping her roll with her hand, she cut across the air with her katana.

“‹‹Ice Bullet››—Fire!*”* Three fist-sized blocks of ice were created in an instant, and Tesfia fired them off as Alice landed. Cracks ran down the ice blocks.

“—!!” The fist-sized blocks scattered into countless fragments the size of a fingertip and rained down on Alice. Her eyes shot wide open with astonishment. She wasn’t surprised by the spell itself, but rather wondering when she’d learned it. Tesfia had constantly complained about how she couldn’t use it in their training.

But back then, she’d fired off five blocks of ice. Alice recalled Ciel asking Alus the trick to learning Thorn Pierce. There was no reason to simply copy the spells recorded in the spell encyclopedia. It was possible to learn the magic itself by arranging it somewhat, even if it was at a lower level.

Even as she came to understand what had happened, there was no sign of panic in Alice's expression. She looked composed even as the countless shards of ice scattered before her. Of course, she wouldn't be able to fully dodge them all even if she tried.

However—

"‹‹Reflection››" The tip of Alice's spear emitted light. In an instant a veil of light appeared before her. And the ice pieces crashing into it were sent back the way they came.

This time it was Tesfia's turn to be astonished. She'd more or less understood that they'd come flying back, but in the past Alice had only been able to reflect using the blade part of her spear.

"Wha!! I—*‹‹Ice Wall››*" She hurriedly buried her katana into the ground and cut it up in one go. A thick lump of ice was created, following the trajectory of the blade. It wasn't all that big, but it was enough to cover her body as the ice was turned into a wall.

Tesfia pushed her back against the ice wall and kept her head low, preparing for the oncoming storm. And it came. The reflected ice shards crashed into the wall, shaving away at it. Her own attack was now breaking down her own wall.

On the spur of the moment, Tesfia made herself into a small ball. Cracking sounds rang out. There was no way she could peek out from the wall considering the piercing noises. The few seconds of hailing bits of ice felt abnormally long, and she could only pray her wall would survive.

Once the raging counterattack came to an end, Tesfia felt a chill run down her back.

"—!!" Kicking off the crumbling Ice Wall, she dove forward.

And the tip of the spear came flying straight above her.

Turning around, Tesfia saw the ice wall get cut clean through, like a hot knife through butter.

Alice directed a smile her way. "Don't think it's going the same as before, Fia," she said, and lightly jumped over the lump of ice, landing on the other side. She

drew her spear and closed in.

“That’s my line!” Tesfia braced herself and draped her sword in chilling air, fighting back with a blade of ice. It was a spell known as Ice Blade.

Tesfia met Alice’s side sweep with a downward swing.

Metallic sounds reverberated in their ears as their AWRs flew backwards, as if they were going in reverse.

The knockback could lead to a big opening, but the same was true for Alice as well. Tesfia decided to use force to swing her katana back down again.

“—!!” But then she realized the handle with three circles attached to it was closing in on her. Instead of going against the power of the katana flying backwards, she used it to backflip. The tip of Alice’s spear passed just over her head.

Just like Tesfia, Alice had gone with the recoil and spun her spear around. As a result, she’d flipped her spear around backwards and attacked with the back.

This was their difference in close combat skill. Aiming for where Tesfia would land, Alice kept her spear in place and took a step closer, sliding her hand towards the edge of the handle. Readjusting her grip, she closed in on Tesfia, swinging her spear from a backhanded slash to an upward one, and from upward to downward.

Tesfia was just barely able to pick up on the incoming attack as she spun around. Just as she landed, she firmly held her katana horizontally with both hands, attempting to defend herself. However, the heavy spear had a lot of momentum behind it, and it forced her to her knees. In that posture, she was limited to a battle of strength.

This continued for a short while.

“Fia, feel free to surrender anytime.”

“Y-You must be joking. Things are finally getting... interesting!”

As they talked, Alice’s spear was gradually being eroded by the Ice Blade. And as ice began to cover the blade—

Tesfia gathered mana in her right leg and stomped on the ground. The next

moment, the cold air around her feet spread out and created frost.

"—!!" Alice felt the danger prickling on her skin and jumped backwards.

But nothing more happened.

"Gotcha." Tesfia gave her a childish smile, and a beat later Alice caught on.

"You tricked me..."

Tesfia hadn't been in a position to move as Alice focused on pushing her spear down. And while on the verge of losing the battle of strength, she worked out a plan. She focused her mana around her legs and used magic to freeze her surroundings, which Alice quickly reacted to.

Thinking that the attack would come from the ground, she'd jumped back to evade... but she'd been completely fooled.

"It's not like I'm *them*, so I can't use magic without incantation unless I use an AWR."

Hearing that, Alice could only smile wryly. Having to deal with extraordinary opponents like Alus and Loki on a daily basis made her overly cautious, and she'd reacted purely by instinct. Even though it was easy to see through if you thought about it for a moment.

The move had only been to escape from her situation; besides, with her abilities, Tesfia would only be able to cover the area around her legs anyway. As she thought this, Alice also realized that the distance between them now wasn't all that favorable for her. Considering the difference in total amounts of mana, she wanted to conserve hers as much as possible, bringing things into close combat where she had the upper hand, but now she'd gone and left her ideal range by herself.

At this range, Tesfia had the advantage with her magic. But Tesfia wasn't particularly optimistic about the current situation. She'd been forced to use a lot of magic already, so while she might have had more mana to begin with, there probably wasn't much difference between them now.

That wasn't counting just the number of spells they could use either—there was that AWR to consider.

Alice herself had said that it suppressed the consumption of mana when casting spells through it.

Reflection really is a handful. The primary reason Tesfia had the upper hand in their match records was because Alice had few spells at her disposal. But even then Tesfia wasn't dominating their win-loss records. A big reason for that was Reflection. In battles between Magicmasters, it was a truly troublesome spell.

A drop of cold sweat ran down Tesfia's cheek as she thought of Alice's spell one day being able to reflect Icicle Sword.

Reflection required its user to spend more mana than what had been used for the target spell. Because of that, forcing Alice to repeatedly rely on it would eventually lead to a victory, on paper at least, but things weren't that simple in reality. The threat of Reflection was that the user could imbue even more mana into the reflected spell.

In other words, reflected spells could hold even more power and speed when fired back. With enough mana to spare, the spell could be fired back with twofold power.

Tesfia frankly wasn't confident that she could survive the counterattacks until Alice ran out of mana. Even if she fired off Icicle Sword, Alice might be able to easily avoid it.

Meanwhile, Alice saw that Tesfia was hesitating over her next move and moved first. She ran towards Tesfia while zigzagging. *I'm at a disadvantage in a drawn-out battle. Fia's probably going to try to make me use up all of my mana from a distance, but I won't let that happen.*

Alice poured mana into her AWR and secretly readied a spell to be cast at any moment.

As expected, Freeze spread out from Tesfia just as before to slow her down.

Alice jumped diagonally to the side and slashed with her spear in the air. The ice on her blade burst away as another Shiylereis was fired off. Seeing how she'd easily torn through the Ice Wall before, Alice knew that Tesfia didn't have the means to fight back against the spell, so she unleashed it in a wide arc.

Tesfia's only ace, Icicle Sword, took a moment longer to cast than Shiylereis.

She gritted her teeth and dodged to the side as Alice had expected. “—!!”

But Alice’s attack didn’t end there. One of the spear’s circles was floating in the air and slid out to appear from behind Alice’s back. Inside the circle was concentrated light before a spell was released, forming a small vortex within the ring.

Aiming for where Tesfia would land, the ring let out a slash attack. The small circle was an AWR of its own with the ability to copy the magic formulas cast by the spear itself. It had been on standby behind Alice ready to cast a copy of her spell.

The arc of her spell was bigger than the first time, meaning that there was more mana put into it. Before long, a loud explosion rang out, kicking up dirt and covering Tesfia from view.

Alice was convinced of her victory and calmly landed. But she didn’t let her guard down yet. With her spear at the ready, she waited for the cloud of dust to dissipate.

And from the dust—“Now you’ve done it.” Accompanying a cutting sound of something heavy being swung, the dust was flung to the side.

There was no way that Tesfia’s sharp katana could scatter the cloud of dust like that. It must have been done by something larger.

“...!! You’re going to make me jealous,” Alice muttered, as she saw Tesfia appear from the dust.

What Alice saw was a massive sword of ice, far longer than the katana, pointing to the side after having been swung. Alice’s slash had likely been blocked by that sword.

But it wasn’t like Tesfia was holding it in her hands. She was still wielding the Fable family’s treasured sword. The massive sword of ice was fixed in the air by her side, obediently following her orders, and was standing ready for its next move.

Just what had Tesfia done... So far, she’d only ever used Icicle Sword as a projectile weapon, like an arrow pulled taut, frozen in the air, ready to be loosed at a moment’s notice.

Yet just now, she'd used it as a second floating weapon that traced the motions of her katana instead of shooting it off.

Alus had felt that Icicle Sword had room to evolve, and this was one such evolution.

Incidentally, it wasn't shaped like a throwing weapon, but rather in a form that made it able to swing around. But its blade alone was almost three meters long. That kind of massive ice sword floated next to Tesfia, who stood with her katana ready. It was like an abnormal kind of dual wielding.

It was a method of use she'd come up with on the spur of the moment, but it was in Tesfia's nature to face adversity with invention.

Even Alice was envious of that side of her. She'd received a lot of credit for her talent in magic at the Institute, but it all faded before her best friend. Alice had put in just as much hard work as Tesfia, but even then she couldn't reach her.

She'd always known deep down that her redheaded friend would come up with something in the eleventh hour. It often ended in failure, but Tesfia would also show unknown possibilities just as often.

Thinking on it, Tesfia had learned how to use Ice Blade during the incident with Godma Barhong. She hadn't done it through knowledge, but through sheer intuition.

If Alice was told that that was just the difference in their talents as Magicmasters, there was nothing she could do. She'd just have to give up. But no, she couldn't bring herself to do that. Tesfia had something she didn't, yes, but that didn't mean that she had all of Alice's merits.

Alice stared straight at Tesfia. Controlling the golden spear's remaining circles, she brought them to her side. She kept them ready to activate the copied spell at any moment. However, she didn't fire Shiylereis from them. The light gradually faded from the circles, and they returned to their original state.

Cautious of what Tesfia would do next, Alice decided to not pointlessly expend mana.

That would prove to be meaningful in the coming phase of the battle.

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Meanwhile, it was actually Tesfia herself who was the most surprised by this situation. She'd been completely absorbed in the fight, but she hadn't done it by intention. She simply believed that she'd be able to deal with Alice's spell without using advanced magic.

Halfway through, she'd realized she wouldn't be able to cancel it out with a projectile, but she'd had no other choice and forcibly cast it anyways.

However, just keeping the sword of ice floating in the air consumed quite a lot of mana. But thanks to Alus' repeated training, she was able to maintain it.

Tesfia glanced at her giant sword of ice, and flashed a wry smile for an instant. *Talk about an ugly Icicle Sword.* Moreover, having focused on conjuring it up as quickly as possible, its blade lacked sharpness. If anything, it was more of a blunt instrument utilizing its weight to crush its target.

Now that she'd calmed down, she might be able to deliberately alter its coordinates, but considering the mana consumption, it would be difficult. It was likely she wouldn't last for long with it out.

But strangely enough, Tesfia felt the spell was responding well to her innate disposition and rhythm, like a perfect fit. In fact, she felt quite intimate with the sword of ice, as if it was the sword she'd been using for the past ten years.

Tesfia had no way of knowing, but this use of the Fable family's Icicle Sword was its second form, and one of the secrets passed down through generations.

However, she was still in the middle of a match. So she stopped her thinking there and sharpened her senses further, willing her body to remember this sensation. She wasn't really the type to learn by thinking anyway. She preferred to remember things by instinct.

Desperately racking her brain, she tried to remember what had gone through her mind when she'd blocked Alice's attack. If she remembered correctly, she'd put the arm holding the katana in front of her face to cover her... and the ice sword moved in response to that.

In that case... Setting only the magic's origin coordinates, she linked it up to the movement of her katana. Just like when she'd practiced moving her mana

around, she focused on the mana in the sword, and tried moving it like it was her arm.

And when she did, the ice sword tilted slightly, just as she had imagined. The sensation was sluggish, but it did feel like another part of her body.

This will be pretty useful! Tesfia nodded at the results and instinctively clenched her fist. It felt like the sword might crumble away if she let her guard down for even a moment, but that was fine. It was still useful, and would be of aid to her in this fight.

Since she'd cast it on the spur of the moment, there was no guarantee she'd be able to do it again. At any rate, there was no doubting anymore that her training on the basics of mana control under Alus had been a big influence in using this new move. *I guess he can just see right through me.*

An image of Alus sarcastically smiling at her popped into her mind, as she realized that he might have had her do this training just for this purpose.

Taking a deep breath, Tesfia spun the arm that held the katana around, and the sword of ice slowly moved around to her other side. It felt like the ice sword and katana were one and the same.

Having confirmed this, she grinned at Alice. "You really let me have it before!"

The giant ice sword emitted enough cold wind to cover its wielder's feet. Immediately after the sword of ice reached its position, Tesfia took off running. With great speed she closed the distance.

But before she reached Alice, she hit the brakes. Right now her ice sword was within range of her. Swinging her AWR sideways, the giant ice sword soon followed her movements and swept in a horizontal arc. The pressure from its sweeping motion was accompanied by cold air.

Even though she was controlling it through mana, she felt like her body was being pulled by the weight. She wouldn't be swung around if she could constantly adjust the coordinates, but she wasn't capable of that yet.

With her fighting skills Alice could probably dodge and counterattack—but she chose to retreat instead. She'd assessed that just being grazed by that powerful swing would determine the outcome. Even from a distance, the force

of the swing was enough to give her a headache. The ice sword's cold air probably had the same freezing effect as the spell Freeze. She could feel it in her body, and the arena's system must have decided that it was damage and converted it to mental damage.

Staggering slightly, Tesfia still did her best to brace herself. Even though the ice sword was only replicating the movements of the arm that held the katana, just maintaining it drained her mana. *I'm not going to be able to keep this up for long*, she told herself, and readied her katana.

"It's my turn now." With a fearless smile, Tesfia took off running again.

Perhaps because she felt close combat was her only choice after seeing Shiylereis get blocked, Alice followed suit.

In an instant the distance between them shrank—and the sword of ice and golden spear clashed.

The ice sword was too large to maneuver properly in close combat, but it still stood ready to strike at any opening. Alice had no choice but to devote some of her attention to it.

During their clashes, Tesfia stumbled. And before long, Alice's thrust scratched her cheek. But it wasn't a direct hit that would end the match right away like usual. It only looked close because Tesfia used the bare minimum of motions to avoid the tip.

While ruining her posture by completely avoiding it, she used her katana to ward off the follow-up attacks, and when Alice pulled her spear back, Tesfia used that opening to swing the ice sword.

Alice ducked to avoid it, but a kick came flying towards her abdomen. She used her spear to block it. Both sides were driven away from each other.

Aww geez, Alice griped to herself. Tesfia's ice sword was seriously troublesome. It wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that its appearance had completely turned the tables.

Even though she gritted her teeth at the unfavorable situation, Alice had a happy-looking smile on her face. She was enjoying herself, getting a good feel for how much they'd improved on this big stage. There was no way either

would find such a great match outside of going up against their best friend.

However, that aside... Alice thought that a single direct hit would settle the match. Even if she tried to block it, any attack with momentum behind it would send her flying and might deal decisive damage.

Sensing Alice's momentary hesitation, Tesfia swung down her AWR. Following suit, the ice sword cast a shadow on the ground as it assaulted Alice.

With a loud *bang*, the ground shook as the sword carved a big chunk out of it and kicked up dirt.

Alice had dodged it by a hair's breadth, but she wouldn't have come out in one piece if she'd taken a direct hit. Even though it would've been converted into mental damage, the visceral sound would have sent shivers down the spine of anyone who heard it.

She glanced at the hole in the ground and spotted the cold wind mixed in with the cloud of dirt. The dirt at the bottom of the hole had frozen over.

She's using a spell on this level... Alice looked over at Tesfia and suddenly realized something. Before long, it turned into conviction, and she nodded to herself.

Right now Tesfia appeared to have the advantage, but in reality there was no composure in her expression, and she was glancing over at her ice sword.

She was maintaining an ice sword of that size. Tesfia probably tried to hide it, but she was still breathing roughly. Alice was out of breath too, but at the moment Tesfia was expending far more mana.

Fia is pushing herself pretty far too.

That meant the battle would be decided before long. Neither side had much mana left. After their back and forth, Alice likely had more. But she would need to take a considerable risk herself to overcome the sword of ice.

She actually had an idea for how to handle the sword. She'd been given a lecture on it when Alus gave her an outline of the AWR.

However, Alice hadn't really had the time to experiment with it, and Alus himself had said she wouldn't be able to handle it the way she was right now.

But considering the situation, she was happy he had told her about it.

It's better to bet on this small chance than to not do anything at all and lose.

Alice wasn't normally the type to go for all or nothing plays, but she wasn't in a position to avoid it anymore. She wasn't even sure if she could buy any more time against Tesfia with the way she was now.

She knew it would be difficult. Yet there was only one person standing here now, and that was her. She couldn't trade places with anyone else, and she definitely couldn't back down now. That's why she resolved herself. She was the only one who could make her own path.

The golden spear was one thing, but fixing the three circles in position, ready to attack, would drain her mana. However, after seeing her attack from before, Tesfia would be forced to stay on guard for it, making it pretty effective to keep her in check.

Alice took this into account and affixed the circles above her. And she readied herself to fight up close once more, knowing how reckless it was. Though she had the advantage in a simple melee fight, if she chased Tesfia too far and took a hit, that would be the end of her. She might not be able to get all the way through Tesfia's defenses, but she was fine with that.

Tesfia beat Alice to the punch and attacked first.

Alice dodged the large swing from the ice sword and parried the katana while counterattacking. Her goal was to gradually inflict damage with counterattacks and exhaust her. By building up damage and having it be converted into mental exhaustion, she could strip Tesfia of her concentration, making her unable to maintain her magic, but...

Alice's best friend would always break through her limits when cornered. She knew her friend's potential, so her plan was just wishful thinking. Which was why she didn't have high hopes...

Then again, being able to fight to their hearts' content, and use everything they had against one another, was what she truly wanted.

The two girls stared at each other. Ignoring their heavy breathing and exhaustion, they refused to let their eyes off the other. Both instinctively knew

that letting their guard down for even a moment would be fatal.

An intense back and forth began once more. Neither Alice nor Tesfia were simplistic enough to step in too far in hopes of landing a critical hit. Alice's spear was moving faster than ever before. And Tesfia was closing in on the limits of her ability to maintain her Icicle Sword.

In their clash Tesfia took scratches and grazes, which were converted into a dull mental pain. Even now she was doing the best she could to maintain her focus and put up a good fight.

The same was true for Alice, and it wouldn't be strange for either to lose her focus at any moment.

It was truly a battle on thin ice. Everyone in the audience held their breath as they stared at their exchange. They didn't move a muscle and couldn't take their eyes off the stage. Their spearmanship and swordsmanship were first-rate and entranced the audience, who forgot the passage of time. Before they knew it, their palms were sweaty and even blinking felt like a waste of time—they wanted to keep looking on for as long as possible.

On the stage, the two crossed blades and exchanged blows.

Alice's body suddenly trembled. She instinctively felt danger and in a moment —

"Ahhh!!"

As they heard her scream, the audience had no idea what had happened.

Alice was sent flying into a wall, her face twisting in agony as she struggled to breathe. The circles floating in the air powerlessly fell to the ground as a metallic sound rang out. She'd finally taken a hit from Icicle Sword.

She had stepped in a little too deep, and though she'd successfully dealt a lot of damage to Tesfia, her exhaustion and the chilling wind from the ice sword had slowed her down a little. A small opening had appeared and Tesfia hadn't missed her chance.

Sliding down from the wall, Alice managed to keep herself from collapsing by using her AWR. She was only barely conscious because she'd managed to get

her AWR in between the attack and her body.

Her sight was blurry, and she looked towards Tesfia who was struggling to breathe just like she was. She must have taken too much damage to follow up right away. Then again, getting a hit on Tesfia in exchange for a direct hit from Icicle Sword hadn't been worth it.

The girls looked like they would fall over if a light breeze hit them, but eventually the light returned to their eyes.

"Haah, haah... you're already... at your limit... right, Fia?"

"I-I can still go on..."

Anyone could see that Tesfia was bluffing by the fact that she was drenched in sweat and unable to keep one of her eyes open.

Alice used her AWR as a staff and limped closer.

Tesfia noticed her and stood up straight.

Both of them took deep breaths and tightened their jaws.

They moved slowly, and then picked up speed before taking a final large step for the last clash.

This... will finish it! Alice thought.

Each contestant was up against their best friend and a worthy rival. Without saying anything, they each knew they had to end the match with their greatest moves.

Readying her spear, Alice thrust her left hand forward. When she did so, one of the circles floated in position in front of her. From what she'd heard from Alus, Shiylereis was an intermediate class spell. That's why it would lose in power to an Icicle Sword that was more advanced, leaving her with no means to oppose Tesfia.

Aside from one. And that means was one of the circle's abilities—amplification.

Each of the three circles was an individual AWR, and so far they'd simply been copying the spells cast through the golden spear. But it was also possible to use

them to amplify the casted spell.

Spells passing through the circle doubled the power of the spell. So by simple math, going through all three increased the power eight fold.

But at the same time—it required incredibly accurate mana control. The reason for that was the special structure of the circles that made them individual AWRs. In other words, in order to perfectly pull off the amplification, the caster needed to use two or more AWRs and use multiple spells at the same time.

It was absurd, but Alice was determined to give it a shot. But using all three circles at the same time was a little too reckless. Taking her chances of success into account, using only a single circle was the better choice.

She understood that it was a form of extension of mana control, but it was her first time. Not only was she uneasy, but she still hadn't fully grasped the principle. But even so, her determination was unwavering.

No matter how much she analyzed it, she wouldn't come to an answer now. She'd just have to do it.

As Alice focused on her task, the formula on the circle began to glow, causing it to slowly enlarge. A film of warm light formed within the ring. This warmth was something the artificial sun humanity had created couldn't replicate. It was akin to natural sunlight.

Seeing that, Tesfia readjusted her grip on her katana. The ice sword remained perfectly still next to her. As Alice was about to unleash her final move, Tesfia was going to take her head on.

The massive blade stood at the ready. It required total focus to manipulate and support it. The sword of ice perfectly traced her every swing, and next she would surely slam it into Alice.

On top of that, Tesfia poured all of her remaining mana into the sword, making it sharper, sturdier, and defining it more accurately. The AWR in her hands swiftly read her intentions as cold air flowed out of it. In response, Icicle Sword trembled momentarily, and then its surface changed form, transforming from its rough shape to an elegant and refined sword.

So far the ice sword had been moving at a distance from Tesfia's AWR, but now it completely merged with it to optimize its movements. The katana's blade was covered in translucent ice. It was as if her AWR itself had become a beautiful sword of ice.

Even though the AWR was covered in ice, Tesfia felt like it weighed just as much as before, if not even less than that. By having the high-performing AWR merge with the ice sword, it took over handling all of the variables for the caster. Reading the flow of mana, the sword of ice perfectly traced its movements.

The fantastical crystallized-looking sword had become a size smaller, but one could clearly tell that a large amount of mana was compressed within from its extremely cold yet beautiful appearance.

The distance closed between the two, and the spear and katana swung as one, as if each were attracted to the other.

"‹‹Shiylereis Double››!!"

"Ice World, Frigid Blade—*‹‹Zepel››*!!"

The magical light Alice controlled flew through the circle, pressing against the film of light as if to break through it, and then an amplified slashing attack shot out.

At the same time—Tesfia swung her ice sword, sharper than ever, with all her might, and large amounts of cold air froze its surroundings.

When the two clashed, a blinding magical light filled the arena as cold wind froze the ground in an instant.

The next moment an explosive sound reverberating in the pit of everyone's stomachs ran through the venue.

The frozen ground burst open as cracks ran through it. In the center where the two girls clashed, cold winds and light formed a circle that looked like it was expanding, but then in an instant, it shrunk as if it was being absorbed. The light created enveloped both of them.

Everyone in the audience instinctively closed their eyes and then hurriedly

covered their ears as the shockwave reached them.

After several seconds, someone in the audience let out a stupefied voice as their jaw dropped. In front of the audience, the two girls now lay face up on the ground.

The two were in a large hole in the arena that spoke volumes of just how fierce the final clash had been.

Both girls were motionless. That sight made one fear the worst.

Fortunately, relief soon came over the audience, as with all eyes on them the girls began to laugh while continuing to lie on the ground.



And next... “Are you okay, Alice?”

“Yeah, but I can’t move. What about you, Fia?”

“Me too... also my head hurts.”

The girls felt intense headaches as they stared at the arena ceiling. That was the result of the special function that converted damage into mental pain. But it seemed to hit them in the funny bone as they started laughing again.

But they soon stopped, frowning at the pain. However, even then their lips quivered as if they were trying to hold back smiles.

Tesfia sighed. “So what happens now?” After laughing until she was satisfied, she had returned to reality and wondered how victory would be judged here.

Yet—

“That doesn’t matter,” Alice declared.

“That’s true. Winning or losing doesn’t matter, I’m fine with having been able to fight to my heart’s content. What a strange feeling...”

“... Yeah. Me too.”

Silence continued for a while. Then—“Ahh, I’m beat.” Tesfia stretched her body with a satisfied smile. “Still, I thought I was going to win halfway in,” she continued.

“I was planning on winning from the start,” Alice replied mischievously.

Tesfia retorted, “Even though you were shaking like a leaf before we started?”

“But I never imagined you would use a new spell at the last moment.”

“Me neither... but I’m sure that Al prepared me for it.” Tesfia grinned and showed her pearly whites. “My mother showed me that move once, which is how I came up with it. But it was still mostly unconscious. Pathetic, right?”

“That’s not true. It just makes it even more amazing that you were able to use it when you needed it.”

“Hmm. You think so? ...If anything, I’d say you’re amazing, Alice, especially that last move. I didn’t know you had a trick like that up your sleeve.”

“Haha. Al taught me about it, but he said it was still too early for me. But that was the only thing I could think of.” Alice blushed a little. “I feel really refreshed right now,” she added, giving her impression of their battle.

A glance at her expression made it clear she wasn’t lying. Tesfia was also satisfied with how they’d fought.

Finally, the buzzer signaling the end rang out.

“...!!”

“...!!”

The two lifted their heads to look at the screen above them.

“Ahahaha,” Alice laughed.

“Hehe... ow!! I guess this kind of thing can happen,” Tesfia said.

“But... that’s fine too.”

“Yeah.”

On the screen was the word “Draw.”

The audience stood up to cheer. Unrestrained thunderous applause rained down on them for the incredible match. Their names would surely spread far and wide throughout the tournament.

The passionate cheers continued even as they were carried out on stretchers and until the next match began.

Two students from the same institute working together to better each other, and showing off their trained skills and abilities, was surely the original intention of the magical tournament.

As such, Tesfia’s and Alice’s match left an everlasting impression on the excited audience.

The two were carried to the infirmary. And there stood Felinella and the other competitors from the Second Magical Institute, lavishing them with praise. “That was a truly impressive match, you two.”

A draw was not unheard of in the tournament. Making that kind of judgment during the preliminaries wasn’t allowed, but it sometimes happened during the

main tournament. How that was handled was on a case by case basis. Sometimes the call would be made by referees in a committee, and sometimes another match would be held.

However, when both students were from the same institute, the decision could be left up to the institute. In other words, the Second Magical Institute advanced in the tournament, and it was up to the team as to who to allow to advance.

“Regardless of the outcome, you can take pride in a fight that wouldn’t put the Second Magical Institute’s name to shame,” Felinella continued.

“Yes, we’re satisfied too.”

“Yeah,” Tesfia nodded on the bed next to Alice’s bed.

The two were hooked up to IVs on their beds. They weren’t just dealing with exhaustion and massive headaches, but they’d also severely depleted their mana stores. They would just have to wait for those to naturally replenish. As long as they got some rest, it wouldn’t be a problem though.

But after that kind of match, the eyes that fell on them had changed. They’d already been seen as excellent students, but the upperclassmen wouldn’t look down on them just for being first-years anymore. In fact, some even gazed at them in admiration.

As for the others in their class year, they rejoiced and praised them to high heaven.

Ciel was among the first-years who were moved by their match. She took their hands and said to them, “Good work.”

“After seeing that match, we’ll need to work hard, too.” Felinella smiled and patted Illumina’s back. “If our juniors are working this hard, we can’t afford to take it easy. Right, Illumina?”

“Those two are on the same page. But I’ll do my best,” Illumina said with a straight face. It wasn’t like she was unhappy; this was just how she was.

Felinella understood this, and so did Tesfia and Alice, who’d spent more time around her lately.

“By the way,” Tesfia asked Felinella, “Do you know where Loki is?”

“What are you talking about? Ms. Loki is on her way to the stage right now.” Felinella chuckled at Tesfia’s question, and looked over at the screen in the corner of the infirmary.

The room was equipped with a small screen to watch the matches on. Loki’s match hadn’t started yet, but there was less than five minutes to go.

“You two just watch the matches from here as you rest up. We’ll be going back, but make sure you don’t get up, okay?” Felinella said in an almost sisterly tone, her index finger raised in the air.

“I understand. Well, it’s not like I can move anyways,” Alice lamented with a wry smile.

“Just leave the rest to us,” Felinella said, as she left the infirmary.

The pace of the matches in the main tournament was slower, so Tesfia and Alice didn’t need to rush to get ready for their next match. Before moving on to the finals, the semi-finals for each class year group were held first, so the two could rest for five matches at least.

“Hm? Don’t you need to go too, Ciel?” Everyone had left the infirmary aside from Ciel. Tesfia looked her way and saw her bringing a chair and putting it between their beds.

“I was thinking that we could watch Ms. Loki’s match together.”

“That’s fine, but are you sure you don’t want to watch it up close?”

“It’s okay. I wouldn’t understand what I don’t understand regardless of if I watch it through a screen or up close.” Ciel scratched her cheek with embarrassment.

Alice quickly realized that she was looking for someone to explain things. “We don’t understand everything about Loki dear either, so don’t hope for too much.”

“Got it!!”

“Hey, it’s starting.”

At Tesfia’s words, the three turned to look at the screen.

Thirty-Third Chapter

The Depth of Darkness from Blind Faith

The thunderous applause reached into the waiting room. It was the signal that Tesfia's and Alice's match had ended.

Loki was getting ready by the entrance. She was wearing an unfamiliar outer garment, and held both of its edges as she wrapped her arms around herself.

It looked similar to what was supplied by the military, but it was shorter, ending at her waist. Since there weren't any sleeves either, it was pretty much a cloak.

As she fastened the clasp around her neck, Loki looked down at the cloak. The principal had gotten hold of this for Loki to wear out of consideration. Her AWRs could be quite unwieldy when there were many of them. So far, she hadn't needed that many knives, but in this next match she couldn't afford to go easy on her opponent.

The cloak was pretty thick, and its interior was lined with bands and pockets. The tightly packed knives were also quite heavy but Loki showed no signs of paying that any heed. She was already used to it. Besides, she wasn't so weak that she would complain about it.

One may have wondered how her thin arms could be so strong, but to Loki this was within the range of weight she'd carry on a daily basis.

She spread her arms to see how it felt. As expected from custom made wear, it didn't get in her way at all. That was thanks to its short length and the fact that it only covered half her arms, guaranteeing free range of movement. She made a final check in satisfaction.

"Ms. Loki, I wasn't of much use, but good luck out there," Felinella, standing next to her, said apologetically.

The truth was that she hadn't been able to get any kind of information on the

opponent Loki was facing. But that wasn't a fault of hers or the other students gathering information. It was simply that he'd ended his matches in a flash, preventing anyone from getting any decent information.

Felinella was skilled at information gathering, but she couldn't exactly infiltrate his hotel and get the information she wanted.

"That's not true. It just means that he's rather strong and not stupid enough to show his hand. I'll just have to see for myself in the match. Well, the outcome is already clear, though."

Felinella was surprised to see Loki being so talkative and fearless, but she also felt a weight come off her shoulders. "Don't push yourself."

"That depends on my opponent. Besides, missions are one thing, but I don't think it's possible to be reckless on stage with all eyes on you."

"That's true, but..." Felinella began, but she swallowed the rest. "It's about time. We're going to go check up on those two," she said, looking over to a nearby screen. Displayed on it were Tesfia and Alice being carried away on stretchers.

"I doubt they'll be able to properly fight in the finals," Loki said.

"So it seems."

Loki noted that they'd shown power beyond their abilities. They'd truly gone all out. She was exasperated that they'd fought without any consideration for the future, but she wondered if she could do the same in her own match.

After that, she stood by the entrance, leaning against the cold wall and closing her eyes, waiting for her name to be called.

This was one match she absolutely couldn't lose.

Of course, she wanted to obey Alus' instructions, but even more than that—she'd sworn that she would win.

Loki felt up to this point that she hadn't been able to do anything as Alus' partner. It wasn't like he didn't acknowledge her, but her lack of strength was undeniable.

He'd given the excuse that they had to split up for this mission, that his

mission this time around was too difficult to bring her with him. But even then she wanted to be at his side, hoping to be able to give her life for his if the moment called for it.

She had no qualms about living with Alus. If anything, she was in bliss. But Loki knew in her current state, Alus saw her as someone to be protected.

She always wished to be of use to him. That's why she had no hesitation to become a wall to protect him. Her image of the ideal partner's position was to be one step behind him. But where was she now? When she thought of that, his back felt ever more distant.

Then again—she'd done her best not to overstep her boundaries and had held back on being pointlessly stubborn. That was because Alus' existence was just too great... no, perhaps that was only an excuse. Since she'd become his partner, her life had been so fulfilling. It might be that she just didn't want to give up her current situation.

I really am selfish. But even then...

But even then—Loki was fine with that. There was a wonderful promise awaiting her after she had won. And she was going to secure that win no matter what.

And best of all, it was Alus himself who had suggested it. *I promise to bring you along on my missions*, he had said.

He left this mission to her because he trusted her. He had presented her with a wall to overcome because he expected her to overcome it. So it was only natural she would respond in kind.

That's why she had to win.

That's why she had to carry out her mission.

The distant sound of her name being called by the announcer reached her ears, and she slowly opened her eyes. There was an unshakable determination in them.

She narrowed her eyes due to the brightness of the day, but she was too focused to hear the explosive cheers. *Al wouldn't give me a wall that couldn't*

be climbed.

Loki had had almost impossible tasks pushed onto her before, but she'd cleared them all or had been within reach of the top. Surely he'd entrusted this mission to her because he thought she could win.

With that thought in her mind, she began to rapidly spin up plans and strategies. She'd put on a bold face in front of Felinella, but remained cautious, knowing who she was up against. If her next opponent was just a normal opponent, it wouldn't be worth calling a wall for a Triple Digit like Loki.

Her next opponent was Fillic Argan. He was the student of Rusalca's Single, Jean Rumbulls, the ranked No. 3. From what little information they'd managed to glean, he was a Triple Digit with the abilities of a Double Digit.

Meanwhile, Loki was near the rank of No. 100 at best, but she wasn't a Double Digit yet. She took this in stride, because she knew she'd picked up more strength compared to before.

Her opponent's strength was unknown, but she wasn't being asked to go up against a Single. It didn't matter if he was stronger than her. In this tournament, it wasn't the one with more mana or more powerful spells who won.

Indeed, it would be the last person standing who would win.

Most battles between Magicmasters were typically determined by dealing fatal damage to the opponent. This was something most had gotten a feel for during training and mock battles. With the headache that was brought on, they weren't in a state to cast spells.

So should she make the first move, then? The answer was no.

Even without counting the fact that Fillic's abilities were those of a Double Digit, he'd won his way into the main tournament without showing his hand, so he wouldn't go down that easily. So exposing her own hand right off the bat was out of the question.

Loki slowly moved to her assigned spot, and finally raised her head and looked at her opponent for the first time.

Fillic Argan. A first-year student from Rusalca's First Magical Institute. His

build reminded her of Alus, but the atmosphere around him was clearly different.

Even though he wore a refreshing smile, loathing seeped through that mask, and he was looking her way with a ferocious stare.

With less than two minutes left before the match, all they could do was wait until the start signal rang out. Or so she thought.

“What a disappointment. Your ‘Sir’ Alus ran away at the last minute, did he?” Fillic’s voice reached Loki’s ears, and she raised her eyebrows in response.

His words were dripping in sarcasm. And the way he’d so unpleasantly added the ‘Sir’ was clearly trying to provoke her out of scorn. “And here I was hoping to show all the nations’ rulers Alpha’s No. 1 struggling against a mere Triple Digit from Rusalca.”

“That would be impossible for you. You should be happy that you’re not going to get embarrassed too much.” Loki coldly narrowed her eyes at the sight of this pitiful fool who didn’t understand Alus’ greatness. The edges of her lips turned up into a ridiculing smile.

“Haha, I wasn’t expecting to win against the ranked No. 1. But I would at least have had a better chance than going up against Sir Jean.” The moment he said that name, Fillic’s expression changed. “Truly... he is meant to sit on the throne of No. 1. Not that guy. I don’t know how he did it, but it was clearly through some dirty means. It seems Alpha is really good at squirming in the darkness like bugs.”

He continued, not even trying to hide his scorn anymore, “The sight of the ranked No. 1 struggling against Sir Jean’s pupil would’ve thrown doubts on the title of the greatest. That’s why this is such a disappointment! I never thought he would get cold feet... and of all things hide behind some girl! I take my hat off to his boldness.”

There was irritation in Fillic’s voice as he continued to mock Alus. He’d heard from Jean that the girl in front of him was Alus’ partner, but no matter how much abuse he threw at her, she wasn’t Alus himself.

Why was he even so obsessed with Jean’s position in the first place? The

reason for that lay four years in the past.

At the time, Fillic lived in a town in the remote regions of Rusalca. Having been born into the underclass and in a terrible environment, he made a living through stealing, his talent in magic helping him in his work.

As he used his magic for evil and piled up successes, he eventually became convinced that he'd always be able to escape no matter what.

But the end came suddenly. He finally tasted defeat.

The whole thing happened in an instant. The magic he prided himself on had no effect, and he didn't realize he'd been caught until his cheek was pressed against the ground.

It was none other than Jean, who'd come out to the countryside for an inspection, who caught him. On a whim, Jean decided to interrogate Fillic, learning of his circumstances and noticing his talent for magic.

Jean was already a first-rate Magicmaster at the time, and Fillic's self-taught magic wasn't going to work on him. But he did have a knack for it, and ever since then Fillic had been in his care.

It was all thanks to Jean that Fillic was even in the institute. That, coupled with the fact that he trained him from time to time, meant that Jean had become irreplaceable to him.

He saw Jean as the ideal Magicmaster and worked hard every day to catch up to him. To Fillic, Jean wasn't just his savior; he was also the one who taught him how to live and pointed him in the right direction in life.

That's why he couldn't believe—or stand for—someone the same age as him having a higher rank than Jean.

Eventually, when he'd started training more with Jean and going out into the Outer World, he heard rumors from the other members of their squad of how Alpha had faked their No. 1 ranking Since that point, he'd begun to question if Jean's rank had been given through a fair evaluation, or if Alus had stolen his rightful place from him.

In contrast to his spiteful words, Fillic wore an unblemished smile. In other

words, he wore a mask for show as he sneered at Loki.

Loki always stayed cool, but she couldn't stand for Alus being criticized any longer. "You weren't told anything, were you? I suppose that's just how little you mean to Sir Jean."

He probably hadn't heard that Alus had left on a mission. And that if Alus said it was a difficult mission, it had to be something extraordinary.

Looking around the venue, it also appeared that the guards around the rulers had decreased in number. In other words, this was a national-level incident, and probably involved more than just Alpha.

Loki had vaguely understood this, but if Fillic hadn't, then... *That's all there is to him.*

Now it was Loki's turn to sneer, as an icy smile floated up on her expressionless face, and she held a finger up. "You are misunderstanding one thing. Even if you were to fight Sir Alus, someone like you wouldn't even be able to see a fraction of his strength. That means that he decided I would be enough for an opponent like you."

The daring statement made Fillic's temple twitch, but his expression remained unchanged. "Ms. Loki, was it... I'll throw those words right back at you. Someone like you won't be a worthy opponent for me, unfortunate as that is... but this is fine in its own way. You've been trained by 'Sir' Alus, haven't you?"

"..." Even the thought of answering him filled Loki with disgust, and she stared at Fillic with cold eyes.

"So I'll win this my way to satisfy myself. It will also help to prove Sir Jean's superiority, and by having you disgracefully lose and expose the extent of your abilities, it will show that 'Sir' Alus has no eye for talent." Fillic covered his mouth with the palm of his hand, but he was no longer planning on hiding his hostility.

Fillic's appearance might attract plenty of girls. But it was clear that he was twisted.

Loki felt sick to her stomach. But she also saw another side to him. The true nature of that ugly side was his reliance on and absolute belief in someone else

that poisoned his mind to look down on anyone else.

She, too, respected and admired and devoted herself to Alus. So she could somewhat understand his attitude as someone else who had extreme respect for another Magicmaster.

However, she didn't look down on other Singles as useless like he did. You could say that she had no interest in them, but she did have a connection with Lettie who was a fellow Single of Alpha, and as a woman she had a degree of envy of her too... though she kept that to herself.

All things considered, Loki made sure to pay at least the minimum degree of respect to all Magicmasters with a modicum of strength, especially if they were Singles like Alus.

Moreover, her feelings wouldn't change even if Alus wasn't a Single Digit Magicmaster. Just staying at his side was enough. So Alus' rank, talents, and status came second.

To her, Fillic's attitude and way of thinking was abnormal. It felt extreme to her. So the only thing his twisted sense of values and unbending arrogance made her feel was disgust.

The buzzer signaling the start rang out, but neither Loki nor Fillic moved.

"Sir Jean this, Sir Jean that... Frankly, it's... Are you gay?"

It was those words that started the match.

Fillic's smile quietly faded away as he directed a deathly glare towards Loki. A torrent of mana swirled around with Fillic at its center and soon spread out over the ground. He seemed to be saying there would be no mercy for Loki after touching on something that was off-limits.

Loki bent down, emitting mana, ready to move at any moment. She fixed her sight on her opponent so that she could react no matter what happened.

But when she looked—she saw he was empty-handed with no AWR in sight.

Fillic swung his right arm to the side and opened the palm of his hand.

For a moment, Loki felt like she saw the shadow at his feet move... no, it really did move. A black circle was born below his open palm, and the shadow

turned into a dark liquid and rose up as if it had been given life. It transformed and whirled in a conical shape, its tip stretching up towards his hand.

Fillic closed his fist as if grabbing something, and the shadow slipped off like water off a flat surface.

"..." Loki stared at the shadow.

The object cloaked within the shadow was revealed. In Fillic's hand was suddenly a long sword. It was a little too big to wield with one hand, but it likely wasn't just a simple weapon.

The sword was pitch black, as if manifested from hatred itself, with impurities in places across the blade's surface. The sight of it made warning signs go off in Loki's head. It was no normal weapon, and the magic formula engraved on it only proved it. It was a bizarre sword.



But even more surprising than that—

“The dark element...” With this intense mana, Fillic’s affinity was finally revealed. It was like an indication of his true nature that he hadn’t even shown a shred of in his previous fights.

“That’s right. Are you surprised? Sorry, but I don’t think you’ll lose this painlessly,” Fillic answered lightheartedly, as a sadistic smile spread across his face.

Loki didn’t answer. Instead she searched her memories for all the information she had on the dark attribute, one of the two elements.

As its name implied, the dark element had a grim reputation. It was an attribute that rarely saw the light of day. Those with the affinity were valuable, but it was said that they were also selfish, unstable and prone to crime. In fact, many with an affinity for the dark element were magic criminals. They easily broke the laws of society for their own gain and desires, hurting anyone they pleased. They had no hesitation crossing the line most would stop at.

Moreover, perhaps because of the influence of their affinity, they sought stimulation to a greater degree than normal. Many dark attribute spells also had the characteristic of being effective and powerful once a location was chosen.

People with the talent and ability to control themselves could become first-rate Magicmasters, but those without often didn’t hesitate to turn to crime.

Having thought this far, Loki suddenly realized a certain possibility and pointed the tip of her knife towards herself.

“Don’t worry. I’m not that type,” Fillic coldly laughed, having seemingly read her mind. Seeing Loki hadn’t let her guard down, he smiled wryly, but Loki was no longer reacting to his attitude. She just cautiously observed him.

There were two types of dark attribute Magicmasters. The first used spells belonging to the dark element.

The other directly influenced their opponent’s mind. These were techniques categorized as mind manipulation or illusions. In the past, there had been one

who'd reached the heights of a top class user of these kinds of techniques among the magic criminals.

Loki had been worried that Fillic was in the latter category of dark attribute users, and that he'd already used a spell to influence her mind. The most effective way of snapping out of that was to shock the mind awake through self-inflicted pain. If needed, she wouldn't hesitate to use her knife on herself.

Fillic fearlessly grinned at her. "It probably would've been easier that way, but I guess you aren't that lucky."

"That's enough prattling. Please just die. Oh, I guess I would be disqualified if you did. Instead you'll eat dirt without any time to regret your foolishness."

Loki quietly and calmly moved her knife. Before long electricity shot out from its tip.

However, Fillic swung his long black sword upwards and easily scattered it as if he'd expected it. The remaining electricity still on the sword was soon devoured by the darkness. "The lightning attribute sure is fast," he said with a smile.

He casually handled his sword, as dark mana swirled around the blade of night. With a peculiar gait, Fillic closed in on Loki at a frightening speed.

Loki observed him and swung her knife upwards. *"‹‹Electro Road››"*

Lightning shot up from the ground, shooting upwards like an electric whip and assaulted Fillic. But a simple sidestep moved him out of the whip's way and it scorched the air. It wasn't the kind of spell that would end just from being dodged, though.

Loki next swung the knife diagonally downwards. The lightning flying towards the roof then came flying back down towards the ground, following the knife's movement.

She should have successfully taken him by surprise, but Fillic's smile only grew wider. The snake-like lightning strike let out a loud roar as it assaulted him from above. But just before it hit, a massive arm sprouted from the shadow trailing behind him and caught it.

The electricity was then crushed and scattered within the black hand's palm.

"...!!" Loki was astonished for a moment by the spectacle.

Using that opening, Fillic closed in further and swung down his long and narrow weapon. His movements were pretty fast, but it still looked slow to Loki who had the advantage in speed. At that speed, even if she had been slightly distracted, she wouldn't have fallen behind him.

The scarily fast swing caused the long sword to cut through the air and sink into the ground.

But as Loki jumped backwards, she saw something surprising. "—Ugh!!"

The black mana whirling around the sword turned into several tentacles, and their sharpened tips reached out towards Loki. As she was upside down, Loki could see the sharp tips flying towards her.

She shot out electricity to scatter two of them, but then realized she wouldn't be able to deal with the rest and covered her face with her arms and curled up. The sharpened tentacles that she had been unable to dodge grazed her arms and legs.

Loki's face distorted as she kept her posture low while landing. A slight headache told her she had taken damage, but there was something she now understood. "That was a spell..."

She'd been sure that what was wrapped around the sword was mana, but seeing it freely transform and attack her, she became convinced it was actually a spell wrapped around the sword. That explained why the magic formula on the blade wasn't glowing.

Fillic narrowed his eyes, and surprisingly gave her praise. "Well dodged. You properly analyzed the situation and changed your trajectory with electricity. But it seems you weren't able to escape unharmed... well, it would have been disappointing if that had ended it."

Despite being praised, Loki only felt disgust and completely ignored him.

It was certainly a troublesome spell. Even with her speed advantage, Loki would need to keep on guard for the sharp tentacles that came after her once

she dodged the sword. Not to mention that giant arm that blocked her Electro Road was a rather high level spell.

Electro Road was one of the more complicated intermediate spells. Even at a quick estimate, the spell that crushed hers was most likely an advanced spell.

Fillic pulled his sword out of the ground, and slowly readied it in an exaggerated fashion.

Loki kept a close watch on him, when she suddenly felt a chill run down her spine. She hurriedly jumped away. Moments later the giant shadow arm violently came pounding.

A loud *crack* rang out as the ground was shattered and dust kicked up. In the aftermath, thin fractures ran across the ground like a spider's web.

"So you dodged that too."

Loki glared at the boy who'd sounded impressed, and saw the arm turn back into a shadow in the corner of her eye. She'd been able to quickly notice it with her sonar, but it was a troublesome attack. And she ground her teeth at how unpleasant it was.

The way he exaggeratedly handled the long sword had probably been on purpose to attract her attention, which slowed down her reaction. That let her know that he was clearly used to fighting. At the very least, he might be more used to fighting people than she was. So far his attacks had used shadows, but who knew how many tricks he had up his sleeve.

Loki kept herself from clicking her tongue in frustration, and tightly pursed her lips. Normal magic likely wasn't going to work here. And so she let out a light sigh.

The new spell she was now determined to use was something she'd practiced in secret to surprise Alus. She'd always been expecting to face Alus in the finals, so she'd quietly prepared it for that day. It probably wouldn't work on someone at Alus' level, but she might at least have taken him by surprise and earned herself some praise. She'd never expected to have to use it here.

Showing her new move off when Alus wasn't here didn't sit right with her, but she wasn't in a position where she could choose not to. And she most definitely

wasn’t going to hold back if it meant not fulfilling the promise made with Alus.

With new resolve, Loki swung her arms behind her, pulling out eight knives. She held them between her fingers. Mana flowed out of her body and made the magic formulas on the knives glow.

Before long, it all turned into lightning. Scattered bits of lightning floated around her neck, making her silver hair flutter.

“I don’t know what you’re planning, but I’ve already finished my preparations.” Fillic spread his arms as five black wolves crawled out of the shadows beside him. They all had glaring, ferocious red eyes, with snarls reverberating from their shadow bodies.

Loki assumed it was a form of summoning magic, but she showed no signs of being shaken. Even summoning magic familiars like these should be an advanced spell, and he’d summoned five of them.

If she was more well-versed in magic like Alus, she might have been impressed. However, such superfluous thoughts like those didn’t add to her chances of success. That was reserved for superior Magicmasters like Alus.

But Fillic wasn’t done. The shadows that wrapped around the five black wolves each sprouted two arms, like the one that had attacked Loki before.

Even that wasn’t all. The arms bent, and the fingers burrowed into the ground. Darkness spread out from them in the form of a black circle. The dark arms put even more strength into it, as if to forcibly make the black circle bigger.

Eventually the black circle distorted, and a sharpened horn emerged from it. The horn was attached to the forehead of an otherworldly face that slowly appeared from the circle. And following the face came the neck and shoulders, and finally it grabbed the edge of the circle to climb out. It appeared that the arm from before had belonged to this creature.

This monstrous giant must have moved as Fillic commanded. It had a demonic appearance similar to Fiends, sporting a length of over four meters. The creature had fangs sticking out of its lips, and below its horn was a red cloth blocking its vision. Bone-like spikes stuck out from its shoulder blades, and its

form was surrounded by a dark red smoke.

The red eyeballs behind the cloth seemed to pick up on Loki's existence. The creature's giant face was turned downwards, clearly looking in Loki's direction. Next, a strange black smoke began spewing out from between its fangs.

"Now then, I've even brought out hidden demon Yaksha, so isn't that enough? You were honestly stronger than I expected. But spending any more time on you would hurt my reputation." Fillic wore a broad smile and raised his long sword. "So let's..." At those words, the shadow wolves took off running.

The five of them spread out like trained soldiers, baring their vicious fangs, with black smoke pouring out of their mouths as they closed in on Loki.

Loki remained quiet. Like a clear stream, she was completely silent and unperturbed. She was neither upset nor panicked.

Like hunting hounds, the five wolves flew toward their prey, as at the same time the demon called Yaksha behind them started moving as well.

Suddenly the earth trembled. Yaksha took a step forward and jumped, making the ground sink in. It followed a low trajectory, but moved at high speed. As it flew past the wolves that were supposed to be in front of it, it raised its arms high, before swinging its heavy fists down at Loki.

She appeared to remain unmoving, but just before the massive fists were about to hit, she activated the trigger of the spell she'd kept ready.

"‹‹Force››"

The reason Alus had hammered home the point of being careful when using this spell was because it put an extraordinary strain on the body, especially for a still developing girl's body. Bone fractures, muscles snapping and similar injuries that could end a Magicmaster's career were very likely if one was careless.

Moreover, Force also had a side effect of numbing the sense of pain, so the body could take more punishment than the user realized, leaving them incapacitated. An example would be feeling your muscles cramp up, when in reality they were close to tearing.

Also the longer the spell was used, the duller the sense of pain grew, and the

user wouldn’t notice how bad of a state they were in until their body ceased functioning properly.

Alus had talked to Loki about this spell because she wanted strength. It was a spell that anyone with an affinity for lightning and a wish to become stronger would hear about at some point. Seeing how Loki wanted power not for her own gain, but to be of use to him as his partner, Alus could be forgiven for letting the information slip.

As for how the spell worked, mana was converted into electricity and covered the body. That allowed for freely controlling the signals from the brain, accelerating them, and enhancing all physical abilities.

There was a slight change in the nature of mana that let the user enhance themselves past their limits, but the risks were high, making it a double-edged sword.

It was truly a spell meant to be used by those with an innate talent for it. On top of being a lightning attribute spell, it also required very delicate mana control on the level of a spotter to maintain, meaning there were few users of this spell. Alus had believed Loki had the aptitude for it.

However—Yaksha’s attack could also be described as super fast.

When Loki was just about to use Force, the shadow of Yaksha’s destructive attack covered her small body.

The next moment, its attack smashed into the ground, blowing it away with an explosive sound.

Fillic saw that immense destructive power and looked to be casually waiting for the buzzer to signal the end of the match. However, soon his eyes opened wide, and he braced himself against the scene playing out before him.

The wolves following after Yaksha were somehow being extinguished, one after another. As he looked on in a daze, the ferocious wolves were defeated, and dispersed into a black smoke.

They were summonses, so they’d disappear in the same fashion if Fillic had undone the spell, but he had no memory of doing that.

While shaken, he suddenly noticed something, and stared at a point in the arena. One of the wolves there was about to disappear, but before it did he could see a blurry shape slashing at it. And before the black wolf dispersed, Fillic could see something sparkling around it.

They were sparks from the electricity Loki was draped in. But when he realized that, the wolf had already been defeated, and with that all five wolves had turned into smoke in the blink of an eye.

When Fillic saw a long trail of light from the electricity, he spoke out. “Tsk, so you weren’t done in!” He ground his teeth in frustration, and poured mana into his long sword to cast—“Wha—!!”

There was quite a bit of distance between him and where the wolves had been defeated. And yet Fillic felt like someone was pushing him from behind. This sensation was followed by a burning heat, and he reflexively rolled forwards.

After he dodged it, he felt a powerful headache come on. The realization that he’d been cut in the back came as his head pulsated in pain.

There had been such a distance between them, so when had she closed in? And the attack had come from behind. It seemed not even Yaksha could track that speed, as it simply stood around the area where the wolves had disappeared.

Fillic didn’t know what happened, as he fell to one knee and turned to look behind him. When he did, he saw the many knives chasing after him.

He clicked his tongue in his mind, and turned his face to dodge the knife that was almost on top of him. He then created a shadow wall to block the remaining knives.

But the knives—wrapped in electricity—pierced right through it. The next instant, the wall dispersed, revealing Fillic’s face distorted from his headache.

The remaining knives had grazed his arms, legs, shoulders, and other places in his body. Yet even as he endured the pain, in front of him was... nothing. He could just barely make out some sparks from electricity in the corner of his eye.

“Ack!!” Fillic was attacked from behind yet again, this time a kick to his flank,

sending him flying.

Rolling across the ground, he managed to get back on his feet and slid to a stop. He didn't even have enough time to worry about his headache as he looked where he'd just been standing.

"...!! What did you do?!" he asked, astonished by his opponent's transformation.

Loki, who was now standing still and confirming the sensation of her kick, slowly lowered her leg towards the ground.

Fillic could see the electric sparks dancing around Loki's body. But where was she hiding the strength to send someone heavier than her flying with a kick?

He could get a feel for the power behind the kick through his headache. The damage was converted to mental damage, but he clearly had broken ribs.

Yaksha, standing in the fading dust cloud, wavered for an instant as if it was disappearing. A clear sign that he was starting to lose control of it due to his inability to focus. He didn't know what she'd done or what kind of spell it was, but not being able to maintain Yaksha right now was bad. So he started to pour his mana into it to keep it stable.

The color of Yaksha's body was now darker, and it exhaled a red breath mist as it turned around.

"Yaksha!" At Fillic's shout, Yaksha's body turned into a black mist. That mist immediately moved in front of Loki and returned to its original form. It had practically teleported its massive body.

Yaksha swung its sharp claws sideways, launching a sweeping attack at Loki.

Even a single claw hitting would be fatal, but—

As expected, the claws hit nothing but air.

Yaksha looked at its hands in confusion, but then it realized the slight sensation and got a cruel smile on its face.

Some distance away, Loki was holding her left shoulder that had been scratched by the claw. She was probably moving slower than expected because of the pain. That was especially true, seeing how Fillic was able to follow her

afterimage. She'd likely not be able to go unseen from now on.

Meanwhile, to Fillic she looked like she was teleporting in bursts, leaving behind afterimages. By now he'd realized that that was because Loki was moving at unimaginably high speeds.

As proof that he was getting used to it, black smoke appeared before Loki, and Yaksha smashed its arms down.

"Kuh!" In Loki's mind, it was a hit she should've avoided completely. Perhaps she'd pushed herself too far, as there was a slight lag between her will and her legs moving, sending a chill down Loki's back.

But if she took a serious hit now, her situation would turn for the worst. That's why she forcibly turned her speed up another notch.

Dodging the tremendously fast arms and claws, she left Yaksha in the dirt and zigzagged towards Fillic.

"...!!" Fillic readied his long black sword and cast a spell. The shadow at his feet rose up to form a big wall.

"Agh!!" But before he could finish his defenses, Loki kneed him in the gut.

His body bent backwards as the breath was knocked out of him. He crumbled and writhed in pain.

Seeing he was injured—Loki followed up with a roundhouse kick and sent him flying again.

The next moment she sensed Yaksha coming from behind, and she veered to the side to escape. She didn't have the time to deal with Yaksha. She would need to finish this with the next hit or she wouldn't be able to move anymore because of the backlash from Force.

Just a little more... Loki had managed to kick him to the right place after all.

Having been sent flying, Fillic rolled to the area where the five wolves had been defeated, and shook his head while slowly standing up. When he did, the magic formula above the ground started glowing blue as a sign that it was activating.

"Wha—!! Fuck! That bitch!"

Fillic glanced around and realized the situation with an astonished expression, desperately moving his legs to get out of there.

Around him were several knives sticking out of the ground and forming a circle. He knew then that he'd been thrown into the hunting grounds. It was a massive magic circle six meters in diameter. An electric field ran between the knives, with static electricity discharging from the magic circle itself.

It made Fillic shudder, and a shiver ran down his spine.

Suddenly, the shadow by his feet contracted. Of course, Fillic hadn't ordered it to do so. Instead, his surroundings were getting brighter as if a spotlight was shining on him.

He looked up and saw a dazzling source of light. He realized its power and that it was like a representation of the hostility directed towards him. In an instant he began trembling with fear.

Loki picked up more speed, shaking off Yaksha, and jumped up.

Left behind, Yaksha shook its head, and then looked up at the source of light just like Fillic.

By then, Loki had already reached the ceiling of the arena, landing on it upside down. The electricity coiled around the knife in her hand was blindingly bright. Perhaps because of the amount of concentrated energy, a shrill vibrating sound shook the air.

Force's effect had now expired, and when she landed, an unpleasant sound could be heard from her bent calves and thighs. The sound was probably from some of the muscle fibers being damaged and snapping.

She scowled at the pain, but bit down to endure it, and elevated her focus. The side effects of Force weren't considered damage dealt by the opponent or outside effects, so it wasn't converted into mental damage.

Meanwhile, as the air rumbled, Fillic turned to Yaksha. It had now found Loki again and was stretching its arms out to jump after her and catch her.

However, the distance between them was considerable, and it wouldn't be able to return back to Fillic's side and protect him in time. Considering the

volume of electric sparks, it was an advanced level spell.

Fillic realized everything. He gritted his teeth and looked up. By now it was all too late.

That's why the decision on what to do next came in an instant. *To think she'd corner me this far...*

Vast amounts of electricity gathered in Loki's knife, looking like it might discharge at any moment.

So far, he'd only ever looked down on her, but having come this far he felt honest admiration.

Without struggling against gravity, Loki's feet left the ceiling and she fell head first, brandishing her knife.

"‹‹Lightning Ray››"

The lightning rampaging about like it was trapped in a small box—was released in one moment.

With a thunderous roar, the mass of energy descended down towards its target.

The lightning left behind a thunderclap as it drilled into the ground. The ground crumbled apart and a burnt smell filled the air.

Black smoke rose up as the aftermath of the lightning coiled around the entire arena like a snake.

Loki landed some distance from where the lightning had struck, but staggered as she was unable to brace herself. An unfathomable pain ran through her knees, and she put her hands against the ground to keep herself from collapsing.

If she collapsed here it might be judged a draw. So she poured all of her strength into her arms to push herself up until the call was made. As a result, she ended up pretty much sitting with her legs stretched out and a grimace on her face. With this, she at least shouldn't be considered as being down on the ground.

Now I'll be able to give Sir Alus the good news. With her mind on Alus, Loki

barely even registered the applause.

But suddenly the audience fell silent, and noticing that the cheers had stopped, Loki was pulled back to reality.

She doubtfully looked over to... where he was.

There was a burnt smell in the air. Smoke was rising up. She clenched her fist as she spotted a black, humanoid silhouette.

“It’s known as...” That quiet, almost muttering voice came through the smoke. Following the voice was a right leg, and then a whole body.

Loki’s eyes opened wide.

The figure wore a jet black armor that covered their entire body. On the helmet was a horn sticking out at an angle. Since the helmet’s visor was down, it was difficult to see the wearer’s expression, but deep inside was a pair of unsettling eyes.

Loki attempted to stand up as her face twisted in pain. She tried her best to keep it from showing, but her face was pale when she stood up.

The armored figure fearlessly stared at her as it opened its mouth. “It’s known as an expert level spell, but Yaksha is not a so-called summoning spell. I do have to acknowledge you for making me use this... Yaksha’s Garment, my ace card. But even then the victor remains the same...!!”

The figure, Fillic, triumphantly walked to the center of the stage, but his knee suddenly gave out and ruined his posture, which he clicked his tongue at. “I suppose I still can’t handle the highest level of spell perfectly yet. This has resistance to all attributes aside from light, but I seem to have taken more damage than expected... but from what I can tell, you can’t move properly either. Just maintaining this is taking all I’ve got.”

Fillic instinctively frowned at the fact that Lightning Ray had exceeded his armor’s defenses and dealt more damage than expected. Because of the damage taken, a portion of Yaksha’s Garment was wrapped in a black haze because it wasn’t properly materializing.

However, with a grin, the boy transformed into a black knight continued to

speak, proud of his current position of superiority. “Well, I can’t move much myself... but this Garment can connect to the shadows and let me use magic without going through my AWR... like this... you see.”

What he meant was that by merging with the shadows, he could connect to the AWR remotely from afar. But the AWR had to be inside the shadows, and it wasn’t as though he could use magic without limits either.

As Fillic finished speaking, he brought up his arm and opened his fist. A black shadow ball of mana formed in his palm and he closed his hand once more to crush it.

It looked like a sideshow as he enjoyed his advantage. However, Loki was staring at him without letting her guard down, and saw a different reason for his action. The reason he’d crushed that mass of mana was to test how well he could put together spells with his headache, knowing that he couldn’t perfectly use Yaksha’s Garment.

At least that’s what Loki expected... no, she was convinced of it.

Just maintaining the spell should drain a lot of mana, and despite his composure, Fillic seemed to be complaining. Hence why he’d done what he just did.

Loki had seen through him, but she would probably collapse herself if she didn’t do anything. But if she were to do anything, she knew that her next spell would be her last.

Fillic spoke to Loki. “I’m not a fan of attacking someone who’s defenseless, but this is a match. Don’t think badly of me... I’m going to win this for Sir Jean’s sake!”

Loki reacted to his words. Just like how he said he was doing this for Jean, she would say that she was doing this for Alus. She was going to prioritize her promise with him over all else. That meant that for her, this wasn’t some school event or a tournament. It was a battlefield to prove that her existence had meaning.

Sweat ran down her chin as she smiled. “What are you talking about? I’m defenseless? Of course not. So what if you used Yaksha’s Garment. That has

nothing to do with me.”

“So you can still crack jokes. Very well. Then this should end it...!”

Suddenly something fell onto the ground like rain, as the sound of clashing metal rang out. Loki had taken out all of the knives in her cloak and scattered them across the ground.

“What’s this? Surely you’re not surrendering?”

“...” Loki wordlessly pointed her palm downwards.

Thin electricity discharged from the tips of her fingers, passing through the holes in the knife handles. Eventually the blades of the knives began vibrating like they had a will of their own. An electric field like a string connected the knives.

Next, Loki pointed her palm upwards, and the knives floated up, guided by her motions. The knives formed an orderly circle and pointed their blades at Fillic, beginning to rotate at high speeds.

“That’s more like it... so you’ll struggle until the end.” Seeing this, Fillic resolved himself to face her with the strongest spell he could use.

Just as Loki had anticipated, he’d used quite a bit of mana. That’s why he was going to use the rest of his mana on the next attack to finish this.

Fillic stretched his right hand out. As he did, the shadow at his feet moved forward, ripples spreading across its surface like it was a liquid.

A pitch-black orb rose up from the unnaturally sunken shadow. The orb was the size of a human head, made of an almost glass-like substance with a black liquid inside.

This was an advanced level spell that Fillic often used, and it was similar to Jean’s style of using several small ball AWRs. However, it was an erosive kind of spell that obstructed its target’s movements, so the only thing that was actually similar was the spherical shape.

Bringing the overly proud Fillic back to reality was the muttering of a chant reaching his ears.

“With thunderous roar, may the vertex of tempestuous thunder manifest...”

“—!!”

Inside the circle of rapidly rotating knives—was another smaller circle rotating in the opposite direction. An electric light pulsed out from the center of the dense electric fields. The rotating speed gradually accelerated, with large amounts of light escaping the center as the energy gathered there.

Sensing that this spell was even more powerful than the advanced level spell that had hit him before, Fillic felt cold sweat run down his back as his fear pushed him into casting his own spell.

“‹‹Darkness Granaechord››”

After pushing it with his palm, the sphere flew towards Loki at a high speed.

The shadow it cast drew a dark line on the ground connecting Loki and Fillic.

If touched, the sphere would erode Loki’s body and stop her from moving. However, in a match like this, even that would be converted into mental damage, so its original effect wouldn’t be all that pronounced.

That said, its powerful erosion and ability to seal the opponent’s movements would deal massive damage when converted, giving it more than enough power to finish the match.

Loki’s spell completed fractions of a second later, and she quietly spoke its name.

“‹‹Naruikazuchi››”

She weakly thrust her palm against the center of the two circles.

This was the spell she’d secretly been practicing to show Alus. It was also the spell she had used in the past to become his partner, but back then she’d used a Fiend’s core as a catalyst—a taboo.

But now—with an increase in total mana and honest hard work—she was able to use it without a taboo.

Its power wasn’t all that different from when she’d used the taboo. But normally it wasn’t a spell she would’ve been able to use. Expert level magic wasn’t that simple.

To be honest, not even Loki knew how she'd become able to use it even after her hard work. One possibility was when Alus had turned her mana into his own and paid the price for the taboo when she had been defaulting, in order to save her life. If that was the case, she couldn't thank him enough.

It was also possible that Loki's disposition had changed to accommodate the ability to use that spell after using it once; but she preferred the former idea. That way, she was able to think of the mana flowing in her body as a miraculous breath gifted to her by Alus. That's why she had wanted him to see this spell first.

Ignoring her complex feelings, Naruikazuchi sped through the arena in a straight line and engulfed everything.

Fillic was convinced of his victory the moment he casted Darkness Granaechord. It wasn't a spell meant for destruction, but the torrent of magic eroded even spells cast to counter it, affecting their structure. That's why most spells clashing with it would be eroded and swallowed by the darkness. Almost all resistance was assimilated with the dark sphere, making it bigger.

Which was why he could only look on as his own spell was scattered and dispersed by Loki's massive lightning strike.

And in the blink of an eye, it engulfed even him.

Even the ground was heaved up by the shockwaves left behind by the divine lightning thrusting forward like a gigantic spear of light. Its absolute power nullified even Yaksha's Garment and pierced through Fillic's body.

"Aaaggh! A-Ahh..."

By the time the blinding light died down, white smoke was rising up around Fillic, who barely remained standing.

Once his jet black armor was fully stripped off, Fillic's eyes rolled back in his head and he fell forward as if the strings holding him up had been cut.

This time for sure, Loki told her mind and body as she exhaled a heavy sigh, trying to keep her fading mind from cutting out. She couldn't stop herself from sitting down and slumping over, but surely Alus would at least forgive her for that, as the edges of her lips rose up into a smile.

“Victory, Second Magical Institute, Loki Leevahl.”

The silver-haired girl let out a triumphant “I did it,” but it went unheard by the public.

She’d won, yes, but it had been a tightrope walk of a match. Once Alus heard about it, he’d likely bring up point after point to reflect on. But even so, Loki would carefully listen to these points in glee.

A promise was a promise. And with this, you could say she had become Alus’ partner in the true meaning of the word. The joy and satisfaction from that knowledge filled her heart.

“Ms. Loki, are you okay? ... I suppose not.”

Looking back over her shoulder, she could see Felinella bringing over medical personnel.

“Yes... I am not quite okay. I probably have ruptured muscle fibers in my legs and some other places.”

“I can’t really blame you after seeing your opponent’s strength, but try not to cause people to worry too much. For Mr. Alus’ sake, too.”

Loki couldn’t really say anything back against that, other than a weak “Yes...” with exhaustion visible on her face.

“Just leave the rest to us.” Felinella put her hand on Loki’s shoulder as she was carried away on a stretcher. Her own match was coming up.

With this victory, Alpha had taken a big step towards an overall victory.

If the second-years could win, it would be all but confirmed.

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Having been taken to the intensive treatment room, Loki’s head hurt over hearing the doctor’s diagnosis. There were over a dozen tears in muscle fibers in both her legs, as well as her knee ligaments, triceps, quadriceps and biceps.

Normally it would take over two months to heal, but the doctor told her there was nothing to worry about, giving their stamp of approval as they explained. Apparently there were twenty very skilled healing Magicmasters here, including

specialists that weren't even in the military.

Some of them were working on Fillic as they spoke. Surprisingly enough, he was less injured than Loki, as most of his injuries had been converted into mental damage, leaving him unconscious, but he still hadn't woken up.

Loki's own wounds would be healed, and she'd be walking around again by the end of today as long as there weren't any emergencies. It would be a few days until she was fully healed, but it still came as a surprise to her.

Like the doctor said, the healing Magicmasters were skilled, as once they began the treatment her pain disappeared almost immediately.

After twenty minutes of first aid medical procedures, Loki was—regrettably—lying in bed next to Tesfia and Alice. Incidentally, once Loki's match ended, Ciel had returned to the waiting room.

"You pushed yourself quite a bit, Loki dear," Alice said, sounding worried.

"Are your legs okay?" Tesfia asked.

"Yes. I will be able to move around soon, so there won't be any problems," Loki replied. Her legs were wrapped in bandages and strung up in the air to ensure she kept them still. Tesfia and Alice naturally cast doubtful stares her way.

Loki had been blunt, but after being reminded of the taste of victory, she puffed her chest up in pride. "Speaking of forcing yourself, so did you two."

The two girls smiled wryly at her remark. "It was a match in the main tournament. We had to go all out after all," Alice said. She'd been unable to go easy on Tesfia when they stood in the arena. It was a rare chance for her to have a serious fight with her best friend.

"Still, I doubt you'll be able to fight in the finals like that..." Tesfia said, bringing up the topic nobody had touched on yet.

Loki had secured a victory for the Second Magical Institute, but she couldn't forget about that. The trophy received for individual victory was made out of mithril, and it would be useful for Alus' research.

However—“I’ve been ordered not to by the doctor, but I could fight if I wanted,” Loki said with a fearless smile.

“You can’t do that!” Tesfia rejected the idea outright. To her, it looked like she was just putting up a brave front.

“Yes, Al would be worried if you pushed yourself even more and worsened your injuries.”

“Ugh... I wouldn’t want that.” If Loki simply suffered from exhaustion and mana shortage like Tesfia and Alice, she could fight after resting, but merely moving would put a lot of strain on her. “But still, you seem to have recovered quickly, despite saying you wouldn’t make it for the next match,” she said with envy.

Alice shook her head. “Not at all. The healing magic helped with the headache, but my mana is still...” She raised her arm and ran mana through it, but she couldn’t even properly control it.

“I won’t make it to the next match either. It’s vexing, but I can’t help it,” Tesfia said mournfully.

“I wonder what will happen?” Alice said.

“Well, the finals are going to be between two students from the same institute, so maybe it can be cancelled? They can’t do anything about injuries,” Tesfia noted.

“Which means... there’s the question of determining third place.”

“...!”

“...!”

Tesfia and Alice both reacted to Loki’s words.

Having seen the match on the screen, neither of the two girls could rejoice. Though Loki had won, neither of them felt like they’d stand a chance against Fillic.

“Let’s leave all the winning decisions to Feli. We should just focus on recovering,” Tesfia said, to fix the atmosphere in the room.

“Though the only thing we need to focus on is lying around.”

At Loki’s words, silence fell over the infirmary.

Thirty-Fourth Chapter

Acquired Honor

Meanwhile, in contrast to such concerns...

Loki, Tesfia, and Alice were watching the second-year matches from on top of their beds. Their focus was entirely on the screen.

Displayed on the screen was the first match of the second-year students, but the match in question was incredibly one-sided. Before long, Felinella's alias, Orchesis, was being muttered in the stands here and there by some audience members that were watching.

One almost felt bad for her opponent, and even the applause for the winner was somewhat awkward with some fear mixed in. Felinella's brilliant skill and the terrific way she handled the match chilled the heated audience.

The next matches were supposed to continue with the semi-finals for the first-years through the third-years. After that, it would be the finals and the third place deciding matches for each of the class years, meaning that the participants would pretty much have to fight in succession.

However, since everyone in the first-year division was injured or exhausted, their matches would be pushed back in the schedule. The biggest reason for that was that Fillic was still unconscious.

Loki was the only actual injured competitor though, as Tesfia and Alice would be able to recover some mana through resting. So in the end, all they could do right now was sit tight in their beds.

They spent their time watching all of the matches in the infirmary with serious looks on their faces. Unlike Felinella's one-man show of a first round, Illumina was struggling in the second. She put up a good fight, but ultimately lost. Yet even then she was expressionless, not showing any exhaustion, though there appeared to be some frustration behind her mask.

She tended to stay in Felinella's shadow, but this vice-captain was talented as well. One could only say that this was a poor matchup for her. After all, her opponent was Karia Ferrard, someone who had a similar ranking to Felinella and who was Rusalca's promising second-year student.

In the middle of the battle, Illumina had switched her strategy to stripping her opponent's stamina, but in the end, Karia was a cut above her. Illumina herself likely knew she had a low chance of winning, but she'd chosen that strategy as her best possible chance.

Tesfia and Alice applauded her fight from the infirmary. Besides, it was still too early to give up. The finals were still ahead of them after all. It was the next match that would determine the Second Magical Institute's results.

Moreover, the Second Magical Institute didn't have any competitors for the third-year division, so Rusalca's First Magical Institute was winning their way through as expected. The first-year division's finals were skipped for the aforementioned reasons, and it was decided to move on to the finals for the second-year division.

With this being the finals, Felinella wasn't going to have as easy of a time as before. Having seen the match between Illumina and Karia, Tesfia and Alice were also getting pumped up.

As the Institute's representative, Felinella had of course been marked, and there were likely measures that had been put in place against her. Her abilities were on the level of an active duty Magicmaster, after all.

Strangely enough, this was pretty much a repetition of last year, when Felinella had faced Karia in the finals. It was Alpha versus Rusalca then as well. Last year, Felinella had come out ahead, but this year Karia would surely have more cards to play against her.

Also, they could more or less have anticipated that they might face each other again, so Karia must have thoroughly studied her tactics. One could expect a close game.

While Loki had fulfilled her promise with Alus, the overall outcome wasn't solely dependent on her. It was more than likely that this match would determine if the Second Magical Institute won or not.

Because of this, Loki was the one who was the most intently staring at the screen, having left the rest up to Felinella. She clutched the blanket that was over her knees.

The instant someone lost their concentration during the back and forth attack and defense would determine the outcome. *They look about evenly matched. I had the image of Feli being pretty good against other people, but her opponent is pretty strong too... or rather, it seems they've thoroughly examined her tactics.*

Karia was skillfully using two short spears to handle Felinella's attacks. Like Alice, she was exceptionally skilled at close combat.

But to think there was someone this strong in Rusalca. Even Loki hadn't expected this. She only had absolute trust in Alus, but she had believed that Felinella would easily be able to win in the finals. Even if she didn't take what she heard from Tesfia about last year's match into account, Felinella had experience with the Outer World and live combat, and she'd supported Alus during the Godma Barhong incident, so Loki had a fairly high estimation of her.

Even if she'd underestimated her, Felinella's abilities were already above those of unskilled active duty Magicmasters. More important than her Triple Digit rank was her experience in combat. That's why Loki was surprised to see that there was an opponent among the regular students who was capable of making Felinella struggle.

Karia Ferrard. Loki could tell that she most definitely had some experience in the Outer World, making her similar to herself or Felinella in that regard.

"You can do it, Feli!!" Tesfia sat up on her bed and cheered at the screen.

Alice, too, was fearfully looking at the screen. Her expression was constantly changing. Sometimes she covered her eyes, but still kept her eyes glued to the screen by peeping through her fingers. Kind of like someone who was bad with horror movies, but who was still interested in watching one for some reason.

As a result, comments such as "Ah!" and "Just a little more!" and "So close!" and so on filled the room. The three weren't much different from the heated audience at the venue.

Perhaps infected by their passion, Loki too let out a “That was good!” at one of Felinella’s moves. Catching herself, she covered her mouth and blushed.

Back when she was doing missions in the Outer World, she never could have anticipated this would happen. She didn’t really see herself as a student of the Second Magical Institute anyways. She’d simply enrolled as part of her duty to serve as Alus’ partner.

And now she was cheering along with Tesfia and Alice as another student. What a strange world.

The spectacle on the screen would sometimes frighten them, and sometimes make them clench their fists at the appearance of a golden opportunity. As things went on, even they ended up getting tired.

Finally, the match came to an end. After a fierce fight, it was Felinella who remained standing on the stage. She’d been trained by Alus, and had gotten stronger and tougher for this tournament.

Moreover, there was no way Felinella hadn’t considered that the other schools would take her skills into account. In that sense, she was far from being full of herself. To finish the match, a side of her she rarely showed came to the surface and she unleashed a powerful move with all her strength.

“All riiiight!!” Tesfia cheered.

“Yeah, that’s Feli for you,” Alice said happily.

The two leaned toward each other on their beds and high-fived. They still hadn’t fully recovered, but they seemed to have gotten better.

“But I’m sure Felinella isn’t overly pleased about it.”

Hearing Loki’s voice, Tesfia and Alice looked her way with confusion in their faces, as if asking what she’d seen in that fight that they hadn’t.

Both of them already knew about this, so Loki saw no reason to hide it. “Like Sir Alus, Ms. Felinella has the public face of a student of the Institute, and another secret one doing military missions. Of course, her strength and skill are leagues above the other students. But Felinella is doing the best she can to keep up appearances and prevent others from seeing her hidden side. You could also

say that the students from the other institutes had next to no knowledge of her true strength."

She was the same way with Alus' training time. She drew a clear line between missions and daily life, and she never used techniques meant for missions in front of students from her own institute or others.

"Of course, it's not like she was holding back or not being serious. That's just how Ms. Felinella separates her private and public lives. But this time her hand was forced. And her opponent likely didn't expect that either."

That was just how close the battle with Karia had been. In battles of magic, being able to counteract the other greatly influenced the outcome. In that sense, Karia had thoroughly prepared for their match.

As Loki explained all of this, Felinella, breathing roughly, was gazing at the unconscious Karia being treated.

"Yeah, this match was more intense than last year's..." Tesfia said, with an ecstatic look on her face. Like Loki said, she'd needed to rely on strength from her hidden side to win. And she felt honest respect for the opponent who had forced her to rely on that. A truly superb match was probably equally attractive to anyone watching it. Tesfia's heart was pounding even now.

"Even so, with this win..." Alice trailed off, and looked at Tesfia and Loki. The two could easily guess what she was thinking.

"Yes, with this, I can truly fulfill my promise," Loki said.

"At any rate... with this, the Second Magical Institute has won!!" Tesfia shouted in a loud voice not suitable for an infirmary, raising her hands up high. With Felinella's victory, the points gained almost certainly gave them enough to win the overall tournament.

"We did it!" Alice clenched her fist and thrust it out, though not in such an exaggerated manner as Tesfia.

"Well, it was only natural." Loki couldn't be quite as innocent as the other two. But she still felt relief. After all, with this she could finally stay at Alus' side and fulfill her duty. She could become his partner in the true meaning of the word.

Loki quietly savored that joy, a smile emerging on her face.

As the third-year finals began, Felinella appeared in the infirmary.

She looked the same as always, as if the intense battle moments ago never happened, and seemed a little puzzled over Tesfia's and Alice's excitement. In the end she thanked them, and smiled.

The next moment, her expression completely changed to that of the leader of the Second Magical Institute's competitors, reporting on what would happen next.

Fillic still hadn't come to. So what was going to happen to the first-year division's matches?

"It seems the committee discussed quite a bit over how to handle this special exception. Lady Cicelnia and Lady Lithia were present at the meeting. So the final judgment was left up to the rulers. As I said before, the first-year division matches will be delayed until after the third-year division, so the decision will be made then. Incidentally, it seems that with the second-year division concluded, Fillic will be put in a shared third place if he doesn't wake up. Loki also loses the finals by default due to her injuries. There's no precedent for this, but it can't be helped."

While individual victories would be logged, it couldn't be helped that the focus was on the overall victory for the institutes. Alpha's and Rusalca's rulers had gotten involved because this concerned Tesfia, Alice and Loki on Alpha's side, and Fillic on Rusalca's side.

"So we don't know who wins?" Alice asked.

"Yes. In the overall score, Ms. Loki should win, but her injuries are a result of her lack of self-managing abilities. Whether risking your future for the sake of victory in a student tournament was the right thing to do is questionable."

"This doesn't even count as an injury. I can fight against either of these two without problems," Loki declared with determination.

But Felinella pinched the bridge of her nose and sighed. "Not a chance! If your injuries worsen because of that, Mr. Alus will get angry with me. And don't object to the leader's decision. We've gone over this before, haven't we?"

With a bitter expression, Loki realized she wouldn't get any further. She'd more or less understood her reaction was like a childish tantrum, and with Alus being brought up, she regrettably had no choice.

"I don't want anyone to think that personal feelings were involved, so I'll tell you the matchups before the judgment is made. No hard feelings, Ms. Alice, but you'll be put in the third place match, and Fia was supposed to fight Ms. Loki in the finals, but since she loses by default, Fia will be the winner."

Loki lowered her head. Though her own recklessness had invited this result, she kept the humiliation of losing to Tesfia to herself.

"I understand," Alice said. "So I will take part in the third place match."

"I'm sorry, Ms. Alice. You might not be able to fight properly, but it's common practice to pit element against element, so you're more likely to win against Fillic."

"In that case, I gladly accept." Being told by Felinella that she might win, Alice accepted the task with a smile.

"Publicly, Fia will be the victor, but in the Second Magical Institute's records all three of you will be recorded as sharing first place. I'm only doing this because places have to be determined for the tournament, so don't misunderstand me."



Filled with emotion, Tesfia's cheeks were flushed and she had a pleased look on her face. But as Felinella hammered home the point with a serious expression, Tesfia returned to reality. "Of course, Loki is one thing, but it wouldn't have been strange for either me or Alice to win. I'm more surprised over having been able to win my way this far."

"I'll just leave it at that," Felinella said.

"But I'm serious!"

Felinella smiled at Tesfia's frown, her own serious expression melting.

The news was released to the tens of thousands in the audience. But there were no complaints among the audience who had watched Tesfia versus Alice and Loki versus Fillic. Though there were some who had hoped to see even more fierce battles.

For the time being, however, once the news broke, applause for the competitors' hard work came from the audience in the stadium.

And the following announcement that the Second Magical Institute had won the tournament sent the audience into a frenzy. Even though there would be an award ceremony later, an unending storm of applause fell upon the competitors from the Second Magical Institute.

Time passed, and an elaborate ceremony was held.

Since Fillic still hadn't woken up even after all the other matches were over, the ceremony was quickly readied.

Loki gave the small runners-up trophy she'd received on stage a dubious gaze.

Tesfia was hugging a trophy as tall as she was right next to her. To Loki, that looked a little dangerous.

After that, she once more observed her own trophy. *This is... dirty.* Realizing a certain truth, Loki pondered on how to break the news to Alus, feeling a small resentment.

Loki's trophy, as well as Tesfia's trophy, was supposed to be made out of mithril. But when she secretly poured some mana through them, nothing felt right. It wasn't as if she fully grasped the structure of the trophies, but she

grimaced at the difference in reaction to mana between the outer layer and the core.

In other words, the trophies weren't made out of mithril. The surfaces were probably gilded with it. No, they definitely were. She could clearly feel the small quantities of mithril.

Loki had called it dirty because the core of the trophy had—despite not being made of mithril—an extremely similar weight to pure mithril. Meaning that it was impossible to tell the difference from the weight.

Even though it was beyond her control, Loki couldn't help but feel guilty after all of her hopes to present Alus with the valuable mithril. Of course, she had to accept it.

Loki's shoulders slumped, but then trophies were intended to be a proof of victory in the tournament, a symbol of glory that no one expected to be melted down and remade.

That said, as the overall winners of the tournament, the Second Magical Institute, as well as the nation that it belonged to, would enjoy all kinds of benefits.

A partial exemption on trade tariffs was one such benefit. As a byproduct of that, more of the latest information on magic would flow into the nation. There would also be an influx of people from other nations to purchase goods which would enrich the nation as a whole.

The Second Magical Institute was presented with the latest AWRs from all the nations. Through a sponsorship contract, they would receive priority on prototypes for one year after the end of the tournament.

Alpha's reputation as a major power also rose. The point of these kinds of events was to emphasize the importance of Magicmasters. While it was an honorable job tasked with saving humanity, most rarely lived long. If one wasn't from a military or noble family, few parents would gladly send their child off to an institute that would lead to their death.

That's why they needed an event to advertise themselves. Simply put, they needed to raise awareness in society to keep a supply of Magicmasters coming.

The intent was to motivate the youths to become Magicmasters and assure them it was a highly esteemed path in life. The more exciting the tournament was, and the more records broken, the more pronounced this effect became.

Alpha was already considered a major nation, but with this, their reputation for training Magicmasters would increase as well. There would definitely be more people applying to be students at the Second Magical Institute next year.

The ending ceremony was a solemn affair, but once back in the waiting room, Alpha's competitors were rejoicing and sharing in the glory of victory without reserve. They were all victors, and they had earned the victory together.

"Thanks to all of us coming together, the Second Magical Institute has come out victorious. Now we will be able to return triumphantly with our heads held high," Felinella said as the leader of this festive group. *But let's not get full of ourselves and remain diligent. We've all seen what we need to improve, and those who lost early on also need to keep up the effort to improve themselves...* she wanted to continue saying, but she changed her mind after looking at the group.

Perhaps that would be a little boorish right now. She sighed softly at their joyous looks, and decided not to say anything further for now.

After this, they had an event that would have an impact on their futures to look forward to. Every year after the Friendship Magical Tournament was over, there was a party and celebration held at the winner's hotel. The tournament had ended sooner than expected, so by now the preparations were hurriedly being made.

The party was split up into three parts, with the celebration held at the end. While it was called a party, it was straining the nerves of the competitors for a different reason.

During the first part, military personnel would arrive, and in the second part the nobles would come. And it wasn't rare for students to be scouted here. Though those with deep ties to their nation like Felinella and Tesfia rarely got scouted by outsiders.

Aside from them, however, everyone else was aware that they might be recruited by other nations. That's why this party was a prelude to the drafting

process that would influence the future assignment of troops for all nations.

As an example from the past, students from the Second Magical Institute were sometimes recruited directly by the captains of various corps from Alpha's army. However, Felinella knew that this time the other nations would be a lot more active in their recruitment as the result of a decision made at the rulers conference, so she couldn't enjoy the festive mood in a carefree way like the rest.

Incidentally, even if the recruited person accepted the invitation of another nation, it was standard procedure that they would only move after graduation, though civilians would have a hard time pleading their personal circumstances to the military even if it was another nation's military.

In those cases, the students in the classes might leave before graduation, but Felinella couldn't bring herself to get in the way of a choice that would affect their future. Instead, she wanted to respect their will and rejoice that someone had seen their future potential.

For the time being, there were over two hours until the first two segments of the party, so the celebrating students returned to the hotel for now. The topics on the way home were mostly on the recruitment, as expected.

Tesfia and Alice were only waiting for their mana to recover, and would walk normally soon. Loki had recovered quite a bit, but was in a wheelchair just in case. It was, of course, automatic and ran on artificial mana, but for some reason Alice was pushing it from behind like a personal assistant.

"We have another kind of battle ahead of us," Tesfia muttered, as if representing everyone's voice. But as a member of the renowned Fable family, her manner of speaking was rather carefree.

When it came to squad assignments, connections came into play. Being from a noble family with ties to the government, she might not be recruited by other nations, but it wouldn't be strange for a force within Alpha to try to recruit the winner of the first-year division.

Those kinds of things were her specialty. The established reputation of the Fable family in social circles and her ability to move around in them weren't just for show.

But there were some who weren't as used to it. "I think I might be more nervous than during the tournament... I don't really know how to politely decline, so if someone were to invite me, then... uhh."

"Are you planning on turning down any recruiters, Alice? Someone good might invite you, you know. I'm sure the rulers, Governors-General, and Lady Lettie will be looking at you, too."

"That might be true, but right now I can't think about the future, so it would only put more pressure on me..."

"Well, that might be, but Lady Lettie's squad is made up of elites who everyone adores, and to refuse an invitation from them..." Tesfia said, even though there was no guarantee something like that would happen for Alice.

This prompted Loki to retort, "I don't think that's possible. Lady Lettie left on the same mission as Sir Alus. Though someone might still be here to represent their unit."

"Oh yeah, now that you mention it, that's true. But they really are amazing when you think about it. And what Al taught me was useful in the tournament, so I'll have to thank him later."

Unlike the indifferent Tesfia, Alice wasn't sure how to react to Loki's words, and decided to return to their original topic. "What about you? Someone might try to talk you up too, Fia. I can definitely imagine applications for an arranged marriage or engagement proposals flying around."

"Urk... I don't think I want to hear that. I'll politely turn them all down! Yeah. That should solve it... but if they're too persistent, come help me, Alice."

"What?! They might take offense if I intrude, so that's a little..."

"... You're so cold! I'm begging you... if you don't..."

"If I don't, what?"

"I might end up punching them."

Alice thought Tesfia was joking for a moment, but when she saw those big puppy eyes pointed her way, she realized she might be serious.

In the end, she gave in and shrugged. "You might actually do it, and it might

ruin the mood. Well, I get that, but what if there really are recruiters?”

“It’ll probably be fine. In my case they’ll have to go through my mother first, but if it’s Lady Lettie’s squad, I’d okay it immediately.”

“Uhm, so can I ask you to take care of it for me too?” Alice asked Tesfia. “... Pretty please?”

“Okay. Let’s help each other out!” Tesfia said.

Loki watched their exchange with an amused expression, which Tesfia noticed. “What?!”

“No, I was just thinking that you might be approached by men, but...” Loki fixed her eyes on a certain part of their—especially Alice’s—bodies. One of the features was the two hills visible even through clothing.

Before she knew it, Loki was gazing at them with envy, but she turned her face away from them as she continued, “Do you really think Lady Lettie would invite you? Aren’t you getting a little too ahead of yourself? First-year students still have a long way to go... and you’re both only in the four digits, even if you did do well in a tournament... that’s just reaching too far. Pfft.” Loki let out a snicker on purpose.

“Just let me dream a little!” Tesfia complained.

“You’re in the military, so I guess you know a lot about this, Loki dear.”

“Let me teach you about reality. Lady Lettie’s squad is composed of members that are all skilled enough to lead squads of their own. Doubles are the norm, and only Triples that live up to Lady Lettie’s expectations are allowed in. This is an elite force considered among the best of the best in Alpha. If you still want to dream, then go ahead.”

“Ugh...” Even Tesfia felt like she was shaken awake when told that her dream demanded she reach the superhuman levels of a Double Digit. Among the hundreds of thousands of Magicmasters, only 90 could have that rank. While she’d gotten stronger, that was still just a pipe dream.

Tesfia then said, “Wait, if a unit like that is on a mission with Al...”

“...” Loki realized she’d said too much.

“Loki dear, is Al’s mission really that dangerous?”

“I don’t know! I haven’t heard the details either.”

“... Well, I’m sure that there are a lot of secrets when the military is involved.” Tesfia seemed to reluctantly accept it, but Alice looked uneasy like Loki had been. Even knowing how much stronger a Single was.

“You can try asking Sir Alus once he returns. Not that he will tell you.”

“I bet...” Alice’s bitter smile seemed to infect Tesfia too, as she wore a similar uneasy expression.

Thirty-Fifth Chapter

Chaos in the Outer World

Returning to the early morning hours during the main tournament...

The artificial sun still hadn't risen, and the room where Cicelnia had called the emergency meeting was dead quiet. Despite the lively dispute earlier, there was nobody in the room now.

Everyone at the meeting had already started to take action, hurriedly reporting the important information they'd learned to their nations.

The first thing they did was to contact the supervisors back in their own nations, and have them ready their high-ranking Magicmasters and form units to depart for Balmes. Even the nations that had their Singles out on missions gathered the strongest force possible, because of the similarities to the calamity of the past.

Alus was in a room being utilized as the temporary headquarters with Lettie and her squad, memorizing their affinities, spells they specialized in, and more.

"Lettie, we won't need a lot of simple firepower or numbers. Instead, I want you to pick out around ten Magicmasters skilled in detection, barriers, and obstruction. And since it's yours, I figure I should leave keeping the squad together to you. Things will go smoother if I run my orders through you."

He gave out all kinds of instructions on the course of their mission. The temporary headquarters was a single room on the fifth floor, though it was relatively large. It was dirty, but they'd just have to bear it.

"Gotcha, captain! All personnel are fully ready here. I bet the Governor-General must have seen this coming..." Lettie said in a joking tone, wearing an affectionate smile she hadn't shown during the emergency meeting. She seemed to have a thing or two she wanted to say to the Governor-General, but she didn't say anything further for now.

“Sir Alus, it’s been quite a while since I was last on the frontlines...” Rinne, wearing her maid outfit, was also present. She’d been worked into the plan as well.

“You’ll be accompanying us as a spotter, Ms. Rinne. Just stay out of any actual battle. I won’t be able to research your magic eye if you die.”

“O-Okay...” Rinne’s answer tapered off due to her apprehensions, not over Fiends, but over being seen as a research subject.

Seeing this, Alus frowned with regret for a moment. He shouldn’t have stayed in the military, even if it was at Berwick’s request. Though he couldn’t have expected to be asked to clean up after not only Alpha, but the other nations as well. “On the surface, it’s meant to be a mission to measure the Devourer’s strength, but...”

“... In reality, it’s definitely a mission to exterminate it,” Lettie finished for him. “It seems Alpha has decided to address this threat on their own. Lady Cicelnia looks like she made preparations for that.”

“I bet. Which means we can’t waste any time. Take too long, and the other nations that can’t stand waiting around will intervene, so we’ll need to settle things before then.”

That’s when two male Magicmasters, among the best of Lettie’s elite squad, Sajik and Mujir, asked some questions as if representing the group. They were the ones who had guarded the ruler during the tournament with Lettie.

“Sir Alus, may I ask about the details of this extermination? I hear we will be going with a select few this time...” The older-looking Sajik had a well-trained body, seemingly sculpted out of rock, but his polite tone clashed with his appearance.

“It is an honor going with Sir Alus, but does the greatest Magicmaster himself really need to do this on his own?” the rational-looking Mujir added, urging Alus to explain further.

Of course, they didn’t have much time, so Alus kept it short. “As you’ve probably realized, we’re up against a Fiend. But we don’t have the detailed information on it yet. Or rather—nobody does. All we know is that it probably

rivals an SS-class. And on top of that, it's a Devourer."

"—!!" Sajik reacted.

"You mean that it's the second coming of the calamity fifty years ago?" Mujir asked in a panicked tone. Even a fearless, battle-hardened warrior would find themselves unable to brush off that shocking news.

While it had been reported that the Fiend had been exterminated, the SS-class responsible for the calamity fifty years ago—referred to by its moniker of Cronus by the military—hadn't actually been killed. They had, through countless sacrifices, left it near dead, but in the end it had escaped their clutches.

Of course, the Magicmasters didn't just sit idly by as it ran off. But there was no one left who was capable of stopping it. With one of its arms cut off, the Fiend—of all things—took to the sky with its massive body and flew off.

The nations intensified their Magicmaster training in preparation for its possible return. This was also around the time inhuman experiments began, the result of humanity being flung into a hysterical urge to protect itself.

After a decade, Cronus still hadn't reappeared, and humanity finally calmed down. Realizing that that kind of research should be avoided, it was abolished as an abhorrent practice, and international policies took completely the opposite turn. Many who participated in the experiments were also punished.

"It's hard to imagine this will be a second coming of the calamity. According to the database of Fiends, Cronus would be discovered immediately if it got close with that huge body. Well, it wasn't Alpha in charge of dealing with it but Balmes, so who knows how accurate that information is."

Fiends ate Magicmasters—and sometimes their own—to absorb their power and transform their bodies. The changes became more extreme the higher the class, the most common change being either growing larger, or conversely shrinking and becoming more compact. In those cases, their appearance wasn't as twisted as low or mid-classed Fiends, but instead resembled more of a complete life form.

"For the time being, it's clear we need to head to Balmes right away. So make preparations, we're leaving in thirty minutes," Alus announced.

Lettie's elite squad saluted, and left the room in an orderly fashion without making a sound. They were the finest Magicmasters around, and they'd soon realized they were short on time. If they had any more questions, they could ask on the way there.

Alus and the others took up the rear.

Lettie asked, "What will you do about the tournament, though?"

"I'll be absent, of course. But I've made enough preparations for Alpha to win." Alus had a daring smile, and Lettie responded with a child-like smile of her own.

"I love that part of you."

"Well, considering the situation, I'll take whatever I can get my hands on to make it worth my time... and Ms. Rinne, there's still something you haven't reported to us yet, isn't there?"

Lettie wordlessly nodded at Alus' sudden change of topic.

"...!!" Rinne reacted.

If that nasty Cicelnia was going this far, there must still be more to it. Alus figured that Rinne must know what it is, seeing as how her cooperation would be indispensable to gather that kind of information.

As expected, Rinne awkwardly drew her mouth shut.

"What's the point in hiding it now? Or did Lady Cicelnia tell you to keep quiet?" Lettie asked.

"... I am sorry."

"Ms. Rinne. Does this mean that the information won't have any impact on the extermination whatsoever?" Alus didn't overlook the fact that Rinne looked away for a moment when he asked.

He sighed. "I understand. I'll ask the Governor-General about it later."

While Cicelnia was at the helm, she was the ruler of a nation... and though she had the authority, her primary role was standing above people and controlling them. So it couldn't be helped that she could only see things from a

human or political perspective, but the situation was different when Fiends came into play.

It was the Governor-General who handled military affairs, and it was standard practice to disclose all information beforehand to assist him in carrying out his duties. If not, Magicmasters ran a higher risk of being sent out to die for nothing. In other words, it was the same as the person giving the order not truly wishing for the subject to return alive.

Of course, they might not tell the rank and file everything, but in those cases there was often a warning included. Including an apology for not being able to reveal everything to the person who'd have to stake their life... that was the responsibility of those who stood above others.

To say nothing of how this was an international incident revolving around a Devourer... It might be revealed eventually, but Alus and the others were staking their lives on it now.

"Aww, geez. What does she take my squad for?" Lettie said. While it sounded like simple grumbling, there was a smoldering rage mixed in underneath the words. And of course there would be. She trusted in her subordinates, and also valued their lives highly.

"Perhaps the Governor-General is planning to reveal the information when the time is right. Either way, it's a good thing we caught it early." Alus showed no further signs of pursuing the matter, simply leaving those meaningful words.

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Gathered behind the hotel was a group wearing black coats, lined up in an orderly fashion.

The times were tense, but the expressions on the faces of the black-clad group didn't look all that nervous. Some even looked quite relaxed, practically kicking back. Their methods varied from stretching to carefree yawns.

However, the mood did a one-eighty as the commander for this mission appeared alongside their original captain, and they all saluted with perfect coordination.

"Here, this one's yours, Allie," Lettie told Alus, giving him a custom-made

cloak.

As the temporary commander, Alus quietly accepted it. Custom made it might be, but this was the same thing he had worn during the magical martial arts demonstration. The cloak he'd returned to the top brass after he'd finished with it had returned to him.

Though it was a coat, protecting the wearer against the weather was only its secondary function. This special coat was made out of reinforced fiber with a variety of other useful effects, and its primary function was that of anti-magic defensive gear.

Each nation had various anti-magic equipment, and Alpha specialized in things that were easy to move in, like cloaks.

For example, Halcapdia had knight-like armor, giving it a national flair. The Balmes military struggled financially, so their Magicmasters were required to provide their own armor that varied wildly in quality. It was said that problems with military equipment like this was one of the reasons Balmes had fewer Magicmasters than other nations. In other words, they had a low supply of Magicmasters with a relatively high rate of death.

As Alus finished his final preparations, Rinne whispered to him that the ruler had arrived.

He turned to look over at them, acknowledging Cicelnia as well as Berwick. "Since you've come all this way, are you here to tell me something?" Alus said, skipping any greetings.

The ruler tilted her head in an adorable fashion, while Berwick stroked his chin with a troubled frown. "Alus, Vizaist has set up out there. When you reach him, he will give you the plan and information."

Cicelnia looked to feign ignorance at Alus' question, but her expression then turned serious, and she presented something to him with both hands. "This is a letter I received from Balmes' Lord Holtal. It specifies the temporary delegation of command, complete with his signature."

Alus casually accepted the letter that rested in an ornate box, and shoved it into his pocket.

“And take care of Rinne.”

“Of course,” Alus answered, but at the same time, he hoped she’d give him more to work with if that was what she wanted.

Many rulers knew next to nothing about the Outer World and the battles that took place there. That was a result of sharing political duties with the Governors-General, but it also meant that there was a subtle shift concerning the important things. Not even someone as intelligent as Cicelnia could fully put herself in the shoes of a Magicmaster.

Alus didn’t even try to hide his weary sigh. And that was when Berwick moved to him and spoke in a low voice, “Sorry about that. It seems there’s a mineral deposit near the Fiends.”

“—!! What kind?”

“I hear it’s mithril. And I want you to ask Vizaist about the details, but Kurama may have been brought in for this incident.”

Feeling a sudden headache coming on, Alus firmly planted his face in his palm. But realizing that nothing would come from losing his composure, he gave Berwick a simple “I see.”

It was like bad news gave way for more bad news. He gave Berwick a cold glance. “Governor-General, it will be your fault for failing to act when you should have.”

“I know. It might be late, but I’m doing what I can.”

Alus gave Berwick a meaningful smile when he left his side, as Cicelnia gave Berwick a doubtful stare.

But with the wisdom that came with age, Berwick brushed it off with a cool look. Yet even with that, he had a bad feeling about the smile Alus gave him.

“It’s about time for us to head over. Leave that work to us. I’m sure you haven’t forgotten, but get those rare books and credit waiver ready. And seriously, I want you to spare me from any more missions like this for a while.”

“I know. You be careful out there.”

The squad members who overheard their conversation were reminded that

their commander was still a student when they heard credits being brought up. That said, nobody here would make light of Alus. They more or less knew what kind of hard missions he'd gone through.

The Magicmasters here weren't all that fixated on rank, but Alus was a Single like their captain, and the ranked No. 1 at that. His rank carried a huge weight. In fact, they couldn't imagine entrusting their lives to anyone other than Lettie or Alus.

This was an elite squad, and they were confident that they wouldn't waver for a moment even if left behind to face a horde of Fiends.

Alus lightly cast his eyes down and faced the orderly lined-up squad.

Lettie must have misunderstood his action and raised her voice in an uncharacteristic fashion. "Everyone, listen up." After setting the table, Lettie quickly passed the baton over to Alus.

"I don't know what you're expecting, but I'm not doing it."

The squad stared at him with expectation, but Alus gave them an annoyed look back. He slowly raised his hand, saying, "Hurry and go already," giving out a marching order after his appointment.

It wasn't a loud domineering voice by any means, but nobody missed it and the squad members moved like the wind, heading in the direction of Balmes, the place of reckoning. They moved fast—to the untrained eye the group looked like they'd just vanished. As expected from an elite squad, their marching speed was extreme.

After seeing them off, Alus put on his own cloak, fastened it around his neck, then disappeared with the flutter of his cloak.

"I could not see it clearly... but are they really moving on foot?" Cicelnia asked.

Rinne hid her exasperated look. "For Magicmasters of that caliber, it's faster than going through several transport gates."

Berwick added on to her explanation. "Not to mention that Iblis is close to Balmes. I imagine they'll arrive by noon. And knowing Alus, they'll set out to

exterminate it by tomorrow," he surmised.

He shifted gears as he realized how busy things were going to get. *First off is Kurama.* Berwick already knew that Balmes' Governor-General, Gagareed, was considering making a request to Kurama. He didn't have anything conclusive, but in the worst case, Alus and the squad might end up facing them.

Alus had secretly assassinated one of their executives in the past, so there was a high chance that Kurama saw him as a hated enemy. They easily changed their point of view if it profited them, but that was why they couldn't be trusted. Perhaps it was best if they were eliminated as soon as possible.

"I will be heading over to Balmes, too. Rusalca's Lady Lithia should still be here, so make preparations to send her an encrypted message," Berwick loudly ordered the Magicmaster behind him.

And behind that Magicmaster was Cicelnia, gracefully returning to the hotel. In Alus' mind, Cicelnia didn't know anything, but she wasn't a fool. She knew that as someone with no knowledge of battle, there wasn't any point in her going to Balmes.

Instead, she would negotiate with Balmes' ruler, who would stay behind. That was likely going to be very one-sided, but Cicelnia was thrilled to continue playing her game where she could enjoy her superiority over another nation's ruler.

Suddenly she raised her head. "Hm? Rinne, are you sure you should be dawdling around here?"

"Ah! I'm sorry. I'll be off right away." After a short bow, a cloaked Rinne took off at great speed, following after Alus and the others.

The AWR Rinne had brought for this mission was a bow as tall as she was. She looked a little awkward as she ran while holding onto the quiver at her waist, but the worry Cicelnia felt as she saw her off must have been needless fear.

Cicelnia's elegant servant was a high-ranking spotter, and was quite experienced in her own right. Though lacking in combat abilities, her well-trained physical abilities exceeded the average person's.

And so, as silence filled the world this early morning, Alpha's strongest force

set forth to eliminate the threat to humanity that appeared outside of Balmes in the Outer World.

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A black-clad group cut through the wind, making their way through a forest.

Alus and the others were taking the shortest possible route to reach Balmes' border. Right now, they were probably in between the Tower of Babel and the upper-class district.

Despite the abundant overgrowth in the forest, they kept up their speed, nimbly evading the trees and their branches.

On the way, Alus glanced around to confirm that everyone was there, before adjusting his speed and taking a big leap.

That was when Lettie showed up next to him. "What did the Governor-General say?"

"It seems there's a mineral deposit near where the Devourer appeared. Balmes' forces must have bumped into the Devourer when they were investigating the deposit. We could've ended up with a lot of troubles if we'd gone in without knowing."

"I know Fiends can use it as a nest, but is it really that bad?"

"No, the problem is the deposit itself. Supposedly it's mithril."

Behind Lettie was Rinne, who'd caught up along the way, and was awkwardly listening in.

Normally, like Lettie said, where Fiends made a nest wasn't all that much of a threat, but this time was an exception. That couldn't be helped, as there had been no nests in deposits of material used to make AWRs in the land that Alpha had reclaimed.

"Typically, materials used for AWRs are good conductors for mana. Places filled with those materials make their detection through mana much more difficult. And the effect with mithril is more pronounced than most. If you're not incredibly skilled, you probably won't be able to use magic there. So in that sense, bringing Ms. Rinne with us was the right call."

Knowing she was part of the mission, Alus wasn't going to leave her behind. But with her abilities, he figured that she'd be able to catch up right away and went on ahead. He assumed that she must have had something to explain to Cicelnia. He had no idea that she'd just accidentally forgotten. But it was true that Cicelnia had told her to keep quiet about the mineral deposit.

"Really? So I guess the Eye of Providence isn't magic then," Lettie said.

"Not at all, Lady Lettie. Using the eye requires a lot of mana. So it should count as magic."

"Yes, I believe the eye expends mana and it manifests as magic," Alus noted.

"Then won't it be impossible to use it for detection at the deposit?"

Not even Rinne herself could answer Lettie's question, and they silently waited for Alus' answer.

"I believe it's possible. I've only given it a quick look, but the magic itself is reliant on the eyeball, with no traces of mana remaining at the observed location."

"Oh? That's amazing! I guess I can't have any more secret meetings with Allie in the Outer World," Lettie teased.

"Lady Lettie, it's not all-powerful."

"Whatcha mean?"

Rinne realized that hiding the truth here would only hurt them. While it was at Cicelnia's instructions, it was true that she'd hid the existence of the deposit and wanted to make up for it. "I see hundreds of views, so it's impossible to observe for a long period of time because of mana constraints. And if the target notices me looking, the effect disappears and my sight won't recover for a while."

Alus remembered something that had happened, and groaned. It was back when Rinne had come to get him for the guard job at the rulers conference. He'd quickly noticed the strange gaze. Back then, he felt like someone was looking down at him from above. After that, he used his other sense and concluded that she had been responsible for the sensation. That must have

been her ‘looking.’

“In other words, if the target directly senses you, it’s over,” he said to Rinne.

“Yes, but it’s not as vague as just sensing. The failure condition is making eye contact with the target. The strength of that recoil depends on the target and the situation, but it tends to be more powerful the more aware the target is, and sees through me.”

“So what then, you can sort of look at them?” Lettie said. “And it shuts down when you make eye contact and you take damage?”

Rinne nodded, affirming this with a bitter expression. Having her weakness exposed didn’t feel all that great. “A-Also, I would like to ask you two to keep quiet about this...”

“I know,” Alus said.

“Of course! Geez. We’re Magicmasters too; we’re not that mean, so we’ll keep our mouths shut.”

Rinne felt some degree of relief at Alus’ nod and Lettie’s bright smile.

Alus might end up having to use his own special ability. That’s why he’d prefer no questions be asked. His Gra Eater wasn’t just a convenient special ability like Rinne’s magic eye. It was an unmanageable power that stirred up a sense of fear among those who saw it, and if possible he’d like to keep it hidden. So whether he used it or not would depend on the target.

“Still, the more I learn about it, the more interested I get,” Alus said.

“I-Is that so? There are other magic eyes aside from the Eye of Providence,” Rinne noted.

Lettie put a finger on her chin, bringing up one example after another. “If I remember correctly, aside from the Eye of Providence, there’s the Blue Eyes of Hequatra that can overwrite all magic, the One Eye of Salem that governs over life...”

“And the Clear Eyes of Ezefore that harbor death,” Rinne added.

“I thought they were all bull, but after seeing yours, I’m not so sure anymore.”

“I can understand that. The existence of magic eyes is undeniable, but it is said that extremely few people live after awakening to one... and I hear that the Eye of Providence is relatively easy to control. That’s why I am somewhat reluctant to call it one. Apparently, those who awaken to the One Eye of Salem only live for a few days, so it’s strange to say that they govern over life. The users don’t live long enough to truly confirm its effect. The Clear Eyes of Ezefore kill their user upon their awakening, which is how they got their name. I personally believe that magic eyes are special symptoms brought about by some form of mana disorder,” Rinne explained.

“So you’re saying there are no other magic eyes?”

“I wouldn’t go that far, Lady Lettie. But please think about it. The One Eye of Salem being able to create life exceeds human knowledge, and those with the Clear Eyes of Ezefore die when they awaken, so doesn’t that kind of make sense? It’s obvious that magic eyes have special powers, but I think that these are just rumors from when research on them was flourishing.”

“Apparently, the majority of those who awaken die from mana disorders. You’re pretty knowledgeable about this, Ms. Rinne,” Alus said. “Normally it’s hard to gather that much information about just your own magic eye.”

“Yes, I looked up a lot of things to control my magic eye. Perhaps to erase the failures of the past, the military is burying knowledge on magic eyes, including the term itself. Even if those special abilities are real, there’s nothing that can be done for them, after all...”

Rinne’s words trailed off at the end. Ultimately, the principles of the Eye of Providence were largely unexplained, and even if the other magic eyes existed, there probably wasn’t any way to protect the wielders from their negative effects.

In fact, not a single magic eye test subject had been saved in the past. Knowing that, it was thought that completely erasing all the information on magic eyes would prevent any needless confusion.

Back when there were still some who knew about the special abilities of magic eyes, there was an unspoken rule that if someone showed signs of it, it needed to be reported to the military immediately. But that was in the past. By

now, even fewer people knew about magic eyes.

“I see... but there is something I should correct you on,” Alus said. “There is a special power similar to the One Eye of Salem that governs over life. There’s been a case of someone wielding the One Eye of Salem losing control. And when they did—a phenomenon of life being created happened. Though no detailed information was received on it, so we don’t know what caused it.”

Rinne’s eyes opened wide. Alus probably didn’t notice because she was behind him, but she still stumbled over her words. “W-Where did you hear about that?! I’ve dug into this a lot, but I’ve never heard anything about that.”

It was only natural that Rinne would be surprised. Even for military personnel, gathering information on that sort of research was difficult. Research was classified, and there probably wasn’t much data to be found throughout the entire human domain, and of course, there were no such records in Alpha.

Once Rinne became able to control her magic eye, she’d asked for the Governor-General’s cooperation through Cicelnia, so there were no doubts about that. So perhaps it had come from another nation. But that was even stranger. As Alpha’s most important asset, they wouldn’t allow Alus to freely visit another nation so easily. Before becoming a student, he’d spent practically all of his time in the Outer World.

However, Alus’ next words stunned her. “I bet. I learned that during a mission in the Outer World. I wrapped up early, and found it by accident while taking the long way home. The information was inside of a facility, but shortly after that it collapsed during battle, so I’m probably the only one who knows.”

“—In the Outer World?! So that means magic eyes first appeared quite a long time ago...”

“That’s right,” Alus answered her. “At the very least, it’s been over fifty years.”

“From way back then, huh? If there was even one case of it running out of control, would they have been able to stop it with their techniques back then?” Lettie asked Alus curiously.

“Who knows, but I believe that magic eyes have a reason for being called

what they are, regardless of their origin or how they came about.”

Before she knew it, Rinne’s fist clenched. If this had been known sooner, research on magic eyes and how to restrain them would have advanced further, possibly reducing the number of people who’d died when awakening to their power.

“I’ll only say this because it’s you, Ms. Rinne, but have you heard of the Four Books of Fegel?”

“No. Is there information about magic eyes in them?” Rinne stared straight at Alus as she asked this. She’d spent so much time in her life trying to explain magic eyes.

As for Lettie, this was the first time she’d even heard of those books.

Incidentally, the other members had realized the secrecy of the topic when Alus said ‘I’ll only say this because it’s you’ and moved away from the three. *That’s an elite squad for you. They have a knack for this kind of thing.*

“The Four Books of Fegel is an interesting collection of research data. I hear that it’s packed with so-called prophetic and fantastical descriptions. Their contents can’t even be verified by current methods. Supposedly the improbable points of view and strange ideas would be very valuable to the right reader. And even copies of these books are considered rare and highly confidential documents.”

“But you’re really talking trash about those super confidential documents...”

“—!!” Rinne reacted to Lettie’s statement.

Lettie smiled dryly, but Rinne seemed to quickly pick up on something.

Alus nodded at her. “Indeed, rare or not, the books being designated as confidential doesn’t make sense. If the rumors are true, the originals exist. Not to mention that I’ve seen something like it lately.”

That was during the Godma Barhong incident. It was unclear when the man taken by madness had gotten his hands on that.

“S-So you mean that there might be something shocking about magic eyes recorded in those Four Books of Fegel?”

“That’s just what I suspect. The copies being what they are, not much can be gleaned from them. But if the originals actually do exist, there should be very interesting things written in them. After all, the primary reason they were called prophetic was that they had writings about Fiends before they ever appeared. So it wouldn’t be strange for there to be topics touching on magic eyes. Not that I can say for certain since I haven’t read the originals.”

Neither Rinne nor Lettie could hide their surprise. Alus had only seen it as a way to kill time on the way there, but it seemed the information was more shocking than expected for them. “Let’s leave the fun topics at that. We’re almost at Balmes’ border, so let’s pick up the speed.”

At Alus’ call, the squad increased their pace, moving at the speed of wind.

Rinne sped up and ran side by side with Alus. She had something she wanted to ask. It seemed like she’d calmed down from her shock.

She glanced at Alus with a stiff expression, and carefully chose her words so as not to expose her feelings. “Sir Alus, may I ask why you kept that information about the One Eye of Salem to yourself?”

“Hm? I didn’t keep it to myself. I’ve only taken up an interest in it lately, but I reported it to the top brass immediately. Though, as a result, it got concealed. Without any evidence, you could call it a reasonable decision... but you get why, don’t you?”

Rinne felt a chill as she nodded. As far as she knew, there were only a few examples of research on magic eyes. All of them ended up without anything to show for it, and their test subjects died. Just being linked to that would ruin one’s social standing.

Having to deal with criticism to acquire special abilities was one thing, but things were different when there were no results to show. The special abilities disappeared even if the eyeball was gouged out. And those who awakened to them would die within a few days.

On top of that, there were only around a dozen who had awakened. And considering the number of people who managed to control it... now that humanity was reduced to a tenth of its population, it was far more realistic to focus on the more cost-effective solution of magic.

“Besides, with people fearing magic eyes running out of control, and the inhuman research of the past, those who awaken likely won’t willingly come forth,” Alus said.

“That’s...” Rinne began to speak, but swallowed her words.

Ultimately, the death rate was practically one hundred percent. She was one of the lucky few. After being picked up by the military once they’d finished their research, Cicelnia had taken her into her graces on some whim.

And like Alus said—the bad reputation remained. It had a dark past, like with taboos, so few would treat her fairly.

“So in that sense, it would be better to cooperate with my research than rely on some shady book, Ms. Rinne. It’s very likely that some discovery will reach a new development,” Alus said with a carefree expression.

Rinne smiled wryly at his sly statement.

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A sturdy bulwark had been built around Balmes’ military headquarters, and some of the walls were just on the outside of Babel’s barrier.

At the top of the twenty-meter wall were sentries cautiously keeping watch over the outside.

There were devices to detect high-classed Fiends, but security was tight around this strategic position. With almost all the high-ranking Magicmasters having left for the Outer World without returning, the security had gotten even tighter.

Those related to the military had stopped thinking about their remaining military strength, as if to escape from reality. Hopefully they’d be able to do something if an A-class Fiend showed up. Or maybe a B-class... that kind of negative thinking was clearly spreading through the headquarters. Even if the devices picked up a high-classed Fiend, there was no one left to send out to eliminate it.

Of course, those who called themselves Magicmasters couldn’t just look on from afar.

“I hope Sir Duncal, or even Lady Gileada, returns,” one of the sentinels solemnly muttered to himself.

None of the other sentinels answered, the words painfully melting into the heavy atmosphere looming over them. This kind of statement had been said every day lately, with nobody seriously answering anymore.

Most people had family on the inside of the barrier, which was why they felt a strong sense of duty to become the shield that protected them. As a result, they were prepared to give up their lives if needed. If that act would protect their loved ones, they would take pride in it, even if they had regrets. But there was no guarantee that they would be able to protect anyone even if they died right now.

“It’s already been so long since we lost contact with the extermination force...” Suddenly, an unexpected answer came from one of the other sentinels... perhaps just on a whim.

“Never mind. I was just talking to myself.” The first man to speak raised his hand to stop the other. There wasn’t much dignity in his behavior, but it couldn’t be helped. He had just been a normal sentinel, not someone who commanded Magicmasters. In fact, he had been one of the underlings tasked with cleaning up the weak Fiends around the walls.

The captains had been taken into the extermination force, leaving just them. While he fumbled around trying to imitate the captains, it just felt wrong. But as this fill-in sentinel captain realized he was complaining in front of the others, he hurriedly shut his mouth.

Seeing how the comrades he fought side by side with had been completely changed out, that couldn’t be helped. If it was just a change of comrades, he could have continued encouraging himself. But considering how few were left, naturally feelings of helplessness would well up. And that inevitably led to thinking about being left behind, which made him feel even more helpless, and it continued in a negative spiral.

He even felt like the AWR he’d used for years was unreliable. Looking around, there were some who didn’t even have their AWRs. Morale was at rock bottom.

“Captain, why won’t Governor-General Gagareed ask for aid from other

nations? There are rumors saying he won't even respond to the other nations' requests for information."

"How should I know," the sentinel captain said. "Our job is to shut up and follow orders. But I hear that the Governor-General is very conservative. So there must have been a good reason for him to take such drastic measures. Maybe he's decided reinforcements won't be needed at the moment," he said to his younger subordinate, but inside, he cursed the upper brass for not calling in reinforcements already.

The captain had volunteered to be on lookout since last night, so there was no energy in his voice, and he'd rubbed his eyes countless times.

That was when five of his subordinates who were also on lookout approached him. "Captain, it's time to change over."

"Finally. I can't wait to go home and get some sleep. I have lookout duty in the evening again. You men make sure you rest, too. I don't want you overlooking any Fiends because you're too tired to focus," he said, preparing to go down the stairs and walk to the military headquarters.

The other sentinels couldn't hold their yawns back, as their mouths opened wide. But the sentinel captain didn't feel like telling them off. If he was in their position, he would have done the same.

They'd been allotted a few rooms in lodgings a ways from the base for resting. And so they went out from the ground floor.

"It's pretty noisy, Captain."

"Yeah. I wonder why."

"Why don't we take a look? Seeing how they're crowding around over there, I don't think it's a Fiend," one of the captain's subordinates said, and pointed. There were guards there too, but they showed no movements as they stood on each side of the door.

It couldn't be an emergency. And yet there must've been over fifty people gathering there, gossiping about what was going on outside. There were even people on the second floor looking out the windows.

The sentinel captain was confused. “Yeah, what’s going on?”

“It’s something out of the ordinary for sure. But it doesn’t look like a crisis. Security is acting like normal, and there’s no alarm,” said one sentinel.

“But even the outside response personnel are here... What are they going to do if a guest shows up?”

“Haha, a guest’s not going to get inside in this crowd, Captain.”

“I guess that’s true,” the sentinel captain said in astonishment, as he looked over at the entrance.

Taking his subordinates with him, the captain casually asked one of the people who had gathered what was going on. “What’s with this ruckus? We’re supposed to be on guard.”

“I-I’m sorry, but there’s something going on over there...”

If the captain’s memory served him right, this woman was part of the outside response team and a non-Magicmaster. Seeing how timidly she bowed, she must have been a newbie who still wasn’t used to things.

She pointed towards a large glass window on the second floor with a bewildered expression.

After confirming that there was nobody higher ranking than him present, the captain commanded his subordinates and cut through the crowd. “Open up, let me through.”

His subordinates pushed the crowd aside, and the captain climbed up to the second floor to look out the window as people around him gave him annoyed stares. “—!! What the hell is this? There’s a suspicious group approaching! Why hasn’t anyone sounded the alarm?!”

“Sorry. Does anyone here know anything about the group in black?” one of the more considerate subordinates asked.

“Someone said that the woman at the front with braided reddish hair might be Alpha’s Lettie Kultunca,” somebody said.

This earned a reaction from the sentinel captain. “What?! Why would Alpha’s ranked No. 7 be here... no, wait, it’s still not confirmed. We can’t rule out the

possibility that they're bandits yet."

Having unconsciously shouted this out, all eyes focused on him. If it was a squad from Alpha then that was fine, but they could still be criminals looking to take advantage of the weakened Balmes. If they were, it would be strange for them to show up at the military base, but caution was still needed. There were also some people who worshiped Fiends, so it might be a terrorist attempt by one of those cult groups.

At any rate, I can't show any weakness in front of my subordinates. Why is it always me who has to play the role of captain at times like this... the captain couldn't help but complain to himself about the situation.

"C-Come with me." He unfastened the clasp so he could draw his AWR at any time. He'd survived in the Outer World for seven years, and he knew that even a bare minimum of preparation would help him respond to the situation.

With his five subordinates at his side, the sentinel captain decided it would be best to act undaunted as he stepped outside. How successful he was depended on who you asked, but personally the captain wanted to pat himself on the back.

He also made sure to keep his legs at shoulder width to keep them from shaking. *As for my arms... I guess I should cross them.* He purposefully hit the sheath of his sword AWR with his knee to create a metallic sound, doing his best to look like a soldier. This was as threatening as he could make himself look.

However, the group clad in black didn't even look fazed by his attitude as they continued forward.

The redhead at the forefront, as well as the other members, gave off a strange pressure. Soon, the person alleged to be Lettie Kultunca was close enough to see clearly, and the captain tensed up.

He'd fought Fiends in the Outer World himself, so he could tell. The pressure she gave off was not normal. Even if he didn't know the others in the group, he could see she had the proper presence a high-ranking Magicmaster would have.

Alpha would've been able to determine if the person in front of him was

Lettie herself, but as a member of Balmes' military, there was nothing he could do to confirm it now.

Suddenly, he heard a clattering sound.

Before the captain knew it, his own hand on top of his AWR's handle was shaking. He was undeniably feeling fear. It was only natural he'd want to draw his AWR out of self-preservation, but if the captain did so, his subordinates would follow suit. If he lacked self-control, things could spiral out of hand quickly.

As these thoughts ran through his mind, he suddenly snapped back to reality. "Idiot! Don't move without orders!"

At the captain's shout, the young subordinate who'd begun to draw his AWR returned to his senses, and hurriedly corrected his behavior.

The captain, of course, had only noticed it because his hand was starting to draw his own AWR. *I can't really blame him.* Looking down at his sweat-soaked hands, the captain took a deep breath. His lips trembled as he exhaled, but he didn't see any shame in that.

After a moment, he seemed to resign himself and took a step forward. "You're Alpha's ranked No. 7 Magicmaster Lettie Kultunca, are you not? I am a patrol captain of Balmes' military headquarters," he said in a soft manner, in an attempt to show his lack of hostility.

There was still some distance between them, but this was a way for him to determine their true intentions. If this wasn't a squad from Alpha with Lettie at the lead, and the black-clad gang were bandits or terrorists, he could at the very least use his life to buy some time for the others.

In response to the captain, the woman took a step forward and waved with a smile on her face.

The sentinel captain, who'd frankly felt like he could drop dead at any moment, let out a sigh of relief. As Lettie continued approaching, he was taken in by her beauty. She had large, innocent-looking eyes, well-shaped facial features, and a toned body visible even through her cloak. He'd heard the rumors, but never imagined they'd all be true.

The rest of the group with her had equally strong presences. Each and every face in the black-clad group was far more powerful and fearless than his own.

Yet Lettie's beauty stood out from the fierce group, like a bright flower in the desert.

As the captain thought such things, he felt like something was off. The center of that sensation was the hooded figure standing next to Lettie. He was no woman, and from his appearance he didn't look like the other seasoned veterans. If anything he looked frail, like a young boy.

Lettie whispered into his ear, and he started walking forward in her place, his hood still hanging low.

"Captain, I apologize for not contacting you before now, but we're pressed for time. I ask that you please forgive me and my subordinates for our rudeness."

"I-I don't mind..." While the captain said that, he furrowed his brows at something odd. Did he just say his subordinates? It was hard to believe considering how young his voice sounded. He was still young enough to be called a boy.

Yet in spite of that, his voice had calmness and depth to it, leaving a lasting impression.

The captain's doubts eased, and he hurriedly but politely spoke to confirm his suspicions. "Can I ask for your name? I wouldn't want to be rude myself."

"It's Alus."

"... Ah, o-okay. Sir Alus, is it?"

He felt like he'd never heard that name before, but he didn't want to risk asking for proof of identity for fear of upsetting him.

The captain would just have to make it through with his own clumsy ways. For starters, he seemed to have the same position as Lettie, so he could assume that he was someone important from Alpha.

But that was when a carefree laughing voice came from next to the boy. "Hehehe... hahaha, w-what's with that, Allie..."

"What else was I supposed to say?"

“... Allie?” That wasn’t the kind of tone you took with someone above you. If anything it sounded like carefree behavior between friends. Balmes’ captain had been convinced that the hooded figure was a VIP from Alpha, but this only confused him more. Suspicious or not, though, he could only carefully observe the situation.

“You’re confusing the poor thing by not telling him your rank first.”

“I can’t help that. I’m not even known in my own nation, let alone any other.”

“This is rough, huh. At times like these... ah, this is a pain.” Lettie took a step forward and respectfully stretched her hand out towards Alus as if presenting him. “Before you stands our prideful Alpha’s strongest... the ranked No. 1, Alus Reigin.”



“Wha—!!” The overwhelming shock froze the captain in place as he impulsively let out a wild voice that took away any dignity he might have had left. He didn’t have the composure to look at his subordinates’ faces, but he knew what kind of expressions they were making anyway. They surely looked as flabbergasted as he did.

“Hey! You could have put it better,” Alus told Lettie. “This is only going to take more time now.”

“You don’t get it; this is the only way. And it’s a good opportunity since you’re always gloomily shutting yourself away in Alpha.”

“That’s just going to cause misunderstandings! ... That’s enough. More importantly...”

When Alus turned to look at the captain, the captain flinched and kneeled on the spot. This was the only thing he could think of as an appropriate response to the situation. He was a Magicmaster in his own right, and before him stood not just a Single but the greatest Magicmaster who was above all others. This was the best sign of respect he could think of.

In fact, he felt more respect for this Single, foreign nation or not, than for the top of his own nation, who’d only made one blunder after another.

The subordinates took a cue from their captain and kneeled in respect before the strange yet great Single Digit Magicmaster.

“You don’t have to go that far. It’s only going to create a bigger disturbance.”

“Not at all, this is my personal sign of respect for you. But if you say so...” The captain slowly stood back up, with his subordinates following suit.

As he raised his head again, he looked at the boy. With the hood now removed, he could clearly see his face and the atmosphere around him. The captain didn’t know if it was just him, but he looked displeased without any trace of affability, like the teenager he was.

Though surprised to see his age confirmed, the captain’s behavior didn’t change: because to him, Alus looked like a savior. “So Sir Alus, why have you come to Balmes?” he hopefully asked. There was more vigor in his voice now as

if he'd come back to life. He was ashamed of his own self-interest, but couldn't keep himself from asking. The relief he felt wasn't so much because of his position as it was as an individual.

Alus pulled out the ornate box he'd received from Cicelnia and removed the thick letter on expensive paper from within. It was a note of authorization signed by Balmes' ruler Holtal himself. He figured that getting the captain to understand the situation would be enough. "We have received orders to aid your nation and eliminate a certain target. We've also received temporary full authority to take command by Lord Holtal Qui Balmes. As such, we'd like to meet with Governor-General Gagareed for now."

The captain stared wide-eyed at the letter held in front of him. Once he confirmed his ruler's signature, he gave his answer. "U-Understood. However... the Governor-General hasn't met with anyone these past few days."

"Don't you get it? I have been given complete temporary control of Balmes' army. With the ruler's approval I have higher authority than the Governor-General. So take us to Gagareed right now; we don't have the time for this."

"Yes, sir!"

With that, Alus and his party finally entered Balmes' headquarters.

The crowd that had gathered naturally parted to make way for the captain's return with Alus and the others in tow. But they all had mystified stares.

The number of Magicmasters they passed as they made their way to the top floor of the headquarters was far fewer than in Alpha. There might even be fewer here than in the Institute. Alus realized Balmes was in a very poor state.

Eventually, the captain stopped before a door and turned around. "This is it... Governor-General, I have brought an elimination force from Alpha."

There was no response to his knock.

"Good work; that's enough," Alus thanked the captain and rudely opened the door.

"Who said to let anyone in?!" At the same time, an intimidating angry shout rang out from inside.

“Why should I care about your orders?” However, Alus casually brushed it off and stepped in regardless of what the room’s owner felt. Of course, there were too many in their party, so only Lettie accompanied him.

“Who the hell are you! What is security doing?!” With bulging veins on his face, the middle-aged man got up from his chair.

That was when another person in the room turned around and called out to Alus, “You’re faster than I expected, Alus.” He greeted him with a smile, but Alus simply shrugged as if he’d expected this.

“Lord Vizaist, I see you were waiting for this.”

“That’s correct. I tried to talk things through ahead of time, but this man is just too stubborn.”

Alus wordlessly handed Vizaist the letter. Upon receiving it, Vizaist turned to Gagareed, showing it to him. “Will this suffice, Lord Gagareed? With this, command of the military is transferred to us. We need information, so I ask for your understanding.”

“L-Like hell I will! I have no intention of asking for help from the likes of Alpha! This is Balmes’ problem, and it will soon be settled...”

“It seems you still don’t understand the situation,” Vizaist said. “Once things are under control, you will likely be court-martialed. To think that you don’t even understand that this incident doesn’t just concern Balmes anymore... Everything has already been decided.”

He forcefully sat back down, crossing his legs. However, he knew that they didn’t have the time for this as well. So he decided to go with the carrot instead of the stick, changing to a softer tone. “Lord Gagareed, you are just a step away from a capital crime. Any further obstruction of the mission will threaten humanity and only further deepen your sins. Don’t think extenuating circumstances will be taken into consideration. If you will be cooperative, Alpha will gladly make accommodations once the dust has settled. You are fortunate that we are the only people outside of your nation who are present. Though I am sure that the other nations will gather in another two, three days. If this hasn’t been resolved by then... you will be made to face responsibility for all the soldiers who have died. If that happens, you’ll be lucky to get a death sentence,

and at worst provisional punishment.”

Gagareed turned pale at Vizaist’s mention of provisional punishment. That was the most serious sentence there was. The condemned was forced to provide mana for as long as they lived through a special tube. It was said to be painful enough to make anyone beg for death.

There were some who said that it was far too brutal, but with the world being threatened by Fiends, it was a deterrent in place to eliminate conflict between humans. And when faced with that, it put a damper on even the stubborn Gagareed’s spirits.

Considering his achievements, he normally wouldn’t face such a severe punishment. But the situation being what it was, having put humanity at risk, if one of the rulers demanded capital punishment, it was likely he would receive it.

By keeping the casualties to a minimum through a swift resolution, it would end up saving Gagareed as well. “How far... would I avoid only the provisional punishment, or the death penalty too... and what will happen to Balmes?” Even if he knew he was playing into Vizaist’s hands, he couldn’t help but want to avoid that terrifying punishment. His voice sounded terribly hoarse and muffled.

“I would say that depends on your cooperation. If you were to retire, I would speak out in your favor. But know that it won’t be an honorable discharge. As for Balmes... its national body won’t change. The other nations will need to follow up on the overall lack of Magicmasters in some way, but none of the nations have enough leeway to make Balmes a vassal state. From the citizens’ point of view, the nation’s top leadership will simply change.”

“... I understand.” Gagareed nodded weakly.

Seeing that things had wrapped up, Alus discreetly walked up to Vizaist and spoke in a quiet voice, “That promise will only last until the other nations’ forces gather. If Alpha doesn’t solve this on its own, it will be hard for us to force our will through.”

“Sorry about having to put you through this.”

“It’s not your fault, Lord Vizaist. Besides, I’ll just demand adequate compensation.”

“Ha ha ha! A small price to pay to eliminate the target.”

“I sure hope so.”

Vizaist must have been at work forming a plan before Alus and the others arrived, because on the table was a large map, with its blank spaces hanging off the edges.

“How’s the current situation?”

“Lord Gagareed stubbornly refused to help, so I had to borrow a map and investigate on my own, sending my subordinates to ten kilometers out from the wall. At the moment we have no clues. The target remains unconfirmed. Of course, I’ve only had them confirm that there’s nothing there. I can’t ask them to die, after all.”

Alus nodded, and Lettie, who’d sat down and made herself at home, joined in the meeting as well. Gagareed was still seated in his own chair, but he could only groan.

“Long time no see, Lord Vizaist.”

“I see you haven’t changed, Lettie. Now then, with Alpha’s strongest gathered, we should be able to beat this thing.”

“That said, I hear it’ll be hard to kill with just one nation’s forces,” Lettie said.

“That’s exactly why. The top brass seems to have something in mind, so this isn’t just for Alpha’s sake; it’s also meant to lead to a stronger partnership between the nations. Standing against Fiends already demands international cooperation, but those at the tops of their nations already put too much value on their pride and ask for excessive compensation. That’s what leads to situations like this,” Vizaist noted.

He continued, “It’s true that unfair negotiations backed up by force were rampant in the arena of international politics, but that’s in the past. The nations were divided up for the sake of stimulating economic growth, but there won’t be a future for humanity as a whole if all nations only act out of self-interest. I

won’t say that helping a nation for no compensation is better, but demanding compensation beyond what that nation can give will negatively affect future cooperation.”

“You say that, but I’ll pass on being loaned out to other nations,” Alus said.

Vizaist smiled wryly. “We’ve gone a little off-topic.”

Alus nodded, then said, “Still, it’s incomprehensible... is the enemy really a Devourer?”

He meant his question for Vizaist, but it was Gagareed who answered. “We don’t have any decisive evidence. It was a lone survivor who carried a message from Gileada. And that survivor died a few minutes after passing on the message.”

As she was a former Single, even Alus remembered Gileada’s name. And if she’d said so, she was probably right. “If that’s the case, it’s strange for a Devourer that’s constantly on the hunt for prey to not have attacked Balmes immediately. Is it actually digesting its food, or something?”

“Yes, this is just my guess, but it’s probably still in the area around the deposit,” Vizaist said. “Information is scarce, but for the sake of convenience let’s call the target a Devourer.”

“There’s not much we can do about a lack of information. So we’ll choose a few from Lettie’s squad and head out to eliminate it. Even if it doesn’t work out as planned, we’ll get more information. Lord Vizaist, please work with the other nations that will be arriving to harden the defenses. Lettie, pick out some members that fit the criteria and have them memorize the topography of the area.”

“Gotcha, captain.”

Seeing Lettie salute, Alus narrowed his eyes. “If you have the time to play around, get going.” He then continued, “Lettie, I’ll pass on any new information as well.”

Once he saw her leave the room, Alus moved to gather more information based on the thoughts he’d had on the way here. “So, Lord Gagareed, the mineral deposit is the only point of interest around that area, is that right?”

“That’s right. The area around the deposit is barren, with its surroundings being the same old forest as elsewhere. When we sent out scouts, we found the area wasn’t all that different from the ancient maps,” Gagareed said, pointing at the large map. Like he said, the mineral deposit had been drawn on it, with no other adjustments being made.

“And how did the extermination force move?”

“They advanced, surrounding the deposit, and gradually closed in on it as they smoothly eliminated the Fiends in the way. In their last report, they mentioned encountering six A-class Fiends within the deposit... and after that we lost contact.”

“Six of them, huh... so one of them was the Devourer,” Alus mused.

“What will you do? We can only leave the decisions to someone who’s in the field,” Vizaist said.

“Lord Vizaist, I’ll have to take a look with my own eyes first. So we’ll just have to head out to eliminate the Fiends as planned. Ms. Rinne will be with us, so they shouldn’t be able to get a jump on us.”

“Indeed. While command has been officially transferred to us, there are still things for you to do in your position of Governor-General, Lord Gagareed. Give orders to the remaining soldiers, and leave a few units nearby as messengers so we can stay in touch,” Vizaist said.

“I understand. I can understand that... but are they going out to eliminate Fiends with those few numbers?”

“Like I said, this is Alpha’s strongest force. Alus and Lettie are both Singles.”

“—!! So you are the strongest among the Magicmasters. In that case, that’s all the more reason not to move in such small numbers...”

Alus was sick of the same arguments being brought up again and again. He bluntly said, “The decision is already made. I will be going out to eliminate the Devourer. But don’t worry, I’ll succeed. I think it will be in your own favor if you hurry with preparations to depart right away, Lord Gagareed.”

“... I know.”

“I imagine it would be best to choose the messengers from the Magicmasters on guard at the wall.”

“I guess we can’t avoid the destruction of nature this time around,” Vizaist sighed.

The opponent was an extremely high-classed Fiend. And the battle was expected to become exceedingly fierce. Vizaist recalled how the entire area around a certain research facility had been leveled. Taking into consideration the fact that humanity would someday retake the Outer World, he wanted to avoid pointless destruction.

That was a common view in the upper echelons of government, which was why there was a forest within the human domain. That was partly to keep the will to reclaim the Outer World from being diluted, but also because of the feeling that human beings belonged in nature.

“I’ll try to keep any damage to the deposit to a minimum. I’m planning on fighting some distance away from it anyways.”

“Please do,” Vizaist said dryly.

“We’ll leave once preparations are ready... no, by tomorrow morning.”

“Hm? I figured you would want to go right away.”

“Lettie might be with me, but there will be a squad too. This situation is filled with unknowns, so we need to expect the unexpected. Not to mention that we don’t know the topography, so it’d be pretty lame if we got lost after the mission was completed. And most of all, I want to avoid a battle at night. Besides...”

“So you’ve heard about those other problems from Berwick as well... How about it, Lord Gagareed?” Vizaist asked meaningfully.

The Governor-General responded by making a bitter expression.

Alus furrowed his brows, realizing that his bad feeling was right on the mark.

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The discussion was proceeding under the assumption that the Devourer would be eliminated. That hurt Gagareed’s pride and caused him some

resentment.

He was aware that his nation wasn't powerful compared to the others. But even so, Balmes had sent in hundreds of Magicmasters and not been able to win, and he struggled to hold back a scornful laugh at Alpha thinking a dozen or so would be enough. Because of his current position he was staying silent, but on the inside he was saying, *Try it if you can*. *My military career goes a long way back, and I understand that Single Digit Magicmasters are in a league of their own. But even then, just two of them aren't going to have the edge of several hundred.*

True, Balmes didn't have any Singles to be proud of. But their other Magicmasters weren't so weak that they should be taken lightly. If anything, he was confident that their Doubles and below were of the same quality as any other nation.

Gagareed kept his frown from showing, observing the situation, but he was surprised when Vizaist brought up a new topic. And he wore a somewhat bitter expression as he could clearly see where Vizaist was going. So he resigned himself, realizing he wouldn't be able to smooth things over. "I-Indeed, I've requested aid from Kurama."

"...!! You idiot!" Alus spat out.

"—! I didn't have a choice. Besides, the request can be immediately recalled. That's the kind of agreement we came to. Kurama is supposed to contact us once the elimination is complete, so there's still time to take it back."

"That's why I'm calling you an idiot. They're a criminal organization that can take on nations. There's no way they'll step down from a chance to show off their existence on an international level and grab their reward. I doubt they'll back off with just an exorbitant cancellation fee."

Vizaist nodded at Alus' words. "I suspect not. We'll be keeping our eyes open to prevent them from getting in Alus' way. They're far too big to be discarded as a trifling matter. There's nothing we can do here, but Berwick should be working on it."

"As you probably understand, I won't be able to focus on the Devourer if they interfere," Alus warned.

“I know. Say, Lord Gagareed... if Kurama won’t step down and starts rampaging about, ruining everything, I won’t be able to cover for you,” Vizaist said.

Perhaps finally realizing his blunder, Gagareed’s expression turned even more bitter and he nodded in resignation. Before he knew it, his supposed support meant to keep him alive had turned into a sharp blade threatening to behead him, as everything backfired on him.

“Yeah, I doubt we’ll be able to depart right away with this. Prepare rooms for us.” Alus had already given up on showing any signs of respect for the former Governor-General. *Kurama, is it... To think a criminal organization is pretending to be mercenaries. But they really are a headache at times like these. This is what happens when you don’t crush them ahead of time.*

The situation wasn’t going to improve if Alus clicked his tongue. Even though he knew that, this was a serious pain. The Kurama executives were quite elusive. Not only was the location of their hideout unknown, but they typically used hooligans and criminals as fronts so as to leave as few tracks behind as possible.

On top of that, its members were all first-class magic criminals, each one boasting considerable strength, and they also tended to collude with various central figures in each nation. Gagareed’s careless request was also a result of their shady connections.

That said, there was a reason why Kurama was allowed to run around freely. And that was because the ones strong enough to face them were in the Outer World. Even Alus had only been able to take out one of their executives after returning from a mission. He’d sounded the alarms back then, but the nations were slow to act. Because of that delay, the only thing known about some of the executives were their names.

Alus ended up with another cause for concern, but he’d just have to rely on Berwick and Vizaist.

That’s when Vizaist spoke up. “I will send one of my subordinates to you, Lord Gagareed.”

“... I understand.” It was easy to figure out that they meant to keep an eye on

him, Gagareed thought. He was a criminal now, after all.

Alus bowed to Vizaist and left the room, saying, “Tomorrow morning, then.”

As he stepped out, the others were nowhere to be seen. Only the sentinel captain who had escorted him there remained, standing as still as a statue. “I had the others removed to another place to be on standby. They’d stick out here, after all.”

“Thanks.”

When Alus honestly thanked him, the captain lowered his head with, “It’s an honor.”

Alus was guided to a meeting room used by Magicmasters. The room had a massive table, a display screen, and there were even drinks and snacks that had been prepared.

“We don’t have any Magicmasters who will be using this room, so feel free to use it as you please. Once your rooms are prepared, I will come get you.”

A sorrow seemed to hang around the captain as he left, as he casually reported that they didn’t have enough Magicmasters left to use the room.

The door closed, and once Rinne confirmed that nobody was listening in, Alus told the squad what he’d heard.

“Sorry, Lettie. I’d like you to focus your selection criteria a little more on their combat capabilities. We’ve got more trouble on our hands.”

“Sir Alus, in that case, allow me to accompany you,” the mountain of a man, Sajik, said. From the sound of it, he hadn’t been selected.

“How about it, Lettie?”

“I think it’s fine, but fighting is the only thing this old man can do,” she said, and a couple of laughs came from around the room.

Sajik wasn’t quite that old, but the others had taken to calling him ‘old man’ because he looked older than he was. The scar on his cheek was another reason. “What are you saying? My nose can pick up even the stench of Fiends.”

“Oh, so you can detect, too?” Alus said, as if he was impressed, but he wasn’t

really all that interested. They had Rinne for detection with them, so all he needed from any extra squad members was simple power. There was nothing wrong with having a talent, but as long as they could fight that was fine.

“Geez, you’re making a fool of yourself again, aren’t cha?” Lettie lamented.

Another member spoke up in exasperation. “Sir Alus, please don’t take him seriously. The only thing this one can smell is a Fiend’s shit.”

At that point, a couple of members burst out laughing. Typically Fiends didn’t need food, so what they excreted instead were the remains of bones, or scraps of meat from prey they’d absorbed mana from.

The squad had taken to calling this ‘shit,’ but Alus, who had no way of knowing that, just looked on dumbfounded.

With an almost fed-up expression, the member who’d spoken up—Mujir—continued explaining, “His nose is more sensitive than others, and when he tried to, he successfully found their shit. He’s quite proud of his nose, even though it only responds to the shit, even if a Fiend is right in front of him.”

“Hey, don’t put it like that,” Sajik protested. “It ends up finding us Fiends, doesn’t it?”

“That’s some rare magic. Does it make use of the nature of change in the mana itself, or does it work under some other principle?” Alus asked.

“Oh no, it’s more like a wild sense of smell. Like a male seeking out a female.”

“Hey! Mujir, if you keep talking shit about it, my cute nose will fire off.”

“I bet it’ll have some amazing firepower if it’s using shit as fuel,” Mujir replied.

Sajik stood up as Mujir rolled up his sleeves.

Even more laughs were heard from around the room, as the atmosphere became like that of a rowdy bar. Some were even egging them on.

Lettie rubbed her forehead and sighed, saying “They’re at it again...”

Looks like this happens all the time, Alus thought, shrugging as he thought what good friends they must be. Then he spoke up to settle things down. “If it was just a joke then leave it at that, Sajik. I don’t mind you tagging along, but if

you’re only going to focus on shit, I’ll leave you behind.”

“Not you, too...” Sajik said in a weak tone, and hung his head. The other squad members patted his shoulders.

“Now then, I still haven’t explained why we’re delaying our departure. We don’t have any time to spare, but according to Lord Vizaist, the Fiends are still not making any moves.”

The atmosphere in the room completely changed as Alus had a serious look on his face. “It seems this nation’s Governor-General is completely incompetent too, as he’s requested aid from Kurama. Apparently he honestly believed them when they said he could recall his request at any moment.”

Lettie asked, “Then why don’t we capture them while we’re at it?”

“No, we won’t have the time for that. I don’t hate the idea of focusing on the criminals and crushing that Governor-General’s ulterior motives, but you’d give up your chance to make a name for yourself and I’d lose my reward. Instead, we’ll prioritize the elimination and just hope that Kurama doesn’t interfere.” Even though this battle could determine the fate of humanity, Alus was being pretty carefree in his words.

That’s when Mujir put his hand on his chin and asked the question on everyone’s mind. “What if they decide to meddle with us?”

“We’ll avoid direct conflict and keep them in check. If our hands are free after eliminating the target, we can deal with them, but they won’t be stupid enough to wait around for that.”

“You bet. It’s just one problem after another,” Lettie sighed.

“You can complain all you want afterwards. We have Lord Vizaist working on it, so we just need to accomplish our own mission. I don’t mind sending some attacks their way if we discover them, but avoid combat.”

Considering Kurama’s executives were equivalent to Singles, they might end up poking a hornet’s nest, making the situation even worse. Then again, it was hard to imagine that Kurama would overstay their welcome with the elites from all nations gathered nearby, but they wouldn’t lose anything by staying alert.

“What about supplies?” asked a squad member. “Should we prepare equipment for retreating as well?”

“No, that’s fine. Bring the bare minimum equipment; I want you as lightweight as possible. There shouldn’t be a lot of small fries this time, so leave behind all equipment used to hide traces. Just take what you need to protect yourself. If there are no other questions, we move out as the sun rises.”

“Yes, sir!” The squad members stood up and saluted in perfect unison.

That was it for today, Alus thought. He finally breathed out and recalled the tournament. It should be coming to a close around now. He’d left things up to Loki and Felinella, so he had nothing to worry about, but he had left Alpha in the first place to participate in the tournament.

The image of Cicelnia’s alluring smile popped into his head, making him feel a small amount of resentment. *It wouldn’t be interesting to leave it at this*, he thought to himself, regretting that he hadn’t demanded a bigger reward when he’d had the chance.

Thirty-Sixth Chapter

The Two Encounters

Alus and the others left Balmes' headquarters at first light the next day. It was Alus, Lettie, Rinne, and twelve others from Lettie's squad, for a total of fifteen.

But Alus wore a dubious expression just before they left. "We don't need anyone seeing us off in the first place, but of all people, why is the Governor-General here?"

"That's my line. Why haven't you left yet?" Berwick countered.

Alus glared at him, as if to say, *Whose fault do you think this is?* But Berwick didn't react at all, feigning ignorance. "It just means that Kurama's existence will be a nuisance."

"Just leave that to me. They don't seem to have made any moves yet... no, I guess we can't rule out that possibility."

"That means that we'd have to take care of everything. So once the other Singles arrive, have them stay on high alert."

"I intend to," Berwick said.

Alus let out a sigh, and Berwick grinned. "That reminds me, Alus, your pupils were in the main tournament, weren't they? Do you know how it went?"

"*You're* going to bring that up? Well, I'm not worried about the results, so I'll just have them tell me when I get back."

"Hmm, I think that would be for the best."

"And? I imagine you wanted to see Alice's match."

Berwick's wrinkled face smiled. "There's nothing to worry about there. I've had all of the Second Magical Institute's matches recorded, at the highest quality as well. I gave strict orders to my subordinates, so I will have views from all angles. I've had the latest in technology assembled for this occasion. I put

extra effort into your matches, so it'll be in far higher quality than what the tournament managers have. Ha ha ha."

Alus wanted to see the results of their training as well, so he decided to pretend he didn't notice Berwick's abuse of authority. "You better let me have a look too. I think you're a little too old to be immature."

"I'm not unreasonable. So I can be convinced to show you."

This old kook, Alus thought. Berwick didn't have children of his own, so he might be seeing Alice as a grandchild. Even if he didn't, he always kept an eye out for her.

Alus found out about this after the fact, but Berwick had had a hand in Alice's admission into the Institute. The way he seemed to come to life was like any elderly person witnessing their grandchild's big moment. His methods were a little extreme though.

"Well, just think about it," Alus casually replied.

But Berwick's expression turned serious. "When you return in one piece, I'll consider it."

Alus looked peeved at the fact that Berwick would merely 'consider' it. Frankly, he was too exasperated to retort. "Right, we should go."

"I'm leaving this to you."

"We'll handle this side of things, but..."

"I know," Berwick said. "I'll make sure the other nations don't intervene."

"Well, we'll have things wrapped up before then," Alus said, and they parted ways.

After that, the group cut through the wind as they made their way to their destination, out beyond Babel's barrier, and finally arrived in the Outer World.

Seeing the picturesque scenery in front of him, Alus let out a sigh. *I guess I wouldn't be here seeing this if not for this mission...*

Unlike the weather inside the barrier that conformed to humanity's convenience, this was real shifting weather.

Today it was clear and refreshing. Beyond the barrier lay another—the real—world. It had been a while since he had last felt this sensation, and Alus took a deep breath as his Magicmaster intuition returned to him.

“Rightcha, let’s go. It’s time to clean up this monster.”

“There’s no guarantee that it’ll be a monster,” Alus said seriously. He’d said this meaning that the Devourer might not be strictly classified as an ogre. Typically, Fiends that more closely resembled humans and walked on two legs were referred to as ogres, or sometimes as monsters.

Of course, Lettie hadn’t meant to refer to those ogres. It was just an expression, but it appeared Alus hadn’t picked up on that.

Lettie, confused, looked at Alus’ expression for a moment, before realizing that he’d misunderstood her. She started laughing. “Allie, you should get out more... It’s just a figure of speech.”

“... Just hope you don’t get the tables turned on you.”

“Oh! But if we get the tables turned on us, so will you as the captain.”

“That’s... not going to happen.”

“Yeah...”

Rinne shrugged as she watched them. “The two of you seem quite composed.”

“Of course,” Alus said. “I’ve never struggled to eliminate a Fiend so far.”

“... That’s just how it is. Allie, once this is done, Vanalis is next.”

“I know... oh, there was something I should have said before we left. Everyone stop a moment.”

The squad members’ faces tensed up as they looked at him.

“At the completion of this elimination, you all can split up my part of the reward.”

“—!! Seriously? The reward for eliminating something estimated to be at least an SS-class isn’t something to sneeze at, you know,” Lettie said to him. “It’s even more with other nations involved...”

“I bet. But I’m not planning on working for free. I’ll get something better than money.” Alus wore a meaningful smile, but the squad members paid him no heed as they cheered. As the captain took the biggest portion of the reward in an elimination, his giving up his portion meant that the squad members’ rewards would skyrocket.

They, of course, took pride in serving their nation as Magicmasters. But they still needed money for their equipment and to live. It was human nature to be happy for what you could get.

In the end, very few showed any interest in what Alus meant by ‘something better.’ Sajik was actually drooling as he imagined what to use the money on.

“All right, let’s go. It’s hunting time.”

The squad members sported ferocious smiles at Alus’ words.

The black-clad group’s morale was high as they made their way into the abundant greenery, running in a diamond formation with Alus in the front. In the center of the diamond was Rinne, with Lettie next to her as the vice-captain and bodyguard.

“As expected, Balmes did some cleaning up,” Alus noted.

They’d traveled quite a distance by now, but hadn’t encountered a single Fiend. There was practically no sign of any, either. Seeing as how Rinne wasn’t reacting, Alus knew there weren’t any Fiends anywhere near them.

“Still...” Alus said.

“It’s strange for there to be no sightings at all.”

Alus nodded at Lettie’s voice coming from the receiver in his ear. “The Fiends are likely keeping their distance by instinct. Maybe they’re scared of being eaten, or maybe they really were eaten. Either way, it’s no normal A-class ruling this area.”

High-classed Fiends tended to rule areas with lower-classed Fiends obeying them. And unlike wild animals, Fiends didn’t need to eat to live. So even if the lower-classed Fiends feared the A-class or higher Fiends, they didn’t normally distance themselves this much.

But the Fiends were keeping their distance from the target. Alus suspected that meant their target didn't even bother trying to rule, but simply devoured its own kind instead.

If his suspicions were correct, then it was abnormally aggressive and greedy. In other words...

As they reached the halfway point, Rinne showed a slight reaction.

Alus immediately picked up on this, and he gave the squad orders to stop before she could even let him know. The squad maintained formation and kept watch on their surroundings while Alus went over to Rinne, impressed by her abilities.

"There are four people 500 meters to the north of here, and one more quite some distance away from them, for a total of five. Are they Balmes' survivors, perhaps?" Rinne reported her findings, and asked the question that the squad began to ponder.

Alus couldn't say right away, but suddenly he felt a strange sensation. *...We're being watched?* He thought he could feel eyes on him from somewhere.

"Ms. Rinne, how many details can you make out?" Alus asked Rinne about the figures to the north.

Lettie gave Alus a meaningful glance. She most likely felt the same sensation he did. He told her to hold off on that with his eyes, and waited for Rinne's answer.

"They're wearing rather crude cloaks. But based on their appearance, they are most definitely Magicmasters."

"Pretty unnatural for survivors," Alus noted.

Rinne nodded, and focused some more. The figures all wore cloaks that reached down to their feet, and hoods that covered their faces, making it impossible to even tell their genders.

Two of them stood on the branches of a large tree, keeping watch.

One person was moving towards the two on the branches.

Rinne concluded that they must be grouping up. She then closed one eye to

purposefully lower the number of views she controlled. Her vision magnified, giving her a closer look at the lone person.

When she did this, she could see some kind of AWR hanging from the person's hip.

Hearing this, Alus started thinking. If they really were survivors, he couldn't figure out why they'd still be here in the Outer World. If there was just one of them, that would be one thing; but with five they should be able to move around.

A reason not to move... maybe some are injured, or perhaps they're bound with some kind of spell.

Catching on to Alus' hesitation, Sajik and Mujir gave him their suggestions.

"If they're survivors, should we go rescue them?" Sajik asked.

"No, wouldn't it be smarter to wait and see what happens?" Mujir put in.

In the next moment, the magic formula on Rinne's eyeball rearranged itself at dizzying speeds, and she let out a muffled shout. "...?! Something is strange. The two on top of the branches don't appear to have done any fighting. One is wearing a red robe and is rather small... and the other one is probably a man based on their physique."

If they were survivors, they would have been in these woods for two weeks. Why hadn't they reported back?

Instead, the worst case scenario that Vizaist and Berwick had mentioned came to mind.

"What do you think, Allie? Could they be from the other nations?" Lettie asked him.

"Probably not, they'd be too fast. Not to mention we would have heard something about it through Berwick."

Alpha would start off on its own. That was what Cicelnia and Berwick had set up, and they would've made sure the other rulers followed that.

"So..." Lettie finally accepted reality and spoke the name that made all the squad members frown. "You think it's Kurama?"

“It’s very likely... but I don’t want to break up the squad to see what they’ll do.”

Right after Alus said that... “No way!!” Rinne shouted out, and as everyone turned to look at her, the sound of something breaking rang out.

She fell to one knee and covered her eye to ease the pain. Tears streamed out from between her fingers.

Lettie supported her from the side, but before she could ask what happened —

“Looks like it was right on the mark,” Alus muttered. He’d seen the magic formula on Rinne’s eyeball scatter like it was smashed to pieces.

Rinne had been observing the figure in the red robe from behind. However, the figure had turned around in an instant and glared at her magic eye with hostility. In other words, the target had noticed the Eye of Providence.

And because of that, the effect was broken as Rinne had said before, with the result being that she had temporarily lost her sight.

“Ms. Rinne, are you okay?”

“I was completely seen through by the person in the red robe!! ... I’m sorry, Sir Alus, my sight won’t recover for a while.”

“How long?”

“From thirty minutes to an hour. Fortunately, I was only looking through one eye.”

“Just to ask—can you tell how strong someone is through that eye of yours?”

“It doesn’t have that kind of ability. However... this is the first time I’ve been noticed so clearly. There was clear murderous intent in their stare.”

“... I see, murderous intent, was it?”

It took someone at Alus’ and Lettie’s level to notice a magic eye. So the opponent was likely equal to a Single.

At the moment, they were north of Balmes, and relatively close to Hydrange. Their Single was a young man named Kurokel Ifertas. He had been at the rulers

conference, so Alus knew what he looked like: he was slender, carried around a book, and seemed more on the scholarly side of things. Based on his height, he wasn't short enough to be called small. So he likely wasn't the one in the red robe.

Hydrange might still be hiding someone on an equivalent level to a Single, but it wasn't likely. Nor was it likely to be the other nations for the same reason and their current location.

The information Alus received from his sixth sense backed up his suspicions. Its detection capabilities weren't as advanced as Rinne's magic eye, but from his experience, he was getting that there was one more on the same level as a Single aside from the red-robed figure.

Two powerful people not connected to any nation had gathered in a problematic region in the Outer World.

This had to be Kurama, the organization that Gagareed had made a request to.

"So it's really come down to this," Alus spat out. The Governor-General and Vizaist had been too late.

"Captain Alus, should we avoid combat and keep them in check as planned?" Mujir asked, keeping his cool, but there was Rinne to think about too.

"Sir Alus, I will be fine. I'm still a spotter. Even if I lose my vision, I can still see. It's not like I only rely on the Eye of Providence."

She wasn't bluffing. It was the simple truth. Alus had worried that she wouldn't even be able to walk on her own, but that had been needless worry.

Alus made a swift decision, and with an almost evil smile, he gave his orders. "We'll make the first strike... shoot to kill. Someone on the level of a Single won't die from that. Can't say anything about the weaklings, though."

As expected of an elite force, the team showed no signs of losing their nerve. If anything, they were pumped up, some even letting their mana leak out.

What are they after... Are they just seeing what happens? Did the cancellation of the request not reach them? Or are they just ignoring it completely? Well,

there's no need for mercy against criminals just looking to make a name for themselves and extort their requestor for a reward.

Alus figured they wouldn't have to fight against the two strong people from Kurama. If they'd set out to deal with the Fiends, they'd want to avoid pointless battles too. Since they had noticed the magic eye, they knew that Alus and the others were here. If they wanted a fight, they'd have come in swinging right away, but they hadn't, and weren't showing any signs of moving either.

They might end up stirring up trouble for themselves, but Alus would be able to handle them.

He considered that the Fiend would notice the abnormality, but they wouldn't have been able to launch a surprise attack on an S-class anyways. He just wanted to avoid a surprise attack from the Fiend. And Rinne's magic eye was essential for that.

And so they could spend the thirty minutes needed for her to recover by curbing Kurama.

"If we're gonna take a shot at them, we gotta use *that*," Lettie said with a mischievous smile.

Alus had a bad feeling about this, and scowled at Lettie, but the squad members that heard them perked up their ears. "You just want to compete, don't you?"

"Why not? It'll really boost morale, you know."

Alus gave in, as Lettie smiled.

The two using the same spell would synergize with each other, as carelessly using spells of differing attributes might cause them to clash with each other. The spell Lettie was referring to was an expert-level spell refined from the basic principles, making it easy to use, and Alus had also made additional adjustments to it.

In Alpha, they were the only two that could properly use it. It was one of Lettie's favorites, and she liked to use it whenever she could. However, because it spanned such a wide area and tended to, well—*remodel* the terrain, the Governor-General usually ended up with his head in his hands.

“You sure love being flashy.”

Hearing Alus’ approval, the other squad members started getting giddy with excitement.

“You guys get the second wave ready!” Alus drew the AWR from his hip, pouring mana into one of the chain’s rings, making its magic formula light up.

Meanwhile, Lettie raised her right hand, the back of it facing her, and curling four of her fingers.

Her AWR were rings, and for this mission she’d worn one on her right hand and two on her left. The somewhat unrefined rings had their entirety engraved with magic formulas. The ones on her left hand were meant to aid her casting, while the one on her right activated the spells. This time she also wore a bracelet on her right wrist.

“We don’t have to be specific with the coordinates, right? We’ll just blast away the entire area... Are you ready?” Lettie asked.

“Whenever you are.”

Alus used his sixth sense to reconfirm where the group was, realizing that there was no need to hold back. There were five of them, but he decided to aim for two of them.

He didn’t bother specifying coordinates in more detail. Or rather, considering the nature of the magic, there was no need to do so.

The two poured large amounts of mana into their AWRs and their respective magic formulas lit up.

“‹‹Detonation››”

The surging flames stained the area red.

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Meanwhile, the red-robed figure and their friends were there for a proper reason, just as Alus had expected. As for what that was...

On the same day that Alus and the others left Balmes, once the light of morning had completely dispelled the darkness of night—four shadows

casually, yet extraordinarily quickly, ran through the forests of the Outer World.

In the front was a small figure wearing a crimson robe. The outfit reached down to the figure's knees, and its long flowing sleeves also stood out. There was quite a lot of fabric left over, but despite the high-speed traveling through complex terrain, it didn't get in the way at all.

The group was tracing the way they'd come from, returning to Balmes.

"Tsk! This is why we can't trust those bastards in the military. I bet they're looking down on us as bandits." A cute young girl's voice came from underneath the red hood, though she was cursing like a thug.

She continued talking to herself, "They must have under-reported to us so that they could skimp on the reward!"

The Governor-General had asked them to eliminate a Fiend, but the information they had received was very conflicting. In cases like these, Kurama selected members based on the difficulty of the mission, which they based on the information they had. After that, they demanded a reward considering their labor and in line with their reputation.

Normally, they verified this kind of thing before accepting, but this time the request had been urgent, so they had determined the difficulty just on the information they were given.

"And this is the result! Fuck!" the girl spat out in anger, venting.

As she did, a larger figure picked up speed to get next to her. "Sure, it was a pain, but we'll just threaten them and grab what we deserve. We might even get some extra valuable info out of them, double our rewards, and if they refuse... one of humanity's so-called guardians will just disappear," the man who was more than double the girl's height said with a ferocious smile, as if to say it was business as usual.

Sure, it was business as usual—but the girl didn't enjoy murdering people like this man did.

Kurama was certainly a first-class criminal organization, but it wasn't like all of its members shared the same ideals. Essentially, it was a group of outsiders with powers who came together, with no ideals in common.

That’s why the current leader didn’t interfere in their work, aside from making sure there weren’t any tracks left behind.

One could say that they were accepting of outsiders, but there were plenty of people with twisted ideals, political opinions, or who just straight-up enjoyed murder in the organization. But as a criminal organization, they couldn’t just do whatever they pleased. So when times called for it, they needed to work as a team.

Of course, no one really came together in earnest, but they could put aside their differences when their interests aligned.

The girl wasn’t really a criminal to begin with. But after corrupting herself, she had begun to use her previous position and abilities to accomplish illegal requests in Kurama. By now, she had become one of Kurama’s executives.

Regardless, she needed the money to hide herself in the darkness from people in power, and to survive in this harsh world on her own.

Moreover, Kurama was pretty well known, but since it was a criminal organization arrogant politicians and nobles would sometimes look down on them.

However, they didn’t put up with that. Especially not when that contempt led to situations like this one. In those cases, they demanded exorbitant compensation including reparations, and if they didn’t pay up, they paid for it with their body and their life.

“It still looks like the usual old shitty monster. Don’t tell me you actually got cold feet, Elise.” The massive man turned his rough face toward the girl called Elise as he teased her. His swarthy face had scars everywhere, and he had stitch marks on his thick neck. Like his face, his body likewise was covered in scars.

However, these weren’t scars inflicted on him by his enemies. He was an oddball who cut himself with a knife for each person he killed on a request. Despite his big size, he didn’t make any sound as he ran, just like Elise.

“You brat! We could have done it... but you’d have been dead, Hazan. Not even I could have killed that myself. So consider yourself lucky, kid.”

They hadn’t fought it, but Elise and Hazan had already identified the target.

The dread that had run through Elise's body when she'd observed it through magic was still present. Strangely enough, it wasn't the sensation that she would get killed.

The Fiend's form wasn't all that unusual, just like Hazan said. But the sensation Elise felt was hard to describe in words. It didn't look out of the ordinary, but she felt some kind of unexplainable ghastliness. If she carelessly attacked it, something that couldn't be undone would surely happen.

Obviously this was an abnormal situation, and she determined that she lacked information. It must have been either an oversight or a deliberate omission by Balmes' Governor-General. Battle had been expected to start before dawn, but she'd seen a strong indication for their defeat with just the two of them plus an additional two subordinates, and they'd temporarily turned back.

If they'd gone to kill it, she would have been fine, but Hazan, who hadn't even picked up on its strength, would have gotten killed by his own inexperience. Even then, he was one of Kurama's feared executives.

As the international community was keeping a watchful eye on them, they couldn't afford to throw away fighting power for no reason.

Personally, Elise wouldn't give a damn if Hazan died here.

"Everyone's a brat from your point of view. You can relax, I'm not making light of your power. I was just wondering if you'd gone senile... I frankly don't care if we blow away the Fiend or that fucking client."

"Hey... who are you calling senile? Do you want me to tear you to pieces?" With an irritated voice, she flipped her hood up. Elise's hands were hidden by her sleeves, but the sound of her knuckles cracking could be heard.

"Fighting to the death with an old hag would be pretty fun, but I don't fight against someone I can't beat," Hazan said.

"Then let me teach you some worldly wisdom from an adult. Stupid or not, you better watch your mouth... because if you start barking on your own again, you'd be better off cutting your own tongue out."

Hazan fearlessly snorted at her and said, "It would be faster to smash your ears in."

But Elise ignored him. *To think this idiot is the only one here in this situation... maybe I should just finish him off and say he got killed on the mission*, she thought to herself, but soon reconsidered that he was better than nothing. She was sure she could win if they fought against the target, but she wouldn't be able to avoid getting hurt. And if she were to collapse...



“This is why I hate brats...!” After spitting that out, she suddenly felt like she was being watched, and hit the brakes.

Hazan did the same. The two slid across the ground as they turned around. But there was no one there.

That said, it wasn’t her mind playing tricks on her. Her subordinates aside, Hazan had clearly felt it too. And so Elise jumped up to the massive branch of a nearby tree.

Keeping her subordinates waiting down below, she scanned the area, when she saw something moving in the corner of her eye far away. It was a branch lightly shaking.

Elise suddenly rolled up her sleeves, revealing her hands. They were the thin, fragile-looking hands of a child. However, that was just a portion of it, as the rest was concealed with wrapped cloths from elbow to wrist.

She kept her sleeves from rolling down further, while making a circle with her fingers, bringing it up to her eye and peeking through it. A lens of water was created with mana, working the same way as a telescope. Elise used that to peer at the distant landscape, like a scout peering at enemy lines.

“Who are they?” The branch lightly creaked as Hazan’s huge frame stood on it.

“They’re pretty skilled. They probably have the same objective as us.”

“So they might beat us to the punch,” Hazan said. “We should crush them to avoid any future problems.”

“You just want to fight them, don’t you?” Elise said. Hazan’s awkward smile was all she needed to know that she was right. “—!!”

She felt a prickly sensation and pulled her hand away from her face, looking behind and above her. As she did, the water lens dripped off her hand and fell to the ground.

That strange sensation she’d felt before was now right behind her. But once again—she saw nothing.

However, she was convinced that someone had been responsible for it.

Because the moment she reacted to having noticed that stare, it completely disappeared.

She didn't know what kind of spell it was, but that was all the more reason to stay on alert. *Maybe it's a special ability*, Elise realized, and raised her opponent's potential threat level a few notches. She'd need to treat this opponent with care.

"So what are you gonna do, Elise? If they steal our prey, I'm gonna be pissed. We shouldn't let them do whatever they want."

Elise glanced at Hazan, who was making sense for once. He had a point, but considering how she'd been unable to fully evaluate the target's strength, she wondered if she could use this situation to her advantage. The other party was an unknown, but maybe she could let them clash with the target and see what happened.

Their affiliation was also unknown. They probably weren't Magicmasters from Balmes, but from one of the other nations. It was possible that the client would find out if she wiped them out here, which could become an international situation that would lead to problems for her later down the line. In the worst-case scenario, they might not even get the cancellation fee they were about to grab.

Of course, if that happened, she couldn't let Balmes' Governor-General live, but killing clients left and right would cause their trust within the underworld to drop, and they'd have less influence behind the scenes in political terms. There was no reason to recklessly make things difficult for herself here.

There was also the sense of utter dread she'd felt from the target before turning back. As long as the identity of that sensation was unknown, she wanted more firepower on the level of their executives to pitch in and help kill it.

However, Elise's cheek twitched as she thought of Kurama's other executives, and realized that wasn't going to happen. There were some she could never get along with, some who would pounce on any weakness, and some who lost sight of everything when the fighting started. There was even an idiot who only seemed to be able to say, "I'll fucking kill you!"

The girl shrugged. *Nah... the best option here is to grab that cancellation fee for not giving us enough info...* That made deciding easy.

“Getting a little extra money’s not going to be worth it to kill that thing. We’ll hit up that bastard for giving us worthless information and make him pay up. Besides, I don’t think he’d give us any information that I would accept. After all, I saw it for myself and couldn’t tell,” Elise said.

“... You gotta be kidding me?!”

“We’ll get a bunch of cash without doing any real work. So just settle for that.”

That’s when a fifth figure approached them. The contact they’d left behind in Balmes had caught up with them.

He jumped to one of the branches below them and muttered a single word, “Canceled...” He’d brought news of what the client wanted.

“You heard him. No more whining, Hazan. The situation’s changed, and someone else got the short straw. I’m not fighting if it’s not worth it.”

“You might be after the money, but I wanna fight something. So I’ll go pound on those guys.” As Hazan said this, the muscles in his body swelled up and pushed against his robe.

Elise left Hazan for later, and asked her subordinate with her eyes if there was any more information.

“This information hasn’t been confirmed... but according to the news, the Singles from the other nations will be gathering to eliminate the Fiend shortly.”

“Shortly?” In that case, who was that group in black? *Are they reconnaissance then... No, that doesn’t quite add up...*

“There’s a lot of confusing information out there, but it seems Alpha has already sent out an elite squad.”

In that instant—a dark red mana filled Elise’s surroundings.

Hazan’s eyes shot open in shock. He could see Elise’s eyes open wide, and the edges of her lips spreading so wide it looked like they’d torn.

His stirred-up fighting instincts were quickly disarmed after seeing her abnormal appearance. It was like an open fire on the verge of erupting immediately getting deprived of oxygen; his momentum was completely taken away from him.

The subordinate who'd brought her that information instinctively lowered his head and cast his eyes down, as if trying to hide from his fear. His trembling legs made it clear that he didn't dare look Elise in the eye.

As for Elise herself... *They're from Alpha. In that case...*

She thought about killing them, but quickly calmed down. Sure, it was Alpha's fault that she'd fallen as low as she had. And she'd sworn to get revenge, but that was decades ago.

She didn't want to remember those beasts driven by greed, how they'd thirsted for more, and how they'd set her up.

All the ringleaders of the incident had left this world long ago. Elise had dealt with the majority of them herself, but some had reached the end of their lives or died in accidents. The flames of vengeance should have died long ago, with her revenge complete. Yet just hearing that name made her feel a pain that tore at her body, and started a hatred whirling inside of her.

But that was in the past. She realized that taking out a grudge on Magicmasters from a younger generation wouldn't alleviate her feelings in the slightest. So she silenced her mana.

"I'm backing out of this... but I'm interested in how they'll face that thing," she said.

Her curiosity reared its head for a moment, but with the various nations' Singles and elites gathering in Balmes, it was better to not overstay her welcome.

The moment after she thought that—

"Tsk!!" She clicked her tongue at the same time as she saw the phenomenon. Everywhere she could see were glowing small red dots. She didn't even need to think to know this was an omen of the enemy's attack.

I figured they'd notice us... but this is—!! Elise immediately jumped backwards, and the moment after her escape—

In the blink of an eye, one of the red lights burst open into a large explosion.

Following that, the other dots popped one after another in a chain explosion.

One was powerful enough, but now tens, hundreds of them were going off at once.

Each explosion was engulfed by another, leaving ever growing destruction in their wake. In an instant, everything turned into a sea of fire, the ground was blown to pieces, and the trees withered to ash.

However, Elise had cast a spell at roughly the same time as the explosions had begun. Her arms began to faintly glow beneath the cloths wrapped around them as she thrust them forward. She moved her fingers slightly, as if controlling something, and a membrane of water expanded around her into a giant globe that enveloped her completely.

Next, large quantities of water burst out with the speed of a torrent. Before long the globe around Elise was as thick as a wall, absorbing the water current around her and creating a raging vortex that crushed everything in its path.

Water furiously splashed about, not just protecting Elise, but also extinguishing the flames.

Inside the globe of water was one more person. Hazan, with his face red and swollen as he trembled with rage.

"That was Detonation, but it's been refined quite a bit," Elise noted.

It was hard to imagine that just anyone would be able to use a spell like that. Magic may have evolved since Elise was in active duty, but the user must have put a lot of work into it. Its degree of perfection was a little too high to call it a mere expert level spell.

"So this is the power of modern Magicmasters. It's got to be a Single," Elise muttered, and then thought to herself, *If there had been someone who could use this level of magic back then... No, that's in the past; nothing would've changed.*

Before long, the burning, bright red flames had been extinguished by Elise's power. Seeing that was enough, she undid her spell and the two people inside the floating globe naturally fell toward the ground.

The next moment, Elise sensed large amounts of mana in the distance, a sign of incoming spells. "That's thorough. They know how to fight."

"Now I'm getting pumped! I love this kind of thing!" Hazan exclaimed.

Their surroundings had been completely burned down, and the three subordinates were nowhere to be seen. They'd likely been turned into ash. They were supposed to be pretty strong, but they didn't stand a chance against that level of magic suddenly hitting them.

They already had criminal records, and had taken to committing more serious crimes, so they weren't destined for decent deaths anyway.

While it didn't pain her to see them go, they had worked together on a mission for a short period of time, so she did feel a little bad about it. But now wasn't the time to get sentimental.

As she fell towards the ground, Elise could clearly feel the hostility approaching her. It was a massive summoned beast that had transformed its body to lightning as it dashed through the air.

Next to it was another. A liquid purple serpent was swimming through the air, making its way to Elise and Hazan. The liquid that it splashed about appeared to be a strong acid. When it dripped to the ground, it burned the trees and white smoke rose up.

"Sorry, but I'll play with these two!" Hazan said.

"Whatever you want." The wind conjured up to break her fall rustled Elise's hood, revealing her face.

Her hair that reached down to her shoulders danced in the wind, exposing the white nape of her neck. Her pale blonde hair was dyed crimson the further towards the ends that it went. Her amber-colored eyes looked as sharp as a predator's, but her skin was as clear as a child's.

Her youthful body showed no signs of her age. Seeing as how she only

reached up to Hazan's waist, those who didn't know her would assume that she was just a determined child. She most certainly didn't look like someone old enough to be called an 'old hag.'

Yet that insensitive Hazan sometimes called her that in jest, much to Elise's displeasure. Of course, she knew better than anyone that her appearance wasn't going to change.

Because she'd looked just like this for almost one hundred years.

Without waiting to land, Hazan ripped off his cloak and unleashed a violent torrent of mana. He grabbed hold of the sword handle at his waist and pulled it out of its sheath. But surprisingly, what one would normally expect to be at the end of the handle wasn't there.

Hazan fearlessly grinned, raising his arm and grasping his weapon even tighter. Yet there was still no blade to be found. "First off's that poison summon!"

"Then you take responsibility, and don't let them near me."

"Who's gonna let you have it! This is the perfect prey to vent on!" As he landed, the muscles in one of Hazan's hands swelled up abnormally, and as he swung the handle, there was now a long sword blade sticking out of it.

The invisible energy launched from it flew through the air and slashed up the ground, ultimately splitting the liquid serpent in two.

But as one might expect from a liquid body, it quickly put itself back together, furiously making its way towards him... but at the same time, a fierce pillar of fire rose up from the ground that had been fissured by the invisible energy.

"Shaaa!!" The serpent didn't even have a chance to evade as it squirmed in the flames. Its body shrank as it evaporated in the heat, until it was completely gone.

Hazan grinned once more. However, this time the beast of lightning brought down its claws on him.

"Hah! Weak!" The claws aimed at Hazan's shoulders were stopped in midair, even before reaching him. At a closer look, he could see that it had been

blocked by an invisible energy field, and as the claws clashed with that, the beast was unable to push in any further.

Elise knew that was thanks to Hazan's Storm Armor, but the lightning beast was born from advanced magic as well. The armor wasn't going to be able to block it forever.

Yet composure was written on Hazan's face. Or rather, it was happiness, he was enjoying the current situation. As a serious combat fanatic, this was just extra spice to enjoy the battle even more.

Shortly, the dense storm that Hazan was wearing turned even rougher, grinding away at the lightning beast's claws. Seeing this, it didn't hesitate to turn back into lightning and retreat.

"—!!" But in the next moment, a splash of water grazed Hazan's cheek.

Seeing the beast fall back, he'd undone his spell, but his cheek was cut and blood ran down his swarthy skin.

He spun around to glare at Elise. After all, she should have been the only water attribute user here.

However, Elise calmly faced his glare, sitting down on one of the large rocks lying around and irritatingly pointing her finger up at the sky. "It's because you're taking your time playing around."

Turning to look, Hazan saw multiple magical lights flying in. He ground his teeth, the veins in his temples bulging. "SHUT THE FUCK UP!" he roared in rage, and at the same time a shockwave shaking the atmosphere was created.

The next moment, it wiped out all of the incoming magic. That mana-infused shockwave had forcibly interfered with the very structure of the magic formulas.

Roots Actor Break was an expert level spell quite close to a taboo, putting it in the gray zone. It was one of Hazan's biggest trump cards.

The magic beast was caught up in the destruction and turned into remnants of mana.

"Sheesh, talk about indiscriminate. Why don't you learn to distinguish

between friend and foe already," Elise muttered, as she confirmed that her own barrier had disappeared.

It was a snide remark she'd said loudly enough so that Hazan should've been able to hear it, but he showed no sign of reacting to her, simply staring in the direction the spells had come from. "You dare to fucking hurt me with your shitty spells?! I'll fucking kill you!!"

"That's enough. We're leaving."

However, bloodlust was the only thing on Hazan's mind. "Not a chance! I'm going over there to crush them even if I'm alone!"

The moment after he said that, he felt a violent tempest of mana pushing his back, and he slowly turned around.

"This is why I fucking hate babysitting. This is a request that I accepted. I'm not going to listen to your selfish opinions. If you're going to throw a tantrum, I'll deal with you myself."

"Tsk!... Fine... I get it. However—!!" Firmly grasping his bladeless sword, he forcefully swung it in the direction the spells had come from. A blade of wind created from the slash flew straight that way, running through the burnt forest and cutting through the trees beyond.

That brought Elise to the verge of erupting, but she squeezed out the last of her mental fortitude to bear it. *I'm never teaming up with this guy again*, she decided, realizing that the next time Hazan did something stupid she wouldn't be able to hold back. She'd reached the limits of her generosity.

"We're leaving now. Seeing as how they're not showing themselves, that Detonation and those summonses were probably just to keep us in check and see what we'd do. If we don't make a move on them, we can avoid a clash. If we *don't do anything*, that is!" Elise said, but kept herself from continuing with, *Though it might already be too late because of a certain meathead*.

Her strong tone made Hazan snort as if he'd lost interest, and he turned around to pick up his cloak that was on the ground.

"—!!" Hazan reacted.

“Interesting...” Elise said.

The last slash attack that Hazan had fired off had actually been sent accurately towards where the caster was. But quite some distance away from them, the presence of that massive blade of wind had abruptly disappeared.

Obviously, as the one responsible for it, Hazan could tell as much. He clenched his fist that held the cloak, and stared in the direction he’d sent the wind in, where he could see the trees that had stood in its way had been cut down.

Elise couldn’t explain what happened either. But there was no doubt that Hazan’s powerful mana-infused attack had been scattered. Or rather erased without a trace.

She was curious too, but if they let this chance go, they might really end up having to fight. Moreover, she didn’t know if Hazan had done it on purpose, but with all the trees gone there was now a straight path to them. “We’re going.”

“... Tsk. Fuck!” After a short pause Hazan finally agreed to leave, putting on his cloak as he clicked his tongue.

Looking over the burnt area once more, Elise thought of her fallen subordinates and slowly closed her eyes. She didn’t know their real names, and their faces were a blur, but she could at least give them a silent prayer.

Hazan, on the other hand, seemed to have already forgotten their existence. He didn’t bother remembering anyone but the strongest.

I wasn’t exactly growing senile behind the scenes, but it seems the world has changed a lot. In order not to be left behind with the times, Elise had made an active effort to stay updated, especially when it came to the field of magic.

Living a hundred years, the road I seek to master is thin and narrow, yet the world is both deep and vast. Under the red hood she’d put back on, Elise unconsciously wore a daring smile.

“Alpha, huh? This’ll be fun! I’ll have the boys make a list of the enemy’s members. The next time we meet, I’ll kill you in order!”

“Just not during this request. There might be clients who care about

international politics who wouldn't take a liking to that, which would make it harder to move about... besides, with that level of skill it won't be easy. They probably have a Single in there," Elise said, and then fell silent.

She was digging up knowledge from the vast wealth of it in her mind. It was only natural to stay on guard against Magicmasters who could fight on a par with Kurama. Singles in particular required one of their executives to even stand a chance.

In that regard, Alus and the other Singles saw Kurama's executives as opponents they couldn't afford to underestimate.

Hazan glanced over at the red-hooded woman. "Oh yeah, you know lots about politics too. How much do you know about Alpha's military strength?" His tone wasn't the same one he'd used when calling her a hag, which was only natural since he was now asking her for precious information.

"... Yeah, right. Well, right now, Alpha has two Singles. The ranked No. 7, Lettie Kultunca... and Alus Reigin who is the ranked No. 1." Elise didn't actually know anything about Alus aside from his name. He rarely showed his face, with very few who actually knew him, including the military top brass.

But perhaps that was all one could hope for in a criminal organization like Kurama. They did have connections to the top people in the various nations, but they were fundamentally hostile towards Magicmasters and the nations. While the top people might rely on Kurama for the dirty work, they weren't foolish enough to easily give up information on their own nation or the other nations.

Elise lamented her current position a little. But then she reconsidered, and was relieved that they'd been able to avoid fighting. *If they have a Single with them, we'll leave that monster to them... and go negotiate for our reward.*

She ignored Hazan, who was grinning like an idiot who'd found a worthy opponent, and quickly changed gears. For now they would go collect what they were owed. Since the nations would be gathering in Balmes soon, Kurama would find it difficult to move about freely.

Singles were the only ones who could effectively limit Kurama's movements, but they'd been unable to do so with all of their missions in the Outer World.

Yet now those Singles would be in Balmes, meaning they couldn't afford to be careless.

First, they'd leave this scorched land behind and make for Balmes.

Just as they started running, the two suddenly stopped again. Elise turned to Hazan and clicked her tongue. "Shit, this is all your fault, Hazan."

"Yeah, I don't mind that. In fact, I'm so pumped right now. Tagging along on the hag's errands isn't all that bad."

The two raised their eyes and glared.

Burnt trees were stacked on top of each other, creating a small mountain. And on top of it, staring down at the two—

"Sorry, but this is work, you see."

A young man with blond hair, dressed in a white military uniform, took a breath after having run as fast as he could all this way. The next moment, he narrowed his eyes and continued, "This is a big haul. I'm glad I hurried to get here. I recognize that scary face. You're Hazan, one of the most wanted criminals from Kurama."

"Well, ain't I famous? And who're you supposed to be?"

"You guys are really good at skulking in the shadows. In fact, your name and face have only started circulating in our circle recently. And I'm not particularly good at going after humans."

Hazan's lips twisted into a crude smile. His cloak rustled a little as he quietly gripped the bladeless handle in preparation for his next move. "I've got no business with weaklings—!!" A long blade was created with wind.

Nobody would have been able to notice the faint flow of mana and the blade concealed by warping the light around it... at least not an average Magicmaster.

"Unfortunately, when it comes to magic, I'm your superior." With a refreshing smile, the young man leaped off the small mountain of trees, evading Hazan's long-range attack.

Next, he caught Hazan's wind sword with his bare hand as Hazan swung it against his neck. Hazan's AWR, which was just a handle, could create a blade

through magic. Theoretically he could freely control its length and unleash its slashes as wind blades. As it lacked a physical form, its strength was heavily influenced by its wielder.

However, Hazan was one of Kurama's executives. He could more than handle the AWR's special properties. Yet this young man had seen through his attack and caught the blade in his hand, and then continued to crush it. Or rather, he hadn't touched it directly.

As proof of that, there was a slight gap between where the blade had been and the young man's palm. He could control the mana covering his hand freely, turning it into a shield or an iron glove like a magic trick.

That one display was enough for Elise and Hazan to measure their opponent.

"You're Rusalca's Jean Rumbulls, aren't you? The ranked No. 3," Elise said, turning her amber eyes on him. She sported a somewhat fed-up expression over how things had turned bothersome. If the group from before was from Alpha, this meant the other nations' Singles had already started arriving in Balmes. It might just have been that Jean was extra speedy, but he had still arrived faster than the intel they'd been given.

"The ranked No. 3, huh, so for the first time in a while I can fight someone with a spine," Hazan grinned.

"I'm a busy man, and you people have been giving everyone a lot of trouble. So, sorry, but I'm going to dispose of you here."

Elise said, "I was hoping to leave this gloomy place behind, but I guess you won't let us go that easily. In that case, I'll have to go all out too, but isn't your actual goal elsewhere?"

Jean narrowed his eyes as he heard how much Kurama knew.

"You wouldn't want to wear yourself out fighting us, would you? How about we negotiate instead? And just so you know, this is me compromising." She decided to at least try it, but Jean Rumbulls was known to be very serious in his work, so that probably wasn't going to fly with him.

However, Elise got an unexpected reply. "If you'll be returning to your own hideout, I can leave it at that. If you promise not to meddle with Balmes, that

is.”

Her face stiffened the moment he said that. “Sorry, but that’s no good.” She had no intentions of returning empty-handed. Figuring that was the end of the negotiations, she reached toward the cloths covering her arms.

Meanwhile, Jean stared at the two members from Kurama with a derisive smile. “I expected as much. Not that a promise is worth anything... to people like you.” He too had prepared himself for the battle that was unavoidable. He’d also hoped to buy some time, as Rusalca’s following forces should catch up eventually.

“I’ve just had to put off a fight before this. So you better not let me down!” Hazan found this as convenient as anything as he bared his fangs. Mana incomparable to before flooded to his AWR.

The next moment, the blade of wind instantly grew longer as it attacked Jean directly.

Jean dodged it with nimble steps, but its reach was unexpectedly long, looking like it might even reach the clouds.

Seeing that blow in lieu of a greeting, Elise stepped forward as if to push Hazan back. “I told you we don’t have time for this, Hazan. Stop playing around. I’ll do this.” She had a daring smile as she loosened the cloths around her arms. “I guess I’ll erase one of the Singles. I’m sure you can stop the Fiends even with one of you dead.”

Despite looking like a little girl, Elise’s words sent a chill down Jean’s spine. At some point his palms had started sweating. And he realized that he’d been fooled by appearances, as he needed to be the most cautious of her.

Jean’s body and mana felt numb as the loudest warning signals he’d ever felt were running through his head. “I’m not a fan of hurting the ladies, but I suppose I don’t have a choice.”

He kept his smile the same as he remained at a distance from her. He wasn’t being overly confident in his own abilities. But it seemed that Hazan and previously identified executives weren’t the only ones with the strength to rival Singles.

As this was going on, Jean sensed another group of Magicmasters leaving the area.

So Alus and the others went, huh? What a relief, he thought to himself. He might struggle on his own, but they'd surely accomplish the more important mission.

Governor-General Berwick had gone through Lithia to send him over here in case Kurama made any moves. Cicelnia had said that Alpha would deal with this on their own during their meeting, but Berwick hadn't forgotten what Lithia said. Her offer had been spurned by Cicelnia, but he figured it would still be effective for limiting Kurama's movements.

Jean didn't know about Alus' special ability that might be necessary to eliminate the Devourer, but he could serve as another unit to keep Kurama in check.

He certainly felt a friendship with Alus. And unlike Alus, he had a sense of justice that wouldn't let him ignore Kurama. Jean had only been sent here to keep Kurama from interfering with Alus and the others, but if worst came to worst, he'd have to fight.

He'd left his squad behind so that at least he alone could catch up as soon as possible when he saw the sea of flames. *I suppose this is a good chance to repay some of the favor that I owe Alus.*

This was an important moment that might impact the future of humanity. And the best option was to send Alus on his way without any worries. So even if Kurama was a tough opponent, Jean only had one thing he had to do.

"Elise, give him to me. I made up my mind. I'm not going to let anyone else have him." Hazan took a step forward and stood in her path.

A displeased expression appeared on Elise's face.

However, Jean didn't care about their complicated relationship. "Either way's fine. Come get it."

"That's enough of your prince act! I'll mess up your face until it loses its shape!" Driven by impulse, Hazan sped towards Jean.

Seeing a slash incoming, Jean looked to be judging its range, but the concept of range didn't exist with Hazan's AWR. His target was always in range. He brought his right hand with the swollen muscles over to his waist on the opposite side, and in the next moment swung the blade made from magic.

However, Jean had closed the distance as well. Hazan's arm was stopped in the middle of its swing. Having slid up close, Jean had stopped the arm from moving with a single hand.

After an instant of shock, Hazan tried to forcibly push Jean's arm away. "Ack!!"

Jean used that flow against him, landing a kick on his chin. However, he could feel something like layered wires resisting his kick. With that, he couldn't expect much effect from the attack.

Swiftly pulling his leg up high, Jean brought it down on the top of Hazan's head next. Hazan's massive frame was slammed into the ground, as his head violently tossed up and down.

Yet he seemed unfazed by the combo, as he quickly got back up.

Jean appeared to have seen that coming, as he pointed his open palm towards Hazan's chest. In it was a silver sphere with a strange pattern that hadn't been there before. He thrust his palm to strike Hazan, and the shock went through Hazan's body.

It was a combined technique with his AWR, Rage Balls, a spell known as Impact created by focusing mana into the palm and having his AWR construct it into multiple spells unleashed on contact.

Each one alone didn't have all that much power, but by timing the shockwaves so they overlapped, they had several times the power in a single point.

Hazan was sent flying like a cannonball. However, partway through, he regained his posture, bent backwards, and slid across the ground as he barely managed to land on his feet. His chest had slightly sunken in, but Jean could feel the unnatural wind serving as a barrier and protecting him from the worst of it.

It was too shallow.

On the spur of the moment, Hazan had used Gargalom, a wind attribute defensive spell that was effective against Jean's Impact and dispersed most of it. Having barely endured the impact, Hazan, still bent backwards, looked up in the air and began chanting something.

Jean didn't notice that until after he'd taken a step forward to follow up.

"‹‹Under Desire››" Without any sign of hiding it, Hazan poured vast amounts of mana into the ground.

A summoning, huh. Eventually a stone arm came out of the ground. Many human-shaped arms followed it and then they all attacked Jean at once.

He immediately moved away, but as expected, the hundred or so arms gave chase to catch him. It was a simple tracking program built into the spell, but because of it, the arms would chase their target wherever they went.

It looked like the grudge of the dead, trying to pull the living target underground. The most troublesome part of the spell was that the arms were partially made out of the minerals that were underground, making them as sturdy as steel.

After casting his spell, Hazan leaned forward into his usual posture. Being the complete battle fanatic that he was, his eyes were wide open and his lips twisted into a sadistic smile. He didn't pay any heed to the streak of blood running down from the corner of his mouth.

It was a result of not being able to fully kill the impact, but even that was another bit of spice to excite him further. The taste that filled his mouth as he licked it up only stimulated him more.

Meanwhile, having determined that he wouldn't be able to escape the arms' pursuit, Jean jumped high into the air as some of the fingers touched his legs.

The rock arms stretched out to chase after him. He looked at the arms below him and also glanced over at the girl in red. She wasn't showing any signs of intervening, but Jean was still more cautious of her than Hazan. He wasn't going to show her any openings.

Glancing down at the approaching arms, Jean extended his hand. As he did, the silver AWR in his hand changed shape from a globe to a thin sword.

Upon a closer look, it became clear that its color was a mix of silver and red, the red parts due to it being heated as hot as magma. It covered the surrounding area in a hot vapor.

The globe shape wasn't Rage Balls' true form; it was just one of its forms that it maintained for convenience's sake. It was also meant to lower the opponent's guard. Very few people alive knew about this, including Lithia and Rusalca's Governor-General. Not even Alus knew about it.

The Rage Balls, which had properties similar to those of shape-memory alloys, were made entirely out of meteor metal.

What was once a globe was now a thin double-edged sword. That transformation clearly hadn't followed any laws of physics as its total volume had increased. And the blade glowing red from the heat had one magic formula after another starting to light up.

Jean raised the completed sword and swung it down at the approaching rock arms.

"‹‹Vermilion››"

A single strike that would wipe away everything, the slash unleashed a powerful shockwave, destroying the rock arms and their insides, blowing them away without a trace.

The blast alone tore up a big hole in the ground, sending dirt flying through the air. After causing the surface to cave in, the shockwave spread across the ground through the surrounding area.

Just when it looked like Jean had escaped from his pinch by pulling out his ace, an invisible blade of wind approached him while hiding itself behind the fragments of the arms.

"—!!" Sudden changes in position were difficult in the air, and Jean hadn't anticipated Hazan's follow-up attack.

Jean relied almost entirely on instinct as he twisted his body to avoid the massive blade. When he landed, blood dripped from a scratch on his cheek, staining it red. The wound wasn't all that deep, but it was a close call. It was a skillful attack snuck in as he was distracted for a moment.

Phew, I guess I won't be able to use Vermilion for a couple of days.

Jean's Rage Balls actually had several more forms aside from the globe and sword, each with its own unique spell suitable for that form. The magic formulas themselves changed with the shape-memory alloy, but they were all limited to one use, and the AWR would be burning hot for a while from the magical load released.

"Well, this is a lot of effort. That kind of power would have been so reliable if fighting side by side, but I guess it can't be helped." Jean lightly landed, and put his hand on his hip. Rage Balls returned to its globe shape, floating beside him and still emitting heat.

"Yeah, it's a shame. So let me kill you." Quick to action, a dense amount of mana coiled around Hazan's arms like snakes, emitting an ominous light. A flood of mana gushed out in response to his excitement.

The mana around his arms turned into a spell. It was as if his arms were wearing the wind directly.

That's not Tempest. It was probably a spell Jean had no memory of. Either way, he wasn't given any time to think, as Hazan stomped the ground hard enough to leave an imprint and rushed him.

It was like a wild beast's charge, but his movements were nimble and extremely swift. He looked like he was being boosted by the wind, as if leaving afterimages behind.

"‹‹Fade Spira››" Like an animal swinging its claws, Hazan pulled his arm down as if to crush everything in his path, including the ground.

Jean managed to dodge the attack, but a thin wind wrapped around the arm he'd kept in front of his face and tore his arm to shreds in an instant. When he strained his eyes, he could see a thin, smoke-like wind coiled around Hazan's arms like snakes.

By the time he noticed, Jean's sleeve had been torn apart, and beneath it were several sharp claw marks that had torn up his skin. He'd dodged the attack, but the wind had reached out from Hazan's arm and touched his own. In addition to that, it had twisted his arm and scraped away his skin instantly. If

he'd been just a little slower to dodge, he might not have been able to use his arm anymore.

Jean stepped backward as he counterattacked. It seemed Hazan's arms would tear and destroy anything in range. It was a rather advanced spell, but once he'd seen its range, that was all.

Pouring mana into it, Jean changed the form of his Rage Balls into a stake. Pointing its sharp tip in the right direction, he sent the stake flying towards Hazan.

Having gotten in position to launch his second attack, Hazan was unable to dodge in time and the stake jammed into his flank. A binding spell unique to that form was immediately activated, fixing not just his left arm but his whole body in place.

Yet even as blood flowed out of his side, Hazan didn't so much as flinch.

Jean had been fighting Hazan while keeping an eye on the girl behind him, but he realized he'd lost sight of her during the intense back and forth .

The moment he sensed danger, Hazan forcibly overwrote the coordinates holding his body in place with his own mana, and raised his freed left arm. That took about a second of time.

Normally, that would be more than enough time for Jean to evade. However... "—!!" Jean stepped away from Hazan, and he felt a wall of wind made from magic behind him, preventing him from moving. *So this was what he was after from the start.*

Hazan had closed in, to the point of taking a hit from the stake, for this one moment when Jean's escape was cut off. In order to bring the fight to one of close combat, he'd put his life on the line to finish the enemy.

With his back against the wall, there was no time for Jean to run. He'd have to just play along with Hazan's rules and ready himself to get injured.

Yet Jean showed no panic after being cornered. Because of his AWR's performance, the longer the fight dragged on, the bigger of a disadvantage he'd be at. And he still felt the biggest threat was the girl behind him. So he'd need to finish this quickly.

Rage Balls' restrictions after activating a spell was a side effect of its versatility. In exchange for the perfect spell for the situation, it temporarily lost its function as an AWR, so one might even call it defective. Casting high-level spells when the AWR was overheated from the load caused there to be a delay in its processing speed.

Jean swiftly determined that it would be a bad idea to show them too many of the tricks up his sleeve, and instead he would finish the fight in the next attack. Rage Balls, which had returned to his side, next changed into two daggers.

Its ability to split and seemingly multiply was yet another unique functionality of this AWR. The two daggers were as light as feathers, and handled as quickly as lightning.

By linking their movements to his nerve signals and artificially making them part of his body, it was possible for Jean to exceed the speed that humans could perceive. In other words, this form came with a support spell from the start, but not only did this put a strain on the AWR, it also came with the risk of his muscles and ligaments getting torn.

Jean resolvedly readied the two daggers. With this, he'd be able to exceed the expectations of both sides striking each other, and add in a few fatal blows as they crossed.

With Hazan's massive fist raised overhead, Jean's arms reflexively moved.

However, words were then quietly but coldly uttered.

It was as if time itself stopped in that moment. The same seemed true for Hazan as well. And strangely, his attack was forcibly stopped halfway through.

"Don't lose your head, Hazan." It was a penetratingly cold voice filled with heavy bloodlust, to the point where Jean's body instinctively tensed.

Before he knew it, the girl had stepped out of the giant's shadow and jumped over his right shoulder. She grasped his shoulder so hard the flesh could tear, and from that position, Elise unleashed a kick at Jean's neck, aimed at his cervical vertebrae.

It was a complete ambush from a blind spot, or rather Jean had been unable

to sense her mana approaching from this close and was stunned.

Moreover, it was a strike meant to use the advantage of surprise and destroy his neck. It was one of the secret teachings of assassins, but he'd never seen anything like it performed at such a high level.

There was a terrifying depth to it that could only be described as the essence of the art of killing. It went beyond that of an interpersonal battle between Magicmasters.

By the time Jean felt danger, his arm had already automatically moved up to protect his neck. Firmly gripping the daggers, he braced for impact.

Just as he was convinced he'd be able to block the close call, his consciousness wavered.

He only realized he'd been hit after he was already sent flying. It felt like he'd been mercilessly struck and sent into the air by a heavy blunt weapon. Even so, he recovered, using his legs to kill the momentum.

Fortunately, it hadn't been fatal, but his mind was a little cloudy and his sight was shaking. As Jean unconsciously rubbed his neck, he wondered why he'd been hit by the kick he should have blocked.

Did she alter my perception...? But I was on guard for that...! That's when Jean noticed that the arm he'd raised to block was wet. It wasn't because he was bleeding, nor was it from a sudden spell of rain. But it wasn't on the level of dampness. It was like it had been drenched in water. This made no sense.

Jean had taken a defensive position and blocked the girl's kick with his arm. Yet the kick had slipped past his guard and directly hit his neck. "I don't know what you did... but you've got some bad habits for a young lady."

"The way you're dripping with water makes you look a little more attractive, don't you think?" his opponent returned sarcastically.

Jean took a deep breath, but no brilliant ideas came to mind. As long as he didn't know what she'd done, there was nothing he could do.

That said, the skills of the girl in front of him were—*That's bad news. Actually, how old is she even?* From her high-pitched voice and the luster of her skin that

he could see from under the hood, she was perhaps in her tweens. It was hard to imagine she was older based on appearance alone.

Yet her expressions and the way she cursed wasn't like a young girl. "Time's up, Hazan. If you make any more moves, you'll become one of my targets too."

"..." Hazan raised his hand in surrender to her warning.

However, she didn't even glance his way. From Jean's point of view, she only warned him to keep up appearances, not actually caring what Hazan did. His shoulder that she'd gripped was stained red with blood.

"Alright, Mr. Handsome. Let the end begin."

Beneath the hood, her eyes were a heterochromatic pair of amber and blue. And seeing her mouth twisting into a warped smile, Jean was able to understand the position he was in.

Soon it... no, they... became more apparent. They were all massive, to the point that Jean couldn't help but wonder why he hadn't noticed them earlier.

It was like the entire area had turned into a sea, as fish-like creatures were swimming around.

No, calling them creatures wasn't the right word. They were probably made entirely out of water through magic. The way even light passed through their bodies, they could perhaps best be described as water spirits.

Each one was easily over two meters long, with their shapes and sizes varying wildly. They had tails, fins, and long sharp teeth in their mouths, the telltale sign of predators.

Despite the variations, they all had one thing in common. They had no eyes.

Looking up, one could see massive fish swimming in circles around the girl. "Geez, this looks like it's going to take some time." Not even a Single like Jean had ever seen or heard about a spell like this. The only thing he could really tell was that this belonged to the water attribute.



Jean lightly opened and shut his hand in a way that wasn't noticed. His arm hurt from Hazan's attack, and his fingers were numb from the impact.

"Why not enjoy this undersea paradise while you have the chance?" Elise played around with her fingers like a conductor, lightly swinging them about. When she did, the school of water fish swimming through the air began moving as one toward Jean in a frenzy, as if this was the first food they'd been given in months. They paid no heed to their surroundings and as soon as they latched on to their prey, they weren't going to let go until there was nothing left but bone.

Jean would have to run to escape the starving school of water fish's attack. As he ran, he racked his brain to come up with a plan to get out of this, but the water fish had an unreal speed and were gradually closing in, despite his abilities as a Single.

The school chasing him wasn't showing any signs of exhaustion. So if he stopped for even a moment, he'd be the prey of their countless sharp teeth.

"Come on, they're catching up to you. You wouldn't be able to act cool if all your clothes were torn to tatters," Elise told him.

"Now you've said it..."

One of the fish sped up from the rest and scratched up Jean's arm with its teeth. Despite having been created with magic, their teeth were very real and razor sharp.

The school was getting even closer, and Jean was starting to get attacked by the fastest of the water fish.

While skillfully dodging them, Jean returned Rage Balls to a globe and sent it away in exchange for a split-second of his time. Reaching the front of the school of water fish, Rage Balls unleashed a powerful lightning attack without any warning.

The water fish that were run through or brushed by the lightning were shocked, and had portions of their bodies blown away.

Of course, that wasn't enough to wipe out that number of water fish. Each

one had been made with individual mana, and destroying a portion of the school wasn't going to make it disappear in its entirety. If anything...

"So it didn't work after all," Jean muttered, glancing behind him. He could see the supposedly destroyed water fish regenerate and start swimming again. It looked like their numbers had actually increased instead of decreased.

Then attacking the source is all I can do. His arm's state wasn't a problem. It could still move well enough. But his AWR was starting to overheat, unable to perform its normal functions. He understood the cost of using the unique magic, but he wasn't in a situation where he could choose not to use it.

Now that he'd used two unique spells in succession, Rage Balls needed time to cool off. Not even Jean knew how delayed its processing speed would be now. At any rate, it was a war of attrition.

Another school was approaching him from the front, and just before they collided, Jean made a sharp turn to catch hold of the girl.

But there was such a vast distance between them. And instead it was the girl, Elise, who had caught hold of him.

"This is how you use magic. A lesson for you to take to the afterlife."

The water fish had been chasing after Jean like trained hunting dogs to guide him to this spot. As Jean realized this, his reaction was one step too slow.

The girl in front of him raised one arm, creating a large water globe. And inside it were wild, raging black currents.

Eventually the cloth around Elise's arm was melted by the water, revealing a vividly glowing magic formula—carved right on her skin.

That wasn't something completely impossible. There had been experiments for decades, but carving a magic formula directly into the skin was unsuitable for freely controlling spells due to the need for precision in the formulas.

Cells are born and die daily. The scars from a magic formula carved into the skin would heal and twist, and ultimately backfire when used. No matter how much work one put into it, the formula would lose function before long.

After pointing a creepy smile in Jean's direction, Elise frowned for a moment.

That frown contained sadness, anger, and all kinds of emotions, and could be interpreted in any way depending on who was looking. It was a vague and incomprehensible expression.

Next, the bubble filled with black water floated forward for a short while before stopping, squirming as if to unleash the torrent inside, and spat out several small spirals that flew straight for Jean. There was of course still the school of water fish coming at him from behind as well.

It was a pincer attack. Even if he wanted to dodge to the side, having been lured in with the perfect timing, there was no escape.

In that case! Jean suddenly kneeled and thrust his arms out on either side. He'd already had Rage Balls split into two, keeping each one in front of the palms of his hands. On the surface of the forcibly activated silver-colored AWR was a very faint light from the magic formula.

He immediately pointed one arm towards the school and another towards the spirals, accompanying those gestures by speaking out the spell name.

"‹‹Hellfire››"

It was an expert level spell that turned the area around it into scorched earth. The AWR still hadn't properly cooled down, yet he'd forcibly changed its form and cast two massive spells at the same time.

He could tell that Rage Balls was reaching its limits, as it was starting to shake. The flames unleashed were clad in lightning. Just a look at the crimson flames made it clear how intense they were, and they engulfed everything, turning it into ash.

As a result of their clash, Jean's vision was covered by an immense amount of steam. He could barely see his hand in front of his face.

Hopefully the same was true for his opponent, Jean thought to himself, but he remained on guard. At the very least, the water fish weren't attacking him from behind, so they must have been wiped out.

The problem was in front of him... Jean didn't think that was enough to beat her, but...

“—?!” He sensed something in the white steam, like a massive snake... but also like a water current. He could definitely hear something hiding in the steam, wriggling and scraping across the ground. Even if he wanted to confirm what it was, he couldn’t see that far.

Next, he heard another abnormal sound beyond the steam. Jean furrowed his brows at the sharp, whip-like cutting sound. Reaching out with his mana, he could just barely make out that someone was fighting.

Though whether it could be called a fight or not was a different matter. The sense of battle lasted for just an instant, ending with a single blow.

Before long, the steam surrounding Jean was blown away by a strong wind. When he could see again, there was nobody in front of him.

The only things he could see were the boiling surface and a burnt-away forest, clearing up his view considerably. Even the trees that were barely still standing were burned to their roots. When Jean touched one, the scorched bark peeled right off.

So they ran away.

If anything, he was the one who’d been cornered. And he felt less regret and more relief over this turn of events.

Eventually, after several deep breaths, Jean sat down. “That was rough... It’s not worth showboating on your own. But still, Kurama was tougher than expected.”

Still seated, he let the tension leave his body and took another deep breath. He paid no heed to the burnt smell and simply focused on calming down.

Rage Balls, still split in two, was lying nearby. Even after he got to Balmes’ defensive lines, the AWR wasn’t going to be of use to him.

Not much time had passed since Kurama had left, so Jean looked in the direction that Alus and the others had gone in. “If Kurama’s run off, then my work is done for now. I can just leave the rest to Alus and take a breather.”

But still—what was with that ending? He hadn’t been able to see it for himself. There was no way his subordinates had arrived as reinforcements. So,

just who was it who had helped him out as he was backed against the wall with his AWR overheating... No, perhaps assuming someone had helped him was too rash.

From the way things looked, it wasn't impossible that someone had let the two Kurama executives escape. It was possible that the whip-like sound hadn't been due to battle, but was some sort of signal. Regardless, he hadn't been able to see anything in the steam, so he'd just have to guess based on what he'd felt with his mana.

Only one thing was certain. He'd sensed a fourth mana that didn't belong to that girl or to Hazan. So someone had likely intervened.

But who would show up here? Jean had rushed over to stall Kurama for a top secret mission that no one else knew about.

Nothing was making sense, so Jean looked up at the sky and let out a sigh.

*

"Hmm hmm, hm hm hm, hm hmm."

With the scorched land behind her, the woman was happily humming, as if she was out on a casual stroll.

This was still the Outer World. While their numbers were reduced here, it was still an area where the Fiends ruled.

Despite being such a dangerous place, the woman ignored the burnt smell and cheerfully talked to herself, "Oh dear, that Elise is always so restless. You can't get in the waaay. But right, she doesn't know anything, does she? Oh well, that's fine. Just leave it up to him, and everything will work out..."

Anyone who saw her would surely be shocked. After all, she wasn't dressed like a Magicmaster, but like an average city girl you'd find anywhere in the Inner World.

She had the gentle face of someone who'd never left the human domain, and would never get anywhere close to battles against Fiends. Being surrounded by a comfortable, ordinary life, such as gossiping with her friends or smelling the flowers on a stroll down the road seemed like it would suit her best.

She looked approachable and friendly, like someone who was easy to ask for directions. “But what a mysteryyy, who told them where the deposit was? That’s information you could only find out after a geological survey in that areaaa. In fact, who was it who said you could get mithril from there in the first plaaace?”

The woman enjoying talking to herself suddenly stopped, and found the answer to her question by searching her memories.

“Oh my? Now that I think about it, I was the one who told the head of Balmes’ research team about it. But that won’t dooo; if there is something you want, you have to take care of what you wake up... Oh, those people were all devoured, weren’t they?”

She shrugged off the circumstances of the world, as if to say, ‘Oh well.’

With graceful steps, as if she were dancing on a stage, the woman, Dakia Agnois, happily smiled. “But if it’s Alpha’s number one... I can expect much from hiiim. After all, he’s the one who killed me. Now that I think about it, what did he think of me when we saw each other at the demonstration? I wasn’t wearing a strange outfit, so I’m sure it’s okay.”

With a truly happy expression, Dakia began humming once more... a song with an unheard melody and unknown lyrics.

Afterword

Thank you very much for reading *The Greatest Magicmaster's Retirement Plan*, Volume 6.

Things are finally getting hot outside. Hopefully by the time this volume gets into your hands, the temperature will be a little more comfortable.

Long time no see, Izushiro here.

In a sudden change of topic, if I were to give this volume a subtitle, I'd call it the Seven Nations Friendship Magical Tournament arc. The previous volume, this volume, and the coming one could fall under that designation, being a beginning, a middle, and an end to the arc. And so, this volume would be the middle one.

However, like I explained in an earlier afterword, as in the previous volume, this arc features two parallel stories. And with this volume, I am sure they've become a lot clearer. In the middle of the story, the subject shifts from the tournament to a certain crisis. I might touch more on that in the afterword for the next volume.

I have a little more leeway for this afterword, so I'd like to touch on this volume's contents some more. This will include some spoilers, so as per usual, I recommend leaving the afterword for after you've read the volume.

Starting with—there's the highlight of Tesfia's and Alice's match. As they're so close to each other and know each other so well, it becomes a fight where neither can hold back. They're best friends, and each other's biggest rivals.

They fight with all of their might, and at times they push their potential beyond their limits to create new possibilities. Because of their serious battle born from mutual respect, they displayed a higher degree of skill than usual. Even as the author I pondered how to end this battle, so what did you think?

Moreover, the greatest Magicmaster's—Alus'—existence was important for this. He is an extraordinary existence even when it's not directly related to

magic.

Magicmasters are noble warriors fighting against Fiends for the sake of humanity, and they take pride in their work. However, Alus detests shackles, and only looks for freedom. Yet he feels conflicted because he understands his responsibility. He too is yet another being that is unable to abandon everything. He likes to think he's able to keep his private and public lives separate, but isn't quite able to do so, which is a very human side of him. I would be very happy if you agreed with that.

Protected from the Fiends' advance, the people enjoy a transient peace, living their lives by only looking at their surroundings. Their only other concern would be what their natural enemy, the Fiends, are doing. Among them, only Alus gazed to the far distance, past the threat of Fiends... This is a discovery I didn't make until writing the afterword, but in the end, the most important thing is how the readers feel.

Now then, I'd like to put aside my urge to speak more and move on to the customary thanks. It is only thanks to the cooperation of a great many people that *The Greatest Magicmaster's Retirement Plan*, Vol. 6, is in your hands.

Special thanks to the designers, printers, and reviewers. This time in particular I caused a lot of problems for the review side with last-minute adjustments. It is thanks to them that this volume was published without too much time passing since the last volume. So I truly thank you from the bottom of my heart.

I would also like to thank my editor-in-charge for precise advice on last-minute additions and corrections, bringing the story to an even higher level of perfection. And thank you once more for all of the other help. I look forward to working with you in future volumes.

Finally, Miyuki Ruria-sama in charge of illustrations. Thank you for always living up to my unreasonable requests. I love all of the characters, but now another has been added. For those of you who can't tell, please feel free to take a peek at the cover.

I can still remember talking with my editor about putting this character on the front cover like it was yesterday. And it kind of was.

This volume features a new character named Elise, and she has slightly

different hair. Her hair takes on a red gradient as it reaches the ends, and I was worried about what would happen to this when she got illustrated. Maybe it would be forgotten... However, as you can see, it turned out fantastic.

Thank you so very much for the wonderful illustrations; in my mind this series would no longer work without Miyuki Ruria-sama's illustrations. Please take good care of this series going forward.

Having reached the very end, I would like to thank all the readers who read all this way. I am sure that the best way I can live up to your expectations and patronage is to deliver the best story possible. I sincerely hope we can see the end of Alus' story together.

Now then. How did you find this volume? You don't have to answer this. I just can't keep myself from asking. I can't imagine any further joy than having this story remain in your heart.

I'll do my best to deliver the next volume without too long of a delay.

—Izushiro

April 2018


Icicle Sword!
Shiylereis!


Lettie Kultunca
A beautiful Single Digit Magicmaster from the nation of Alpha, the ranked No. 7. She has a sisterly disposition and a refreshing personality, earning her a lot of fans.
Jean Rumbulls
Rusalca's Single Digit Magicmaster, the ranked No. 3. He is old friends with Alus and a friendly ladykiller.
Hazan
A giant Magicmaster who specializes in wind attribute magic. One of Kurama's executives, he loves life and death battles and slaughter more than anything. A total combat fanatic.
Elise
A woman Magicmaster belonging to the criminal organization Kurama. On the surface she looks like a little girl, but her abilities are on a par with Singles. She carries a big secret and a dark past.
Alus Reigin
The series protagonist. He is 16 years old and rules at the top of the rankings, the greatest genius Magicmaster. At the moment he is attending the Second Magical Institute while hiding his rank.


DETONATION
The two poured large amounts of mana into their AWRs and their respective magic formulas lit up. The surging flames stained the area red.

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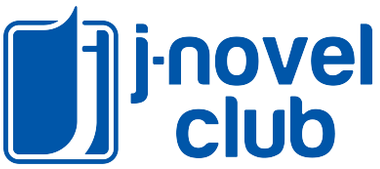
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The Greatest Magicmaster’s Retirement Plan: Volume 6

by Izushiro

Translated by Warnis Edited by Jan Suzukawa

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Original Japanese edition published in 2018 by Hobby Japan This English edition is published by arrangement with Hobby Japan, Tokyo English translation © 2020 J-Novel Club LLC

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Ebook edition 1.0: September 2020