
IZUSHIRO
ILLUST RURIA MIYUKI
THE GREATEST MAGICMASTER'S RETIREMENT PLAN
9


THE GREATEST
MAGICMASTER'S
RETIREMENT
PLAN

The Greatest Magicmaster's Retirement Plan

CONTENTS 9

Forty-Eighth Chapter Presence of a Noble Collar

Forty-Ninth Chapter Iridescent Collar

Fiftieth Chapter Innocent Incarnation

Fifty-First Chapter Wake Up at Night

Afterword

Forty-Eighth Chapter

Presence of a Noble Collar

In a room on the top floor of Alpha's military headquarters were two figures.

The only ones who had the opportunity to enter this room were either Magicmasters or military members of high rank. So anyone who didn't fit the criteria being summoned there would be nervous and have a bad feeling about it in the back of their mind. After all, the room belonged to the supreme commander of Alpha's army.

That said, it was a very simple room. The entirety of it was neat and plain, and the only thing that stood out at first glance was the mountain of documents on the desk.

One of the two people in the room had been summoned by the room's master. As soon as his mission was over, he had immediately answered the summons. He was a Double Digit Magicmaster who had climbed the ranks through his accomplishments. Yet now he was as nervous as a rookie as he gave the bitter report he'd brought with him.

"I am sorry. We lost the target... They shook off our pursuit," he reported with a downcast, stiff expression.

His mission had failed. It was a shameful result for a Double. He couldn't even make the excuse that they'd had a lack of manpower. Unable to look the commander in the eye, he was gazing down at the beautiful pattern of the carpet.

"Don't worry about it. It must have been impossible from the start."

"No, sir! That's not... I was made keenly aware of my lack of ability."

"That's not what I meant. There's an expression: the right person in the right place. The military is lacking in Magicmasters who can move in situations like this. Anyone available probably would've let them escape."

"...!!"

Faced with his surprised and relieved subordinate, the master of the room—an older man—thought to himself, *If Vizaist had been around, we might have been able to do something about it.* Thinking of the information specialist who was missing from the room, the room's master, Berwick, furrowed his brows as he thought about how to handle the aftermath.

Feeling pressured by his appearance, the Double Digit Magicmaster straightened his posture. Meanwhile, Berwick was actually more concerned about the actions of Alpha's high command than how to deal with the situation.

He'd reached his prime long ago, but he wouldn't have been surprised if someone had said that over half his wrinkles were due to 'him.' *I was sure Alus would join the pursuit...but it seems he managed to avoid it.*

Berwick had received a report on the campus festival intruder from Sisty a little while ago. He guessed that Alus had some kind of thought or consideration on the matter and had only given the order to follow the intruder who had escaped from the Institute, not making a big deal of it.

The report concerned an intruder who had infiltrated the Second Magical Institute campus using a fake license and injured two students. It went on to describe the intruder's features and the mysterious magic they'd used, but that was all.

In reality, one of Sisty's former subordinates had been injured as well. According to their report, there had been two intruders. In addition to the person who'd harmed the students, there was another person who had helped them. Moreover, there were no further reports on this other person after the first incident.

Not only were both of them very skilled, neither had taken their victims' lives. Despite their flashy moves, they lacked the decisiveness one might expect from villains.

Berwick surmised from this that their moves were planned, but it was impossible to tell what their ultimate objective was. In other words, he suspected that personal feelings were mixed in. Either way, considering their skills, Berwick believed they were related to Kurama.

Which was why Double Digit Magicmasters weren't up to the task of pursuing them. But Berwick was more troubled that Alus didn't join the hunt. Despite Alus dealing with the intruder himself, the information on them was far too vague. Considering his position, it wouldn't be strange for him to contact Berwick. And since he'd fought off the intruder, it would've been natural for him to then capture the intruder when they tried to escape.

But it had been Sisty who had contacted him instead. And Alus had let them escape without making any further moves.

He might have been injured, but Berwick suspected that Alus had done so out of his own free will, intending to safeguard information. Alus also had a bad habit of not reporting in to Berwick when he thought he had the ability to resolve a situation by himself. That was probably the case this time as well, with Alus assessing the intruder and coming to that conclusion.

After thinking about it, he realized his subordinate was still standing frozen in front of him. Berwick felt a little bad about it and decided to praise him, then let him leave the room.

As relief washed over the subordinate, he stepped back...but just as he was slowly closing the door, Berwick called to him. "Sorry, but can you stop anyone from coming in here for a while?"

"Yes, sir!"

After hearing this plucky reply and the sound of the door closing, Berwick made a private call using a secure line.

First, he made an attempt at direct contact. *Now then, the intruder getting away is one thing...but the question is whether or not* that *is moving beyond my expectations.* The calling sound rang out, as a virtual screen was constructed in front of Berwick. He was going out of his way to do a video call to question him directly.

At moments like these, he felt ill-equipped to keep up with the times, but he would get less information if he relied on audio alone. Often a person's expression, gaze, breathing, and gestures said more than their words. Though when it came to Alus, it likely wouldn't amount to much. That said, he still felt it was better than just audio.

The connecting tone rang out a few times. The way he didn't answer right away was just like him. Berwick sighed as the tone continued to ring.

Finally—"You're late, Alus. The festival ended hours ago."

"Sorry, but I have plans for the second day, you see." Replying to Berwick's exasperated tone was an almost impudently calm voice.

But Berwick still admonished him. "You've got your priorities wrong... That aside, does the strange information coming my way have anything to do with the events at the festival?"

"Yes. But it's nothing important, so I didn't expect the Governor-General himself to call," Alus bluntly said. His expression on the screen was plain, with no emotion. At times like these his experience showed its worth.

"You had Sisty give a false or intentionally vague report, didn't you? That...or you dragged her into it."

"... No. I can't even think of a reason to do so."

"Now, don't say that. Why don't you let me hear it?"

"Hear what?"

Berwick was too mature to throw a tantrum here. In fact, he'd expected as much. It seemed his bad hunch was right. With the Governor-General making his move directly, he'd severely limited Alus' choices. In other words, he could only tell Berwick the truth or continue to hide it.

And...it seemed Alus was choosing the latter. "Alus, I might be a less than second-rate Magicmaster, but I am still the Governor-General. I've lived longer than you and have more experience."

"I can imagine... I understand, so let me ask one more time. Hear what?"

His continuing to play innocent prompted Berwick to pinch the bridge of his nose and let out a heavy sigh.

"More importantly, Governor-General, it seems my campus life is at risk."

"... You reap what you sow."

It was a short statement, but whether he'd expected it or not, it contained a

hint from Alus. Realizing that, Berwick didn't try to prod any further and decided to back off. He sighed again. *Meaning that it must have been a pretty flashy fight. No, perhaps he finally met an opponent he could fight to the fullest...*

Sensing the flow of things, Berwick guessed that Alus would no longer be able to hide his rank or his abilities. He'd expected it would happen at some point, but couldn't deny that it was a little too soon.

He couldn't help but wish that Alus was the kind of boy who relied on adults for help, as he massaged his temples. He didn't grasp everything, but he understood the overall situation as he posed a question. "Are you sure you're fine with that?"

Alus was sharper than most when it came to these things, so he probably understood what Berwick meant. He was saying the military couldn't touch it—or rather, the military couldn't do anything about it. No matter how extraordinary he might be, Alus was still part of the military, so his actions were still subject to certain restrictions, and he was expected to exercise restraint.

He wasn't sure how much Alus understood, but he addressed him in a grave tone, hoping that at least he wouldn't deviate too much.

Alus seemed to pick up on what he wasn't saying aloud. Having come that far, he gave up on feigning ignorance, and the glint in his eye turned sharper as he shrugged ever so slightly. "I won't cause any problems for you. Probably."

"How unreliable. Well, no matter, if you're going to say that much there's probably nothing to worry about, but there are some things that you just can't do on your own. So don't go beyond being human."

"That hurts. But I've learned my lesson. Still, it'll be convenient for your side too," Alus said with an aloof attitude.

But his answer made Berwick feel some weight drop off of his shoulders. Of course, he didn't want to leave anything to chance, though if he couldn't understand Alus' intentions there was nothing he could do.

"You're not going to try to tell me that this is all my fault, are you?"

"If I did, would you turn yourself in?"

“That would be impossible right now. I still have security work to do. And we can’t let our guard down here after what happened.”

“... Always coming up with good excuses, aren’t you?” Berwick snorted. He rested his cheek on his hand, putting on his usual calm demeanor.

Regardless, Alus almost never readily accepted Berwick’s summonses. Well, he’d show up if ordered, but it was a little premature for that, and his excuse was rational. He inwardly decided that this was about as far as he would get, so he steered their conversation into a more casual chat. “By the way, how are your favorite pupils who were attacked by the intruder doing?”

“... That way of putting it is really misleading. You’re the one who’d call them your favorites. I imagine it’s Alice you’re thinking about.” Alus stared reproachfully at him.

To which Berwick responded, blatantly coughing in a dry fashion, “Of course, Alice was one of them, but Ms. Tesfia was also a victim, wasn’t she?”

“As I’m sure you’re already aware, it was nothing serious. They’re already better and busy getting prepared for tomorrow. To the public eye, it was just a mock battle that went a tiny bit too far.”

“What a coldhearted master they have.”

“They’re lucky they’re not being pushed off of a cliff into the abyss.”

“Hmph. Being mindful of others is the talent required of those who teach and lead,” Berwick grinned, hinting at his two students’ feelings for Alus. Berwick wasn’t the kind of person who couldn’t figure out what was going on. That said, he wasn’t so uncouth that he’d tell the person in question about it directly.

“I can only teach what I’ve experienced.”

Berwick only smiled wryly at Alus’ blunt statement. At the same time, he felt a little sorry for Tesfia and Alice. “Still, isn’t that a little too cruel?”

“Of course, I’ve made some alterations. I can only say that the training I received was a bit inefficient.”

“I-Is that so...” Berwick was at a loss for words for a moment. The Magicmaster training program the younger Alus had been a part of was

currently suspended. It might have been inefficient, but it was clear that the education had also been very flawed. Then again, that was a stain on the military itself, not Berwick.

“That said, I am planning on heading to Rusalca at some later point, Governor-General.”

“Hmm...? To Rusalca of all places, is it?”

“As such, I’d like to receive permission when that happens.”

“Well, right now you are a student who should be learning more about other nations, so I don’t particularly mind. But what exactly are you planning on doing?”

“It’s to learn more about the latest AWR technology. Lady Lithia invited me to come over at the rulers conference, and I can’t well ignore her.”

Berwick gritted his teeth. “I guess there’s no helping it if it’s at the ruler’s personal invitation. But I imagine you’ll need to keep quiet about it to Lady Cicelnia. As I’m sure you’re aware, you won’t be able to stay for long.”

“I know.”

Normally there were formalities to follow if an Alpha Single was going to visit a foreign country, even if it was only for a few days. But considering Lithia and Cicelnia’s relationship, it was clear as day that she would flat-out refuse if asked directly about it.

However, Berwick believed he needed to handle Alus’ request properly. Especially considering his achievements, and in particular, eliminating the Devourer. He’d received a special reward from the national treasury and completely recovered by now, but he’d been totally exhausted for a while. Considering the strain on Alus, he could at least approve of his traveling to another country as a form of vacation.

But even putting all of that aside, even if he had good reasons to refuse the request, Alus would be difficult about it, so... “I guess you would be treated as a guest of honor over there.”

“I’m not so sure about that. I’m planning on giving Jean a heads up

beforehand, but if possible, I'd like to observe the latest AWR technology incognito."

"Being passionate about research is fine, but what will you do about your studies?"

"I was going to make use of consecutive holidays, but I'll leave the studies up to you. Fortunately, all the debts you owe me will come in handy."

"You little—!" Berwick inadvertently blurted out, but as he saw Alus' self-satisfied expression, he forced the rest of it back with a bitter look.

Alus wasn't going to accept any cheap repayments, putting Berwick in an overwhelmingly unfavorable position. If he was going to be forced anyway, the least he could do was try to put a leash on Alus through waiving credits.

Which meant that—despite being the Governor-General—he'd need to bow to Sisty for her aid. He felt a chill at the thought of someone seeing him like that.

Perhaps guessing at his thoughts, Alus added one last thing. "It might be a bother, but I'm counting on you. By the way, I have a feeling there's another mountain to climb before Rusalca."

"Hm?" Berwick raised an eyebrow.

"Oh, it has nothing to do with the intruder... But, well, maybe it's just my imagination."

"I'd like to say that your hint is very general, but I imagine we'll find out if your hunch is right or not eventually, yes? Well, I'll handle your leave."

After that, Berwick ended the call. It was the first time they'd spoken in a while, but he thought it was a very frank discussion he never would've expected from the Alus of the past.

Such a conversation could be seen as enjoyable, but now something heavy was weighing on his mind. Greatest Magicmaster or not, Alus was young enough to be Berwick's grandson. No matter how much he might know or how skilled in battle he might be, mentally speaking he still had a ways to go.

Leaning back in his leather chair, Berwick had a sort of premonition, which

was very unusual for him. “I have a bad feeling about this.”

Indeed, Alus’ rank guaranteed his current position and granted him some carefreeness, but as expected, it was still a weight on his mind. That was why he didn’t like getting others involved, and attempted to resolve everything on his own. That also meant not seeking the help of nations or organizations.

Berwick knew why Alus had started acting like that. His every action indicated he was walking down a solitary path as someone who stood at the very top. That was why he would attempt to guide him away from such a path at every opportunity.

“Things just don’t go according to plan,” Berwick expressed his concern aloud. True, the pursuit had ended in failure, but the target was extraordinary. Regardless of Alus’ intentions, it was something outside of Berwick’s control.

Could it be that the executive unit Aferka is involved? In that case, it’s clear that things are going to become complicated. Should I tell Lady Cicelnia before that...? No, that would be taking a risk.

Magic-related terrorism or similar acts inside the nation were what triggered Aferka to get involved. When that happened, they hunted their target in secret and purged them.

From Berwick’s point of view, they were likely to intervene because of the incident at the campus festival. Then again, there were exceptions like Godma Barhong. The military had always been after him, so they didn’t allow Aferka to make a move.

The military had Vizaist’s intelligence department, and they’d worked to prevent magic crimes in secret using personnel centered around Alus. However, the military, whose primary objective was the Outer World, was unable to deal with all internal threats. There was the local army that served as a police force, but magic was outside their area of expertise.

Considering that fact, Aferka’s existence was a big boon in stopping a large number of magical crimes before they became serious. Aferka currently had territory of their own within the nation, and they were led by a certain clan, making them something of a private army. As such, they were a special existence that was distinctly separate from the military despite their

similarities.

In other words, they weren't under Berwick's command, but under the current ruler Cicelnia's authority. But even that was only a formality, and since the ruler wasn't supposed to have any direct military authority, she couldn't move them as she pleased.

The clan leading them was in a delicate position, but they avoided standing out ideologically, continuing to remain in the shadow of Alpha. They were kind of like Cicelnia's version of Vizaist's covert troops under Berwick.

However, Aferka was basically a unit that gathered information and did underhanded work within the nation. They also monitored and suppressed nobles who deviated too much from the norm on Cicelnia's behalf. It was also different in that it had its own chain of command apart from the decisions of the ruler.

If Rinne Kimmel was Cicelnia's right hand in the light, Aferka was her left hand in the shadows. And befitting of something in the shadows, the left hand sometimes moved without its master's knowledge. It was not so much that they were independent, but more that they were left to their own devices.

Alus dealt with vicious magic criminals in parallel to his missions in the Outer World, but what he did was only a portion of the whole. Meanwhile, it was Aferka who was in charge of the rest. When they moved without Cicelnia's orders, not even Berwick could control them. In the worst-case scenario they might even end up clashing.

Aferka's will was influenced by the former ruler. During a period of civil strife that could even be compared to a war, they had been a subjugation force reorganized by the Arlzeit royalty. They were simply continuing the same mission they'd been on since their establishment. Meaning that as Alpha's shadow guardians, it was quite possible they would move to purge the intruders who attacked the Institute. They had been allowed to do as much since the beginning.

The problem was that not even Cicelnia was aware of their actions. Aferka made their behind-the-scenes work the clan's family trade, all while loyally protecting the former ruler's life.

Berwick was deep in thought for a while, even forgetting about the Double Digit Magicmaster he'd left standing outside. But just as he was about to sink deeper into thought, a voice from the other side of the door pulled his consciousness back to the surface.

Without a knock, the door opened ever so slightly. Through the gap, the alert voice of the Magicmaster standing guard came in. "Lady Lettie, wait! Nobody is allowed in on the Governor-General's orders!"

"Don't worry. I'll allow it, so all you have to do is just pretend you didn't see anything."

"I can't let you do that! Please wait a moment."

"Well, I'll still go in anyway. Sajik. Mujir."

There was a bit of a commotion. The cheery voice named two Magicmasters, who were currently pinning the Double Digit Magicmaster's arms behind his back. As he complained, his mouth was covered as well.

Meanwhile, a lone woman casually walked into the room, her long braid swinging back and forth. With bold steps—as if she owned the place—she walked all the way up to Berwick.



“Do you not know what manners are, Lettie? In fact, what do you think a Governor-General’s orders mean?”

“It was the guy outside who got the order. This is the first I’ve heard of it.”

After all the fuss at the door, she was feigning ignorance, and Berwick could only feel exasperated. Even if he admonished her though, it wouldn’t have any effect other than to tire himself out. “No matter. I just finished my business anyway.”

Even as Berwick muttered this, Lettie was roaming around the room. She picked up a piece of glass and leaned against his desk with it in hand. It was a snow globe. The next thing he knew, she’d turned it upside down to scatter the powder inside and play with it.

Berwick had no idea what she was after, and stared at her as he furrowed his brows. This wasn’t the kind of place you came to without any business, not even if you were a Single like Lettie.

“The preparations are done, so we’re going to be setting out soon,” Lettie abruptly said. Her tone turned impersonal. A Single Digit Magicmaster setting out could only mean to one place. The Outer World.

He felt it was a little soon, but he couldn’t stop her. He understood the circumstances, after all. She’d been summoned back, forcing her to cut her mission short so that she could eliminate the Devourer Demi Azur.

The mission to retake the land was seeing steady progress. So she must have been unhappy to have to abandon it midway through. There’d already been several deaths in the squad she’d left behind there.

Berwick didn’t need to ask about her intentions. He replied, “I see. Would you like me to come with you too?” He recalled what she’d jokingly said at the Friendship Magical Tournament. If his memory served him right, it was along the lines of, ‘If things go awry, are you going to go out there yourself?’

“Are you serious?”

“On an emotional level. Realistically, I know it would make no sense.”

“I bet. If you died now, those scumbags with nothing but ambition would eat

the military up from the inside out.”

“...”

Even someone who spent most of her time in the Outer World could tell what went on inside the military. She’d felt something questionable going on there for a long time.

Berwick didn’t take it as sarcasm, but as a form of warning. Though the edges of his lips rose as if to say it was none of her business. “And for that sake, we’ll need to reclaim Vanalis.”

“We’re the ones who’ll have to do the heavy lifting, though. Was Demi Azur according to plan as well?”

“Oh, don’t be like that. I had no way to predict that such a Fiend would appear. But it is true that its appearance was good fortune for us.”

“So was Allie’s special ability,” Lettie grumbled with a frown. The Demi Azur incident had shown Alus’ inhuman abilities, and her frustration over not having been told was coming to a head.

It was the first threat to all of humanity in half a century. If it had been a united front by all seven nations, she wouldn’t have had to think about it too hard. But even though she’d accompanied him, Alus had practically dealt with it himself.

However, Alus’ trump card was obviously a state secret. So if she wanted to know about it, she would have to ask him herself. But she knew that was an unreasonable task.

She still had her doubts, though. Moreover, she’d always found it mysterious that Berwick kept information hidden on him, despite the fact that he stood at the top of all Magicmasters.

“... Regarding that, there are things I can’t tell you. Well, I do have my plans...not to mention that Balmes owes us a massive debt after the incident. And Lady Cicelnia’s schemes are also involved. If you want to know any more, you’ll have to ask her directly.”

“Hmph. Fine, whatever.”

“I’ll give permission for the mission. But there’s going to be a time limit. I want you to understand that while you’re out of Alpha, we’ll be shorthanded.”

“You’re lending forces to defend Balmes. Don’t go too far trying to earn their favor, that cost comes straight from the field after all. Well, just try not to get abandoned by Allie, though I’m on good enough terms to exchange promises with him.”

“All right, all right. I feel like I’m being abandoned. Still, he’s a handful.”

“Is that complaining going to drag on much longer?”

“Uh...no...”

Lettie seemed to see Berwick’s ulterior motives behind his anxious appearance. “You like that kind of thing, don’t you? The self-preservation thing,” she said sarcastically, as if she understood how he operated.

He stood at the top of the military. So she felt that his every word and gesture had a scheming nuance to it.

Berwick bitterly cast his eyes down at his desk. He hadn’t meant it that way, but it seemed he wasn’t able to slip out of his ingrained habits that easily. “Information is important in any situation. Especially concerning him. A collar might sound bad, but it needs to look to others like he’s under control.”

“Are you going to put suspicion on Alus and repeat *that* again?”

The toughest period in Alus’ life was after he’d completed the Magicmaster training program and found himself ostracized for his lack of emotions and high fighting ability. His attitude grew increasingly fierce and blatant, and the missions assigned to him were all high-risk with a low chance of survival.

All of that was pushed onto Alus, who was still young enough to be called a child by most. In fact, those orders went beyond the level of harassment to the abominable. It was like they were telling him to die.

Having become the Governor-General, Berwick had no intention of repeating the mistakes of the past. But at Lettie’s remark, he began to wonder if he was actually about to do so. The words left a tight expression on his face. “Don’t worry,” he said to Lettie, as if trying to convince himself. “I understand where

you're coming from. Well, the thing I'm worried about is whether he'll be able to have a good relationship with his 'collar.'"

"Who would knowingly get along with a collar?" Lettie knew Alus' personality and couldn't imagine him accepting anything binding him. "Lil Loki had that role before, didn't she?" She'd had a firm grasp of the situation when they first met. She'd been in charge of observing Alus while he was at the Institute, though that role had all but crumbled away by now.

Lettie bluntly referred to their relationship as such, and in response Berwick easily revealed the truth. "On the surface, yes. As it stands, there will need to be a replacement for Loki Leevahl."

"As a way to deal with internal dissenters? It sure must be a pain being the Governor-General and still not have things go your way."

"Hm, it's not as painful as you think," Berwick said, implying he was working behind the scenes, when he suddenly realized they'd digressed and went back to the original topic. "Sorry, going back to what you were talking about. Are you going to leave right away?"

"I have somewhere to stop by first. I'll go after that." With a tone that said she was done talking, Lettie pushed off the desk and began walking towards the door. She threw the snow globe backwards to Berwick without looking.

He struggled, but managed to catch it successfully, before a meaningful smile appeared on his face.

Once Vanalis was recaptured, they would be able to re-enter the Outer World and begin the human counterattack. And Alpha would lead the way. With the elimination of Demi Azur, Berwick's position within the military was solidifying. So now was a good time to take more drastic measures than before.

Alus asking to leave the nation does bother me, but the Outer World comes first for now. No, as someone who won't be going into battle myself, I should make preparations for both. Having do-or-die moments at my age sure makes this job worthwhile.

With Lettie leaving for Vanalis and Alus' future uncertain, it might be a good idea to have Vizaist return for the sake of national security. Currently, Vizaist

was stationed in Balmes, entrusted with command of the local forces until a new system was in place.

But if he was going to be summoned back, he would need a replacement. A certain man's face appeared in Berwick's mind. Despite some unease, he made his decision and called out the door.

The Double Digit Magicmaster, finally freed from Lettie's subordinates, appeared inside the room. He tried to apologize, but Berwick stopped him with a hand gesture. "Sorry, but could you bring Lindelph?"

"At once, sir!"

It was a name everyone in the military knew—the name of a frivolous young elite who'd risen to the rank of commander in record time.

The Double Digit Magicmaster tried to make a call, but was stopped again. "A call's not going to get him to come over right away. He's been left with command of a region, after all. It would be more effective to relay the message to him directly. While you're at it, tell him that it has to do with Vizaist."

"Understood!"

Once he left the room, Berwick rubbed his chin with a troubled expression. His thoughts had returned to where they were before Lettie arrived. *Alus, huh.* Opening up a direct line, he got ready to make a call.

The fact that he fixed his appearance was a sign of how awkward he felt. He was feeling a bit overwhelmed by all of the requests he would have to make to the head of the Second Magical Institute.

Forty-Ninth Chapter

Iridescent Collar

Unexpectedly, the mock battle had been at an incredibly high level, the likes of which had never been seen before. And it didn't take long for discussions about Alus and Elise's match to spread throughout the Institute. A lot of students had been witnesses, so it exceeded mere rumors.

There was nothing he could do during the remainder of the first day of the festival, so Alus retreated to his lab. But even the next day there were no signs that the commotion would die down.

That said, he couldn't exactly give up the security job he'd accepted. As the ranked No. 1, no matter how much of a hassle it might be, abandoning his mission because of the rabble whispering would affect his dignity. However, he couldn't help but feel it was difficult to do anything with all eyes on him. He knew too well that trouble often came at times like these.

It was now midday of the second day of the campus festival. Alus kept a close eye on the stalls lined up at the front of the main building. He was unusually enthusiastic about his security mission.

I'd steeled my resolve, but this is just... The position of the highest rank was a difficult one. Their being cautious of him and staying away was fine. That was still what he would consider peaceful.

But today was obviously abnormal. The first thing he noticed was the crowd in front of the main building.

He could tell they weren't just simple visitors by the fact that they weren't moving along the main route. Sometimes they would stop and send meaningful looks his way; other times they whispered to each other and wandered back and forth in a suspicious manner.

He understood what was going on, and a shadow fell across his face. Alus felt

dark clouds gather over his future. The overall number of visitors hadn't changed much from the first day, but the area around him clearly had an unusually large number of people. Of course, the cause of that was Alus himself.

I thought I pulled it off pretty well, but I guess there's still a price to pay. Alus forced his twitching cheek to stop and swallowed his urge to complain. His wish to at least finish his security assignment was beginning to look problematic. *All I did on the first day, helping people out during the first few hours and then resolving some trouble in my own class... No, that was because the prize cost too much, so I guess I caused that problem? And then...there was guiding someone around campus and lunch with Feli...which probably doesn't count. Which means...*

The "mock battle" against Elise at the end, and the following discussion with the principal afterwards were bad. Felinella had actually asked him if he was sure about coming out today, but he'd pushed on anyway. Aside from his pride, Alus had a one hundred percent completion rate when it came to missions, so he figured this would be an easy one, but it seemed his presence made it more troublesome.

What to do...

The students mixed in with the crowd stared at him with far more interest than before. It was a kind of envy, or admiration.

Yesterday's overwhelming match gave the novice Magicmasters—who couldn't have imagined the infinite potential of magic—a glimpse into what a first-rate Magicmaster was capable of.

"... Well, I guess it would be impossible to hide it." Alus sighed, and moved away from the front of the main building. And when he did, the students followed after him like chicks following their mother. With a strange line in tow, he made his way towards the cafeteria terrace.

Since the terrace area was reasonably large, he figured that he'd at least have some space to himself. It put him some distance away from the main building that would see the most traffic, but it couldn't be helped.

However, even when he reached the terrace and sat down on a nearby chair,

the situation didn't change at all. He felt a headache coming on.

Even now he could hear rumors being whispered in the background. Those involved in the circle of whispers had probably witnessed yesterday's events, or heard the rumors about them, and wanted to get close to him in some way.

If possible, they would surely have loved to confirm his ability and rank. Many probably wanted to form a connection with him, or at least receive some advice on magic.

But that was the outcome Alus least wanted. He wanted to avoid being regarded as a hero by random people whose faces he didn't even know and have them put unreasonable expectations on him.

The reason they kept close but not too close was because of their own hesitation. They didn't know what attitude to take with someone who'd been their classmate or just some first-year yesterday, and who now all of a sudden was the center of attention. They couldn't treat him like they had up until yesterday, but suddenly flattering him to the sky felt odd too.

But there was a fearless fighter among them. Alus could tell how strong-willed she was just by seeing her expression.

"Hello, Alus. I believe this is the first time I've properly greeted you." Her blonde hair swayed as she walked up and stopped in front of Alus' chair. She had short-cut bangs, but they didn't make her look young. Instead, they emphasized her lovely facial features.

Unlike the onlookers who were somewhat intimidated, she stared straight at Alus with a strong glint in her eyes. Alus recalled Tesfia mentioning that she had transferred in after the Friendship Magical Tournament. His intuition told him that she wasn't to be regarded lightly.

"My name is Lilisha Ron de Rimfuge Frusevan," the girl boldly introduced herself with a graceful smile.

Based on the length of her name, it was clear that she was nobility. Not only was she neat and clean, she also had an atmosphere that attracted men. Every time her body moved a little, a sweet scent was released, creating a seductive atmosphere. Her powerful presence came not only from her good looks but

also from how her uniform was arranged.

“Yes, it’s a pleasure to meet you, Lady Rimfuge... or should I call you Lady Frusevan?”

“You jest. You are close to not only the Fable family’s daughter, but also the Socalent family’s Puppet Orchesis, are you not? I dread the thought of what might happen if you only gave special treatment to me... So please, feel free to just call me Lilisha. We’re in the same year, so your consideration is unnecessary.”

Although it was their first meeting, Lilisha smiled elegantly as she sensed an awkwardness in Alus that was quite unlike him. And she skillfully carried on the conversation.

But Alus felt that was suspicious. Like it was all just an act... he astutely picked up that her smile wasn’t for him, but for the other students around them.

“You seemed to be absent before the campus festival. Were you perhaps ill?”

He’d heard a similar phrase before. And he’d gone through a difficult experience with Tesfia, so it was only appropriate to answer without slipping up.

Lilisha had already become a person to be wary of. For a normal student she was strangely familiar with Alus’ circumstances. She probably had a channel to the military, but Alus felt this blonde girl had the power to fully destroy his already partially-destroyed daily life.

Maybe I should rake her over the coals like Loki suggested once? he thought, in between their casual chatter, but he couldn’t afford to do anything rash in front of the other students.

More importantly, there was something bothering him. Lately, it felt like she was at the center of rumors. And of course, not because she was a person of interest. If anything, she was the one starting the rumors.

The speed at which unconfirmed rumors spread was certainly fast. But on the other hand, people would lose interest just as quickly. However, lately, new information and topics would pop up again immediately, so the strange atmosphere never fully died down. And Alus suspected that Lilisha was the

source of it all. He didn't know where she got it from, but she was always on top of the news. And she even took the initiative to gossip and further the mood in the Institute.

"Yes, maybe I got a little too overzealous during the Friendship Magical Tournament, so I didn't feel so well afterwards."

"Were you perhaps injured? I happen to know a good doctor."

"No need, I'm all better now. You don't need to speak so politely. We're classmates."

"Yes, that's true. If we were just classmates, there wouldn't have been any problems. And I wouldn't have had to come and introduce myself."

"..." Her words were suggestive and sudden, possibly laced with the pride and arrogance of nobility. Alus hesitated on how to answer for a moment.

As he did, Lilisha gracefully bowed and brought her lips next to his ear. "Are you perhaps tired of...military service?" she whispered sweetly, her tone one of sympathy.

However, the words had a ring to them that etched them into Alus' mind. *So that's how it is.* At the same time he felt a burden drop from his shoulders. It was a little annoying to Alus to have to pose as a student.

In this case, he didn't need to be so sociable and hold back. Pushing the surrounding noise out of his mind for a moment, he sent a chilly stare Lilisha's way.

Lilisha accepted his cold stare with a smile, and slowly raised her body. She maintained the smile, but Alus dropped his false mask. "I'm not even trying to get involved with you guys, so why do you keep sticking your nose in my business? How exactly do I look to your eyes clouded by a noble's pride?"

"Now, don't say that. From a personal standpoint, I am not your enemy."

"But you're not my ally either, are you?"

"Hmm. It's a bit of a shock to have you treat me so cruelly..." Lilisha's smile suddenly turned troubled. Her expression was that of a weak female student inviting pity. "It's our first time meeting...and I don't think I've done anything to

make you dislike me... If I've done anything that offends you, then..." The entire atmosphere seemed to change as she spoke.

"It's that kind of trickery I don't like. Using underhanded methods as naturally as breathing, and you don't even feel any reluctance about using them... That's why I'll have to use what power I have."

Hearing Alus' tone full of disgust and resignation, Lilisha looked up and gracefully smiled. "This isn't so much about nobility as a lady's etiquette. But I feel like I've gotten to understand you a little. I think we'll be able to 'get along.'"

Before Alus could ask what she was talking about, Lilisha spun her delicate body around. With her back to Alus, she glanced at the onlookers and curtsied. Her movements were graceful and refined, and, while the boys disagreed, the girls didn't look too favorably on her. It wasn't like she'd gotten a head start on them, but she'd practically monopolized the opportunity to approach Alus.

Paying the stares no heed, she pulled a paper from her pocket and read it out in a clear voice. "Alus Reigin has used a spell akin to a taboo, unfit for use, during a mock battle at the Second Magical Institute's training grounds. Not only did this shock and put the students at risk, it invited chaos into the Institute and disrupted order. As such, Alus Reigin is hereby placed under temporary house arrest. From the Second Magical Institute Principal, Sisty Nexophia," Lilisha loudly declared in the principal's name.



Her polite and businesslike tone gave everyone listening the impression that the judgment was the truth. The students, and even Alus, looked completely dumbfounded.

Confusion spread at first, but then the students began to complain. And that was only natural. Alus had gone toe-to-toe in a mock battle against a last-minute entrant who was most likely related to the military and was currently the talk of the campus. To the students he was practically a hero, and now he was being given a sentence based on something that felt like a false accusation.

Lilisha's voice echoed out and completely changed the atmosphere in the cafeteria. Her expression seemed to say that everything had gone just as she'd planned. Even Alus, staring at her back, could pick up on the elation she was feeling in her entire body.

"This is a decision from the principal, and this letter was entrusted to me to deliver to Alus. And the end of the letter carries the principal's seal, as you can see for yourself," Lilisha continued, explaining it to Alus as well, as she held the paper high to show the students. "Alus' actions were unfortunately a little too excessive, so this suspension was inevitable. After all, he is rendering his assistance in military affairs."

Her final statement left the students shocked and astonished.

Now you've done it. With no other way to vent his resentment, Alus gave her a sharp glare.

"This decision has already been made by the principal. I'm sure that you're all curious about Alus being related to military affairs."

Lilisha gazed around, seeking the students' approval. They were all watching with bated breaths, wondering what she would do next. But whether it was unexpected or not, the confusing situation was controlled by Lilisha, and the students' attention was entirely focused on her.

Alus murmured to her back, "You little busybody. Should I ask who sent you?" It was strange even for Sisty to leave such an important signed document to just any female student. If anything, Felinella would have been a better pick. Then there was her mysterious charisma, as well as her transferring in during the off-

season, if Tesfia was right. With so many factors at play, Alus could definitely sense something.

"... I'm sure you've already guessed by now," Lilisha whispered behind her, telling Alus his guess was correct.

And if that was the case, he had a hunch. "... Well, it's not like I can be sure."

Alus had a sour look on his face, but Lilisha continued whispering, "You won't be able to hide it all in this situation. So we'll offer up the bare minimum of information as a decoy to hide the most important thing. It won't hurt much, I promise."

Having regained some calm, he understood that Lilisha was moving in a beneficial way for him.

"You were scouted for your potential and have been secretly working with military affairs... Or that's what we'll say. There's plenty of third-years who have jobs in the military lined up, but you're an exception as you're in your first year."

Alus could follow what Lilisha was after. She was putting out the fire by releasing a small dose of information. By falsifying a part of the truth and publicizing it in a plausible fashion, they could hide the critical part. It was far better to reveal his connection to the military than expose his rank and full extent of his power.

And indeed, it would explain his strength, which went beyond a simple student's, and even though some questions would remain, it was likely that nobody would question it any further.

Thinking of that way, Lilisha was a kind of collaborator this time, regardless of whether or not she could be trusted. "Berwick, then."

Lilisha answered Alus' question with a wordless smile. Then she called out to the students in a theatrical voice, "I will represent everyone here and ask Alus the truth, so I ask you to please remain silent for a moment."

By the time she turned to face Alus again, she'd already taken off the mask of the daughter of a noble family, and switched it for a stern military expression. "The orders handed down to me were meant to be the task your partner was

supposed to fulfill. A surveillance mission.”

“Well, you failed that the moment you revealed it to me.”

“I never imagined I would be able to elude your eye. I would have been found out when establishing my position anyway.”

“Still, why would you do this?” If she’d been given a surveillance mission, she had no reason to make any public moves. Even if she was discovered, all she had to do was observe Alus from afar and report what he did. Standing right in front of him and attempting to accommodate him was the complete opposite.

“Information will need to be revealed in stages... this has become unavoidable, Sir Alus. Though the schedule itself has fallen apart because of the irregular situation. But I will attempt to fix it.”

The irregularity she referenced was most likely yesterday’s attack on the Institute. Or rather, Elise, who’d come to attack Alus. That incident was the trigger for this situation. That battle to the death, dressed up as a mock battle, had ruined his peaceful Institute life.

Even as they spoke in low voices, Lilisha didn’t forget to keep her attention on the students. Unlike magic, the ability to read the atmosphere and control the flow of events was a result of her noble birth and cultivated by her environment. Though Lilisha may or may not be related to the military, the fact that she was from a noble family as Tesfia had said certainly seemed to be true.

Once they were done whispering to each other, Lilisha continued making a report blatantly meant for the students. “The truth is... Alus is allowed to serve in the military because of special treatment. As I’m sure you are all aware, skilled third-years are scouted by the military early on, and brought on for training. In Alus’ case, it was kind of like skipping grades. As you saw in yesterday’s mock battle, his abilities as a Magicmaster are exceptional. Enough for even the military to want to immediately add him to their forces.”

She skillfully stated things in a way that gave the students some truth, left the rest to the imagination, and stopped them from prodding any further. “It was kept hidden to avoid any unnecessary confusion. I heard rumors of Alus’ power when I transferred in, but it seems this was the truth behind them.”

As she spoke, the students began recalling the same rumors. Lilisha wasn't just being eloquent. She had a clear voice and a captivating inflection. She appealed to emotions and wore an expression that invited sympathy. The students were naturally drawn into an atmosphere that seemed to turn even a lie into the truth. "It must have been a difficult situation for the principal. Exceptional as he might be, Alus is still just the same age as us. Even if the military has a need for him, he is still a fellow student of the Second Magical Institute. So it would be a disservice to him if you make this into a bigger scene than it needs to be..."

Lilisha suddenly paused, and stared at something in the crowd. She'd spotted some red hair out of the corner of her eye. Struggling to get out of the crowd, being pushed back and forth by people, the vivid red hair visible through the gaps in the crowd gradually made its way over.

Eventually the person reached the terrace and vigorously jumped to the front row. "Whoa—phew, I thought I was going to die." Wiping the sweat off her brow, the redhead Tesfia Fable put her hands on her knees and tried to catch her breath.

All eyes turned to her, and having been interrupted, Lilisha closed her lips, which then formed a small smile. *The Fable family's... Good timing, I would love her assistance in this.*

As if to say how convenient, Lilisha turned a soft, charming expression towards Tesfia. "Thank you for your time. You're not hurt anywhere, are you, Ms. Tesfia?" She purposefully walked up to her and held a hand out.

"N-No. Thank you. I'm fine, just a little tired." After a moment of hesitation, Tesfia took her hand. Despite having a noble's pride, her strong point was being able to get along with anyone after recognizing them, but this time she acted with caution.

As she'd explained to Alus, Lilisha's family, the Frusevans, was a line of Magicmasters on par with the Fable family, so Tesfia was aware of her. The Frusevans were, strictly speaking, a branch family of the Rimfuge family, who were without a doubt one of the most prestigious families in the nation.

Though it was a branch family, it was unique in that it wasn't subordinate to

the main Rimfuge family. Nor were they affiliated with the other three major noble families. Her mother Frose might be well versed in noble affairs, but Tesfia didn't know the depths of the situation.

In noble society, power struggles and conflicts were inevitable, and no family could escape from factions and connections. Yet the Frusevan family had chosen to isolate itself, and was still able to maintain a certain level of influence. Though Tesfia didn't know why that was, she felt mistrust and uncertainty towards Lilisha's family.

That's why—perhaps as part of a conditioned reflex—she wore the mask of nobility so as not to reveal her feelings. But as she rose up and saw Alus, the mask dropped. "I didn't want to believe it... but you were really here?! It's all unfolding just like Feli said it would."

On the second day of the campus festival, Felinella herself would take part in the mock battles. She'd proposed that Alus take things easy today, which he had firmly refused to do. Having become worried, but unable to do anything herself, Felinella had sent Tesfia over in her place. Seeing Alus' indignant face and the onlookers, Tesfia looked exasperated.

Lilisha, on the other hand, put on a cheerful expression and gathered everyone's attention through subtle gestures and body movements. "Ms. Tesfia, if possible, would you like to help clear up any doubts about Alus? With your performance in the tournament and as a friend of his, I'm sure your words will help convince everyone." On the surface, her expression was friendly and intimate. "How about it?"

Tesfia forgot about her caution from before, and looked down at her hand that was wrapped in two soft hands. "Mmm... W-Well, Feli asked me to give my support too."

"Thank you. I thought you would say that!"

"...?" Although she felt a little uneasy about it, after getting a brief rundown from Alus and Lilisha, with the important part of Lilisha's identity left out, Tesfia accepted her request.

But Alus, who watched the two, had a bad feeling about it. "Why you?" he asked, implying that this kind of thing was Loki's job.

“What’s that supposed to mean?! Phew... Because of what happened yesterday, Loki didn’t participate in the expected number of mock battles. So she’s working hard together with Feli.” With a weary smile, Tesfia continued, “Well, leave it to me. I’ll do something about it.”

Hearing that kind of phrase—that only the most unreliable people would say—Alus’ bad hunch transformed into despair.

“So what’s the situation?” As expected, she had no idea what was going on.

“...” Lilisha was speechless. Alus could see the exasperation in her face. When it came to Tesfia, it was only natural to misjudge her personality by only relying on her family name. But seeing someone as skilled as Lilisha get dumbfounded amused Alus.

That said, it would be Alus who would suffer any real damage. *You made the call, so you do something about it,* Alus signaled to Lilisha with a stare, so she explained things to Tesfia in a whisper.

“We need to calm things down in order to prevent anyone from realizing Alus’ rank or special position, and especially not his Single Digit status. It would be difficult to hide that he helps with military affairs, so I’ve at least explained that ahead of time.”

“—!!” Lilisha had given some details before, but Tesfia didn’t expect she would know that much. Realizing that she did, a startled expression appeared on her face.

This prompted Alus to scratch his head and speak. “She was apparently sent over here by the Governor-General. No wonder she transferred in at such a strange time.”

“Huh? The Frusevan daughter is serving the Governor-General?” Alus had implied that Lilisha wasn’t just an ordinary student, but Tesfia seemed slow on the uptake. She fell silent, gradually understanding the situation, before finally nodding.

Seeing that Tesfia had generally grasped what was going on, Lilisha took a step forward and spoke to the students again. “... So why don’t we have Alus’ friend Ms. Tesfia explain things. I’m sure she’ll be able to clear up any questions

we have.”

Despite everything, one couldn’t forget that Tesfia was one of the finest first-years, as well as the daughter of the renowned Fable family. It seemed her appearance was far more effective than Alus had expected, as all the students were silently waiting for her to speak. “I don’t know what I can do, but I’ll give it my best,” she whispered to Alus, before stepping forward.

Glancing at her profile, he could see the dignified expression of a noble lady. But he still felt uneasy. *I guess the die is cast. Even if the worst happens, I’ll be fine as long as I can finish my guard job.*

With a look of resignation, Alus stared at her somewhat small back with a slight smile. In his mind, his daily life had already collapsed. If she was going to follow up on that, however clumsily, he felt it might be fine to leave it to her.

It was clear she was going to be bombarded with questions, but she showed no hesitation as she stood before everyone. “I’m Tesfia Fable. I will answer any questions you have from here. Anyone with a question, please raise your hand.” It seemed she believed she might slip up if she was the one who started talking, so she adopted a waiting approach.

Eventually one student, and then two, hesitantly raised their hands. After that, the momentum picked up with question after question, but Tesfia dealt with all of them with a firm and decisive attitude. It wasn’t like she was stupid; having grown up in noble society, her ability to handle others was surprisingly high. Since she came from a renowned family, she might indeed have been a better fit than Alice or Loki for this.

Fortunately, the majority of the questions centered around Alus’ position in the military and the rights and wrongs of the principal’s decision. Any questions Tesfia couldn’t handle were swiftly dealt with by Lilisha, and Alus was presented as someone who assisted the military with some jobs, and that the military had high hopes for his future.

The level of the mock battle between Alus and Elise actually far exceeded the level of excellent, but fortunately the level of skill put on display was too high for most to understand, so it was possible to deceive the students.

Moreover, it was decided that Tesfia would talk with the principal about

shortening his house arrest and restoring his honor.

From Alus' point of view, it seemed all of the problems had been resolved at minimum cost. Now he only had to return to his guard job. But there was one last thing to confirm. "Can you really keep this up?"

To him it was a poor plan full of logic holes that he could never accept. And he asked his collaborators if that would be enough to permanently convince the students.

Lilisha said, "This is just how these things work. This is kind of how it has to work. What they actually want is the atmosphere of something hidden. A source of rumors. They partly want the truth, but if a new topic arises they'll naturally turn towards that. That's just what people their age do." She explained everything with a know-it-all look. One might think she'd enjoy the thought of having people dance in the palm of her hand, but she seemed almost envious of their simplicity.

That was certainly a problem that was hard for Alus to understand. He'd been raised in a completely different environment, so who could blame him? Even now there were times when he couldn't follow Tesfia's and Alice's sensibilities.

"By the way, where did you learn about Ulhava?" Alus murmured quietly to Lilisha's back. She was standing behind Tesfia, as Tesfia continued her explanation to the students. The question was nagging at him in the back of his mind, and he felt like he had to resolve it.

When Alus and Loki had returned to class, Lilisha had mentioned that name. It was the reason she had left a strong impression on him. If she was simply sent here to observe him, there was no way she would have known a truth that only the ruler, the Governor-General, and a handful of others knew. For what she claimed her role was, Lilisha knew too much.

She also had a tendency to bring out small amounts of truth to control a situation. That was something that exceeded the limits of a surveillance mission. She was simply too active. Not to mention how skillfully she'd controlled the atmosphere.

It was that suspicious side of her that made Alus conclude that—while she might not be an enemy—she wasn't quite an ally either.

“... It’s something you could look into if you wanted.”

“That’s where you’re wrong. No matter how much you looked into it, you wouldn’t find anything conclusive. Even though you kept things ambiguous, from the sound of your voice it was clear you were saying it with conviction.” Alus’ tone remained unchanged. But there was a strangely tense atmosphere between them.

“That’s just your imagination...is what I’d like to say, but it’ll be harder for me to carry on if you find out, so very well. I asked my brother to help me find out more about you. My bloodline, as my name suggests, is both Rimfuge and Frusevan. Rimfuge has five families, and Frusevan is the original bloodline. They’re all said to be branch families, but there’s not much of a hierarchy. However, in truth the different families operate under different chains of command. That’s why they don’t appear to have any deep relationships or interactions with one another.”

“I see,” Alus said. “So which family are you from now? And what do you mean by different chains of command?”

“There are things I just can’t tell you. Not to mention that this doesn’t have anything to do with you in the first place. Military service is certainly important, but I also have my own reasons,” Lilisha sent a cold glance to the side as if to divert the topic.

As Alus observed her attitude, he was convinced. He’d felt something off about it. Especially in her respect towards him. It was natural for anyone in the military to pay a degree of respect to a Single. But she was a little different.

No matter how well she hid it, Alus had the impression that her manners were only superficial. She claimed to be affiliated with the military, but there was no sense of duty in her eyes. “Feel free to act as usual. I’m sure that’ll be easier for you. You don’t have to be considerate around me.”

“—!! What makes you think that?”

“I suppose it’s a dislike of similar people. I’m like that, so I can tell. I’ve been shunned for a long time, after all.”

“... How careless. I was trying to be focused on my work, but it seems I can’t

hide it. But I do at least respect you. It's just not that high up on the list."

Alus couldn't help but smile wryly as she said that to his face. He wasn't sure if it was because they were the same age or not. "That 'at least' was unnecessary. Well, don't worry about it. I'm not childish enough to get upset over wording."

Having realized it was pointless to put on appearances before Alus, Lilisha suddenly ruffled her hair. Her long blonde hair looked disheveled as she shook it, but she showed no sign of caring. "Then I'll take you at your word. Ahh, this kind of thing tires me."

It seemed the mask of a noble lady was heavier than she expected. She stretched, as if a weight had fallen off her shoulders, looking relieved. However, she didn't appear to be as casual as she made it sound. Despite being freed from some tension, Alus could tell that her movements were still somewhat refined. Meaning that she was probably still not her full real self.

What a complicated woman, he thought.

"I did say that I couldn't answer. But with your power, you could surely bring a single woman to her knees... If you turn to violence I'll have no choice but to confess." As she gave him a provocative smile, she seemed out of her element, like a sensitive girl trying to act tough.

Alus sighed. "Fine, I'll give up on asking any more... If Berwick's involved, there's no need for me to step in." Any further attempt at discussion would be fruitless. Besides, when he thought about why she'd been sent to the Institute to begin with, he could sort of see what Berwick was after. "If I'm going to be watched anyway, it's just as well that I take you in."

"Ahh, I never thought about that. I see, so a Single Digit Magicmaster is going to take an innocent young girl for himself."

He couldn't overlook that. "... Why do nobles love to make such heavy jokes?"

"That's a prejudice. If anything, I think not making full use of a Single's privileges is strange. If you did, you'd never struggle with women."

"Now that's a real bias. As if such a privilege exists! Anyways, if you're not going to cause any trouble for me, I'm not going to complain."

“... What to do. I’m not your ally, but I suppose I’ll handle it for now.” It was hard to tell if she was joking or not with that answer. However, she showed him a troubled expression paired with a small smile, as if to say that she couldn’t become an ally because of her position, regardless of her own will—but she wasn’t an enemy either.

Alus took that as an expression of her true opinion, and sighed as he put a stop to their discussion. For now he’d just have to trust her. He couldn’t see any bright future in doubting her. *It’s not like I expected Berwick to make no moves at all. He might even be a little late. Well, as long as it’s just surveillance it’ll be fine.*

He didn’t really think the Governor-General’s supervision was any of his concern, but he’d made a deal to go to Rusalca and cover his credits. He was also curious about Lilisha. It must have meant that Berwick had been looking for a replacement for Loki.

Still... Rimfuge and Frusevan... He glanced over at Lilisha. Then he got a dubious look on his face. “Hm?”

Tesfia, in the middle of her explanation, had stopped. And so had Lilisha.

Wondering what was going on, Alus noticed that there was a huge swell of emotion spreading among the students. It seemed they were extremely moved by something, and were shouting to each other about it.

The next moment, they all took off running towards the main building at the same time, like a disciplined army.

“What?” Tesfia was completely dumbfounded, the confusion clear on her face. She had no idea what was going on. Only she, Lilisha, and Alus remained. That big crowd had cleared out in a matter of seconds.

Alus was likewise baffled. Either way—“Looks like I’ll be able to get back to work... What did you tell them, Fia?”

The red-haired troublemaker turned around at his voice.

“For example...did you tell them that the principal will remember them and it will influence their grades if they keep prying further into my business?”

“I wouldn’t do something so malicious!”

He’d thought that maybe Tesfia would go that far, but it seemed that was an unfounded worry. “So what happened? I don’t get it.”

“Mmm, I think I heard someone say that somebody really looked like somebody.”

“Boring,” Lilisha interjected. The shallow word seemed to be a clear expression of the woman herself. Alus was thinking the same thing, having been swept up in something so trivial.

Lilisha then gazed in the direction the students had run off in. “What a pain... It looks like there’s a commotion in front of the main building. Not that I know the details.” She furrowed her brows.

“Hmm, so some sudden trouble made your plans fall apart?”

“You could say that... but you’re also going to get affected by that, Alus. I might not be an ally, but I’m still pretty cooperative.”

Letting out a sigh, Lilisha turned to Tesfia. Being stared at by those big round eyes made her twitch and shrink back for a moment. “Thanks for the help. You were somewhat useful, Fia. I got you involved because I thought you’d be convenient, so good thing you were from the Fable family. You were honestly the most uncertain element around Alus, so this was a nice result.”

She smiled, but her words were frank and unreserved. From an outsider’s perspective it would have been seen as a mixed message.

But to Tesfia, her attitude was so different that she was surprised, and didn’t know how to react. She figured maybe Lilisha was just making a strange joke, so it was only natural that she looked dumbfounded.

“Well, frankly, it was just on the level of being more useful than I expected.”

It was then that Tesfia finally got Lilisha’s malice. She raised an eyebrow. “... That’s quite the manner of speaking. Maybe you lack manners because your family is isolated and doesn’t even maintain the most basic interactions with any influential family? You seem pretty naive yourself,” she said sarcastically.

“Pfft, I was joking, Fia. Let’s get along as people who know who Alus really is.

Besides, it's my job to ensure his treatment at the Institute. So let's stay on good terms, okay?"

"...You say now."

"Don't worry. I'm just taking Alus at his word and have stopped being considerate. It's not like I need to put on an act anymore. It's seriously a pain to put up with students from time to time. You think so too, don't you, Fia?"

"...It's about time you stop looking down on people! Who do you think you are?!"

Alus had gotten sick of this, but he felt like he'd missed his chance to escape. Tesfia had stopped hiding her distrust and was staring at Lilisha with raised eyebrows, but Lilisha simply wore a provocative smile.

Judging from the atmosphere between them, it was hard to imagine that they'd get along. Alus felt the way Lilisha was treating Tesfia was particularly immature. It was also starting to make Tesfia get heated, and it looked like things were about to devolve into a childish argument.

With no other choice, he stepped between them, intending to put his hands on their heads to push them apart and mediate. "Geez... Cut it out."

He touched Tesfia's head without a problem, but his other hand grasped nothing but air as a sharp shriek rang out.

Lilisha had crouched down and was holding her head with both hands. Seeing her so frightened, Alus didn't know what to say. "It's not like I was going to hit you."

She was cowering and trembling. He felt a slight twinge of remorse. At the same time, he realized that what he usually did with Loki maybe wasn't all that normal.

"Pfft, what a scaredy cat." Tesfia looked down at Lilisha and covered her mouth as she laughed.

"—!! S-Shut up, idiot!" Lilisha shouted with a red face, as she came to her senses, trying to pretend otherwise, but it was too late for that.

"I'm good now," Tesfia said, looking like she might start laughing again at any

moment, so Alus bonked her somewhat hard on the head. “Ow!”

“That’s enough. She’ll probably be working more with us going forward.”

Next, Alus reached out to Lilisha. “Sorry about her. Still, that surprised me. You would have caused some misunderstanding if anyone had been watching.”

Lilisha sulkily took his hand and stood up, returning to her usual firm attitude. It was too late to put on a false front by now, but that was a noble’s pride for you. “I wasn’t surprised, and I wasn’t scared either! The Fable family really is just so...vulgar!”

“You’re the one who—”

Seeing how the two were about to clash again, Alus intervened. “Cut it out. If you do something stupid again, I won’t cooperate with you. And Fia, if you want to continue being taught, then be quiet. Anyways, if you try to get me into any more trouble, I might just talk to the Governor-General and have you disappear... from the Institute, that is.”

“If I disappear, it’s only going to be inconvenient for you!” Lilisha was undaunted.

However—“Should I use a Single Digit Magicmaster’s so-called privilege?”

Lilisha let out a lengthy sigh, perhaps signaling her resignation, and no longer tried to fight back.

Tesfia was visibly dejected, but still managed to squeeze out some words. “Fine, I understand. If your identity as the ranked No. 1 is completely exposed, you won’t be able to stay at the Institute. That would be bad for me and Alice...” She averted her eyes, as if to say she had no other choice.

Lilisha smirked. “Yes, so let’s ‘get along.’ As a way to earn your trust, let me tell you something.”

Suddenly, all emotion seemed to disappear from her face. “Like Alus said, I was dispatched at Governor-General Berwick’s orders. I suppose you could say my mission is his personal protection. I look forward to your cooperation in all sorts of ways in completing it.”

By sharing military secrets, she was trying to meet Tesfia halfway. That being

the case, Tesfia was the kind of girl who would respond in kind. Not to mention that they both wanted to protect Alus' secret.

"Fine, I get it. I'll help in whatever way I can," Tesfia answered honestly, having had a complete change of mood.

Lilisha looked nonplussed. "... Uhm, I look forward to working with you, then," she replied with an awkward wry smile.

Alus, who'd been watching the two, suppressed a sardonic smile. At the same time, he felt like praising the redhead's airheadedness and her inability to pick up on subtleties in these kinds of cases.

Indeed, she was oblivious to them. Lilisha's "all sorts of ways" had been intended to keep her in check. Not only did she want them to "get along," she also implied that Tesfia shouldn't do anything on her own when it came to this.

Yet Tesfia had completely ignored it, innocently taking it at face value. *Lilisha was way off the mark. She thought she'd figured her out just based on the Fable family name. But that was a big mistake.*

At the very least, it was clear that Lilisha was trying to protect Alus' position in the Institute. At the same time it looked like she would try to take control of everything behind his back. To be honest, he didn't feel very good about it. With that in mind, having Tesfia around made things much more interesting for him.

In other words, Lilisha's worst obstacles are unexpected developments and people who stir things up without realizing it. Any irregularity that moves outside of her plans... And the prime suspect, Fia, also knows about my identity. That's why she tried to drive her point home.

"Well, this is the kind of person she is. Besides, I'm not a big fan of you skulking around without my knowledge," Alus said, putting his hand on Lilisha's shoulder, causing her to shrink back again.

He then turned his back on her and called out to Tesfia. "Fia, don't trust her too much. She'll probably prioritize monitoring over protecting me."

"Monitoring...?!"

“—!!” Lilisha probably hadn’t planned on revealing that much to Tesfia. She glanced at Alus with a complicated expression, but kept smiling, despite a twitching cheek.

“It’s just insurance. As long as I can’t trust you a hundred percent, you’ll have to deal with it.”

“Wow, talk about twisted. Well, I guess it’s within permissible limits...just barely though.”

“I’m going back to my job now,” Alus said, and began walking off, but instead of returning to the main building he headed for the auditorium next door. It was close by and also on his patrol route.

Meanwhile, Tesfia and Lilisha were left behind. “I’m going to remove the source of the commotion...” Lilisha said, shrugging. “Things are going to get busy,” she muttered, as she started towards the main building. Her tone of voice was impatient.

“W-Wait a minute. What is monitoring supposed to mean...? Uhm, you know, Feli left things up to me! Al?!” Tesfia panickingly looked at Alus, and then Lilisha, before deciding to chase after Alus.

Fiftieth Chapter

Innocent Incarnation

Shortly after Alus had left his post with a crowd of students in tow...

The campus festival was even more crowded today, due to all the noise and commotion of the first day. Seeing how lively it was, Alus figured there was at least some value in playing along with Elise's life-threatening little play. After all, despite what had happened, the festival hadn't been canceled.

But on closer look, he could see military personnel mixed in here and there. They had been given more Magicmasters for security, and there were also Magicmasters from other nations in disguise, scouting around the Institute. In that sense, it couldn't be helped that the festival felt a little more imposing than the first day. Even so, doing anything that would ruin the festive mood was strictly forbidden.

Still, the line was quite blurry, as there were some new Magicmasters visiting their alma mater, and scouts looking to recruit students with potential. In other words, there was a sort of dress code in place in order to not ruin the atmosphere.

Among them, a certain person's presence stood out. Or rather, they just didn't fit in.

Plenty of people noticed this person, but no one tried to call out to them. Perhaps it was more accurate to say they couldn't call out to them. To put it nicely, they would've been presumptuous; to put it more baldly, they got cold feet. Anyone who noticed this person looked away, pretending that they hadn't seen them.

There were even some that were glad they hadn't come dressed in military uniform. After all, if they were, they wouldn't have been able to ignore this person who deserved the respect of the entire military.

Anyway, the ones who encountered this individual prayed not to cause any commotion, and some hid their anxiety behind smiles on their faces.

***

Looking at the campus festival from above, the Institute was so tightly packed with people that it was hard to identify them individually. The vast number of visitors barely left any unfilled gaps.

Every time the person passed by someone, the fragrance made them glance back. Wearing a feminine fragrance, she gallantly made her way through the crowd. Mysteriously enough, despite there being so many people around her, she never bumped into anyone, not even touching shoulders. Her steps were so light, she seemed like she might start skipping at any moment. She was expressing her good mood with her entire body.

The woman's long skirt swayed as she walked along. Her braided hair was almost dancing as it bounced off her back. The sound of her footsteps clacking on the cobblestones kept up a beat, as if it was a hymn praising her beauty.

She wore a woman's clothes, not a girl's clothes, and was in such high spirits that she might start humming at any moment. Together with her light dance-like steps, she attracted the eye of everyone around.

But anyone who tried to get a closer look would only be able to see her for an instant. After all, once she found something she wanted to see, she quickly disappeared into the crowd.

"It sure is lively. I think it might be even livelier than that time I won."

Lettie Kultunca, who had come to the event dressed as a civilian, was proud of her alma mater's achievement for the first time in a couple of years. But most of all, knowing Alus was around made her feel light and happy. His presence was one of the reasons she'd decided to visit for the first time in a while.

She walked around, comparing the sights to how they'd been in her memories of the past. Spotting the differences was enjoyable. The main building had seen renovations and expansions, so it was a far cry from how it had looked back then.

Indeed, the Institute was only growing larger all the time. She didn't

particularly feel nostalgic, but it was refreshing, and reaffirmed once again that not everything crumbled to dust over the years. The research building, paved roads, and the many Circle Ports were all new, and she updated her memories upon seeing them.

As a Single, Lettie was a very busy woman, and had almost no opportunities to go on a pleasure outing like this. Counting the days since she'd been called to the Friendship Magical Tournament, it had been more than a few months. And this was the first time she'd had the chance to visit the Institute in private since her graduation.

"Thinking about it, it was pretty fun here." Words of reminiscence suddenly came from her mouth.

Just how many of her classmates were still alive...? That was a gloomy thought, but nevertheless, the fun memories she'd made here were irreplaceable.

But as she thought of people's daily lives in the Inner World, she couldn't help but feel the Outer World was not a place for humans. After all, when she recalled her memories, she could no longer clearly remember the faces of the people she'd spent those times with.

The Outer World, a place where you could die from a single mistake, was just too bleak. Every day spent there shaved away at one's life, and it easily faded even the most precious memories.

Lettie made a conscious effort to smile, shaking off the darkness that had come over her expression. "... Well, I guess that's just not my character."

She stopped and purposefully sniffed the air. The next moment, she jogged over to the front of the main building to the stall she'd discovered. "I did skip breakfast..." Her stomach was empty, and she stared at the skewers laid out at the stall with a sparkle in her eye. Dipped in what smelled like a delicious sauce, they looked so good she almost began to drool.

"Hey pops, I'll take ten to start with!" she said to the male student, who most definitely wasn't old enough to be called "pops," startling him. Of course, it was just a cute line she wanted to say, having no idea she'd offended him.

In a few minutes, Lettie's hands were full of skewers pinched between her fingers. And hanging from her arms were bags packed with stall food. The fragrant smells mixed and blended to the point that it was hard to tell what she'd bought. All were spoils of her tour of the stalls, bought on impulse because of her appetite.

Even now her mouth was full of one of the dishes, as she merrily enjoyed her day off. "I would love some alcohol, but I guess that's asking for too much."

She still had the inside of the main building to see, so her expectations were high. She'd only gotten started on the major event that was the campus festival. Enjoying the stall food with such vigor that everyone around her was taken aback, Lettie enthusiastically made her way towards her next pleasure.

However, just as she was bringing the last skewer to her mouth, the sunglasses she'd put on slipped off and fell.

She hurriedly tried catching them in midair, but it was too late.

Alarming whispers could be heard around her.

Hey, isn't that...

It definitely looks like her...

The atmosphere abruptly changed. Like a ripple, the buzzing of the crowd spread, growing larger and larger.

"Uh oh, looks like I've been found out."

Pushing the skewer into her mouth and holding it sideways with her teeth, Lettie awkwardly glanced around, hoping to find somewhere out of the way. But her efforts were in vain, as her fun time looked to be coming to an end.

Before long, she was surrounded by a throng of people. It was like a human cage, and even Lettie would struggle to escape it.

"Aw geez." She'd thought to disguise herself by wearing the shades, but in reality, she'd only dressed up to look more fashionable. She didn't want to look suspicious by dressing too formally, and figured it would be fine since people had only really seen her in uniform.

Even while she was thinking of a way out, more people gathered around her.

But for some reason there were no military personnel. The only ones around her were Institute students... in other words, just the youths.

The commotion grew bigger, making her escape more difficult. She thought about using her excellent leg strength to jump over the crowd, but she was wearing a skirt. Since she'd gone out of her way to dress up, she didn't want to get stains or wrinkles.

Her outfit was certainly intended to be a disguise. Not to mention she had a plan as well. *If only there was some old geezer around that I knew. I could make use of him, but they're never around when you need them... so useless!* "Oh?"

She took a step backwards. When she did, a small figure flew down from the sky and landed in front of her. Her beautiful silver hair glistened as it reflected the sunlight.

Lettie greeted her little savior, who'd jumped over the surrounding crowd, with a big smile on her face. An urge to reach out and pat her head rose in her chest. "Lil Loki! Great timing."

Having come across the scene by chance, Loki had spotted Lettie at its center and hurriedly went over. She'd been dragged into mock battles by Felinella, but her desire to help Alus with his guard duty made her wrap things up as quickly as she could, and at that moment she'd been walking around the Institute in search of Alus.

"Lady Lettie?! What are you doing here? And making such a scene..." Loki said in a quiet tone.

"That's a misunderstanding. I didn't do anything. I was just surrounded by the time I noticed." That said, it was a natural outcome when a Single was in a place like this.

Loki gave Lettie a suspicious look, before noticing her appearance. "...? Still, those clothes look good on you, Lady Lettie. You are attractive in your military uniform, but you look very beautiful right now." As she spoke, Loki seemed to get a little excited as her cheeks turned red.

The gap between how Lettie was on the battlefield and how she was now only made her charms stand out more. She even entertained the thought that

the commotion around her was caused by a natural reaction to her beauty instead of her identity being exposed. “Oh? You know how to make a gal happy. Let’s get married!”

“I think I will pass.”

“Then at least let me give you a reward,” Lettie said, and pulled a candied apple out from somewhere.

“Not right now,” Loki refused. She straightened her posture. “Actually, Sir Alus is in charge of security, so it would be best not to make a scene...”

Lettie’s shoulders trembled, and she looked awkward. She’d gone out of her way to dress up, so this wasn’t welcome news. After pondering a moment, she handed one of the bags hanging off of her arm to Loki. Inside was a lot of the stall food she’d been eating. “Here, give this to Allie.”

“... Why?”

“It’s the top five of the foods I tried here.”

“Ah,” Loki said in understanding. She respected Lettie as a fellow Magicmaster, and after the battle against Demi Azur their relationship had evolved to the point where they could enjoy a conversation.

Of course, that was in large part due to Lettie’s good nature, just like Alus had once said. Her positive personality made it easy for people to let their guard down.

Still, considering both Lettie and Jean Rumbulls, Loki couldn’t help but think that Alus’ friends were likable people who didn’t abuse their status. Thanks to that, even Loki—who wasn’t very good at socializing—was able to keep up with her. From her point of view, they were very human and didn’t seem like famous Magicmasters.

When she saw Loki smiling so naturally, Lettie also broke into a smile. “Now then, lil Loki’s here, but what do we do next?” Her tone was optimistic though, and she didn’t look as troubled as her words suggested, making Loki feel a little exasperated.

There were indeed many ways to get out of this if they weren’t picky.

However, magic was out of the question, and she'd prefer not to jump over the crowd. Like Lettie, Loki was wearing a skirt. She'd only been able to jump in because all the attention was on Lettie. Her skirt was even shorter than Lettie's.

She thought about just forcing their way through the crowd, but that likely wouldn't calm the commotion. *I want to get to Sir Alus as soon as possible, but I can't just leave Lady Lettie here...*

Meanwhile, Lettie suddenly looked away from her and waved her hand over the crowd. "Ah! There you are! ALLIEEEE—!"

Lettie shouted Alus' name without reserve, to the worst person she could ask for help from. After all, it would expose their relationship to the public.

"Lady Lettie?!" Loki managed to grab and pull her arm back down, but it was already too late.

Alus, who was walking by with Tesfia in tow, came to a complete stop.

I just told her not to make a scene too. With a shiver running down her spine, Loki followed Lettie's stare. There she saw Alus' pained expression. *I'm so sorry, Sir Alus...* Tears welled up in her eyes.

Faced with Loki's wordless gaze, Lettie looked at her with a confused expression.

Loki's frustration grew rapidly as she wondered if her feelings had reached her or not. If Lettie's identity was fully exposed here, her relationship with Alus would also be revealed.

"Great! We can just leave this to Allie," Lettie said with a carefree smile.

This increased Loki's despair and made her realize, *Ah, this person just doesn't get it.*

Naturally, Alus recognized how bad the situation was, and he made no move.

Seeing his discouraged expression, Loki just wanted to disappear. However, she'd forgotten something. Though Alus walked by as if nothing had happened, the person behind him didn't. Like Lettie, she didn't mean anything bad by it, but...

Loki was shocked as she stared in Alus and Tesfia's direction. Alus had decided

to ignore Lettie, but what about the redhead?

Tesfia stopped, gazing in their direction with a curious expression, as if not particularly thinking about anything.

Loki's tension reached its peak. If Tesfia reacted in a way that would lead to exposing Lettie's identity, it would be too late. She pleaded with Tesfia in her mind. *Please, just please don't do anything unnecessary...*

However. "H-Huh...? Is that you, *Lady Lettie*?!" A look of astonishment appeared on Tesfia's face, as she said the worst thing Loki could have imagined.

Her face drained of blood. Her mind went blank. At the same time Loki could feel anger welling up as her heart went wild. *Yes, I already knew you would betray any expectations.*

A vein bulged in her temple as she glared at Tesfia. But Tesfia happily smiled and waved. Loki's glare had completely missed the mark.

Adding on to Loki's confusion, the crowd around them began getting excited. Her plans to calm their surroundings had been ruined.

But there was a saving grace. As of now, the rumor going around was that one of the Single Digit Magicmasters, Lettie Kultunca, was here. The core of the disturbance was that a Single was here at the Institute.

That being the case, she couldn't afford to miss this chance. Indeed, it could still be turned around. The tumult that was expected to follow would transform the crowd into a mob. The commotion would spread and the number of onlookers would increase. If that happened, the stalls would get caught up in the madness, and it would expand beyond what security could handle.

Naturally, Alus' workload would increase like crazy...so Loki steeled herself and spoke to Lettie. "Lady Lettie, there's no repairing this situation. Let's escape before it gets out of control."

"Huh? More importantly, where did Allie go?" Showing no concern for Loki's fears, Lettie put her hand over her forehead and searched for Alus.

Loki didn't need to use her detection abilities to know that Alus wasn't going to stick around here, let alone intervene. A single look at his face was enough.

His security job was important, but coming in contact with Lettie was far more of a problem. And so Loki's worth was being put to the test. At the very least she was convinced of that. This was something only she could do, with her knowledge of Alus' position and his relationship to Lettie.

Loki needed to take action to protect his peace and daily life. Moment by moment, the opportunities to escape were slipping away.

However, there was still a chance. Right now the information that Single Digit Magicmaster Lettie had come to visit was only hearsay. It wasn't fully confirmed.

Loki tightly pressed her lips together. She was a little embarrassed and squirmed over what she'd decided to do. Her cheeks turned pink as she pulled at Lettie's sleeve.

"G-Geez, Sis...! H-How could you get lost at the Institute. It's embarrassing. I-If you're going to come visit then at least let me know..." Blushing even more, Loki began her third-rate acting job. "P-Please play along," she whispered to Lettie.

However, despite Lettie supposedly playing along, her expression looked excited, which concerned Loki. Even so... "T-This is why...everyone always calls you sloppy." Being unused to acting, she stumbled over her words, but Lettie didn't even seem to mind as she stared at Loki with an ecstatic expression.



Loki was startled by the passion in her stare, but it was too late to back down now. So for the time being, she desperately tried to signal with her eyes.

“Aw, shucks. If my so very cute little sister says so, I have no choice but to listen. Yeah. Your big sis is sorry. Would you mind if this sloppy sister of yours monopolized you for the day to deepen our bond? We’ll even bathe and sleep together!” Flushed with excitement, Lettie opened her arms wide and hugged Loki’s head.

“Lady—Sis?!” Loki’s face ended up buried in Lettie’s breasts, and immersed in the fragrant smell of stall food.

“Yeah, I’ll properly reflect on my actions! I swear. See!” For some reason Lettie was getting even more into it, and all Loki could do was try to mumble in protest. Even in this situation, she looked around to confirm their surroundings. Everyone seemed stunned and dumbfounded.

She had hoped to get them to believe that her ordinary sister came to see the campus festival, but had they bought it? It was a crude plan made in the heat of the moment, but they’d just have to pull through with their momentum and make everything vague.

Loki gave it one more push, using her thin arms to escape from Lettie’s grasp. “G-Geez, it’s embarrassing, Sis. Everyone’s watching... I-I know. I’ll show you around the Institute... first?” Her confusion and impatience made the last bit come out in question form. It seemed it was impossible for her to completely play her role when acting towards Lettie, whom she respected. That aside, guiding her around the campus was a good excuse to escape from the crowd.

“Yeah! Let’s go around together.”

She didn’t know how much Lettie seemed to understand, but at least she was motivated. The surrounding crowd wasn’t reacting exactly like Loki had hoped, but they watched over them with warm expressions. As if to say that the sight of the two sisters was heartwarming.

Loki was well aware she and Lettie looked nothing alike, and that the sister setting was pushing it. She’d only tried it as a means to escape from their situation, but having gone this far, she’d have to see it through. Grabbing

Lettie's wrist, she began to walk. "This way!"

Lettie happily followed her lead. She no longer saw anything but Loki.

If they could escape without giving the crowd a chance to question it, her play would have been worth it. She felt like praising herself for keeping it up, though it might turn into a memory she wouldn't want to remember.

However, Loki's once-in-a-lifetime performance was stopped by a comment from the sidelines.

"The principal is calling for you, Lady Kultunca."

"Huh?"

Loki was left speechless. She could feel her scenario crumble to pieces. Everything she'd built up went down the drain, and she was certain she'd be left with nothing but a humiliating memory. Her cheek twitched as she glared at the person who was the source of all of that.

"It's over already? Things were just getting good too," Lettie blurted out in an easygoing tone, having enjoyed everything. But her eyes soon narrowed as she recognized the female student that had called out to her. "Ah, so that's how it is."

"I'm not sure what you mean... I just spotted a strange commotion and came over. Though in a sense, it was good timing."

The girl with an elegant smile and blonde hair was most likely the collar that Berwick had talked about. Moreover, Lettie had seen through part of his intentions. There was no way the mission entrusted to her was as simple as being a collar. Although it was going too far to imply anything intimate about it.

Upon closer look, the girl had a graceful face, and even the atmosphere around her had an unwavering nobility to it. Lettie couldn't help but feel a gap between the girl and someone of common birth like herself. There were a ton of people like that in the upper echelons of the military, and they were a crafty bunch that anyone would get sick of.

That's who the group of people known as nobles were. The girl gave Lettie the impression of arrogance and haughtiness that she was so used to.

There were, of course, exceptions to those nobles. However, as a Magicmaster with a commoner background, she knew the arrogance of nobility firsthand.

Lettie quickly pulled back the blatant disgust she had let slip. That was because she knew that the girl before her was from a famous lineage. Not many knew the details of the bloodline, but a Single Digit Magicmaster had access to national secrets.

“You’re...” Loki said with a sharp stare. But her cheeks were red with embarrassment from her little act from before, so it didn’t have much impact. “Lilisha, if I recall...” she continued, mentioning the name Tesfia had said before.

“... My, I’m happy to hear that. I still haven’t properly greeted you yet. Please feel free to refer to me so directly in the future, Ms. Loki. I was hoping that we would be able to get along.” Lilisha, who had a noble-like, long, and complex set of names following her given name, gave Loki a soft smile. However, it was that of an older sister dealing with a younger sister. It felt similar to an adult bending down to the same eye level of a child when speaking to them.

Lilisha then took her gaze off of Loki. “At any rate, the campus festival will be impacted if this commotion grows any larger.” She curtsied to Lettie only, before glancing around. She then asked the students blocking the path to the main building to move aside. Perhaps overwhelmed by her elegance, the crowd parted and made way. “Now, let’s go. The principal is waiting.”

Ultimately, the moment Lilisha showed up, the situation was easily defused. Loki was relieved, but also a little disappointed in herself. But she pulled herself together for the time being. “Just...who are you?” she cautiously asked, as she stared at Lilisha who was walking ahead of her. She had heard about her lineage at the same time she was told her name.

“I’m nobody suspicious. Well, here at the Institute you can think of me as support personnel for Sir Alus. One who has the principal’s approval.”

“...!” When she heard that, Loki’s expression turned grim. She wasn’t trying to be pretentious, but she strongly believed that no one else could be Alus’ partner.

In order to rein her in, Lilisha gave her a disarming smile. “You don’t have to worry. This is actually a surveillance mission given to me by the Governor-General, but it’s not something that includes his daily life.”

“... Is that so.” However, Loki couldn’t help but get caught on the word “surveillance.”

“You can relax. You technically came to this school for surveillance too. I’m the same, I’m simply here for support. It’s just the bare minimum to satisfy those who don’t think fondly of Sir Alus temporarily leaving the frontlines.”

Loki fell silent. Her position as Alus’ partner was something she’d acquired due to personal feelings. True, she’d come to the Institute on a surveillance mission, but that was just for appearances. She’d only really observed and reported on Alus in the beginning...

Of course, she’d been able to stay with Alus to this day because the Governor-General had taken her personal feelings into account. That was one of Loki’s major flaws. Moreover, it was also meant to keep the people who wanted Alus’ swift return to the battlefield in check, so Loki had had no choice but to accept it.

Besides, it was at Berwick’s behest that Alus had enrolled at the Institute in the first place. That was why he bore part of the responsibility, and he couldn’t just let him go unchecked. Alus was a bird in a cage because of his status as the greatest Magicmaster and his unique power.

“In other words, I was sent over to continue your mission. That’s why I’d like to nip any chances in the bud of Sir Alus’ identity being exposed, Lady Kultunca.”

Having been called out so politely, Lettie awkwardly averted her gaze. “Well, I wouldn’t wanna upset Allie myself...so I got it. I appreciate your consideration. Well, please continue to cover for me.”

Looking at the two of them, Loki felt something odd. Lettie’s attitude towards Lilisha was a little different from the Lettie she knew. It was strangely cold, or rather, psychologically distant.

It wasn’t only Lettie’s attitude making her feel that way. Lilisha was rather

unreserved towards a Single Digit Magicmaster. For a noble, she should be a bit more careful when dealing with one of the nation's two Singles. And Lilisha didn't seem foolish enough to not understand that, which made her behavior even more questionable. She didn't even react to Lettie asking her to cover for her.

"Still, Frusevan, huh. Now that I think about it, you look a little like your brother," Lettie casually said. She might be cheerful and friendly, but she wasn't someone who opened her heart to just anyone. She had a tendency to intuitively judge whether she liked or disliked a person.

However, the reason she followed her intuition was because it had never failed her before. Her bad hunches were usually right on the mark when it came to first impressions.

"Brother...you say. Who might you be talking about?" The way Lilisha put a finger against her chin looked adorable.

"Well, the one I know, I guess." Lettie wasn't particularly well versed in Lilisha's relationship to her siblings, so she responded with a disinterested shrug.

"Well, that aside... I will cover for you if need be, Lady Kultunca." After saying that, Lilisha turned her back on Lettie and Loki, and led the way as if to hurry them along. "For the time being, the situation's moved on to the next phase."

"You're talking about Sir Alus," Loki said. She didn't miss Lilisha's inference. Due to yesterday's incident, a portion of Alus' power had been revealed. She increased her caution towards Lilisha even more.

Lettie said, "Allie's position, huh? Is that also at the Governor-General's orders, or is it the head of state's instruction?"

"—!!" Lilisha was very slightly shaken, but only the most perceptive would have picked up on it.

Sensing that from staring at her back, Loki then glanced at Lettie, who was happily skipping along next to her. *So there are orders passed down to her that not even Sir Alus knows about...? Or maybe she has another role apart from surveillance?*

But as to be expected, Lilisha immediately collected herself. And the time to feel each other out had come to an end. “... Lady Kultunca, we’ve arrived.”

They stood in front of a room with a plate next to it that said Principal’s Office. After stopping for a beat, Lilisha spun around. “Having you say such strange things is troubling, Lady Kultunca. This is a mission from the Governor-General, so try not to make any unnecessary assumptions... This is why Single Digit Magicmasters are such a problem.”

“Should I not have said that? My allergy to nobles isn’t as bad as Allie’s, but I guess I just can’t get used to them. Oh, I mean the old-fashioned ones.”

“Now, please don’t say that,” Lilisha smiled tightly, with a dark look in her eyes. Lettie appeared carefree on the surface, but she could sense the antagonism underneath.

Loki didn’t know the reason for Lettie’s attitude. For a simple hatred of nobility she was being a little immature. Perhaps there was something smoldering within her that Loki didn’t know about.

But for now, she pulled on Lettie’s sleeve to stop the conflict. “Lady Lettie, I believe she will be of assistance to Sir Alus at the Institute. Especially since she’s here under the Governor-General’s orders.”

“You tend to lose sight of things when it comes to Allie. You should take in a broader perspective. Trusting and having faith in someone are different things. But I guess it would be strange for me to meddle that much.”

Lettie put her hand on the doorknob, but before opening it she gave Loki one more piece of advice. “I don’t know about the Governor-General’s orders or approval, but a relationship won’t properly start until that lady reveals everything. So good luck, lil Loki! And once he’s done with his job, can you call him over to me? Just mention our promise and he’ll get it.”

“Understood.”

Lettie waved her hand to say goodbye, and disappeared into the principal’s office.

After hearing all of that, Loki was convinced there was something about Lilisha that was worthy of Lettie’s concern.

“Did you really have to say that much...” Lilisha grumbled with a frown.

Loki grabbed hold of her arm. She had a lot of things she wanted to ask. “Now then, can I hear what you have to say?”

“Hmm, so I got caught. Just know that I’ve already gotten Alus’ consent.” Her reserved style of speech she’d used around Lettie was gone without a trace, and even as she tried to excuse herself, Loki stared straight at her with an unchanging expression.

“It’s rude to refer to Alus so directly.”

“Even though I’ve received Alus’ permission for it?”

“I understand. In that case, I don’t mind. I don’t see you as someone to be as cautious of as Lady Lettie said, but I can’t trust you.”

“You mean I’m not worthy of your trust?”

“That will be up to you.” Loki’s gaze didn’t waver. The intensity of her stare was in no small part because she had neglected her own role.

However, that had nothing to do with the problem with Lilisha. Moreover, since the military was intervening, she couldn’t be careless. And since she was in touch with them, Loki believed Lilisha had her uses for protecting Alus’ peaceful life. “So, what exactly is the next phase?”

Lilisha sighed. “I guess I can tell you that much. My duty is to monitor Alus. But I also have another objective...”

“Which is?”

“I need to gradually reveal Alus’ position. Of course, that’s the Governor-General’s intention as well... Annoying as it might be, it’s no longer possible to hide everything. You get that too, don’t you?”

Loki saw nothing wrong with Lilisha speaking with her so informally. If anything, she felt this was closer to her true self.

She reluctantly nodded. She wanted to protect Alus’ peace, but yesterday’s incident left enough of an impact to fully shatter it. It might be possible to play it off for the time being, but if Alus was going to remain a Single, it would eventually reach its limit.

As Loki began to understand, Lilisha continued on, wearing an expression that made the other party think she was being frank while hiding the things she didn't want them to know. "At some point, Alus being the ranked No. 1 will become widely known in the Institute and throughout the world. So I'm sure we'll be able to cooperate." She reached out her hand for a handshake.

"But that's not all, is it?" Loki said, not taking her up on the gesture.

As if she'd predicted that response, Lilisha quickly pulled her hand back. "Well, I didn't think it would be that simple either. Like Lady Kultunca said, it's not like I'm unconditionally your ally. Not to mention that my personal situation might end up causing trouble for you."

That's why Lilisha decided to compromise by revealing what she could. And so she began speaking of the military's intentions, though mainly the Governor-General's, prefacing it by saying that it was her interpretation.

***

Meanwhile, inside the principal's office...

"Coming in... Oh?! It's been a while, Sisty," Lettie said in a cheerful tone, smiling at the principal.

She then put down the souvenirs she'd gotten on Sisty's desk, and abruptly pulled out a baked good. "Would you like one?" she asked, holding one out to the former Single who did not look to be in a good mood.

After that, Lettie got back on track. "So, what business did you have with me? Well, I was in a bit of trouble, so you calling me over did help me."

"I'm the one who wants to ask that. I had you come over to keep you from causing a commotion. But what business do you have here?"

"Hmm, well..." Lettie's gaze wandered, as if looking for an idea. Then she brought over a guest chair from the corner to sit in front of the desk.

"That aside... that sure is a cute outfit you're wearing. Are you here on a date? Not that I can recall you being that close to anyone."

"Wow, it's the first time we've met in a while, and this is what I get. Well, I am a woman, so there are times I want to dress up too. I'm always in uniform, so I

really enjoy the change.”

“And who would this be for?”

“You want me to say it out loud?” Lettie flashed a mischievous expression, perhaps to hide her embarrassment, before putting her chair up on a single leg and spinning it around. She stopped the spin with the chair back towards Sisty, boldly rolled up the hem of her dress, and then straddled the chair, resting her arms on top of the backrest.

She was sitting like a child, her slender legs wide open. Pretty dress or not, it wouldn’t change her personality. Not even Sisty could pull off acting that innocent and defenseless.

Sisty looked a little dumbfounded, but chose to continue their talk rather than point out the issue. “Both you and that girl are so fond of him. Is the ranked No. 1 really that attractive?”

“Now now, you don’t mean that. It’s attractive because it’s Allie!” Lettie said with passion, prompting Sisty to stare at her with a cold gaze.

She let out an exasperated sigh. “Who knows just how serious you are.”

“You sure have become ill-mannered to ask that, Sisty,” Lettie said cheerfully, as if recalling a distant, fading memory.

Sisty did not oblige her. “That’s enough idle chatter. So let’s get on to the main topic. Frankly put, why are you here? A Single’s not that free, is she?” she asked in a stiff tone, completely dispelling the casual atmosphere.

After Alus told her to keep quiet, she’d been sure she wouldn’t get off scot-free, so this much had been expected. With a Single showing up at the Institute after yesterday’s incident, she couldn’t help but want some insight into the military’s intentions.

The fact that the principal of the Institute under the control of the military had failed to report the matter could be taken as a sign of disloyalty. The chances were low, but in the worst-case scenario the military could even take her into custody and remove her from office. Which was why she proceeded very carefully.

She knew Lettie well. The girl might look naive, but she could be formidable when it was called for. As a Single Digit Magicmaster tied down by politics, she'd learned to make good use of her natural friendliness to not let people know what she was really thinking.

If Sisty tried to figure it out, she might be seen through instead. Even if she did have the Governor-General's backing, if the top brass reached a consensus to remove her, it was definitely possible.

Sisty wasn't power-hungry or desperate to protect her position no matter what, but she did have feelings for the Institute. Not to mention that it would be bad for her to lose her position with Alus around. She was firmly determined that she would be the one to protect this place.

However, Lettie showed a nonchalant attitude. "Why did I come here? Uhm...a secret rendezvous?" she said, scratching her cheek.

"..." To see her casual appearance, it sounded like a convincing answer. Sisty was nonplussed for a moment, before she let out another heavy sigh as if exhausted. "Fine. Just honestly answer me one thing. Did you come here on the Governor-General's orders, or the top brass's orders?"

"—! Oh, is that what you're worried about? Which means you've done something again? But don't worry. I came here to meet with Allie, out of love!"

"'Again'? Stop it with the baseless accusations, please. I'm a former Single, you know. Before he showed up there were no problems I couldn't handle myself. Things were peaceful after you graduated, too..."

"How rude. You make it sound like I was some kind of problem child."

Sisty rested her cheek on her hand, and gave Lettie a cold stare as if wondering what she was talking about. "You collapsed the old main building and destroyed the damage exchange system who knows how many times. Aside from that, there's no counting how much equipment and other items you damaged. And it wasn't just lifeless objects either, you sent several students to the hospital... Shall I go on?"

"You sure do remember all the small things."

Annoyed by her frivolous attitude, Sisty began counting up all of Lettie's

wrongdoings from when she was a student. “Not even Alus is that bad. Though the scale is on a different level.”

All of the troubles Alus brought with him could threaten Sisty’s position. Moreover, his mere presence seemed to invite them. The fact that he wasn’t causing it himself made it worse. “Well, what’s done is done. But having you strut around like you’re a flawless, model Single Digit Magicmaster just doesn’t sit right with me.”

“Urk... Ah, uhm, anyways, that messenger you sent over. Lilisha or something. She’s pretty tricky. I’m surprised you’d let someone as troublesome as that into the Institute.”

“Hey! Don’t go changing the topic just because it’s inconvenient for you!”

“It’s just a strategic retreat from a losing battle.”

Sisty cradled her head in her hands, as she felt a headache coming on. But she continued to observe Lettie. Her attitude had been normal so far, but Sisty’s concerns hadn’t been fully put to rest.

That was when she suddenly realized. *Oh dear, maybe his tenseness is rubbing off on me. To think I’d suspect Lettie...*

Sisty had the feeling that Lettie would side with her, even if she was here at the will of the military. The principal wasn’t in a position where she could blindly believe everything, but she was open towards Lettie in her own way. It was a form of faith.

But that aside, Sisty did have an interest in the topic Lettie was trying to divert her to. She’d picked up something strange in Lettie’s expression and attitude. “Lilisha...from the Frusevan family. Well, I was the one who told her to bring you here.”

Lilisha was actually a mystery to Sisty as well. She was awfully suspicious for someone that the Governor-General had only sent over as a replacement for surveillance on Alus.

Sisty had her own plans when she’d had Lilisha make contact with Lettie. If Lettie had been here on a secret military mission, then her meeting with Lilisha, who was likely here for the same reason, would hopefully give her some kind of

reaction or clue.

However, it seemed that had been a needless worry. If Sisty had been right, it was hard to imagine that Lettie would've brought up Lilisha on her own.

"I'm sure you already know, but I don't really like the Frusevans. The fact that I can't do anything about it when it bothers me makes it even worse. So what was the big deal with that? It's not like you forgot about it, right?"

"... What are you talking about?"

Hearing Sisty's answer, Lettie frowned. "You only lost your position as a Single because of the old aristocrat faction pulling the strings behind the scenes. I still haven't accepted that. But they've still got lots of influence in the military even now."

"Why bring up something from so long ago? Well, I guess something like that happened... Still, thank you," Sisty muttered. From Lettie's tone of voice, she must have used her spare time to look into it.

At the same time, she was happy that Lettie was angry for her, and her expression was much gentler than her words had been. "But it is true that I wasn't suited to be a Single."

"That's not even funny as a joke. You even had your own misgivings about it. You evaded it before with a flippant attitude, but it's about time you told me."

"About what?"

"About backing a Single from the old aristocrat faction. You get what I'm saying, right? From their point of view, Governor-General Berwick, who's in the opposing faction, got hold of two Singles in Allie and me. They don't like the look of that. Even you had to back a Single of their choosing because they had a slight political advantage."

With Berwick steadily gaining a foothold, there were naturally some who were concerned. There was an air of confrontation secretly growing inside the military. It was also true that eliminating the Devourer had given Berwick's side a boost, but not all was well.

"You're still hung up on that?"

“Normally it would be crazy to drag a Single Digit Magicmaster into an internal conflict and boot them out. You know how a member of the Frusevan family was mentioned as a candidate to be a Single, right?”

“Yes, I might have heard something like that.”

“They’re the same people who forced you out of your position. You and the Governor-General even acknowledged it... Why did you even leave your position back then? We’re just lucky Allie picked up after you.” With no other way to manage her resentment, Lettie asked the question that had always bothered her.

Sisty understood her anger. That’s why she was both happy and somewhat abashed. Not to mention that she was a little hesitant to speak since it would expose the side of her that she didn’t show to others. “Putting the Frusevans and Lilisha aside, I left my seat as a Single because I felt it was about time. I made way for Alus.”

“What a grand finale that would make, if that was enough to convince anyone. And with the punchline that the military is a fun workplace.”

“But it’s a happy end for my story. It connects to the first page of the next generation’s story.”

This might have been the first time Sisty was that honest about it. She once had the honor of being a Single Digit Magicmaster serving Alpha, even if she was only the ranked No. 9. Ultimately she’d soon ended up making way for Alus and Lettie, and then Alus had made use of his overwhelming power to climb up to his current position.

She had no regrets. She had laid a foundation and passed the baton to the next generation of brilliant talents. “Thinking of how exceptional you Singles are, I’m glad someone like me didn’t stay long. Besides, that was also laying down the groundwork.”

“For what?”

“For now. This job as principal of the Institute. I’m sure that it’s my calling to train the younger generation. And I needed some achievements for that. That’s why I became a Single for a moment and then left my position... You could say I

placed my bets on Berwick's prediction."

"What's that supposed to mean? Did the Governor-General have some scheme in the works?"

That didn't sit right with Lettie, but Sisty softly smiled at her. "You could call it foresight. Just look at the present. Alpha has become a top class nation... and we have both the ranked No. 1, and you at No. 7." She raised a finger and pointed it at Lettie.

Lettie's eyes widened slightly, and she realized Sisty's true meaning. In other words, Berwick and Sisty had predicted that she and Alus would become the Single Digit Magicmasters representing them even back then. "You mean you knew the old aristocrat faction wouldn't produce any Singles from the start...?"

Seeing Lettie with an unusually serious expression, Sisty smiled wryly and shook her head. "Not at all. We just knew Magicmasters who were better."

It wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that those skilled enough to become Singles already had the foundation of magic in place at birth. Although it was difficult to find them that early, there were those who were born with outstanding talent to become Magicmasters.

Some of those were in a league of their own even among the outstanding talent. They were truly excellent, geniuses that went beyond human capacity. From the moment they were first exposed to magic, they acquired a monstrous understanding and disposition towards it. They were living divine blades for use against Fiends.

"I think that's enough of this topic. In short, I left to entrust everything to the future generations. Berwick accepted that and arranged another role for me after I stepped down. As insurance for me once I left." Remembering her past, Sisty had an amused smile.

Lettie stared at her and thought to herself, *Which means...Sisty becoming principal after retiring was part of the Governor-General's plan. If it's like that with Allie too...*

It actually hadn't been that long since Berwick became Governor-General. But based on what Sisty said... "Just how long has that plan been in the works?"

“That’s a secret.” There were three reasons why Sisty had become the principal. The first was to secure excellent talent for the military. The second was to identify the next Single Digit Magicmasters, to prepare for the coming days in advance.

The third reason was creating a second home for Alus. That was the insurance Sisty had spoken of.

And that wasn’t all. Countless novice Magicmasters would be trained here. And by growing and developing under Sisty’s influence, she would be able to separate them from the old aristocrat faction as much as possible, allowing them to face their futures as clean slates.

They’d worked hard for humanity’s future, building up their strength...all the way up to today. With Alpha leading the way, they were finally about to launch their counterattack against the Fiends threatening humanity.

If all the pieces had been set up in anticipation of that...it was practically on the level of being able to see the future.

The thought made a chill run down Lettie’s spine. “...” And she pouted. She felt like she’d been dancing on top of Berwick’s and Sisty’s palms this whole time. This went beyond scheming. This kind of meticulous planning was almost demonic. The plan had been in the making long before Berwick was even Governor-General.

Of course, Lettie wasn’t amused by it. Besides, she still had her concerns. Berwick’s plan was making rapid progress, but how much of the backlash had he foreseen? At present, the aristocrat faction was making some strange moves. An internal conflict was already on the verge of igniting.

“Sheesh, I’m no match for you two behind the scenes types. But that’s all the more reason to ask... Why now, and why Frusevan?”

“Is that discontent because Alus is involved?”

“Of course. Still, I can’t figure out why he’d send a lit fuse over.”

“The truth is...I don’t know either,” Sisty replied with a troubled expression. Berwick had practically forced Lilisha upon her. She didn’t have the option to refuse. His intentions were unknown, but it was the Institute’s job to train the

next generation of Magicmasters. So no matter who they were or what their background was, she couldn't deny the admission of a skilled novice Magicmaster without a good reason. Especially not if they came with Berwick's recommendation.

That said, Sisty understood Lettie's misgivings. The Frusevans did indeed have a dark side. Lettie was probably just considering the dangers of that.

"This is just my prediction, but... Berwick might be thinking Lilisha's existence itself could become key at some point. Well, I don't really know all the workings inside the military, so I suppose not even the Governor-General has it easy."

"So it's like a gamble that you know the risks of, holding hands with your old enemy? What a joke. They're still in the middle of sabotaging each other," Lettie sharply pointed out.

But Sisty could only shrug and smile wryly, implying it was no longer something the principal could decide. Not even a Single could interfere with the Governor-General's decision on principle. So this was not much more than complaining. It wasn't completely pointless, but it was hardly productive.

Lettie also understood the Governor-General's decision couldn't be overturned. Yet her grim expression remained unchanged. It was as if she wanted to get an expert's point of view from Sisty. She then muttered a few disturbing words. "... The executive unit reporting directly to the ruler."

"I'm surprised you know about that ghost organization."

"You can't expect a corpse with its head long gone to be able to think rationally," Lettie said, ruffling her hair. She had an exasperated look, like a child who wasn't getting her way.

It was clear Sisty could tell what Lettie wanted to say. But her demeanor remained unchanged.

Lettie concluded that she'd been worrying needlessly, so she swallowed her next words with a bitter expression. True, she was feeling something close to a personal grudge. She felt like clicking her tongue at herself for being childish. Maybe just leaving Loki with a warning about Lilisha was the right call. It might have all been in her mind after all. "... A gamble, huh," she muttered.

That was enough for both parties to realize the discussion was over. However —

“Then, next it’s my turn.” Without pause, Sisty returned to the topic that had been left unsettled.

“Whatcha mean?”

“Now, now. You said you came here for personal reasons, but what exactly do you want?”

“You’re still thinking about that? Fine, I guess I should be a little embarrassed?”

“Embarrassment won’t get you anywhere with me.”

Being faced with Sisty’s serious expression, Lettie gave up on playing it off. But her tone was blunt as if she was trying to hide how she truly felt. “It’s about Vanalis. The reclamation was put on hold because of the incident with Balmes and the Devourer, so I’m gonna get Allie to help me out. We made a promise at the Friendship Magical Tournament,” she said in an oddly heavy tone.

This seemed to come as a surprise to Sisty, who gave her a look. “I’m amazed he made a promise. He hates all kinds of troublesome matters like that, doesn’t he? How did you make a deal with him? Don’t tell me you...”

Despite her suspicions, Lettie was unperturbed. “That’s right, he was no match for my seductive techniques. Allie has a good eye for these things. And most of all, he’s a boy.”

“... Lies. How plain a woman’s life can be when she doesn’t know true love.” Shooing away the air of youth Lettie had been casting around, Sisty flashed her a composed smile full of the wisdom of age. “How about you get some more experience with men? Only someone truly naive would be fooled by that,” she said, immediately seeing through Lettie’s bluff and breaking it to pieces.

“... I’m not old enough to have built up any experience.” What Sisty had pointed out was true, so Lettie quickly decided to give up on that and change the topic. “Still, why did Allie grow up to be so straight-laced? Well, it’s not like I can’t understand. It’d be so much easier though if he’d just fall for my honeytrap. Dontcha think so, Sisty?” she said, though a certain suspicion about

her was coming to mind.

“Can you not look to me for agreement?”

“How can you say that when you dress yourself up to look younger?”

Now it was Sisty’s turn to fall silent. She had things she wanted to say, but when taking her actual age into account, Lettie couldn’t be blamed for what she’d said. “Just so you know, it’s a lot of work to maintain your beauty. And I’m not making myself look younger. I am young!”

No doubt an empty excuse. Claiming she needed to maintain her beauty was already proof that she’d lost. Besides, no matter what she might say to Lettie, who was in her twenties, she had no way to compete against natural youth. Her resistance had been pointless from the start.

“That’s enough of that. I only dig a deeper hole for myself the more I speak.” Sisty sighed. “Well, there’s no way that seduction would work on him...” Of course, she wasn’t referring to her own use of Bewitching Garden cologne that time. She couldn’t deny she’d gotten caught up in Lettie’s idea of seducing men, but if that was enough to get the better of Alus, things would have been easier.

She didn’t really believe it, but seeing as Lettie didn’t seem to have tried seduction, then she must’ve been that way in the Outer World as she’d said.

That aside, Sisty actually had an idea as to why Alus was so obstinate when it came to all things sensual. Having been in harsh fights on the battlefield since childhood, it was very possible that he never had the room for any unnecessary lust to grow.

She then recalled what happened in the past. Back when Alus was racking up achievements and making a name for himself, dark rumors had begun to circulate in the military. As a result, nobody was eccentric enough to want to team up with him, and he was pushed around the battlefields like a machine to clean up Fiends.

He’d also been under Vizaist’s command for a short time, but it was only temporary for various reasons. Which meant that back then...he’d been completely isolated.

But as a boy with a unique talent and innocent face, who lived in the shadow

of harsh duties he was pushed to perform, he had sympathizers. Be it pity, curiosity, or maternal instincts, he was popular among a number of single women then.

There had been no public outcry, and Sisty only found out about all this later. She didn't know if it was true or not, but judging from Lettie's passionate look, she had the feeling it might not be a lie.

And while she didn't want to cast aspersions...her long experience in the military told her that unmarried women tended to become very bold when out in the field where death was common.

That being the case...it might be her crude imagination, but it wasn't impossible that something may have happened. She couldn't imagine Alus falling for a seduction, but maybe that was because he was overly familiar with it?

Conversely, he might just have written such women off as being those kinds of creatures, completely dismissing them as targets of interest.

However, Sisty wasn't going to speak of such vague rumors, and steered the conversation towards something more productive. "I-I see. So preparations to continue the mission in Vanalis are finally finished, then."

"Yeah, something like that."

"But couldn't you have just made a call instead of coming here? It's obvious you would cause a commotion."

"That's why I came in disguise. Besides, this is my alma mater, y'know. What's wrong with visiting for a breather? Well, I guess it was because it would be harder for Allie to turn me down in person, too... but we did make a promise."

"Okay, okay, I'll leave it at that." Lettie's forcefulness, or rather her negotiating ability hidden beneath her innocence, was probably natural. And Sisty could imagine Alus getting talked into it.

From that point on, their conversation turned into something like girl talk. Some bits of information were exchanged as they noisily enjoyed themselves. Their discussion only turned livelier as they snacked on the stall foods Lettie had gathered from the surrounding stalls.

Before anyone knew it, Sisty's treasured liquor and antique wines were brought out from her secret shelves.

Their little party continued until the end of the second day of the campus festival. The two were completely wasted by the time evening set in, and Alus arrived at the principal's office with Loki.



The stink of alcohol stung his nose even before entering the room. If any of the teachers were to see her like this, Sisty would lose all authority. As Alus stared at them coldly, Loki set to work ventilating the room.

“... How easy the principal must have it if she can drink in the middle of the campus festival. I had a lot of work on my hands with security, myself.” Alus began with a sarcastic remark as he stepped into the reeking room.

However, Sisty and Lettie didn’t seem to pay any attention to that. They were having the time of their lives, after all. Any sarcasm wasn’t going to reach them.

“Geez, you know it would be a lot easier for me if you worked harder,” Sisty weakly objected.

From the looks of it, Sisty wasn’t keeping up with Lettie, who’d done her rounds in the military. Redness had spread from her face down to her collarbone. It was a sensual sight, but she sure was getting lax during the campus festival.

Perhaps she was really stressed out. He had gotten her involved during the incident with Elise, so Alus couldn’t blame her too much.

If he couldn’t get them to say why they’d called him over, the visit would be in vain. But when he looked at the other person in the room... “Well, I can more or less guess... Are preparations already finished, Lettie?”

“They’re perfect. That’s why I came to get you, Allie.” Lettie staggered to her feet, her speech slurred.

She wrapped an arm around his neck and brought her face closer. She was nothing more than a pestering drunk, but aside from the weight on his shoulder, Alus didn’t find her too much of a bother. He knew she was a girl who got touchy-feely, and there’d be no end to it if he reacted to every little thing.

Loki was staring at them from the other side of the room, but he couldn’t get a read on what she was thinking. He figured she’d be unhappy at seeing Lettie draped all over him, but apparently not, because she was giving him a meaningful look.

It appeared to have something to do with Lettie’s outfit, and when he looked

her over again, he realized she wasn't in her usual uniform. But that was all.

Unable to bear it, Loki spoke up. "Lady Lettie, come here for a moment. I believe you will be able to better show Sir Alus that way." She peeled Lettie off of Alus. As she did, he wondered what exactly it was she was supposed to show him.

"Oh, yeah," Lettie said, as if she'd forgotten all about it. Grabbing hold of her skirt, she twirled around. "... How does it look?" With a somewhat flirtatious posture, she innocently smiled at him. Her red cheeks might be due to the alcohol, but without a doubt, she did look lovely.

"..." Alus quietly observed her. He could tell the difference between men's and women's clothing at least. And she was definitely wearing a fashionable outfit. Meaning...

Even he knew the right answer immediately. It was simple when you understood it. Glancing back to Lettie's face, he saw that her eyes were full of expectation.

But why was it that women practically forced people by their silence to give them the answer they wanted at times like these? Giving her that answer would peacefully settle everything, but since he knew what Lettie was normally like, any honest words got caught in his throat.

"... Y-Yeah, i-it suits you... Also..."

He glanced at Loki. He wondered if it was okay to say the same difficult words he'd been forced to say to her, to Lettie as well.

Loki simply closed her eyes and nodded. She'd given her approval.

"Yeah. I think you look very beautiful?"

"My...?!" It wasn't Loki or Lettie who reacted, but Sisty. She was still as drunk as ever, but her eyes opened wide in surprise. The next moment, she looked moved, as if rejoicing at the growth of her own child.

As for Lettie herself... "Haha, I might have been the one asking, but this is juuust a tiny bit embarrassing." The joy was apparent in her whole body though, and she squeezed the fabric of her skirt. She'd taken advantage of her drunken

state to ask, but she'd actually been a little nervous. Indeed, she was only outwardly drunk. In reality, she was unable to get fully drunk.

From Sisty's point of view, these childish kind of gestures were a privilege of the young.

Loki, standing behind Lettie, directed an admiring smile towards Alus. Perhaps she was in a similar state of mind as Sisty, though she seemed a little unsure of herself.

Alus thought about things, as he watched all of this. People's faces used to look stern whenever he said anything, but lately that had been happening less.

The Institute was different from the military, which had a much bleaker atmosphere to it. It was where those who wished to protect the nation gathered. But in reality, that world was all about survival of the fittest. There was also an ugly side of it where people would hold each other back and kick one another down if there was an opening.

Alus had thought that was the natural order, but his impression changed after coming to the Institute. It made him realize that being in a state of peace was a blessing. It was a world made up of only beautiful things. He couldn't forget about the Outer World, but a part of him was getting used to things like idle gossip.

That realization was probably not unique to him. Lettie and Sisty getting drunk wasn't something they could do in the military or the Outer World. It was a form of relaxation.

It was like he was looking down at himself from above, watching himself as he enjoyed this peaceful daily life. Like seeing himself in a mirror... who was real, and who was fake? He wanted to ask himself who he was.

He was aware that there was no perfect place for him in the small world of happiness, but still, he wished he could immerse himself in it with all of his heart. He felt contradicting parts of himself pulling him apart.

Alus' consciousness, which was trapped in these thoughts, was suddenly brought to the surface as Loki's words reached his ears. "By the way, Lady Lettie... Sir Alus is still living the life of a normal student at the Institute. So I

would like you to avoid causing that kind of trouble."

Then Alus suddenly remembered he had something to complain about. "That reminds me. Fia not thinking things through is one thing, but Lettie, you should have known there'd be confusion if you showed up here. And most of all, you took my precious time from me."

Sisty gave Alus a protesting look, though she knew his life was already starting to come apart. "Just so you know, this school is a place of learning, not some kind of health resort," she said with a pouting look. She smacked her desk. As expected she was still drunk, but since nothing good would come from carelessly interacting with her, everyone ignored her.

"Yeah, I'm sorry for causing a little bit of a commotion. That's why, uhm, I don't really have anything to offer as an apology, but you can take one of the things I bought."

Alus glanced at the stall food and snacks on top of the desk, but most of it had already been eaten, leaving only leftovers.

Once she realized that, Lettie quickly backstepped. "T-Then how about taking me instead? Strike now and you'll even get a bonus."

"Don't need it." He didn't know how much of this was the alcohol speaking, but nevertheless he immediately rejected her.

Having been brushed off, Lettie clung to Alus with a slightly hurt expression and tried again in a pleading voice. "Oh, you...uhm...seriously?"

"I'm going to stop you right there, you are not going to engage in obscene acts in front of the principal!" Though drunk, it seemed Sisty still had her common sense and wasn't going to let things go on like this.

However, her following words betrayed those hopes. "Do those kinds of things in secret, please!!"

Loki's shoulders twitched. *Oh, so that's fine*, she thought to herself, making a mental note of it.

At any rate, it seemed this was an old trick of Lettie's when teasing those younger than her. Her expression quickly changed to a serious one. "That aside,

is there really any need to hide Allie's rank or abilities anymore? Wouldn't it be easier to just reveal it to the public?"

Alus could understand where Lettie was going. He hadn't really given much thought to how difficult it would be to conceal his identity, or what the consequences might be. However, it had been Berwick's suggestion and there weren't any other good options at the time. He wouldn't deny that he'd had dreams of blending in with the other students while keeping his identity a secret.

Meanwhile, Loki wanted to agree with Lettie. She thought the world should know of Alus' hidden power and his achievements. It was because those were hidden that people like that Fillic she'd fought at the tournament got conceited.

But even though they were now on the verge of collapse, the peaceful days she'd spent with Alus had been full of joy...

Loki racked her brain thinking about it, but soon reconsidered and raised her head. She already had her answer. She'd leave everything to Alus' own desire. All she had to do was support him in whatever decision he made.

Finally, Sisty spoke. "I object. The Institute doesn't treat students differently based on their rank or status in the first place. It goes against policy to announce that Alus is actually a Single and the current ranked No. 1. Not to mention that it would cause a lot of confusion. It was the Governor-General's order to begin with, and I can't well go against that. Alus is already getting plenty of preferential treatment too...aren't you?"

"Who's to say? I don't really have any memories of that." There'd been the Elise incident yesterday and his special credits, but he still felt he was getting far more trouble than it was worth pushed onto him. "If I were to say, although the document you gave Lilisha helped settle the commotion down for a moment, I'm in awe that you would give me a suspension. I'll admit it's convenient...but that document was signed by you, wasn't it?" Alus stared at Sisty, and Loki, who knew about the incident, also gave her an accusing look.

"Ahh... Well, yes. I did prepare it, but that incident was a little bit of trouble, you know? I had to at least do that much to conceal your position."

"After that mock battle, you sounded so motivated when you said to leave

the rest up to you. And the result is this lousy cover-up?”

Sisty looked a little awkward at that. He’d practically saved the campus festival from massive turmoil, yet he was being punished, even if it was just a formality.

“Well, as it so happens, I’ll be gone from the Institute for a while... I believe you’ve heard that from Lettie already.”

“Vanalis, yes,” Sisty said, as if exasperated at his being in high demand, but at the same time she was relieved he’d changed the topic. She’d been a little concerned actually.

“Yes. So in the meantime, I want you to do me a favor when it comes to the classes and credits I’ll be missing. I’ve already talked to the Governor-General about the exemption as well,” Alus said sarcastically, in the same tone Lilisha had used when she told him what the document was about.

Sisty had no choice but to smile bitterly and nod.

Alus then pushed the point further. “Also, instead of calling it a suspension, I’d like you to make it a voluntary short-term absence from the Institute. Well, I’m sure Fia and others will come and appeal for the same thing.”

Sisty silently nodded to that as well. She knew how important reclaiming Vanalis was. Not only would it be a great achievement, but it would also serve to further strengthen Berwick’s position, which would keep any dissenters in check.

“And if it drags on for longer than expected, you can extend the absence. By the way, what will you do, Loki?”

“I will accompany you, of course!”

An expected answer. At the Friendship Magical Tournament, he made a promise with Loki to take her on any future missions. She was perfectly capable, and since spotters were basically useful in any situation, Alus had no objections. “All right, so do that for both of us.”

“Oh, what a cute extra!” Lettie exclaimed.

Sisty looked troubled as she was asked to abuse her authority twice over, but

Lettie happily hugged Loki from behind, which seemed to tickle her a little.

“Yes. May I accompany you too, Lady Lettie?”

“Of course. You’ll be more reliable than the guys in my squad!”

Lettie was probably flattering her. After all, when it came to each unit’s achievements, her squad was the best in Alpha. Not only were they skilled, but their techniques honed through real combat set them apart from ordinary military personnel. Loki’s actual battle experience probably didn’t compare.

Sisty topped up her glass with a pout, trying to escape reality, as Alus pressed the point further. “Then it’s decided. So take care of everything if you will, Principal.”

“... But after what happened yesterday, I’m still a little worried about security.”

“You might have forgotten this, but I’m just a student. You should try not to overly rely on me.”

“... How about using not only the military reinforcements, but your personal connections?” Loki had a suggestion, implying that Sisty should take responsibility for it herself.

Alus said, “I might have said this before, but don’t take the principal at her word. Especially when it comes to fighting power. If it comes down to it, she’ll just have to fight herself.”

“He’s right, lil Loki. This old bat is still strong enough to be an active-duty Magicmaster.”

“Huh? O-Of course, I suppose she is a former Single...” Loki had seen the principal’s capabilities for herself during the incident with Godma and the Dolls’ attack. Despite that, she couldn’t help but worry. After all, even between people who once shared the same rank, there was a large gap between those in the past and those in the present.

Research on magic was seeing progress every year, and with practice methods and know-how constantly improving, the Magicmasters’ powers were elevated in all ranks. As a result, Single Digit Magicmasters from half a century

ago would only be around a Double's level by today's standards.

Loki had been quick to assume that Sisty was no exception to that rule. But Alus called out to her with a somewhat stern look, wanting to correct that shallow understanding. "That's where you're wrong. Even if she returned to active duty, she still has enough power to be considered a Single." And inside the Institute grounds, he knew her power was further enhanced due to a unique barrier system. "So her security concerns are just an excuse for her to have fun."

"I-Is that so... Please excuse me."

"I'm not sure if I should be happy or angry. If I were to say just one thing... Lettie! Who are you calling an old bat?!"

Lettie averted her gaze, and tried to play it off to avoid the brunt of Sisty's anger.

"You're just as bad as when you were still here!" Sisty loudly sighed, feeling like she was getting pushed around by a mischievous child. She wanted to tell her to grow up, but held it in. She reconsidered after thinking that Lettie's childish side was a result of all the things she'd seen in the Outer World.

Former or not, Lettie was once her pupil. So she could still think of her as cute. The more difficult a child was, the more one could enjoy their growth.

Even now, Sisty could vividly remember the hardships she'd been put through back then. Ever since she became the principal, there hadn't been a student as troublesome as Lettie, excluding Alus. As a prestigious school, the Second Magical Institute had a lot of students from good families. To be frank, they were spoiled. Lettie, as something different from that, remained in her memories.

"Go on, get working for the nation." Sisty shooed them away, prompting Alus and Loki to turn their backs to her.

It was already dark outside, but they could still hear students' voices. That was when, suddenly, Sisty said, "Ms. Loki, do you have a moment?" to the slightly surprised silver-haired girl. "Don't worry too much about it. That woman might be physically mature, but she doesn't have as much guts as she makes it

sound.”

She hadn’t missed the pall of gloom that came over the young girl’s adolescent feelings. When Alus complimented Lettie’s outfit, whether he’d said it reluctantly or not, Loki’s heart hadn’t remained calm. Even if it was the result of her own actions, her heart was unsteady.

Sisty knew it was the kind of advice you’d expect from an old woman, but she still did it for the sake of consideration.

But the next moment, a figure forced her way in between them. That figure, Lettie, grabbed hold of Loki’s shoulders and spun her around. Then she turned her head and stuck her tongue out at Sisty. “We’re off now, granny,” she called out in a cheerful tone.

A fierce wind blew over their backs. It was a literal storm, blowing them away.

“Oh?” Alus said.

“Eeek!” Loki said.

“Ahahaha!” Lettie said.

After being blown away, Alus glanced over to see Sisty smiling eerily, pointing the index finger she was using to control the wind to send them on their way.

As they were blown out into the corridor, the two girls fell on top of him... From an outsider’s perspective, nobody could imagine them being high-ranking Magicmasters. And especially not that two of them were Singles.

“Hey, don’t get us caught up in it, Lettie.”

“Sisty’s the same as always.” Lettie was giggling like a child who’d found a new toy, clearly enjoying the experience. She was in high spirits.

That said, her outfit was now horribly wrinkled. After Loki helped her off of Alus’ back, she dusted her clothes off.

Finally, Alus stood up with a surly look. “To think she’d so brazenly use magic inside the Institute...”

“You don’t do that nowadays?”

“It’s typically forbidden.”

Sensing a generational gap from Lettie's words, Loki asked, "Was it not like that before?"

As her senior, Lettie casually spoke of the old days. "Well, it was pretty lax. Back then she would beat me up a lot. Like going for the face, even though I'm a girl."

"—!! Ah, I see she had a rather extreme educational policy in the past. She doesn't seem that way now," Loki said.

"I bet it was just her doing something stupid again like this time," Alus noted. "Going out of her way to piss off the principal."

"Ah, ya got me," Lettie joked. She looked a little happy. In the end, it seemed she hadn't come all the way over to the Institute just for the mission.

In any case, they couldn't keep talking in front of the witch's abode, so Alus took the initiative to start walking. His body would get wrecked if he stayed here with someone who poked sleeping bears for fun. "We'll get the details on our way there. When are you leaving?"

"Well, I'd leave that to your convenience, but I had a few troops head out ahead of us, so I'd prefer it if we left sooner rather than later." Meaning that the preparations were all but done, and all that was left was waiting for Alus to join in.

Tomorrow was a day off, so the timing was just right. That said, it was pretty much always used to clean up the mess caused by the campus festival. Because of that, there were plenty of classes looking to clean everything up today, so they could enjoy the entire day off tomorrow.

Fortunately for Alus and Loki, their class only needed to return some tools and deal with leftover prizes, which wouldn't take much time. In fact, he hoped they were already done by now. "Then I'll see you tomorrow before sunrise at the headquarters."

"Gotcha."

Alus turned to Loki. "Are you fine with that too, Loki?"

"Yes," Loki answered briefly and energetically.

“Now then, I guess we should get back to our class...things sure have been busy.” Frankly, Alus wanted to skip out on cleaning, but he couldn’t have both of them do that. So he muttered this to himself, as he reflected on the ups and downs of the campus festival.

***

Two hours had passed after Alus and Loki saw Lettie off.

Alus ignored his house arrest and continued with his security job, with Loki assisting him.

Despite the bustling activity in the distance, Lilisha was alone in a building in a corner of the Institute. This building featured an auditorium as well as several multipurpose halls. During the festival it was primarily used as a place for lectures for the guardians of prospective students.

Those lectures were over, so the auditorium was nearly deserted. A quiet, serene atmosphere prevailed in the building.

Lilisha was loitering in a self-study room in a far corner of the building. The room had a *No Trespassing* sign on the door, and there were no lights on inside.

A few moments later, the faint light of a virtual screen lit up a portion of the room.

Lilisha, who’d secretly entered the room and hidden from sight, tapped the virtual keys. Before long, a *Sending* message appeared on the screen. It would take less than a second for the transmission to finish.

But she didn’t bother to confirm this, as she stood from her chair and leaned against the wall. She pulled out a card-type device similar to a license from her chest pocket, and after pressing something on it, she put it against her ear.

Lilisha’s breathing was ragged, and even the ringtone made her heart jump. As she cleared her throat, the ringtone ended and she could hear some noise on the other end of the call. It was a private channel, but the other side was using jamming signals in case of wiretapping.

The momentary pause made her tremble. Beads of sweat ran down her back, and if she wasn’t bracing herself her legs would be shaking. During the silence,

Lilisha bit her lip to steel herself. “Brother... Yes, I’ve managed to blend in. I made contact with the No. 1... Yes.” Her passive response showed not only her strong respect towards the other party, but also a hint of fear. Considering the way she’d spoken to Alus, it was hard to believe that she could get so tense.

Eventually the other party seemed to blame her for something. “No...that’s not...” she said, desperately making excuses. Her focus was entirely on the other side of the call. She was so anxious to prove that she was valuable to the other party.

She’d called him *Brother*, but her way of speaking wasn’t how one would speak to a family member but to their absolute master.

Lilisha put her other hand over the one that held the card-type device. Each time she heard his cold, emotionless voice, her hand and voice trembled. At some point, she slumped down to the floor, her back sliding against the wall.

This was a regular check-in regarding her mission she’d been given by her family. It included gathering information on Alus. To unveil the power that put him at No. 1.

Lilisha had joined the military a few months ago, and had received the mission to monitor Alus by the Governor-General, thanks to her family’s backing and working behind the scenes. Part of why she’d been picked was also because she was close to Alus in age. She would be able to naturally blend in with the students at the Institute.

Being able to perform a secret mission for her family alongside her military one was very convenient to boot. The mission her family gave her was to gather information on the mock battle incident, or rather, the intruder that attacked the Institute.

However, all Lilisha had to report was the name of Minalis and nothing else. After all, Alus wasn’t going to slip up.

Once she told her brother everything, she heard a sigh of disappointment, as if he’d figured it all out already.

Lilisha’s shoulders stiffened, but she quickly snapped back to reality and hastily tried to cover for her blunder. She mentioned another piece of

information she hoped would be worth something. “The theft that happened at the exhibition hall has come to light. I have already sent over the material.”

Alus had been the one to arrest the thieves, but Lilisha had information that Alpha’s nobility was involved with those corporate spies. Although they were a branch of the Rimfuge family, the Frusevans worked in the shadows to maintain the order within the human domain. That duty included purging nobles that strayed too far from the ruler’s intentions. Meaning that the collection of information regarding nobles should be somewhat appreciated... At least Lilisha believed it would contribute to her family. There was an issue of jurisdiction with the local army, but if nobility was involved...

However, no praise came from the other side. If anything... “What a stupid, useless sister. That matter has already been dealt with.”

All Lilisha could do was let out a surprised gasp.

“I never expected anything from you to begin with. Dumping you on the military for a mission was the right thing to do. They’ll gladly take in a failure if they can use some magic.”

“Brother, w-what do you...” Lilisha asked with a trembling voice, her eyes opened wide.

However, in spite of her desperation, the cold voice mercilessly said, “I’m not listening to this,” and hung up.

***

Once they parted ways with Lettie, Alus and Loki headed for their class. But by the time they arrived, the clean-up was already finished. It was hard to tell if it was good or bad timing.

None of their classmates in the classroom looked particularly exhausted. But their eyes glancing at Alus were full of curiosity. They must have already heard about his house arrest. The fact that Alus and Loki had been called to the principal’s office only further spurred their imagination. But with Lilisha’s aid and the matter of house arrest being delicate, they probably felt too uncomfortable to ask directly about it. So despite the carefree atmosphere, nobody called out to Alus and Loki.

In the midst of this atmosphere, a familiar face stepped up, looking a little embarrassed. It was Alice. She'd mainly been involved in the mock battles, but she was the elected class representative as well.

Alus and Loki moved to the back of the classroom, and sitting there was a girl with characteristic red hair.

"Good work."

"Yeah... you too," Alus answered, and Tesfia asked in a whisper, "Was everything okay?"

"It's fine. There weren't any problems."

Tesfia was concerned after hearing about Alus' house arrest, and then his being called to the principal's office. At this rate, she might actually go and appeal to the principal like Alus had told Sisty.

"I was a little surprised too, but we've already talked it through. That's why you don't have to do anything. In fact, it's like I owe her. The house arrest was convenient for me... Anyways, don't try to do anything stupid, okay?"

She looked questioningly at Alus.

"G-Good work, everyone." That was when Alice nervously spoke up and bowed deeply at the podium. They were all classmates here, so she didn't need to go that far, but that was the kind of girl Alice was. It was their first campus festival, and the first time the class had come together as one. Anyone would feel more humble than necessary. "Uhm, with this, the campus festival has come to an end. There were some problems along the way, but we were able to overcome them with everyone's cooperation. I thank you very much."

Alice struggled with her speech, despite the notes in her hand. One would think she'd be able to speak a little more fluidly. But seeing her with flushed cheeks and stuttering speech was somehow relaxing in a way.

"What a strange sight," Alus whispered to Loki, who agreed. She didn't need to give a speech to the students. She could have just let them go for the day, and then used the contact network to send out individual messages to their licenses.

Even so, nobody complained as they listened to Alice speak. They likely wanted to enjoy their feeling of accomplishment and sense of unity a little longer.

However, this kind of unity that the students felt was something Alus and Loki didn't fully understand. It was a confusing sensation, like they'd suddenly been thrown into a different world they knew nothing about.

Once Alice was done with her speech, the classroom was enveloped in a peaceful mood as the students relaxed after their hard work. The feeling of liberation led to a high-spirited atmosphere.

Unable to keep up with the change in mood, Alice gazed at the students with a vague smile and scratched her cheek.

That was when a new figure, Ciel, appeared at the podium. She was gripping a small piece of paper, a note of some sort. She took the stage with great vigor, puffing up her chest, and followed Alice's speech with a joyful look on her face. "It has already been announced, so some of you might already know...but our stall was the number one student attraction in terms of the greatest number of customers! Well, if you include the survey evaluations we're in overall third place..."

Ciel added that the valuable prizes might have been a minus, but the students didn't seem to care, as they all cheered. An air of excitement filled the room and they all started applauding. It grew in intensity until it became like a storm that could be heard from outside the classroom.

Alus' cheek twitched, as the noise grew so loud he worried his eardrums might burst. Yet even though he struggled to get used to the mood in the Institute, he didn't feel too displeased right now.

"Well, it was all thanks to Sir Alus' prizes," Loki muttered to herself.

"Don't say that. The point is that they all came together and accomplished something," Alus replied with a wry smile. It wasn't like he didn't understand what she wanted to say, but he couldn't have run the stall himself. Some things could only be done as a class. "Besides, my prizes didn't amount to much. Yours, Alice's, and Fia's prizes contributed to attracting customers, too." If anything, they were the main prizes among the men, but he kept that to

himself.

“I see. Yes, I understand,” Loki replied in a somewhat happy tone.

Just then, Alus happened to recall the unidentified mysterious stuffed animal that Tesfia had made.

“Is something the matter?” Loki curiously asked, when she saw Alus smile.

“I wish I could have shown you her stuffed animal,” he said, indicating Tesfia with his eyes.

In turn, Tesfia averted her gaze with a glum expression, and sighed. “So you saw it. It’s fine, because someone took it.”

“... I bet it was an accident. They probably were aiming for something else and happened to hit yours.” Alus couldn’t help but be amused when he recalled it. It was creepy and he’d even mistaken it for a Fiend at first, but Tesfia insisting it was a dog just made it even funnier. “Then again, perhaps that’s another part of the festival to enjoy.” It was a student-run festival, after all. It’d be rather tasteless to have a line-up of nothing but commercial prizes.

“If you’re going to go that far, do you want me to make you one too?”

“I wouldn’t need it, even if it was only meant to be a sample model of a Fiend. But if it had been left over, maybe I could have hung it up in my room.”

Of course, the prizes made by the three girls were the stall’s main attractions, and they’d all been taken, but if any had been left over it would’ve been pretty sad in its own right. Alus wasn’t actually making fun of the quality of the stuffed animal. In fact, he felt the way it looked showed that Tesfia had put a lot of effort and hard work into making it.

“Fine. I know it was ugly... I can’t make something as well as Loki or Alice.” Admirably enough, the person herself was self-aware about her work.

Well, it looks like she spent more time and effort than anyone usually would, so I’m sure the guy who got it won’t discard it. For some reason, Alus felt like it concerned him too, so he reflected on the ugly stuffed animal one more time. With some pity in his heart, he wished the best for the stuffed animal. Just the fact that someone had taken it was praiseworthy.

And in fact, all of the prizes in the corner of the classroom had been left unclaimed. Some of what Alus had submitted remained as well, but that was partly because he'd submitted many items and assumed that some would be returned.

When he looked at Tesfia, he saw she was nodding off. She must have been quite exhausted. With a slight smile, in the noisy surroundings, he thought back on the campus festival. He'd mostly been busy working behind the scenes, so he hadn't really been able to fully enjoy it as a student. In fact, one could say he hadn't even been able to completely handle the security work left to him. But now that it was over, he realized it really had been a busy time. To Alus, it had been a long two days.

In the midst of his thoughts, Ciel climbed up to the podium again. Someone noticed and turned their attention to her, which spread to the other students, and the class naturally fell silent.

With all attention on her, Ciel proudly thrust her hand forward in an exaggerated pose. "Heh, silence please... I have new information. Our class might have missed being the overall number one in the survey..." She paused for effect. "But in terms of profit, we're at the top! So it's time for what you've been waiting for! Let's distribute the profits!"

For the campus festival, the stalls were allowed to distribute profits within the classes. As Ciel reported, they'd made the most profit...and so all of the students (Alus excluded) waited with high expectations.

But as one would expect from the well-behaved students of the Second Magical Institute, nobody wore a vulgar expression. Some even played it off by feigning looks of indifference.

However—"Hey, you're drooling," Alus blurted out, seeing how Tesfia was reacting to the idea.

An astonished Loki followed up. "Talk about greedy..."

Tesfia's cheeks turned as red as an apple, and she instinctively wiped her mouth with her sleeve. "N-Nothing's coming out?!" Realizing she was being teased, she glared at Alus.

“Hm, maybe I was just seeing things. But it looks like that woke you up.”

Tesfia had looked sleepy, but when Ciel started talking about splitting up the profits, she’d snapped wide awake. She might be the daughter of the Fable family, but for various reasons she had to work to support herself, so she absolutely wanted some pocket money.

“You really are straightforward, aren’t you?”

“...” Tesfia didn’t deny it or object. Instead she hid her red cheeks by turning away. It was a fair reward for the work she’d put in, so it was really nothing to complain about. It was just very like her.

But those trivial matters aside, a small safe-like device was brought up to the podium. It was used to collect and manage money used for loans, but it also had the function of paying out sums. When the students pressed their licenses against it, money was transferred to them.

In the blink of an eye, a line formed. It was just a student event so it wasn’t much money, but they were still happy about it.

Alus was looking at the line with a smile, when he noticed Tesfia holding her license in her hand and glancing his way. “How annoying. I won’t say anything, so just get in line already.”

“I know that! Come on, you two—” Taking Alus’ hand in her own, Tesfia tried to get him to line up as well. It seemed she wanted to avoid looking shallow by having Alus accompany her, instead of lining up alone.

“I don’t need that small change.”

“Me neither. Si—Alus and I don’t really...”

Having expected Loki to react like that, Tesfia let out a sigh. “That’s not what this is about. This was an event, and it’s not a small amount of money... There’s meaning for the class as a whole to receive this money. Both you and Loki contributed to the class.”

“... Is that how it is?”

“That’s how it is.”

From Alus and Loki’s point of view, they couldn’t really agree, but there was

certainly a sense of solidarity among the students. That kind of atmosphere and camaraderie might look meaningless, but it did have a meaning. Ultimately, the two of them were pushed to the back of the line by Tesfia.

Humming to herself in high spirits, Tesfia took her place in line in front of them. She'd meant what she said, but at the same time, she looked a little relieved to be able to get paid without any worries.

When it was finally his turn, Alus casually reached into his pocket and pulled out his license to press against the card reader.

Meanwhile, Tesfia, who'd just done the same, was gazing at the numbers on her license with sparkles in her eyes, probably hearing the sound of money clinking in her head. At the same time, she was muttering to herself about what she would have for dinner today.

Well, whatever, Alus thought with a wry smile.

Before long, they were dismissed for the day, but it didn't take long for talk of having a party on their day off to come up.

"That's why I want you to keep tomorrow open," Ciel said, stopping Alus and Loki from joining the flood of students leaving the classroom. "To be more specific, there will be a buffet for all the students in the multipurpose hall, but we decided to gather in the classroom first. And those who can cook will bring food with them," she continued happily.

Alice seemed to agree with her. "I was thinking this kind of thing would be nice for a change. So why don't you two come too, Al, Loki dear?" It wasn't compulsory, but with her being so motivated she wasn't going to let them escape, as she grabbed Loki's hand. "Let's cook something together," she urged.

However, Alus just shrugged. "That would be difficult. Sorry, but I have an important errand tomorrow."

Alice looked a little puzzled, then timidly turned to Loki. "Don't tell me... You too?"

"Yes, I am sorry, but I won't attend tomorrow."

"It's something we can't miss."

Alice’s shoulders drooped in disappointment. Alus felt a little bad for her, but he’d made the promise with Lettie a while ago, and he’d also talked with the Governor-General and Sisty, so it was all set. He couldn’t enjoy the aftermath of the festival forever.

“Hey, is that...” Tesfia asked, coming over, but she quickly fell silent when she saw Alus’ face. As someone who understood his circumstances, she had a dim idea of what was going on.

As if to dispel the mood, Ciel stepped in and brightly said, “I see, that’s too bad. But if you find the time, let’s have a party with everyone.” She didn’t know about his circumstances, but she could sense the strange atmosphere.

“Well, our hands were full with security and mock battles, so maybe that would be good for us,” Loki suggested as a kind of compromise. Alus also understood that, and added on an “Eventually.”

That’s when he noticed that his voice sounded so clear because the five of them were the only ones left in the classroom. He thought he could finally take his leave, but...

Then Ciel raised her voice as if she’d come up with a brilliant idea. “Ah! Then let’s have an after-party with the five of us. That said, all we can really do is eat some food,” she finished with an embarrassed smile.

Alus could tell that ever since yesterday’s incident, the other classmates were keeping their distance from him. Ciel, on the other hand, showed no such unnecessary consideration, and nor did she change how she behaved around him. Then again, he felt like it had backfired on him on this occasion.

While he was looking for an excuse to refuse, Alice clapped her hands. “That’s a good idea. That way I can prepare food with Loki, and it is our first campus festival, after all. So let’s do it!”

“That’s true. I’m tired, so let’s hurry up and finish the preparations,” Tesfia said. Despite looking tired, she was surprisingly motivated.



This happened just as Alus was about to point out how tired everyone was as a way to get out of it, so it was horrible timing. The girls' dorm curfew was pushed back for today as well, so he couldn't use that as an excuse either. It seemed the outcome was decided the moment Alice clapped her hands.

From then on, the conversation proceeded so quickly that Alus had no room to object. There was no longer any way to escape, so he smiled wryly to himself, and signaled Loki with his eyes.

Tesfia's words became the deciding factor, and Ciel took the initiative to arrange for shopping and the other things they would need. Finally... "I forgot to ask, but where are we doing this?" she said, having forgotten about the first thing they should have decided.

Tesfia and Alice immediately answered, making Alus' bad hunch a reality, "Al's room."

"Huh... That sounds good to me!"

Alus and Loki tried their best to resist, but there were three girls against them, and so they ended up giving in.

Fifty-First Chapter

Wake Up at Night

In contrast to how noisy it had been during the day, it was dead silent now. The coming of night had absorbed all sound as the busy day came to an end.

As the night settled in, the number of students still out and about gradually became fewer. The lights in the training grounds and auditorium had been turned off long ago, and the streets on the campus were lit with a few streetlights. The remaining vestiges of the campus festival were some stalls that were left standing.

However, a bright light was still on in a corner of the research building. From inside, the voices of laughing girls could be heard, as if the festival was continuing on for them. They were probably enjoying their youth, letting their vigor carry them through the night. Forgetting all about their exhaustion, they were chatting to their hearts' content.

They all prepared dinner together, and opened up the candy bag they'd bought with the money from the festival...but first, they toasted the occasion with some juice. After that, they began their girl talk that had no end in sight.

Alus and Loki were more or less forced to spend the time with the girls, but they were spacing out.

Eventually, the clock passed midnight, and welcomed a new day. The girls ignored any idea of curfew they might have had, and slept on the sofa, table, or wherever they pleased in the laboratory. That's when Alus opened his eyes.

Loki had woken up first, and the sound of her gently opening the door had then woken him. "Sir Alus, I decided to speak with Ms. Felinella just in case." She really was considerate when it came to these kinds of things. She must've made arrangements with Felinella, who was the dorm supervisor, so that the three girls wouldn't be punished for breaking curfew.

“I see. I gave her a quick call yesterday, but they never did go back to the dorm.”

“Well, this time is an exception.”

“You can say that again. Feli sure has it tough, though. I should speak with Sisty about it later.” With a wry smile, Alus looked over at the three girls still fast asleep. “All right, let’s get ready without waking them up.”

... Fifteen minutes later. “Are you tired?” Loki considerately asked him at the front door. She’d been kept up late by Tesfia and the others too, so she’d not slept any more than Alus had.

“Don’t worry. We’ll be able to get some rest when we get there. I wouldn’t want to go to the Outer World half asleep,” Alus replied jokingly.

“Yes, gladly. I’m a little tired after yesterday,” Loki said with a dry smile, to which Alus answered briefly with a “Me too” as they prepared to leave the laboratory behind.

In reality, marching on without sleep wasn’t uncommon in the Outer World. Loki had also trained to be able to go without sleep for two or three days. The tiredness she was feeling was probably not from exhaustion, but from having gotten her fill. The last two days had brought a lot of fresh and new experiences to her.

That said... After the attack and Lilisha’s appearance, Alus’ life at the Institute was becoming more and more unstable. There were plenty of concerns that weren’t going to go away, and there were things he would need to take care of in the future. It seemed he would never be freed from such troubles.

Even so, the Second Magical Institute was a place where he could temporarily forget about all that. After glancing at the three girls’ peaceful sleeping faces through the gap in the door, Alus left the scene behind him.

Two figures blended in with the darkness, then ran in the direction of the military headquarters.

***

No matter how late at night it was, or how close to dawn, this place never

slept.

This was the outermost reach of the human domain. Beyond the absolute protective barrier projected by the Tower of Babel was the world humanity once lived in.

Before the grand barrier was a massive fortress, Alpha's military headquarters. Because the highest authority of the military had to remain ever vigilant, it was placed closest to the frontlines within the barrier.

It was a fortress where Magicmasters who put their lives on the line every day gathered for the lofty cause of humanity's future, hoping to be able to temporarily forget about everything and get some well-deserved rest.

Upon their arrival, Alus and Loki immediately headed for the nap room. There were still a few hours before dawn, so they had the time to spare. The two didn't hesitate to devote that to sleep. Anyone who had been in the military for a while had mastered the trick of entering a deep, if brief, sleep. It was absolutely necessary in order to survive in the Outer World.

Incidentally, the nap room could be used by any soldier, but it was tight, with each bed just barely large enough for a single person. It was a space purely for the act of sleeping.

The time being what it was, there weren't many people moving about in the headquarters. Those who were around seemed to be headed for an early shift, or returning to their rooms while holding back yawns.

When they noticed Alus, some who weren't up to date looked at him suspiciously, while those in the know hurriedly saluted. Either way, it was just annoying right now.

The nap room was divided into two separate rooms of small beds lined up next to each other, and capsule-style beds affixed to the wall. Alus and Loki ultimately went with the capsule beds, because despite how small they were, people would be less likely to disturb them there.

And the two slept like machines. Deeply, ever so deeply, forgetting all about their peaceful lives at the Institute, their consciousnesses completely shifting towards something suitable for the Outer World.

Eventually the sky started to lighten. Alus woke up on the wrong side of the bed, unusually enough for him. He'd been practically forced awake by the presence of someone moving near him. It was one of the most unbearable ways for him to wake up.

He turned around in bed and unhappily opened his eyes a little. "What do you think you're doing?"

"Giving you the best way of waking up," Lettie said with a mischievous smile, close enough for their faces to touch.

Alus clicked his tongue in his mind, as if to scold himself for his carelessness. He'd never been so deep asleep that he didn't notice someone getting in bed with him. He even entertained the excuse that maybe he was tired because of the campus festival. It seemed those mere two days had exhausted him more than he knew. "Best? I think you mean worst. And it's too hot."

"Well, we are sleeping together, after all."

He sighed. "Is it time already?"

"That's right, it's time for good kids to wake up. The bad adults are all ready to go."

He never expected he'd keep Lettie waiting. Looking at the clock, there was still some time left. However, Alus was only called in to help with this mission, so he was planning on following the instructions of the squad's commander.

As he sat up, the sheet slid off, revealing Lettie in her usual military uniform. But even that was quite revealing. "I'll get ready right away. You go wake up Loki." Loki's capsule was next to Alus' capsule.

Hearing that, Lettie burst into a smile. "He he, looks like I can still enjoy myself a while longer." She covered her smile with her hand, but it was so obvious. Glancing over at the wall where Loki was sleeping on the other side, she wriggled her fingers in anticipation...

The next moment, the capsule door popped open. From inside, a small figure, a hurrying Loki, jumped out. It seemed she'd changed into nightwear before going to sleep, as she wore a thick camisole and shorts. She'd been sensitive enough to pick up on Lettie's wicked intentions, and leaped into action at a

quick speed. Shaking her silver hair, she immediately turned to Alus, but her eyes met with Lettie's, who was sitting on the edge of his bed.

"Good morning, lil Loki."

"!! G-Good morning, Lady Lettie. By the way, why are you in Sir Alus' bed?"

"That's an adult secret," Lettie grinned, but in the next moment she was pushed out of the capsule bed by Alus.

"Y-You don't mean...a night raid?!"

"Don't be so unrefined... Besides, it's not night anymore, it's dawn."

"I-I guess so...?" Loki was still a little sleepy, so she racked her brain as she gazed out the window and saw some light. She was a bit relieved, but shocked at the same time. Sisty had said that Lettie didn't have the courage for it, but she was at least bold enough to sneak into his room...

Ahh, I can't think straight... No matter how much she might shake her head, she wasn't going to snap awake, but she still struggled to organize her thoughts and attempt a rebuttal. "B-But Lady Lettie, crawling into Sir Alus' bed is pretty imprudent. There's a call button on the wall."

"You know, I gotta get in my regular check on my sleeping squad members. If you miss that, it has an effect on our teamwork," Lettie said, like this was common sense, despite being a simple excuse full of holes. "You do it too, dontcha?"

"... No, I wouldn't—"

"If you can't deny it right away, I guess we're like birds of a feather."

Loki's confusion only increased as Lettie grinned at her, and she couldn't come up with a counterargument. Well, it was true she was familiar with the concept, so she wouldn't have been able to counter it right away even if she'd been fully awake.

"Still," Lettie said, "this nap room is as cramped as ever. It can't be helped that people keep bumping into each other."

"Bumping into each other?!" Loki blushed as indecent thoughts popped into her head. It was a comment she couldn't overlook, but at the same time, her

adolescent curiosity ran wild. “W-W-W-What do you mean ‘bumping into each other’?” With her bedhead bouncing up and down, Loki approached Lettie in a panic.

Meanwhile, Lettie only mumbled, “Hehe. Are you going to make me say it out loud?”

However, Alus brought the farce to an end. “Hey! Quit making a racket in the nap room, you’re being a nuisance. And Loki, hurry up and get ready already, or we’ll leave you behind.”

“Oh, aren’t you in a bad mood. Were you always this bad in the morning, Allie?”

Alus glanced back from the doorway, throwing a cold glare at Lettie. “I don’t want to hear that from you. Who kills their presence to sneak into someone’s bed? Normally, I just would have punched you.”

“Sounds like you were pretty tired. Didn’t you notice that I rubbed my cheek against you and patted your head?”

“... If you did, I would definitely punch you.”

If Loki had heard this, she would’ve been relieved over Lettie’s lie being exposed, but unfortunately she was gone. After Alus’ warning, she’d jumped into her capsule bed and gotten ready in a hurry.

When she returned in a fluster, she’d changed her clothes and had her bag slung over her shoulder. She also looked to be a little out of breath.

“Hey, I’m sorry for waking you up a little early. You still have time to get ready.” That said, Lettie showed no signs of regret.

With a resentful look, Alus seemed to be saying that you couldn’t be too careful around her.

At Lettie’s direction, Alus and Loki moved to the changing room, where they made their final preparations for the Outer World. Perhaps because of the time, there was no one else around. However, it wasn’t the shared changing room used by lower-ranking Magicmasters, but one prepared specifically for Lettie’s squad. There were private rooms with showers for every one of them, and they

even came with a full range of toiletries. Considering the difficulty of their missions that was only natural, and the room left nothing to be desired.

As a side note, many of these rooms for the troops were shared by both men and women. As far as Alus knew, divisions of men's and women's shower rooms were mostly based on arrangements made by the squads themselves.

On the other hand, men and women were practically always separated for the large baths, but Lettie having the personality that she did, the distinctions between men and women in her squad were rather loose.

As such, Alus and Loki ended up in the same room. For civilians that would be one thing, but for the military it was nothing to make a fuss about. With both of them having been raised in the military, they treated it as normal and each got into their own preparations with changes of clothes they'd brought with them, and then entered shower rooms next to each other.

They didn't exchange any words either, simply opening the doors to their showers. That was followed by the rustling sounds of clothing coming off, and after a while, footsteps, and then the sound of the showers turning on.

Warm water rained down on the tiled floor, with steam coming out of the slight gaps at the tops of the shower doors. Despite being so used to it, this time Alus was feeling strangely unsettled. The sound of water coming from the next stall reached his ears, making him feel a slight frustration, and combined with the silence it made him uncomfortable.

At the same time, he got an urge to say something to Loki. It was odd because that had never happened before in any of the many missions he'd been on, he thought, as he took his shower.

"Sir Alus, why did you accept this mission? You said it was a promise with Lady Lettie."

As the voice came from the other side of the wall, Alus was a little astonished. Maybe she was feeling the same way, or perhaps she'd opened up because it was just the two of them here. Either way, he hadn't expected her to call out to him.

But thinking about it, there was no rule that said you couldn't have

conversations in the shower.

Alus was a little surprised, but he had no reason to ignore her. As he scrubbed his body, he gave her a simple “Yeah...”

He hadn’t given it any deeper thought, but still needed some time to think of an answer. It wasn’t like he and Lettie were strangers, but in the past he wouldn’t have helped without expecting something in return. Besides, Lettie’s squad had been ordered to assist Alus in defeating Demi Azur, so he didn’t really have a debt to repay.

Only one thing came to mind. He wasn’t helping Lettie because she was a Single, or because they were both soldiers of Alpha. It was probably because he was drawn to Lettie as a person.

However, the more he unraveled that thought, the more embarrassed and reluctant he became to put it into words. So he decided to be straightforward. “It’s not like we owe each other anything. I would say...she and her squad remind me of the old days.”

“...?” Loki was speechless.

Alus wiped off his body and looked up, staring at the drops of water running down the wall, while in reality his mind was somewhere far away.

A bit later, he sensed that Loki had finished up her shower too. That silence only amplified his embarrassment, so he uncomfortably moved from the shower stall to the changing room while waiting for her response.

However, there was no answer from Loki. “What’s wrong? You’re the one who asked.” After putting on half of his clothing, he finally couldn’t take it anymore and asked her. As the buckle of his belt clanged, his voice filled the changing room. And then—

“Sir Alus, are you curious about Lady Lettie?”

“What?” Her question was probably because of what happened earlier, but it was still too abrupt. Alus ruffled his wet hair and glanced over with dismay in his eyes. “I’m not curious. It’s the opposite. She lives a completely different life from me, yet she seems to be having a great time,” he calmly said, before adding *I’m sure* in his mind. “So maybe what I should aim for as a Magicmaster

is the place Lettie is at.” He managed to wrap up the essence of the situation in an evasive tone.

That was all he could do. He’d never spoken his mind so frankly before. He still wasn’t used to it, but he felt like he’d been reflecting on things a lot lately. His resistance to saying these words seemed to mysteriously disappear when he was with Loki.

Yet again, there was no answer. The awkward pause made the atmosphere in the changing room uncomfortable. To be frank meant not letting others’ opinions or one’s own self-restraint filter what one said. It was like a child saying the first thing that popped into their mind.

Alus suddenly realized that he wanted someone to hear him out. It wasn’t like he wanted her to tell him if his thoughts were correct or not. He just wanted her to sympathize. “No, was that a lifestyle I gave up long ago? ... I’m not sure if that’s an answer, though,” he said questioningly, because he was unclear on it himself.

It was like a vague wish in a dream, an ideal that couldn’t be expressed in words. He thought that Lettie and the troops she led must have been full of that. So it wasn’t what he should aim for, but what he wanted to aim for.

As he pulled on his shirt, he felt a sentimentality that he couldn’t get rid of, making him feel very vexed. Unexpectedly, putting his thoughts into words wasn’t as refreshing as he’d hoped. In fact, he was very self-conscious, and after he said it, he felt shy.

As a result, rather than a shift in mood, Alus was left with a bitter feeling... but shortly thereafter, he could hear the sounds of hurried footsteps behind the shower room door.

“... Are you done changing?”

“Hm? Yeah, mostly.”

Loki opened the door ever so slightly, and stuck her head out. She wore a bright smile, as if she couldn’t hold her joy in, and with a relaxed expression she stared straight at Alus.



He stopped putting on his clothes, and stared back at her. Loki's silver hair was soaking wet, as she'd just finished her shower. The wet strands of hair clung to her face and the water dripped down on the tiled floor. The figure peeking out through the small gap looked unguarded, giving her a childlike naivete. She probably had nothing wrapped around her body either. Even though there was no one else around, she'd never done anything that bold in the laboratory where they lived together.

At the same time, Alus didn't know what he'd said that had pulled at her heartstrings like that. Her cheeks were a beautiful shade of pink. With her eyes wide, Loki stared straight at him. "Sir Alus!"

"W-What." He was taken aback by her forcefulness.

Seeing that, Loki gave him a toothy grin. "I think that's great. I'm happy to hear how you feel, but more than anything, I am so happy that you decided to put it into words."

Since she looked so happy, he felt somewhat foolish; but he could understand what she was saying. Alus rarely ever spoke about his inner thoughts. If he did it was under orders, in situations he couldn't escape from.

This time there were no such circumstances. He'd made up his own mind. It may have seemed like a small difference, but it was actually a very large one.

But at the same time, he asked himself if it really meant all that much. Loki's words were probably correct, and he could objectively understand it was a sign he was changing. But it didn't feel real. "Is that how it is...?" he asked in a listless tone, as if it concerned someone else.

However, words of affirmation immediately came back at him. "That's how it is!"

Resistance to change was something everyone was familiar with. And not even Alus was an exception to that. However, nothing would change if he simply froze in place because of his hesitation. If only one person, like Loki who was smiling at him right now, were to stay by his side, he wouldn't end up staying frozen. Especially when that smile was filled with compassion.

"Well, that aside... Loki, you're going to catch a cold if you stay like that."

“—?! T-That’s true.” It wasn’t until then that Loki realized what state she was in. She tucked her head back in.

Before long, Alus and Loki, now fully prepared, headed for the nearby waiting room. It was also referred to as the squad room, and it was where the squad would be briefed before a mission. Moreover, when said squad belonged to a Single, its scale and equipment were in a league of their own. Of course that cost quite a bit, but Lettie’s squad had achieved more than any other in the nation.

Aside from Alus, who rarely appeared in public, it was Lettie Kultunca who was the leading Magicmaster of Alpha and a symbol of Alpha’s power. She and her squad had the power to support the foundation of the military.

Upon their arrival, Alus, ready to get going at any moment, knocked on the door. In response to his knock, the thick door was opened. Inside were skilled veteran Magicmasters everywhere he looked, all waiting for Alus.

When they recognized Alus and Loki, they rose from their chairs and welcomed him with an orderly salute.

They all gave off a fierce aura. Alus, who’d fought alongside them, was one thing, but Loki tensed up whether she wanted to or not. Tesfia and Alice would probably stiffen to the point that they couldn’t even move in their overpowering presences. If it weren’t for the military uniforms they wore, they could easily be taken for a bunch of villains you’d see casually strolling through a black market.

“Oh, you’re here.” In the back was someone calling them over in an out-of-place cheery voice. Lettie wasn’t sitting in a chair but on top of a desk, and Alus gave her a criticizing stare.

Lettie’s attitude aside, there was a stiff mood in the air. As an elite squad, Alus recalled them being much more relaxed when fighting Fiends, but today they were being quite well-mannered. They formed neat lines to the left and right, leaving the middle open to greet Alus and Loki. It was as if his every move was being watched, making him uncomfortable, but he continued down the path in the middle.

It wasn’t like he knew everyone in Lettie’s squad, but from what he could see

there were many rather powerful Magicmasters.

There were high-ranking Magicmasters that had helped with eliminating the Devourer, including Sajik and Mujir. But this time there were others too. They were all personally recruited by Lettie for their power, and Alus seemed to know some of their faces.

That said, Lettie didn't actively recruit all of the best ones in the nation. If she, as a Single, did that, it would lead to a major imbalance in the military overall. As a matter of fact, one of the characteristics of her squad was that many of its members grew dramatically.

Mujir was one of those members, and after joining her squad his ranking had shot up to the level of Double Digit. In other words, Lettie took into account not just their power but their potential as well.

"Sir Alus, have you recovered from your injuries?" Mujir took the initiative to call out to him in a friendly tone. His words were out of honest concern for Alus.

"Yeah, there was no problem. Actually, why don't you all sit down already, you don't have to go all out like this," Alus replied without hesitation, but as he looked around at the people who'd taken a seat, it seemed there were many he wasn't familiar with. Meaning that only a small portion of the squad had accompanied him to eliminate the Devourer.

So he could understand the somewhat nervous mood. In short, the majority of them didn't know what kind of person Alus—the top of all Magicmasters—was. Their captain Lettie was a friendly individual, but they knew she was unique in that regard. Which was why they were worried that it would be disrespectful if they treated him the same way as their captain. At the very least, they'd sat back down like Alus requested.

The atmosphere was still uncomfortable as Alus and Loki walked up to Lettie. "How about you get started? You don't have much time, right?" Alus spat out, as he recalled what happened in the nap room. She shouldn't have woken him up a little early just to tease him. He'd anticipated that it wouldn't be a strategy meeting, but instead a simple exchange of information. He'd only gotten the gist of it in the principal's office, so he should get more details here.

"All right everyone, quiet down," Lettie said, jumping off the desk. At that, all

the rugged faces turned serious and looked in her direction at once, which was impressive but also a little creepy. It was like students turning to look at their teacher, but the “students” resembled hardened criminals, so it just looked all wrong.

That aside, a screen in the room showed a detailed map of Vanalis, as well as the Fiends they could expect to encounter there. As someone who specialized in research, Alus could perfectly remember all of it just by giving it a single look-over. He guessed that the important information would be handed out on paper or something. Yet nothing of the sort reached his hands. In fact, there were no signs of any papers being handed out.

“Hey, hand them out already,” he said, as he held his hand out to Lettie. But she just looked down at his hand questioningly. “You brought me here to share more detailed information, didn’t you?”

“Ah! That’s not it.”

Following that, Loki sent a puzzled glance at Lettie. In response, she shifted to the side. “All right, listen up everybody... First off, introduce yourself, Allie.”

“What?”

Alus raised an eyebrow, but Lettie just continued, “Okay, go ahead,” like it was the most natural thing in the world. He was stunned.

“Geez, you’re so shy. Oh, fine.” Lettie shrugged, and shook her head a few times as if she’d seen it coming. That attitude made Alus’ cheek twitch.

Seeing that, Mujir panicked and leaned forward to cover for his captain. “I’m sorry. This is kind of like a tradition when joining the squad.”

Alus held his head, as he felt a headache coming on. Thinking about it, it made sense, but it felt way too late now.

“Since Allie is so bad at speaking, I’ll introduce him for you. Like some of you already know, he’s Alpha’s ranked No. 1 and Governor-General Berwick’s favorite. And the cutie next to him is his partner, lil Loki. Okay, applause, everyone!”

It was a complete farce, but the squad still stood up to give a standing

ovation. There was even some finger whistling.

“All right, now get along with our new members,” Lettie continued as a matter of course, but there was something in her statement that Alus couldn’t overlook.

He raised his voice in protest, not going to let it slip by. “I haven’t joined your squad. I’m just giving you a helping hand.”

“Boo. It’s easier to have your names on the roster... Anyways, Allie and lil Loki will be helping us out on this mission.”

There were voices of blatant, feigned surprise that rang out.

“Well, just think of them as special aides. So let’s go take back Vanalis. By the way, unlike with the Devourer, you’ll be under my command, Allie.”

“Of course. I don’t have any objections to that.”

Loki was treated the same way, but she showed an obvious look of disapproval, as she’d been planning on only obeying Alus. He picked up on that, but it couldn’t be helped. It would be inefficient for her to only follow his orders in a squad. Even in an elite squad like this, a spotter was too valuable a resource to be devoted to one individual.

And so he called out to her, “You’ll have to deal with it. And take a good look at this squad, there’s a lot you can learn from them.”

“I understand.” Satisfied for now, Loki turned to gaze at the squad again. She felt that Alus was right. Sure, they looked a little vulgar, but they were all battle-hardened veterans. She was aware of her lack of ability. Steeling herself, she lowered her head. “I may be inexperienced, but I look forward to working with you!”

The squad warmly welcomed the girl’s laudable greeting. She called herself inexperienced, but those who had been on the Devourer mission knew she was the primary reason Alus’ life had been saved. They hadn’t even been there when Alus was in danger. She might have felt unworthy, but her courage was admirable. That was why they could accept this small girl’s earnest feelings.

A solemn applause slowly spread through the room, welcoming her. Despite

the difference in age, they looked on her as a comrade. They accepted her, not as Alus' partner, but as a Magicmaster in her own right. Not to mention that she already knew what the Outer World was like. There was no need to warn her not to be a hindrance.

"I'd really love to welcome lil Loki to our squad," Lettie greedily muttered, but with a gentle smile on her face.

Alus nodded his head at the scene. *So they're putting their lives in each other's hands. It's a little roundabout, but very much like Lettie.*

The squad had completed missions together for a long time, building up a strong bond, so they stayed stronger than any other squad and overcame their hardships. However, Alus and Loki were like foreign objects from the outside, so to speak. As long as they were under Lettie's command, their cooperation was essential. That's why, as newcomers to the squad, they needed to build up their trust. Which was why Lettie had gone to the trouble of setting this meeting up.

Of course, Alus was able to make up for a lack of coordination through technique, not to mention he had complete faith in his abilities. But Loki was different. Just being Alus' partner wasn't enough for them to trust her in the Outer World. From the squad's point of view, she wasn't good enough to be trusted with their lives.

The squad's loyalty to Lettie as an individual was higher than their loyalty to the nation. Perhaps that single-mindedness was why they'd caught Lettie's eye. They had strong spirits and were able to trust someone from the bottom of their hearts. And most of all, for the sake of their ideals, they could swear an oath without an expectation of personal gain.

In the Outer World, everything could change in the blink of an eye; the line between life and death was always near. Life was fragile and fleeting when fighting under those conditions. They walked down a path of life where they would never be ashamed. So, unlike Alus, they were warriors who belonged at Lettie's side. Thinking of it that way, it strangely made sense. It was just a baseless guess by Alus, but it was a sobering thought.

Nevertheless, Alus and Loki were similar partners. Since they would be walking together on this path, he decided to say something as Loki's senior in

the military. “Sorry about this, everyone. I think it’ll be a little troublesome, but help teach—”

“Right, let’s get going.”

He wondered if Lettie was just living moment to moment and not even able to read the room, as she interrupted Alus and clapped her hands with a serious expression, stirring her squad into action.

Is she doing this on purpose? Alus looked over at Lettie who was carefreely rushing her squad.

She was willful and fickle. And once caught up in her pace, one tended to be dragged along with her until the end. It was hard to tell if she was a natural airhead or calculating. Besides... No, there was no point in complaining now, so Alus swallowed his words and shrugged.

At the same time... “She never told us anything,” Alus said, but with Lettie and her squad having rushed out of the room, his words didn’t reach them.

***

As Alus and the others left the military headquarters, they were seen off by lines of people on either side of them. However, it was only a gathering of those free at the time, and they were only wordlessly saluting him, but that didn’t happen much in his time in the military.

Not only did he have a lot of secret missions, but he also operated alone, so he didn’t stand out as much as a large squad. This alone showed how popular Lettie was and what a presence her squad had.

When he passed through the Tower of Babel’s barrier, he felt an inexplicable thirst being quenched. The sky changed into a deep blue color and he could tell without a doubt that it was the real thing.

Next, a clear breeze caressed his hair as the real world revealed itself before his eyes.

He could see far off into the distance. The sunlight shone on the horizon. The depth of the orange glow disrupted his sense of time, making it look like sunset. However, dawn hadn’t fully come yet. It was like the world was showing off that

it hadn’t changed, being vividly colored by the season.

Alus had several things he wanted to ask Lettie, but in this one moment, his mind was clear. Considering the season, the temperature outside was rather low compared with the human domain, though Alpha—which was located in the south—was better off than the other nations.

They carried the standard equipment, and the squad members hadn’t taken any particular measures to defend themselves from the cold. Besides, everyone present was an elite, and they could deal with this by covering themselves in a layer of mana, like a simple robe made out of mana.

There were, of course, downsides to this. First off, they were easier to sense by Fiends. Next, maintaining the mana robe would distract them for a moment when casting a spell. Then again, with the skill of this squad, it was the latter they’d need to worry about.

Battles against Fiends relied heavily on making the first strike. That said, if they couldn’t move their bodies because of the cold at a critical point, they’d be getting their priorities backwards. It would take some days to reach Vanalis, so it would be best to maintain their basic protection through mana, while accepting that they’d end up in a couple of battles.

But as they started making their way over, Alus had an odd thought. *It should be about five days to Vanalis, but...at this pace...* They weren’t going too slow, but too fast. He plotted the general course to Vanalis in his head.

Vanalis was a very important place for humanity’s counterattack on the Fiends. With Alus reclaiming Zentley and Covent, the signal for the counterattack being lit was still fresh in the minds of everyone. Of the two, Zentley was safely under control, thanks to Alus eliminating the high-classed Fiend that controlled the area. Since then, development of the land was progressing smoothly, and it now functioned as the largest base in the Outer World.

Covent, on the other hand, was practically untouched. They had an idea as to where they should set up their base, but there were no Magicmasters stationed there. Right now, the only thing they’d set up were magic anti-Fiend mines to deal with any threats. It was partly because they lacked the manpower, but also

because of how large Covent was, so they had no way to keep the Fiends away permanently. Meaning, a substitute for the Tower of Babel.

In order to stabilize the region, they needed a device like the second Tower of Babel set up in Folen, or something like it. The reason one hadn't been deployed yet was because its effective range was too small. Despite initial predictions, Covent was simply too large of an area to properly manage.

Alus had completed the harsh mission thrust upon him, and that alone should be cause for rejoicing, but the clean-up process hadn't been properly thought through. There was also the fact that Covent was located between Alpha and Rusalca, making the situation more complicated. True, Alus was solely credited for retaking it, but Berwick had no intention of claiming its vast lands all for Alpha. If anything, it could even be used as a card in negotiations with Clevideet.

As a result, dealing with the land was constantly being pushed back, and it would be a long time before Covent would be repopulated with humans.

But as far as the plan was concerned, there was already a draft. That's where Vanalis's importance came into play. In other words, the top brass of Alpha's military saw it as a major geographical foothold for establishing permanent control over Covent.

In order to avoid having to pass through steep mountainous terrains, the suppression of Vanalis was a must. That was the situation regarding Vanalis, as far as Alus knew.

Next, he shifted to considering the political situation. Even he believed that it would be impossible for a single nation to manage a continent as large as Covent. Cooperation with the other nations was needed, so more joint operations with Rusalca had to be considered.

Unfortunately, there were two at the top that were hostile towards Rusalca. And in addition to that, the girl with braided hair running in front of him was not on good terms with the Single who could be considered the face of Rusalca. *Just what's going to happen?* Moreover, even if they retook Vanalis, Rusalca and Clevideet hadn't cleared the routes that led to it from Fiends. Yet Alpha had already reclaimed Covent, which lay beyond it.

That was a sign of how extraordinary Alus' power was, but it also meant that Alpha's achievements were far above the other nations. The neighboring nations hadn't caught up with them at present.

To maintain Covent, Rusalca's reach into the Outer World would need to advance to the same level. Vanalis would be a major step in that direction. *Regardless of how we come to terms with Rusalca, the first thing we need to do is get Vanalis back.*

Alus wasn't too interested in politics, but he wasn't very happy that the maintenance of Covent was in danger after he'd taken it back. So it was inevitable that he'd lend Lettie a helping hand... or so he bitterly thought, in an attempt to convince himself.

He and the others blew through the Outer World, not paying any attention to the Fiends near Alpha. As he wondered how far they'd gone, he looked back to Loki and saw that the silver-haired girl already had beads of sweat on her forehead. *We are going at a high pace, after all. I guess it's a little hard on her.*

They'd been advancing for several hours without a break. Maintaining this pace was hard on not just Loki, but also on the other members. It was difficult to imagine that they'd keep going through the night when Fiends were much more active, but from what he could tell from looking at Lettie, she was planning on going as far as they could today.

As he glanced around, he could see that Loki was indeed not the only one who was tired. There was a woman who looked like a healing Magicmaster in the group, and she was visibly tired.

The journey to Vanalis wasn't easy, considering the distance. It wasn't just the exhaustion either. Fiends were also a problem. The number of Fiends around was increasing because it was impossible to sweep the area on a regular basis. Low-classed or not, they became more of a threat the more their numbers swelled. There were also Fiends that changed their habits and became more violent when they swarmed.

It was the mission of the platoons and defense units, many of whom were newbies, to reduce their numbers. The types of Fiends here were limited and not too hard to deal with. Sometimes high-classed Fiends and Variants were

spotted among them, but in those cases, high-ranking Magicmasters were sent out to handle them.

But as they advanced beyond the area under military control, approaching Vanalis, they would go beyond the scope of detection. Meaning that the closer they came to Vanalis, they would enter the regions dominated by Fiends.

Alus knew firsthand of the horrors of these lands, having chased the distant horizon in search of what lay beyond the maps. The land under human control was just a small part of the world. The rest belonged to the Fiends.

Before their appearance, humanity had reigned over the entire world. But their former glory was long gone, replaced by their nemesis. Humanity had taken up magic, replacing the science of the past, in order to acquire the power to hunt down Fiends, but unfortunately it didn't look like the gap in strength between them would be closed anytime soon.

But with momentum building in their favor, they had a rare chance to counterattack. Which made reclaiming Vanalis all the more important. Lettie had lost comrades in arms here, so to her it was a long-cherished desire.

With those thoughts in mind, Alus and the others entered a new region after a short break. Up until now, they'd been going through a forest with tall trees using branches as footholds. The visibility was poor, but the distance between the trees was wide, so it was relatively safe.

However, the environment in the new area changed abruptly. The temperature and humidity rose rapidly, creating a light mist. The branches formed peculiar patterns, at times intertwining in web-like configurations. The ground flattened out, and the roots that were spread out before now mostly disappeared into the ground.

It was a unique and unfamiliar landscape filled with more primitive life force than before. If they pushed away some branches and looked through bushes, it was easy to imagine finding a ton of small wildlife and insects.

But looking at it, it really was an unnatural landscape in an irregular climate. The heat had suddenly increased. The change was just so abrupt. It was like stepping out of a cold region and jumping into a desert.

In reality, these large changes in the environment weren't particularly unusual in the Outer World. Nature was wielding its power as it pleased with humanity's disappearance, but according to some theories this had happened because of the influence of mana.

Regardless, the reason they needed to stay on guard now was because these kinds of places tended to be inhabited by Fiends unique to these regions. *We're not going to be able to just run through this place*, Alus thought to himself, as if waiting to see how Lettie and her squad would handle it. He slowed down a little and started running alongside Loki.

"Sir Alus, Lady Lettie, I've detected two B-class Fiends one kilometer to the north. We will probably encounter them on our march." Loki had also noticed, and quickly made her report.

One of the problems Alus was wrestling with was how to handle Loki. She would be in charge of detection until they reached their destination. That would seem normal at first glance, but he felt something was strange. Normally, a squad of Lettie's caliber would have a spotter solely devoted to them. They couldn't be called an absolute necessity, but a spotter was at least as important as a Double Digit on missions like these.

That said, Alus was temporarily under Lettie's command, so it wasn't his place to ask about every little thing. He'd find out eventually, so he chose not to say anything.

He'd already gotten a look at the cooperation of the squad during their elimination of the Devourer. They were without a doubt the best Alpha had. He'd fallen back to where Loki was because he was planning on leaving this up to them.

Perhaps sensing that, Lettie gave her squad an order with a hand signal. It was a signal unique to her squad, and Alus and Loki didn't understand what it meant, but the squad members swiftly moved into action and changed their formation.

The squad picked up the pace towards the Fiends Loki had located, and two members passed by Lettie's side. Sajik and Mujir.

"They're both very skilled," Alus told Loki. "Sajik in particular uses the same

lightning attribute, so keep your eye on them.” He expected the two of them to clash with the Fiends.

“Yes!” Loki wiped away her sweat, and squinted her eyes to get a better look.

There was a huge shadow in front of them. But the two charged in towards the Fiend without hesitation, as if it were a simple task.

The Fiend walked on four legs, but it had a half-man, half-beast appearance, leaning forward so far that its front paws were just above the ground. Its short fur was strangely slimy and shiny, and ran from its head down its back. Its silhouette was reptilian, but the fur made it look like a quadruped as well.

At a closer look, there was a thin, dark, flying membrane below its slim but sturdy-looking arms. It had a thick neck, and its mouth protruded like a wolf’s mouth.

This was the typical predator type. Their absurdly long claws dug into the ground. This act made it look like it was trying to intimidate the squad, and it also seemed to be hitting rocks as sparks flew from time to time.

These were B-class Fiends known as Vigals. Their habitat was limited, and while their rate of proliferation was quite high, they were known to swarm. Because of that, it was said that if you found one, there’d be another ten within a two-kilometer radius.

Meanwhile, Sajik and Mujir seemed to wordlessly decide on how to deal with it. Sajik’s eyes narrowed as he gathered power in his right arm. His muscles bulged as his fist tightened and a magic formula started to glow on his gauntlet-type AWR. At the same time lightning appeared to surge through him.

The next moment his body was gone, leaving only flashes of electricity behind.

“—!!” Loki’s eyes opened wide. Sajik had used Force, a spell she’d only acquired after a ton of hard work. Not to mention he had such a large body, yet he’d probably accelerated even faster than Loki.

But what surprised her the most was that the spell she liked to keep hidden was being used right off the bat. He was even managing to use magic in conjunction with Force without any trouble.

As proof of that, Sajik's fist was wrapped in lightning as he appeared right next to the Fiend. The punch he threw seemed so careless. Yet it was enough to completely destroy the Vigal's head and turn it into dust.

Loki gasped and looked closer. The head had disappeared from its thick neck without a trace. A beat later, black blood spurted out like a fountain, and the Fiend collapsed. A pool of black gathered around its twitching body, but it gradually stopped moving. It appeared he'd completely eliminated it, but they couldn't relax yet.

Loki had definitely sensed another next Fiend to it... However, it was nowhere to be seen. Perhaps it was hidden in the dense foliage of the trees.

She used detection magic again, and was about to report on its location...but... It seemed she was a step too late. And all she could do was call out the name of the person closest to it to warn him. "Mujir!" she shouted, but all he did was lightly raise his hand as if to show his understanding.

As an experienced veteran of the Outer World, Mujir didn't let his guard down for a moment. Regardless of whether or not he'd been told of the Fiend's presence, his heightened senses alerted him to its whereabouts. He wouldn't miss even the slightest rustle of leaves.

Just after the Fiend that lost its head completely turned to dust—as if waiting for the moment Mujir glanced over to witness that—a huge shadow jumped out from the tree next to him. The second Fiend hiding there fiercely attacked.

But with the intertwining branches and thick foliage, Mujir saw it a moment too late. It snapped any branches in its path with its thick, gnarly horns covered in mana as it came towards Mujir. It was five meters long, and its horns looked somewhat like a moose's horns. Its body was stocky and covered in a thick, armor-like hide with an eerie dark pattern.

The Fiend pointed the eight sharp tips of its horns, with the tips showing a suspicious light, and rushed straight at Mujir.

He managed to dodge the first strike... However, having been charged, Mujir was thrown off balance. Even so, he didn't flinch, his lips drawn together into a firm line not betraying any hint of fear. He silently readied his tonfa-style AWRs, smoothly coating their surfaces with mana.

The Fiend turned around, pointing its horns at Mujir once again. To Mujir they looked to have shrunk, but they were all moving individually like they had wills of their own.

Next, all eight points attacked, aiming for his heart. It was clear at first glance that the mana covering the tips gave them an overwhelming durability and power. It would be foolish to try and block them all, and even dodging would be difficult. A normal Magicmaster would get speared to death.

Yet Mujir was ready with his AWRs, as if he'd expected this absurd attack. With fluid movements, he snapped many of the approaching tips, and deflected the rest. His attacks were too quick to be seen by the naked eye, and finally he slammed his tonfas down on the Fiend's head as it rushed him.

The vertical impact drove its head into the ground, scattering fragments of teeth. It was like a massive hammer had been swung down on the hard ground as it caved in. Aside from Mujir's unbelievable AWR skills, he'd unleashed a strike so heavy it went against common sense.

"I guess it wasn't needed. Clear!" Mujir briefly reported the completion of the elimination to Alus and the others. Incidentally, what he meant by "not needed" was the fact that the Fiend was about to be wrapped up in the ground that had been softened. It was the effect of Mujir's binding spell, which meant he'd already made preparations for his next step.

However, he must have realized that his blow to the head had destroyed the core. It was a lethal blow for a Fiend, and by the time he made his report, the Fiend was already turning into dust.

"I've finished up here too," Sajik reported, as if answering Mujir. He had also destroyed the first Vigal's core and watched as its body turned to dust. He raised his gauntlet-covered fist and flashed a confident smile.

In the meantime, Alus and the others had gone around the Fiends and continued their march. The two would join up later, so the overall marching speed wasn't affected.

"That sure was overwhelming," Loki said in awe next to Alus.

"... Magicmasters that are out in the Outer World for long periods of time are

all like this. Superb skills, and more importantly, no hesitation in their actions. Finishing off the Vigals fast was good too."

Vigals had the ability to merge with the shadows and conceal themselves, making them very troublesome Fiends. Their B-classification wasn't just because of their apparent strength, but also due to their threat level, which included special abilities.

Hearing Alus' praise, Sajik's face relaxed into a grin that didn't match his rugged face.

Mujir, next to him, gave him a cold stare. "You look creepy, you know that? Sir Alus, this guy lets it go to his head, so you should leave it at that. We were informed about the Fiends ahead of time, so anyone could have dealt with them," he said, giving Loki a gentlemanly smile.

Loki was well aware that he was just being polite. A spotter's job was to sense Fiends and point out where their cores were. The former was one thing, but she'd been unable to fulfill her responsibility for the latter. And she had a regretful look on her face. "I'm sorry. Next time I will..."

"It's fine. Nothing good will come from straining yourself too much, lil Loki. Right now, you just need to detect them!" Lettie's casual follow-up helped ease the burden on Loki's mind. She wasn't overlooking Loki's issue, but she wasn't sternly rebuking her either. She was probably being considerate because of her position as captain.



That’s when Loki realized something. It appeared this battle was meant to show her the squad’s combat style, and to teach her the timing of when to detect the cores. Sajik and Mujir were probably the strongest in the squad after Lettie, whose intention had been for them to demonstrate the tactics they were good at for Loki. “... Thank you very much.”

What Lettie didn’t put into words were her expectations and trust in Loki, as well as showing that she had a place on the squad. By giving her a role, she was entrusting her with a task that gave her a sense of responsibility. Having recognized this, Loki gave words of thanks to Lettie’s back. The Institute was one thing, but she was lacking in power as a squad member.

Alus also felt a need to thank Lettie for her consideration. After all, he himself had no interest in cooperation. He was used to fighting on his own, and he’d accomplished countless missions that way.

He gently closed his eyes, recalling fighting in groups. Yeah, he was no good at it. “From the looks of it, these squad members already have knowledge of the locations of cores, so there’s no worries about destroying them. So you should focus on just detecting the presence of Fiends, Loki.”

“Allie’s right. It’ll depend on the location, but generally you just need to report the destruction of cores. If you can’t tell right away, you just keep attacking until they’re finished off. A spotter’s abilities are a pretty delicate thing, so we only really ask them to detect cores for A-class and above.”

“... You heard her. When it comes to swarms, the location of cores is less important than detecting their approach in the first place.”

“I understand. I will prioritize detecting the Fiends around us,” Loki answered in a clear voice. Even she who had gathered some experience in the military since childhood was on the bottom of the totem pole in this squad. But rather than discouraging her, it made her even more motivated.

That’s what it meant to go with Alus in the first place. If she wanted to stay with the strong, she would need to get stronger herself.

Meanwhile, Alus thought to himself that Lettie’s “practical guidance” was just like her. She was the type to teach by doing rather than saying. Depending on

the circumstances, things might turn harsh. Then again, as someone who'd had to learn everything by doing himself, Alus felt more at home with that method.

At the very least, if she didn't devote herself to training with everything she had, the price to pay would be paid by the lives of her friends. In that sense, Loki being in the squad meant more than he'd expected.

Sajik, in particular, was helpful. He was very skilled when it came to the lightning attribute. Despite his big body, he had finely-tuned techniques. Of the different attributes, lightning required the most precise skills. Those who could use the elements aside, very few Magicmasters could handle it. That was why it would be good for Loki to see someone with the same attribute fighting up close.

That said, Sajik seems to be the type to rely on power. Alus smiled wryly as he recalled how he had fought before. Not only was he quite skilled in combat, and well-versed in techniques, but he appeared to be very aggressive. *It'll be up to Loki if she sees him as a good example or not*... he concluded, looking over at Loki.

He shrugged. Maybe he was being too nosy.

Alus and the others continued their march while taking regular short breaks. They only eliminated any Fiends that got directly in their way; moreover, Lettie's squad dealt with them swiftly and flawlessly, so Alus didn't have to do anything.

Even so, the Outer World was teeming with Fiends. And within two days, they'd eliminated more than fifty of them.

There were some injuries, but the squad's exhaustion was kept to a minimum. The continued forced march was taking its toll, but they were safely reaching the end of the second day.

Unlike the Inner World, where the weather was artificial, the Outer World followed the seasons, and the sun set early during this season. The temperature difference between day and night was also rather extreme, and they planned to set up camp the same way as the first day.

Lettie was having her squad move at their top speed to reach Vanalis as soon

as possible. In exchange, the squad carried very little in terms of equipment and supplies. But if they did run out of supplies with these numbers they'd be in serious danger, which Alus found strange. He figured she had some kind of plan, but even by the end of the second day he hadn't heard anything from Lettie.

After finding a suitable place to camp, the squad members quickly got to work. It was hard to call the place comfortable, but at times they had to sleep up in the trees, so there really wasn't much difference.

Then someone started looking for animal tracks as if familiar with the task, without being instructed to by Lettie or Alus. If there was a watering hole or animal habitat, it was a place that was relatively safe from Fiends.

In the depths of the Outer World, animals and Fiends were somehow able to live separately from each other. Instead, the Fiends went after humans to the point that it seemed they were designed only for that. In the cases where Fiends wandered into animal territory, they might harm them but rarely ever ate them. It was believed that was because of the mana within their bodies, but the truth was unknown.

Either way, wild animals had a tendency to cautiously avoid Fiends, and humans could use that fact to find safe places to camp. For the time being they relied on animal wisdom to make it through the night. That was just how poorly Magicmasters fared in night battles.

They hunted for food, so they were self-sufficient. In no time at all, they had enough meat, fruit, and wildflowers to fill the table. The "table" was a log cut horizontally in half, and for chairs they used logs cut in round slices. There were also some who sat on suitably shaped rocks.

The tools used for processing and cooking the food, and seasoning it, were very limited, but it was much better than nothing. Before Alus and Loki had a chance to do anything, Lettie's squad had quickly gotten everything ready without a hitch.

Leaving everything up to her subordinates, Lettie stared off into the distance with a pensive look. Her profile as she gazed at the setting sun looked somber.

Before long, the sun had fully set, and as night engulfed the world, small lights lit up their camp. They'd chosen a place behind a large tree, taking great care

not to let any fires start to catch any Fiend's eyes.

The squad quietly ate their meals in whatever way they pleased. It even looked nostalgic to Alus. "This is strange..." he muttered, as he brought a meat skewer towards his mouth, seated on his makeshift log chair.

The surrounding eyes naturally gathered on him. Not only was he new to their squad, he was also the ranked No. 1, so they unconsciously paid attention to whatever he said.

"What is, Sir Alus?" Loki asked, as if representing the silent squad members.

"Well, I don't know why, but the meat has no smell at all. It's only natural for wild meat to have a scent. Though I forgot that, since I've only been eating your cooking lately."

"Now that you mention it... I didn't notice. Maybe because I cooked it together with wildflowers."

From the looks on the squad members' faces, that seemed about right. Each squad had different skill levels when it came to cooking, but a skilled cook made a big difference.

Still...he'd forgotten. At some point, Alus had started thinking it was natural for meat to have flavor and be soft. Right now they weren't in their usual comfortable laboratory but outside of the human domain. This was the Outer World, where nothing could be taken for granted.

Seeing the two exchange surprised looks, Lettie grinned at them. "What's with that? Allie, you're living the easy life with everything you could ever need."

"I don't want to hear that from you after your attempt to destroy it. Still, I wouldn't have been this bothered about it before."

"Isn't that because you're not in the Outer World as much as before?"

"Maybe." It was a little painful to hear, but he prided himself on having worked enough already. But this small realization made Alus aware that he'd been away for quite some time now. He had never really paid attention to the taste or smell before. Or rather, he'd only eaten to get the necessary nutrition and calories.

Incidentally, the one in charge of cooking for this squad was the female healing Magicmaster. She was older than Lettie and had a gentle, compassionate expression. One didn't need to look at her medkit to tell that her focus was healing; her atmosphere made it clear enough.

Considering that she'd managed to keep up with the march alongside Loki, she had rather high physical abilities. Of course, she was attached to Lettie's squad. An average healing Magicmaster would just drag them down. As she gathered the cleared plates, she smiled at Loki. "There is an abundance of ingredients here, after all. We don't have it all figured out yet either, but I could teach you what I know."

"Thank you." Loki timidly gave the woman her plate.

"Don't worry about it. This squad tends to go on a lot of excursions, and going to look for ingredients is fun."

After saying that, the woman began serving up soup made with herbs. The fragrance alone made it seem like a dish that was unthinkable in the Outer World. If not for the insects, it would have been fantastic. Even Alus was taken aback by how varied the dinner table could be depending on the cook's skill.

The conversations in the camp became more lively when she started serving food, as if they'd forgotten they were in the Outer World. Perhaps that was thanks to her personality.

This could be fun in its own right...but they're lacking in tension. Alus planted his elbows on his knees. Beyond the dancing flames was Lettie, who had carefreely kicked out her legs and was having a relaxed chat with some of the men. *Sorry. I said I'd help, but I didn't come here to play around.*

He coldly narrowed his eyes, and flicked the skewer into the fire once he'd finished eating the meat off of it. He then spoke up as if to dispel the harmonious atmosphere. "... Now then, I think it's about time you tell me." If they kept up their current pace they would reach Vanalis in three days instead of the projected five. Alus didn't understand why they needed to be in such a rush. And tonight was the night of the second day... He preferred to find out why as soon as possible. Since Loki was present as well, he wanted at least the bare minimum of politeness from Lettie.

Alus' dead-serious tone turned the mood around completely, bringing about a heavy silence. They all knew what he was demanding from Lettie. Loki also glanced over at Lettie.

"Hm?" Lettie murmured, before there was a strange pause.

"... Don't tell me you actually forgot?" He eyed Lettie suspiciously, but in the next moment all the tension seemed to leave his face as he got an exasperated look.

At the same time he felt relieved that he'd asked about it now. She was a Single too. He had asked her for documents before they left, so he should have known something was up. At the same time, maybe it was his own fault for thinking Lettie had a good reason for rushing.

It was true that she'd been rushing them. She'd woken Alus and Loki up early, and pushed up the schedule to depart as soon as possible. He didn't plan on prodding deeply into her squad management, but since he was going to help with the mission, he needed to know what was going on.

"How rude. I didn't forget... Well, we are close enough to reach our destination tomorrow, so I guess it's time to get into my business mode," Lettie said, without any tension in her voice.

Alus didn't know what her supposed business mode was, but he was fine as long as she told him all about the situation before they arrived.

Lettie looked to be mulling something over for a moment, before letting out a small groan. "Hmmm, well...where should I start... Or rather, I thought you were the type not to rely on preliminary information..." Suddenly, her gaze drifted away from Alus to the silver-haired girl.

"Yeah, that's true."

Lettie brought the edges of her lips up into a grin.

"But I'll be the one who decides whether or not I rely on it," Alus said decisively, sensing that he was getting caught up in Lettie's pace.

"So how would you like to do it? Like a question and answer format?"

"Cut that... Actually, I guess that's fine. As long as I can get my concerns

addressed already.”

“All right, then bring it.”

Alus questioned if this was her so-called “business mode,” and rubbed the bridge of his nose. Normally, he would’ve wanted Lettie to brief him on everything including minor details, but as long as he could get an answer to what he felt was off, it would work for him.

Moreover, the question and answer format meant that he would choose the questions, and that Lettie probably wasn’t trying to hide anything. So he took it as her show of sincerity. Based on her tone and attitude, he could tell she was probably thinking something stupid like this was the fastest way, or that she didn’t need to put any thought into it this way.

Pretending that he didn’t see the awkward looks on Sajik, Mujir, and the rest of the squad, Alus began anew. “I’ve read up on Vanalis before. I’ve memorized the location, terrain, and various other information, but how does it actually look?”

“Hm, well, you’ll see when we get there, but Vanalis is a giant plateau with some differences in elevation. On a hill near the center are the ruins of what used to be a city, but has since become a nest for Fiends. It’s been weathered over time pretty heavily, so there’s not many traces left of it now. There’s plenty of rubble too, but most of it has been swallowed up by nature.”

“I can imagine. Vanalis is an important key point, geographically speaking.” Digging through his memories, Alus recalled that there’d been a fortified city on that hill. Then he noticed Loki had a questioning look on her face. He knew what she wanted to ask. “That explains why it’s taken over half a year to conquer Vanalis... The city was built there because it was a suitable place to dig in. The difference in elevation from the surrounding area provides good protection and a view of any approaching enemies. It’s like an anthill, or a monster’s nest full of Fiends,” he explained, from what he could remember.

There wasn’t much literature from that time that remained, so he didn’t know why it had been built that way, but perhaps it was a remnant from a long period of warfare against other humans. “Meaning that you could get ambushed from anywhere just by getting close, and if they jumped back into their holes, there’s

nothing left to do. It was made to work against humans, but of course that design works for the Fiends, too. It's also hard to detect them because they're hiding underground. Moreover, caution is required because the land still needs to be used afterwards."

"—!! Thank you very much," Loki said gratefully.

All of that was just the bare minimum of information, and was something that should naturally be shared. What he wanted to know lay beyond that. Since Lettie hadn't shared that yet, in a sense that meant she really trusted him. That was a complicated feeling.

He'd finally arrived at the Institute in hopes of leaving the military's influence, though he knew that was a contradiction since he was still being sent out on missions to the Outer World. While he earnestly hoped for a peaceful life, he found himself longing for the Outer World at times too. Perhaps that meant that—deep down—he didn't want a place inside the barrier. It might be that he already knew he had no place he belonged to. Which was why Lettie's behavior didn't really displease him.

"Let me confirm what you told me about Vanalis before. You said that a single S-class and two A-class Fiends are in charge of it. There's no doubting that, right?" Alus had heard that from Lettie's own mouth during the Friendship Magical Tournament.

"Yeah, that was the spotter's report."

"What species and form?"

"Beast species, probably."

"Probably? Is it not confirmed?" From the sound of it, it seemed they'd directly seen it, but only for an instant. For the time being, Alus was satisfied that it wasn't humanoid.

As Fiends grew stronger, they tended either to become bigger or humanoid. It was unclear, but it was thought that this meant their form was becoming more complete. Those that turned humanoid didn't look exactly like humans, but they took on a similar shape.

The humanoid Monsters were mostly clumped together as ogres. Those that

were especially threatening were sometimes referred to as Demons. Those Fiends tended to be born after devouring a lot of people—Magicmasters, actually—and took on a more perfect form as they evolved. And when that was taken to its extreme, it could result in the birth of a calamity.

Incidentally, researchers were really the only ones who used the term "species" when identifying Fiends. Alus' scholarly side was demanding a classification. There was a vast variety of Fiends, and the mana information they took in tended to cause individual differences.

But back to the topic. "I'm not sure I can really explain the Fiend ruling Vanalis," Lettie said. "It's like a mix. If I were to say, a Chimera?"

The men in the squad nodded. That was probably the overall consensus. Perhaps it was a type that wasn't even in the database of Fiends.

When Lettie said "Chimera," it took less than a second for Alus to reach a conclusion. "... So it's a Variant." *How troublesome.*

But then he realized something strange. When Lettie had been recalled to the Inner World, she had said that she was almost done. From the sound of it, she didn't need his help as long as she had enough time. So why had she called for him, then?

Before he even heard the answer from Lettie, Alus realized the core of the matter and spoke up again. "It's an Enduring Variant, then?" If the appearance Lettie had reported was due to the results of a mana sonar, they would've been able to sense the Fiend's internal mana. That was why they could estimate its class.

However, as with Vigals, a Fiend's threat level wasn't estimated just by the amount of mana it had. The Variants typically had unusual behavior patterns that differed from their normal counterparts. The Devourer that could eat unthinkable amounts in a short period of time was one such example. At other times they might target animals they usually wouldn't look twice at, or engage in abnormal behavior like cannibalism.

But a Fiend whose erratic behavior exceeded even that was considered an Enduring Variant. Many of them would end up destroying their own cores, but on rare occasions they would endure and survive, and see an explosive

evolution that defied common sense.

“It would be a bit of an exaggeration to call it an Enduring Variant. But in terms of mana it’s an S-class.”

“If it’s ruling over Vanalis it might be pretty troublesome,” Alus said, analyzing the situation emotionlessly, causing Lettie to sigh.

“There you go, saying things you don’t mean again.” Lettie clasped her hands together and stretched them behind her head. And then she let out a long exhale. “Phew. Well, I can finish it off, so long as the surrounding trash is gone.”

There was no conceit in her attitude. She was confident in herself and her squad. Unlike the other nations that were rather passive, Alpha actively sent their Singles out to eliminate Fiends. Even if it was a humanoid S-class, they wouldn’t hesitate to deploy a Single. Lettie was aggressive, but both she and Alus had enough experience to handle A-class and S-class Fiends.

Here I was thinking she was too cautious, but maybe I was just overthinking it? Hearing the confidence in her tone, Alus changed his mind.

Aside from the Devourer, he’d fought alongside Lettie in the Outer World on a few occasions. She was the type of Magicmaster who wielded her overwhelming power without hesitation. She preferred short encounters, even if she did have to get a little forceful. The fact that it had taken her over half a year wasn’t just because of the S-class and A-class Fiends, but probably also because of the regional characteristics of Vanalis. It appeared that the location and particular circumstances of Vanalis made it hard to blow away.

Frankly, Alus would’ve liked some more detailed information on the Fiends, but he left it at that for now. Instead, he asked her the question he wanted to know the answer to the most. “What’s the reason for rushing to Vanalis?”

“I wanted to move the introductions along, ya know.”

“No, that’s not all, is it? We’ve encountered quite a few Fiends on the way, and combined with the forced march the squad is winded and hasn’t been able to properly restore their mana.” Alus and Lettie had reserves, but the squad members, especially Sajik and Mujir in the vanguard, were exhausted.

Of course neither would let it show, but Alus could tell from their flows of

mana. Loki was the same. She'd only participated in a few battles, but constantly using mana sonar in the Outer World didn't just drain mana; it was wearing on one's nerves.

"And since there's no spotter assigned and everyone's lightly equipped... An advance party, huh." It might have sounded like Alus was asking about it, but he'd more or less grasped the truth. Everything pointed to the existence of an advance party. Lettie had probably split the squad and sent some ahead to Vanalis. That group must have brought some of their supplies with them. "... Since when?" he asked.

Lettie answered without any intention of hiding it. "Seven days ago. They're transporting the supplies too, so they're making their way there while avoiding combat as much as possible. Of course, there's quite a few of them, and many who are skilled."

"I see. So you sent the spotter with them." It didn't need to be said that a spotter was necessary to avoid needless battles. Sending such an important asset with them meant that it wasn't just a small scouting party. "Well, I more or less get it...but why are you rushing this much?"

Lettie gave him an unusually serious look. "Allie, I'm sure you already know, but taking back Vanalis is our most long-cherished desire. After all the work we put in, we had to pull out in the middle of it. And because we couldn't bring them back...it's the place where my subordinates and our friends rest. The advance party all felt the same way...they wanted to group up as soon as possible and avenge them. When it comes to carrying supplies, it's not like using a separate party to carry them over in secret is unusual."

Carrying supplies lowered the marching speed. In other words, it was a preparation employed to accommodate Alus, who was devoted to his studies at the Institute, and bring him to Vanalis with the minimum amount of burden on him.

"... I see," Alus replied, in a slightly somber tone. But he wasn't sure if she was being stubborn or if this came out of her responsibility as the captain. Technically, he knew what kind of expression to show in this kind of situation, but... He didn't show any expression, but he did hang his head down a little.

Even if he raised it, all he would be able to do would be to copy the expressions of those around him.

While he could understand their feelings, there was still a gap as far as him feeling them himself. As a result, with his heart surrounded by a thick wall of ice, he couldn't evoke any strong emotions like Lettie. But...there was nothing that could be done. Even Alus himself didn't think there was any way to fill the hole in his heart.

That was when...he heard a small voice say, "Al," with a tinge of sadness to it.

When he turned to look, he saw Loki's sorrowful gaze. He felt awkward and a kind of loneliness he couldn't shake. She'd seen through even that.

At first he was surprised, but in the next moment the surprise was replaced by a strange sense of conviction. *You can tell, can't you.* Loki always thought of him first, so he couldn't hide it from her. With her drawing closer to him, he couldn't take it any longer and looked away.

He was the only one who was different from the others here... It was possible he was scared of seeing his reflection in Loki's eyes.

As if to not let Alus go, Loki's hand moved. She placed her delicate hand on his hand.

Alus didn't have the courage to shake it off. At the same time he understood that it was futile, and he gave up trying to escape from her determined consideration.

"Oh right!" Lettie suddenly let out a yelp, dispelling the gloomy atmosphere. "I want to avenge my fallen comrades, but what do you think?"

"What? You're leaving too much out and I can't tell what you're talking about."

She shrugged, as if she'd simply expected him to follow along. "We've left Vanalis alone for more than two months now, and I'm sure the number of Fiends has increased. What do you think about that? C'mon, let's hear an expert's opinion."

Alus' cheek twitched, but Lettie's eyes implied that she was serious. She was a

creature of moods, and he realized there was no point in trying to argue with her each time. “‘Expert’ would be misleading. Let me just ask, do you have any experience in retaking a region?”

“Wow, how rude,” Lettie said, puffing up her cheeks.

When he was in the military, he never cared about anyone else’s achievements, and he tended not to remember anything that didn’t catch his interest. Or rather, he didn’t have the luxury of stuffing his head with useless knowledge.

“It’s not like we’re as abnormal as you are, but this squad has put in some work, ya know? Well, we haven’t taken back a region as big as Vanalis...because you grabbed them all!”

“Sorry about that,” Alus said. It wasn’t like he’d volunteered to do it, so he didn’t feel he deserved those complaints. That said, Lettie was just joking. “So practically none, then. About the Fiends, the influence of the Devourer might have reached all this way. There’s no way they wouldn’t be affected after you almost conquered Vanalis and then had to leave it for two months.”

When Fiends took a lot of damage to their population, they sometimes sped up their population growth, or summoned allies as if to recover it. There were instances in the past where they had moved from a spot without showing their numbers.

“However, I can’t say for sure if enough Fiends have gathered to set you back to square one. Even more so if there’s a high-classed Fiend controlling the area...” Although it was only a guess based on past experience, Alus had encountered similar cases before.

After thinking for a few moments, he held up four fingers. “You were about seventy percent complete with clearing out the area, right? If this is the population density of ten percent of the area... then I would say the Fiends have recovered by about forty percent.”

“Hmm, we’d be able to come back from that.”

“The most effective way of handling these kinds of missions is to destroy it from the top. The small fry will scatter on their own, and any ability to

consolidate their numbers will be lost.”

“That said, Vanalis’s terrain gets in the way of that.” Lettie scratched her cheek at Alus’ prediction. The surrounding squad members nodded in agreement with her.

“There are Fiends that claim entire mountains, so I know of similar conditions. Besides, with me and you guys, we could burn down their holes one by one, even though it would be stupidly tedious.”

“Well, I did think about that when I invited you, Allie...” Lettie said hesitantly.

Mujir followed up. “Sir Alus, we have already started by eliminating the A-class and have successfully slain three of them. But of the remaining two, one is rather troublesome... It was identified as a brain eater. An Ogma.”

“—!!” Alus glanced at Mujir with a sharp look. He then realized something. “So that’s why. It explains why it’s taken so much time.”

“Sir Alus, what kind of Fiend is that?” Loki asked in a soft voice.

“An Ogma is a rather new species recently discovered in Clevideet. I believe it was exterminated.”

“Yes, we’ve referenced that data, so it is almost definitely one,” Mujir affirmed.

Alus thought back to what information he had. “If I recall... an Ogma uses dark magic, and it can brainwash Fiends.”

Normally, Fiends had next to no intelligence. But when they reached a high-classed level, they could show an ability to control a swarm, and a new species was even more dangerous. This Fiend in particular had been observed using others as shields, be it out of instinct or intelligence.

“Yes,” Mujir said. “I don’t know if you could call it simple brainwashing, but they moved like they were commanding the swarm instead of just leading it.”

“I see. So it might be something like a second-in-command. Just killing the S-class won’t be enough, then,” Alus said.

“That’s right. I was hoping you could deal with the Ogma. But I would’ve wanted to wait a little longer to analyze the current situation,” Lettie put in.

“Got it. I was expecting the worst, but that sounds like an easy job,” Alus casually said, and the people around him responded with a salute. Plus, it being a new species stirred up his interest.

“All right, that should wrap things up for now. We’re getting up early tomorrow, so take it easy and relax a little more, then get some sleep!” Lettie shouted in an inexplicably lax tone, as if she were leading a children’s field trip.

Alus and Loki were half-exasperated by her tone, but were also somewhat put at ease. Fortunately, thanks to the goodwill of Lettie’s squad, they would be able to go to bed without having to take turns standing guard.

Under the night sky of the Outer World, their second day came to a peaceful end. The velvety night slowly lulled the squad members to sleep. Some lay down directly on the hard ground; others leaned against a log to sleep. Other members slept with their cloaks pulled down, and still others made makeshift hammocks.

Alus and Loki were wrapped up in their cloaks and slept shoulder to shoulder. Despite having closed his eyes, however, Alus couldn’t really sleep. He gently opened his eyes and watched the weakening flames of the bonfire.

Suddenly, something bumped against his shoulder. Loki must have completely lost to her sleepiness, as she tilted her head and leaned her body against him. She must’ve been very tired as she was fast asleep, not even so much as twitching. With her eyes closed, her long eyelashes stood out even more.

As he gazed at her profile, he smiled, and his consciousness fell into darkness as he finally got his sleep.

The next morning the squad awoke at first light. Of course, nobody overslept. Even being able to get proper sleep in the Outer World was a luxury.

Everyone finished their preparations in a flash and were ready to depart. Loki, noticing something, spoke up. “It was rather chilly yesterday, but not so much today.”

Meanwhile, Lettie just stretched without a care in the world, yawning. “I could use some more sleep... But yeah, you’ll see for yourself when we get to Vanalis, but we’re already a long way south. When the sun is up it gets pretty

warm, even in this season. Vanalis really makes you lose track of the seasons. There's even plants that bear fruit around this time of year. But that's a big help because we don't need to worry about food."

Alus didn't particularly mind, but like Loki had said, the temperature had risen. "We probably won't need to use any mana to keep ourselves warm, then."

"Yeah, from today we're going to avoid using mana as much as possible."

"What about detection?" Loki asked.

"Of course detection is an exception!" Lettie held up her index finger and pointed it straight at Loki. The next moment, she seemed to spot something, and flashed a mischievous smile. "Oh? Lil Loki, you've got some drool around your mouth..."

"—! Seriously?!" Loki's face turned red, as she hurriedly wiped her mouth with her sleeve...and for some reason she turned to face Alus.

"Looks like you were able to get some good sleep in," Lettie said with a nasty grin, but Loki ignored her and lowered her head towards Alus. "I'm sorry, Sir Alus." She must have remembered what posture she'd been in when she woke up. If she was drooling, there was the possibility that it had gotten on Alus' shoulder.

"Don't worry about it. Besides, you were just being teased. There isn't anything on me."

With a yelp of surprise, Loki turned to Lettie and gave her a questioning look.

"Sorry, it was just a playful morning prank," Lettie said. "All right, let's get going!" she continued with a smile, clapping her hands together and turning her back on Loki and Alus.

However, she didn't fail to say something unnecessary to fan the flames of Loki's sense of shame. "Ahh, that's nice. I want to sleep on someone's shoulder too. It looks like you can sleep like a rock."

"Lady Lettie!!" Loki shouted, and ran after Lettie, who had taken the lead in the squad.

And so Alus and the group began a new day in a relaxed mood.

***

The lack of tension only lasted for a few minutes. As soon as they began to move, the squad's expressions changed.

This was the land of regret and remorse, the place where their comrades rested. Lettie's squad might be rich in experience, but they were particularly invested in this reclamation mission.

At the same time, their surroundings were starting to change. After a couple of hours in the morning, a lush natural landscape greeted them.

As they ran, they could clearly feel the temperature rising, and they were beginning to get jealous of Lettie's light clothing. It was like the seasons were proceeding in reverse.

"At this pace, it won't take another hour," Lettie said to Alus, in a loud enough voice for the rest of her squad to hear.

Unlike yesterday, they encountered next to no Fiends. It was unnatural, and it did raise Alus' sense of caution, but right now it was a godsend to him and the others who were rushing to their destination.

However, around forty minutes later...there was a big change in temperature.

Before, it had been slightly rising, but now it was clearly different. And it wasn't getting hotter. Instead, it was rapidly dropping. It was like there was some invisible boundary keeping summer and winter from colliding.

Tension ran through the squad. Alus narrowed his eyes. It was obvious that everyone had caught on. Of course, nobody stopped marching. After another twenty minutes, they could see their own breath.

"Sir Alus!" Loki, who'd run up to him, wasn't sure what to do about this.

"I know. It's definitely strange. There's more to this than the fury of nature."

"Yes, and then there's the Fiends... there were few to begin with today, but they've all disappeared."

Alus clicked his tongue and glanced at Lettie's back. Regardless of the

situation, they should still be heading for Vanalis. “Don’t get hasty, Lettie!” he shouted, as he saw her pick up speed.

There was no answer, but her back said it all. She needed to know what was happening in Vanalis, as well as what had happened to her squad members that had been sent out ahead.

Chasing after Lettie at full speed, the squad stepped into a cluster of big trees covering a small hill. Crowns of frost were already starting to form on the tops of the trees.

Eventually they got out from between the thick trunks and reached the top of the hill... There, their view was wide open and unobstructed.

They also found Lettie stopped in place. “... What is this?” she muttered. Alus, stepping up next to her, had no reply. At the same time, he looked down to the unfamiliar sensation on the bottoms of his feet.



“Snow...” Loki blurted out.

It was a silvery world. An infinite number of small white crystals covered the area around them.

They flew like ashes in the wind, and formed a white veil covering the sky. The trees and earth, which had probably been a fresh green a few days ago, were now all dyed in a single color of innocence.

Their breaths out were white, and every time they inhaled, they could feel the cold air stab the backs of their throats. Their blood vessels constricted, and their bodies, which should have warmed up from all the running, were rapidly getting stiff.

Snow simply continued falling, showing no consideration whatsoever to the people below. Before the scenery that left everyone stunned, only Alus’ sharp eyes saw through the veil.

He could feel the clear presence of a Fiend along with the storm of chilling air.

And so he spat out, “Now you’ve done it.”

Afterword

Those of you who read the Afterword first... Could you start from page one this time? This time around, I would like to talk about the contents of this volume, which might be a spoiler for you.

How did you find *The Greatest Magicmaster's Retirement Plan*, Volume 9? This volume is almost completely new, and there was a lot of content and information I wanted to add, so I decided to make it a structure that would lead into the next volume.

This series is very battle-heavy, but in this volume I decided to scale back on that and flesh out the characters' daily lives. I think I was able to dig deeper into the characters because of it, and that was good.

Elise might have burst onto the scene, but the story's background is relatively lively, and a more peaceful mood permeates the Institute because the festival was the only real stage. Well, I didn't intend to have it last so long...

A new mission befalls Alus and Loki, and the laid-back atmosphere of the Institute looks to take a big turn with the introduction of an out-of-season transfer student. It may look trivial now, but it will cause big ripples that lead to larger changes in the future. That sure gets my writerly juices flowing.

But that's enough for the preamble. In the next volume, the story around Alus and the others will unfold with a field of snow as the stage. This is all brand-new, and I'm personally really looking forward to it.

There are a couple of characters to pay attention to. First, is the middle-aged? or maybe younger? pair of veteran Magicmasters Sajik and Mujir, who also play a more comedic part. They represent a degree of variety in Lettie's squad, but Mujir is a lucky man with a wonderful wife, who might secretly be on the happiest path in this story.

This time they appear in an illustration, as Miyuki Ruria designed their characters. Please look forward to their activities in the future.

Next is that out-of-season transfer student. She too has such a high-quality design, and as an author I am very honored. I'm sure that she will have a lot to do with the development of the story in the future, so look forward to it!

There's more I would like to talk about, but it appears I've run out of space, so I'd like to give my usual greetings.

I would like to especially thank my editor-in-charge for their patient support. Because of it, I was able to work out something I was satisfied with.

I would also like to thank everyone involved in this project for their cooperation. I really am supported by a lot of people.

And then there's clearly Miyuki Ruria for the illustrations. I am so very sorry for keeping you waiting. I really am sorry... Thank you for taking time out of your busy schedule to add color to the story with your beautiful illustrations. And you even took the time to add to the cast. I am honored by your attention to detail and with each illustration being memorable. This time there were more illustrations than normal that left me grinning.

Finally, I would like to give my deepest thanks to the readers who have come all this way. Thank you very much for picking up this series. I might not get an answer, but did you enjoy this volume?

I will work to get the next volume out as soon as possible, so I look forward to your continued patronage.

—Izushiro


"I would love some alcohol, but I guess that's asking for too much."
Enjoying the stall food with such vigor that everyone around her was taken aback, Lettie enthusiastically made her way towards her next pleasure.


Lettie Kultunca
Alus Reigin
Loki Leevahl
Lilisha


“Giving you
the best way
of waking up”

Table of Contents

Cover

Forty-Eighth Chapter: Presence of a Noble Collar

Forty-Ninth Chapter: Iridescent Collar

Fiftieth Chapter: Innocent Incarnation

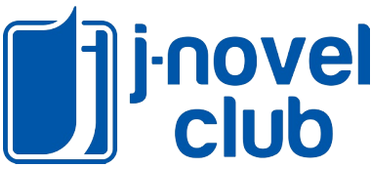
Fifty-First Chapter: Wake Up at Night

Afterword

Color Illustrations

About J-Novel Club

Copyright



Sign up for our mailing list at J-Novel Club to hear about new releases!

Newsletter

And you can read the latest chapters (like Vol. 10 of this series!) by becoming a J-Novel Club Member:

J-Novel Club Membership

Copyright

The Greatest Magicmaster’s Retirement Plan: Volume 9

by Izushiro

Translated by Warnis Edited by Jan Suzukawa

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author’s imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

Copyright © 2019 Izushiro Illustrations Copyright © 2019 Ruria Miyuki Cover illustration by Ruria Miyuki

All rights reserved.

Original Japanese edition published in 2019 by Hobby Japan This English edition is published by arrangement with Hobby Japan, Tokyo English translation © 2021 J-Novel Club LLC

All rights reserved. In accordance with the U.S. Copyright Act of 1976, the scanning, uploading, and electronic sharing of any part of this book without the permission of the publisher is unlawful piracy and theft of the author’s intellectual property.

J-Novel Club LLC

j-novel.club

The publisher is not responsible for websites (or their content) that are not owned by the publisher.

Ebook edition 1.0: May 2021