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



The Greatest Magicmaster's Retirement Plan

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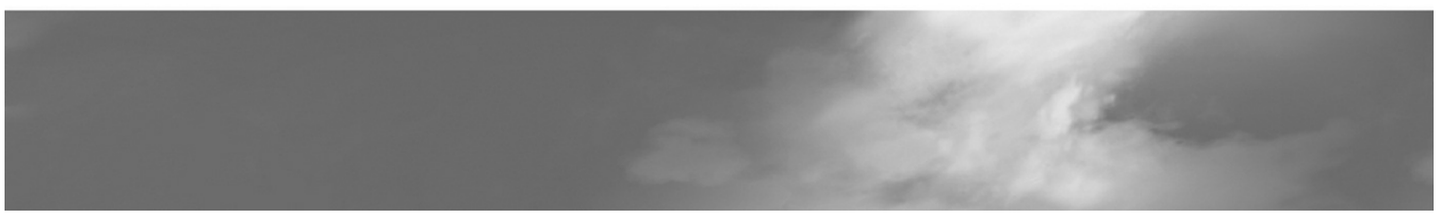
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Fifty-Second Chapter

A Morning of Afterglow and Doubt

The top floor of the laboratory building in the Institute was truly desolate. The entire floor was made up of this single room.

Through the windows came the sunlight of early morning. However, the barren room had no real lived-in feel to it. For starters, there were practically no curtains, blinds, or any other interior decor for that matter. The few desks, tables, and other furnishings that were here were devoid of any color. They were either white or black, not giving much of a hint for the owner's preference in color. It wasn't inconvenient, but there was nothing interesting about it.

That said, points could still be given for the interior. Nowadays, curtains and other ways of minimizing the level of light were more like hobby items with little practical use. The windows in this room could be shaded at will. It was also possible to set them to auto mode that would adjust the lighting depending on the amount of sunlight in the morning. Although this type of window was widely-known about, it was still a luxury item that most households couldn't afford.

Speaking of expensive things, the laboratory equipment in the room would fetch a high price as well. Even an amateur could make a decent guess at the value. But since everything was arranged in such a haphazard manner, the room looked more like a warehouse than anything.

Compared to the girls' dorm where Tesfia and Alice lived, there was a stark difference. There, they had curtains on all the windows regardless of size, with much attention paid to the interior as well.

But there was still a corner of the room that felt lived in. That was mostly thanks to Loki. Then again, her tastes were similar to Alus's at their root, so it could hardly be called modern.

Regardless, it was now early morning, a refreshing morning after all the clamor of the day before. A soft light flooded into the room most girls would consider plain and boring. It was the pseudo-light of the artificial sun, which,

with progress in science and magic, had become very similar to the real one.

The faint light shone on the three girls sleeping in the room. They were all spread out every which way, and dressed as if they'd fallen asleep in the middle of a midnight chat. Their bodies might have gotten stiff if left alone, but fortunately Loki had put blankets over them out of consideration.

Eventually...a yawn. "Good morning?!" Strangely enough, the first to wake up was the redhead, Tesfia. Her normally shiny red hair was now a complete mess. In a way that was just like her. She must've thought she was sleeping in her usual bed in the dorm, but the next moment she frowned in pain at her aching joints. Which made sense, as of the three girls she was the only one who'd slept on the bare floor.

She let out an "Uhh" and her body jerked. "It hurts," she said, as if looking to share her feelings with someone. The tone of her voice made it sound like she was appealing to a doctor.

The next moment, her attention shifted from her body to the unfamiliar blanket over her. It was then that she finally realized she'd fallen asleep. Although her eyelids were heavy, she opened them and confirmed she was indeed in Alus's laboratory.

Her body shot up as she tried to sort out the situation in her head. She couldn't remember exactly what had happened just before falling asleep, but she traced her memories of what happened the day before.

Looking around, she saw Alice fast asleep near her. Unlike Tesfia, she'd curled up on a small sofa. But Tesfia didn't need to go through her memories to know that she'd been here with Alice and Ciel, as well as Alus and Loki. However, Alice was the only one around.

"Where's Ciel?" Tesfia blurted out the name of the missing party, as she tried to shake off her sleepiness. She slept in the same dorm room with her best friend Alice, so sleeping together elsewhere wasn't much different. But this was her first time sleeping in the same room as Ciel.

That said, it wasn't unusual for them to visit each other's dorm rooms and have pajama parties. Those kinds of girl gatherings naturally happened when girls their age lived together. However, because the Institute tended to attract

students from respectable families, these kinds of acts were frowned on by students who respected the norms. Because of that, sleepovers were held in secret. Yet that too made it exciting for the young girls.

Tesfia was pretty well-acquainted with Ciel. In spite of that, she'd never slept over in Tesfia's and Alice's room even once.

Still shaking off her drowsiness, Tesfia rubbed her eyes. Then she looked across the room again. That's when she spotted a cute-looking blouse she'd seen before, gently spread out next to a blanket.

She casually picked it up and gave it a suspicious look. "What is going on here?" she asked, completely confused, before looking down. Something was wriggling beneath the table.

Bending down to look, she finally found Ciel. Her hair was messy and she was wrapped in a blanket with only her head sticking out.

Just then, Ciel slowly opened her eyes and yawned. "Good morning, Fia," she mumbled.

"Good morning, Ciel." Aside from the fact that Tesfia was bending down to stare under a table, it was a very normal greeting, which left only one thing unanswered. She looked back to the clothes in her hand, her mind still not working properly.

The next moment, there was a sharp *bang* as Ciel bumped her head on the table. "Ow," she yelped. At the same time, her consciousness snapped awake. The pain aside, she had realized something that made her unable to enjoy the blissful morning hour.

Crawling out from under the table with some skill, she made sure to keep her blanket wrapped around her. "Can I have that back?" Ciel meekly asked after a moment's hesitation, red up to her ears.

The noise of it all must have woken up Alice as well. Unlike Tesfia, she didn't have low blood pressure, and it didn't look like she would fall back asleep. A difference in how they grew up, perhaps, but not even Alice had fully recovered from her built-up fatigue, so she blinked repeatedly in an attempt to clear her head.

“You two are up...early.” She was generally laid-back in her manner, but it took her longer to finish her sentence than it usually did. Still in a daze, she asked about the same matter Tesfia had been wondering about. “By the way, why aren’t you wearing any clothes, Ciel?”

“...”

“What?! Ciel, are you naked?” With Alice’s words and the clothes in her hand, the reality of the situation sank in even for Tesfia. It was hard to tell with Ciel wrapped up in a blanket, but it seemed Alice was more observant than Tesfia was when newly awake.

Once the idea was in her mind, Tesfia couldn’t keep herself from imagining Ciel’s appearance under the blanket.

Ciel herself wasn’t entirely sure of her situation beneath the blanket, so she timidly checked.



The two held their breaths as they watched.

After a moment, Ciel let out a sigh of relief. “I-It’s fine,” she said. “I’m still wearing my underwear.”

“Of course you are!” the other two retorted, but then they realized something. There were supposed to be four girls plus a member of the other sex in the room. The strange situation brought to mind a normally unthinkable possibility. Four girls and one boy had spent the night in the same room, and the next morning, one of those girls was stripped of her clothing.

Tesfia gave Ciel an anxious glance as she returned the blouse. Alice too gave her a look of sympathy.

Ciel confessed, acutely sensing their doubts. “N-Nothing happened. I just...” She paused. “I just have a terrible sleeping habit where I take off my clothes.” Red up to her ears, Ciel wriggled under her blanket as she put her clothes on.

Alice tossed an undershirt and shorts over to Ciel, and opened her mouth as her doubts had finally been answered. “So that’s why you always turned down any sleepovers.”

“Yeah,” Ciel weakly nodded in return.

“There’s nothing to worry about. We’re all girls,” Tesfia said, in hopes of backing her up. Not only was she saying that to cheer Ciel up, she was also saying it to herself to try to calm down her stirring heart.

“Well, Fia’s got her own bad sleeping habit she doesn’t want to show others,” her dorm roommate Alice said with a wry smile.

That said, Tesfia was still nobility. So whenever she went over to someone else’s for a sleepover, she would always keep her guard up. In that sense, Alice felt like Tesfia showing that side of her was a sign of how much trust they had in each other.

Unaware of Alice’s thoughts, Ciel said, “It’s been a bad habit since I was a child. I just haven’t been able to fix it.” It appeared this bad habit had forced Ciel to hold back from any sleepovers. She’d been looking for a chance to go home yesterday too, but at some point the fun had made her forget it.

Despite being exposed in the end, she was taken aback by Tesfia's and Alice's reactions. "You can be so withdrawn when it comes to yourself, Ciel. We don't mind, so let's have another sleepover sometime."

"Y-Yeah," Ciel nodded hesitantly at Alice's suggestion.

"Well, to be honest it was a bit of a surprise. But now we can have a sleepover whenever we want. You've already been found out, so it's all the same now," Tesfia nodded with a smile.

Meanwhile, Ciel seemed relieved by the fact that she wasn't being taken advantage of. She did in fact feel that now she could sleep over in their room without hesitation. But she was still a little embarrassed.

Things having finally settled down, the three girls were greeted by a peaceful early morning. That's when Alice recalled something, and she looked around with a strained smile. "Ah. Maybe you shouldn't get dressed here. Al's probably still sleeping but he's here too." They were being a bit careless, since this was Al's room, after all.

That warning came a little late, and though Ciel didn't look particularly shaken up, she did speed up in putting her clothes on. She was embarrassed, of course, but also relieved that she was covering the essential parts of her body. If Tesfia had been in her shoes, she would have been in hysterics.

At any rate, the early morning commotion came to an end. The Alus the girls knew wouldn't overlook their loud chattering. Even Alice had been prepared for Alus to come out with a frown on his face when she warned Ciel. She'd been prepared to get scolded, but...betraying their expectations, nothing happened.

"Huh?" Alice said. She and Tesfia exchanged glances at this anticlimax. They soon realized that an inexplicable silence filled the large room. When they focused, they couldn't sense the presence of anyone aside from the three of them. Even Loki's bedroom, which was just a simple partitioning, would have been subjected to their voices and the noise. Tesfia and Alice had helped with its design, so they were well aware of that.

"Looks like it's not just Al." Tesfia paused. "It doesn't seem like Loki's here either," she mumbled, looking at the other girls again.

Shortly after that, they confirmed that the owner of the room was, in fact, missing. Alus and Loki had disappeared quite some time before they woke up. As proof, the license that served as a key was left on top of the table. It was meant for the remaining guests to lock up after themselves.

Once she'd finished dressing, Ciel combed through her unruly hair with her fingers and brought up yesterday's discussion, which Tesfia and Alice had forgotten all about. "Oh yeah, Alus and Loki did say they had business to attend to today." Incidentally, as of yesterday, Ciel had stopped saying the "Ms." in front of Loki's name, as a sign of their friendship.

After a moment's pause, Tesfia and Alice recalled the same thing. It was nothing to make a fuss over now, and having known the two for a while, they could guess at what was going on.

"I wonder what business it is this time," Alice said. "Do you know, Fia?"

Tesfia shook her head. "I don't know. But Lady Lettie did show up yesterday, and I don't think she's unrelated to this."

"Really?! I wish I got to meet her too," Alice exclaimed.

"I only got to see her for a short while. And then..." Tesfia remembered being called out to by Lettie, only to be scolded by Alus, which brought a wry smile to her face. But that had been that. She would've liked to talk with Lettie as much as she could, as long as it didn't cause any trouble for Alus. She admired Lettie Kultunca not just as a powerful Magicmaster, but also as a woman.

Lettie was a veteran, full of composure, and she showed her feelings in a natural and human way. It was that openness that attracted people to her. Tesfia wanted to become just like her. Filled with a frustration she struggled to put into words, she recalled what had happened in the baths at the Friendship Magical Tournament.

She then rephrased what she'd been about to say. "That's true. If I get the chance, I'd like to have a talk with her over some tea."

"Lady Lettie is really easy to talk to, isn't she?"

"It's like there's no barrier or gap between you."

“I know what you mean,” Alice agreed with a smile.

It was difficult to put into words why people were attracted to each other. However, they both felt that Lettie was carefree and open-minded. At the same time, she was wild, but equipped with her own unique sensibility. At the core of her actions were firm principles that were different from rigid military discipline and common sense. In other words, there was a clear focal point that supported Lettie’s own righteousness.

On top of that, there was her affability. Even though they’d never met before, she’d gladly interacted with them. It was only natural that Tesfia and Alice would be drawn to her. To novice Magicmasters like them, Lettie was an ideal. In addition to that, she still maintained her human nature despite all of her battles with Fiends in the Outer World. Needless to say, that was yet another reason for Lettie’s popularity.

It also meant that her way of Magicmastery was the opposite of Alus’s way. But the two girls were still immature, so they didn’t even notice. Lettie had kept her human nature in the Outer World, while Alus had lost his. They knew too little of the Outer World to realize this.

“Lady Lettie seems to do some things completely on impulse,” Tesfia noted. “But that’s part of what makes it so easy to get close to her.”

“Yeah.”

As Tesfia and Alice continued talking, the remaining girl asked in confusion, “Who are you talking about? Lettie? Do you mean...THAT ranked No. 7?” Ciel was in shock.

Everyone at the Institute knew Lettie’s name. And the two girls nodded in affirmation at Ciel. Even though they’d met her through their common connection with Alus, Lettie was still a big deal to them. They’d thought they would never meet her. What greater honor could there be than to have someone like her remember their names?

However, they already knew Alus. He went beyond Lettie, standing at the top of all Magicmasters as the ranked No. 1. That being the case, perhaps they shouldn’t take Lettie at face value either.

A normal person would never work as a Single. Of course, there were all kinds of bonds and inconveniences related to rankings, more than the girls could even imagine. Once they became aware of that, they wouldn't be able to innocently yearn for it like the other students.

"I'd love to see Lady Lettie fight just once, right, Alice?" The fact that Tesfia could state an extravagant wish like that was a sign that she still had the mindset of a student.

"Yeah. I wonder what kind of magic she uses," Alice asked, in an innocent and naive fashion. Even as she spoke out of curiosity, she didn't truly realize the greatness of Single Digit Magicmasters that were touted as the most powerful warriors on the battlefield. This, despite her daily contact with Alus...which meant that she just didn't know the Outer World.

But that wasn't just limited to Alice. Nearly all the students at the Institute had no idea what battles in the Outer World really looked like. The girls didn't know that it would take someone's death for them to finally realize it.

"Singles have all the information about their affinities and spells kept secret, after all. Well, I bet Alus would know," Tesfia innocently said.

However, Alice, realizing she was stepping into a minefield, answered with a dry smile, "I think Al would get angry if we asked."

Ciel agreed. "Of course he would. Actually, are you saying that Alus would know?"

There had been an event that caused a big commotion in the Institute yesterday. And that was Lilisha revealing that Alus was a Magicmaster for the military. Being a Magicmaster was like a full-time job, so as a student perhaps he was being treated like an apprentice Magicmaster, it was thought.

The credibility of Lilisha—who'd only just transferred in—aside, the high-level mock battle that took place on the festival's first day had removed all doubts. Then again, the reality far exceeded the false information Lilisha leaked to keep the situation under control. The students couldn't even imagine the truth...that their classmate Alus Reigin was the ranked No. 1 Magicmaster.

With one day having passed since the campus festival, Ciel was finally able to

calm down and think about what had happened yesterday. “Thinking about it, it wasn’t a very convincing explanation. I get that Alus is part of the military—no, that he’s helping them out with military affairs—but is that okay from a disciplinary level?”

It was an obvious question. As a general rule, recruiting minors into the military wasn’t allowed. Maybe it was different in the past, but in the present day, public opinion was firmly against sending minors into battle. Part of that was because the tranquility in the Inner World had dulled the sense of danger in people’s minds. It was a side effect of the peace they enjoyed.

“It’s probably complicated,” Tesfia said. Being nobility and having a mother with a military background helped her to understand that side a little easier. She furrowed her brow. The military probably wasn’t pleased that people were talking about Alus’s status and treatment. Above all, the military wasn’t just a simple force in Alpha; it was also a metaphorical wall that psychologically separated the common population from the Outer World. A soaring wall that stood between them and the threats that loomed from the Outer World.

Which was why no matter what someone as powerful as Alus did, the military would settle the matter within its own walls. Or rather, they had no other choice.

Having considered things to that extent, Tesfia—unusually for her—pondered for a while. That meant that perhaps what Lilisha talked about yesterday may have been in Alus’s best interests. At the very least he didn’t have to leave the Institute, and his position had been only marginally affected.

Some of the best students already took up unofficial military duties before graduation under the guise of training. In fact, Tesfia had even heard that Felinella, who was at the top of the Institute excluding Alus, was working for her father, Vizaist.

Besides, Lilisha’s revelation hadn’t been completely false, and she’d kept the core truth hidden. Alus’s most important secret was still a secret, and it had been done with a minimum of effort. However... “Hey, do you think Lilisha is really on Alus’s side?”

Alice and Ciel both fell silent at Tesfia’s unexpected question. Alus himself had

said not to trust Lilisha. Those words kept bothering Tesfia. Most of all, if you assumed that surveillance was Lilisha's primary role, then she really should keep her guard up around her. She was convinced of that much.

When Tesfia faced Lilisha, she had sensed there was something different about her compared with the usual nobles. That's why she honestly didn't have a favorable impression of her. The world of nobles was twisted compared to commoners' society. It didn't even have something you could call normal.

Or perhaps they just didn't get along. It was a vague feeling, and it was hard to share with Alice and Ciel. It was something that only someone who knew a fair amount about noble society would truly understand.

Lilisha's family name, Frusevan, was one of the reasons for that feeling. That family was something of an outlier in noble society. If anything, they were pretty much treated as heretics.

Seeing Tesfia's wrinkled brow, Alice let out a sigh. "Well, there's not much point in thinking about it. Fia, you're the type of person who only gets confused the harder you think about things."

Alice was pretty much calling her an unintentional troublemaker, but she knew Tesfia had good intentions. In any case, Tesfia tended to run in circles with her thinking.

Tesfia just shrugged in the face of such kindly intended, but painful to hear, words. "I-I know that." She'd had plenty of failures under her belt, so the best she could muster was a pout.

"But," Alice said hesitantly, "I don't really like that we don't know." She blurted this out in a somewhat lonely tone. They'd been together with Alus and Loki thus far, so being kept out of the loop felt like being treated like an outsider.

Somewhere deep down, she knew that she and Tesfia were able to stay under Alus's tutelage because they helped him to create a place for himself within the Institute. But he didn't even need to be a student here. That much was evident from Principal Sisty's involvement. The fact that they were in such a fortuitous situation right now was due to political circumstances. It was simply because it was necessary for Alus to live at the Institute.

In that case, they didn't need to poke their noses into things they didn't need to know. There was a clear line drawn by Alus. Stepping across that line risked creating a rift between them.

However... "We would have helped if he'd asked," Alice mumbled with a sorrowful look.

Since she looked unusually dejected, Tesfia hurriedly stepped in. "That's just like you, Alice. But I can understand how you feel."

"Can you not just agree on this on your own? We spent the whole night together, so please don't leave me out." Ciel interrupted the somber mood with a sulking expression. "Well, I don't know what kind of relationship Lilisha has with Alus..." She stopped to ponder it. "Ah, could it be that she herself is the problem? Like a rival in love? I'm good at spotting that kind of thing!"

She nodded with a self-satisfied look. Was she trying to be considerate? At any rate, she'd pulled the conversation in a different direction. It wouldn't be surprising for her to have a more in-depth understanding of Alus's situation compared with the other students. She seemed so proud of herself to have caught onto the scent of an adolescent girl in distress.

"Say, Ciel? Have you not woken up yet?"

"That's mean, Fia! I am fully awake! Can't you see that my eyes are even sparkling?!" Ciel protested Tesfia's serious question by opening her eyes wider with her fingers. She might be an airhead, but she was sensitive when it came to affairs of the heart. Three girls starting to talk about a boy fulfilled all the requirements. "Well, maybe I took my imagination a little too far, please forgive me for that," she continued, bringing her hands in front of her face in an apologetic gesture. It seemed it had just been her brand of joke.

"But if Lilisha is the key, why not close the distance to her?" she continued. "She seems well-informed, so maybe you can get something out of her?" This was advice from someone who wasn't as familiar with the situation as the other two were.

Alice followed up on that. "That's true. There's no need to be hostile towards her from the start. We might be able to work together to help Al with something." Lilisha was sent by the military to watch over Alus, so if they

showed that they were being cooperative, they might be able to be of help to Alus. They could also observe the observer, so long as they kept a degree of distance from her.

Alice's idea was simple. Meanwhile, Tesfia showed a puzzled face, but after thinking on it for a while, she said, "That's true. Al's been a big help to us, so we could at least try."

"Yeah, let's at least hear what she has to say." Alice put on a bright smile, as Tesfia nodded in agreement.

However, Ciel was unable to fully grasp the unspoken intentions and hesitations. "But she's a transfer student, so why not just get along with her?" she asked, but that wound up putting an end to the discussion.

After that, the three looked around the room and decided to clean it up, since it was still a mess from last night.

Looming after this was the campus festival's closing party. Participation was optional, but the multipurpose hall would be opened for a buffet party. Their class had also planned for a small party before that, but the three girls agreed they needed to clean up here first.

Incidentally, when it came to cleaning, Ciel was as good as Alice. Though Tesfia was not very good at all. That wasn't just because she lacked skills, but also because of a lingering doubt in her mind. Just where had the owner of the room and his silver-haired partner gone? She knew there wasn't much point in thinking about it, but it still vexed her.

Trying to shake those thoughts away, Tesfia went to work, cleaning the room in her own way. *Frusevan... I know, maybe I should ask Mother.* She stumbled upon that realization when they were halfway through cleaning the room.

Fifty-Third Chapter

The Transformation of Vanalis

Alus was in the middle of Vanalis, faced with the world having transformed into silver. He took a deep breath and then exhaled, his breath turning white.

A few days had passed since the day after the campus festival when he and Loki set out. Although they practically had the Governor-General's permission, having both of Alpha's Singles outside the nation was less than desirable. Because of that, they couldn't really afford to spend too much time on this mission. But the situation before them was unexpected.

Alus glanced over at Lettie. She simply stood there stunned, making no attempt to bat away the falling snow.

Lettie had spent over half a year trying to conquer Vanalis and still hadn't accomplished it, which was why she wanted to borrow the help of Alpha's strongest card. That's why settling this quickly was definitely her top priority.

But that's a little dicey now, Alus thought quickly. Including the time needed for marching, they could only really spend three days eliminating the Fiends. If you added in the clean-up of remaining Fiends afterward, five days would be desirable.

The Devourer was only eliminated recently, and he'd heard of Fiends making strange movements in the Outer World lately. In other words, the situation in the Outer World was still unstable.

And since Berwick sent out two Singles, he would have to consider what to do about the deployment of defense personnel while they were absent. Alpha's defensive strength wasn't going to waver because of the lack of Singles. However, that assumed normal activity among the Fiends. In the case that an abnormally large swarm attacked, or an S-class Fiend attacked, the defensive line would collapse within seven days according to the simulations.

Of course, Alus didn't take those at face value. His own prediction had the defensive line collapsing within three days in the worst-case scenario.

The snowfall before them shouldn't have existed in this season. And it threatened to destroy all of their intentions.

It had been over a century since human hands were removed from nature. Even so, the changes in the natural world exceeded human imagination. Trees grew at absurd speeds, and there were new plant species and animals no one had ever seen before. The one who enjoyed the benefits of this evolution the most wasn't Fiends or humankind, but Mother Nature.

However, no matter how far out of the realm of imagination the scene before them was, it was definitely more than just a natural phenomenon.

Just a few hours ago they'd been in stifling heat, but now the world had turned silver and they had frosted breaths. The temperature change was so drastic that it didn't just rule out natural phenomena, but also illusions from dark attribute spells.

There was a slight movement next to Alus. Having caught up to him, Loki immediately did what she needed to do and sent out a wave of mana across their surroundings. She closed her mouth and shook her head. There were no Fiends nearby.

Alus gave Loki a passing grade for having made the correct initial move without being distracted by the scenery. He then went on to analyze the situation.

First, there was the presence of the Fiend he was sensing. Also, the fact that Loki's detection hadn't caught it. *It's clear that this is not just ordinary snow, as it's able to obstruct mana sonar. Jamming, perhaps?* But he couldn't really sense any mana from the individual snowflakes.

Considering the amount of mana in the air, it was unnatural for there to be no mana in this vast amount of snow. It was possible this was a result of interference with the information dimension, which was even more advanced than interference with matter. But the situation being as extraordinary as it was, it was difficult to tell right away.

Like Loki with her detection, he'd used his own attribute-less magic to expand his field of view. Basically, the three-dimensional structural information of his surroundings unfolded in his brain, and he could grasp the situation around him as if watching a diorama from above. And while it wasn't as effective as detection, it could pick up the presences of Fiends to a degree. It had an

effective radius of one kilometer. Within that area, he could vaguely pick up on a Fiend's presence.

But even with his power, that was the limit. And it was impossible to pinpoint its location.

It might actually be interfering with the information dimension. *It's pretty impressive, but it appears it's not right next to us. And it doesn't seem like it's making any move to attack us anytime soon. So now what?* Alus pondered his next move, frowning at the unfamiliar feel of the ground.

"It really is snow, right?" Loki murmured next to him. It was standard practice not to take anything at face value in the Outer World. But her tone mixed a Magicmaster's caution with doubt that what she was seeing was real.

"Yeah." After a moment, Alus nodded, affirming that what she said was correct. He currently saw nothing that suggested otherwise.

He then watched Loki turn her face up to take another look at the landscape. He followed suit, but only saw the same silvery world as before. The falling snow danced like ashes in the air, swallowing up everything in its path.

Eventually the slowly falling snow began to cover Lettie's head, changing the color of her hair to white.

When Alus took a step, the snow reached up to his ankle. *This is quite the snowfall... It's as far as the eye can see.* Not even he had anticipated this situation. Of course, he'd never experienced it in the past.

Alus continued to analyze the situation, while Lettie snapped back to reality, barking out orders as she shook the snow off her head and shoulders. "Confirm the situation! Prioritize finding the advance party, split into five and get going!" she shouted, in a more serious tone than usual. But it was clear both she and her squad were still shaken up.

Even so, her orders were very effective in moving the situation along. The squad hurriedly put down their packs and was about to get into action...

"Hold up, Lettie. Give me two or three minutes." Without even waiting for an answer, Alus ran back the way they came at full speed. He didn't look at Loki, who gave chase behind him, as he made for the boundary of this frozen world.

Even Loki struggled to keep up with Alus when he ran at full speed. Fortunately, she didn't lose sight of him. "Sir Alus!" Seeing him come to a standstill, she called out to him. "What are you doing?!"

"So it's here."

By following his gaze, she easily found what he had been searching for. It was a thin line of snow that had fallen from the overlapping tree branches above.

"What is this?"

Ignoring Loki, Alus squatted down and swept up the snow with his fingers, rubbing them together. "I didn't catch it right away, but I'm convinced now. This is magic."

It was most likely an environment-altering spell. But seeing how wide of an area it covered, its interference far exceeded Niflheim. In terms of falsifying the world, it was similar to Helheim. However, its scale easily surpassed what Alus could accomplish. "Coming back here was the right call."

"Yes. But this is..." Loki looked at the snow suspiciously. She couldn't tell who had used the spell, or what their intention was. The magic that Magicmasters used was primarily intended to combat Fiends. It was a weapon. That was basically true for detection and barrier magic as well.

When Alus created a new spell for Alice, he'd explained how magic was made by narrowing down a theme. That was why there was no such thing as the perfect spell that could do anything.

In any event, the magic that Magicmasters used was meant to kill Fiends. That was the basic premise for it. And conversely, the magic that Fiends used was a tool to kill humans. Yet despite such a powerful spell being used, there seemed to be no intent of attack behind it.

Well, the chilling temperature could be considered an attack, but in that case it could just be directly used against them. Turning the entire world silvery-white was simply ineffective.

Having confirmed the truth, Alus left the questions for later, and made his way back to Lettie and her squad.

“Let’s start from the conclusion. This snow is a product of magic.” It might not be a useful piece of information right now, but since the other party was an unknown entity, it was important to share and understand as much as possible.

At the very least, it was necessary for how Alus operated. His experience told him that even the slightest unanswered question would come back and bite them. “However, the intentions behind it are unknown. It isn’t clear what effect it will have moving forward. If it’s just meant to slow us down, this is pretty half-assed. I can’t grasp what the plan is, to the point that I couldn’t tell it was magic right away.”

Alus didn’t miss the look of unrest on the squad members’ faces, but he didn’t pay any further attention to it. This was a squad of elites. They had enough experience to immediately accept any situation.

However, that merely meant they had a high degree of adaptability. And adapting and analyzing were two completely different things. Just being able to adapt to a danger wasn’t enough. You only got a passing grade if you could analyze a threat, form a plan, and then execute the plan. Simply accepting the reality of the situation could also mean abandoning the thinking needed to resolve it.

While Lettie and her squad looked on in silence, Alus had already begun to think about their response.

Lettie also realized that she’d lost her cool. “That was careless of me,” she said, reflecting on it.

“There was no way around it this time,” Alus replied, as if telling her not to worry about it. Incidentally, not everything he said was with her in mind. While she was shaken, he was objectively looking at the situation. It was his habit of stepping back and considering things, which was often useful in these cases.

“Sorry about this, Allie.” Lettie hesitated, then added, “Can you lend us your strength some more?”

“I did make a promise, so I’ll do my job. That said, try not to rely on me too much.” Alus didn’t have much practice working with large squads, so in effect, he was telling Lettie he’d lend his wisdom but that she’d have to make the final decisions.

Still...I don't like this snow. There was a strange foreboding feel to it that wouldn't leave him. It put him on edge and made him uncomfortable.

Regardless, moving on from this place was preferable. Then again, since they didn't know the truth of the falling snow or the source of the phenomenon, they couldn't do anything too drastic.

Normally, this kind of environment-changing magic was used for more than just offensive purposes. *But it's pretty weak if it's meant to stall us, so it makes more sense to assume it's for detection.*

Alus considered the possibility that the surface of the snow was being used as a way to detect people, similar to vibrations in a spider's web. However, magic was the Fiends' invention. So for them it was more primitive and instinctive, or rather, lacking in logic. Especially when compared to human magic.

Because of that, even he struggled to decipher the hidden aim behind the spell. It was like trying to figure out the intentions behind a toddler's abstract painting. It was possible that there wasn't even any intention in the first place. "Let's take it slow from here. Bring out a map."

It was the female healing Magicmaster who responded to Alus's request. She ran up and pulled out a thick piece of paper from the pouch at her waist.

He took it from her and spread it out. It was a drawing of the area that covered two kilometers by two kilometers, a wider area than his field of view, which was welcome. It was hand-drawn, but from the version number in the top right corner, he could tell it had been updated several times. The map was detailed and had been backed up by careful research, a sign of how much time they'd spent fighting in this region.

"Is this the forward base?" Alus asked Lettie.

"That's right. It was made by cutting a hole in a rock face, so it's hard to detect."

The forward base was created to be used over a long period of time. It was built on the steep slope of a cliff to make it difficult for Fiends to invade, and as long as they kept mana from leaking outside, it was unlikely to be found. It wasn't very large, so it could only be used by a small number of people, but it

would function perfectly as a base.

He looked at Lettie. She appeared to have regained her calm, but her shock from before wasn't just because of the unexpected snow. If that was all, then with Alus's help they could just handle things on their own. Instead, her doubts weren't focused on the squad, but on the safety of the advance party.

If that was the case, then Alus should prioritize resolving the anxiety of the mission leader, the expedition's strongest fighting force aside from himself. *The advance party was sent ahead to carry supplies to the base as well. With these numbers, a lack of supplies will slow down the conquest.*

He was hoping for a quick resolution and wanted to avoid spending time on preparations. But Vanalis wouldn't be so easy that they could just rush in without planning. Even if he were going in on his own, he would require a degree of planning so that he could carry it out step by step.

So they should move now. They would search for the advance party and confirm their safety. And in the worst case, they should at least secure their supplies. Alus decided that now, before the snow got too deep, was the right time to go.

"Lettie, let's get to the base on foot. We can't do anything too flashy, but we'll use the bare minimum of mana to keep our body temperatures up. The snow doesn't have any natural mana in it, so there's a chance we might be found by mana emitting across the surface. So we need to keep any mana from leaking."

Lettie nodded at Alus's suggestion, and immediately all squad members coated their bodies with mana. It was one of the mana control techniques, but there was a limit to how long they could keep it up.

Alus could form a thin film of mana not even one millimeter thick around his body. Even if an ordinary person examined him up close, they wouldn't be able to detect it. He could also maintain it for a long period of time.

Lettie could handle herself, but her squad members were another thing. And then there was Loki. *I guess she'd last two hours at most.* If they only needed to keep a film up, they could all last for several days. But it was drastically more difficult to maintain without any leaks. It was like threading a thin thread

through the hole of a needle and holding it there, while keeping it from touching the needle even a little. Of course that required extreme focus, which would delay their responses to any attacks from Fiends at the same time, which could end up being fatal.

"So what do we do about searching our surroundings, Allie?" Lettie asked, understanding the difficulty of the task.

Alus turned to Lettie as if that was a trivial matter. "I'll do something about it. Still, I see you're not a Single for nothing."

"You think?" His unusually frank praise made Lettie show an embarrassed expression.

Lettie had a high level of mana control. He didn't know how long she could keep it up, but just like him she had a film so thin it was questionable if a normal Magicmaster could even pick up on it. It was kind of like lotion applied to a woman's soft skin. Seeing her pull that off without any problems sort of made Alus feel like his identity was being threatened.

"Well, it's still a little cold," Lettie said. With a smile, she brought her shoulder next to Alus's shoulder. Coated with mana or not, she wasn't wearing a lot of clothing. Her belly being exposed in this kind of weather was a strange sight indeed.

"Just put up with it," Alus said, and pushed her away. He then glanced at Loki, who he was a little worried about. *As for her... Well, I guess she'll be fine.* Her daily training was paying off as her mana control had improved considerably. She was practically on even terms with Lettie's squad.



In the meantime, Loki, who had no idea why Alus was looking her way, devoted herself to controlling her mana.

“Anyway, Lettie, I’ll keep an eye on our surroundings too. Fortunately, my way of detection is unique and leaves almost no traces of mana, although it’s not as accurate as a spotter’s results. I believe we should continue on foot, even if it is a bit of a hassle. Also, now that we’re in this situation...we should reconsider the plan.”

All of that was just Alus’s opinion. It was Lettie who had command of the squad. “You decide. I’ll follow your lead.” He was going to continue by saying, “My way will only bring about a lot of unnecessary animosity,” but swallowed those words. The self-deprecating tone in that would’ve come from personal experience.

Revising the plan meant leaving the confirmation of the advance party’s safety for later. It was an efficient but coldhearted decision, especially since Lettie and her squad considered the advance party as comrades in arms. It was clear as day that there would be emotional backlash among the squad. Alus wasn’t so immature that he would make that kind of decision for another person’s squad.

“Right. But the advance party isn’t just carrying supplies. They also have medical equipment, materiel to enhance the forward base, spare AWRs, and more. At the very least we have to recover the supplies.”

Lettie was right. Their mission wasn’t going to end just by eliminating the Fiends. The supplies would be necessary at some point, and once the battle started, equipment and spell talismans would be needed to treat the wounded.

“That’s a lot to carry. The plan was to meet up with them at the forward base, right?”

“That’s right. There’s also two other temporary bases, but they’re just in case of emergency.”

Alus gazed at Lettie. Her voice sounded calm, but her face looked like she was desperately holding back her emotions. Having spent a lot of time in the Outer World she understood the reality of the situation, but she was still worried

about her subordinates.

As a fellow Single, Alus found that a little unexpected. However, a moment later, there was an empty feeling in his chest, and he remembered that he was the strange one for thinking that way. It was that part of his heart that would likely never be filled.

At the same time he realized why Lettie's subordinates looked up to her. He and Lettie were similar, but different in some ways.

Alus quietly continued speaking. "That's true, we'll have to get to the base first. It'll be easier to come up with a plan if we can confirm the situation." That might help alleviate the anxiety and frustration he sensed from Lettie, so he gave a reply that was in line with her feelings at the moment.

Fortunately, it doesn't look like the Fiends are making a move. If the snow was indeed being used to detect them as Alus surmised, then they were already within the enemy's reach. But based on the typical Fiend's habits, they would have attacked the moment they detected Alus and the others. Yet there were no signs of that so far.

Even when compared to a spotter's mana sonar, he would be able to detect such a powerful enemy rapidly approaching. *If they show no reaction to us moving on the snow, then the snow might not be used for detection after all. That actually makes the spell even creepier.*

Alus and the others quietly continued their march over the snow. Vanalis's topography was basically slopes surrounding a hilly area, like a ridge of small mountains. They'd be able to reach the peak of any of them in no time if they hurried. The base they were headed for was built into a slope slightly below the peaks of the ridge.

A few hours later, Alus could see the hazy peaks at the limit of his vision. From there they would finally be able to reach the highest point in Vanalis.

On the way there, Alus silently listened to the sound of the snow being crunched under the squad's feet. As before, the snow had no trace of the mana that should naturally occur. It was definitely a product of a spell. But hearing the sound—which was real—he found it hard to believe that it really was made by magic. It was near impossible to distinguish from the real deal.

The snow was nice and cold, and melted in the hand as you'd expect. If it really was created, were the sensations he felt just in his head, with the snow having no actual substance?

The experience posed a conundrum for Alus. What was magic? And what was information?

Then he snapped back to reality, clicking his tongue at himself for being distracted. He rechecked the map, looking around for landmarks they would use to reach the base. There should be a distinctively-shaped rock nearby.

"Will this be all right?" Suddenly he heard a light step on the snow, and Loki's voice calling out next to him. Her question was referring to Lettie's state of mind, or maybe to Vanalis's transformation.

"It's fine. This is common in the Outer World, aside from this snow, that is." However, if Loki was worried about Lettie, she had a point. Lettie and her squad had been summoned back to Alpha without finishing their mission. Because of that, she expressed strong regret over having left Vanalis. She must've wanted to get back to the frontlines as soon as possible.

And it wasn't like Alus couldn't understand that feeling. It was a mission carried out in a world full of unimaginable threats that had literally whittled away at their lives. Naturally, if she was thrown back to square one, of course she would feel it was unreasonable.

Even though he could rationalize it away as a typical reaction, he didn't consider it normal, though Lettie had lost several subordinates during the mission. And being so devoted to her men, she found that all the more intolerable. In fact, there were times when she had revealed as much to him.

However, he couldn't let Loki think about something unnecessary right now. Brushing the snow off of her silver hair, he spoke to the anxious girl in a nonchalant tone. "Don't forget that she's a Single. And this is the Outer World. Out here, we're the uninvited guests. You don't have the luxury of losing focus."

"Yes! Excuse me."

Unnecessary concerns were an unwelcome thing in the Outer World. If need be, they could return home after the mission and console each other. But here,

that kindness was weakness, and even a sin. He could understand Lettie's impatience, but out in this cruel, merciless world she would have to take care of herself.

"Hey, Allie, I forgot to mention something..." Lettie suddenly spoke up in a blunt tone, tapping Alus on the shoulder. The way she sort of fizzled out at the end though suggested it was something important, and to be honest he had a bad feeling about it.

"What are you saying all of a sudden? If you've got something to say, then let's take this opportunity and you can tell me everything."

"Uh, well, it's about the Fiend that controls Vanalis."

"Yeah, you told me about it before. A Chimera, wasn't it? So did you come up with a reason why it would use such a strange spell or something?"

After hesitating a moment, Lettie said, "It's probably the third leader."

"What?" Alus had been listening, but when she said that, he instinctively turned his head to look at her.

For some reason, she looked surprised in turn. But the next moment she smiled wryly as if to hide her awkwardness. "Sorry." She brought her hands in front of her face and apologized, as if saying she hadn't put much stock in that information. She then began walking again, and continued to explain. "Honestly, it wasn't certain, so I hesitated whether to say anything or not..."

"Now's not the time to hesitate. So what's this third leader?"

"As far as I know, the highest-classed Fiend ruling Vanalis has changed twice. You know, like the turf wars that happen from time to time?"

"Hold up. Then you're saying—"

"While we were gone, the Fiend ruling Vanalis might have changed again."

"And they might be responsible for this snow?"

"Probably. It's possible that there's a different Fiend than the Chimera ruling this place now. I guess that'd make it the fourth leader." As she spoke, Lettie looked a little calmer, a sign that she'd been able to switch her focus back to the mission at hand. Or maybe she'd just been trying to cover up the fact that

she'd been slow with the information.

That was a relief, but still, Alus had never heard of leaders changing so often. To put it simply, the fact that there were so many Fiends capable of taking control of Vanalis was abnormal in and of itself. Even if it were possible, it was only natural for the strongest to take over the leader's position based purely on the principle of competition. So this fourth leader would be quite the formidable opponent.

"Sheesh, talk about accepting a troublesome mission. I'm confident I would've refused if you'd told me sooner." He glared at Lettie, but it was too late to do anything about it now. Seeing the edges of her lips rise, his shoulders drooped.

"It's too late to turn back now, A-L-L-I-E!" It was clear that Lettie would just dodge the issue if he tried to press her. In other words, he might have been led by the nose from the start.

Alus resigned himself, and gave up even trying to complain. "I don't intend to. I've already accepted the mission. I especially don't intend to return from these backwoods empty-handed..."

"I'm counting on ya!"

Lettie smiled, and Alus realized she'd recovered faster than expected. Vanalis's transformation came as a shock, but it seemed Alus's presence had proved reliable. *I feel like I've been duped, but oh well.*

Before long, Alus confirmed they were close to the base Lettie and her squad were using and that the mountain it was built on was covered in snow, using his field of view again. At the same time he looked around for enemies, but sensed no Fiends around.

After marching for a while, even Alus started to feel cold. On their way to the base, they discovered a cart half-buried in snow. It seemed to have been haphazardly left there. The wheels weren't locked and the cargo was still in it.

The squad looked it over, and confirmed that the food was mostly preserved thanks to being frozen over. As expected, upon checking with Lettie, it seemed the advance party hadn't come to Vanalis with a cart in tow.

“So after coming to Vanalis, they packed the cargo on a cart before moving on, and then it was abandoned.”

“What do you think, Allie?”

After glancing at her, Alus gave her his frank thoughts. “If you think about it normally, they must have encountered a Fiend. That said, there’s no traces of any major battle. I can’t tell because any footprints have been erased by the snow, but they might have feared the base would be discovered and left temporarily.”

The advance party hadn’t put up a fight against the Fiend, and instead retreated. Alus concluded that was the most likely answer. “The base is close. Let’s carry the supplies in and confirm if they’ve returned or not.”

“Right.” Lettie’s answer was surprisingly simple.

Alus matched her attitude, and avoided touching on the worst possible outcome. He wasn’t sure what to say to her, but nothing he could think of would be right. Expectations were often met with disappointment in the Outer World.

After that, the squad searched as wide of an area as they could, but because of the snow they found not a single trace of the advance party.

They’d gotten closer. The base was already within a stone’s throw. It still couldn’t be seen with the naked eye, as it was built into a rock wall on a steep hill, and would be camouflaged to hide it from the eyes of Fiends.

“This is going too smoothly,” Alus muttered, as the squad silently marched on high guard.

Whether he spoke from experience or his talent was anyone’s guess. But the words of the ranked No. 1 were enough for everyone to tense up and sharpen their senses even further.

That was when it happened. A creature appeared on the path they were walking down as if it were a chance encounter.

“?!” The squad was taken aback. Just thirty meters in front of them they saw a short and stout creature crawling, leaving rut-like tracks in the snow as it slowly

cut off their path. It had a black body that looked like it was wearing a dark dome-shaped tent. Ivy grew on its body, and on the ends of the ivy were leaves that rustled as they were pulled along the snow.

The ivy and leaves had strange shapes, and not only did they rustle with each movement, but the tips seemed to wander through the air. From the way the vines were wrapped around it, it was impossible to see its outer shell. The intertwined vines formed a natural armor, and it looked like a bundle of ivy moving on its own.

Surprisingly, the Fiend showed no hostility. It had gotten so close to them without Alus even noticing.

That, in combination with its strange appearance, left everyone stunned for a moment. Or not, because in the next second Alus alone kicked off the ground.

In the blink of an eye, he closed the distance to the Fiend. It was far too fast to imagine it was pure reaction. It was as if he was moving by instinct. With an explosive burst of power, he disappeared from within the squad's ranks like a bolt of lightning.

His AWR appeared to shimmer in his hand for an instant. The next moment the squad was able to see him he was far behind the Fiend. The blade of mana extending from his AWR was extremely thin, and they could clearly see how long and large the swung blade was.

Turning back to the Fiend, they saw that the ivy covering its body had been cut through in a single stroke.

A moment later, the snow soared up as an aftereffect of the superhuman feat, and at the same time a sliced line appeared across the Fiend's body and dome-shaped outer shell. The next moment, the two halves slid apart. And the countless cut ivy vines and leaves rustled as one and fell to the snow.

Without making any further movements, Alus undid the mana blade. However, he didn't feel like he'd cut the core. *Tsk.* He clicked his tongue in his mind.

This was a kind of Fiend not seen around Alpha. Using a mana blade in order to keep his output of mana to a minimum made sense, but it had ultimately

backfired, keeping him from finishing it off in a single blow. But he did intuitively realize something upon attacking it.

Its core's location is strange. And this sensation is... Sure enough, a being peeked out from under the severed vines and black shell. Its appearance looked much like the chrysalis of a beetle. It had three pairs of legs folded up across its abdomen. On its back were several small saplings in a charred black color. These were likely the origin of all the ivy.

Underneath those saplings were thick wings that fit snugly up against its body. Rather than calling it the main body, it seemed more accurate to call it the outer shell's contents.

Its unique appearance that not even Alus had seen before made him feel like a bucket of cold water had been dumped on him. Even while astonished, his instincts as a Magicmaster sharpened even further. After a few seconds, he no longer felt surprise at the Fiend. Instead, his thoughts had shifted to analyzing how to eliminate this creature.

But before he could make his next move, a gauntlet clad in electricity was swung at the chrysalis. Sajik had followed up on Alus's slash.

He'd swiftly picked up on Alus's intentions and concluded that he was the most suitable. In addition to his fast steps, he used Force to move his large body at an extreme speed. His fist wrapped in lightning shook the air, and a thunderclap roared.

The powerful blow should've had enough behind it to shatter the Fiend's body. However, just before his fist reached what appeared to be the head of the chrysalis, it came to an abrupt stop.

Looking down, he saw the chrysalis's folded-up legs now wrapped around his arm, as at the same time undulating vines spun around his gauntlet. Then they dug further into his arm, looking to snap it. "Urk." Pain shot through Sajik's arm, and he bit down to endure it.

In that case... Sajik's mana swelled. He was going to shock the Fiend by running the power of his AWR through his arm. Determining that it was only a matter of time before his arm would become useless, he was prepared to sacrifice it to hurt the Fiend back.

“Burn!” The veins in his arms rose as the muscles bulged and explosively expanded. Soon an ear-shattering sound was released from the top of his fist.

“‹‹Thunder Lion››!” With Sajik’s fist as a starting point, the spell was constructed and materialized.

It was the summoning spell Thunder Lion. Only the lion’s head appeared, and it opened its sharp lightning jaws and bit into the Fiend’s legs. Powerful lightning ran through the chrysalis’s body, and shining white light enveloped the surroundings.

Lightning strike after lightning strike hit. Smoke rose up from the chrysalis. But even then there was no end to the attacks.

Alus, who was watching from the other side, stared at the chrysalis as white smoke rose up from it.

A moment later, there was movement. The wings that were sticking to the chrysalis’s body spread out and blew away the lightning that wrapped around its body. A gust of wind laced with white smoke ripped through the air.

Seeing that, the squad tensed up at the precarious situation. Lettie alone watched the situation unfold with a calm look in her eyes. Because even though a cold sweat ran down Sajik’s back, he maintained his balance and continued attacking with lightning.

Just as Sajik felt his arm was at its limit, a series of lines appeared on the chrysalis’s body, running from its head down to its abdomen. It looked like cracks had appeared in its body.

The Fiend, cut into a dozen pieces, fell down on the snow with a dull thud, spraying blood as it did so.

When Sajik looked beyond it, he saw Alus standing there with an expressionless face.

The dark green blood that seeped into the snow soon evaporated, along with the snow it had stuck to. Without caring for the condition of his arm, Sajik straightened his posture, and gave an Alpha-style salute. “Thank you, Sir!”

Then a fist unexpectedly swung down on Sajik’s head. “You idiot!!” It was

Lettie's iron fist. This was more or less expected, but her expression was less angry and more exasperated. "Sorry about that, Allie."

"I don't mind. It only happened because I didn't finish it in a single attack. It was a strange opponent, but everything ended well."

Alus looked down at the fragments of the Fiend that were crumbling apart, and let out a sigh. Sajik's lightning and his space magic had destroyed the core, wherever it may have been, but for some reason even at this close range he couldn't sense the Fiend's mana capacity or its potential. Was that the effect of the strange snow too?

Meanwhile, Sajik seemed somewhat confused at why he'd been scolded by Lettie. His colleague Mujir gave him a dumbfounded look. "You idiot, think about why Sir Alus dealt with it immediately by himself. And why the mana blade was used!"

His words were met with an annoyed glance from Sajik. He didn't seem to have realized his biggest mistake. But the truth was, neither had Loki. She'd been ready to help Sajik with his crisis, but it appeared that might have been unnecessary. She softly looked up at Alus with an expression of shame at her inability to understand the situation.

Unaware of her feelings, Mujir sighed and continued, "And you have the best reactions in the squad too. Sir Alus, may I explain it to him in your stead?"

Alus nodded lightly. He didn't think it was a big deal either way, and he felt it best to leave the squad to its members.

"He was being cautious of mana leakage," Mujir began. "That's why he didn't use a spell but a mana blade to keep other Fiends from detecting us. And then there's this snow. It seems to be an environment-altering spell as Sir Alus noted, but if it's not meant to stall us, it might be some kind of trap or means to spy on us. If it's the latter, what do you think the consequences of your actions would be?" The way he explained it in such a blunt manner made it clear he was saying the same thing as Lettie...in other words, to think through his mistake properly.

Sajik seemed to get it now, and looked like he was about to apologize for his thoughtless actions.

However... “It’s already done, so I’m not going to find fault with you. But I didn’t expect its insides would be like that,” Alus casually said, stopping Sajik and changing the topic. “At any rate, it was clearly an A-class or above.”

“No way. A Missing Shell’s no A-class. It’s just an extravagant jack-in-the-box. Besides, it’s not one of the A-classes that we’ve marked, so do you mean they’ve increased?” Lettie asked Alus.

A Missing Shell was a Fiend whose biology was shrouded in mystery. It was a relatively low-classed Fiend, and its core was located in the middle of its vines, with its surroundings being hollow. Lettie said the mysterious Fiend was like a jack-in-the-box, and its appearance did surprise many.

There were two A-class Fiends left in Vanalis, one of which was the brain-eating Ogma, so Lettie’s answer left Alus confused. He felt like clicking his tongue as he mulled things over again.

A Missing Shell was a C-class at most, something easily managed for this squad. However, its contents shouldn’t be included in that evaluation. In fact, this was the first time Alus learned that there was something inside. Perhaps someone had called its insides hollow from observing it after it had turned to ash.

However, at the very least, the information on the Fiends here needed to be updated after Lettie and her squad had been away for two months. Moreover, if there were high-classed Fiends present here that they didn’t know about, that would have an impact on conquering Vanalis.

That said, Missing Shells weren’t counted as high-classed, so it was possible that this was just an exception. At any rate, they needed to be cautious. “Looks like the Vanalis campaign has regressed more than expected.”

Lettie’s expression turned grim at Alus’s remark. “I’m worried about my squad.” She sounded like she was talking to herself, but in reality she was making a plea to Alus.

Of course, there was no change in Alus’s policy. First, they would get to the base and confirm the situation, including the advance party. But the unexpected factors made it clear that the overall mission would be delayed.

That was when... “Sir Alus?!” Loki’s urgent tone immediately put everyone on guard.

“Here they come. So it’s definitely a bad situation then.” It was because he’d sensed this ominous event heading their way that he’d instantly moved to kill the Fiend from before.

“So that was a scout,” Lettie noted.

“A pretty high-classed one for that.” That had been one of Alus’s concerns. The newly registered species, Ogma, was calculated to be an A-class. Yet he felt that the Fiend he’d just eliminated was around an A-class itself. Then there was the bit of information that Vanalis had seen a change in leadership. Perhaps all of the Fiends in the area were becoming more powerful.

“Well, there’s no use thinking about it.” As Alus muttered this, all forms of Fiends came crawling out from behind the snow-covered rocks and out of the silvery ground.

They totaled far more than twenty. But it wasn’t like they had just let them approach. Loki’s detection wasn’t flawed either...they just couldn’t be perceived.

Alus realized that the strange snow reflected mana diffusely and in small amounts so that you didn’t notice it. As a result, there was a clean layer on the surface that wasn’t tinged with mana. The Fiends must have used that to camouflage their presence.

Of course, the old tunnels that were in this area were probably being put to good use as well. That meant neither Loki’s detection nor Alus’s field of view could accurately locate them. *If that’s intentional, this goes beyond cleverness into being strategic, as if it was planned by a seasoned army commander...*

He noticed Lettie glancing at him. She was silently asking him if they could use some high firepower magic to intercept the Fiends without worrying about mana leakage.

Having been discovered by this many Fiends, there was no point in holding back. And if this was a scouting party, there was a good chance the other Fiends in the area already knew their location. “I don’t care. Let’s get this over with.”

At Alus's reply, Lettie swung her arm down and ordered her squad. "Wipe 'em out." It was a familiar order and she had no qualms issuing it. They'd already confirmed that the Fiends around them were common species.

And so the battle began. Mana burst and exploded here and there. The Fiends were exterminated one after another without pause. The squad was perfectly coordinated, acting with no waste. Blood splattered on the snow before dispersing into mana particles. This was a case of the right people being in the right place, with each squad member moving in such a way that their best skills were brought forth.

At the heart of that were Sajik and Mujir. They prioritized eliminating the troublesome Fiends, leaving the rest to the squad, so the battle proceeded smoothly. In terms of coordination, they were the best in Alpha. Even without Lettie, their combat power was exceptional.

Regardless, a scouting party wasn't a problem for Lettie. With the highest class here being a B, they left the destruction of the cores to the following forces while they prioritized neutralizing them. There were some Fiends that could self-heal, but that was accounted for.

The battle was handled almost mechanically and according to plan, and the result was a complete win without any injuries. There wasn't even any need for Alus, Lettie, Loki, or the healing Magicmaster to do anything.

Just how many squads are there that can fight this smoothly in a group in Alpha today? Alus thought, recalling the Demi Azur battle.

Eventually, silence returned to their surroundings. But in the next instant... "?!"

Light flashed far away. Alus sensed it, and was just barely able to see something approaching in the upper part of his field of view.

At the same time, a series of roaring sounds rang out. In fact, by the time the sound reached their ears, the white light was already close enough to erase Alus's and the others' shadows.

There was no time to analyze it. When they sensed magic, it was already too late. Only Alus and Lettie were quick enough to react to the long-range magic

blast.

Lettie braced herself, while Alus thrust out his arm as the dazzling light threatened to swallow them up. Everyone covered their ears.

Alus promptly threw up a barrier, but having been made so quickly its durability was questionable. Even so, he just needed to buy a moment of time.

Pouring mana into his AWR, Night Mist, one of the chain's rings started glowing with the light of mana. Thick ice in the shape of a massive shield was layered over the barrier that was just barely holding.

It was large enough to cover the entire squad. That said, having been created by a simple magic formula it had an unrefined shape. If skillfully manipulated, however, an ice barrier could slow down the compositional information of the spells that attacked it. And someone exceptionally talented could use the barrier to degrade the power of the spell.

But the light contained an enormous amount of mana. The powerful glow both seeped into and refracted off of the shield of ice. The attack followed. Exceeding the speed of lightning, the tremendous heat collided with the ice shield, causing particles that resembled sparks to scatter.

The next thing Alus saw was the light bouncing off the shield. It dragged a tail behind it like a meteor. But instead of disappearing into the distance, the tails multiplied and stopped in midair.

It's still active even after being repelled?! Alus swallowed his astonishment and braced for impact.

The number of tails of light easily exceeded one hundred. Instead of disappearing as normal, they curled and attacked Alus and the others again. "Is that Brionach...? No!"

Blocking the second wave with the ice shield, Alus groaned. The composition and amount of mana contained in the spell that assaulted them was different from what he—or even all of humanity—knew. If anything, it felt like an attack that brought out the true power of magic.

Is it the completed version of Brionach?! It's been said that no Magicmaster has found the quintessence of it yet, but to think a Fiend would reach it!

It was then that the realization that magic originated from Fiends really hit home. The situation was now critical. This Brionach—or as he would call this god-level version *Demis Brionach*—differed from the one humanity knew. It was basically a spell that couldn't be defended against.

The spell only split up further and attacked anew for each time it was repelled. It didn't matter how much more powerful the barrier might be. It was possible that the tails might actually disperse if they continued dividing at some point, but Alus didn't have the time to test that theory. Even now the repelled Demis Brionach was splitting into more arrows of light that were raining down like meteors. By now they were close to one thousand in number.

A moment later, Alus undid his ice shield. As dense remnants of mana danced around him like mist, he exhaled slightly. In the same moment, a black mana wrapped around him and he kicked off the ground.

Once in the air, he spread his arms and unleashed several Gra Eaters. When he swung down his arm, the Gra Eaters were sent to devour every single piece of Demis Brionach.

It was his first time using it since the Demi Azur battle, but even he was surprised at how much more easily controllable it was than before. His thoughts aside, the Gra Eaters danced in the air as they ate the pieces of light one after the other.

Eventually, he landed back on the ground, and by that time the threat had been entirely erased. Dropping to one knee, Alus let out a single huff, secretly full of relief.

Fortunately, the squad was in awe, intuitively realized that Alus was in charge of the Gra Eaters, and hadn't made any unnecessary moves. Thanks to that, he was able to devote his full attention to controlling them.

The strong scent of burning stung his nostrils. He'd ended up showing them one of his trump cards, but in this situation it had been unavoidable. "That might have surprised you, but we'll talk about it later."

Next, Alus turned a sharp glance in the direction Demis Brionach had been cast from. The light was already disappearing, but faint white smoke remained in its trail. *They're far away. Several kilometers at least.*

Considering the fact that the spell moved faster than sound, it was no doubt meant as a surprise attack. Even Lettie could only manage to react, so Alus had been the only one who could muster a defense.

"That's Allie for ya! So, how far away is the enemy?" Lettie already knew about Gra Eater, having seen it before during the Devourer battle. Thanks to that, she wasn't as surprised as her squad.

Alus nonchalantly answered her in a blunt tone, "I can't tell for sure."

"Then why are you so calm? The next one's coming!"

"No, it won't come right away."

"Hm?"

Alus didn't have the time to explain, but he did have a good reason for thinking that. First, Demis Brionach was far more powerful than what humans were familiar with, but it wasn't the kind of spell that could be cast repeatedly. If the attacker was able to do that, then Alus would've immediately had everyone else retreat. "In short, it's a spell that takes the mana floating in the air and supercompresses it before it's unleashed. Considering the power, it should take half a day before the mana in the atmosphere recovers and can be used again."

He had already seen through the fundamental basis for Demis Brionach. That was in part because he'd had Gra Eater devour it. "Distance is one thing, but I don't know where they are. Just firing magic blindly would be pointless," he concluded in a fed-up tone.

And of course he was fed up. He'd realized the usefulness of the magic snow. While they didn't know where their attacker was, their attacker knew the exact location of Alus and the others.

He cast an annoyed look at the snow by his feet. He'd been on guard for the falling snow, but it seemed the accumulated snow had some effect as well. *This is the reason they found us.* As proof of that, any remaining mana remnants were being absorbed and accumulated into the snow.

Mana wasn't matter, and so it wasn't affected by gravity. So there was only one reason it fell to the ground: the special properties of the snow. It wasn't

just diffusing but also absorbing a part of it as well. The Fiends were taking advantage of this.

We were detected by the faint traces of mana. They know where we are. So there's something below us. It was natural to assume that the tunnels below ground were being used as a makeshift radar network. It was the optimal environment for receiving detection results.

The details were still unclear, but combined with long-range magic, the Fiends could stomp out Lettie and her squad from a distance. At the very least, it was proof that Fiends were working together.

Being attacked by enemies who could hide in safety was definitely troublesome. *If I could at least tell the range they're at...*

As that thought entered his mind, the edges of Lettie's lips curled up into a fearless smile. "We only have to find out the distance, right?"

"But detection's not going to do much good."

"Tsk tsk. I can't stand getting attacked so one-sidedly. You too, right, Allie?"

"Well, yeah..." Alus bitterly replied, as if saying he'd have already done something about it if he could.

Lettie crooked a finger, and immediately one of her squad members ran up to them. With AWR in hand, he quietly cast a spell.

Appearing before Alus and Lettie was a strange water mirror. It must've been a water spell, with the mirror reflecting the scenery of somewhere distant. In a sense it was like a quickly-constructed telephoto lens. But, perhaps affected by the snow, its shape was somewhat crooked. The surface rippled like water and currently showed the top of the mountain.

As Alus leaned in for a closer look, the squad member held up his hand and fine-tuned the shape and direction of the lens. Before long, he could see something moving. It was the back of a Fiend that was leisurely descending down the mountain.

The Fiend was three meters tall and walked on four legs. It had a wolf-like appearance and strangely-colored fur. From the way the fur blew in the wind, it

seemed similar to human hair. But what stood out most was its distinctive single horn that could be seen even from behind. It was still smoking, as if it had emitted an extremely hot ray.

"I see. That definitely looks like the guy that just attacked. It's similar to a Lefkis, but that horn..."

Lettie ignored Alus's mutterings and took a bold step forward. "Right, now we know roughly where it is." She spun her arm around, raring to go.

Alus didn't need to say anything. She looked like she was happy to get a chance to counter the Fiend, but in reality she probably just wanted to fire off a big spell to vent her frustration. He hoped it was just his imagination, but it was probable considering her personality.

Lettie's body flooding with mana was truly a dignified and powerful sight. It was the aura of someone who had absolute trust in their power. It was like a reflection of her straight and honest personality. An overwhelming amount of mana flowed from her and into her ring-shaped AWR, and her next spell would surely have extreme firepower.

Taking a pose to aim her spell, Lettie went through the process of casting and specifying the coordinates. The next moment, no fewer than twenty red dots shone near the top of the mountain.

After a moment's pause, Lettie snapped her fingers. *"‹‹Detonation››!!"*

When they heard the spell name, everyone aside from Alus took a step backwards.

Immediately, a series of explosions occurred. Bright red flames covered the mountain and climbed up towards the top. It was the kind of spell Lettie specialized in, but its scale was extraordinary this time around.

However...

Alus, who was staring at the explosive scene, let out in an exasperated tone, "Hey, you missed." The coordinates of Lettie's spell were way off to the side of the top. From the distance they were at, even a slight miscalculation would lead to a difference of hundreds of meters. Fortunately the mountain didn't collapse, but if it had hit properly, the mountaintop would have been blown

away.

“Oh?” Lettie made a dumbfounded sound. The next moment, the shockwave from her explosions hit them, ruffling her hair.

Alus was completely unconcerned. “You were so fired up and this is the result? Are you sure your skills haven’t gotten rusty?”

“Whaaat?! You’ve got it all wrong, Allie!” Lettie tried to make excuses upon hearing Alus’s remark.

By now her authority as a captain had fizzled, and the coldness in her squad’s stares in her direction weren’t only from the frigid weather.

“Don’t worry about it, Lady Lettie!” Loki tried to cheer her up, her fists tightened into balls, but it wasn’t very effective.

“Not you too, lil Loki...” Lettie whined, but she couldn’t think of why it happened in the first place. “But why? I was a little loose with the coordinates, but I wouldn’t miss that badly.” Since Detonation covered such a wide range, there was no need for pinpoint accuracy in the targeting. Because of that, it wasn’t out of the ordinary for Lettie to have only a rough idea of what she was aiming for. Yet this time she’d missed not just the sizable target, but the terrain anywhere near it. So her question was only natural.

Seeing that she was unable to accept the result, Alus quickly offered an explanation. “Well, that was a joke. It’s this strange snow’s fault. It appears that it doesn’t just diffuse mana, but also absorbs it. So it gets in the way of detection and middle to long range spells,” he told her. “With mana being distorted, it naturally has an influence on coordinates as well. That would be fine at a closer range but with that kind of distance, this is the result.” He reported this in a matter-of-fact way, then lifted the edges of his lips into a grin. “And so you let the target escape.”

“Urk?! M-More importantly, why didn’t you say so sooner, Allie?!”

“I wasn’t entirely sure. But now it’s clear. Still, you sure were flashy.” It was a serious situation, but Alus sounded frivolous. His doubts had cleared up, and now their plan going forward had become more defined. “Just learning that all magic is being obstructed is worth it. To put it another way, we’ll be able to go

all out, and to try to detect every little thing will be pointless. We've already encountered the enemy scouts. And after such a spectacular attack, there's no need to worry about being detected again."

"What should we do, Sir Alus?" Loki asked, which stopped Lettie from throwing a tantrum.

Her question completely changed the mood, and a serious expression returned to Alus's face. "Let's begin with sharing information and start the plan over from square one. First, the enemy is almost definitely using the snow for magical obstruction and detection purposes. So it wouldn't be wise to stay here. They're not going to be able to use that spell from before over and over again, but there's no guarantee some other spell won't come flying our way. So I think we should aim for a base we can escape to and change our plans," Alus said, looking over at Lettie, who nodded in return. "Lettie, we should probably split the squad. I'll leave choosing the personnel to you."

"Gotcha. So we're not letting them narrow down a target or find the location of the base."

Alus nodded. Whenever he had to work with a squad for some reason, there was something he was always careful of. And that was his habit of thinking of squads as fighting power rather than human beings with their own wills and lives. It wasn't so much that he didn't try to think that way, but rather that he wouldn't show it.

It was a quality that didn't mix well with someone who cared deeply for her squad like Lettie. His coldhearted mind had already unconsciously discarded the advance party. At best, he was hoping to confirm if the spotter was alive or not. Now that the effects of the snow were clear, the spotter's value had somewhat diminished. But he had a hunch that when dealing with this enemy, the number of quality eyes would determine the outcome.

Under these special circumstances, any more forces—seasoned veterans or not—were probably just numbers. Taking it to the extreme, as long as they could maintain their current fighting force, they could revise their plan. It didn't matter who was dead or alive.

At most, he only had a preference for them being alive. His coldhearted

reason for this was to keep Lettie's mental state stable. *That's just what the life and death of other troops are to me. I'm really not suited to operate in groups.*

Alus kept his self-deprecating thoughts to himself. He wasn't the type of person to go out of his way to spread seeds of discord on his own.

Right now, he was feeling strangely nostalgic for his rather peaceful Institute life. After the splitting of the squad, Alus naturally ended up together with Loki. They were also accompanied by another squad member who knew the location of the base.

Lettie's squad ultimately was split into four groups. The plan ended up being that they would scatter and regroup at the base. That would make them more mobile, but it lowered their firepower, so they would have to avoid combat and shake off any pursuing Fiends.

Shifting to covert operations understandably made everyone nervous, and the hope of finishing the mission quickly was looking shaky already. Anyone slipping up here could lead to the mission failing.

"Lettie, let's regroup at the base at 2100 hours at the latest. In the worst case we'll need to consider pulling out of it. Tell the squad that whoever gets there first needs to be prepared."

"Why go through me when you can just say it yourself?" Alus had tried to go through the squad captain as usual, but Lettie just gave him an odd look.

Alus's own intentions aside, Lettie's reaction made sense given the situation. Everyone already understood that there was nothing that could be done about the Demis Brionach without Alus. And while it wasn't the case at the start, in reality, he was now the one making the plans.

Realizing that, Alus gave up on any needless consideration, but he still left the final judgment up to Lettie.

After some advice from Alus and sharing of information, the groups set out.

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Accompanying Alus and Loki was the healing Magicmaster. Since a healer was a valuable asset, Alus felt a little bad about having her come with them. He

couldn't tell if Lettie was being considerate, trusting him, or just pawning her off on him, but he decided not to say anything regardless.

"Louise, was it?" Not saying anything at all was a little awkward, so Alus decided to start the conversation. At the moment they were moving at high speed, searching for the best route to the base while expending the minimum amount of mana.

"Yes. This is my second year assigned to this squad." Being only in her second year, she wasn't a veteran member considering when the squad had first been established.

Louise had a rather calm temperament, perhaps because of her role as a healing Magicmaster. She was still young, but was probably a few years older than Lettie, or so Alus thought...but then he didn't know much about a woman's age to begin with.

"I see. I'm sure there must be a lot of hardships in Lettie's squad."

"Huh?! Y-Yes, well..." Louise hesitated at Alus's frank question. It seemed his words had been a little too blunt, causing an unnecessary conflict within her. At any rate, she seemed to recognize what he was talking about.

"Of course there would be a lot of hardships in Lady Lettie's squad, Sir Alus."

"I guess so," Alus vaguely replied to Loki's follow up.

Louise glanced at the two, and spoke. "That's true, there are a lot of hardships. But it's been a lot more fun than any of the other squads I've been assigned to."

She wore a carefree smile. Despite all the fighting in the Outer World, she called it fun. That couldn't be true if taken at face value, but Alus felt it showed she'd reached a certain level as a Magicmaster.

Perhaps that was thanks to Lettie's squad. At any rate, he felt her answer indicated she was rather skilled despite her youthful age.

Unaware of Alus's inner thoughts, Louise asked him, "Sir Alus, about that Fiend that cast that long-range spell..."

"The Lefkis. Well, it's probably an evolved form, but I can't say for sure yet."

“It cast a spell, Brionach, you called it?”

This was something he’d planned on bringing up when they were all together. “It was a long-range spell that looked like that, but it wasn’t any Brionach that I know of. It might be something the Fiend created on its own, or it might even be the completed form of Brionach,” Alus explained. “I don’t know if it’s an evolved version or a Variant, but I’m calling it Demis Brionach. Whenever it comes into contact with anything other than its target, it switches over to the second stage of its composition.”

“It switches over?” Louise asked, but Loki was intently listening as well.

“Yes. Under certain circumstances it splits and recomposes itself into a tracking projectile,” Alus politely told Louise, unaware of his tone of voice.

Women around her age tended to throw him off. Furthermore, her attitude didn’t show the usual excessive amount of respect towards his rank as a Single. He also felt a strangely familiar sense of atmosphere with Louise. But he didn’t understand why.

“Even if you cast an anti-Fiend barrier, it would only temporarily reflect it before the Fiend attacks again after changing its nature, is that right, Sir Alus?”

“That’s correct.” Alus nodded at Loki’s answer. Brionach was considered one of the most powerful spells for wiping out a group of enemies. However, the spell unleashed through that horn had been further modified from the human-designed Brionach. Trying to block the spell with a barrier only made it split up more, making it exceedingly troublesome for the defending side.

“Moreover, most people wouldn’t be able to react to that speed.” Louise was trying to come up with a countermeasure against it, but as a healing Magicmaster, it was outside her area of expertise. Even so, as a member of Lettie’s squad she had plenty of intelligence and creativity.

“Yes. At the moment, using my special ability is the most convenient way.” Alus purposefully called his Gra Eater a “special ability” to keep it vague. It was his way of drawing a line. Even though they were both Magicmasters of Alpha, he wanted to keep his trump card hidden up his sleeve if possible. If it was only a simple special ability he’d have no reason to be nervous.

Also, Gra Eater wasn't all-powerful. There was a limit to how much mana it could absorb, and letting it devour everything risked having it run rampant and exposing Alus to danger. Not to mention he strongly felt the need to take his failure during the Demi Azur battle to heart. If he didn't, his small, silver-haired partner might push herself to do something reckless again.

As he thought that, Alus glanced over at Loki, who seemed not to notice his stare. She offered another solution. "Sir Alus, can you not use a spell to cancel it out?"

That was a technique of using an equal or more powerful spell to collide with the other and wipe it out. Of course, only a rather high-ranking Magicmaster could use such a technique, so naturally it would be no problem for Alus. "I thought of that too, but there's honestly no way to test it."

"..." His words made Loki realize the problem. Long-range or not, at that speed the defender would be at a big disadvantage. Being as powerful as it was, they would have to detect it and prepare ahead of time in order to counteract the spell. Even the barrier that Alus quickly threw up was only possible thanks to his god-like reflexes and magic construction speed.

"This snow is working better than I expected," Alus muttered to nobody in particular. Vanalis was a fortress that gave a topographical advantage to those who lived there. The tunnels that stretched beneath the land were one such thing, but the environment-altering snow was also persistently blocking their invasion. "As for the Lefkis, it won't make much difference whether we focus on how to deal with it now or later."

He'd have to follow up with Lettie and her squad about Gra Eater. Since it was a secret between him and Berwick, he'd need them to keep quiet about it. In the end, he'd just have to trust them. Maybe the futility he was feeling was because it was Lettie.

As he thought about these things, Alus vigilantly kept an eye on their surroundings. "Ms. Louise, as you know, I'm the only one who can deal with Demis Brionach. There shouldn't be any danger in splitting up for now, but there will be in the future. So there is something I'd like to ask you."

Louise raised her head and looked at him. "If it's anything I can tell you."

“Do you know if there was anyone who could use light magic in the advance party?”

She gasped. “What does that mean?”

“Hm? Exactly as I asked.”

Louise furrowed her brow at Alus’s blunt and uncaring tone. He’d been considerate around Lettie, but for better or worse, Louise was the only one here now. And since it was something he’d need to confirm eventually anyway, it was better to do so when there were fewer people around to get angry.

Loki didn’t look particularly sympathetic either. She wasn’t as bad as Alus, but she was similar to him in that she was unlikely to be moved by this.

He didn’t see any point in putting a flower on the grave of the dead, or giving it water to keep it alive. In the Outer World, there was not even a drop of water that would be given to a flower that had already withered.

Of course, he wasn’t one to force his values on others, and it wasn’t like he couldn’t understand how Lettie, Louise, and the others felt. He was well aware that he was capable of having inhumane thoughts. But even so...

“...”

Alus spoke, as Louise remained silent. “As with Lettie, I can feel a gap between me and everyone else.”

“No, it’s just a difference in how we perceive things,” Louise answered. “You’re just the kind of person I heard you were, Sir Alus.” And she seemed to look at him with sympathy in her eyes.

“I’m glad you’re the one who came with us,” Alus said. He strongly thought that everyone who strove to be a Magicmaster, such as his students Tesfia and Alice, should have someone like Lettie as their goal.

However, he couldn’t see how Lettie and the squad could feel their emotions in situations like these. Others seemed to get it, but he couldn’t. Compared to them, he and Loki faced the Outer World with cold hearts. Or rather, they became indifferent to life and death.

When they stepped into the Outer World, a lid fell that shuttered their

emotions and put a cap on their feelings. They took no interest in the lives of others, and even if an acquaintance died, they'd probably just think, *Again*? They could always feel that cold expectation in the back of their minds.

Even Loki could only really see colors in the world through Alus. It wasn't a matter of right or wrong. That was just how they'd turned out.

After a moment's hesitation, Louise let out a sigh of resignation. Her steps turned heavier as well. "There was one..." she said hesitantly. "A Magicmaster who could use the light element. The spotter." She turned to Alus, as if to ask why he wanted to know.

"It's confirmation. The origin of the spell the Lefkis used, Brionach, is a composite spell of light and lightning. In the past it's been theorized that Fiends are incapable of handling light magic. But there's an exception to that. And that is, if they've managed to acquire the magical information of the light element and take it in."

Alus purposefully avoided saying it out loud, but by "take it in," he of course meant to consume it. It was then that he finally realized the reason for his politeness and sense of familiarity towards Louise. When he'd been in *that* squad, there had been someone very much like her.

"Sir Alus!" As that thought ran through his mind, Loki's tense voice reached his ears.

"I know," he answered in an exasperated tone, as he came to a halt.

Once again, they hadn't been able to detect the Fiend until it was close enough to see. And if they were using the old tunnels that reached across Vanalis, discovering them would take even longer. Even now, Loki's warning had only come when the Fiend was one hundred meters ahead of them.

If a part of its body hadn't appeared above the fallen snow, they might have seen it even later. The snow wasn't just a magical obstacle. It also worked as camouflage for the Fiends.

A D... No, a C-class. His assessment of the situation was less accurate than usual. The medium-sized Fiend had an unusually small head and a massive body. Appearance wise, it was like a boar standing on two legs. With its large

feet, it lumbered over towards Alus and the others.

Before long, its muscular body was fully revealed above the snow. At the edges of its mouth were thick fangs that extended upwards. A large amount of steamy white air exhaled from between the fangs.

Just as Alus put his hand on his AWR, Loki stopped him. “I will do it,” she muttered, while bringing her hands behind her back. Without waiting for his reply, she flew across the snow.

She accelerated like a bolt of lightning, leaving behind only sparks of electricity. In the blink of an eye she closed the distance to the Fiend. But that wasn’t all.

Loki had already gotten behind it with her eyes locked on its thick neck. She swung down the knife AWRs in her hands, unhesitatingly stabbing into the Fiend’s weak point.

There were no wasted movements in her attack. It was the equivalent of a human’s carotid artery, but she didn’t even give the Fiend the chance to cry out in pain. Because—in the next instant—lightning ran through her AWRs and fried it from within. Kicking off the Fiend’s back as it fell forward, Loki landed back down on the snow.

Even Alus was impressed by her skillful destruction of the core in a single hit.

“No way?!” Louise gazed on in amazement. She’d sounded like she knew of Alus to some extent, so it wouldn’t have been surprising if she knew Loki as well. But somewhere deep down she must have underestimated her, thinking that a spotter’s fighting wouldn’t amount to much.

In reality, Lettie had mentioned that Loki was a child soldier, one who had taken part in that horrible Magicmaster training program the military had in the past. However, that only concerned Loki. What Louise knew of Alus, she’d gotten from another source.

The existence of the training program was a taboo subject in the military. It was an unspoken rule that they were not to talk about it. Not only had it produced a lot of casualties, but it had been deemed a failure and quietly shut down, with all major records of it being destroyed. The girl before her was a

rare survivor and an even rarer success.

Witnessing Loki fight firsthand, Louise reluctantly saw the usefulness of that inhumane training program. Even if it wasn't ethically acceptable, the truth was that the small girl had eliminated a Fiend several times her size. And for a brief moment, Louise felt elated. If they could fill just one squad with a fighting force like this, humanity's future would be bright. But she quickly shook her head and pressed her lips together as if to scold herself.

Paying no heed to Louise, Alus only said a few words to Loki. "You've gotten better," he said, praising her as the Fiend turned to dust.

"I still have a long way to go," she modestly answered, but she was unable to hide the joy in her face. Then she realized she was smiling and clamped down on her expression.

With a wry smile, Alus looked at the Fiend that was crumbling away. "If you can take out a C-class with one hit, you should be fine against anything other than the biggest threats. And it looks like you can tell where the core is at close range. Just being able to confirm that is a great thing."

"Yes." Loki was a little shaken up, but she still rejoiced. Not even she had expected she'd be able to take the Fiend down in one hit. But these kinds of things were all about testing, and she'd let a weak current run across the Fiend's body as she launched her mana sonar at point-blank range, which had allowed her to detect the location of its core.

Alus's training to get her to use the mana sonar flexibly and continuously in combat had shown results and improved her abilities. That aside, his being able to accurately understand the process Loki had used, even with the snow's obstruction, was impressive as always. Loki was used to him being amazing, but she hoped to one day be able to surprise and amaze him instead, though it looked like that day was still far away.

"Hmm."

Immediately after Loki's moment of joy, Alus's expression turned slightly bitter, which caused her heart to skip a beat. "W-Was there a problem?"

"Well...I don't mind, but with this we'll need to take a detour."

“Ah—!” Loki let out a yelp, but quickly covered her mouth.

Right now, they’d split up their forces and were making their way to the base. They’d accepted that they might be detected during their march as a whole squad, but once they split up, the need to stay on guard for any mana leakage had come up again. That was true not just for Alus and his group, but for all groups.

However, just now, Loki had used Force, mana sonar, and a lightning spell to take out the Fiend, which was likely pretty bad. It was unclear if they’d been detected by the mana emitting across the snow, but if they wanted to be sure, they would need to leave their current location and take a different route.

“I’m sorry.” Loki lowered her head in apology.

But Alus planted his hand on top of her head. “Just being able to skillfully deal with that Fiend was good enough. In fact, maybe looking to regroup again in two hours was asking for too much.” Having realized that his calculations had been naive, Alus suggested that they backtrack and change their route to Louise who was behind them.

The next moment, he started up a completely different topic. “By the way, I’m curious about who it was that told you about me.” It was a question that had risen in his mind after hearing her muttering. He struggled to put it into words, but her attitude towards him was strangely nostalgic.

Louise looked surprised for a moment, but soon collected herself, answering him with a calm smile. “From a person you know well, Sir Alus. You both started working with the military around the same time. She even visited the campus festival recently, so maybe you met her already?”

“I don’t have a clue who you’re talking about. What’s her name?”

“It’s Elina. Elina Ovril.”

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As the sun started to set, Alus, Loki, and Louise finally reached the base.

Because they wanted to avoid encounters with Fiends as much as possible, they’d taken many detours, which helped Alus learn much of Vanalis’s

geography. But perhaps because of that, he was in a terrible mood and had a sour look on his face.

Loki had never seen him that upset, so even she was surprised. However, the sight of Alus sulking like a child was just so unexpected that it left a strong impression on her mind.

Being able to hear more about Alus's childhood from Louise as they made their way to the base was a truly happy time for Loki. Louise had only heard it from the other woman, so it was mostly hearsay. Besides, whenever that woman told Louise about Alus, she always sounded like she was bragging about him, so it was possible her stories were embellished. But seeing how Alus would frown when Louise recounted the stories gave them credibility.

In any case, because of those stories, there was a strange mood hanging over the three as they reached the base.

Lettie and the rest of the squad wondered what had happened. Not only did Alus have an unprecedented sulky look, but Loki had a gleeful expression she couldn't hide, and Louise looked a little dejected, perhaps from having said too much. Incidentally, all the other groups had already arrived, and there'd been no deaths.

"You look like you're having fun, Allie. Did something good happen?" Lettie asked in a mischievous tone.

Alus walked by her with an exhausted expression, and spoke without turning around. "Does this look like fun to you? Let's start by confirming the situation."

The base was a hollowed-out space in a cliff face, so the rock walls were exposed, making one feel a bit cold. Nevertheless, it was equipped with the bare minimum, and inside it was spacious, going much deeper in than Alus had expected. "This place looks like an ant's nest."

"It's fine that way," Lettie replied. "The most important thing is that the enemy hasn't noticed it yet. So since we're pressed for time, let's get right to planning."

Alus and Loki were ushered farther into the base to what looked like a conference room with a long unshapely table in the middle of it. They'd

probably just used some wood lying around to make it. They were in the Outer World, which was very different from the Inner World with its plentiful supplies. When it came to small things, Magicmasters had to be self-sufficient, so tables and things like that were mostly handmade.

Everyone squeezed together to fit around the table. Once the Singles, Alus and Lettie, took their seats, the atmosphere abruptly changed.

Loki's expression hardened, and she unconsciously clenched her fists as she watched over them.

Alus was the first to speak. "There being no deaths is great news, but how many injured are there?"

"A handful. Well, it won't have an impact on combat," Lettie said. "Louise will get to work on them. They may not get back to normal right away, but at least they'll be able to perform without problems."

Alus looked down at the map spread out on the table, and made a few corrections to their future route based on the information he'd gathered.

Next, Lettie and her squad shared the information they had picked up. One group encountered three Fiends on their way to the base. While avoidance was the basic strategy, they couldn't avoid combat in all cases. Alus and his group had been able to avoid any further encounters by taking detours, but the other groups hadn't been as lucky.

Lettie pointed out the locations where battle had taken place, and gave information on the enemies.

"We've completely lost track of how many Fiends there are. And we can't even make any predictions, huh?" Alus had a pensive look on his face, but then looked up from the map at Lettie as if resolving a question in his mind.

"Oh...so ya noticed."

"So you think so too..."

The two nodded as if reading each other's minds, but most of the others were left out in the dark. Loki casually moved towards Alus and looked back and forth between his face and Lettie's face.

“There’s several questions on my mind, but the biggest is the Fiends’ locations and movements. Loki, imagine that there’s a military command center in the heart of Vanalis. With that premise in mind, don’t you think the Fiends’ movements and the squad’s deployment are similar to the base defense strategy often used in Alpha?”

“I’m sorry. I don’t really understand,” Loki weakly answered in an apologetic tone, but Alus didn’t look particularly disappointed. She could make up for it with some degree of experience. If she, like Alus, experienced a wide variety of missions and was exposed to the strategizing of generals on a daily basis, she would naturally pick it up as well. Even if all she knew was the battlefield, she would easily be able to read the intentions of your average commander.

“The Fiends have all been weaklings sent out to scout in force,” Alus said. “You could think of them as being sacrificial pawns to scout our fighting force.”

Lettie nodded in agreement with a serious expression. She must have been feeling that something was off, just like Alus.

All the groups had ended up in battle three or four times. At first, each group had fought weak Fiends, with the following encounters being against stronger ones. Moreover, in each battle, the type and composition of the Fiends were practically identical.

By collating the information, they found that each squad first fought E-class Fiends with the final battle being against B-class Fiends. These weren’t chance encounters. It was clear that Fiends were being sent their way in order of strength. It was like they were being tested.

“This smells fishy. Are these Fiends using human tactics?” Alus mused.

“Looks like it,” Lettie said. “But that Lefkis seemed to be on its own.”

“Yeah. My hunch tells me that it wasn’t a commander ordering it, but an entity outside of the strategy, like a lone wolf sniper.”

“So is it the other A-class? The Ogma? That would mean it’s not just intelligent, but it’s also commanding the Fiends.” Lettie found her own words hard to believe.

“It might be using the dark element to control them. It’s not impossible, you

know. I dealt with a criminal who used magic to control others. There's a difference between human and Fiend, but the dark element should work the same way."

He had a clear memory of that criminal. That dark element-using Magicmaster didn't just command, but completely controlled their minds and manipulated them against their will. However, research on the two elements—light and dark—still lagged behind other research. So not even Alus was sure how such a thing would work. But it was clear that it was possible.

"What's that? I haven't heard about that."

"And why would you? There's probably more things you don't know than you do."

"Sir Alus, I haven't heard about it either..." Just like Lettie, Loki looked a little dissatisfied at his response.

For some reason he felt like he was being accused of being unreliable. He rubbed his temple. So what if he didn't share everything that happened with them? A woman's heart was still something he couldn't understand. "If saying it satisfies you...I'm sorry."

He apologized just in case, which prompted Lettie and Loki to giggle to one another. They made an odd pair, and for some reason he felt like he'd been had. Perhaps because he was slightly shaken by that, Alus bluntly moved to a more sensitive topic. "So, did you find the advance party?"

"No...not yet. All we've done is recover the supplies."

"I see. Considering the situation, the fact that they didn't bring the supplies in themselves, they're already..."

Lettie's answer had been a simple one, but when Alus saw the complicated expression appear on her face, he realized his failure.

"It's fine. If anything, I want to hear your opinion too, Allie." Although the truth was that Alus didn't need to say anything, since Lettie already had a hunch about the situation.

Alus pretended not to notice her expression, and calmly analyzed the matter.

“They must have left the supplies because of an emergency, especially since they were so close to the base. They wouldn’t have wanted the main base to be discovered by Fiends. So it’s natural to assume they retreated, or moved to a more suitable place to fight.”

“They’re probably standing by in another base,” Lettie agreed, after a pause.

Alus felt like he’d mismanaged the discussion. He’d fought alongside Lettie plenty of times, and he was well aware of her personality and methods. This time, however, he was in her squad, so perhaps he should avoid saying anything unnecessary. He wasn’t the type to be considerate of others, but he owed Lettie for the Demi Azur incident.

That’s when Louise spoke up. “Lady Lettie, I have something to say!” She must have wanted to save Alus from having to say it.

But that consideration made Alus realize his own inadequacy. For a moment he’d shown Lettie unnecessary pity out of concern. They were both Singles. Doing things in that roundabout way was like undermining the other person.

“No, I’ll say it.” Alus stopped Louise, and shared the information on Demis Brionach. Like he’d said before, Brionach was based on the light element, which was an element the Fiends normally couldn’t use. He then bluntly explained his theory on how it would be possible if they preyed on someone with that ability.

“I see,” Lettie answered in an unexpectedly calm voice, before she fell silent. She couldn’t stay indifferent to people dying like Alus did.

If anything, it was Alus who was flawed as a human. “I’m not the type to hang onto pointless hope. It’s probably too late for the spotter at least,” Alus said. In his own clumsy way, he was being sincere. Even if he wanted to offer some considerate words to console her, he wasn’t qualified to do so. All he could do was present the truth, even if it hurt the other party.

In the Outer World, cheap words of comfort meant nothing. He wondered if he would be able to spit out a lie if it meant improving the squad’s morale. If it benefited him, could he fill someone’s heart with shallow comfort?

Alus searched for the answer in his heart. His core was as cold as steel, which in turn made his heart colder.

After a moment of silence, Lettie quietly muttered, “What are the chances?”

“Hm?”

“I mean, what are the chances that the advance party survived?”

“To be honest, I don’t know. It’s possible that I’m wrong on how Fiends can learn the light element. But if you keep your hopes up, you’ll end up disappointed,” Alus said, as if he were talking to himself. Regardless if this was a lesson learned from experience or otherwise, everyone in the room understood what he meant.

“That’s how it always goes. Thanks,” Lettie said. However, the gentle expression she had when she said this didn’t belong to a Magicmaster. She put her hand on her forehead and tugged at her bangs with a pained expression. “It hurts, having more people to mourn...”

“Sorry. I’m not sensitive enough to be able to agree with you so easily. But then again, I’m used to seeing that expression, so I can understand how you feel.”

Lettie let out a sorrowful sigh that was probably filled with regret. She’d been the one who gave the order to form an advance party to carry the supplies. But that was Lettie for you. “They were soldiers too. It’s not like I was babysitting some kids,” she muttered to herself.

All Magicmasters in the Outer World were like that. They continued moving forward even if it meant stepping over their dead allies. If they couldn’t do that, they needed to retreat back to the Inner World.

“Allie, do you know how to get over a situation like this?”

“Not really. I’ve never thought too hard about it.”

“Wow, that’s cold. Well, that’s probably fine too, but it’s not good for you.” Lettie was forcing herself to look cheerful.

Alus noticed that, and decided to go along with it. Being as awkward as he was, all he could do was to act like he always did. “I don’t need you to tell me how I should handle things. But since you seem to want to say something, let’s hear it.”

“You need to be more honest with yourself,” Lettie said, with a shrug and a wry smile. She stood and put her hands on her hips. “You spend time together. You continue going in the same direction. Those who survive just quietly continue carrying out their mission day by day! Just like they always have. That’s the only way to carry on the feelings of those who have passed.”

“...”

“That’s why we’re definitely going to take Vanalis. And then we’ll all have a laugh together.”

Alus felt like she was talking about the mental side of things. He could tell she was talking about something he would probably never understand. After all, contrary to Lettie’s method of dealing with the deaths, so far all Alus had done was to turn his back and give up on them.

Lettie might be right that it wasn’t good for him, but it was too late to change. At the same time he was envious of her way of life. That was why he said something he didn’t truly believe. “Yeah, maybe so.”

Even he felt that was pretty transparent. He mocked himself for the cheap reply. Just knowing he would never understand the other side was a chilling feeling.

The side that Lettie was on was full of friends, living and dead. And the side Alus was on was one of inescapable loneliness. It was cold and dark, a wasteland for the soul. There, Alus was alone. He could never come over to Lettie’s side. Even if it were just a white line painted on the ground, just one step away, he would never be able to cross it. That was why her side was so overwhelmingly bright.

But he wouldn’t let that get him down. He was well beyond that stage. He would simply walk down that harsh, lonely path on his own until he reached its end.

Suddenly, a tug on his sleeve brought his consciousness back to the surface. When he looked down, he could see the silver hair of the one behind the small act.

The silver-haired girl didn’t even look up at him. She simply pulled at his

sleeve as if to say this was where she belonged. That she would be by his side, supporting him, felt like a weight on his shoulders.

She voluntarily chose to stay with him. She was a fool who chose the only place where cold winds blew.

Alus didn't look her way. But the sensation of her small hand pulling at his sleeve remained.

In the end, his loneliness was easily overturned. This made him realize that he wouldn't be left alone in the shadows, which almost made him feel sentimental.

He felt an impulse to examine Loki's expression, but was convinced it would look just as he imagined. Beneath that silver hair was surely an expression filled with gentleness. She was foolish enough to give up her own life over a coin-toss of a decision. That way, she could leave everything up to fate, because it was all for Alus's sake.

That's why her presence, and the sensation of her small warm hand, brought a change to his expressionless face. "That's true...it doesn't change what we need to do," Alus muttered.

"Ha ha, I see you're as dry as always, Allie. Then it's about time we get back to work as Magicmasters. For starters, I'd like to hear what you need from us right now," Lettie said in a playful tone. There was no longer any hesitation in her expression. Instead it was straightforward and strong, ready to fulfill her mission, the very picture of a Magicmaster.

At this point, Alus wasn't reluctant to give her counsel. Like Lettie, he carried the title of Single. In these situations, his personality that let him abandon any pointless consideration was a welcome thing.

That said, he never really had much in the way of consideration for others to begin with. But now, by comparison, he felt like he was getting swept away by emotions. Perhaps that was because of his time at the Institute? *Or maybe this is Fia's and Alice's influence...either way...*

Alus changed gears, putting on his Outer World mask once more. It was different from the one he'd used when running around the Outer World alone, and also from the one he used when he lived a leisurely life in the human

domain. “All right, let’s get to business.”

When Alus said that, Lettie and her squad changed their expressions. Sajik folded his arms with a fearless smile, while Mujir gazed down at the map with a serious expression. These two were Lettie’s right-hand men. With Alus and their captain on the move, they were full of motivation.

“You will eliminate the Ogma and Lefkis without me and Lettie. We’ll ignore the other high-classed Fiend you’ve confirmed for now. With anomalies happening in Vanalis, there are too many uncertain elements, so we’ll prioritize those two troublesome Fiends,” Alus explained. “If we can at least eliminate the two, it’ll become a lot easier to defeat the leader. And as for those two, don’t worry, I’ve got a lead. Now then, I’m only going to tell you this once, so make sure you listen closely.”

He confirmed that everyone was listening properly, then shared his analysis of the current situation, as well as the strategy he’d developed.

The Fiends that the advance party had encountered, as well as the ones encountered by the groups when the squad split up, were most likely brainwashed by the Ogma. They served as the Ogma’s eyes, ears, and limbs. Surprising or not, this was the Outer World. It wouldn’t be impossible for a Fiend to evolve to attain such intelligence.

In recent years, such abnormal evolution had become particularly noticeable. That’s why he thought the Fiend was likely analyzing them with the information it had as well. It would be best to assume that all information from the ones who’d fought had been leaked to the enemy. There were even fewer reasons to deny that the first Fiends they’d fought had been sent as sacrificial pawns to measure their abilities.

With the environment of Vanalis itself having changed, it was now a different world that not even Alus could fully figure out. *If I take the time to do it on my own, I should be able to handle it... No, there’s no point in that.* If he were to make a mistake, the whole plan would be shaken up.

Moreover, Lettie and her squad were the ones assigned the mission. Compared to them, Alus had little experience fighting in a squad, and no experience in backing others up. He and Loki were only here as helpers, but

having come all this way, that wouldn't be enough.

"The Ogma can't be ignored. The first Fiend we came across was definitely an A-class, and if it could brainwash even that one, then we can't afford to ignore it. But that aside, the Lefkis's long-range Demis Brionach needs to be dealt with immediately. In the worst case, it could wipe us all out."

"Hm? You're the only one who can deal with it, right Allie?"

"Yeah, right now I can only use my special ability."

Lettie lightly reacted to the words "special ability." After the Demi Azur battle, she had directly confronted Berwick about it. In the end, though, even she was brushed off, meaning that it was an extremely highly classified matter. "That was that black haze, wasn't it? During the Demi Azur mission, Ms. Rinne said that just touching it would be dangerous."

"There's no doubt about it. It doesn't care about friend or foe. And if it absorbs too much mana, it goes out of control."

Lettie looked surprised that Alus didn't so much as hesitate to expose his secret. He'd been prepared for that since the moment he decided to use it as his trump card. Of course, if it wasn't Lettie, he would have kept it secret.

"Are you sure? The Governor-General never told me anything in the end."

"You make it sound like you tortured him."

"How rude! Like a frail young maiden would turn to torture. Well, I did poke him here and there, but he never spat anything up."

The only ones who could take that kind of attitude with the Governor-General were the two Singles. Or perhaps it was just because Alus and Lettie were special.

"I'm not sure that's much better. Well, either way, I had no choice but to reveal it anyway. But don't misunderstand, there's still a lot even I don't know about my special ability."

"Gotcha! Still, I feel like you and I are much closer now."

"That's just your imagination."

“Meanie.”

Just like with Loki, it seemed to Alus that sharing secrets with women made them overreact.

For some reason, Loki stepped in. “Please leave it at that, Lady Lettie. Sir Alus’s special ability is a military secret. I experienced it firsthand. Even if there’s a limit to how much it can absorb, it’s very powerful and amazing,” she said, as if to say that she knew more about it.

Lettie grinned at her. “I know about the limit and everything else. After all, Allie just told me.”

Realizing that her childish one-upmanship had been seen through, Loki blushed and turned her head away.

The mood had turned pretty sloppy, but being too serious could end up backfiring too. So Alus ignored the current flow of the conversation, and continued on. “Lettie, and Sajik using Force, are probably the only ones who could dodge Demis Brionach. But even then you wouldn’t come out unharmed.” He didn’t include Loki because she couldn’t control her Force as precisely as Sajik.

“So the top priority is the Lefkis,” Lettie said. “And the Ogma after that. So who’s behind the snow, then?”

Alus had no immediate answer for her casual question. That was indeed the problem. Environment-altering spells were all expert level or above. Magic may have originated with Fiends, but a normal Fiend would never be able to use spells at that level.

It was clear that a Fiend higher than an A-class was involved. Moreover, the Vanalis mission had a time limit. Ever since the Demi Azur incident the Outer World had been busy, and if an S-class marched on Alpha while its two Singles were away, they wouldn’t stand a proper chance. If that happened, the damage would be horrible.

Not to mention that time wasn’t their only enemy. The Fiends had already detected Alus and the others. They might have been able to deceive their eyes for now, but there was a limit to the squad’s food supply. So they likely

wouldn’t be able to stay under the radar until things calmed down. If the Fiends surrounded them and closed in, Alus and the others would be flushed out eventually.

“It’s most likely the S-class that is dominant here that’s responsible for the snow, but...” Alus paused for a moment, letting the serious mood fill the room.

While everyone was silent, Loki asked, “What if it’s not?”

“Exactly. There’s a risk of thinking that’s the one who is responsible, and going all out against them. But either way, this snow is putting us at a disadvantage. It can throw off a Detonation, so it will be very difficult to hit from a distance. Meanwhile, they can attack us without obstruction, just like the Lefkis did.”

Alus spoke bluntly, and with some bitterness in his tone. “At any rate, we’re limited as to time. We need a method to deal with both the S-class and A-class Fiends. I was thinking of splitting up into groups and eliminating them individually, but that lowers the chances of success.”

It was natural for a lot to be asked of them on missions to the Outer World. Alus was used to it, and it wasn’t the kind of thing to make a fuss about. However, this time it was a harsh choice, and he had an ominous feeling.

It wasn’t just limited to him either, as Lettie casually spoke up. “Well, that’s fine. When it’s all or nothing, the chances of success aren’t going to change even if you think too hard about it. You know that too, don’t you, Allie?” She said it so naturally that it sounded like it was something normal, instead of something that was life-threatening.

The Outer World was constantly changing, putting Magicmasters through many hardships. And Magicmasters were the ones who used their power and wits to overcome that. Lettie and her squad had always done so before. And they would do so now as well, rather than believe in something as unreachable as perfection.

Alus wouldn’t go so far as to call them reliable, but he did smile for a moment, before tightening his expression. If they wanted to complete the mission in a short period of time, they would need to do it the hard way.

Knowing that, he held up four fingers. “Taking them out one at a time is

impossible. We still haven't found the S-class, not to mention all the tunnels running through the region. If we narrow down our target, it'll probably manage to evade detection and bring things into a war of attrition..."

"...And if that happens, we won't have the room to eliminate it," Lettie finished for him.

If the Ogma was throwing Fiends at Alus and the squad as part of a plan, it would be steadily learning their strengths and weaknesses. After seeing Alus's battle against the chrysalis-type Fiend, it probably wouldn't bring all the Fiends down onto them. Nor would it try for a one-on-one battle.

And by feasting on the advance party victims, the Ogma must've picked up a lot of knowledge and information. Of course, it was probably information it didn't have access to before, so it was unlikely to be able to apply it.

But maybe that was wishful thinking. That information might have already been shared with the S-class. Fiends working together was normally impossible, but in Vanalis the impossible was already happening. The basic premise should be that their prior experience was useless here.

Taking all that into account, there weren't many options left for Alus and the others. "We'll have to play their game and outsmart them. There are conditions that must be fulfilled before we can defeat the biggest target, the S-class. Well, it's not like we're going to lose in a battle of intelligence against a mere monster."

Then he showed everyone the way to claim Vanalis. The strategy looked similar to a chess game, using intelligence rather than force to eliminate the king. "If the S-class appears, Lettie and I will take it on. I don't know what kind of Fiend it is, but let's work on the assumption that it's responsible for the snow. There's a risk involved if we're wrong, but we can't afford to ignore the enemy's strongest piece. At the very least we'll need to take on the leader. I also have a few ideas about where big Fiends may be lurking."

Alus had a sense of the terrain from an old map of Vanalis. It didn't have detailed information on the tunnels, but he'd added in the information he'd gotten by seeing things for himself. "I'd like to leave eliminating the Ogma to Sajik, and the Lefkis to Mujir. Loki, you'll join Mujir's group."

Loki looked shocked. She'd been convinced she would stay with Alus. She turned her eyes to Alus, wanting to say something, but he stopped her with a stern look.

Alus had his own ideas for choosing the people he did. Since he'd gone that far, not even Loki could openly show her displeasure. As his partner, she couldn't afford to challenge his authority and risk sullying his name. So, reluctantly, she closed her eyes and backed down.

After noting this, Alus continued. "We'll also select a separate search party for the advance party. They'll set out after us." This was a suggestion that took the squad's coordination into account. It was unusual for him, and if anything it was a bad gamble. He never would've approved such a plan in the past.

Since we're working together, their strength will be key. Still, I'm surprised at myself for thinking this is the best move. He had honest praise for Lettie's squad, who was at the center of the plan. "I'll leave choosing the personnel to Lettie."

"In that case, don't worry. Relying on these idiots can be pretty fun. It feels great giving orders from above and watching them break their backs to get it done." Lettie mischievously grinned at Alus.

Humans were never perfect, and with countless unpredictable possibilities, any plan would have its holes. That's why Alus rarely put much trust in such things. But here he was, presenting a plan to try to move the situation along, despite knowing that one's own judgment and abilities as a Magicmaster made all the difference in the Outer World.

"All right, let's wrap this up. We just have to do the same thing as always, kill the Fiends. That is all." Alus concluded the meeting, and the tension hanging over the squad dissipated as they all broke into smiles.

While the squad members chatted away over how nice and simple that was, the long strategy meeting finally came to an end.

Fifty-Fourth Chapter

Humanely, At Least

Everyone burned Alus's plan into their brains as they checked the map. By the time they were done, it was already night. The weak moonlight eerily illuminated the snow that it fell on.

The plan would begin tomorrow morning. The only ones who made their move at night when the Fiends were more active were the rash and the foolish.

In the base, the squad members made preparations for the big day. Some were casually conversing with each other, so there was a good, relaxed mood in the base.

Lettie's squad had guts. Once a plan was in place they were quick to adapt to it. However, even in the midst of that, there were shadows looming above them.

Alus had chosen not to touch on it, but the fate of the advance party was one such thing. The search party that would look for them would investigate the other small bases. There were plenty of people that insisted they could be hiding out there, Lettie included.

That meant dividing their already limited forces, but Alus saw it as inevitable from an emotional perspective. They weren't like him. They weren't like machines that felt nothing over dead allies. That bond was their strength...and their weakness. Even if he could understand it in his head, he couldn't sympathize.

At the moment it was a little too early to go to bed, so he wandered around the base. It wasn't big enough for him to take a long walk, just a short one to change gears.

His footsteps lightly echoed. On the walls were lights powered by artificial mana generators. They came with a risk of the base being detected, but as long as the entrance was sealed, it shouldn't be a problem. The generators were useful for long missions with a large number of people and had a lower chance

of being detected than pure mana.

Eventually, Alus reached a certain room. In the corner were the supplies that the advance party left behind, consisting primarily of food and spare AWRs, as well as various items for maintenance and work, and small pieces of paper with healing magic formulas written on them for treating the wounded. There were also signal flares engraved with single-use magic formulas.

However, there was nothing here they would specifically need for tomorrow's plan. He also spotted some alcohol but decided to pretend he hadn't seen it.

"What is that?" Loki, who'd appeared at some point, peeked out from behind Alus and gazed at the mountain of supplies. What caught her attention was a strange object that stood out among the supplies brought in. It was wrapped in a dirty cloth for protection, and looked like a thick pole.

Lettie also arrived in the room. She had the three subordinates she'd brought with her lift the item up.

Seeing how careful they were with it stirred even Alus's interest. He glanced at Lettie, who nodded in return, and ripped off the cloth. A pole covered in a white, translucent material was revealed. Inside were precise machines put together in a complex manner, and the top of the pole was engraved with an intricate magic formula.

Alus examined the formula. "It's not a formula with an attribute. It traces the structure of a spell, but it wouldn't manifest anything. I see, the circuit duplicates the process," he muttered to himself. "Just the copying process is dozens, no, hundreds of times more effective."

Then he took his eyes off of it and exhaled. "The manifestation coordinates are managed by another process as well. In other words, this is a Circle Port."

"That's Allie for ya! I had no idea what this was until a subordinate who knew the details explained it to me."

"I can imagine. I'm the one who developed the composition formula. That said, it's been altered quite a bit since then, so I'm not going to brazenly say I made it. Well, that's probably not the only thing that's been changed either."

From a simple look, it probably had functions planted in it he couldn't even

guess at. The structure itself was like a black box, but it was clear that a high-speed computing system was incorporated for parts that couldn't be supplemented by the magic formula. Otherwise, a device of that scale wouldn't be able to execute such a complicated formula. "Not only is it more compact, but it can be used at an even longer range. So they've managed to make it practical."

"Apparently it's only half-complete," Lettie said. "But this is the Outer World, so it would be impossible to make it practical right away. Once Vanalis is reclaimed, though, and the groundwork is laid and transfer technology becomes more practical out here, it'll greatly improve the transportation of supplies."

When Alus reclaimed Covent, that technology would've been a massive help. Then again, Circle Ports weren't that developed back then. At most, they were being experimented on back home in Alpha.

Besides, in that mission, the top brass didn't expect Alus to survive. Or rather, they would have preferred he didn't. If not, they wouldn't have sent a boy to the Outer World alone and without any decent supply routes. That had been nothing more than a suicide mission.

"So, anyways..."

"Hm?" Alus was pulled back to reality by Lettie, who scratched her cheek as she hesitated to continue.

"I, um... I want you to check to see if it's broken or not. It's probably okay, but it was with the supplies we picked up here, so just in case, you know."

"I'm not going to say no, but didn't you bring someone who could do that themselves?" From the looks of it, it was a very delicate piece of equipment. If they were going to use it as part of an experiment, they should've brought an expert who could fix it in case something happened.

"Fortunately, we've got someone right here," Lettie said, and pointed at Alus.

Alus's cheek twitched at his bad luck. More work was being pushed onto him, but he told himself it was necessary since they were working together.

"I had some technically inclined members, but unfortunately they were in the advance party and so they're not present at the moment. Besides, I don't really

want to let anyone into the squad just because they have the technical know-how... I'm shy around strangers, ya know," Lettie shamelessly said.

If she was shy, then Alus had a serious communication disorder.

"Joking aside, we just didn't have the luxury of bringing someone who would get in the way of fighting in the Outer World."

"Then you're really lucky that I'm here. But you don't have any raw materials here, right? If it's really messed up then there's nothing that can be done. I'm not exactly a machine expert." Alus wasn't all-knowing. He had a large amount of magic knowledge, but he didn't have the requisite experience or skill with mechanical engineering and the like to be useful in the field. That's why he'd had the Folen engineer, Budna, help develop his AWR, Night Mist.

After that, Alus gave the Circle Port a simple check, and concluded that it should probably be okay. The transfer gates called Circle Ports were sensitive equipment, and weren't something normally brought into the Outer World. Even though it was customized to be sturdier, not even Alus could tell if the black box was all right unless he picked it apart.

"Well, it's not like we can just move it around as we please anyway. So it's not going to play a part until we retake Vanalis. So we don't have to think too hard about it until..." Alus started to say something, when a sudden realization hit him and got him thinking.

He'd created the foundation that made up the Circle Port. Or rather, he'd devised the theory of transferring information from one place to another, which led to its creation. But even that was just a by-product of him coming up with the Shuffle spell. "Hey, do you think there'd be a problem if I broke this?"

"Who knows? It looks expensive, but I guess it would depend on how practical it's supposed to be. But to be honest, I don't think the Governor-General is senile enough to seriously expect anything from this transfer gate."

"Yeah. Then I'll just treat this as something to be 'used,' so there should be no issue."

"You look like you're thinking of doing something bad to it," Lettie said, in a tone that seemed to say she'd given up on the Circle Port, not that Alus had said

he was actually going to break it.

“No, this is to raise the chances of completing the mission. Though I’m sure the people who made it didn’t expect it to be used like this.”

***

It was early morning, and the sun was about to rise.

The base was as silent as a cemetery. Even Sajik and the others who could wake the dead with their snoring were sleeping strangely quietly.

Normally, people struggled to get some solid rest in the Outer World. But anyone spending enough time here eventually adapted to it. Of course, everyone kept their AWRs at their sides.

When Alus awoke, it was as if his act was contagious, as Lettie and then the rest of the squad woke up one after another. Maybe they all had an internal clock, or perhaps they’d picked up on a change in the atmosphere. Soon the signal would come for the mission to begin. They’d finished all the preparations yesterday.

Alus sat by the base entrance, waiting for that time to come. Fiends tended to be more active during the night and relatively quiet in the morning.

Eventually the sunlight shone into the base. Alus stood up. “Let’s go.”

“Yes!” Loki answered. She was more enthusiastic than usual.

She was among the least experienced here. Even her kill count, which was extraordinary for someone her age, was near the bottom for this squad. Alus felt that her skills also counted in the lower half of the squad. Rank aside, there wasn’t that much of a difference in the spells she could use and the battle techniques she had at her disposal when compared to Sajik and Mujir. There was a difference in mana, but she was still within the bounds of being useful.

He could understand Lettie wanting to utilize Loki. Not only was she a spotter, but her combat abilities were more than adequate. Even so, Alus felt doubt. “Being motivated is fine, and it’s not like I want to question your judgment, but be careful of your surroundings.” He decided to press the point in a roundabout way.

For today's mission, Loki would be in the same group as Mujir. Alus had his own thoughts regarding that decision, but he still felt a little uneasy. Whenever Loki acted for Alus's sake, she was driven by a strong will that one could call obsession. It could even be called her identity, and sometimes it was accompanied by a stubbornness that wouldn't let anything get in her way.

But that tendency could be dangerous when acting in a group. Lettie was the squad's commander, and Alus would respect her decisions. After all, a squad could only perform at its best with a clear chain of command and solid coordination.

"Oh? Here I was thinking I was witnessing a heartwarming scene, but you sound just like a stubborn old man."

"That's none of your business. Also, I can more or less imagine who you're thinking of, so maybe I'll tell them you said that."

Lettie scoffed, then walked up behind Loki and put her hands on her shoulders. "You're fine the way you are, lil Loki. We'll always be human, so there's no need to overthink things! Besides, no matter how hard you think about it..." She hung over Loki from behind, leaning over her, then pointed at Loki's chest. "After all, this place right here is honest."

With a smile, she released Loki before slipping past her and back to her original position. Having overcome many trials, the sight of Lettie's back was like the image of reliability. At the same time, it carried the clear answer she'd reached. And Loki might need that answer.

Relying not on her head but on her intuition, Loki frantically called out to that back. "I might put our allies in danger! Is that still... Is that really all right?"

"If you mess up, someone might die, sure. Sounds like you get it, lil Loki. But even if you know that, this place right here won't let you stop." Lettie turned around, pointing to her own chest with her thumb.

Her following words were as quiet as a whisper, but they left a deep impression on Loki, who understood that her words were meant for her allies that had passed away before.

"...It can really be such an inconvenience." Contrary to her words, Lettie wore

a smile that was a mix of gratitude, regret, and grief...as well as other emotions.

Seeing that, even Alus kept his silence.

He really felt like taking back what he'd casually said to her. Lettie was right. What she said was backed up by experience and supported by the thoughts and wishes entrusted to her by others. The answer she'd given could apply to all Magicmasters, and maybe it should be.

Alus felt like he finally understood why he couldn't hate her. It wasn't just her character or personality. Her way of life lay beyond what Alus continued to deny. It was a use for life he could never understand or reach.

Loki's way of life that prioritized Alus came from a natural wish. But Alus was different. He was so different that he felt a kind of parched despair inside. That's why he felt something close to yearning towards Lettie.

He recalled saying something similar to Tesfia and Alice, as he had to Loki. But it didn't apply to him. Every time he saw an ally die, he'd survived by calling it a meaningless death. And that wasn't something he could change now.

But he didn't want the others around him to be haunted by that same shadow. It wasn't a way of life anyone should want. "That's true. In the end, all that you do is for yourself," Alus briefly said, which caused Loki to look at him with a surprised expression.

He saw himself reflected in Loki's beautiful eyes. Without doing that, he couldn't tell what kind of face he was making. Up until now, he'd never even made an effort to show an expression with ordinary emotions. And reflected in Loki's eyes was his usual bored-looking face, the usual expressionless, empty face.

Unaware of what Alus was thinking, Loki hesitated, then expressed her unwavering feelings. "Yes! For Sir Alus's sake."

"..." Hearing that, Alus instinctively smiled, a little bitterly. If he told her to stop, she would answer that Alus's sake was her sake, like it was the most natural thing in the world. In her mind she equated everything with Alus. "It looks like I said something unnecessary. You're prepared enough."

Loki vehemently shook her head. "No, that's not true. What you said and Lady

Lettie said...it moved my heart."

It was easy to understand her feelings. How far to continue existing for one's own sake was a difficult problem. Alus had given up trying to solve it for himself, but he understood what Loki was trying to say, which was why he finally relaxed. "You can just think it over and decide for yourself at your own pace. And while you're at it, remember Lettie's words. It's like advice from an old woman, and it's worth it."

"Hey, I can't let that one slide! Who are you calling an old woman?! I think we'll need to have a long talk about this."

"I'll listen for as long as it takes once we're done here."

"That's another promise," Lettie said triumphantly, gloating over her new promise extracted from Alus.

But he simply turned his gaze to the cold sky of the Outer World outside the base's exit. "Don't take it at face value. All adults would put it off till later."

Lettie just smiled more broadly, and replied "The stupid adults, that is," before taking the lead and jumping outside. Alus, Loki, and the rest of the squad followed suit.

From the moment they stepped outside where the snow was everywhere present, the squad cut all chatter and marched in silence, their faces tense as they anticipated deadly battles.

An overcast sky hung above them. Finally, some rays of light shone down through the rifts in the clouds, but the rays through the clouds created a strange pattern. The small ice crystals falling down through the dim sky stood out like an anomaly.

The sight of the ominous silver world sent shivers down the squad's spines. They exhaled white breaths that felt strangely heavy. And the sluggishness that weighed down their bodies felt worse than yesterday. It wasn't just because their clothes were soaked with wet snow.

After marching some distance from the base, the squad stopped in a clearing. The fact that they were able to pull that off through eye contact alone was a sign of how focused they were on the mission, and also that each was well

aware of their individual role.

“Lettie.”

“Gotcha.” Hearing Alus’s call, she began constructing a spell. “Here I go,” she said, and reached a hand up towards the sky. The magic formula on her ring glowed as she poured an overwhelming amount of mana into it.

“‹‹Ix Flare››” Flames immediately burst forward, evaporating the surrounding snow, and soaring up as if to sear the thick clouds above.

The sudden rise in temperature created fierce gusts of wind. Soon the sky lit up red and the falling snow ceased. Although it didn’t reach the clouds far above, the heated air vaporized the snow in the air in a limited area. The effect would last for a while.

“Is that enough, Allie?”

“Yeah, that should do it. It would be a lot easier if they’d just take the bait.”

Unlike Lettie, the rest of the squad kept their mana leakage down, even keeping the mana they’d coated themselves with to a minimum. Of course, Lettie’s spell wasn’t enough to cancel out a spell that was capable of such dramatic environment-changing moves. If they could break the link to the caster that would be the best case, but they didn’t even know its abilities or where it was. Which was why Alus hoped it would at least work as a form of harassment.

It had also been intended to let Lettie warm up, but despite the scale of her spell, she still didn’t seem refreshed. Even so, she had an affinity for fire, so she was the right person for the job. Incidentally, she’d suggested using Detonation, but that got rejected from a mana consumption point of view.

“It’s starting to come back,” Alus said after a pause. The supposedly departed snow came back with a vengeance and once again filled the air. But it wasn’t like Lettie’s spell had been for nothing.

“Was it pointless?”

“No, it was meaningful. This is a reaction from the enemy.”

It was a flashy little trick that had caught the spell caster’s attention. As proof

of that, the weather around them changed drastically in a matter of minutes. The once slowly falling snow turned hard as hail and blew horizontally. In the time it took for them to exchange a few words, their vision was so obscured they couldn't even evacuate.

The weather in the Outer World was normally rather unstable, but this was unnatural even here. They were practically blinded, unable to see even the steep cliff the base was built into. At best they could just barely make out the other squad members near them. The cold air was so bad that they couldn't endure it with their usual mana coating.

Talk about short-tempered. I guess it was pretty effective.

"Sir Alus! Where are you?" Loki's familiar voice sounded from nearby.

Hm? I can't even pick them up with my field of view. Loki and the rest of the squad members shouldn't be too far away. Instead of relying on the naked eye, Alus used technique and magic to search for them, but he couldn't find Loki or anyone else.

Alus's field of view was a form of detection that copied the surrounding three-dimensional space into his brain. He'd learned before this that the snow's bizarre properties kept him from feeling out his surroundings, but surprisingly, he couldn't even pick up on his nearby allies. With the snow turning into a blizzard, it seemed its ability to jam mana had strengthened. The jamming no longer just stretched across the surface of the ground, but also worked in the air around them.

"Which means... Lettie, they'll be coming soon now."

"Gotcha."

He'd used the Consensor to report his suspicions to Lettie, thinking that communication through magical means might be jammed. So they used the product of old science that was capable of receiving and transmitting sound transformed into radio waves. Its effective area was less than if you used magic, but this kind of old tech was useful in situations like these.

The squad members also heard Alus's and Lettie's exchange, but didn't falter. Voices came through the Consensors from time to time as the members

confirmed each other's positions.

Well, it's just as I thought. Alus had already predicted the caster could alter the strength of the snow. Considering the scale and duration of the spell, the caster would have to constantly make adjustments. And with the amount of mana needed to create the blizzard, it was unlikely to be the Lefkis or Ogma.

However, he couldn't tell if it was the Chimera that Lettie mentioned before or a new leader. His experience kept him from wanting to decide that too quickly. At any rate, there was no doubt that the caster was powerful.

New leaders arose from struggles between Fiends. The Lefkis and Ogma should be high-classed Fiends that were aiming to become the next leader. So if those two were following the leader, that leader must be stronger than expected.

If the enemy was taking away their vision, it meant they were preparing to attack. But even so, there would be no major changes to the plan.

Lettie fired off another Ix Flare, which cleared up the blizzard and allowed them to see for a short time. "Now's our chance! Don't stand around, get going!"

The squad moved into action at Lettie's voice, making their way towards the position Alus told them about earlier.

The group under Sajik's command would deal with the Ogma, while Mujir's group with Loki would take the Lefkis. Once they reached their destination, they would split up and eliminate their targets.

"Allie, don't you think you're pushing me around too much? I'm the captain, ya know. You're even using me as a decoy."

"It wouldn't hurt to eliminate the S-class if it comes out, but I imagine it'll be a struggle. Besides, you only need to buy enough time for its annoying followers to get killed."

"If it's just a matter of luring out the leader and stalling for time, why don't you join in too, Allie?"

"If it's too much for you..."

“Meanie. Anyways, this snow is starting to get pretty annoying, so how about we blow it all away?”

The two casually chatted through the Consensors. Right after the squad moved off on its own, Lettie intentionally amplified the mana around her body and released it, just in case her voice alone wasn’t enough to broadcast her location.

As soon as she finished confirming her squad was on the move, Alus answered her. “Blowing it away sounds nice, but it’s just a by-product of magic. I don’t think there’s any point in it, but do whatever you like. The most effective way would be to cut it off at the source, be it that Chimera or the next leader.”

Environment-altering spells falsified and overwrote the laws of the world. So if they wanted to counteract it without dealing with the caster, they’d need to replace it with an environment-altering spell that was stronger than the one being used.

“I know that,” Lettie said, a bit sharply.

That said, it might be worth confirming any traces of information and rewritten compositions. It wouldn’t go as well as when Loki did it, but by hitting it with some mana and measuring the response, he might find some clues as to the S-class Fiend’s identity or something else.

Thinking it was worth a shot, Alus put his hand on Night Mist, when he suddenly saw a shadow. He didn’t need to strain his eyes to see the black shadow flapping its wings behind the wall of wind and snow. It was something incredibly large showing its silhouette.

In the midst of the blizzard, the huge monstrous shadow proudly asserted its presence, gradually becoming more distinct.

It was a massive Fiend that looked like a butterfly or moth. It had two sets of four wings, and eight long legs that looked like they could reach all the way down to the ground. At the tip of each leg was a sharp talon. With its wings spread, it easily exceeded thirty meters in width.

The Fiend slowly flapped its wings and hovered in the air. Even in midair, the wind pressure that reached the ground was considerable. With each flap, it

kicked up a storm of snow.

It had been a while since something made Alus feel a chill down his spine. At the same time he narrowed his eyes and his cheeks twitched. He'd expected as much, but still... "It's not the Chimera. So that's the fourth leader, huh."

He had guessed as much based on the bizarre situation. He'd expected the worst from the moment he heard from Lettie about the change of leaders. Even so, he hadn't expected to see something so huge that could fly. *I hope you're not more than an S-class...*

Immediately, the giant moth flapped its huge wings and shot forward, closing in on Alus.

It's fast! The second Alus thought that, one of the Fiend's long legs stabbed through the place he'd been an instant before, as he jumped to the side. Following up, another leg swung like a whip from the opposite direction. The talon at the tip tore through and gouged into the ground.

"?!" The shockwave threatened to blow Alus away, but he hurriedly threw up a barrier to endure it. Gravel and pebbles mixed with the snow and flew like bullets, crashing into the barrier and shattering it.

But the attack hadn't been aimed at Alus. The whip-like leg snapped past his view at an extreme speed and headed for Lettie.

Instantly he threw up his hand and pointed it towards her. A thin barrier appeared, but only for a moment, and it wasn't enough to stop the Fiend's attack.

With a dull sound, Lettie's body crashed through the trees and disappeared from sight. Being sent flying at that kind of speed, the impact would be tremendous. She was likely going to feel that one.

Alus clicked his tongue, and in the same moment the blizzard ceased. The Fiend held its position, hovering in the air, as if to say no matter what Alus or Lettie did it wouldn't amount to anything useful.

He was concerned for Lettie's safety. If she'd lost consciousness, she wouldn't even have been able to break her fall properly. So if she were left as is, she could die. Losing Lettie right here would be the worst-case scenario.

Tsk, the squad might fall apart right at the start. Putting all his energy into his legs, Alus took off at full speed, chasing after Lettie.

Eventually he found Lettie's body hanging off of a large snow-covered branch that was about to snap. Fortunately, she was still conscious.

"Lettie!"

Lettie, clearly in pain, responded to his voice by turning her face towards Alus. The damage spoke for itself. She must have used a cluster of trees in passing to cushion her fall.

The two locked eyes. As Singles, they didn't need words. *Don't bother with me, just stall it.* Her intention was clear. The S-class needed to be held back no matter what. If that giant moth turned on the rest of the squad with that super speed, they would be annihilated.

Without voicing it, he moved his mouth to say, *Got it. I'll take over for a while, but get back soon*. He silently turned back to the moth. *I'll deal with it until then.*

Alus put his hand behind his back and drew Night Mist, its chain ringing as he did. At the same time, the sound of wings echoed in the air.

He glared at the massive shadow that had appeared again. At a second look, it really did have an odd appearance. The long antennae sprouting from its head extended out to either side like a mustache. Its body was covered in reddish-brown bark, and there was nothing that looked like eyes on its head.

He then observed the patterns on its wings, which looked like those of an avant-garde painting. The forewings on either side had large circular patterns, the eerie circles looking like they were the eyes that were missing from its head.

"This is my first time seeing this type," muttered Alus...who'd slain hundreds of different kinds of Fiends.

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Lettie let out a small groan as she hung over the branch. The tremendous pain coursing through her body threatened to make her pass out even now. And the taste of blood in her mouth made her grimace. She'd tried to get used to

everything in order to handle the Outer World, but she never got used to that iron taste.

Even so, she remained calm, and confirmed her injuries. *My left arm's fractured in several places, but the problem is my ribs and internal organs.*

When she moved on the branch, pain shot through her neck. If it was just whiplash she'd be fine, but she couldn't tell for sure. She touched her stomach and felt internal bleeding here and there.

Well, this sucks. She didn't think she'd let her guard down, but even so, she'd been hit by an attack before she even realized it. *If not for Allie covering me, I'd be completely outta the fight.*

She took a breath to calm down. Staying conscious was the silver lining in the dark cloud. She'd covered herself with her left arm, but Alus's barrier that he'd quickly put up had helped to a degree.

Lettie scowled from the pain, and thanked him in her mind. With a yelp, she righted herself and used her good right hand to drop herself to the ground.

She'd done what she could to kill the momentum but the impact on landing still made her cough violently. She held her breath to endure it, but sharp pain spread through her chest. The ribs weren't broken through, but were probably cracked, as were the bones in her left arm in several places. Her clothing at the shoulder was ripped, and every time her heart beat, she could feel warm blood flowing out of the wound.

She could still open and close her hand, so hopefully it wasn't that bad, but even so the blood had already stained her sleeve a deep red.

With a low growl, she directed her fiery eyes in the direction she'd been sent flying from. Alus was fighting there. Dirt and snow were being kicked up, with flickers of a shadow seen racing through the air. She was too far away to tell what was going on, but could easily hear the sounds of battle.

Lettie closed her eyes and focused on her condition. *It's no good... I can't take deep breaths. But I guess not being able to use my left arm won't affect much.* She tried to calm down, but her attempt was overpowered by violent emotions. It wasn't just humiliation. She felt like the kick from the moth had woken her

up.

Vanalis was the place where her comrades had fallen. They wouldn't be able to rest in peace with all this noise. That said, fighting with just anger as her driving force would ruin her. That only fueled impulsive actions that would betray her comrades' feelings. They'd spent so much time together in the Outer World fighting side by side. They'd fought life and death battles together, trusting their backs to each other, but one by one they had fallen.

Maybe fighting to avenge them wasn't the thing. Instead, Lettie should focus on mowing down any obstacles that stood in their path to achieve their long-cherished wish. In the near future Vanalis had to become a place where her squad could make a ruckus as they enjoyed themselves.

That was why victory had meaning. She wanted them to take pride in being a member of her squad. Engraving the splendid victory of Single Digit Magicmaster Lettie Kultunca was surely the only way to repay the souls of the many fallen squad members. After all, there was no way the person they revered as their captain would betray them. She couldn't show them her fleeing back after all of their sacrifices.

Lettie forcibly ripped off her left sleeve with her teeth. She ripped the cloth into strips, then used her right hand and teeth to dexterously bind the wounds on her left arm. Since the sleeve was drenched in blood, putting it in her mouth resulted in the blood taste again. "Disgusting!" She spat the blood out, roughly wiping her mouth clean.

Once done, she poured more strength into her legs and jumped up. Using her right hand she grabbed hold of a sturdy branch, and as she hung onto it, she peered into the distance.

Her destination was the battlefield where Alus was fighting. Her target was the giant moth.

Lettie's eyes shot wide open. "Haah, haah, haah..." She forcefully pushed down her ragged breathing. Her lips, stained red with blood like lipstick, formed a fearless smile as if she was enjoying the fight.

***

“Don’t think about doing anything stupid,” Mujir called out to Sajik, who was running alongside him across the snowy landscape.

Some time had passed since they’d sensed Lettie’s mana had stopped. They’d tried calling her through the Consensor but were already out of range. Something must have happened, but right now, they had a mission to accomplish. They had a duty to eliminate the A-class Fiends they were assigned.

They were currently on their way to where the Fiends’ suspected stronghold was located, under Lettie’s orders. Alus suggested the plan yesterday, and Lettie had jokingly said, “If you guys don’t take them down, we won’t be able to make any progress. You get that, don’t you?” So an invisible pressure weighed down on them.

As Magicmasters, completing their missions was important, especially since they were in a Single’s squad. Even so, Lettie’s life was worth more to them. However, Alus was with Lettie, not to mention that part of the mission had been left to those two. So they wouldn’t rush back to her.

Sajik didn’t respond to Mujir right away. But having experienced so many battles together, Mujir could tell Sajik was shaken up inside. He also knew that as a human being, his reaction was understandable.

Eventually, Sajik answered with a growl, “I know. We’re not turning back... There’s no way.”

“Of course not. If you or I turn back without eliminating the A-classes, then Sir Alus’s plan will fall apart. We have a big responsibility here,” Mujir said, keeping his eyes forward.

Sajik typically was driven by emotion, while Mujir had a better view of the situation. If Sajik weren’t here, he might’ve been tempted to return. However, they’d already run so far that it was too late to turn back, which was why he was able to make a calm decision. “All we can do is find our targets as fast as possible and eliminate them.”

“Gaaaaah! You’re always so annoying. I told you I get it!”

“Then keep your mana in check.”

There were bulging veins on Sajik’s temple, but this kind of back and forth

wasn’t unusual. And Mujir usually had a sound argument. Understanding that, Sajik ultimately backed down. “But even then...”

“Are you doubting Sir Alus?” With this last jab, Mujir was silent.

Loki, running behind them, strongly agreed in her mind with Mujir. If possible, she wanted to fight alongside Alus, but the plan had been made after his proposal. Moreover, she wasn’t naive enough to make selfish demands in Lettie’s squad. Alus didn’t disagree with Loki going with them. But that was only on the way to Vanalis, so she couldn’t let herself become complacent.

After a silence following Mujir’s remark, Sajik finally answered. “Sorry, I got too worked up.”

“Don’t worry about it. It happens all the time.” Mujir didn’t find their exchange meaningless. The other squad members were also present, and they felt the same way Sajik did. In a sense, his irritation and impatience represented their feelings, so soothing him meant calming the rest of the squad as well.

Mujir had an understanding of the subtleties of a man’s heart and how to control it. That said, he’d learned most of it from Lettie. “By the way, Loki,” he called out. His tone was professional, yet caring.

“Y-Yes, how can I help you?” Loki answered. He wasn’t just her superior, but surpassed her in every way, so she was anxious.

“Sir Alus said to count you as part of our fighting power, but you are his partner and a spotter. I’m sure Captain Lettie is fine, but the enemy this time is formidable. If it comes down to it...”

She could tell what Mujir wanted to say. He was worried and being considerate of her. Even so, there was a sharp glint in her eyes, though she was by no means offended. “Please don’t worry about me. If I get in the way you can just abandon me. But I was given this mission by Sir Alus, so I won’t withdraw all on my own.”

Loki spoke without any anger in her expression, but there was still slight irritation. She interpreted Mujir’s words as him treating her as a girl too young to be out here. He wasn’t seeing her as a Magicmaster standing on the battlefield.

“I understand. But I can’t abandon you.”

“Is that because I’m Sir Alus’s partner?” Loki raised an eyebrow, unhappy at the thought of even more preferential treatment.

“Not at all. Like Captain Lettie said, you are already a member of this squad.”

“...”

Sajik grinned and gave Mujir a knowing look. Mujir glanced back, but didn’t particularly react. “You’ve already shown us your power, so I’d like it if you could help us.”

“Of course,” Loki immediately replied, but there was no smile on her face. She struggled to show any emotion in front of anyone but Alus. She also believed a smile wasn’t something you forced.

Her answer could be considered brusque, and Sajik didn’t hesitate to throw out a teasing remark. “Hah, looks like she hates you, Mujir. That way of speaking... She really is Sir Alus’s partner.”

Once again, Mujir ignored the cheap taunt. Actually, he highly regarded Loki, even putting her on a par with Lettie. Alus had been famous for not accepting a partner. When Mujir saw Alus’s display of power against Demi Azur, he was truly happy to be a Magicmaster in Alpha. And that Alus had chosen Loki as his partner. On the way to Vanalis, he’d seen her hidden nature and talents. Wearing lightning, she was a Magicmaster whose infinite potential was reassuring. That was how Mujir saw her.

Next, he spoke in a low voice. “Sajik, how old were you when you were able to learn Force?”

Sajik realized what his colleague was trying to say, and rubbed his chin. “Ah, when I was around twenty-two, I think. There’s no end to the injuries until you completely master it.”

“I know.” That was why Mujir couldn’t help but wonder how Loki had learned so many spells at her age. Not even Force was so easily obtained. It needed an affinity and sufficient hard work. *Then there’s the determination she has for her age.* He was reminded of the shock he felt back in the Demi Azur incident.

Mujir hesitated whether to say anything about how he felt, but ultimately decided to speak up, prepared for the giant of a man next to him to crack a joke at his expense. “Loki, I don’t want you to misunderstand me. I respect you as a Magicmaster.”

Loki was taken aback by his confession. But he’d witnessed the scene after Alus’s battle against the Demi Azur. Just one look made it clear what had happened. Despite Force tearing her body to shreds, she’d run over to Alus faster than anyone else. It was an incredibly brave act that Loki had accomplished with that slender body of hers. When he realized that, Mujir was ashamed of himself. All he’d been able to do was watch it all go down.

A true hero spoke through their actions. That was how a Magicmaster displayed their value.

Seeing Loki look surprised at being praised, Mujir averted his eyes and scratched his cheek. The ability to move in a time of crisis had nothing to do with power, wisdom, or preparation. Like Lettie said, it was a matter of heart.

He tried not to look at Sajik, but as expected, a tactless voice came from that side. However, the words he spoke were unexpected. “I get you. I want to be like the little lady too.”

Mujir was shocked to hear Sajik’s earnest words. “That’s disgusting. What are you talking about with that big body of yours? It’s because of that nonsense that you’re always going to be single.”

“I’m talking about the heart here!”

“That’s enough chatter. We’re in the middle of a mission now.” That’s when Louise interrupted them. She was a healing Magicmaster, but had the respect of the men in the squad. There wasn’t anyone here who hadn’t been treated by her healing magic. Moreover, women had a lot of influence in the squad, perhaps because Lettie was the captain. According to Lettie, that was because there were only stupid men around.

“I know, Louise.” Even as he spoke, Mujir vigilantly kept an eye on their surroundings and made sure to keep the speed up.

Loki noticed that. Mujir’s expression was surprisingly calm. It was hard to

accept that this was the same man who, embarrassed, had scratched his cheek a moment ago. Sajik next to him was the same.

The squad had only one mission, to eliminate the two targets Alus gave them as soon as possible. As soon as Loki thought that...

“My nose tells me it’s about time,” Sajik blurted out.

Everyone heard him and stopped. Detecting through magic wasn’t working, but Sajik’s nose was strangely sharp, and when they were this close there was no doubt that Fiends were near, prompting everyone to get ready.

The next moment, they found themselves surrounded by a horde of Fiends. There were over thirty of them, all B-class.

“Hey, aren’t there more of them than before?” Sajik complained.

“Looks like they picked up their momentum again. We cut down their numbers by a lot before too,” Mujir responded, seeming surprised. The two remained composed nonetheless.

“Bingo!”

“Sheesh,” Mujir said to Sajik, who’d noticed it too. “Sir Alus was absolutely right.” The Fiends had crawled up from the numerous holes around them. Each hole connected to an old tunnel. The exits were clustered in this area. Since none of the Fiends were particularly weak, they were probably a guard force of sorts. If so, they might be directly above a Fiends’ nest.

They’d come here first, following Alus’s instructions from yesterday, and it looked like he’d been right on the mark. “From what he said, the Ogma should be lurking here.”

Mujir flatly brushed off Sajik’s muttering. “Of course it is, the Lefkis is too big. Would you live in a hole with that body of yours?”

Alus had marked this location as highly probable for a nest of Fiends after looking at the old map, as well as considering the information he’d gathered. But he’d also taken into account the characteristics of the Ogma. If it was brainwashing its subordinates, it couldn’t get too far away from them.

In reality there were few places where it was easy to check on how a battle

was going, as well as manipulate pawns, without being detected. It would either be a high elevation...or underground.

The Lefkis had fired off a spell at extreme range from the top of a mountain, but in return they had revealed Lettie's Detonation. Her aim had been thrown off by the snow, but the wide area it covered was a clear threat to anything that was hiding itself. Furthermore, it was natural to assume that Alus and the others would be wary of elevated areas.

That's why Alus predicted that since the Ogma considered itself a strategist, it would avoid taking up position in an elevated area. In the end, the tunnels made the perfect place to hide. And above all else, he'd added the rule of thumb that underhanded users of magic tended to hide in safe, dark places.

"All right, it's about time we split up," Sajik said. "I'll leave that to you."

Mujir didn't need to press Sajik, as he took on the obligation of eliminating the Ogma. The reason Alus didn't put Loki in Sajik's group was their shared affinity. Having two lightning attribute users would only narrow down what they could do.

And since the Lefkis's Demis Brionach contained at least part of the lightning attribute, it was likely that it could counteract it, which was why Mujir was sent to deal with the Lefkis.

Sajik's group consisted of six people. They were each first-rate Magicmasters, with healing Magicmaster Louise joining them. That was a decision made in part because Sajik's close combat style often resulted in injuries.

"I'll take care of this. If you're struggling, just hold them off and I'll come over to help." Sajik unleashed a powerful surge of electricity and blew a big hole in the Fiends' encirclement, giving Mujir a thumbs up.

"Talk about exaggerating a badger hunt. Meanwhile, we're going to have to hike up a mountain. Well, I do appreciate your opening a path for us." Mujir rolled his shoulder and walked up to Sajik's side. In front of the hole, he raised his tonfa. "Don't mess up."

"That's my line," Sajik snorted, lifting his gauntlet-clad hand in return. The two then bumped their fists together.



After that, Sajik clanked his gauntlets together and attacked the horde of Fiends with Force activated. In a flash, five were dead. Each had their head or vital point destroyed, then electricity shot through them to burn up their cores. A foul smell arose in the air, but Sajik didn't seem to mind. It was like he was taking out all his pent-up stress and frustration on the Fiends.

"All right, it's time for us to go too," Mujir said after seeing that, urging Loki along. "The Ogma is underground just like Sir Alus predicted, so it's best to assume he was right about the Lefkis as well."

Loki recalled what Alus said yesterday and nodded. He'd concluded that the single-horned Lefkis was an evolved form. When Fiends took in mana, individual differences would appear, but since it was evolved from a Lefkis it most likely would tend to move around mountainsides and peaks.

That would make tracking it down rather difficult, but Alus made a certain suggestion based on that assumption.

Mujir and Loki took off running with the other group members following them. Taking advantage of the hole Sajik opened up for them, they swiftly left the encirclement.

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There they go. Now then...

Sajik sensed the others disappearing into the distance. His hands were clad in electricity. Every time they discharged, the snow around him evaporated into mist. He was deliberately adjusting his strength to attract the Fiends' attention so they wouldn't chase after Mujir's group, but there was no longer any need to hold back.

"I'm doing *that*." As soon as Sajik announced this, he swung his thick muscular arms down. When they slammed down, countless thin lightning streaks ran across the ground. The group jumped in a panic, trying to get away from the currents.

Sajik's muscles bulged. A huge amount of electricity flowed into the ground.

"‹‹Outbreak››" A gigantic magic circle appeared on the ground with Sajik at its

center. It was a powerful electromagnetic field made from mana. And the Fiends were immediately rendered immobile, as if their legs were sucked in.

The circle glowed brighter, and sparks exploded out, followed by a thundering sound across the surface.

Sajik poured more mana into his arms. As he did, the area was enveloped in a blinding light as a lightning storm raged for just a moment.

Soon, the painfully bright light disappeared, and when the group landed on the ground again it was completely burnt. The remaining heat they felt at their feet spoke volumes of the power used.

The spell unleashed a huge burst of lightning in a defined area. The Fiends on the ground had been locked in place by the magnetic field and fried by the lightning. The ten remaining Fiends were charred, their bodies falling apart. Their cores must have burned up as they turned into mana particles.

“If you’re going to go all out right away, say so ahead of time,” one squad member complained, but Sajik brushed them off. It was just business as usual.

With that attack, the Fiends’ presence had mostly disappeared from the area. However, nobody was particularly exhausted or injured. In reality, this kind of combat was their forte. Even if a B-class was too much to handle alone, with two or three members at their side they could take care of it in no time at all. If they could accurately destroy the cores, they wouldn’t even need to expend much effort, though that was a tall order without a spotter.

But that was where experience came in handy. If they’d fought similar Fiends before, it was easier to guess where the core was. They could also use wide-area attacks to clear them out in one fell swoop. In that regard, since the lightning attribute had so many strong attack spells, it wasn’t as reliant on spotters to find the core. Seeing that the Fiends were wiped out, everyone took a moment to breathe.

The ground suddenly shook with a violent tremor, like an earthquake erupting at their feet.

Sajik jumped to escape from it. When he looked at where he’d been standing, he saw a massive arm covered in bristles sticking out of the ground. “?! I don’t

know what's going on, but come out already. We don't have time for this."

The ground split open, and the Fiend's upper body appeared, as if responding to his voice. Its head looked just like a monkey's, and its upper body alone was four meters tall. The body was covered in fur like a primitive ape man.

"Tsk...a monkey's supposed to be up in the trees!" Sajik kicked off a branch and shot downwards, leaving only sparks behind. He swung both arms down to match his timing, slamming them into the Fiend's head.

The impact shook the ground, as his fists swung like two thundering hammers. Sparks of lightning shot out in all directions. Friend or foe, anyone who was in range would have been electrocuted. Not even a Fiend would come out unscathed from being hit by that kind of attack.

"?!" But Sajik felt only a hard sensation, like he'd slammed his arms down on a rock. And below him wasn't the Fiend's crushed head, but the bristled back of its hand.

The great ape had quickly thrown up its arm to cover its head, blocking Sajik's blow with the back of its hand. But that was odd too. Normally that blow would've destroyed the hand, as well as the head below it.

Of course, Sajik didn't recall holding back. Nor were there any signs the great ape had used a spell to defend itself. In other words, the Fiend had withstood Sajik's blow that could shatter not only rock but steel as well, with just the strength of its body.

It's got resistance to the lightning attribute! By the time Sajik realized his attack had been blocked, he'd already come up off the ape man's body. However, even though he was supposed to have landed on the ground, he suddenly felt like he was falling. The ground beneath him had crumbled.

But it wasn't only the area directly below him. A large area had crumbled. Sajik quickly understood that the ground over the network of tunnels couldn't withstand the intense fighting and had caved in. As he fell, he didn't just see countless lumps of earth and pebbles as the ground collapsed, but also something else at his feet. *Is this the Ogma's doing too?*

In the depths of the hole, a large number of Fiends lay in wait. The great ape

Fiend had been a decoy, and Sajik had fallen into a trap.

However, he wasn't going to let his carelessness get the better of him. With the great ape falling beneath him, Sajik poured an almost excessive amount of mana into his fists as he smiled fearlessly. His gauntlets glowed, covered in lightning. The powerful electricity would instantly kill any normal Fiend and reduce everything to dust.

But it seemed his opponent could handle itself in midair. Even as it fell, it swung its giant arm at Sajik's side. Immediately picking up on that, he kicked off a nearby rock and changed his trajectory. Thanks to the instantaneous power and leg strength afforded him by Force, that kind of attack was just too sluggish.

Further, Sajik chose not to dodge, but instead to charge right towards the giant hand. He slipped through the fingers that it had spread out as if swatting a fly, grabbed hold of a finger, and instantly twisted it off.

The great ape, driven by pain, swung its other hand at Sajik at an even faster speed. Sajik swung his lightning-clad fist and took the hit directly. The Fiend's hand burst open as white light surged through it.

The Fiend opened its mouth and screamed in pain. By now, only the thumb was barely connected to its hand. The other fingers flew through the air and turned to ash.

When Sajik drove his fist into the Fiend, he understood what was going on. *Its resistance to lightning is because of that special fur.* It was like it was wearing its resistance directly. That was a troublesome property for a Magicmaster, but it wasn't exactly a perfect insulator. He'd perceptively spotted an opening in the great ape's magically resistant armor.

"So you're a clever monkey," Sajik mocked the Fiend. He then drove his fist into the part of it that wasn't covered by fur...its face. As the lightning burst, its head popped like a balloon.

With the Fiend's head gone, Sajik saw that he was approaching the dark ground. As he braced himself and prepared to land, a sudden blow struck him in the back. The impact rattled him to the bones and he slammed into the wall at high speed.

“Ack!” Sajik was buried into the wall. He coughed up blood, then peeled himself off the wall and fell.

The next moment, the uncomfortable sound of flesh and bone hitting rock rang out. But it was only the palm of his hand, not his body. Before he crashed into the ground, he’d thrown out his arm to prevent having his entire body slam into the ground. At the same time, pieces of gravel and rock rained down on him from above, and blood ran from his mouth to his throat.

That was close. His body was bruised and he had some minor internal bleeding, but that was pretty common for Sajik, which was why he could be so casual about it.

Eventually he pushed his body up and looked at the headless great ape that had fallen next to him. Even though it lost its head, it put up a final struggle, hitting him in the back. Its core had already been destroyed and its body was disappearing, but it had gotten its revenge.

“And it’s not like they’re going to let me rest...” Sajik muttered, as he could see several sparks of light. With him falling down here, the Fiends saw their opening and attacked as one. However, Sajik unleashed lightning as he swung his fist, shooting through the darkness and piercing their vitals, killing them.

Before long, the underground area fell silent as if nothing had happened. Sajik exhaled and gazed at the results of the cave-in. It seemed he’d fallen farther down than expected. He’d be fine if the rest of his group could link up with him here, but the chances of that looked slim.

He scratched his head, looking around him at the tunnels. From the depths of one of the tunnels he sensed an ominous mana he hadn’t felt on the surface. The sensation gave him goosebumps, but it wasn’t only because of the large amount of mana.

“This stinks,” Sajik said. He wrinkled his nose and frowned. It reeked of despicable scum. It was almost certainly from the vile Fiend who used its comrades as pawns while it hid in safety underground.

There was also another stink mixed in, one he was used to smelling. It was putrid and the kind of stench he never wanted to smell.

After looking up once more, Sajik peered down the dark tunnel. He could definitely sense the Ogma in its depths.

Fifty-Fifth Chapter The Shadow of the Snow-Laden Sky The king of moths. It was the kind of bizarre monster that belonged to mythology. Who could blame anyone for bowing down to it when meeting it in reality? There were even humans who worshipped Fiends as the world's saviors. After all, it was impossible to prove that beings that exceeded human knowledge, like gods and demons, weren't real.

That was why, when people saw things or events that were beyond their understanding, they tended to treat them as either divine or demonic. By doing that, they were able to make ambiguous things seem acceptable and reasonable.

Humans were weak creatures after all. But Alus was different. He saw the idols of gods and devils that humans used to comfort themselves in the unreasonable world as useless, and discarded them. At the very least, he had no interest in them.

If something got in the way, just kill and remove them. If people wanted to live to see tomorrow, they needed to struggle to survive no matter what happened.

Still, with a hint of malice and irony, he felt *demon* was a suitable name for Fiends. He thought back to the name of one of the Fiend worshippers' evil gods. "Shem Azah...the king of moths." It was a bit of an exaggerated name, but no problem. He would be killing it after all.

Alus raised his left arm into the air. "Drop dead." The next moment, five fireballs came flying from on high.

It was Volcano, the advanced fire spell. Each fireball was as large as a meteorite, but it wasn't only their size; they were in a league of their own in firepower when compared to an ordinary advanced spell.

The approaching fireballs lit up and dyed the snow-covered ground in red light. They scorched the air as they flew at an extreme speed, covering several hundred meters of the area around Shem Azah.

However... "Tsk." Alus sensed a spell manifesting, and clicked his tongue. It wasn't enough to panic over, but the Fiend wasn't going down without a fight.

As expected, once the five fireballs were close enough, they scattered from within. Shem Azah forcibly undid the magic circle, causing the fireballs to disperse from mana leakage instead of bursting. It was like a teacher showing an inexperienced student the basics of counteracting magic. Alus's fire spell was at a higher standard than a Magicmaster who specialized in it, but even so it was treated like child's play.

"So that wasn't even enough to test you. Or are you just going to play around?" Alus struggled to suppress his anger. The Institute was one thing, but it had been a while since he'd felt something like this on the battlefield.

But he wasn't going to counterattack just like that. Having seen the enemy's first move, he switched his strategic brain on. *If I can't take it down right away, it being in the air is a disadvantage. I can't have it move around freely with that size and speed. Guess I'll have to bring it down.*

The Fiend was probably using wind magic to achieve its mobility. For starters, there was no way it could support itself just by flapping its wings. Right now, the Shem Azah was hovering seemingly by flapping only the back pair of its wings.

Besides, I can't afford to flee. If this thing gets to the rest of the squad, they probably won't stand a chance. In that case it would be better to have a magic battle. Alus's gaze turned to the Fiend's legs that were hanging down. Including the talons, the legs were bizarrely long, even for the size of the moth.

The next moment, Shem Azah violently flapped its big wings just once, causing enough turbulence to create a storm. It quickly turned into a white raging blast of wind that blew up the snow, mowed down trees, and whipped

up leaves and twigs, and the Fiend sent it directly at Alus.

The scale of it made it impossible to escape from. Alus pulled his hands back, then thrust them forward as the wind's momentum weakened slightly. *‹‹Dolrain Zephyr››* Following the flow of his arms, a huge barrier of azure wind formed.

He intercepted the white storm with the wind attribute's highest-ranking spell. If the storm was only wind, he could've used a simpler way of countering it. However, he sensed that something was off, and decided not to let the tempest that threatened to swallow everything reach behind him.

With his hands held out, palms forward, Alus's body shook as the winds raged. Before him, white and blue winds clashed, creating a rift in the air. Both winds fiercely competed, trying to devour and cancel the other out.

Then, timing it perfectly, Alus threw his hands up. When he did, the two clashing winds roared as they shot up into the sky and disappeared.

However, his vision was blocked by the whipped-up snow. A dark shadow moved. The leg that had easily blown Lettie away was swinging again. It tore up the ground as it approached Alus.

The snow not only blocked his vision, but jammed mana, delaying his response by a moment. He pulled in his right arm by conditioned reflex, ingrained through many years of experience. Any superfluous thoughts vanished as his fighting instinct made him move.

His barely opened eyes were a void, showing no emotion. He took a small step forward as he spoke. "I've already seen that."

Contrary to the rapidly approaching kick, Alus slowly walked forward like he was giving himself up. The intense wind rustled his hair, but his eyes remained unstirred. His lips parted as he vocalized a spell's name.

"‹‹Cocytus››" He elegantly moved his hand as if brushing away smoke, his palm expelling chilling air. With his fingers covered in a thin layer of frost, he stroked the Fiend's leg.

There was a flash of blue-white light and the instantly frozen leg was stopped. Or more accurately, it was killed. It wasn't just frozen. Even its kinetic energy

was reduced to zero. It didn't matter if something was slow or fast. Anything touched by the Cocytus would get completely frozen in its matter, mana, and even energy. It was almost like time stopped, which made no sense considering the laws of physics.

It certainly lived up to its name as an ultimate level spell. Even more terrifying was the precise control of its range. The Fiend's leg, half-covered in a silvery-white ice coffin, was spatially frozen in place, but the rest of its body was able to move freely.

It was like the single wheel of a magic car suddenly stopped, and not from mechanical error, but absolutely stopped due to a supernatural phenomenon. The car would naturally be torn apart. The boundary between the car with its massive kinetic energy and the suddenly stilled wheel would tear them apart.

A sound similar to a frozen tree trunk getting snapped by a huge force echoed across the snow fields of Vanalis. The Fiend's body fluids sprayed out, covering the snow in an eerie color.

Alus lowered his eyes to gaze at his right hand covered in Cocytus. He'd already released the spell. Even though he had a wealth of knowledge and could use all attributes aside from the elements, there was still a price to pay, such as poor efficiency and his manifestation speed being affected.

Cocytus was normally something only a Magicmaster with an affinity for the ice attribute could use. So there was a cost for Alus forcibly using it when he had no affinity for any attribute. His right hand was deeply affected by the spell and had turned dark from frostbite. That was the effect of using the spell for only an instant. If he'd continued using it to completely freeze the Fiend, his entire arm could've become necrotic and fallen off, or worse.



However, that level of sacrifice hadn't even registered in Alus's mind when he made the choice. After all, he'd finally been able to make the Shem Azah realize that someone who could kill it was standing in front of it.

After confirming he could still move his fingers sufficiently, Alus detected another leg coming in diagonally from above, and jumped back to get away from the leg and the snow still obscuring his vision. The legs moved more like whips than kicks, and tore up the ground, sending lumps of earth at Alus.

You don't need to go that far to kill me. If you can hit me, that is, Alus carefreely thought to himself, as he easily dodged the attacks.

Eventually there came a break in the attacks, which he took advantage of. Alus narrowed his eyes as he jumped up to the Shem Azah's level. Its massive size threw his sense of distance for a loop, but at least he didn't have to strain his neck looking up at it. He didn't like being looked down on by anyone.

Seems like it'll take some more time for its leg to heal. Some species of Fiends could heal missing body parts in a matter of seconds. But this one didn't appear to have such a high level of regeneration.

Alus twisted his body to dodge an attack he didn't even have to confirm to know was coming, and set his sights on the Fiend's torso. The spell he was composing was of a rather high level. That much could be seen from the amount of mana surging around his body. Night Mist immediately read the magic formula from the ring Alus chose, and expended a vast amount of mana.

However...an attack came from his blind spot. Taking advantage of its long legs, the Shem Azah swung out a leg to cut Alus to pieces from behind.

The attack should've been impossible for even Alus to dodge. However...

Red flames unexpectedly exploded in the air behind him. A Detonation had been cast from somewhere. The burst of fire and shockwave formed a barrier that canceled out the surprise attack. Not only did it protect Alus, but it dealt damage at the same time, a feat a normal barrier spell couldn't imitate.

Alus's expression didn't change, as if he'd expected as much. After a brief respite, *she* had finally been able to take her revenge. Besides, it was the same kind of attack that had gotten her. The only difference was that it came from

behind, but he had already seen through it.

This time, he decided to leave the support to her. He wasn't going to repeat a mistake, even if it was someone else's mistake. That was natural for a first-class Magicmaster.

With the shockwave giving him more momentum, he pointed Night Mist towards the Fiend. Its chain wrapped around Alus like an endless snake, making a metallic sound.

"‹‹Hell Fang››" It wasn't like he chose the fire attribute to match his backup, but he cast a fireball that manifested before Shem Azah. In the blink of an eye, flames fitting the spell name flared up, and as they reached their threshold, another change occurred.

A two-headed dragon was born. As it raised its heads, it grew even larger as if feeding off of the flames. The two heads were engulfed in flames, and by the time they were ready to bite their prey, they were already big enough.

The heads curved in on either side of Shem Azah and plunged down towards its shoulders, as if to burn the wings off at their base. It was a kind of composite spell, combining the fire attribute with a summoning spell.

The patterns on the Fiend's wings glowed, but it was too late. The heads bit down on the Fiend's massive body before it could escape upwards.

After that, the dragon fell still. Alus landed on the ground and looked up. Anyone watching would've imagined the Shem Azah would go up in flames. But no matter how long he waited, the flames showed no sign of fully burning up the Fiend.

Usually that would be enough damage. The slight doubt in Alus's mind quickly turned to conviction. The jaws of the double-headed dragon were slowly turning gray. He immediately understood it was turning to stone. It was a terrifying anti-mana power that replaced already manifested mana, transformed a spell into a different one and then re-manifested that one.

But it seemed it could only affect some types of magic, otherwise the Cocytus wouldn't have worked. Alus took a closer look at the veins on Shem Azah's wings. The eye-like patterns on the wings glowed like an AWR would. *That's the*

source of it.

Alus figured the Fiend was directly interfering with the construct, but had no way to confirm it at the moment. Before long, the two-headed dragon turned into a statue, which then crumbled from its own weight and fell to the ground. “So, you can use the earth attribute too.”

It went without saying that petrification belonged to the earth attribute. Alus gave his spells enough compositional strength, but the effect of the snow was ever present. A sound came from the construct, deteriorating the information itself.

As Alus expressionlessly watched the end of the dragon, a figure landed next to him. After receiving backup in the form of Detonation, he didn’t need to look to know it was Lettie. Drawing a signal flare from his belt, he casually shot it up in the air. Since the Consensor was out of range, this was the sign to let the squad know that Lettie was safe and the mission was to continue.

He saw when Lettie went flying and confirmed the degree of her injuries. They weren’t light, but he still made the decision to carry out the mission after seeing the power of her Detonation and her focus in keeping her coordinates straight. It might be a little harsh, but she was a soldier. Most of all, she wanted to continue the mission as well.

“You didn’t miss this time.”

“Haah...haah... If I did, you would’ve been seriously hurt, Allie,” Lettie answered him, out of breath.

“That’s a needless worry. Besides, your injuries aren’t exactly minor.”

“This much is nothing. More importantly, Allie...let’s switch.”

“With you like that? I think it’s a bit too much for you.”

“I could say the same about you and your hand,” Lettie replied, after looking at his frostbite.

“No,” Alus curtly said. He glanced at Lettie’s body. Her injuries played a part in it, but she gave off the impression of putting up a tough front. If she was being stubborn, she might not be able to make calm decisions.

“Is that an order?”

“I don’t care which.”

Lettie’s demeanor was quiet, but she stared willfully at Alus, who gave it right back to her with a cool expression. Her lips were tightly pursed, like she was grinding her teeth.

But Alus’s answer remained the same. It might have seemed strange coming from someone not normally part of the squad, but allowing Lettie to fight that Fiend on her own wasn’t going to happen.

The mana around Alus surged, a sign he was going to do it. He was also putting pressure on Lettie to hold back her impatience. Besides, they were already in battle. Being battle ready, he didn’t have the time to be considerate of someone else.

He narrowed his eyes and gave Lettie a cold stare. “Don’t make me do your role, Lettie,” he clearly said in no uncertain terms.

That was the line in the sand as a leader. If she was going to step over that line for emotional reasons, Alus would have to take a firm stance, using force if need be. The fact that he was even taking the time to persuade her was his way of showing kindness. If he wanted to, he could’ve knocked her out if need be.

Lettie was blindsided by his refusal. The next moment, her mana and unrest subsided. “F-Fine... Actually, I’m sorry,” she said in a dejected tone, lowering her head. Her braid slumped over like a scolded cat’s tail. But at least she reconsidered her reckless attack.

“I shouldn’t have taken that attitude either. If you just act like normal, I have nothing to complain about.”

“Gotcha.”

Once calmed down, Lettie should be a valuable asset. As for Alus, it was only a small increase in work, but any negative impact on the mission was within the margin of error. “Focus on responding to the enemy rather than attacking. I’ll take care of the rest.”

Lettie’s face lightened at Alus’s somewhat kind tone. She made a beeline for

the Fiend without any signal or answer. Of course her intentions had already reached Alus.

Their highest priority right now was to stall Shem Azah for as long as possible. The worst thing that could happen was if it escaped. Ripping off its leg and sending a dragon of fire after it wasn't just to gauge its strength, but was also meant to provoke it.

The Fiend was huge, and it had the mana to go with it. It also had its quick kicks. In the event it managed to get away and hide somewhere to recover its strength, or headed over to assist the A-class Fiends, the entire Vanalis reclamation mission might end up failing.

The question is how long Lettie's stamina will last. Alus kept a keen eye on his surroundings and chased after her. He'd been keeping his guard up during his entire exchange with Shem Azah due to a certain doubt in his mind.

Unaware of his thoughts, Lettie ran across the snow, pulling her arm back and thrusting it forward again while snapping her fingers. Red dots appeared all around the Shem Azah. In the next moment they exploded, dyeing the surrounding air red. At that range any minor change in coordinates wasn't going to matter as long as she focused. And even if her aim was a little off, the spell covered a fair amount of area. The Fiend wouldn't be able to avoid being damaged from the blast.

"?! What?!"

However, the Fiend dodged the attack in an unanticipated manner. Four maelstroms suddenly appeared in front of the Fiend and swallowed the spell, flames and all. Soon, a black conical tip started growing out of the maelstroms. It reminded Alus of his own Oboro Hien, although something that looked like a charred tree was appearing instead. It looked like a massive stake formed from an old tree, so thick not even an adult could wrap arms around it.

Again! It's using the mana to deploy a different magic formula!

The Fiend was diverting Lettie's spell and counterattacking, while keeping its own mana consumption to a minimum. It was another application of the same ability it used before. Even if it didn't work against all magic, it was troublesome to say the least.

Stakes were fired and rained down on Lettie. Fortunately, because of their large size, they weren't all that fast. She figured they'd be easy to dodge. Staring at the four stakes, she casually jumped. Instead of dodging them, she used them as footing to get closer to the Fiend.

Once she was beyond them, the stakes continued falling. She'd been the one to use the enemy's attack this time, but Alus would've been a little more cautious. The stakes were too crude of an attack for a Fiend like Shem Azah to unleash against a target as nimble as Lettie. But if you asked Lettie, she would say there wouldn't be any problems if she beat the Fiend first.

A large boom rang out behind Lettie. It was the sound of the four stakes she'd evaded piercing the ground and throwing up snow.

At the same time, a strange crunching sound reached Alus's ears. His instincts on high alert, he stopped and poured his entire focus into his consciousness, discarding all unnecessary thought.

A chill ran down his spine. He instantly manifested his special ability and appeared right next to Lettie. He saw a flash of light in the corner of his eye, and the next moment the light reached them before being devoured by his unleashed Gra Eater.

That light was Demis Brionach...the long-range spell the Lefkis used. After a day, the mana in the atmosphere must have recovered enough for it to be able to use it again.

This was what Alus had been on guard for during the entire fight. It was why he'd split the squad up to eliminate the Fiends. It wasn't a matter of numbers. He'd already expected the battle wouldn't be against Shem Azah alone.

Considering the Ogma's intelligence and its strategic abilities, it wasn't unthinkable for the Fiends' cooperation to rival their own. A-class and S-class Fiends were powerful enough alone, but together they would be far more formidable. That was normally unimaginable, but anything could happen in Vanalis.

But Alus had predicted a surprise attack in the case that Sajik, as well as Mujir and Loki, were to fail to defeat the Ogma or Lefkis or both, and they came to the Shem Azah's aid. He'd not only anticipated as much, but even took Gra

Eater's characteristics into his plan and waited for an opportunity.

He was almost sure of a first attack coming. And the Lefkis's position could only be determined once it fired off its attack. *So the Lefkis is still around, and as expected, it fired off a Demis Brionach. That's the first hurdle cleared.*

Gra Eater didn't just eat mana, but also sent it to its master. Right now, the Demis Brionach mana was being absorbed into Alus's body, and of course it was an abnormal amount. *This isn't something it can eat time and time again.* Gra Eater had a will of its own, and Alus simply reined it in and kept it under control. However, its will grew greater the more mana it ate. Once it exceeded what Alus could control, the dangerous special ability would run rampant, becoming a demonic plague that sucked the life out of anyone it came across.

For the time being, it would be fine as long as he could wrap things up while keeping Gra Eater under control. With that in mind, Alus looked over at Lettie.

Lettie had seen the Demis Brionach, but since Alus took care of it, she prioritized the Shem Azah, shooting out flames while dodging its kicks.

Alus suddenly remembered, and glanced behind him. That was where the stakes fired by Shem Azah were supposed to be. He clicked his tongue as something unusual had happened.

The stakes that had been fired into the ground had taken root. They looked to be positioned haphazardly, but still, they were a product of magic. "Lettie, wait!!!"

His voice didn't reach her. She was in the midst of battle with the Shem Azah. Demis Brionach's characteristics made it unsuitable for firing repeatedly. Maybe thinking about the weakness Alus discovered yesterday, Lettie wanted to reduce the Shem Azah's fighting power before something else came to interrupt them. But with her injuries she was at a disadvantage.

However... *Ignoring those would be bad.* The exposed trunks of the rooted stakes were pulsating ever so slightly. Alus hesitated, as something was steadily growing there. Even if he scanned through all of his knowledge, he didn't know what this spell would do.

There's no time to think about it. Emergency measures first. Alus made up his

mind and took action, quickly constructing Niflheim and unleashing it on the stakes. He struggled a little to prevent the snow from influencing it, but it activated as he wanted, transforming the four stakes into clear icicles and freezing the entire area around them. If the stakes were an earth attribute spell that worked like plants, that should be enough to stop them.

That's a bare minimum measure, and now we need to finish this before the Lefkis's next attack comes flying! If the Lefkis could use composite spells, then Demis Brionach probably wasn't its only trump card. It would be safer to assume it could use other long-range spells. Considering Lettie's condition, Alus switched from defense to offense.

The Ogma aside, with the Lefkis firing off a spell of that caliber, Mujir and Loki should've discovered its location. I hope they finish it off quickly, Alus calmly thought to himself. Now that Gra Eater had supplied him with mana...

He reached a decision, then sprang into action. Turning on his heel, he dove back onto the battlefield where Lettie and Shem Azah were locked in a battle of flame and gale. From what he could tell, the old style of Detonation she was using was already losing power and effectiveness. That was in part because she needed more concentration with the snow's interference, but also because her personality and tactics weren't suited for drawn-out fights.

Her spell constructs are pretty sloppy. I guess she's pushing herself just to dodge those attacks. From Alus's point of view, Lettie was reckless. Maybe she'd tried everything else, as right now she was repeatedly using Detonation without regard for her remaining mana. It dealt damage, but it was a horribly inefficient mana method. Even so, just building up damage on the Shem Azah was better than nothing.

Now is the moment. Alus read the situation, leaped past Lettie, and rapidly moved in on the Shem Azah. He raised Night Mist, which read its master's intention and instantly began constructing a spell.

Several small maelstroms appeared behind Alus. It was an attribute-less spell unique to him. Night Mist's shape was replicated and countless blades were born from the maelstroms. The process repeated, and before long there were over a hundred short swords with chains attached.

With a swing of Alus's arm they shot out like arrows, chains trailing after them, towards the giant Fiend's body. The reason the chains were replicated was because this Oboro Hien was intended to restrain.

Shem Azah attempted to counteract with mana, flapping its wings and sending mana into its surroundings. The outlines of the replica Night Mists began to distort and blur.

Alus quickly realized they'd only last another few seconds at most. He spread his arms in the air, as if feeling the wind between his fingers, and then began stroking the air like a conductor swinging a baton. The space he touched with his fingers immediately froze into ice.

At first there was only the crunching sound of air freezing. But as more mana was absorbed, more moisture in the air was collected, and a thick block of ice formed. Soon a long block of ice that followed Alus's movements was created, and looking at the composition, it was almost identical to Icicle Sword.

Alus snapped his wrist to form a sharply pointed tip. Linked to the movements of his arm, he sent the huge ice sword flying at the Shem Azah.

However, the enemy spread its wings, intending to counteract that as well. A thick wall of wind immediately appeared and stood before the ice sword.

The weapon was gradually being scraped away in the clash of raging wind and frozen sword...but Alus wasn't going to let it go to waste. He interfered with space, pushing the equivalent of the handle with his palm covered in mana.

The tip got crushed, but it broke through the wall of wind. However, it was thrown off its path and just grazed the Shem Azah's abdomen. It seemed the Fiend had dodged it, but this was simply laying the groundwork.

Because it had evaded, Shem Azah moved to a certain position. Alus, having anticipated that, had already jumped up next to where it moved to. He swung Night Mist while lengthening its reach with mana. The thinner the mana blade, the sharper it was. The edge created from intense focus was the same as a masterfully crafted blade.

Alus swung the blade diagonally, cutting off the Fiend's wing and slicing its stomach open. He thrust the tip in and stirred it around to expand the wound.

The Fiend's fluids splattered through the air. *How do you like this? Spells aren't the only way to kill you.* Alus coldly looked down at the Shem Azah falling to the ground with one fewer wing, then prepared to land.

Close to the ground, the Fiend flapped its remaining wings and created a powerful gale that blew up a huge amount of snow, concealing its body behind a white curtain. Just before that, Alus saw the eye-like pattern on its remaining wings glow red as if in a fit of rage. The forewings that had been partially open were now wide open, their red eyes emitting mana in a fury.

Just then, the air trembled. The temperature at ground level dropped and snowy wind swept across the land. There'd been sudden changes before, but this time it was a snow tornado created by a wounded Shem Azah.

Alus narrowed his eyes when he spotted Lettie. She was leaning forward with eyes wide open, as if shouting that she'd never let it escape, her level of killing intent bordering on the abnormal.

As she was about to dash into the white storm wrapped around Shem Azah, Alus soundlessly appeared at her side and wrapped his arm around her abdomen to forcibly stop her. "I know how you feel...but that's enough."

"?!" Lettie looked over her shoulder at him with a harsh glare. "Why?! We've got it cornered!"

Alus didn't answer as the snowstorm rumbled, simply pulling Lettie closer.

She wore a surprised expression, but in the next moment a ray of light cut through the snowfall. The shot passed through the space that Lettie was headed for, before burning through the face of a distant mountain and fading away.

"Don't get too worked up. You're not stupid enough to choose death because of a hot head. If that's what you want, fine, but your subordinates will blame me." Alus finally let her go.

Lettie looked like she still wasn't done, prompting Alus to brush away the snow in his hair, and say, "It wasn't as powerful, but that was a Demis Brionach too... To think another one of those would come so soon. There are things not even I can predict."

She silently hung her head down. It might have been weaker, but she could feel the power it contained. If he hadn't stopped her, she doubted that she would've been able to avoid it. That surely would have been the worst outcome. She would've lost an arm at least, but even that would have been lucky. Either way, she'd have been out of commission.

Seeing how Lettie looked relieved, conflicted, and remorseful all at once, Alus shrugged. "The power in that shot was different. The Lefkis must be able to move pretty fast. By changing locations, it's able to secure more mana in the air. It recharged its mana and fired off another shot. It can probably adjust the output. While it's not a complete Demis Brionach, it can repeatedly fire off something with considerable power."

Moreover, though seemingly not critical, he had major concerns. The first was Lettie. "You're not calm right now. You're injured, and you're close to your limits, aren't you? And you want me to protect you, while staying on guard for the Lefkis and fighting the Shem Azah?"

The original premise had already fallen apart. That's why they needed to pause, even at the expense of the original mission. "There's something I've understood in this fight. The Shem Azah specializes in magic, though that kick can't be ignored either. Fortunately, its regenerative abilities aren't very high. Not to mention it's quick to anger and vindictive. It'll definitely come after us."

Alus continued with a mean smile. "So even if it hides in the snow here, it'll come back for revenge. It won't run or go anywhere else. This will be where it gets settled. But unfortunately for it, things won't go the way it wants."

"How would you know that—"

"I can tell. It's not like I've been killing monsters like this for show. We'll fall back for now. It's not the right time yet."

The Lefkis's existence would definitely get in the way. Even if they could finish off the Shem Azah, he didn't want to pay a steep price for it. "Mujir and Loki are on it. The Demis Brionach should have broadcasted the Lefkis's position to those two. So we have to trust in them and wait."

The Shem Azah's massive body had already disappeared within the snowstorm. Alus had told Mujir and Loki that it was pivotal not to miss that

long-range spell. The Ogma was still an unknown, but seeing as it hadn't interfered yet, it was probably hiding underground. In fact, its lack of involvement proved that Sajik had gotten close. So it was likely the type to avoid fighting, which made it less of a direct threat. That was just as the report from Clevideet had said. Either way, since they didn't have enough hands to go around, they'd just have to trust Sajik to deal with the Ogma.

Then there was the other doubt in his mind. Alus glanced over at the black stakes the Shem Azah fired off before. Lettie followed his gaze and looked as well.

Something strange was taking place before their eyes. "Not even Niflheim can stop the pulse within. Can you tell?" Alus asked. He glanced at Lettie, who didn't confirm or deny it. "We'll need to get away from here so I can explain. Seeing how bad this storm has gotten, it's completely switched to defense. It looks like it's trying to lure us in, so we'll need to make preparations. Also, we need to tend to your wounds."

"Fine," Lettie said after a pause, having calmed down some.

Alus was a little relieved. The Shem Azah lurked within the snow tornado, but it wasn't going anywhere soon with those injuries. He narrowed his eyes to try to see through the snow. He was barely able to make out the Shem Azah's body...and something was happening to it. He'd sensed that its activities had stopped, but what he saw was unexpected.

The Fiend's huge body was covered in string. It had woven a cocoon at some point and its body had disappeared into it. It was probably meant to treat its wounds, but if it wasn't going anywhere, that was all the better for them.

Turning their backs on the cocoon, Alus and Lettie decided to make a tactical retreat. Like Alus predicted, the snow that Shem Azah whipped up had turned into a blizzard that swallowed up the entire area. There were no signs of it dying down soon either.

The two sought refuge in a cave on a nearby high hill. The reason they went for height was so that they could sense the Shem Azah sooner if it came back. It wasn't even one of the small bases, but it had been noted on the map in case of emergency. It wasn't too deep, but it was enough to shelter them from the

snow and winds. They put down anything they'd been carrying to move as lightly as possible.

Lettie held her shoulder and leaned against the craggy wall.

Alus quickly made preparations by setting fire to the branches he'd collected on the way. "Strip."

"What?" The suddenness of the word made Lettie yelp.

"I'm treating the injury on your shoulder and checking the rest of your wounds." Alus wasn't going to take no for an answer, but he had no ulterior motives either. If anything, he almost sounded annoyed.

"I understand what you want to say, but can't you be more considerate, like turn around or something?"

"What? I didn't know you had a sense of shame."

Lettie pouted and turned around to remove her top. "I'm not the type to take off my clothes in front of a guy. Just what do you take me for... Jeez." Besides, she hardly ever got hurt in the first place, she wanted to add. With her top off and her back to Alus, Lettie brought her braid in front of her. "Are you angry?"

"No, I'm used to hurting and getting hurt. If you want to die without getting any treatment, that's fine with me."

"So you are angry," Lettie weakly muttered, turning her head away. She blamed herself for everything, giving her an unusually meek attitude.

Alus told her to sit down and she complied. She sat down cross-legged with her back straight. "For starters, I'm going to stitch you up."

Lettie responded with a nod.

He didn't have much use for it himself, but the soles of Alpha's military combat boots had a needle and thread in them. Sewing up a wound with these was a pretty drastic measure, but well known in the military. Back when Alus wasn't as experienced, he'd used them to fix himself up.

Alus first put the needle through the flames to sterilize it before approaching Lettie. When he did, she threw up a hand to cover her chest. Ignoring that reaction, Alus set to treating her. The laceration was deeper than expected, and

the area around the torn skin was burning hot. “You’ll need to get proper treatment later, but just deal with this for now.” He gathered mana in his fingertips as a replacement for anesthetic.

Lettie’s temples twitched as the needle went into her skin, but Alus couldn’t do anything more for her. Thanks to the simple anesthetic, though, her sense of pain was dulled, and it didn’t hurt all that much. In the middle of the treatment, she muttered, “Aren’t you going to get angry?”

“A Single wants someone to get angry and look down on them? I’m not your parent or teacher, so I’m going to refuse no matter how much you pay me.”

“I can’t tell if you’re being kind or cold...” Lettie looked at his hand. Even now, Alus was continuing to focus mana in his fingertips as he moved the needle fixing her up.

“Let me ask you something. Was that supposed to be you being honest from the bottom of your heart?” By *that*, of course, he was referring to Lettie losing her calm when shouting that they had it cornered.

His words dripping with sarcasm made her drop her head with a look of remorse. “Sorry.”

“I’m relieved to hear that. You should be able to calm down a little more the next time,” Alus replied, after he finished stitching up the wound on her shoulder. He examined her body again. Damage to internal organs was particularly dangerous in these cases, and she might have damage she wasn’t even aware of.

Fortunately, that didn’t seem to be the case. That said, her body was covered in bruises. There was also swelling here and there that looked like bruising as well. However, her back only had fresh wounds. There weren’t really any old scars. It was only yesterday when it was as beautiful as that of any normal girl who lived in the Inner World.

But in Vanalis, she had to bear new wounds, alongside bitter regret. She seemed to have gotten over it for a moment, but judging from her earlier actions, the advance party still weighed heavily on her mind. Wounds weren’t just carved into the flesh. In exchange for purity and innocence, they were carved into the soul as well.

When Alus thought of that, the faces of two girls popped into his mind. The two were novice Magicmasters that knew nothing of the Outer World who were just single-mindedly walking down the path before them. “I’m going to say something unnecessary, so just think of it as me talking to myself.”

“Gotcha.”

Lettie’s back was unexpectedly slender. Alus put his mana-covered hand on it while speaking a few words. He’d said he was just talking to himself, but it was an expression of his true feelings. “You know there are students at the Institute that I’m teaching, right?”

“Frose’s daughter Tesfia. And Alice. Right?” Lettie answered immediately.

He was a little surprised that she remembered their names. “Yeah, since I’m teaching them, I’m not holding back. If they’re planning to become Magicmasters, I’m going to help them out as long as I’m there.”

“That sounds pretty rough. Well, I’m sure they’re good kids.”

Alus struggled to agree with that last part. If Lettie felt that way, it might have been some kind of womanly connection. “I want them to become Magicmasters like you.”

“What’s that supposed to mean? Is that a confession?”

“What?” Alus let out a dumbfounded voice at her remark, but Lettie laughed it off as a joke. She seemed back to normal, so he removed his mana-covered hand from her back.

“Wouldn’t you make a better role model, Allie? You’re the ranked No.1 after all.”

“I’m no good. I can teach them all kinds of things, but I can’t be their goal.”

“That’s true,” Lettie said after a pause. She understood what he meant, and seemed to reflect on her rash comment.

When it came to Magicmasters, Alus’s career and characteristics were amazing. But even an outstanding novice Magicmaster shouldn’t look to him as a goal, no matter what their potential. In fact, it was questionable if a Magicmaster who was lacking in so many ways could even be considered a

decent human.

The path the two girls were walking down would introduce them to plenty of Magicmasters on the same path ahead of them. But no matter how far they walked, they wouldn't find Alus on that path. He had gone off the road and was wandering alone through a dark maze without a light. He could never be anyone's goal.

But compared with him, Lettie made for an ideal Magicmaster both as a squad captain and as a person. She cared for her subordinates and valued her bond with her comrades. Even considering that bond, she carefully maintained some distance to avoid taking biased actions.

There were times when she couldn't restrain her feelings, like during the battle with Shem Azah. But that only made her even more human in Alus's eyes. That was why he could never hate her, though he wasn't so naive as to tell her that.

"But..." Lettie said. "I see, so you hold me in that much high esteem." She smiled happily at Alus's words, letting them sink in and feeling her heart grow warmer. "Still, it was pretty roundabout for a confession. I'll give you a passing grade anyway."

"Should I give your head...no, your front, a look over too?"

Her eyes opened wide at this, and she hunched over slightly. "No thanks! No need! I can check it for myself! What's with that casual sexual harassment?! And if you're going to say that, at least try to look excited instead of like you're just saying it for the hell of it... Actually, whose influence was that?"

"Lindelph, I guess."

"Him, huh. Jeez..." Lettie's expression turned bitter at the thought of the man known for being a womanizer. He was a pathetic middle-aged man who seemed to have grown up without ever having been taught delicacy or refinement. "Jokes really don't suit you, Allie."

"I see. Still, if you're that energetic about it, your wounds are probably fine."

"Thanks to you." Lettie looked her body over and lightly moved her arms and legs. After that she started putting her clothes on again.

In the meantime, Alus was properly looking the other way, while also putting a cloth over his frostbitten hand.

Lettie suddenly stood. Alus assumed she'd finished dressing, looked over, and saw that her tattered jacket and sleeves were still by her feet. She gazed at Alus, who stared suspiciously at her. "Yeah, I've decided."

"What?"

"I wasn't sure when to tell you. Actually, I hadn't planned on saying it at all. Allie...when we're done with this mission..." Lettie paused. Her expression was serious. "I want you to officially join my squad."

"You're recruiting me now? But I don't..."

"I'm sure our squad will be the best place for you. Besides, when I first established this squad, your face was the one that came to mind when I was choosing members. I'm sure they'll accept you too...and then we can be like a family."

The military—with a few exceptions—was a place with intense rivalries. That's why there were few people a Single could truly trust. Lettie was no exception to the rule. When she said the unit was like a family, Alus felt that was very fitting for her. Indeed, that was the reason why she was so fixated on Vanalis and why she was so emotional in front of the Fiend. That was something that was present in Lettie's squad and no other.

When Alus realized that, he could only hope that Alice and Tesfia would strive to become someone like Lettie instead of himself. Now she was standing on the boundary of a dark wasteland and the light, reaching out with her hand, inviting him to her side.

He had completed plenty of missions in the past. And many of them involved working with squads, but in the end he was still treated like a heretic. They'd directly or indirectly wished death on him on many occasions. In the world of the living, Alus had been fighting in the place closest to death, and all alone.

"I know it's pretty late though," Lettie said with a gentle smile.

Alus lived in a small, dark, and freezing world, but now Lettie was offering him a place where he could truly rest. He'd been treated as a Fiend-killing tool since

childhood, loathed and feared by fellow humans. She was saying that she would make a place for him to live in public.

“Hey, Allie... Do you hate running around the Outer World?”

“Not really.” Indeed, he didn’t hate the Outer World. In fact, he wanted to see the far reaches of it before anyone else. He wanted to chase after that unfulfilled dream without any restraints. Despite the constant fighting, it seemed the Outer World was the only place that filled him with satisfaction.

Before he could open his mouth, Lettie stopped him. “You don’t have to give your answer yet. I’ll give you some time to think about it and ask again later.”

“All right. I’ll think about it.”

By the time he noticed, the fire had weakened and looked like it might go out at any moment. They’d taken a half-hour break overall. It was the time needed to treat Lettie and let her regain her composure.

Suddenly, Alus sensed something, and peered out the cave’s opening. The blizzard had died down and a huge shadow had appeared under the ash cloud on the field of snow.

The first thing he noticed was the broken cocoon. Next, he saw Shem Azah, which must have struggled to get out of it. Under the dim sunlight, the king of moths trampled its cocoon, and slowly flapped its wings as it attempted to take to the skies again.

“That was faster than I expected. Its healing properties shouldn’t be that high, so it must have just focused on healing its wing.” The eye-shaped pattern on its regenerated wing glowed as if trying to find where Alus and Lettie were lurking.

“But that was plenty of time for you to close up my wound,” Lettie remarked, as she came up to Alus and peered over the battlefield.

With the blizzard over, the sky was relatively calm. From the looks of it, Shem Azah’s focus on healing its wing left its other wounds unhealed. It still had the damage from all the Detonations Lettie had unleashed.

“Go me. I would’ve preferred to just blow it up with a big bang though.”

“You wish. That damage is because you bombed it indiscriminately, neglecting

the composition and coordinates.” As proof of that, Lettie hadn’t used the improved version of Detonation, but the old style that was less difficult to cast to reduce the shifting of coordinates.

Alus had hit Lettie where it hurt, and she could only gaze at him with some shame. She was a Single after all. “As an apology, you can do with me what you want.” She pinched her top and pulled it open a little to give him a glimpse.

She might’ve been trying to thank him for taking over her role. Of course, Alus ignored her. When she was in her element she was bold, but she’d been flustered just before this. Which Lettie was the real one was easy to tell. Alus felt he could understand why Sisty said that Lettie was all talk but no action. “We should get going. It’s best not to let it get impatient and turn on the rest of the squad.”

“So what was with that big stake spell anyways?” Lettie asked.

That was one of the primary reasons Alus chose to temporarily retreat. “It’s probably an invocation spell. An unknown spell trapped within that can be detonated from a distance. And four of them at that.”

“Can we break them?”

“I tried, but it didn’t work. It seems you can’t affect the magic from the outside.”

“So you don’t know what spell it is?”

“Not a clue. Based on how it looks, I thought it might be an earth attribute spell...but considering it further, it could also be a fire attribute spell.” His reason for thinking that was because not even Niflheim could stop it, and the stake spell had been created from Lettie’s flames. Unlike the fire dragon that was turned to stone, it was possible that the Shem Azah only diverted the mana without changing its composition, so it might have used the attribute formula as it was. “At any rate, we’re going to struggle if we don’t deal with this snow. No matter what spell it is, if I’ve dealt with it even once, I’ll be able to counter it the next time.”

“How reliable. But I don’t want another rampage like last time.”

“Well, I’ll do my best. I should be able to just absorb the spell...probably. Then

there’s also the Lefkis that might intervene again,” Alus said.

“So for now we buy time until the Lefkis is eliminated.”

“That’s the plan. The snow is a big influence, but we know we can push it to a certain point. We just have to make sure not to overstep it.”

Alus’s last words made Lettie frown. The mistake she’d made as if she was some rookie was firmly etched in her mind. That was why she made her decision. “Sorry, Allie, but could you help me deal with that guy for a while longer?”

“Yeah, I was going to. But isn’t it a bit too late to ask for that?” Alus’s original mission was over by the time the Lefkis fired off its second shot. In fact, the first shot he’d had his Gra Eater deal with had been so flashy, Mujir and Loki must have found where it was hiding by now. He was convinced of it. “Lettie, we’re going to finish this thing off here, so I don’t want to hear you say you’re already out of mana.”

“I can handle another round. Actually, I’ve got a plan of my own. Can I count on your backup when the time comes?”

“As long as it’s not anything reckless.” Alus wasn’t a fan of doing a common front, nor was he very good at it. But that might not be the case with Lettie the way she was now.

Before confronting the Shem Azah, Alus fired off another signal flare. The Shem Azah would spot them, but they no longer had any intention of hiding. Some flashy colored smoke rose up, before exploding in the air and spreading a wave of mana.

It was the signal for the squad to move on to the final stage of the plan.

Fifty-Sixth Chapter

Mad Fanatic

Weak light shone into the dark abandoned mine from above.

A huge muscular Magicmaster was on his knees, his head hanging low. With his thick arms outstretched to either side as if crucified, he looked like a puppet suspended by strings. He'd lost so much blood it might put him in a critical state, though the man, Sajik, was unconscious and therefore unaware of it.

The bright red drops of blood dripped down and were absorbed into the dirty ground. Sajik's face looked deathly pale, possibly due to the dim light. Thin tubes were stuck into his arms as if they were veins. They wriggled and pulsated as they made their way deep into his arms.

Yet Sajik didn't budge. The tubes led to a large piece of leather cloth a few meters away. But that sight felt out of place.

It was underground and the air was stagnant, and as one could tell from the offensive smell, not even the wind reached down here. But the cloth flapped back and forth like it was moving in the wind. No...it was wriggling like it was alive.

At closer look, the leather cloth wasn't connected to either the walls or the ground. It seemed to be floating in the air. The center of the cloth protruded like there was something beneath it. And in fact there was something...a grotesque Fiend.

The reason it looked like it was floating was because of its thin body. The top of its head was covered with a tattered leather cloth, and beneath that was a thin, sickly figure reduced to nothing but skin and bone. Its knotty joints, sharp claws, and bent legs, were indeed those of a monster. It looked a little humanoid but there was nothing human about it. That would be enough to make most people disgusted and start shaking in fear. It looked like a hanged man, but even for a Fiend it appeared more dead than alive.

The dark impression it gave off and the peculiar tubes that eerily pulsated made it clear that this was the despicable Fiend that brainwashed its underlings and used them as pawns...the Ogma.

The tubes extending from under the dried leather cloth to Sajik's arms wriggled again. They had entered at the wrists and wormed their way to his elbows by now.

Sajik's thick eyebrows twitched, his eyes still closed. The next moment, he flexed his arms so hard that veins appeared, and he broke free from his restraints. He grabbed the tubes and pulled them out of his arms.

What? Fuck, I was dozing off... Sajik slowly and silently raised his head, a fierce anger in his eyes.

He'd been separated from his comrades when he fell underground, and had finally encountered his target when he'd been hit with a surprise attack from a dark element spell and been captured by tentacles.

He had been pumped full of anesthetics, and just as he was about to lose consciousness, he woke up. The reason he'd avoided getting brainwashed was because of the signal flare Alus fired. The waves of mana had penetrated the ground and awakened Sajik. It was truly fortunate timing, though he felt he'd only slept a little bit.

Like Alus had predicted, the Ogma didn't have much in the way of combat prowess, which was why it hid itself down here. Now that Sajik was awake and using Force, it was no different from a child. In an instant he was right next to it and unleashed a powerful kick into its bony body.

The Ogma's body bent in from the impact. Its abdomen burst open and its bones shattered.

After blowing his opponent into the wall, Sajik angrily fired lightning through the tubes he was holding. Lightning ran through the tubes in each hand, and when they met in the Ogma's body they burst into violent sparks. The light was so intense and bright that it erased all shadows for a short while.

Seeing the Ogma burned to a crisp and unmoving, Sajik breathed out. Even for someone as daring as him, having foreign objects enter his arms was very uncomfortable. He sliced off the remaining tubes, threw them to the ground, and pulverized them under his foot. The tubes, having been cut off from their body, soon turned to dust.

“Damn it, I really let my guard down,” Sajik said in disgust, scratching his head. He then rubbed his neck, as having had anesthetics injected into him, he felt strangely sleepy. Moving to his eyes, he rubbed them too, but suddenly clicked his tongue. “Ouch, I got dirt in my eyes.” He kept rubbing as he cautiously surveyed the Fiend.

After confirming it was still alive, he walked over to the charred figure. He gathered mana in his hand, which turned into the lightning attribute, and then discharged it. This took place in an instant, not giving the Fiend a chance to escape.

“It’s time to stop hiding and fight. You sure gave me a hard time for a fake human. But now it’s time for payback... Let’s see how much you can take.”

Still discharging electricity, Sajik grabbed hold of the dried leather cloth, putting more force into his hand. He ripped it off and clutched the thin, wizened Fiend’s neck.

Lightning ran through the Ogma’s body. White smoke rose from it and the repeated shocks made its body twitch. With the intent to finish it off, Sajik swung down his hand like an ax and shattered the Fiend’s head.

“Found it in the first hit.” Inside the skull was a poisonous-looking core resembling a brain.

Sajik’s lips twisted into a grin. He turned his mana into lightning, his gauntlet glowing white as he poured all of it into the Ogma. The core had no chance of withstanding that dreadful attack and shattered.

The Ogma’s core was burned away so fast it didn’t even have a chance to scream, and its body crumbled into ash.

Sajik let go of its head, which was the only thing that remained, and watched it turn to dust on the ground. “Yeah!” he said, his spirits raised.

“Hey, Sajik!”

“Sajik, you still alive?”

He heard the familiar voices of his comrades. They’d split up to wipe out the Fiends as they worked their way through the complex of tunnels, and some of

them had finally reached him.

“I’m here!” Sajik replied in a booming voice, as if to say he was perfectly fine, as his comrades came running up.

“Did you sense Sir Alus’s signal flare? We need to wrap this up quick,” a squad member said.

But Sajik just rubbed his chin and laughed. “You’re too late. I just finished it off. Once we get to the surface, we should fire off the signal to show the Ogma’s been killed.”

There’d been some accidents, but the Ogma had been eliminated in a rather short amount of time. And since Sajik did it on his own that was even better. But as expected from an A-class like the Ogma, even though it was fragile in close combat, it had unexpectedly struck his weak point.

“This’ll devastate the captain.” A stench was in the air. The source of it was a pile of half-eaten corpses left in a corner. They were most likely part of the advance party.

Sajik’s heart was filled with burning anger. The leather cloth the Ogma had worn only added fuel to the flame. Dried human skin had a slight insulating effect. Perhaps it was the Fiend’s attempt at resisting the lightning attribute, or maybe it was because it abhorred the light.

Either way, once Sajik grouped up with his comrades, they turned around to return to the surface. Blood was still flowing out from his arms after he’d pulled out the tubes, without any sign of stopping. “I’m going to have to ask Louise for help with this. She always rats me out to the captain...”

Sajik had pulled the short straw and would have to report the fate of the advance party to Lettie, so he couldn’t help but feel depressed, and he grumbled with a fed-up expression.

However, he had no intention of taking even a short break. Once he’d been patched up, he would link up with the rest of the squad. That’s why he wanted to avoid upsetting Louise when he finally met up with her. And that was why he got his complaints out now as he trudged through the dark tunnel.

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Loki and Mujir were running up a mountain at top speed, their eyes forward, moving as if rushed on by something. But rather than impatience, it was a sense of responsibility that drove them forward.

“What speed... I can’t keep up,” Mujir said with a troubled expression. As a Double Digit, if he wanted to, he was confident that his instantaneous speed could surpass Sajik’s in normal circumstances and even rival Lettie’s.

The same went for his kinetic vision. He could even react to Sajik when he was using Force. But now he cast spell after spell as they chased the Lefkis to stall it, but they showed no signs of hitting. After his first shot, the Lefkis seemed to sense them ahead of time and dodged.

The Lefkis was an elusive Fiend. They wouldn’t have been able to find it if they searched blindly. But thanks to Alus’s plan, they were able to locate it by following the path of the aftermath after the first Demis Brionach. They tracked it down and began pursuing it, but that’s when their troubles began.

“Mujir, let me do it.”

Loki was only meant to be support, so Mujir reluctantly accepted her offer. The Lefkis had to be stopped and he couldn’t afford to be picky. “Please,” he said.

In the same moment as he responded, Loki disappeared in a flash of lightning. Cutting through the air, she closed the distance to the Fiend. Her instant speed was a match for Sajik using Force, which surprised him.

However, she was able to do it by ignoring the stress it put on herself. Loki’s overuse of Force while her body was still developing would eventually come back and hurt her. But even so, there was no other way.

Seeing that, Mujir’s expression was conflicted. He’d heard about the painstaking efforts it took for Sajik to learn Force. Even adults could suffer serious damage to their legs if they recklessly continued to use Force unnecessarily.

Meanwhile, the Lefkis, who had been running from peak to peak, began to charge large amounts of mana into his long horn. It continued to run while charging, narrowing its eyes as if looking at something far away.

Loki could clearly see lightning converging in its horn. The mystical light was without a doubt a sign of Demis Brionach. *?! It shouldn't be able to use it repeatedly!*

As that panicked thought popped into her mind, Loki realized why the Lefkis moved around so much. It wasn't just a means to escape pursuit. Demis Brionach was a powerful spell that gathered the mana in the air and fired it. As a result it used up most of the mana in its surroundings, but by moving to a new untouched area, it would be able to absorb more mana.

The second shot would be less powerful than the first, but that didn't mean it wasn't a threat. *I can't let it shoot again.* Speeding up even more, Loki pulled out several knife-type AWRs and threw them in a single movement.

The knives, clad in electricity, had considerable penetrating power. Flying straight as arrows, they looked like they would pierce the Fiend's head just before it could fire the spell.

However, all of the knives got repelled by a barrier similar to an electric discharge that had been created by the Fiend's horn before they could reach it. It was a combination offensive and defensive move. The composition of the spell must've included parts of a lightning attribute barrier spell. Like a shield protecting a sniper before they fired, the Lefkis seemed to be able to deploy it at will, in which case novice spells or attacks with a comparable amount of mana wouldn't be able to stop the frightening attack.

"Tsk!" Loki reacted, as the Lefkis narrowed its eyes to their limit and fired off the second Demis Brionach as if to ridicule her efforts. In just that moment, the Fiend stopped in its tracks and braced itself with its four legs.

Loki pushed on even harder with Force as her leg muscles creaked, rapidly closing in on the Fiend. She pulled out another knife, determined to take it down this time, and swung it down like a conductor's baton.

"‹‹Lightning Ray››" A thunderbolt shot down from the sky at the point indicated by the tip of the knife, directly striking the Lefkis. An ear-ringing roar rang out.

She'd tried to brace herself as she cast the spell, but as a result of her acceleration she kicked up a lot of snow. She quickly resumed her posture.

Even after getting hit by lightning of that magnitude, the Lefkis stood unfazed. The sight of it shocked Loki. All of the energy from the lightning had slid off its body without penetrating it, like rain off an umbrella. It was then transformed into a multilayered web of lightning that stuck to its body.

The next moment, the Lefkis shook its long mane and body like a wet dog shaking off water. The electricity bounced off of its body and scattered in all directions.

Did Sir Alus anticipate this too? It was already clear that the Lefkis had resistance towards the lightning attribute. The Fiend's body and fur were better mana conductors than an AWR. Alus had said that Brionach and Demis Brionach were partly lightning attribute spells, so even if he wasn't completely sure, he'd at least anticipated the possibility that the Lefkis specialized in the lightning attribute.

If speed was all it took to pursue and evade the Lefkis's long-range attacks, then Sajik using Force would be better than Mujir. However, Alus chose to send Sajik to eliminate the Ogma instead. He must have foreseen this situation.

At the same time, Loki realized she hadn't been told to support Mujir because she was weak. Alus's directions and positioning of personnel had been just right. *If Lightning Ray doesn't work, I'll need to try something else*, she thought, biting her lip. It would be mortifying to remain just as Mujir's support.

A flash of light appeared above the Fiend's head. Mujir leaped at the Fiend and swung down his tonfa AWRs. He'd seen what just happened and tried a direct physical attack. Of course, the surface of the weapons were clad in mana, and combined with his trained skills their destructive power was multiplied several times over. A swift and powerful blow was unleashed towards the Fiend's head.

From Loki's point of view, it looked like he'd attacked when the Lefkis was caught off guard. She felt the battle was won. Her Lightning Ray being brushed off was a surprise, but the Fiend's confidence—typical of high-ranking Fiends—that it had no worthy enemies had come back to bite it. It lowered its guard and Mujir had struck at the opening.

More importantly, with her liberal use of Force, she'd been able to get this

close to the Fiend for the first time. All that was left was to coordinate with Mujir and come up with some kind of countermeasure for its lightning resistance. The Fiend wouldn't get a chance to fire off a third Demis Brionach and trouble Alus again.

However, the Lefkis easily destroyed Loki's naive fantasy. Mujir's attack was a few millimeters away from striking the back of its neck when suddenly the target disappeared from in front of him. The attack meant to strike at its opening hit nothing but air.

"?!" The two weren't as astonished at the attack being avoided as they were at how the Fiend had done it. Thin strands of electricity were left in place of where the Fiend had been.

"Force!!" The spell name that unconsciously came out of Mujir's mouth was the same spell Loki had just used.

"Mujir! Behind you!" Hearing Loki's warning, Mujir turned and saw the sharp tip of the Lefkis's horn approaching his neck.

"Ack!" He bent backwards, the attack just barely grazing him. A splatter of blood flew up in the air from his neck. At the same time he poured mana into his tonfa and swung up at the horn as he fell, putting enough power into it to snap the horn...but the Lefkis used Force and got out of range of the attack.

Tsk... Mujir put a hand on his neck. Blood was flowing out, but his artery was intact. Since the Lefkis had just fired off a Demis Brionach, its horn was hot enough that the grazing strike burned his skin. After checking his injury, he looked down at his tonfa.

His eyes shot wide open, but it wasn't because he'd discovered a way to kill the Lefkis. "Hair..." He was reacting to what had attached to his tonfa in his counterattack. It was a part of its mane but looked completely different from the thick fur the Fiend wore.

It was thin, lustrous, and of a particular color. Mujir's discerning eye immediately told him it was human hair. He'd thought he had prepared himself for this, but he knew whose hair it was...the female spotter who had been in the advance party. Moreover, she was one of the rare users of the light element. Unfortunately, it appeared Alus was right on the mark with his cruel

explanation for why the Lefkis could use an element normally impossible for it.

A violent rage threatened to burst from him, but he restrained it with a cold exhalation. It didn't change the fact that he needed to kill this Fiend, but letting his anger get the best of him was inefficient and went against his way of doing things. He would remain calm, choosing the most efficient and optimum method.

With silent determination, Mujir focused his mana into his tonfa. If the Lefkis could use Force the situation was considerably worse than before. Humans could only use Force for a limited time, and there was no way to mitigate the strain it placed on the body. If anything, it would be strange for such an intense enhancement not to have any drawbacks.

Fiends, on the other hand, evolved their bodies to become more suitable to use magic, and they were also far more effective at using body-enhancing magic.

In that case, it's a battle of time. A-class Fiends and above were nearly perfectly optimized to use the magic of their attributes. The resistance to electricity that it showed in Loki's attack made that clear. Knowing that, Mujir wasn't foolish enough to try and compete with the Fiend in terms of physical strength.

Loki stepped up next to Mujir to cover for him. She'd more or less reached the same conclusion. However, there was something only she could do.

Seeing Loki take off, Mujir was shocked for a moment, but then quickly realized her intentions. They wouldn't be able to eliminate the Fiend if she stayed on support.

Loki had spent a fair amount of time in the Outer World, and gone through her own life or death moments. She might not understand the squad's unique sense of cooperation, but she had enough experience in figuring out how to kill Fiends.

She started by using Force to draw a reaction from the Fiend. The Lefkis was already agile enough as it was, and with Force, Loki was the only one who could keep it in check. She pulled out knives from around her hip, holding them between her fingers, and challenged this Fiend that could resist the magic she

specialized in.

She'd been ready to give her life for Alus's sake from the very start. But thoughts of Lettie popped up in her mind.

After all, this place right here is honest. She was like a warrior princess filled with composure and pride, one of Alpha's two Singles. *It can really be such an inconvenience.* Loki recalled Lettie's complicated expression—like a crying smile—as she thought of her fallen comrades.

Loki liked her. She was a woman who understood Alus, the most important person in Loki's life, and could maintain a friendly relationship with him.

She suddenly remembered their farcical sisterhood that they'd played out during the campus festival. Loki didn't have parents or siblings, but she felt she and Lettie would be able to get along if they really were sisters. The thought of the two being good sisters to each other no matter how old they got came to mind. *I should thank her once we get back.*

Suddenly, Loki smiled. Lettie was right. The heart really was honest. Nobody could stop an impulse from the soul.

Loki felt like she'd been taught something that she'd been lacking. She struggled to put it into words, but Lettie was a different sort of Magicmaster from Alus. She was also convinced that Alus had seen that quality in Lettie and acknowledged it in her.

Alus was the reason for Loki's existence, but the path he took wasn't the only one. This discovery filled her heart with a sense of wonder. It felt like she'd awoken to the truth. Lettie's path as a Magicmaster was yet another ideal.

In that case, maybe there were other ways she could stay by Alus's side instead of just the one... That thought appeared in her mind, and the next moment she was convinced. Indeed, she could possess something that Alus didn't...and she could use it to support him and stay by his side.

Loki finally found an answer. And strength unconsciously filled her body.

Instantly, she shifted to her greatest speed and disappeared, leaving only sparks of lightning and snow in her wake. In the same moment, the Lefkis disappeared as well.

Occasional sounds of electricity clashing reverberated into the distance. Flashes of light produced by the tip of knives appeared and disappeared, dancing in the air.

As time passed, the snow was decorated with splatters of blood, which slowly grew in number. It was red human blood. Loki was being overwhelmed. She challenged the Lefkis in super speeds that exceeded the limits of human perception, but was still a step behind the Fiend, despite being prepared to take damage in order to defeat her enemy.

Loki concentrated on dodging the attacks, and attacking with her knives clad in electricity. But still the Fiend's horn grazed her cheeks and arms, splattering fresh blood, as the Fiend managed to evade everything.

From what she could remember, eight knives had already been knocked down. She was fighting at the edge of her limits the entire time.

Mujir saw this, and sensed the determination in Loki's way of fighting and her intentions. In order for their coordinated efforts to succeed, he needed to get the timing right. And actually, he was the only one who would even be able to keep up with the situation. At best an ordinary Magicmaster would just see sparks colliding at high speeds.

He first used his ears. Following the sounds over the snow, as well as the flow of wind, he could distinguish the clashes and gradually his eyes adjusted. Once that was done, Mujir signaled Loki with his hand.

Loki glanced over at him in the midst of battle, and slowly shifted the location of the fight.

Eventually, the Lefkis finally stepped into Mujir's range, and he wasted no time jumping in. He opened his eyes wide, and with an explosive initial speed he closed in on the Lefkis. It was only for a moment, but it was at super speed.

Mujir's tonfas flew towards the Lefkis's head and leg, the tonfas in his two hands attacking both places at the same time. His top priority was the head where the core was likely to be, as well as the leg to remove its speed. If either attack hit, that would be fine.

At the same time Loki switched over to offense. Both hoped this would put an

end to the battle.

Unfortunately...they didn't quite make it. Of course there was no way Mujir would easily miss the chance he'd been waiting for. The answer lay in the surface of the tonfa he'd quickly brought up to his face. A specific point on it had been heated, burning the surrounding air.

That was a surprise. To think it could counterattack in that moment... Mujir was astonished. It was a technical blow with all of his power behind it. He couldn't believe it had been dodged and he'd taken a counterattack in return. If he hadn't reflexively taken a shorter step and gone on the defensive, that hot horn would have pierced straight through his throat.

Even while battling Loki, the Lefkis remained vigilant against Mujir. That meant that Loki alone couldn't occupy her enemy's full attention.

Mujir's astonishment dulled his movements for a moment, and the balance the two had barely maintained collapsed as a result. Loki, surprised, dodged the Lefkis's thrust aimed at her, losing her footing in the process. Seeing an opening, the Fiend tackled her, sending her body flying.

Since she threw up her arms to protect herself, the damage wasn't that bad, and she landed without further injuring herself. But the attack opened up distance between them, and the Fiend made the first move.

Its horn suddenly started glowing as mana gathered in it. The image of Demis Brionach flashed in Loki's and Mujir's heads. But this attack took much less time to construct.

A ray of light shot out of the horn. It wasn't a long-range attack like before, but a simple one aimed at Loki. The range was only around a dozen meters. By the time she realized that it didn't need a full charge of mana if it wasn't a long-range high power attack, it was already too late.

She never would have made it by dodging normally. A cold chill ran down her back and then...she broke through her own limits. She didn't have time to think about it, using Force to the fullest to get out of the situation as fast as she could.

The Demis Brionach grazed Loki and disappeared into the mountain behind

her. Being a simple version, it didn't have the ability to track her.

After moving several meters in the blink of an eye, Loki fell and rolled onto the snow. She took a deep breath. Once fresh air entered her lungs, the realization that she'd made it out alive finally sunk in.

However, the Lefkis was unconcerned about her feelings and moved to pursue her. As if sensing it needed to be cautious of her, it began its attack on her again. Hoping to crush her skull, it swung down a leg.

She used Force in the nick of time to avoid it, but was drawn into a life-and-death struggle all the same. The recoil of using Force past her limits was bigger than expected and she couldn't use her legs properly.

Loki barely dodged the Lefkis's charge as it attacked her again. Its long hair grazed her chest. As they passed each other, she poured twice as much mana into her knife than usual and threw it, clad in electricity, at the Lefkis.



But the next moment...blood poured out of her chest. “What?!” Loki was shocked, wondering when she’d been injured.

The hair had only lightly touched her chest. Yet each strand was as sharp as a blade and sliced her up. Moreover, they were so sharp she hadn’t even noticed she’d been cut.

Loki held a hand against her chest and rose onto one knee. She still hadn’t recovered from the backlash from Force either. Her thrown knife had already been repelled by the Fiend’s horn. All it achieved was leaving a small scratch on the horn.

!!! Seeing the Lefkis ready to charge again, Loki immediately got to work on constructing a spell. Her body was moving faster than her mind. Her legs not being able to move before this enemy would mean certain death.

She pulled out four knives between her fingers and threw them towards the Fiend. But none of them flew at the Lefkis, instead taking various trajectories.

The Fiend didn’t so much as glance at the knives, as it closed in on Loki.

But that was just what she had planned. *“‹‹Lightning Bind››”* The handles of the four knives sparked, and in an instant lightning connected them into a web of electricity.

Normally the knives would be embedded into walls to anchor the net and capture its target. But here there was nothing to attach to, so it wasn’t fully effective. If anything it was a conditioned reflexive move meant to stall it.

Either the Lefkis saw through the effects of the spell, or knew its resistance would protect it, as it didn’t show any signs of running away. In fact, it leaned forward to lower its horn as if to rip through the web.

The Lightning Bind looked like it was ripped apart. But in the next moment it wrapped around the Lefkis, stalling it for just a moment. The Lefkis seemed surprised and froze for an instant. Shaking its head, it carelessly forgot about the existence of the other Magicmaster.

And in that exact golden moment...Mujir struck. His habit of calmly observing his prey and seizing any opportunity had paid off. He attacked suddenly and

from the Fiend's blind spot, smashing his tonfa into its head at full force.

With unerring aim, Mujir's mana-enhanced tonfa struck the Fiend's vital point, slamming its body headfirst into the ground. In the process his arm brushed against its sharp hair and was lacerated, but he continued on with another attack. Swinging his tonfa around, he drove it into the Lefkis's stomach.

The Fiend groaned, but it wasn't a fatal wound. It forcefully repelled the tonfa, jumping up and away as blood spurted from its wounds.

Loki thought they'd missed their chance, but Mujir calmly continued to observe it. "Hmph, you've been running around as you pleased...but you've finally taken a step back," he said.

She gasped. Indeed, it had stopped. And then it fell back. For the first time, the nimble Lefkis was pressured and was faltering. But it didn't seem like its core had been damaged. And the extent of its self-healing abilities wasn't clear yet.

Nevertheless, they'd gotten a hit in. Loki stood, and confirmed that the many wounds on her chest wouldn't impact her ability to go on. At times like these she was grateful for the special-made military uniform. "I can still fight!" She raised her voice as much as she could, considering her wounds and the aftereffects of Force.

"Understood. We'll finish this in the next attack. From what I can tell, it's reeling. It should be enough to close the gap." Mujir's voice was composed and his tone was certain. He wasn't saying it out of carelessness or pride, but conviction.

Loki got into position to use Force again. Before she knew it, her calves were wet with blood. It was probably from internal bleeding rather than the wounds on her chest. Frankly, her legs were almost at their limits. In addition to increased physical ability, the repeated use of Force could also cause symptoms similar to paralysis of the senses, preventing the user from recognizing their limitations. When they could no longer move their body, they finally understood what state they were in.

Of course Loki wasn't going to repeat her blunder from the Friendship Magical Tournament. She avoided any wasted movements trying to throw her opponent

off and took the shortest route instead.

She closed the distance to the Lefkis and jumped up above it, throwing knives down at it. The knives rained down from the air with incredible force.

But the next moment, a huge amount of snow was kicked up as the Lefkis disappeared from the spot. It had evaded the frightening rain of knives...but not all of them.

!! Loki's eyes focused. Two knives looked like they'd been hit by the horn as they spun around in the air, thrown off from their original trajectory. The knives had come down all over, but two clearly pointed in the direction the Lefkis disappeared in.

It's slowing down. Loki landed, then kicked off the ground again. But she didn't head after the Fiend. Instead she went towards the two knives still spinning in the air, and gave them a good kick to their handles.

The knives were then sent flying like arrows again. They pierced the Lefkis's neck, and the Fiend twitched in pain.

In that moment, the atmosphere around the Lefkis changed. It was a tiny change that might have gone unnoticed if she hadn't been paying close attention. Its center of gravity changed as if it was looking to escape.

The Lefkis was a Fiend with very animalistic characteristics. And Fiends that took in the information of animals—especially carnivores—would occasionally show glimpses of those wild animals' survival instincts. They tended to obey the law of the jungle, so it was only natural that their primitive instincts would lead them to try to avoid death.

But by the time the Lefkis attempted to obey its instincts, the hunter's trap had already closed. Its four legs were sinking into the mud. Mujir's spell, Restriction Marsh, had made the surrounding ground highly viscous. Before long, the Fiend's ankles sank into the mud. The mud coagulated, which made it unable to pull out its feet.

Mujir lowered his tonfa and moved to add the next spell onto Restriction Marsh. Suddenly the mud began to move. It crawled up the Lefkis's legs as if it had a mind of its own. The mud clung to its body, bubbling, like a mollusk

refusing to let go of its prey. As the mud entangled itself around the fur, the Lefkis's body started sinking faster.

The Lefkis drew violent, heaving breaths with its fangs bared, but it shouldn't be able to do anything more.

When Mujir tried to finish it off with a blow from above, he heard a howl. He instinctively controlled the mud, trying to make the Fiend sink down deeper. But before he could... "What?!"

Lightning suddenly struck the Lefkis from above. A bright light filled the surroundings. He suspected the Lefkis had brought lightning down on itself, but both he and Loki were too busy protecting themselves to find out.

More lightning roared, blinding Mujir. At the same time Restriction Marsh was blown away, and the bottomless swamp disappeared.

Normally such a move would be suicidal, but the Lefkis had resistance towards lightning. It was probably a last-ditch effort to take advantage of that property. *So it can even do something like that.*

Mujir didn't have any flashy spells like Sajik. Because he used poison and nature-altering spells, there weren't many he could learn. Even so, he'd spent a long time at Lettie's side in the Outer World, and he did have a trump card or two up his sleeve.

"All that's left is finishing it off, and it still wants to resist, huh." The Fiend's unexpected struggling came as a surprise, but Mujir was still composed. He knew this battle was about to end.

When he'd slammed the tip of his tonfa into the Lefkis, he'd quickly poured a poison into its body that would make the mana within it seize. It was a spell called Medusa's Blood. A Fiend's body was a good conductor for mana and this spell petrified it from within. He'd already injected it into the Lefkis before Loki rained down her knives, and the poison had now fully made its way through the Lefkis's body. As such, it couldn't escape.

"You can't even use those legs of yours." By the time Mujir said that, he was already on the move. Without dropping any speed, he pushed towards the Lefkis, which intercepted him with lightning. But he was a step or two ahead of

it.

He unleashed several tonfa attacks, focused on the Lefkis's horn, in passing. And a moment after he stopped, the horn turned to dust. "Loki, there's no need to hold back."

"All right." When Mujir turned around to say that, Loki had already moved in front of the Lefkis, knife in hand. Her right hand was drawn back, ready to strike at any moment.

The spell she was preparing differed from the usual construction process and the rest of the lightning attribute spells. Even including the deceased, there were only a handful of Magicmasters that could use it. *I see, so she can use the vertex of thunder.* Mujir looked on with admiration.

Loki's mouth moved as she muttered something. The density of electricity increased well beyond what normal lightning attribute spells could achieve. "... May the vertex of tempestuous thunder manifest," she said, thrusting the palm of her hand forward, and then...

Thunder roared. *"‹‹Naruikazuchi››!!"*

The Lefkis howled at Loki, perhaps trying to put up a fight or intimidate her. But the lightning shot down into its mouth. The massive lightning overwhelmed any resistance, and the Lefkis was charred inside and out.

It didn't matter where its core had been. It would've been a different story if it had been unharmed and could dodge, but taking it directly, as well as being hit inside, its resistance simply didn't matter. There was no way to resist the vertex of thunder.

With that, Loki and Mujir were done.

"Good work," Mujir praised Loki, as he got ready to fire up a signal flare.

His words embarrassed her a little. From her point of view she'd only done what she could, which was natural. "No, I couldn't have done it alone."

"That said, it wasn't a good match-up for you." He was being considerate, but that only made her feel uncomfortable. His protecting her pride made it seem like he was treating her like a child. Moreover, she didn't struggle due to a poor

match-up. Even she could tell it was also because her skills weren't up to par.

"In the end, it was your spell that slowed the Lefkis's movements, wasn't it?"

"Well, yeah...but it's not like it's a perfect spell. There are Fiends it doesn't work against too."

"Is it some kind of poison?"

Mujir nodded with a slight smile. It was actually considered impolite to ask Magicmasters about their trump cards. So Loki didn't ask any more questions.

Her chest wounds started hurting worse. When she looked down to check her chest, she blushed a little. Her uniform had torn open from the cuts, and the hole had been expanded from her violent actions. There was a difference in how exposed she was when looking down at it compared with looking at it head on. Realizing that, she understood Mujir's consideration. It was like he was handling an adolescent daughter. And that he'd been doing it without her knowledge made Loki blush even more.

Mujir spoke to her without looking her way. "To think Sajik beat me to the punch... Well, let's send out our own signal."

Loki answered with a small nod. They had noticed Sajik's flare just moments after they defeated the Lefkis.

Before long, Mujir's own signal flare went up. After seeing that through, he realized that the snow still hadn't stopped. It wasn't a fierce storm, but it was gradually piling up as before. *Sajik's signal should mean that he's taken down the Ogma. And the Lefkis is dead too...so I suppose the S-class that Sir Alus and the captain are pinning down is responsible for this snow.*

Thinking about it normally, that would be the case; but he recalled that Alus had been strangely doubtful about it. *Maybe it's not even that S-class that's responsible. Maybe it's an unknown Fiend still hiding in the tunnels. So perhaps Loki and I should look into it*, he thought to himself. *The worst-case scenario would be if there's another Fiend and it's stronger than an S-class.* He wanted to hear Loki's thoughts on the matter, so he turned to her.

Loki was pressing down on her wounds and staring blankly into the distance. Mujir immediately understood what she was doing and what she was looking

at. The vague wave of mana he felt on his skin was from a mana sonar. However, the strange snow should've made detection pointless. So just what was she trying to look at?

He decided not to say anything and simply watched over her. Spotters typically had a keen sense for mana, and the ones that relied on mana sonar were particularly sensitive. He figured she might be tracking something that even a Double Digit like himself couldn't sense.

In fact, Loki had sharpened all of her senses to the point that she felt the cold air with all of her body. She hadn't noticed it in the middle of battling the Lefkis, but now that she was standing in such an elevated place, there was a clear sense that something was off.

The noise from the snow blowing around was terrible on the ground, but was somewhat lessened up here. By connecting different kinds of wavelengths into what went beyond a normal mana sonar, Loki was barely successful in extending the range out.

After she sent out the sonar two or three times, she felt a reaction that caught her attention. That reaction—which was only just within range—greatly shocked her. It was beyond a small mountain.

"Lo-Loki?!" Mujir hurriedly called out to her as she silently started to run. Sensing something urgent in her expression, he quickly gave chase.

Loki had been given some emergency treatment, but her wounds hadn't healed at all. In spite of that she used Force to move from peak to peak at lightning speeds.

Mujir desperately ran after her, just barely able to keep up because the big strain on Loki's legs slowed her down.

But she had a reason for hurrying to that degree.

Fifty-Seventh Chapter

Magic and Magic

One area in Vanalis was filled with smoke and explosions, devoid of any snow. Some snow would fall only to evaporate immediately from the aftermath of spells flying around. This area was enveloped in the heat of battle.

The king of moths, Shem Azah, had once fallen to the ground. But while it hadn't recovered, it now rose up into the sky again.

"So what's the trigger for this arbitrary invocation spell thing?!" Lettie shouted between attacks, with the four huge and eerie stakes still behind her. In order to avoid the Shem Azah's attacks from above, she had no choice but to keep moving. The constant motion was starting to tire her out a little.

"Don't ask me. But, well, if we corner it, I'm sure they'll be activated."

Lettie was exasperated at how Alus was talking like it didn't concern him, but she soon reconsidered her attitude, since it was a spell he didn't really know either. Fiends used many spells that were still a mystery to humanity. *So, worst case, we'll need to destroy the core in a single blow. Still...Allie just doesn't panic, does he?*

She felt his reply was a little too relaxed, but then it wasn't like he was letting his guard down. He probably already had countermeasures in mind in case the worst happened. Lettie was acutely aware of this, but at the same time... "And I'm sure you don't want to use *that* either. I don't know what we'd do if it ran rampant again."

The last time, during the Demi Azur fight, Loki rushing over had created an opportunity to save Alus, but it would take a miracle or two for the same thing to happen again. Alus's special ability was an extremely risky and terrifying power.

"Well, it's not really for me to think about. Besides, I caused you a lot of trouble, so this is where I should be putting work in!" Lettie said, as if to encourage herself, a refreshed smile on her face.

Having Alus nearby was reassuring, and her injured body felt a lot lighter. Maybe it was just her emotions, but it was strange how it affected her mood.

She even felt a little envious of Loki being Alus's partner. It had been a while since she fought while feeling like that.

Thinking back on it, she could only really recall leading a squad in the Outer World. She was always in a position to command and protect others. She hadn't been around someone she could fight with as an equal, or even rely on, for a long time. *Ah...this is pretty comfortable. But I wonder if the fact that I'm thinking of things like this in this situation means I've finally lost it.* Even her inner thoughts were somewhat elated.

Lettie ran across the snow, and as she caught Alus in the corner of her eye, she giggled. "Hee hee." Not even she knew what was so funny exactly, but she decided to push it all into the back of her mind for later.

For the time being, Lettie pulled her arms back and accelerated. In her hands she created bright red fireballs that illuminated her surroundings. The mana naturally flowed into her arms without any resistance. She felt like she could do anything now.

The fireballs gradually grew larger and their fire fiercer. Just before they became too much for her to control, she suddenly changed direction and jumped towards the Shem Azah. With two fireballs large enough to swallow an adult whole at the ready, Lettie put some strength in her arms to swing them, and released the fireballs from her palms.

The massive fireballs flew towards the Shem Azah, growing even bigger on the way. Just in front of it, they overlapped and swallowed each other. That gave them explosive growth, turning them into something like a small sun. Judging from the burning flames, it wasn't the kind of explosive spell that Lettie specialized in. But it was an expert-level fire spell.

Being a fire attribute spell, it was only natural that Lettie would be able to use it, but even Alus could count on a single hand the number of times he'd seen her use pure fire spells. "I see you still love to keep it flashy," he said with a smile. He could tell that she was enjoying weaving her spells much more than during the first encounter with the Shem Azah.

Aside from knowledge and technique, a person's mental state also played a big part in casting spells, which was why a person's preferences and mood

couldn’t be ignored. But from what Alus could tell, creating an expert-level spell of this scale required more than just aptitude. Be it talent or mood... *Impressive, but...* Alus thought to himself, and frowned.

Their current situation was complicated and difficult. That spell most likely wouldn’t be enough to defeat the Shem Azah. The arbitrary invocation spell was eerie, and its trigger was still unknown. Rather than carelessly injuring the Fiend, it was better to put it into a situation where they could finish it off without fail.

That was one of the reasons why he’d held Lettie back from pursuing it before. But he wasn’t certain how to go about killing it. Alus still hadn’t reached an answer. Even so, the battle needed to continue to keep the Shem Azah’s attention on them.

But there is something I don’t understand... Alus hadn’t seen the Shem Azah use an ice attribute spell even once. There were times when high-classed Fiends specialized in specific attributes, but it was typically possible for them to use multiple attributes.

The environment-altering spell causing the snow definitely belonged to the ice attribute, and it was a very high level spell at that. As with Alus’s Muspelheim, spells like that ate up a lot of time and mana as the composition and information needed to be rewritten sequentially.

But it didn’t make sense to go that far just to interfere with magic. In fact, if the Shem Azah was that skilled at ice magic it would be actively using it. Yet the Fiend showed no signs of that.

Moreover, the Shem Azah had lost a leg to Cocytus. If a Fiend like that could use the ice attribute, it would have been able to do something to avoid losing its leg.

Alus glanced over at the Shem Azah. Right now it was blowing away Lettie’s fireball with a flap of its wings.

He helped out from time to time, but he never stopped observing the stakes in the ground. The strange and eerie pulsation that had been unaffected by his Niflheim was still there. It seemed to resemble the beating of a heart. *It’s probably fine, but I need to watch out for Demis Brionach too.*

Just in case, Alus constantly maintained a certain distance from Lettie. *Maybe I'll try using water magic*, he thought, deciding to use an attribute he wasn't particularly skilled in. The rings on his AWR contained formulas for all attributes, but he rarely used water spells.

The accuracy of each attribute depended on the user's affinity. There were attributes that were hard to use without an affinity and water was one of them. Even for Alus, who could use all the attributes, it was a particularly inefficient attribute. "Which to use..." he pondered out loud. A half-baked spell wasn't going to be worth trying.

In the next moment, Alus and Lettie sensed the two signal flares sent up into the air. The Ogma and Lefkis had been defeated.

Which means the Shem Azah is responsible for the snow. As such, Alus felt a stronger need to confirm his suspicions. After launching a mana signal Lettie's way, he focused his attention. *I just need to draw out the ice attribute from this thing's hand of cards, and that'll be all the proof I need.*

Alus sharply exhaled, and swiftly moved from spell construction to manifestation. A pool of water formed above the Fiend. Soon it was like an invisible tank burst as the water started flooding out from one point, creating a sphere. The amount of water alone was enough to submerge a small village.

He took his mind off the spell. And the next moment the massive sphere of water started falling down on the Fiend.

Great Cascade. It was similar to an expert-level taboo spell that caused a massive flood. However, this was a simplified spell reducing the amount of mana used to create the water, which weakened it considerably. Even so, it was a huge amount of water. Bullets of water scattered and shot towards their target. If they all hit, that would be fine, but if it tried to dodge...

"Got you." If one wanted to counteract a water spell like that, the easiest way was to freeze it with the ice attribute. Of course there were other methods of dealing with it, but if the Shem Azah could use ice magic, it would be strange for it not to rely on it.

!!! The countless water bullets were stopped by an invisible wall and froze before shattering above the Fiend. The way they turned into a fine mist and

disappeared had a fantastical beauty to it.

But the sight felt very off to Alus. In reality, it was a strange phenomenon. The spell had been frozen like he'd expected, but it was difficult to judge who had cast the spell. It would be natural to assume that the Shem Azah had used a spell to protect itself, and even Lettie wasn't questioning it.

However, in that moment... *The snow stopped.* Alus unconsciously readied himself to cast a spell before he could even think. He still had his doubts, but he wouldn't overlook such a golden opportunity.

"Allie!" Alus nodded at Lettie's urgent tone, and they moved to finish off the enemy in one fell swoop.

Two Single Digit Magicmasters preparing spells made for a blast of mana that filled their surroundings. Any weak Fiend would cower in fear from that alone and be rooted to the spot. The same applied for Magicmasters too.

A Single's power was similar to going beyond human knowledge. The monstrous amount of mana threatened to swallow up the entire area. Alus's ominous mana had a seemingly endless amount of darkness and intent to kill. Lettie's dazzling mana shone bright, colored by her strong will.

However, in the next second, the two felt a massive wide-area spell activating that covered even the area where they were. It was a blatant reaction of mana that stretched over a kilometer radius, as if Vanalis itself was spitting out magic.

The pressure Alus felt forced him to cancel the spell he was casting. "Lettie!" He ran to Lettie as fast as he could. They only had seconds to spare. As the unidentified spell's presence grew stronger, he reached out with his hand.

Lettie's spell had been dispelled from her own surprise and shock. She twisted her head and looked at Alus with a fearful expression. Not only was she surprised, but she was also astonished by the unbelievable phenomenon happening to her. "Allie, I can't... I can't move my body at all!"

"Reach out with your hand!"

"I-I can't!" She tried to reach out to Alus, but her body refused to budge like she'd been deprived of all freedom. That paralysis only confused her even more. She'd always remained conscious of the mana inside of her so that there

wouldn’t be any interference.

The Shem Azah stared down at them from above as if mocking them. Alus kept reaching out, but he was convinced he wouldn’t reach her at the rate he was going. Even so, he needed to get as close as possible.

Then a part of Vanalis’s ground rose up as if being pushed by something below. A moment later, a powerful wind blew from the bottom of the earth and everything turned to dust. Mud, snow, wood chips, and stone fragments were hurled up into the sky. It was like their surroundings were thrown into a blender. Everything was pulverized as the terrible wind howled.

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“...? Wh-Where am I...?” Lettie opened her eyes and hurriedly looked around.

She was near the peak of a high mountain. The terrain was hard and craggy, the air thin. She could see snow-capped peaks in the distance.

The slanted footing made Lettie lose her balance. The piled-up snow was the same as the snow field where they’d fought the Shem Azah, but that was the only similar thing.

After a moment of confusion, she noticed a strange device nearby and let out a gasp. It was a pole covered in a translucent, white material with complex machinery inside. It was the portable Circle Port that she’d had Alus check out yesterday.

“That was a close one. Any later and we would’ve been toast.”

Lettie turned in answer to the familiar voice next to her. “Um, does that mean we teleported from there?”

Alus nodded.

But why had the device left in their base been moved over here? The reason was that Alus had asked the unit that remained at the base to carry it outside to the top of the mountain near the base just in case.

The Shem Azah was visible in the distance. But despite the distance, they were still in range of being detected.

“Phew, I’m glad you managed to move somewhat at the end. So how’s your

body holding up?”

“That’s true. It feels fine.” For some reason, Lettie pulled at her shirt and looked inside her clothing before saying “It looks fine too,” but it was too much of a pain for Alus to quip about it.

“You seem to be in a good mood for someone who almost died.”

“Well, I knew I wouldn’t die.” Lettie smiled like Alus had said something strange. From the look of it, she seemed a little thrilled to have been caught up in a spell of that scale, or it could just be that she trusted Alus that much.

“In exchange, it was destroyed in a single transfer,” Alus said, pointing at the Circle Port with his thumb. Important-looking parts were spewing white smoke. It was obviously broken.

“Good work,” Lettie said to the machine.

Alus had created the theory that formed the basis of the Circle Port, as well as designed its foundation, so he could certainly use it as an emergency escape device. Of course, he hadn’t planned on using it while it was still snowing because he couldn’t tell what kind of problems that might cause. Fortunately, the snow had stopped in that moment.

Strictly speaking, he’d used the transfer destination of Shuffle, restricted it to one direction, and set the copied coordinates for the Circle Port. Normally, two devices were necessary to make use of the Circle Port. This time though, Alus was responsible for the transmission part, making the transfer possible. The theory behind the Circle Port had been a by-product of learning Shuffle. They both used similar magic formulas, so it was a drastic move only Alus could pull off.

Even so, the sudden transfer of two people proved to be too much for the device. If possible, he would’ve preferred to directly touch Lettie to make the duplication of information easier, but he’d had to settle for just safely transporting them at all.

That finally convinced Lettie, but then a thought occurred to her. “Anyways...it was that, Allie. The pattern on the wings.”

“Hm?” Alus grunted, urging her to continue.

“You know, that eye-like pattern. I looked at it just before, and immediately afterwards I couldn’t move my body. Now that I think about it, Mujir can use a similar spell.”

“Magic that’s applied through vision... Maybe it’s like a form of hypnosis. The pattern itself could be a magic formula. But I looked at that eye too. I don’t get why it wouldn’t use that before now.” They’d cornered the Shem Azah once, so if it had a trump card like that, it wouldn’t have been strange for it to use it against Alus back then. That said, he didn’t understand how a Fiend’s mind worked. “Well, casting a spell through sight would come with a lot of restrictions.”

Rinne’s Magic Eye was probably similar. Its effect was influenced by whether whoever she was looking at had noticed her. The effect that had frozen Lettie’s body probably worked in a similar way.

“Is there no way to counter it? Getting hit by that in the middle of battle is bad news.”

“It won’t work perfectly, but you should make your flow of mana completely autonomous so there’s no room for outside interference.”

“What?! You’re the only one who can do that.”

“Hm? You can’t do it?”

“Quit playing around at a time like this.”

Alus didn’t want to hear that from her, but since he wouldn’t get anywhere by pointing that out, he grudgingly continued to think about it. It seemed that instead of interfering with the body directly, the spell worked by interfering with the target’s mana.

He could think of two possibilities. The first was interference with the Magicmaster’s mana control and freezing the flow of mana. The other was based on looking at the pattern as a requirement, which then affected the subconscious. In other words, a kind of self-suggestion.

Lettie definitely would have noticed any interference with her mana. Considering the panicked look on her face back then, it was probably the latter. “It’s not like the eyes of a mythological monster, but the best option would be

to not look at it. Close your eyes and rely on your mana to confirm your target's location. Anyway, the snow stopping is convenient. I want to get this over with."

"What was with that spell anyway? It's worse than an S-class. That spell was crazy dangerous."

"That was the ultimate-level wind spell Kehenage...probably." Alus leaned forward and looked down at the scenery below them, confirming the spell's magnitude. The area where they fought had completely changed. All the snow was gone, leaving behind only a crater filled with mud, with not a single tree near it. Instead of snow there was now dust and sand, as well as wood and stone still raining down.

The time between the Shem Azah casting the spell and the spell manifesting was too short. And yet it brought about so much destruction. It was enough to kill most people easily.

"I can understand why it was never completed." Even the basics of the formula had never been disclosed. Or rather, Alus recalled that the magic formula had been left unfinished. It was one of the spells that had been developed during the transition between the past and the present. That was the time when many taboo spells had been born, and it had been canceled around the same time.

Alus, who was deeply involved in the development of magic, and who had access to the military's classified materials, was probably the only one who knew how many spells were canceled halfway through their development. *This is just indiscriminate destruction.* Fine control was impossible, and the damage it caused was too great. In that sense it was a weapon of mass destruction.

Spells that were designated as taboo were often too lethal, or had a negative impact on the future of humanity. Of course, spells that were that lethal were originally used by Fiends and were meant to kill. In that sense, Fiends could already use taboo spells, and they were often ahead of the curve in that regard.

Moreover, Alus noted that the four stakes pierced into the ground had been reduced to three. *It's possible that the trigger is automatically pulled when the Fiend is in danger.* Even if the Fiend wasn't brought to the brink of life or death,

if it felt that its life was in danger that could be the condition to trigger it, though it was still uncertain if Fiends had that kind of biological reaction. Most scholars on the subject denied it. Even so, Alus explained as much to Lettie.

It was unclear if she was actually listening, as she intently stared down at the Shem Azah's shadow. "Look at it searching." The Fiend wasn't making any major moves, but Lettie's gaze was piercing.

"Sounds like you have an idea."

"I have a few, but they'd be hard to pull off on my own." Lettie had a pensive look on her face. Despite her brave words, she glanced over at Alus like she was counting on him.

"In the worst case I'll finish it off, but you won't be able to use Kagutsuchi."

Speaking of aces up Lettie's sleeve, the first that came to mind was directly branding the enemy with the fire spell Kagutsuchi. But the conditions were so severe that successfully using it against an S-class Fiend was extremely difficult. Not only would it be hard to restrain it until the spell was constructed, but the brand would be different depending on the size and type of the target.

But most of all, applying the brand required being up close. Not to mention that the brand itself had almost no effect, so Lettie would be defenseless while she applied it. That would be very unrealistic in the current situation. "I don't want to get close to that thing either. Especially not to slowly apply a magic brand, you know."

"Knowing you, you still might try it," Alus said dryly.

"Even I know when and where to use it. It's fine. I'll finish it off with my special move. So if I need your backup, I'll ask for it separately each time. But it'll be a crapshoot."

"..." Frankly, Lettie's words left Alus feeling uneasy, but he'd given a lot of vague instructions based on predictions himself, as well as made last-minute changes to the plans, so he wasn't one to talk.

He also dreaded the thought of what would happen after this. The two might be high up, but it wasn't an area suitable for hiding. The Shem Azah was only searching the snow field since they'd suddenly disappeared, but it was only a

matter of time before they were found. “Whatever. It’ll probably be a crapshoot for both of us anyway. We’ll need to finish this before it goes after the rest of the squad.”

Lettie looked at him with a puzzled expression. “For both of us? Whatcha mean?”

“The Kehenage. One of them activated just now, but there’s still three more of those stakes left and they’re like big unexploded bombs. I have a countermeasure in mind, but I can’t tell how effective it’ll be.”

“Hmm... But we can’t keep hiding here, can we?”

“Yeah, this is bad. If it loses its patience and goes after the rest of the squad, there’s not going to be much we can do.”

“...” Lettie fell silent. She stared at Alus for a moment. “But Allie, you do have a countermeasure, right? Even if it’s not certain...”

“More or less, yes.”

She smiled broadly at Alus’s stern expression. “Then it’s simple. I just have to believe in you. Besides, I can imagine all the complaints I’ll hear if that thing goes after my idiots because I did nothing.”

“That’s true. I’ve gotten tired of hiding here too.”

Lettie was a little relieved to hear his casual banter again. “What a coincidence. I’m not one to draw out a fight either.”

“I bet... Hey?!”

“Well, I’m going first.” She took off running before Alus could stop her, going down the sloped ground. “Sorry, Allie... But I can’t stand losing anyone else because I’m no good!”

Somewhat exasperated, Alus ran after her. But there was a bittersweet feeling in his chest. Sure, it was reckless and simplistic, but that was just how Lettie was. She believed in Alus and wouldn’t hesitate to throw her life away to protect her allies.

That said, Alus had no intention of letting her throw her life away in the first place. *I forgot she was such a handful... This is what I get for casually agreeing*

to help. Either way, if she dies here, the mission will get pushed onto me.

"Let's start with an ambush! Allie, knock it down!" Lettie pointed at the Shem Azah.

Alus's cheek twitched at her easily requesting something like that, and he grabbed Night Mist. He would have loved to say it was impossible, but frustratingly enough, several ideas came to mind right away.

"I guess I'll go with speed." He pulled Night Mist's chain out longer than usual. The ring that appeared in front of his face began faintly glowing.

Lettie sensed the immense wind generating around Alus. Running forward, she looked up. The thick clouds burst apart as a mass of wind shot down like a giant cannonball. "Downburst, huh. Do you think that'll bring it down?"

"If it doesn't, then I'll just fire off one more."

Before long, the burst of wind slammed down on the Fiend's back. The Shem Azah's posture was thrown off as it was suddenly burdened by an invisible weight. Downburst was a strong enough spell to crumple the ground itself when focused on a single point. However, a single application wasn't enough to bring the Fiend down to the ground. Flapping its wings, the Shem Azah put up a fight against the weight on its back.

But that level of resistance was pointless. Alus applied the spell again and again, increasing the weight, pushing the Shem Azah down.

"Great work!"

Alus watched intently as the Fiend was unable to hold on any longer, and fell to the ground just as Lettie had requested. *Well, I did what you wanted.* He wasn't sure about Lettie's plan, but at least he'd get to see what she would do next. This would be the first time Alus witnessed the true depths of Lettie's power on this mission.

The Shem Azah's massive body slammed onto the ground with a roar. In the blink of an eye, flames burst up into its abdomen that was on the ground, which then exploded, a trick not possible when the snow was still around. The next moment, the king of moths was wrapped in fire and smoke.

Claymore, huh. Hidden and timed perfectly. He was a little surprised by her impressive skills. It wouldn't have gone that easily if she hadn't predicted where the Shem Azah would land when it began falling, and planted the spell in the ground.

The spell was a landmine that relied on being planted into the ground and going undetected. From the look of it, Lettie's goal wasn't only to deal non-lethal damage, but also to hit its wings. The blazing flames spread to the wings and set them alight. It looked like it would be tough to burn them completely, but it was enough to damage the patterns.

The eye-like pattern on the forewings was a kind of magic formula in their entirety. It was what had caused the petrification of Alus's fire dragon as well as Lettie's body freezing up. But with the wings being damaged like this, part of the magic formula was too. It wouldn't be able to use that power again for a while.

That said, carelessly dealing too much damage might trigger the pulsating stakes. If the Kehenage activated again, they wouldn't make it out in one piece. *For the time being...* Alus got to work on the countermeasure for the Kehenage that he'd hinted about before.

Like he'd experienced with Niflheim, interfering with the pulsating stakes from the outside wouldn't cause them to cease to function. Not even Niflheim with its ability to create a world of ice could do that. Alus's working assumption was that the black stakes were made up of two attributes: the earth attribute on the outside as a protective layer and the wind attribute spell Kehenage on the inside.

Even with his wealth of knowledge, Alus was unsure whether this countermeasure would work. It was the best method he could think of at the moment. But he couldn't guarantee that it would be effective here, so there was still some risk.

Alus concluded that he had to take his chances with it. "Lettie, keep it busy for a while."

In response, Lettie flexed her arms and made fists, grinning. "You got it! Also, I'll show you something cool in a moment."

They were meaningful words coming from Lettie, but dealing with the stakes came first. Before the Claymore pushed the Shem Azah past its limits, Alus rushed to the stakes. If he misjudged the Fiend's limits he would get caught up in the Kehenage, not that distance mattered much with that spell. He ran like he was flying and arrived at his destination in no time at all.

In front of him were the three black stakes driven into the ground. Looking at them like that, they felt very ominous to Alus. Despite being carbonized, their surfaces were strangely smooth. Their bark was completely unnatural. The Kehenage's activation device pulsed to show that it was still alive, and the time for activation seemed to be coming ever closer.

Alus glanced back at the Shem Azah. Explosions from Lettie's Claymore spells were still taking place. The Shem Azah wriggled its body, but its magic resistance was working against the spells. Only its wings were burning. The rest of its body hadn't taken fatal damage.

Meanwhile, Lettie's mana wasn't unlimited. She couldn't keep up her attack while burning the Fiend's wings and stalling it forever. The Claymores she'd planted were already running out. When that happened, she would have to face the Shem Azah alone, and would need to run around to avoid directly confronting it.

I guess she'll last another ten, fifteen minutes. Alus took a deep breath and sharpened his senses. He covered his hands with a bare minimum of mana, neither casting a spell nor creating a mana blade. Narrowing his aim down to the center stake, he put both hands on the eerie bark.

When he touched it, he could tell it had some kind of elasticity to it that pushed his hands back. A faint smile appeared on his face as he closed his eyes. *Just as expected. It's a composition of two spells.*

Right now he was trying to neutralize the Kehenage. In other words, he was trying to overwrite the spell. The process of composing spells should be the same for both humans and Fiends. If so, then the same should be true for setting coordinates, designating power, durability, directionality, shape, and more.

However, Alus was probably the first Magicmaster to try and tamper with the

internal construction of a Fiend's spell. If it was even possible to perfectly analyze the spells Fiends used, modern magic would probably look very different today. Humans had been searching for ways to fight Fiends for half a century, but still hadn't found a complete solution.

It's pretty loose, but as long as I can understand the spell in broad strokes, then it should be easy to figure out where to make changes. Normal magic, the kind used by humans, was easy to figure out. But he couldn't tell to what extent existing knowledge would help with a Fiend's spell.

He carefully started pouring his mana into the bark. Instead of interfering, he was trying to synchronize with it. Being able to read spells was the ultimate in mana control. Alus was able to use his field of view to recreate the structure in his head. He'd practiced mana control to restrain Gra Eater, and his goal was now to take control of the spell.

That's why he could tell that rewriting the spell was risky business and should be avoided. If there was even a single loose thread it might unfurl the entire spell, causing it to run out of control and mutate, which could lead to even more damage.

Incidentally, Alus didn't think he could completely dismantle a spell of Kehenage's level. Similar to a bomb, he was trying to stop the fuse so it didn't activate, as opposed to neutralizing the bomb's contents.

However... "!!!" As he came into direct contact with the spell, Alus opened his eyes wide. *This is completely different from any spells I know! Shit!*

There was no theoretical formula and no information connected to it. Spells created by humans were established through engineering. Creating a spell was like piecing together a massive puzzle. But there was no single connection in this spell, no steps that made up a single picture. It was more like the caster just willed it into existence. It was a supernatural power that ignored logic and theory. It was too much to handle. Everything was too abnormal.

An unusual amount of cold sweat ran down Alus's back. "Then why do Lost Spells exist!" Ancient letters known as Lost Spells were said to be the origin of humanity's spells. With them, even humans could use magic. They were a form of guidelines, believed to have been derived from deciphered Fiend spells, but

any evidence of that would've dated from before humanity's chaotic period and was therefore lost to time.

The reason Fiends could use magic better than humans was probably because the source of Lost Spells was included in their formulas. It was likely something as strange as hieroglyphs.

Alus sharpened his senses further, diving deep into the sea of information, even if it frayed his nerves. *No, the origin of Lost Spells, their source, exists somewhere. I just can't perceive it.* The sea of chaos chose who could see it. Those with limited vision would go mad. It wasn't a place humanity should enter. It was more like a divine or demonic realm.

Even with his knowledge, Alus was far from grasping everything, though he was probably the first human to access this information. When he perceived it, he felt his brain rapidly activating. It was like he was being bombarded with enough information to last a lifetime. Pain surged through his head like his brain was frying. A fantastical light flickered in his retinas and it felt like sparks were flying around in his eyes.

It was a place where the roots of the world and the soul lay, a place that a mere human's intellect would never reach. Indeed, it was almost as if it was... "The Akashic Records..." Alus blurted out.

His voice felt like it belonged to someone else, like his mind had been taken over by something and the electrons in his brain had fired off on their own to move his mouth. However, before he was about to be swallowed by the unknown, the presence of a jet-black glutton stirred inside him, bringing his consciousness back.

"I see. I was able to access it just a little." A look of satisfaction appeared on his face. He'd understood a portion of the Fiends' magic. It was just for a moment, and he couldn't reach the same place again. Even so, he had ever so briefly touched upon it.

Composition or construction has nothing on completed magic. It even has a sort of beauty to it. To think there's no excess information whatsoever, it's truly monstrous...and pathetic.

Human magic always contained noise in the form of emotions. In a sense, it

was an incomplete product that tried to approach perfection but could never reach it. When Alus sensed that, he stopped trying to interfere with the spell directly. He didn't give up. He just changed his approach. No matter how perfect the Fiends' magic was, humans could create magical theories that imitated their instincts. That, of course, meant they had something in common.

The Kehenage was set up to be remotely triggered. Then the Shem Azah must be holding the trigger or the end of the fuse.

All three are still connected, aren't they? Alus searched for magic in a world that was completely different from the one humans experienced. Digging deeper and deeper, he looked for a construct that matched something in his knowledge.

In order for a spell to be connected to a caster from a distance, some form of communication that transcended space was mandatory. The key was mana. Alus's attribute-less power, together with his observant eyes backed by his outstanding mana control, meant he wouldn't overlook it.

Suddenly, the edges of his lips curled up. It seemed there was indeed an unnecessary circuit in the construct for the three stakes. The reason he saw it as unnecessary was because of conditions similar to the magic that humans used.

But he was only able to notice it after touching the stake. Normally it would have slipped by unnoticed, as something humans couldn't understand. Deciphering it and understanding it would take longer than all of human history.

No matter, I'll be able to cut the link to the Kehenage now. Alus employed magic in his mind to act as virtual fingers. Amid a dimly glowing light, they moved like a pianist's delicate fingers to skillfully unravel the three eerily intertwined threads that pulsed like veins. The circuit was finally cut.

Taking a deep breath, he opened his eyes with a clear mind. It felt truly refreshing, like all of the noise in his brain had been removed. At the same time he could instantly think of multiple things in parallel. For just that moment, he felt like his senses were perfectly clear.

Yet his eyes widened again at the unthinkable scene before him. The stake in front of him was still pulsating.

He should have completely disconnected the circuit from the construct, removing the Shem Azah's control of it. But it wasn't only pulsating. Tension washed over him as he saw the stake had begun to glow in a sinister light. It was the same color as when the Kehenage had activated.

Looking over, he could see the other two stakes glowing the same way, like they were resonating with the first. *I see. It's perfect. What a well thought-out spell.*

The giant stakes resembled time bombs laced with elaborate traps. When he cut the circuit, another mechanism kicked in. The link being cut was probably another trigger for the spell to activate.

The worst-case scenario in his mind was happening. In response, Alus slowly closed his eyes. Gra Eater, which constantly threatened to run out of control, appeared as his final trump card. *Three stakes' worth of mana, huh... It's unclear if it can fit inside the vessel, but too late for that now.*

Considering the risk for rampage, it was a dangerous choice. While Alus had his misgivings, he noticed something odd. Gra Eater was always struggling and putting up a fight even under his control, but this time it was being strangely cooperative. In fact, it was even showing unexpected movements.

This is my first time seeing this. Gra Eater opened its eerie mouth and bared its dark-colored fangs at the stakes as if trying to intimidate them. It wasn't predatory instinct at play, but rather fighting spirit and hostility. To Alus it looked like it was trying to counter a threat with a will of its own. Whether it was enough to call it consciousness was questionable, but Gra Eater seemed to have developed a sense for danger, when before it only had basic predatory instincts.

He hesitated for a moment but quickly got back into it. *I'm not sure what's happening...but I have no choice but to do this.*

His shoulders slumped down as he turned his consciousness in on himself. Like always, he felt his vessel turning incredibly vague. He always felt like he was diving down deep into the sea of a different world that went beyond theory and reality. It was similar to paying complete attention to every little movement to do something as natural as moving your arm or finger. After all, *that* was

without a doubt a foreign body with a grotesque form, but even as such he needed to control it like it was part of his body.

He plunged half of his consciousness into the dark abyss. Then he raised his arm...and spoke its name. *“‹‹Gra Eater››”*

Eight twisted, jet-black forms of mana gathered around Alus in an odd shape. They then rushed like mad at the stakes that were about to release their spells.

Any onlookers might have thought that the black mana moved like a snake, while others might describe it as a naga dragon. However, it was something fundamentally different from a living being. It was a predator’s pure instincts given form. As if embodying that, Gra Eater was nothing but a mouth to eat its prey.

Opening its giant mouth wide, it continuously spewed out black mana. The vomited mana formed a mouth of its own, and the cycle continued infinitely like a nesting doll as it approached its prey.

Gra Eater swarmed to its food at unbelievable speeds. Perhaps sensing the approach of the violent black mana, the stakes emitted an eerie glow and burst open at once.

Alus manipulated his black mana like a whip. He couldn’t tell if the Kehenage had activated or not, but considering the amount of mana flowing into him it must have, and three at that. However, unlike when he’d come into direct contact with the knowledge within the Fiend’s magic, the information in what he absorbed was too rough to distinguish.

A moment later Alus stood alone with only a violent wind rampaging around him. He let out a long sigh and confirmed the state he was in. The absorbed mana far exceeded his expectation, but it managed to stay within his vessel. But he did feel a sort of pressure.

Meanwhile, the three stakes were sucked dry and returned to mana particles. Alus, though, was deep within his own mind, ignoring all of that.

After his battle with Demi Azur, Alus’s vessel for storing mana had increased twofold. Moreover, Gra Eater was easier to control than before, which was why he was very aware of the mana he’d absorbed. Maybe he was being overly

cautious, but he wasn't going to repeat the same mistake.

Once he'd confirmed it had been completely absorbed, he swung his arm towards the Shem Azah. As a result of the repeated Claymores, the Shem Azah had been thrown back up into the air.

Its wings were badly burned, the patterning on them mostly gone, but the Shem Azah flapped them in hopes of flying. But it wasn't enough, and it needed to support itself with wind magic just to stay afloat.

Alus concluded that now was the time to counterattack. There was no longer any need to concern himself with the mana necessary for his assault. And with the greatest threat already neutralized, he had nothing to worry about.

Thinking back on it, this was the first time in a long while that he'd struggled against a mere S-class. He'd been forced to brace himself for death in battle against powerful Fiends, but that was all in the past. Now, he truly had the power to stand at the top of all Magicmasters.

Just as he began constructing his spell to finish off the Fiend, he heard a clear voice chanting.

"Blocked by thirty-five lattices, O hellfires of rejection confined within an infinite hallway. The critical point is there, the edge of light is there, leave not even dust behind. Guide it all to the end of life..."

"...!!" Alus sharply reacted to Lettie's unfamiliar incantation. Before he could even decipher the meaning of it, he searched his brain for the magic formula using the Lost Spell it contained to predict the magic he could expect from Lettie. But there were no matches in his head.

The more her incantation progressed, the worse his goose bumps got. That said, there was no reason for him to cancel his own spell. For the time being, Alus manifested his spell filled with vast amounts of mana before Lettie could finish her own.

The sound of ringing chains could be heard, as two appeared in front of the Shem Azah and another two appeared behind it, hanging down from the sky above. Though made from magic, the chains were unusually thick and could be mistaken for real solid objects.

Just as the Shem Azah seemed to recognize the chains, they were pulled up with great force. As the chains were pulled up, something fell down, cutting through the sky.

It was a set of four crescent-shaped blades. It looked like a guillotine made for Fiends. Each blade precisely cut off one of the Shem Azah's wings at its base, then fell to the ground and disappeared. The chains, having completed their own job, also disappeared, leaving large amounts of mana remnants behind.

In place of the disappeared blades was a flood of blood. Having no wings, the Shem Azah lost its balance and let out a strange, deafening sound. As it fell, it used wind magic to keep itself from crashing into the ground.

The next moment, Alus felt an immense pressure and looked over his shoulder. There he could see Lettie finally completing the mystical spell she'd been casting.

A translucent sphere spread out to envelop the Shem Azah's body. The surface was covered in an enormous number of Lost Spells.

Lettie thrust out her hands, and the bracelet-type AWRs on her arms started glowing. She wasn't using her rings as usual, and moreover, she was using two AWRs at once.

However, her expression was neither hateful nor bitter. She looked terribly sorrowful, and at the same time like a realization had dawned on her. Like she'd finally reached her goal after a long period of wandering... In other words, it was a mixture of joy and sadness.

As those thoughts ran through Alus's mind, the translucent membrane gradually shrank. It looked like it finally got absorbed into the Fiend's body and disappeared, but if one strained their eyes, a bright light could be seen leaking out from its skin. Indeed, it wasn't shrinkage, but condensation. Unlike the red dots of Lettie's Detonation, this spell emitted a blue light.

"Don't tell me—!"

Before Alus could make a move, Lettie put the finishing touches on her spell and quietly spoke its name. "Blue Star... *‹‹M2-Polaris››*"

The blue light reached its limits and explosively expanded. Without any

smoke, blue flames spread over a wide area that included the Shem Azah.

The blue flames that burned the clouds and swallowed mountains first erased sound from the world. Next, it dyed the landscape blue. Then a blast wave swept everything away.

Alus could see blue flames covering the sky in a spherical shape. *A mana explosion... No, all unnecessary information has been removed from it, leaving only pure mana energy. Did she reconstruct the spell and accumulate all of this at once?!*

M2-Polaris was one of the spells that Alus and Lettie had jointly come up with the basic theory for when they were looking at ways to improve Detonation. However, they'd stopped developing it because there were supposedly no techniques for accumulating pure energy from the mana in the air. Even Alus had given up on it, as it was extremely difficult to pull off in the Outer World.

Those bracelets are responsible for this! They must have made the normally impossible act possible. This was definitely the cool thing she had mentioned.

For now, he ran towards Lettie. Did she really understand what kind of aftermath would result from this? It was a spell that would continue on even after reducing all to nothing. No, even if she could do something about it, it was still too dangerous from his point of view. He had started running because he feared Lettie might be releasing it with the intent of going down with it.

The novel idea of reusing mana residue was proof that Lettie had made modifications to the basic theory Alus knew about. His primary concern had been resolved with a single bracelet. There was indeed a large amount of mana lingering around the Shem Azah after Alus's spell, and Lettie had taken advantage of that.

However, the power of her spell was so high that the aftermath would be devastating. A normal person caught up in it would be blown apart.

Clicking his tongue, Alus continued running.

"...! Al...lie..."

Alus slid in front of her, not even having enough time to respond to her voice. He bit his lip, repressing the irritation welling up inside.

Behind him was Lettie pouring everything into her AWRs. Thanks to that the blue flames shrunk just a little. Even so, it was an ebb and flow situation. Lettie weakened the impact and kept it from growing any larger, but she clearly couldn't restrain it.

The mana formula isn't converging properly. Alus narrowed his eyes and assessed the situation. It was a spell he hadn't expected, but having noted the characteristics of that bracelet-type AWR before, he could guess the cause to some extent.

Lettie wasn't able to extinguish the flames faster than they were spreading. Moreover, unlike a simple explosive spell like Detonation, the blue flames defied her intentions and expanded as they spiraled.

Alus finished his analysis in the blink of an eye. He was convinced their current situation would collapse eventually. Lettie probably wouldn't make it. For starters, her AWRs' performance wasn't good enough to contain the spell.

Even so she wasn't giving up, and that paid off. She might have reacted a little late, but it was enough for Alus to weave a spell strong enough to counteract the situation. He had more than enough mana for it, even considering the amount he'd used against the Shem Azah.

He couldn't converge the formula that Lettie had released, but he did have a way to counteract the phenomenon of combustion. It was a method he could use while Lettie's control was clashing with the spell. It rewound the structure itself, even the causation of events, and returned all phenomena to their original states. It was a spell that could even make spells about to manifest return to fundamental mana information.

"‹‹Temple Fall››" Up in the air, above the vortex of blue flames, was a vast composite magic circle containing the highest-level formulas of all six attributes. Everything under its influence had its coordinates fixed and even time itself was stopped. The lamentation of all of creation shook the air, and everything began to return to the primordial void.

Once the spell that disintegrated all compositions activated, there was no longer any need for Lettie. All magical existences under its influence were fated to go back in time and ultimately revert into nothing but mana information.

M2-Polaris was no exception. The blue light gradually dimmed and dissolved into pure mana information. Soon it all faded away, leaving only a pale light, as if it had only been an illusion.

Only a large hole was left in the ground. It was unfathomably deep and filled only with darkness. Temple Fall had drilled way down into Vanalis.

Alus took a deep breath and looked around. The clash between Lettie's M2-Polaris and his own Temple Fall left a massive scar on the land.

"That's my first time seeing that spell," Lettie casually said, as she tried to catch her breath. But her complexion was far from good. As to be expected from a Single Digit Magicmaster though, she could still move. If she'd been so exhausted she couldn't even move, then it would have been more worthwhile to swoop in and save her. For some reason, the fact that she still had energy left in her annoyed Alus somewhat.

"It's only the second time I've used it at all."

"Phew, well, it really saved my bacon this time."

"Were you relying on me from the start?" Alus was completely exasperated by her unabashed attitude.

"Well, if you weren't here I wouldn't have used it. But I wanted to finish it with a bang, ya know...for my dead comrades," she finished with moist eyes and a sorrowful tone.

Hearing that, Alus held his tongue. Her attitude might've been an act, but she was telling the truth about her feelings. It was easy for him to tell she was hesitant to say what she was thinking. To Lettie, the blue flames may have been her way of mourning her fallen comrades, though it was a little extreme to Alus's way of thinking.

"It's over." Lettie smiled as she said the simple words to Alus, who was silent.

The S-class had finally been defeated. There was no need to even confirm it. Not even ashes remained after M2-Polaris, and there was nothing of the Shem Azah left.

In the next moment, Lettie leaned against Alus's back. The tension that had

sustained her had disappeared, being replaced with relief. She glanced at Alus's face with a complicated mix of emotions on her face. But her expression turned stiff again. Alus's eyes, and his focus, were on a completely different place.

"?!" She'd thought the mission to conquer Vanalis was over...but sensing it wasn't, she gazed at him with a questioning look.

"Not yet. There's still one thing that doesn't add up. Lettie, can you run?"

"I can run, but not really use magic..." She didn't have much mana left, and she was mentally exhausted to the point that she would struggle to construct any spells.

"That's fine. I'll deal with the rest," Alus said, unconsciously using words that acknowledged there was still another existence to eliminate.

It was the reason why the snow suddenly stopped in the middle of battle against the Shem Azah. Alus was keenly aware of the true nature of the final challenge. It was the last obstacle before they reached the peak and reclaimed Vanalis.

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Near the top of a lightly snow-capped mountain, the tallest in Vanalis, was a figure looking down at the snow field from above a sheer cliff. Like an unmoving rock, they simply cast a silent gaze downward as if trying to sense something.

The snow had already stopped. The illusion of winter had finally been released. However, the man didn't seem to think anything of the courageous people who had rushed over. His composed face showed no signs of admiration or hints of irritation. He had long red hair that went down to his neck. That color was the only thing that stood out on the man.

His eyes suddenly flickered, though without any sign of emotion. At his feet was a male Magicmaster that he'd just dealt with...staining the snow red.

Thanks to the snow finally stopping, the sun peeked out at the horizon and there were white clouds in the sky. And as the sunlight lit up his surroundings, what he held in his outstretched hand could be seen. His iron grip held a silver-haired girl letting out a faint cry of agony.

Loki weakly struggled, trying to peel his hand off. She managed to squeeze her hands in between his palm and her neck, but couldn't budge his hand an inch. Every time she moved, blood seeped out from the wounds she'd sustained while fighting the Lefkis. She fought to breathe, being held above the ground, and glanced down with hazy eyes.

Mujir was on the ground and unconscious. Blood was pooling around him, which only added to Loki's sense of urgency. But the situation was desperate. There was an overwhelming gap in strength between the red-haired man and her.

After the fight against the Lefkis, they'd noticed the snow hadn't disappeared and sensed an unnatural presence. They'd rushed over here, but what awaited them was an unexpected sight. It was another human this far into the Outer World.

Moreover, he was a formidable adversary. The battle had ended as quickly as it had begun. While Loki might have been exhausted, it was clear that the man was dreadfully powerful. Even Mujir had been treated like he was a child.

And the moment the man shifted to fight Mujir and Loki, the snow had stopped. That was when Loki realized this man was the one pulling the strings and that he was responsible for the snow. The snow hadn't been a Fiend's doing. It was all done by the will of this man.

But why...? When Loki started thinking about the man's motives, more force was applied to her neck. Blood flowed from her mouth and she struggled to breathe. Her vision was blurring.

Loki mustered the last of her strength to resist. She only had one method left, to manifest electricity within her body. She would designate herself as the manifestation coordinates just like the Lefkis had. It was a crude method, trying to take the man down by self-destructing. But it was the only way she could escape from the man's hand. Even if she had to burn herself, it was better than having her neck snapped.

On the verge of passing out, she focused her mind and cast the intermediate-level spell Lightning Bolt right next to herself. A ball of lightning appeared with a rumble and fell to the ground. But before she knew it, the lightning that was

supposed to electrocute both of them had turned into a normal ball of ice.

But that didn't surprise Loki. She already knew the man would easily be able to do something like that. He'd only shown an ability to handle the ice attribute, but even in that field alone he displayed fearsome expertise.

‹‹Force››! Using her remaining mana, she forcibly increased her leg strength. She then twisted her body to kick at the man's arm. It was a powerful kick that she hoped would break a bone.

But as soon as her kick struck the man's arm, pain shot through her leg like she'd kicked a steel beam. Pain seized her entire body as the top of her foot broke. "Aaah..." she cried out, and a spray of blood flew from her lips.

It wasn't just pain either. The foot she'd used to kick was being frozen. She swiftly pulled her foot away, but her skin was ripped off along with the frozen, brittle military boot. Blood poured out from the fresh wound and dripped down from her toes.

"A commendable feat for your age." The man gave Loki empty praise as he threw her away like a broken toy. "But I am beginning to lose interest. So let us bring this to a close," he muttered, as a weapon made of ice began to appear behind him. The sharp tip was pointed straight at Loki, threatening to run her through. At several meters long, the massive single-blade sword expelled cold air all around it.

A pang of regret ran through Loki's mind. She wished she hadn't used up so much strength against the Lefkis, or she could have put up a little more resistance.

But she'd managed to buy a little time. Now her role was over. Loki looked at the man with something close to a relieved smile. Then in the next moment, a force grabbed hold of her body and took her away.

It was neither the reaper nor the impact of the man's ice sword. When the snow stopped, her mana sonar worked again, and she was able to make full use of her abilities as a spotter.

There he is. Instead of a flare, she had fired out her sonar, knowing *he* would notice. She was convinced of it, in fact. Even upon their heavy landing, Loki

didn’t close her eyes for a moment. She’d simply looked on as Alus had swept her away in his arms and rescued her.

Because she had absolute faith in him, she didn’t want him to think of her as some princess just waiting to be saved. “Thank you very much, Sir Alus,” she said in a clear, calm voice, hoping not to cause him any needless worry, as if she’d been ready for this moment.

After Alus gently put her down, Loki looked over at the red-haired man who’d tried to kill her. He was being flanked by Lettie on one side and Alus on the other.

But the man was motionless. And of course he would be. The moment before he saved Loki, Alus had swung Night Mist at lightning speed and slashed the man twice.

The man’s arm fell to the ground. Blood poured out of his neck that had been neatly cut through. However...

“You certainly are...fast.” Despite his neck being cut so deeply, the man’s voice remained unchanged. Holding his hand over his neck, the wound froze over and the bleeding stopped. Perhaps because Alus’s swordsmanship had been so sharp and precise, the severed artery and even his windpipe froze over in an instant and rejoined. “I’m glad I took action ahead of time. I had my experiments to consider this time, after all.” A normal person would’ve been dead by now, but the man’s gentle tone remained the same.

“What are you after? Were you trying to play nice with the Fiends?”

The man smiled at Alus’s question. “Surely you jest. This is just an experiment for fun.”

Alus furrowed his brow as the man continued with a soft expression, “Still, I was surprised that Godma could produce such useful research results. He truly was a genius.”

“...! You mean the Godma that was responsible for the Element Factor Separation Project?” Godma Barhong was a criminal and mad scientist that Alus once received a mission to eliminate. In the end he’d turned into a cross between man and Fiend. He was supposed to have died a mysterious death in

the facility where he was being detained.

“You ended up crushing him... What a shame,” the man answered nonchalantly.

There really had been someone else behind the Godma incident. And although his identity was unknown, the man was a powerful Magicmaster. Putting the pieces together, it started to make a lot of sense.

But Alus’s reaction was to something else. “So the Four Books of Fegel did exist,” he said with a slight smile.

The moment those words left Alus’s mouth, the man’s expressionless eyes narrowed in a bemused manner, which only made Alus’s conviction stronger. If the book he’d spotted was truly one of the Four Books of Fegel...then Godma’s mysterious death was meant to silence him and tie up any loose ends.

And the man before him who’d reacted to Alus’s words was the likely culprit. His motive probably wasn’t to erase any traces of his connection to Godma, but of the Four Books of Fegel themselves. That still left the question of how, but the military wasn’t a monolith. He could’ve had an accomplice on the inside.

“Allie, how do you wanna do this?” Lettie aggressively asked, but it was part of her bluff. She didn’t have the strength to fight with the man before them, but still said it as a way to put pressure on him. The man was the very picture of eeriness and the depths of his abilities were unknown.

However, it was the man himself who answered her question. He was almost fearless given the situation. “There won’t be any need for that. My mission is complete, so I will be taking my leave. That one should still be drawing breath as well...though I would’ve made him breathe his last if I had a little more time,” he said in a light tone, while glancing over at Mujir. In contrast to his tone, though, his eyes were dreadfully cold. It was clear as day he would’ve done so if Alus and Lettie hadn’t made it here in time.

“You sure can talk a lot in this situation. You don’t have the choice of escaping. You’ll be killed by me or by Lettie. Either way, you’re going to die here,” Alus said, his sharp eyes locked onto the man.

The man certainly knew his way around ice spells, and he’d already finished

icing the end of his cut-off arm to stop the bleeding. But that was all. It was next to impossible for him to overturn the situation he was in. Alus had cut his neck ahead of time to prevent any pointless resistance.

So his consciousness is clear even under these circumstances. In other words, he had the mental capacity to understand the situation and adapt to it. That type of person could construct spells even at death's door. The mental strength to do that was impossible for just any normal Magicmaster. So this man was that far removed from the ordinary.

Which was why Alus made his decision. "I won't restrain you. So there won't be any torture either. Don't worry, I'm used to this." A swift execution to avoid future problems...that was Alus's form of judgment. At the same time he was signaling that he wouldn't need anyone's help. Since he didn't know what the man would do, having the weakened Lettie or Loki step in would only complicate matters.

"I see, that is a reasonable assessment. But I have trouble accepting it outright. As such, I will put up at least a token resistance." His tone was the sort that rubbed people the wrong way, and his choice of words wasn't what you'd expect from a cornered man.

In the next moment snow fell, and the man moved.

Alus took a step forward in response. The atmosphere tensed up. He wasn't wearing the expression of a Magicmaster, but of a man who killed people.

It was Lettie's first time seeing him like that. Her eyes opened wide with a tinge of turmoil in them. *?! He disappeared...?* Alus looked like he'd faded away like a shadow as he blended in with his surroundings. Her eyes fluttered in disbelief, but there was no doubt. The second she realized he'd killed his presence, she felt like the temperature had dropped several degrees.

Lettie's red braid jumped from her startle response. A Magicmaster's show of force was mostly based on releasing mana, but Alus had done the exact opposite. It was a sign of combat completely different from what you'd expect a Magicmaster to do.

She experienced an instinctual fear. The unfamiliar sensation made her hands damp from cold sweat even though she also had experience in fighting other

people, and more so than most at that. Alus's every movement emitted an aura unique to those who killed for a living. Lettie unconsciously gulped, and before the sound in her throat fully died down, Alus had slipped right next to the man.

He wordlessly swept his AWR sideways. There was no hesitation, nor did he brace himself, as if killing was just an everyday occurrence. It was a technique for use against people rather than Fiends.

But just in time, the man's ice sword clashed with Night Mist's sweep. And the man's blade wasn't even in his hand. It was fixed in position between him and Night Mist.

That kind of remote control required a delicate and precise technique. Even so, Alus was neither impressed nor astonished. The only thing his mind processed was that his first attack had been blocked. Any other information was pointless.

The next thing anyone knew, an ultra-thin mana blade extended out from his AWR. Without missing a beat, it stabbed into the man's abdomen. Blood spurted out. But there wasn't enough time to push it in further. Before the counterattacking ice sword could hit, he let go of his AWR. It was a quick decision made with the stinging sensation still in his hand.

Taking a step backwards, Alus ducked down under the ice sword. He then struck back, not with his sword but his own arm. Or rather, the new mana blade extending from it. The blade slashed upwards diagonally towards the man's opposite shoulder.

Fresh blood splattered, but that didn't faze him. Once Alus decided to kill he wouldn't stop until he achieved his objective. Even dealing a fatal wound wasn't enough, as it meant the opponent hadn't died yet.

The mana blade swung through the man's body and slashed directly across his neck. It wasn't a mere attempt at a fatal wound, but a swing that would bring certain death.

When Alus landed and kicked up a puff of snow, his job was finished. The man staggered forward two, three steps, then collapsed.

Blood poured out from his neck, and a moment later his head separated from

his neck and rolled over the snow. His expression showed no shock; it was simply the look of a man who had accepted his fate. His blood continued to silently drip on the snow.

Feeling a proper response from his attack, Alus picked up and sheathed his AWR. Normally these kinds of killings didn't remain in his memory. Even this time it was no different from kicking a pebble out of his path. If anything remained in his memories it would be the sword of ice the man had used...or rather the sculpture. Its shape and decorations were vaguely familiar, but in the end it wasn't worth remembering and disappeared in the aftermath of the battle.

"Mujir! You still alive?!" Lettie's voice brought Alus back to reality.

Despite his serious injuries, Mujir seemed to have regained consciousness. He groaned as he moved his wrist and answered Lettie's call by weakly tapping the snow. Loki, looking on with worry, was relieved.

Shortly afterwards, Alus and the others grouped up with Sajik as well. There were no signs of Fiends around them, but you never knew when one might appear. Because of that, they put off retrieving the man's corpse for later.

Alus had checked his body, but found no clues as to what his identity was, nor did he find any equipment needed to survive in the Outer World. That fact only made the man more unsettling. He'd come to Fiend-infested Vanalis empty-handed and aided the Fiends with his snow. The man left nothing but mysteries behind, but for the time being, bringing back the injured took priority.

Sajik, who'd been tasked with carrying Mujir, looked truly annoyed, but the group safely returned to the base.

Fifty-Eighth Chapter

That Reaching Hand

When the group arrived back at the base, healing Magicmaster Louise took over. Her moment to shine was, in a sense, once the mission was complete. With her rapid and accurate instructions, the base was quickly converted into a treatment ward.

A strange scene took place at the entrance to her treatment ward, with a bunch of grown men squeezing together waiting to be examined. Beginning with Mujir and followed by Loki, Louise treated person after person.

Though they were called healing Magicmasters, their abilities typically stopped at enhancing the injured party's own ability to heal themselves. There were of course differences between practitioners, but they were all fundamentally the same.

However, there were exceptions. The first-rate healing Magicmasters known as master physicians didn't fall into that category.

When it came to the level of Magicmasters that a Single like Lettie scouted, they'd likely be among the best in the nation. Louise was no exception, and within a few hours most of the injured had recovered enough to stand on their own.

Alus wasn't well-versed in healing Magicmasters, but their techniques were impressive even to him. It appeared they were now a necessity in the Outer World that they couldn't afford to ignore.

However, Mujir had been instructed to rest for a while. The person in question was unhappy with being told to lie down, but no matter how much he insisted he was fine, Louise's orders were absolute here. Lettie was probably the only one who could go against her.

The surrounding squad members weren't taking it too seriously, poking fun at Mujir instead.

Even Alus had his frostbitten hand healed and had no choice but to follow Louise's advice. *That said, what am I supposed to do about not using my arm?* Being told not to use his dominant arm in the Outer World was a rather strict

condition. He'd overused his hand despite the frostbite, which was how it had gotten aggravated to that level. Fortunately, he could still use magic.

Having finished his treatment, Alus headed for a small room in the back. The base was about as large as it needed to be and no more. Though whether it could even be called a small room was up for debate, seeing as it was just an area separated by a cloth hanging down.

Alus pushed the cloth aside and signaled the owner of the room with his eyes. Since the cloth had been half-open to begin with, Loki had already noticed him coming to visit.

She was currently recuperating on a roughly-made wooden bed, her leg hanging in a sling. As a Magicmaster she must have felt that dreary look was unbecoming of her. Like Mujir, she wore a complicated expression.

Alus seemed to pick up on her state. "The aftertaste of defeat is bitter, I imagine."

"..." With a slight frown, Loki looked at Alus like she wanted to say something.

"Just surviving was fortunate. This time everyone was saved by that recklessness." With a slight smile, he gave her some credit for that recklessness. If the snow had still been around, the battle against the Shem Azah would've been a lot trickier.

Lettie's M2-Polaris flashed through his mind for a moment. If she'd used that spell while the snow was still there, she would either have been unable to use it or unable to control it. Since that spell could easily hit the caster as well, it would be difficult for anyone not considerably skilled in barrier spells. Similar spells existed, but all were designated as taboo spells out of fear of what might happen if they were abused.

For example, someone in high authority could manipulate a disposable pawn to use on the assumption that they'd get blown up too.

"Why did that man coordinate and side with the Fiends? He was all alone next to a Fiend's nest... It's not normal. And he mentioned Godma," Loki asked Alus. The question lurking in her mind was shared by the rest of the squad. It prevented them from honestly rejoicing in their reclamation of Vanalis because

of their discomfort.

“Are you discussing something interesting? I can’t have secret conversations in my base,” Lettie said, as she embraced Alus from behind. She put her chin on his shoulder and whispered into his ear, “Don’t leave me out of this.”

But judging from her relaxed atmosphere, she probably didn’t have ulterior motives. She was sticking close to Alus, but Loki, lying in her bed, wasn’t particularly shaken. Actually, she regretted bringing it up when it was just the two of them. It would’ve been better to discuss it with Lettie around.

Loki slowly closed her eyes, but Lettie didn’t seem to mind. Or rather, she wasn’t even looking at her. There were many injured people in the base. And there was the advance party as well... The result left a bitter aftertaste in her mouth, and wasn’t something she could take pride in. But Lettie, the captain, was no doubt hurting much more than she was.

The next moment, the squad members seemed to have read the room, and their eyes began to turn to them. It was time to listen to the summary of their mission. Since Loki was lying on a bed in a corner of the base, she couldn’t help but feel cramped.

Alus waited for the right moment and continued the topic from before. “In terms of international politics, the reclamation of Vanalis is a great accomplishment for Alpha. It will take some time to build this place up, but the other nations will come to see its value as a frontline base for expansion.”

Mujir listened, as he gazed up at the low ceiling from his bed that he’d been carried in on.

Sajik’s large frame leaned against the wall. He was being unusually quiet.

Lettie let go of Alus and remained silent. Everyone listened in their own way, but their reactions were all muted.

Well, there were casualties after all, Alus rationalized. There were no bodies or remains left behind so the number of dead couldn’t be determined, but their comrades-in-arms had been destroyed. Many of them were treated as “missing” but that was just a euphemism.

However, Alus could neither feel a unity with them, nor could he share their

feelings. At best he understood how they felt and kept quiet.

There was one thing that hadn't met his expectations. The group sent to search for the advance party had miraculously returned with a few survivors. They'd been caught in the sudden blizzard and attacked. Following that, exhausted, they'd found a place to hide.

Hearing their report, Alus didn't think much of it. At most it was good news that they hadn't all been wiped out. But he could understand Lettie's grief when she saw the others weren't with them. She was normally so outgoing that it was easy to tell when she was faking it.

Alus was on the verge of reflecting on similar memories, but they belonged in the past. "There were more than a few casualties, but I'm sure you'll be able to repay them one day. Everyone, you did a good job." The words echoed hollowly. Even he thought they were tasteless.

"Allie, you can save that for the old geezers in the top brass leaning back in their comfy chairs. I'm sure they'll be buttering us up once we get back."

"I guess that's true. Then let's move on to the main topic. You want to know about that man, don't you, Lettie?"

The mood in the room completely changed. There weren't supposed to be any enemies in the Outer World aside from Fiends. Yet it was an outsider believed to be a Magicmaster who was behind the events, a mysterious man who had injured Mujir.

"Let me start with the conclusion. I don't really know who the man controlling the snow was. It's not like I'm friends with all the Magicmasters."

"Wouldn't you at least have heard about someone that skilled? Not to mention that strange exchange you had with him," Lettie said, referring to when they talked about Godma.

It was a military secret, but Alus decided he had no choice but to discuss it. "I'd like to say you should ask the Governor-General for the details, but whatever. You probably didn't hear about it, but some time ago I was given a mission to apprehend a criminal named Godma..."

Alus told Lettie and the others about the incident in an indifferent manner,

noting that Godma was a researcher deeply involved with the Element Factor Separation Project, part of the military's dark past. That illegal human experiment had since been erased from the records. He then explained that Godma had been killed by someone while in military custody, and that Berwick believed there was a co-conspirator behind Godma, tasking Vizaist to investigate it.

Having been in the Outer World all this time, Lettie and her squad had no way of knowing this. "And then he never found him. Man, Vizaist's gotten senile," Lettie joked, but she looked nostalgic at the mention of a familiar name.

"You've got it the other way around. Not even an intelligence professional could find any clues," Alus told her, covering for Vizaist and telling himself they were even now. "I believe it was a man called Enouve pulling the strings."

"Then our snow man was this Enouve?"

"Seeing how he knew about the Four Books of Fegel, there's little doubt." The Four Books of Fegel were the rarest books in the world. Some people considered them prophetic, though there were squad members present who hadn't even heard of their existence.

"Could Kurama be involved in that?" Lettie asked.

Even Berwick suspected that the criminal organization Kurama was behind it. There'd been no proof of it, but Alus, who had a history with Kurama, felt it was the most likely scenario. The mysterious man who was such a skilled user couldn't have been unknown to the world. Moreover, Kurama had become more active this past year, spreading their name around.

During the Demi Azur incident, Alus and Lettie had come across Elise and her accomplice. It was a long-distance exchange, but they'd had a firsthand experience of her power. That was why it was natural for their minds to go in that direction.

"Yeah, that's a strong possibility."

"What are they after?" Mujir, lying on his bed, quickly asked. He couldn't move his head so he'd spoken to the ceiling. It was someone who'd seriously hurt him, so he wanted to know who was behind it.

“I don’t know. According to the man himself, his mission was complete.”

The man had the skill to freely control the snowfall in the vast region of Vanalis, and he didn’t hesitate to incapacitate Mujir and injure Loki. With an exhausted Lettie present, the man was dangerous. That was why Alus had immediately decided to kill him.

“Either way, the dead don’t speak. So that’s all we’ve got for the time being. It’s Berwick’s job now. If the man really was a member of Kurama, killing him was big. Weakening them will make it easier for us to deal with them if they come at us,” he added jokingly, but he knew that with Elise, the Kurama member who’d attacked the Institute, they couldn’t beat Kurama without him.

He didn’t particularly want a rematch with that little visitor, but he had a hunch she wouldn’t appear before him in that way again. *Besides, with that Magic Eye, it wouldn’t even turn into a battle to the death.*

The One Eye of Salem was said to govern over life. And Alus knew what that meant... Elise wouldn’t die. She couldn’t die, even. Because of that, he’d prefer not to have that rematch as well.

However, the squad members didn’t look particularly satisfied. They seemed to be searching for a way to express their conflicted emotions.

Lettie was a little different. She gazed at him with a sort of innocence in her eyes, and he couldn’t tell what she was thinking.

“...?!” Following her gaze, he finally saw that she wasn’t looking at him but past him...at Loki. He didn’t understand what he’d been charged with exactly, but he was aware any supposed sins would come to the surface if examined too hard. There was still something he hadn’t told Lettie and Loki.

“Allie, there’s something else, isn’t there?” As expected, Lettie took a step closer and peered directly into Alus’s face. She was so close that the tips of their noses almost touched.

“There’s nothing else! I have no intention of hiding anything.”

“Hmm, that so?”

He would have loved to say he was innocent until proven guilty, but there was

no escaping Lettie's gaze. In reality, he'd only spoken the facts as they were. He'd left out his baseless guesses.

However, Loki was shaken up by Lettie's implicating tone, and seemed curious about what she was referring to.

Sensing Alus was at a disadvantage, Lettie leaned forward, as if asking if he was really going to hide things even from his partner. As a result, she'd practically taken Loki's trust hostage.

And it was then that Alus gave up. Perhaps he should be praising Lettie's ability to pick up on things. "Fine... What caught my attention was the ice sword the man was using."

"It was my first time seeing it. What a pain to use it by controlling mana, instead of just wielding it directly. Well, you did cut off his arm."

It was definitely a useful technique, but it wasn't worth the effort. A high level of information processing was required to overwrite the coordinates and move the sword quickly. "That's true. But, well, it was an unusual spell. That's all. Just forget about it." The details of the sword's nature stood out, but it wasn't anything to worry about.

Loki, on the other hand, was a little shocked. She must have noticed that the ice sword was similar to the spell that someone else used.

"Anyways..." Alus tried to wrap things up.

But Lettie stopped him with her hand. "All right, I more or less get it, so that's okay for now! I'll take it from here." She turned and faced her squad. "Right! Let's celebrate the retaking of Vanalis!" she shouted in a cheerful manner, raising her fist.

It was boyish behavior and they were all taken aback at first, but then they looked at one another. The next moment, they let out cries of victory. Some hugged, some clapped others on the shoulder, and some smiled from their beds. Raising their brawny arms, they danced with joy, howling loudly and whistling and making all kinds of noise. The gloomy atmosphere from before was gone, being replaced with a great clamor.

Alus and Loki were a little puzzled, but understood this was how the squad

Lettie built up was like. No matter how many hardships they might experience, when the time came and their grueling mission was complete, their sorrow was temporarily replaced with joy.

But the loud bellows were so powerful that they blew even those thoughts from Alus's mind. It no longer mattered how meaningful their results were to humanity and Alpha. They were only moved by the achievements that mattered to them.

However, Alus didn't let himself get caught up in the atmosphere. Instead, a doubt came to his mind. Maybe the snow man only looked like he was cooperating with the Fiends on the surface, while in reality he was doing something else. As the Ogma could control its allies with the dark element, maybe he was trying to control the Fiends too. He had mentioned Godma's research results after all.

Incidentally, all of Godma's research materials were supposed to have been erased at Vizaist's direction. But what if the snow man had been working behind the scenes with Godma? It wouldn't have been strange for him to have received some research results.

Of course, it wouldn't be research on the elements...but the magic that turned people into Fiends.

Suddenly, images popped into Alus's head. The eye-like pattern on the wings, as well as the mane of human hair, and the patch of human leather that Mujir and Sajik had reported. Those human traits had taken on too obvious of an appearance as the result of predation, not to mention Fiends wearing human skin was abnormal. Which meant that maybe...

Shortly thereafter, Louise appeared from the back of the base carrying a wooden tray. On top of the tray were a lot of cups. They must have been handmade as well since they looked uneven, but they'd been filed down beautifully.

Louise picked up a cup and bottle from the tray and began pouring a transparent liquid. "Here you are, Lady Lettie."

"Thank you for the help and for healing everyone," Lettie grinned, and thanked Louise. After composing herself, she raised her voice. "Everyone take a

cup.”

She then turned to Alus and Loki. “Sorry, but kids will have to settle for water.” As Alus gave her an exasperated look, she continued, “That’s a no even if you give me those puppy eyes. This is strong stuff.”

Hearing that, Alus recalled that there had indeed been alcohol among the things the advance party brought with them.

With a wry smile, Mujir added his own excuse. “Sir Alus, it’s not like we’re always drinking. It’s more like a tradition for this kind of occasion.” His eyes were gentle, but with a degree of sadness in them.

Come to think of it, after all that commotion, the toast had a sort of ceremonial solemnity to it. In other words, the kind of occasion Mujir referred to didn’t mean finishing up a big mission, but mourning their fallen comrades.

In Alus’s hand was a cup with enough water to drink in a single swallow. But he felt like that swallow had a lot of meaning. Loki sat up in her bed and held the small cup in both hands.

After confirming everyone was ready, Lettie raised her cup high. As she did, some alcohol spilled out, but she didn’t mind. The squad raised their cups in response. Alus and Loki followed suit, slowly raising their cups, careful not to spill the contents.

“Now we’ve cleaned up your mess. I don’t know if heaven or hell lies beyond this, but there’s no time for you guys to rest. As long as we wield our power in the Outer World, you have an obligation to witness it. That’s your punishment for taking a long vacation before the rest of us.” Lettie spoke as if she envied the dead, but her expression was cheery and innocent. Her words were very like her, far different from the formal language one would usually expect at these occasions.

She then tilted the cup and downed the drink in one gulp, and sharply exhaled. It seemed it really was a strong drink.

The surviving squad members followed Lettie’s lead and downed their drinks. Some were like Lettie, showing expressions like they were putting up with something, while others stuck their tongues out, and still others held their cups

upside-down with unsatisfied looks on their faces.

Sajik furrowed his brow, looking like he was choking on it. Mujir drank his down, but showed no expression. He looked like he could hold his liquor.

Finally, Alus downed his own cup, but as expected it was just water. Thinking Loki's was the same, he glanced over at her. "!!" ... Only to see her face turn red after drinking it. Her eyes went unfocused as well.

Alus turned around and snapped, "Hey!" Louise gazed back at him with a vague look, leaving it unclear if it had been intentional or not.

"Aw, lil Loki drank some alcohol? Well, this is the Outer World, so it's like we're outside our own nation... Actually, I didn't think you were such a lightweight."

"Hah...this is noshing...really! I'm fine. I can make a mountain of Fiends outside!" Not only was she slurring her words, but she was being strangely confident. It seemed she'd even forgotten her injuries. "Sir Alusss, don't you think you take your eyesh off of me too much?! I need you to see tha-that I...I can handle my-myself too!" There were even hiccups mixed in with her speech, so there was no doubt that she'd lost control.

"She's a fun drunk, Allie. Well, I'm just glad she's not stripping or getting violent."

"Don't act like this doesn't concern you! What are we supposed to do about this?"

Lettie looked like she was enjoying herself. "By the way, I'm the type that gets clingy!"

Alus ignored her, and when she tried to lean on him, he silently pushed her away. One look at Mujir's and Sajik's dry expressions revealed she was far from the clingy type when drunk.

"Let's goooo. We-We'll get this corpse party started!" Loki said, and jumped out of her bed.

Alus wrapped his arms around her stomach and held her aloft, but she started thrashing around like a child. "Hey, do something!"

“What are we supposed to do? Right, Louise?”

In the meantime, Loki slipped out of Alus’s grasp and used Force to move a distance of two meters. Drunk or not, her body movements were flawless. The fact that she had no difficulty with mana control and spell construction in her state was surprising.

Seeing Loki’s smug face, Alus slapped his forehead. At this rate, she might make her way outside to the Fiend-infested lands without anyone being able to stop her. Squad members hurriedly moved to block the passage out.

The next moment, Loki showed a strange smile and then...vomited a stream of blood.

“Aaaaaaa!!! Her wounds opened up!!!” Louise shrieked. She had restorative herbs in her hand, but it was already too late. When she saw Loki like that, her shoulders slumped. “I told her she needed to rest too.”

Those didn’t sound like the words of someone who was responsible for her drinking alcohol in the first place. Louise quickly picked Loki up and took her back to the treatment ward.

Lettie was laughing out loud, but now wasn’t the time for that, Alus thought. At least though, he’d gotten a glimpse of a rare side of Loki and her real feelings. Moreover, he’d learned never to let her have a drink.

Feeling exhaustion hitting him all at once, Alus fell back-first onto a bed. That said, it wasn’t actually cushioned, so it hurt his back a little.

Eventually Lettie stopped laughing, and she exhaled as if savoring the moment. The strong smell of alcohol tickled her nose.

It was a brief pause for the Magicmasters who moved from battlefield to battlefield, when time slowed down as it passed. To think a time like this would come in the Outer World, in a small base built in a cave.

Spending time with people in the Outer World brought back memories of a distant past...of the fulfilling days he might have had then.

“This kind of thing isn’t too bad, ya know,” Lettie said, as if reading his mind.

Without answering, Alus simply closed his eyes on top of the hard bed. They

were both Singles, so they had something in common. Moreover, he'd known Lettie for a long time. They weren't too close but they weren't distant with each other either. It was an inseparable relationship in a way. *I'm beat.* With that thought, Alus's consciousness drifted beneath the surface and he fell asleep.

A long overdue stillness settled on Vanalis.

In his comfortable sleep, his consciousness sank even deeper.

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Vanalis had once housed a fortified city. After the high-classed Fiends that had made their nest there were eliminated, the map of the area needed to be redrawn. Some of the terrain had been altered after all.

If the likes of Vizaist or Berwick found out, they'd be holding their heads in their hands. The place where Alus and Lettie eliminated the Shem Azah in particular was unlikely to see any plant life for the next half-century. The earth was burned, and it had a big hole that reached deep into bedrock.

The ground was upturned everywhere as a testament to the intensity of the battle. A lot of manpower would be necessary to fix it back up. But since he wasn't going to be doing that himself, Alus didn't particularly care.

With the battle over, Vanalis was quickly regaining its previous climate. It was a warm region to begin with, and with the strange snow melted away, the original scenery was rising to the surface. The air was crisp, and it no longer hurt to breathe.

The skies of Vanalis were clear and without a cloud in sight. With their mission complete, they were free to be captivated by the beauty of nature in the region. It might be a long ways off, but the flora and fauna would eventually return to carpet the land in green.

After the decisive battle, the appearances of Fiends had been drastically reduced, but that wasn't a rare phenomenon. Once the highest-classed Fiend ruling over the region was eliminated, the remaining Fiends tended to scatter. With the head gone, the proliferation of Fiends would dramatically decrease until another leader appeared. But since they'd gone out of their way to clean up Vanalis, they would've preferred that no new leaders show up for a while.

“I really want lil Loki for myself,” Lettie suddenly blurted out, while they were patrolling through the region to make sure there were no more high-classed Fiends.

Loki wasn’t back to normal yet, but she could still use her mana sonar with no problems. Louise strictly forbade her from taking part in any battle, so she was limited to just detection, which she was carrying out just fine.

“Someone on my level would only get in the way.” The way Loki firmly declared this was both emphatic and stubborn. She was embarrassed, and regretted running rampant yesterday. There were a lot of memories she just wanted to erase.

“Well, the way you threw up blood was pretty bad,” Lettie noted.

“Th-That was because of the alcohol!” Loki wanted to pretend like it never happened, but her reaction made it obvious that she was bothered by it. She turned to Alus to appeal to him that it was the alcohol’s fault and not her own. But then she saw Alus’s surly face. “I’m sorry for all the trouble I caused you!” she apologized, and bowed.

“Well, it was funny, so it’s all fine.”

“La-Lady Lettie!”

Lettie ignored the blushing Loki’s protests, and chuckled to herself as she remembered yesterday.

Exasperated, Alus spoke up to interrupt the flow. “This area should be fine now. Sorry, but we’ll be heading back first.” Other squad members in charge of different areas were reporting in via their Consensors, and there were no problems. They were gradually making their way back to Lettie in small groups. The next step would be a detailed clean-up of the region, but Alus’s job didn’t include dealing with the small fry.

Lettie smiled. “I guess there’s no choice. That’s what we promised.”

“Of course. Any more of this will affect my academic records.”

“So not even you are a match for Sisty. That witch is really scary.”

“Yeah, something like that. So good luck over here.” With that, Alus prodded

Loki and turned around. Their packs were waiting for them at the base.

But Lettie called out to Alus from behind. “Also...I’d like to hear your answer to that question, Allie.” Her manner of speaking remained unchanged, but the way she looked away and sounded a little brusque made her seem like a girl waiting for the answer to a confession. The words rang through the clear air with their delicate nuances standing out.

Only Alus knew what question Lettie was talking about. Ignoring Loki’s puzzled gaze, he glanced over at Lettie. However, he didn’t stop walking.

It would’ve been a lie to say he didn’t have the time to think it over. There was no need to think about it. No matter how long he would reminisce or consider it, he wouldn’t find an answer.

Just the fact that he’d been invited into Lettie’s squad felt like he’d been saved. Ever since he started going to the Outer World alone, nobody would step in regardless if he lived or died. And he felt the same way towards others.

Alus asked to retire from the military because he’d gotten tired of that kind of world. But the world inside was too different for a Single Digit Magicmaster like Alus. There’d been times when he felt his only place was on the outside. So maybe that was why he’d always been waiting for someone to reach out to him.

Lettie interpreted his pause as hesitation, and a smile appeared on her lips. “It’s good to have a place where you can run around the Outer World together with others. These guys won’t die so easily, ya know? Oh, I guess you’d become the captain if you joined. Well, that would be fine too.” She said those heavy words in a rather lighthearted manner, but the squad members that had gathered round didn’t look upset in the slightest.

Instead, they all looked ready to accept it. Some smiled faintly while crossing their arms. Others looked interested, stroking their chins. Still others leaned against nearby trees looking on. However, they were all silent, watching over Lettie’s and Alus’s discussion. Each face was as fierce as the next. They were all powerful veterans who’d lived through their fair share of battles.

“You don’t have to be alone anymore. If you can’t live anywhere other than the Outer World, you should find a place where you belong... This is one such place. Allie, you’re already like family.” Along with her cheerful smile, Lettie

held out her soft, supple hand.



When Loki saw that, she was unable to hide her surprise. She realized everything and broke into a smile. Alus had endured inhumane treatment in the military, and all he'd gotten in return was superficial praise. The pain in his heart and his own wishes had been completely disregarded.

Now his wounded soul would finally be saved and rewarded a little. Lettie was one of the few people who could truly understand Alus, and taking her hand would surely lead to happiness.

Loki would stay by his side as he walked down that path. They wouldn't be able to leave the military and the path would be filled with dangers, but that was no different from now.

More importantly, the squad was where the people who understood Alus's true worth were, and they were there for him. She felt like the things Alus wanted were here. She had lost her parents and was raised in the military. That was why she could understand what he'd choose and what he wanted. Compared to the military that only valued his ability to kill Fiends, Lettie's squad was like a dream. It was both a family and a place to call home.

Loki was unable to verbalize the feeling in her heart. It was warm, but there was also a slight bitterness. The invitation was meant to be good for him and for her as well. But she did feel a difference in what was supposed to be an equal relationship. In the end though, she never said anything out loud.

"That way we won't have to scout for a new spotter either. Lil Loki will be with us after all."

"But aside from that...having two Singles in one squad would completely ruin the military's power balance."

"I don't care about those little things. What matters is what you want to do. Just so you know, I'm not inviting you on some impulse here. I've been thinking about this ever since I created this squad." What Lettie said was the truth. As they were two Singles fighting on the frontlines, she'd always remained aware of Alus's movements, as well as the orders that were given to him. "I won't let anyone complain. Even if the Governor-General is the one in authority, it's the Magicmasters on the scene who have the actual power. If you join my squad, Allie, we'll be in control of sixty percent of Alpha's military power."

Alus stopped himself from saying she was exaggerating. Lettie's inappropriate statement made it sound like she was fine with turning against the military.

But it was actually a sign of her resolve. That was how much emotion she was putting into her offer to Alus. No matter which choice Alus made, nobody would complain. There might be some dissatisfaction, but the power and value of a Single was enormous. And if two of those came together in a single squad, nobody could touch them.

However, Lettie's offer held no political considerations. In essence, she was asking what he wanted and how he wanted to live. If he wanted to live out here, then the existence of comrades was necessary. And she might have been trying to tell him that they'd stay at his side and support him.

Alus already knew that nothing lasted forever. He knew the memories of comrades would always be in the corner of his mind, existing like persistent ghosts.

Throughout his military life, which was the only life he'd experienced, Alus had always cut out anything unnecessary. That was how he kept himself alive. Even emotions were something to be cut out.

But now Lettie was extending her hand to him, and for a Magicmaster, it was a very pure hand.

Alus knew the limits of being alone, but so far he hadn't reached that point yet. So if asked if this was necessary or not...he'd have to say it was unnecessary. Everyone would die someday, and for Magicmasters the Outer World was where they would spend the rest of their lives.

For a moment, the question arose in his mind. Would he sit back and watch as more people died in front of him? No matter how much he helped them, the same scene would play out. And so, it would eventually become a pain and unnecessary.

But maybe this time it would be different. With comrades-in-arms, they would be able to cover for each other when the time came. That kind of thing would be nice.

Even after getting tired of fighting and retiring, there were always excuses to

drag Alus back out. Not even a year had passed at the Institute and he'd already been sent out several times. He was just fooling himself. His situation hadn't actually changed. Retirement had just been an excuse for him to find a place where he belonged, a place where the honor and title of the greatest Magicmaster didn't matter and he could just be himself.

He wanted to find a place where he could do what he pleased. That was all. He wanted to let go of his title and even leave his name behind...

Alus was also aware that his desire was stronger than most people's. At the same time, he wanted to see what lay farther beyond in the Outer World. Perhaps Lettie's hand would grant that wish of his.

Someday, he would be freed from his days of fighting. When all the Fiends had been wiped off the face of the planet... *I guess that's not going to happen. Even if all the Fiends were somehow wiped out, fighting would still go on. The art of killing will always come in handy no matter how the world might look.*

Alus laughed inwardly, and pondered it a bit longer. Eventually he reached his own hand out towards Lettie's hand. If he took her hand, his days of fighting would begin anew. But it would be completely different from what he experienced in the past. It would surely lead to a different future than the path he was on.

However...just before he touched her supple and beautiful fingers that held a sweet future, his hand stopped. "I'll pass. I still have some unfinished business to handle."

That might just have been an excuse he made up. But Lettie silently accepted it with a smile, and withdrew her hand. "At the Institute, huh."

"..." Alus's answer was silence. He didn't really know if there was something he still had to do there. But looking after Tesfia and Alice could certainly be considered unfinished business.

Lettie stared at Alus. She knew the Institute was an important place for Alus, and the same was true for Loki.

Alus had changed a lot since he went to the Institute. Some things were good and others bad, but he wasn't the same as before. That was what you called

growth. In that sense, the troubles that had come to him one after another might not be as worthless as his complaints made them out to be.

“Well, it’s a shame, but I kinda guessed that would happen. That’s why I didn’t plan on saying anything,” Lettie grumbled. Still, she must not have wanted to miss the opportunity of working together with him in the Outer World.

She was also one of the people who’d sensed the changes in Alus. That was why she’d made her offer while more or less expecting to be rejected. At the same time, she was unable to hide her reaction. Despite knowing she’d probably get rejected, she found she was more depressed about it than she thought she would be.

She hid that inner turmoil behind an easygoing tone. “If you’re ever looking for a place to belong, you can always come to us. We’ll be waiting. Always.” As she ruffled her hair, Lettie’s smile wavered. She felt true gratitude, hope for the future, and faint regret.

“Yeah, it was only for a short time, but I owe you... No, I guess you owe me,” Alus jokingly replied.

With a big grin, Lettie grabbed hold of Alus’s shoulders and forcibly turned him around. “Why, you little...!” She then embraced him from behind, whispering into his ear so that only he could hear. “I really owe you... Still, I wish I’d invited you before you enrolled at the Institute. Well, if you’re happy with it, that’s for the best.”

Hearing that heartfelt voice in his ear, Alus gazed at the empty skies above. If she really had invited him before he enrolled, then maybe...

But that would never happen now. At the same time, he felt like her approaching him meant that all of his work in the past had finally paid off a little. As long as someone was around to acknowledge him, Alus couldn’t fully leave this world or the military. Most of all, he didn’t dislike Lettie.

“Lil Loki helped out a lot as well. You can stay behind on your own, ya know,” Lettie said in a joking tone, but with an outstretched hand. That meant she’d recognized Loki as a Magicmaster, a huge compliment coming from a Single Digit.

However... “It is an honor, thank you, Lady Lettie. But I will follow Sir Alus anywhere,” Loki said clearly. She apologized with a bow.

Lettie smiled wryly. “Right, I guess that’s for the best. But the Outer World’s a surprisingly small world, so I’m sure we’ll meet again somewhere. Next time, I hope you’ll properly call me Sis.”

As she brought up the farce of what happened at the Institute, Loki hurriedly raised a finger to her lips. It was the kind of atmosphere unique to women that even Alus hesitated to interrupt. At the very least, their relationship had deepened on this mission.

After watching Alus and Loki turn back to the Inner World, Lettie’s shoulders slumped.

“Ha ha, guess you got rejected, Captain,” Mujir said, as if trying to comfort her. His tone was cheery, but had a forced feel to it because it just didn’t suit his character. It might end up backfiring and offending her, but his loyalty pushed him to take the risk.

And it wasn’t just him. Everyone in the squad knew that this had been her dream since forming the squad. She’d wanted to bring Alus into her squad and fight side by side. Doing so was next to impossible...but it had been Lettie’s personal desire.

Still, wanting to push her will through was something all Magicmasters understood when they gained experience. A Single Digit Magicmaster was a keystone in a nation’s military power, so they tended to get stuck with all sorts of bonds as political considerations inevitably twisted themselves around their feet. Lettie’s squad only learned about the constraints that came with power through spending time with a Single like her.

And that was why they were all positive about Alus joining them. Together, Alus and Lettie could mentally support each other. Not to mention that the squad should be quite comfortable for a Single Digit Magicmaster. Those feelings only grew stronger after the battle against Demi Azur.

“It’s fine. He’ll come around someday...or maybe it would be better for Allie if he didn’t.”

“Make up your mind!” Mujir said in exasperation, as the falling hammer he’d braced for never came.

Ignoring his remark, Lettie just vaguely smiled. In reality, all of the preparations for the squad to receive Alus had already been made. But at the same time she felt Alus wouldn’t have agreed to it, until she heard rumors of his retirement and felt that was her chance. She was going to make her move using whatever means possible.

That was when she learned that he’d enrolled at the Institute, and she put her recruitment on hold to observe what happened. If it worked out positively for him, then there might not be a need for him to join her squad.

But when it came to her personal feelings... “I feel like I missed my only chance. What a heavy loss.” With a sigh, she put her hands on the back of her head and turned around. In front of her was the recently reclaimed land of Vanalis.

“What’s with that? It wasn’t a loss, it was a huge help. Without him, we might’ve had to spend another half a year on this mission,” Sajik pointed out.

But Lettie couldn’t help but feel he was being naive. “Don’t be stupid. It wouldn’t take just half a year. We’d be lucky to get out with our lives, lil Sajik.”

Sajik immediately tensed up at her unfamiliar way of calling him, wondering if he’d screwed up and angered the captain. But no angry outburst came, as Lettie simply began to wander off, her brain already moving on to figure out how to proceed from here.

Thinking back on it, the mission had been full of mysteries. Not only did a lot of high-classed Fiends rapidly change in leadership, but there was also the Lefkis that had the horn of an evolved species capable of firing spells at long range. And too, the unprecedented case of Fiends coordinating with each other... Not to mention that leading them wasn’t the leader—the Shem Azah—but the Ogma, which was all the more strange.

Then again, whether it had actually been the Ogma was doubtful now. The presence of that man cast a dark cloud over Lettie’s thoughts.

She felt like her head was going to explode from considering all the

complicated factors. She groaned and shook her head to clear her mind. “Our priority for now is to maintain this place and prepare for the handover. Sajik, write a report and clean up the perimeter. Mujir, update the map and write the necessary documents.”

Misfortune suddenly befell Sajik and Mujir, as they realized that they would pay for their previous gaffes. Even their pleas for just one night’s rest were mercilessly denied.

Shortly afterward, Lettie received some ominous news brought by the unit she’d sent to the top of the snowy mountain. The area was supposedly cleared of any scavenging Fiends.

Yet they reported that the man’s corpse had disappeared...

Fifty-Ninth Chapter

The Smell of the Past

An hour had passed since Alus and Loki left Vanalis.

Like Lettie had mentioned on their way there, the temperature was already about the same as in the Inner World. Then again, nature in the Outer World was constantly changing, which was why the creatures that lived there rapidly adapted and evolved, including the Fiends. At any rate, the comfortable temperature was a welcome blessing.

They'd made their way there in a rush, but that didn't mean they could take it easy on the way back. In the world of Fiends, humans were the outsiders, and outsiders were ostracized everywhere. But unlike the human world, the merciless Fiends had neither the will to communicate nor the ability to negotiate. However, since they'd already confirmed there were no Fiends around them, now was a good chance for them to catch their breath.

Alus and Loki had only exchanged the bare minimum of words as they made their way through the Outer World. That was in part because they couldn't let their guard down, but also because Alus tended to operate alone, so he didn't mind being quiet for hours on end. At the moment he was running in front so that he could deal with any Fiends they might encounter.

The silence prompted him to think about the identity of the snow man, including the spell he'd used that controlled an ice sword with his mind. No, in reality, he didn't even need to guess. He'd realized it the moment he saw it.

It was also a type of spell he was currently working on establishing the theory for. However, it wasn't for himself, and he was still in the process of creating the structure so it wasn't complete yet.

The fundamentals of that spell were the same as Zepel... Loki probably realized it as well. And the person she'd naturally associate it with was the same that Alus did.

Alus's mind was packed with knowledge. He knew taboo spells and even had the privilege of accessing state secrets thanks to his rank. Of course there were spells he didn't know, but there weren't many he couldn't even imagine the theory they were based on. After all, it wasn't easy to create new spells.

Yet there were exceptions to everything. In particular, it wasn't uncommon for nobility to develop a unique spell for their family and keep it secret. It was like a martial arts school and its secret techniques.

Unique spells born in that way were often only passed down in the family and protected. Adding a new spell to the spell encyclopedia was a great contribution to humanity, as well as a high honor. But in this world where Magicmasters were so valued, having a unique spell that ran in the family as a secret trump card was a way to protect a family's rank in nobility.

Suddenly, Alus stopped thinking and sharply exhaled. If he got too deeply involved he'd only end up bumping heads with nobility. Since he had no good impressions of noble society, he had no interest in poking his nose into their business.

After losing himself in his thoughts for a while, he looked over his shoulder at Loki. "...!" He then clicked his tongue at his own carelessness.

Slowing down, Alus came to a stop. A short moment later Loki caught up and gazed at him questioningly. "Is something the matter, Sir Alus?"

Alus placed his hand on her head a little more strongly than usual, as if trying to cool down her heated body. "No, I'm just glad I noticed it early." He crouched down and inspected Loki's legs. He was no expert, but it seemed the healing spell cast on Loki hadn't gone as expected. Perhaps the spell was at its limit.

Normally it would take weeks for her injuries to heal. They'd left Vanalis too early, and she would've been better off resting in a bed like Mujir.

Seeing his furrowed brow, Loki said with a stiff expression, "It's not a problem. It won't have any effect as long as there aren't any battles with high-classed Fiends!" She desperately made her appeal, thinking she'd be left alone in Vanalis otherwise.

Recuperating in Vanalis was frankly out of the question. She didn't want to slow him down, but truth be told, she didn't want to leave his side. She searched for a way to justify her selfish feelings but couldn't find any convincing words.

She obediently sat down on a nearby tree root at Alus's instruction. Her boot

was then taken off, revealing her leg wrapped in a bandage.

Alus observed her leg closely. Making an accurate judgment in the field was difficult, but it didn't look good to him. She was hurt in other places as well, but the leg would pose the biggest problem on their journey home. It was hard to tell what kind of strain Force put on the body just by looking. Even the practitioners themselves could unwittingly exceed their limits. "It looks fine for now."

"You worry too much! Also, it tickles, so don't, um..."

"All right, let's lower the pace. You wouldn't want to end up in a hospital room as soon as we get back, would you?" Even if he took her to a military doctor or healing Magicmaster upon their return, maintaining their current pace might seriously harm her leg. "Now then..."

"What are you doing, Sir Alus?"

"Hm? I can't bring myself to leave an injured asset be." Alus turned to show his back to Loki, kneeling in front of her, as he put his arms behind him. It was a position anyone could tell from first glance...offering a piggyback ride.

"Asset? I didn't do anything..."

"Really now? Even Lettie acknowledged you. So I'm sure nobody would object."

There was her excellent decision to consider. Upon finding the snow man, he'd undone his spell and she'd bought time, indirectly contributing to the Shem Azah fight. If not for her actions, there was a good chance they wouldn't be on their way home. The interference from the snow could have extended the time needed by several days. Her ability to quickly discern the presence of an abnormal existence was worthy of praise.

"Either you turn back to Vanalis, or you get a piggyback ride from me," Alus continued. "Berwick and the principal will probably do something about the Institute, so staying in Vanalis for a few days won't be a big deal."

Faced with two choices, Loki frowned since it was practically only one choice. Of course, since Alus was facing forward, he couldn't see it.

Sighing, Loki finally resigned herself. But then she realized something and smiled softly so he wouldn't notice. She felt this was the same as when she'd made her first connection with Alus, when he'd saved her during her first mission. She wanted to keep that a secret from him, since she'd been crying then and showed an embarrassing side.

Loki reveled in the feeling of the hand on her head, then put her own hand on her head. She felt like the warmth of when he'd touched her head was still there. And it was the same kind of warmth as back then.

With a bright smile, she timidly leaned over his back. Putting her hands on his shoulders, she was being careful so as not to put too much weight on him.

Alus bent his legs and casually brought his body up. "Hm?"

"...!" Loki had grown some, so it was only natural that she'd gotten heavier. But that was a girl's feelings for you. "Ah! If I'm heavy we can leave my AWRs behind! I have quite a few of them," she hurriedly suggested, taking the initiative. If Alus were to thoughtlessly claim that she was heavy, then she would probably suggest that they return to Vanalis with a bright red face.

"There's no need for that, it's not like you're heavy... More importantly, make sure you keep your arms around my neck."

"Ri-Right." They were already so close, but Loki was being so reserved that she didn't even have her arms around his neck yet. Like he said, she would get thrown off if something happened.

Loki had dug her own grave, but Alus wasn't foolish enough to return to the previous topic. "Then let's go."

But as Alus started running, he felt a little awkward. He'd almost blurted it out, but there was indeed something on his mind. It wasn't her weight, but the two bumps pressing against his back. Of course, if he were to say something, it might be the trigger to something else, so he stayed quiet.

Alus did his best to push it out of his mind. He lacked the tact to make any comments on a woman's body, especially her chest area. It was one of the things he'd learned after enrolling in the Institute.

After a few steps, Alus was back to sharpening his senses and paying attention

to his surroundings. Carrying another would slow anyone down, and even Alus couldn't run indefinitely while carrying Loki. He was very fit, but he couldn't carry Loki all the way to Alpha. At best he'd go on until her injuries healed a little more, or until they got through some of the more dangerous areas. In the end he'd need to take her legs into account.

Moments of silence passed. Soon, Loki seemed to calm down, and opened her mouth to break the silence. Her words were quiet and blended in with the passing scenery. "Why did you reject Lady Lettie's invitation?" she whispered into Alus's ear. Regardless of what he'd chosen, Loki would no doubt have asked the same question. She wanted to understand what he was thinking.

Accepting Lettie's invitation would definitely have been advantageous. Lettie didn't just want his power; her invitation was made after understanding and accepting him as an individual. She'd clearly stated that that was the reason for creating her squad, and that she was prepared to go against the military's intentions if need be.

Having fought on his own all this time, Alus had nowhere to run. Loki was painfully aware of that. In the end, he'd always be put back on the battlefield. As someone who was at his side, she found it very unpleasant. Every mission he was sent out to his death. And she burned with indignation at the thought of the dangerous tightrope walk never ending. Immense strength and ability aside, Alus was still just one person.

Loki was fine with the military being dismantled if it meant Alus could be free. But reality was different, and when she really thought about it, if he couldn't escape then it might be best for him to be on the battlefield with someone who was reliable, capable, and who understood him.

She had no doubt that Lettie was that person. That was why... "Is your unfinished business...those two?" There was no need to worry about such a thing. It was too ridiculous to even consider that those two girls could tie Alus down. Even if he hated giving up on things halfway through, Loki couldn't accept it.

"Well, that's one thing, but it's not my only reason."

"Then why...?!" Loki's tone unconsciously turned harsh, and not even she

knew why. No matter what Alus chose, she would have rejoiced. At the very least, that's what she thought back then...whether he joined Lettie's squad or turned her down and returned to the Institute.

The next moment, she panicked and added, "I'm sorry. I said too much."

"True," Alus said after a pause.

Loki's small shoulders trembled at his words. It reminded her that it was the distance between them that had grown and not their relationship. She shrank back at the thought that she'd overstepped her boundaries. She'd asked the question to understand Alus, but her desire to learn everything about him was extremely selfish.

As if unconcerned about Loki's ashamed thoughts, Alus repeated himself. "True, I don't really get it either. But...it's different from before. That's just what I thought to myself. Hmph, guess I can't even understand myself at times." Thinking back on it, what he'd said to Lettie wasn't a lie. But it wasn't the whole truth either.

Seeing that, Loki intuited the key to the chaos in Alus's heart that not even he could understand. It probably lay in the past. And when she realized that, she decided not to hesitate but to take another step forward.



Her decision was made with a great deal of courage. Her words weren't meant just to satisfy her own desires, but also to help Alus search his own heart. "Sir Alus, if you'd like, could you please tell me? Nothing might come from it, but I'd still like you to tell me about yourself...about your past...and what you have been through," she said, staring straight into Alus's black eyes as if looking for his past hidden within. "I think talking to someone about it would help you understand your own feelings better..."

Alus quietly listened to what she had to say, and when she finished, he paused for a moment. "It's nothing interesting. Have you heard that I was in Lord Vizaist's squad in the past?"

"Yes, I've heard that much." Loki only knew that Alus had joined the squad and at some point the squad had disbanded. But everything in between was a complete blank.

During the mission, Louise told her heartwarming anecdotes about Alus. That said, she'd probably only told Loki screened stories. In reality there must have been more to it. Loki only heard the trivial everyday life stories, and not the horror that made up most of it.

Alus had joined a squad led by Felinella's father Vizaist, and spent some time with his comrades there. His participation dramatically improved the squad's strength, and after he joined their mission completion rate was near one hundred percent.

"If I recall, the squad's name was the Special Fiend Attack Unit."

"So you know that much." Alus sounded a little critical of her inquiry, so Loki struggled to nod along.

As far as she knew, ever since that squad was disbanded Alus had never joined another squad, nor did he take an official partner. He'd been attached to squads as part of missions, but mostly he'd operated alone. "Is that why you rejected Lady Lettie's offer?"

"Who knows? It's a bitter memory for me. Even now it gets in the way from time to time... I've never once forgotten that day. The day that proved I didn't need any allies."

His final words were said in a monotone. Loki softly closed her eyes to digest everything he'd said. What he'd felt at the time, and whether a scar had been left on his heart as a sign of his determination. Wanting to at least experience the same pain, she let her cheek touch his back.

It certainly had a person's warmth...but Loki aside, Alus didn't think so. To him, he'd already abandoned human warmth. Although there might've been something left, it was nothing more than trace heat. Its source had been closed off behind the thick cold door of the past. Should he open that door again, he wondered, looking for the answer within himself. With hesitation, he slowly reached his hand out towards it.

Suddenly, he felt the heat from the silver-haired girl's cheek...and finally put his hand on the door knob. It had been years since it was last moved, so the knob was rusty and heavy.

It was a story about Alus that nobody knew about. The story of a boy who grew up in the military, who knew nothing about the world outside of it. The story of a broken boy.

Afterword

Thank you very much for picking up *The Greatest Magicmaster's Retirement Plan*, Volume 10. Izushiro here. This volume is the follow-up to Volume 9 and is a completely original story. How did you like it?

This was my first time writing such a large story set in the Outer World. It was about a year ago when I began writing a sub-story that departed from the original web storyline... Nowadays that seems like a distant hallucination.

Thanks to your support, the Vanalis arc seems to be well-received, which is a big relief. Of course, I expect to tie up any loose ends in the next volume, so look forward to it.

Now then, moving on to words of gratitude, I would like to thank my editor for their advice and for patiently working with me during the New Year holidays.

I would also like to thank Miyuki Ruria for drawing such exciting illustrations despite being so busy. Having life breathed into my characters moves me more and more with each volume.

Finally, I would like to give the greatest thanks to all of the readers. Thank you very much for supporting this series. It is because of you that this series has reached its tenth volume.

Please look forward to more exciting stories of *The Greatest Magicmaster's Retirement Plan* this year.

—Izushiro


THE GREATEST MAGICMASTER'S RETIREMENT PLAN
10


Loki Leevahl
A silver-haired spotter and Alus's partner. Prepared to devote everything to Alus, she fights through adversity.
Mujir
Lettie's subordinate. A calm intellectual and a skilled tactician.
Lettie Kultunca
A cheerful and sisterly female Magicmaster. Behind her invitation to Alus on the mission to retake Vanalis is an unexpected motive...?!
Sajik
Lettie's subordinate. A more physical Magicmaster who excels at close combat.
Alus Reigin
A student at the Institute, as well as the top-ranked, greatest Magicmaster. At Lettie's request he joins the battle to reclaim Vanalis.


"Blue Star..."
M2-Polaris

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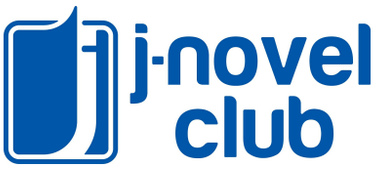
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The Greatest Magicmaster’s Retirement Plan: Volume 10

by Izushiro

Translated by Warnis

Edited by Jan Suzukawa

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