
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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Sixtieth Chapter

Remembering the White Wolf

Vanalis had been conquered. And Alus was making his way home carrying Loki on his back.

The snow from before was completely gone. Looking up, he could see rays of light streaming down through the gaps in the leaves on the giant trees around him.

The good weather lightened his steps. On the way, Loki had asked a question, whispering into his ear. She'd wondered why he turned down Lettie's offer. It was something that had happened a few hours ago.

Lettie had reached out her hand and asked him to walk together with her. She revealed everything she'd been holding back when she tried to recruit him. To travel to the Outer World with allies he could trust instead of being alone... She was offering Alus a helping hand, so to speak.

He'd even felt relief when she'd done so, like he'd met someone aside from Loki and the others who would affirm his existence. That was why he'd seriously considered taking her hand. But in the end, he chose not to.

Loki suspected it had to do with his past, and indirectly asked about it. And so Alus bitterly put his hand on the door to his memories.

It was long ago and his memories of it had grown vague... These days, spending his time at the Institute and being sent out on missions, his recall of that time had faded and become uncertain. But there were still some memories he would never forget. Touching on those memories brought bitterness. And pain.

It was more of a scar than a memory. So when he tried to talk about it, his lips felt heavy as if they were sealed shut. Normally, a person wouldn't want to

reopen such scars. But right now, when the sky was so clear and the air so fresh, Alus felt that a boring story or two could be forgiven.

Really, it was just a trivial story...but it wasn't like he was telling it for Loki to hear. He felt instead that it might be a good idea to reopen it so he could punish himself and chain his heart down again.

Even so, it would just be this one time. It was a scar that should never be either healed or forgotten.

Sensing his hesitation, Loki quietly waited until he was prepared to talk about it. If she were fast asleep, his lips would've loosened easier. But that thought was just another attempt to escape.

Alus closed his eyes, as if blinded by how bright the Outer World was. By telling someone, it was possible that he could realize something he hadn't been able to on his own. It was a slim possibility, but he was attending the Institute now and had a partner. The circumstances were different now.

He thought back on the past, opening up his scar and touching it. Even now, he hesitated. And so he would need a little more time to resolve himself.

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It was too short a tale to require telling at length, and too few people knew all the details to be able to talk about it more extensively. It was a story from the past of a unique unit in Alpha.

The Special Fiend Attack Unit, also known as the Special Unit, was a newly established squad. There were other units with this name, but that was the only unit that was officially recognized as going by that name.

Only Magicmasters acknowledged as worthy leaders and high-ranking officials were permitted to establish squads as individuals. Rank wasn't the only requisite either; achievements and years in service were also taken into account.

Leading a squad as an individual was the exception. Most squads were formed by the top brass. They would issue a notice of the establishment of a new unit and list its commander and members. Of course, the appointments would be compulsory and not voluntary. The squads formed in this manner would include

troops for the frontlines, defense, support, investigation, and more.

In addition, all squads required the approval of a general or above with no exceptions. Because of this, squads that actively went on the offensive were rarely established. The reason was that bringing the fight to the Fiends was not very popular back then. The military tended to choose a strategy that focused on defense, first and foremost. And the majority of the top brass was of the opinion that safety of the citizens came first.

However, the circumstances were somewhat different for the Special Fiend Attack Unit. The squad was formed by an individual for the purpose of eliminating Fiends, a rarity at the time. The man making the request was Vizaist Socalent, and backing him up was none other than Berwick.

As Berwick's old friend, Vizaist was made the commander, but the existence of a young boy named Alus was the most important factor. After all, he'd finished the special training program that normally took several years to complete in just six months. And so Berwick wanted to show the abilities and future prospects of Alus to the top brass by piling up his achievements.

Moreover, haste was necessary. The special training program targeted orphan children and was thus criticized by many. And further, Alus's uncertain origins and young age also played a big part. Putting him into actual combat wouldn't just be a violation of military discipline; it would also invite criticism from the international community. So it was only natural that the military was expected to fight it. There would be strong opposition, but Berwick determined that Alus was worth the trouble.

Berwick himself was skeptical of the Magicmaster training program that had been started by his predecessor. Even so, he thought there was enough potential to push back on the criticism and turn a blind eye to the ethical issues.

Indeed, sometimes it was worth braving the risks. The battle against the Fiends went on, but their very existence posed a threat, and there was also the possibility of unexpected evolution. He believed that if they focused on nothing but defense that the future of the human race would be closed off.

That was all the more reason he couldn't allow such an outstanding talent to get crushed. Alus's powers far exceeded the norm, so as a temporary measure

he formed the Special Unit. Also, he'd only just become the Governor-General and had a lot of political enemies, which put his position in danger. Therefore, he'd had Vizaist put his name down as the applicant making the request.

Berwick also expected that the competent Vizaist, as the captain of the squad, would be able to skillfully control Alus. He also hoped to eventually bring Vizaist into the military's top brass.

He had few allies he could trust, which made his position unstable. Because of his goals, the Special Unit included many people from Berwick's faction, and he'd also chosen to gather oddballs so that this wouldn't stand out.

However, it backfired on him. The formation of an eccentric unit immediately attracted the military's attention.

The newly established unit went about their duties in earnest in order to gather achievements. Since the squad was formed at an individual's request, there was a chance they'd be disbanded if they didn't produce results.

Despite the circumstances, this unit that included Alus was off to a good start, a spectacular one even. It boasted an unusually high mission completion rate for a new unit and quickly became the target of rumors in the military.

After months of completing missions in the Outer World, on a certain day in the hectic and busy life of the unit...

"It's no good... My back hurts too much." A man stumbled into the squad's waiting room and lay down on a row of four chairs. He was only in his twenties but seemed to be suffering quite a bit. He made sure to carefully bend his knees so as not to further hurt his back. But it was clear that he wasn't as worn out as he said.

The man, Lindelph Maeger, tilted his head to the side and wound up peeking under the table. As soon as he did, his eyes that had been slowly closing suddenly opened wide. "Unfortunately, I prefer white over black, but your commitment to supporting the troops is admirable, Elina!"

The woman sitting across from him closed her legs at his words. Her face turned red. Of course the squad had gathered seasoned warriors, so it wasn't from embarrassment but from anger. The sudden movement made her tied-

back golden hair bounce.

The woman called Elina had long bangs, with one side covering an eye and the other side tucked behind her ear. Lindelph was twenty-six and she was twenty-two. Also, he had a higher military rank than her, but when it came to ranking as a Magicmaster, she was far above him.



Elina quickly held down her skirt. “Lindelph, that’s the fifth time this week. I hope you’re ready to die,” she said with a chilling smile, as she threw the documents she’d been reading onto the chair next to hers.

The next moment, the table bent upwards as it was split in two. She’d kicked up from below.

“—! Hang on, I’m weak... Whoa!” Elina had kicked her leg up high...and Lindelph’s eyes were drawn to the obvious place. He welcomed the sight of the black piece of cloth covering the forbidden garden even under these circumstances. “Black’s pretty good too!”

“A-And again!” She skillfully changed her posture and concealed the garden. Embarrassment turned her cheeks red. However, her raised leg didn’t look to be returning to its original position anytime soon, as she put more power into it. “Don’t worry. After I split your skull open, you will be treated as having died honorably in battle and buried with dignity.”

“H-Hold on! S-Seriously!” Shrinking back, Lindelph stared up at Elina with a look of horror on his face. But even then, strangely, he acted in a theatrical manner, perhaps because of his personality. Or he may have been a pathetic man who could only be optimistic even in the face of death.

Elina showed no signs of caring and brought her leg down in a beautiful semi-circle, grazing his nose.

“—! Ack!” He had been in a position that would’ve made it impossible to dodge, but for some reason he just barely escaped the attack. Lindelph’s body floated in the air for a moment, then fell to the ground with a thud, and he hit the side of his head.

Elina snorted, leaving the pitiful Lindelph alone as she glanced to the side. “Alus, there’s no reason to go out of your way to save that man.”

“Not at all, Ms. Elina. We can’t cover up a man dying here. So if you’re going to do it, do it in the Outer World,” Alus answered her with a surly face. Just before Elina’s leg landed, he’d kicked away the chair Lindelph was on. Having his support pulled out from under him, he’d fallen, and the kick only grazed him

instead of hitting him full on. But knowing her, it was likely she'd attacked expecting Alus to intervene.

Had anything gone differently it could have been a disaster, but this kind of thing had been a daily occurrence since the unit's establishment. It was a cliché, in fact. If something like this wasn't happening, there must be an emergency going on.

It was unfortunate that Alus was getting caught up in this slapstick routine. "And if you don't cut it out soon, I won't save you anymore, Mr. Lindelph."

"Don't be like that, Alus. It's the unavoidable fate of being born a man. You'll understand in a few years. That uncontrollable impulse is something all men get."

"Don't feed Alus your nonsense! Lin—delph!!"

"Agh!" Lindelph exclaimed, still lying on the floor. His face suddenly contorted.

Elina looked down at him like he was trash and stomped on him.

"I don't think showing him this is very good for his education either... Argh!"

"Shut up, you piece of trash." Elina put more weight into her heel, then looked up with her expression completely changed. She gave Alus a soft and pure smile. If one only saw her upper body, it would be impossible to guess what her lower half was doing. "Alus, don't listen to anything he says, okay? There are more respectable adults in this unit..." Elina paused to think for a moment. "In the military," she amended, changing her mind with a smile.

"Does that include me, Second Lieutenant Elina?" a deep voice suddenly resounded.

"—! Captain Vizaist... W-Well...of course. As long as we don't mention that grin whenever you brag about your daughter."

"Uh, er... A-As a father, that can't be helped..."

"By the way, Elina, do you think you could move your foot...? Even the captain agrees that it's in a man's nature to grin over women. You need to be a more generous woman."

At Lindelph's words, Vizaist gazed down at him on the floor with a cold stare. "Don't compare me to you. You just have a lecherous heart."

"Come on! Captain..."

"More importantly, get up and clean this room, Lindelph."

Lindelph's head drooped, and he answered with a weak "Yes."

The next moment, the squad members started gathering in the room. They'd only just returned from a mission. Of course, so had Lindelph and Alus. They'd been in the Outer World for the past few days without rest, so they were rather exhausted.

When the others saw the room in a mess, they sighed as if they'd seen this countless times before. In fact it was part of their daily life, so the sight made them feel a little refreshed and even relieved.

The Special Unit consisted of fifteen members. On rare occasions the entire unit was mobilized, but for most Outer World missions they usually went in groups of six or seven.

Vizaist was the commanding officer and Lindelph was second in command. Incidentally, Lindelph was an excellent officer, but because of his personality he tended to be looked down on. So, normally someone of his caliber would have been assigned to another position.

At any rate, the other squad members thought that Berwick must have gathered them here to re-educate the problem children.

Alus, of course, was in the same category. Again, the unit was made up of members with unique personalities. And all of them treated Alus as a fellow Magicmaster rather than as a child. They acknowledged his abilities.

His nature also played a big role in that. He showed no expressions or emotions, and spoke flatly like a robot. In other words, he didn't act like a child in the slightest. Even when the unit was first established, people doubted his age. He looked like a worn-out soldier wearing the skin of a child.

That's why they typically didn't hold back around him. Even if he was better than anyone else in the unit in terms of ability, that didn't mean much to this

group that knew nothing about being reserved.

“Alus, try to look at the bigger picture. If we don’t understand everyone’s roles there wouldn’t be any point in teaming up,” one of the members said, reviewing their previous mission.

“Yeah, taking out the high-classed Fiend wasn’t a bad choice, but it could have been depending on the situation,” another member said with his arms crossed, as he leaned against the wall. “That’s what happened this time. Because of your actions, our movements became more restricted. It’s not like you trust us, but...”

“Yes, I’ll be more careful next time,” Alus said bluntly, without so much as turning to look at the man, like he had no interest in working with him.

Even so, he didn’t mean anything bad by it. Despite his attitude, after these kinds of exchanges his behavior would always change. Besides, everyone knew that being able to see the big picture took experience.

Alus’s growth was astounding, even considering this. It wasn’t something he’d learned anywhere; it was simply raw talent. That was why the members didn’t mind his attitude, as they gave him advice mixed with stern words.

“Oh dear, people are so warped. Alus is still just a child.” ...With one exception. Elina spoke in a joking tone, as she put her hand on Alus’s head.

The unit understood that her warm demeanor was a sign of her high hopes for Alus’s future. The only reason Alus didn’t realize it was because he was still a child.

Lindelph, who was cleaning up the chair damaged beyond repair and the table that had been split in two, glanced over and said, “But he’s stronger than anyone here.”

“...” Everyone already understood that. They just didn’t say it out loud.

Lindelph never said anything about how Alus handled himself in the Outer World. That was because he was conflicted over it. He wasn’t sure if someone as exceptional as Alus should be tied down by the usual methods of warfare such as coordinating with others. It was the most important thing in a unit, but to Alus it might just be a restraint.

No... Normally the establishment of coordination and teamwork was essential for victory, so maybe the problem really was that he was a child.

There was a tacit understanding that Alus was a second generation product of the rumored Magicmaster training program. No one talked about it because the first generation was quickly wiped out in the Outer World. Even among the second generation, Alus was pretty much the only one still serving.

Vizaist surveyed his unit and let out a tired sigh. “Coordination is the lifeline of a unit, and while it’s not really my place to say this, it would be too late by the time you learned that lesson the hard way. But in the end, it’s your call, Alus. Your talent is in a league of its own. Sooner or later you’ll go beyond what a normal person can do. But that’s why you can’t rely on just your sense. Start by learning theory and thinking with your head,” Vizaist said, rolling up some papers and tapping Alus on the head with them.

“Understood.”

His usual monotone made Vizaist wonder if he really understood, and he sighed again.

“Or so the commander says, but he constantly disobeys orders, so he’s learned his lessons the hard way himself,” Elina pointed out.

“Elina, aren’t you being too lenient with Alus?” But Vizaist’s honest opinion lacked vigor. It seemed clear that he’d been driven away as a nuisance. That was just what Berwick had planned.

“This is just the right balance. There’s only a bunch of strict adults around here. Besides, don’t you have a very high opinion of Alus yourself, Captain? You seem convinced he’ll be a first-rate Magicmaster in the future.” Elina poked at his real feelings with an implicating smile. But it was she who held the highest opinion of Alus.

Vizaist turned to the door as if to escape, but then suddenly turned to address the unit. “I’m sorry for bringing this up when you’re tired, but there’s something I need to show you.” It was a forced change in topic, but he said it with a bitter look as if to say trouble was brewing. That was normal, but his showing something to them rarely happened.

For better or worse, their unit attracted a lot of attention in the military. They completed hard mission after hard mission. Their achievements had piled up, and they steadily earned renown. That meant, of course, that there was no end to the orders and requests they received. It was difficult even picking out which mission to take on next.

But lately there'd been some that had been pushed on them in hopes of staining their record, out of jealousy. The relationship Vizaist had with the new Governor-General, Berwick, was well-known in the military. That's why some nobles and officers who didn't like the way the new regime was doing things tried to force reckless missions on the unit. In short, it was politically motivated. That Alpha's top brass and military were not a monolith was a major source of concern for Berwick.

Vizaist led the Special Unit members to a certain research area in the military headquarters. This area focused on the development of new spells, the creation of AWRs, and other items for use in the Outer World, even military clothing.

They were underground in a place used as a storage facility for supplies. Arriving at a small room, Vizaist held his license up against the panel next to the door. The door slid open and the light in the ceiling turned on. It was completely empty aside from one thing.

"Captain...what is this?" Lindelph asked with his mouth open.

The other squad members had the same reaction, or furrowed their brows with unease.

In the center of the room was a big cage. The bars were as thick as a man's arm, and not only were they sturdily welded but they stretched vertically and horizontally to form a crisscross pattern. And inside of it was...

"A-A Fiend?!" someone muttered out loud.

From behind the grid, an eerie low roar bellowed out. The creature in the cage moved slightly. At the same time the shadows shifted, allowing the creature to be seen more clearly.

At a closer look, it was by no means a Fiend. It lacked the distorted shape typical for a Fiend and the ominous body color. If anything, it had a more heroic

appearance. It looked like a creature thought to be extinct... A wolf. To those who didn't know what wolves were, it was like a big dog.

It was covered in silver-white fur and had a long, whip-like tail. Fierce eyes glared as if staring at prey, its sharp fangs bared to intimidate. The blade-like claws were bent in a crescent shape, and each time they scratched the floor it made a clattering sound.

Even if it looked like a wolf or dog, its size was clearly abnormal. At first glance it appeared to be more than three meters long. The size and ferocious growl were more than enough to mistake it for a Fiend.

"This thing was created through an experiment," Vizaist said. "Supposedly it's a Fiendog capable of detecting Fiends."

"And you call this a dog?" Lindelph asked, after a pause.

"Well, they said it was a result of tweaking some genes. It's capable of generating and using mana as well as detecting Fiends. As you know, spotters are a precious resource, so this was created as a potential replacement. It was a desperate measure of sorts." Vizaist flipped through some documents as he continued his explanation to the dumbfounded and wary unit. "So by creating a bunch of these, there'll be fewer ambushes in the Outer World. Moving on to the main topic, I want you to take this with you to the Outer World for a while and gather data."

"T-Take this thing, Captain? It looks like it wants to tear us apart." Lindelph had a good point. The creature's growling was nonstop, and no one wanted to be side-by-side with a beast that had hate in its eyes and kept baring its fangs.

"That's true. It doesn't look very cooperative..." Elina noted with a furrowed brow.

Vizaist smiled wryly. "Well, it wouldn't be. As a result of its mana-generating organs and aggressive genetic modifications, it seems to have developed a rather difficult personality. That's why I had you come take a look at it first. By the way, there are some special circumstances behind this request, so don't expect to be able to refuse it so easily."

"So it's not a request made by the research team? It's from higher up, then...

More of the usual harassment? But isn't this a little too much...?" As Vizaist's adjutant, Elina did some clerical work such as checking orders and preparing documents, so she was well aware of the Special Unit's position in the military. It couldn't be helped, then, that she sounded somewhat disgusted.

"Hang on a second, Captain." That's when a rugged skinhead squad member interrupted the two. "Just touching it might work. It's only an animal and it's probably scared from being locked up here all alone." With that, he fearlessly walked over to the cage.

The others watched in silence.

"I don't know anything about genetic modifications or whatever, but it should warm up to me if I just rub its chin...like this." He put his hand through the bars.

And in the next moment the Fiendog leaped at the man's arm with enough force to shake the cage.

"Aaahhh!!!" The squad member pulled his hand back in the nick of time, and the sharp fangs bit through air. He almost fell over but managed to regain his posture, then turned around as if nothing had happened. "Well, it is just an animal. Guess it'll be difficult to communicate with it."

The squad looked at him with exasperation, while Elina called him an idiot under her breath.

"You sure gave up fast considering how confident you were," Vizaist observed.

"It's just that our usual common sense doesn't apply. The research team sure made something crazy." The man exhaled in relief, then shrugged.

"Besides, I'm pretty sure it's *cats* that like having their chin rubbed. If that looks like a cat to you, I suggest you get your eyes checked out," Elina said with a cold stare.

That's when Alus pointed at the cage. "Look at it drooling. It's like a predator that just missed its prey."

"And you were calling it just an animal. It only saw you as prey," Elina said, looking at the skinhead squad member.

Lindelph, in the meantime, wisely kept his mouth shut, trying his best not to stand out.

Vizaist considered what Alus said. “Then why don’t you give it a try, Alus? If it’s a matter of ability, you just have to keep it from thinking of you as prey, right?”

“—! What are you talking about? What are you going to do if something happens to Alus?!” Elina was the only one who was overprotective of Alus, and she immediately stepped in. Maybe it was her motherly instincts at work.

“Now that’s a needless worry. In essence, it just needs to acknowledge someone as its owner. I can’t think of anyone more suited than Alus,” Vizaist replied.

“That’s true, but...”

“I don’t mind.” Without waiting for them to finish their conversation, Alus walked over to the cage with light steps. Once he was close enough for the animal to reach him if it stuck its claws through the bars, it started to growl again. But since Alus was so much smaller than it was, it wasn’t so much out of hostility as simple intimidation.

“That’s enough, Alus! It’s too dangerous to get any closer!”

Alus ignored Elina’s warning and took another step forward. Or rather, he was so focused on what was in front of him that her words never reached his ears.

He got a strange feeling, and it wasn’t just because he was concentrating. Animals existed in the Outer World too, but he’d never seen such a magnificent creature before. It was even more astounding up close. A lonely looking beast, created to be powerful, ferocious and gallant and yet somehow fragile. It reminded Alus of himself in a way.

That was when the creature began to panic in an instinctive sense, because Alus, unlike those who came before him, showed no signs of fear. It felt that its territory was about to be invaded. It howled, its sharp claws scratching the bars, not ripping them up but leaving scratch marks, amid the deafening metallic sounds.

The sounds triggered an unconscious reaction in Alus. His body responded as

if he'd been attacked, and his survival instincts—trained in the Outer World—immediately reacted. Mana overflowed from him as he readied himself for battle.

Even the other unit members, who were used to it, didn't expect this to happen in the Inner World. They took a step back, bathed in the aftermath of the vast amounts of mana that had been released.

"Whoa?! T-Talk about a cruel thing to do!" Lindelph exclaimed.

"Sudden or not, I wish you could at least keep it under control," Vizaist said with a sigh.

"Y-Yeah. Y-You still have a long ways to go."

"That's not very convincing coming from you when your legs are shaking, Lindelph," Elina noted. "Still, how fearsome."

Various squad members then spoke up.

"Yeah, we'll be fine. But that dog's in trouble."

"What are you more worried about, its being useless with its current attitude or that Alus might finish it off?"

"...Both. Well, I can only feel sorry for it."

The squad members whispered to one another while staying alert to the situation.

"Should children really be like that? Speaking of which, isn't your kid..."

"Yeah, they're the same age. Although I wonder if we can even call him a child."

"He's a reliable ally, but far from a child..."

"It's kind of pitiful really," someone muttered.

This caused Elina to glare at the imprudent member, who quickly said, "Ah! S-Sorry. That's not what I meant."

"S-Sorry," said the member he'd been talking with. They must have noticed how inappropriate their conversation was and apologized for it.

Elina was one thing, but Alus himself showed no sign of caring. In fact, it was questionable whether he'd even heard them.

Elina gave Alus a caring look and tried to call out to him as softly as possible. "Alus, that's enough. I'd feel bad for that dog if you pushed it any further too." Her voice didn't seem to reach him as he took another step towards the cage.

Intimidated by Alus's pressure, the Fiendog tensed. It was something everyone in the room could feel.

Suddenly, there was a loud sound that filled the room. Alus snapped back to reality and turned to see Vizaist's thick hands pressed together, having just clapped loudly. He'd probably also used wind magic to amplify the sound. "All right, that's enough, Alus."

Alus looked back at the cage.

"—!!" The unit members reacted as something shocking happened. The Fiendog had slowly retreated and whimpered as it sat down, bringing its head low. Its nose and tail lay flat on the ground, the ferocity it had exuded before nowhere to be seen. The way it expressed its submission with its entire body was even a little endearing. Instead of returning Alus's stare, it simply gazed down at the floor. It was a pose of yielding to the other party, something that could mean death in the natural world of the strong and the weak.

With a broad smile, Vizaist said in a booming voice, "Then it's decided. We'll keep the Fiendog in our unit for a while. Moreover, Alus, you will take care of it and work together with it in the Outer World. Do you understand?" Despite his authoritative tone, he wore a gentle expression. *Well, it might not be a normal animal...but something might change if he takes care of a pet.*

Vizaist was relieved that they wouldn't have to turn down the request, but he would've come up with a good excuse if necessary. So in the end, he unintentionally showed something akin to a parental sentiment, like a father hoping his troublesome son would undergo an emotional change.

Three days later, the Fiendog officially arrived at the Special Unit's standby room. Apparently it took a lot of work to get it out of the cage and bring it all this way. They'd hurriedly ordered a special-made collar and leash, but it took time to make something that couldn't be easily chewed through.

Attached to the large collar was a leash made of thick chain that was made with the assumption that several adults would be pulling on it. Even with that, it seemed like they would be powerless if it decided to run wild. Not to mention that it would be Alus, a literal child, who would be holding the leash. Naturally, the squad members were uneasy.

The Fiendog's size and presence made the already small room feel even more cramped, but at the moment it was quietly lying down with its eyes closed. It folded its paws and rested its head on them. It also appeared to be pretty intelligent, capable of understanding most things through gestures.

The members seemed unconvinced, but according to the researchers it should eventually be able to understand simple words too. Of course, for the time being it would only follow Alus's orders.

Since the leash was too large to wrap around his wrist, Alus wrapped it around his arm instead. However, it didn't appear that he had to use any real force to get the Fiendog to move.

The current policy was to get the creature as used to the unit as possible and improve their communication. Trial or not, since its primary use was detection, it needed to be able to work alongside the unit. In addition, it was decided that the laboratory's warehouse would be used for its room outside of non-training hours and for sleeping.

Vizaist watched the Fiendog as it was led around by Alus, as the unit also looked on from a distance. "We'll be going on missions together from now on, so it'd be a little tasteless for this thing to not have a name. So I want you all to think of one," he declared, as if welcoming a newcomer to the unit. But since that newcomer looked a little too aggressive, everyone first turned to look at Alus.

Elina began the conversation. She turned to Alus, who was less than half the size of the dog, and gently asked, "Alus, do you have any suggestions?"

"White," Alus said after a pause.

Hearing this, most of the unit slapped their foreheads or just shook their heads. They all seemed to be saying that name would be out of the question.

“Isn’t that a little too on the nose? Besides, its fur is more silver than white,” Vizaist said, adding in his complaint. He felt it was too mundane for someone joining the military, even if it was just a dog.

The Fiendog kept its eyes closed, as if in agreement, although that might have been because it really was sleeping.

“Then, how about you, Captain? Any suggestions?” Elina asked in Alus’s stead, as he was too busy frowning.

“Well... Hm, I do have a name I thought up in case my wife had a boy. How about Golmance?”

The room froze over. For some moments silence hung over them, until Elina timidly asked, “By the way, what was your daughter called again?”

“It’s Felinella. My wife rejected the name I thought up.”

“A-And just to confirm, what was it?”

“Golnea!”

The entire unit, apart from Alus, looked at Vizaist with their mouths wide open. Elina ran her fingers through her hair, then put it behind her ear before shaking her head. She spoke as the group’s representative. “How atrocious...”

“—! Y-Yes, my wife may have turned it down, but I spent three days and nights thinking of that name. I only want my daughter to grow up strong, though, and with a desire to improve herself.”

“Sure, I understand how you feel, Captain, but that name brings up an image of bulging muscles and broad shoulders. You owe your wife big time.”

“True, Felinella is a fine name, but the name I thought up is...”

“That’s enough, Captain,” Elina said. “Any more will affect unit morale.”

Vizaist’s head and shoulders drooped and he moved away from the circle.

“All right, anyone else? Please. Anything.” Elina had wound up taking charge of the conversation. It was a shame for the captain, but it was unavoidable.

“We should determine if it’s a boy or a girl first,” someone suggested.

“Hm, good point.” Elina nodded and turned to Alus. “Which is it?” She

couldn’t check herself because it was only answering to Alus. More specifically, it had acknowledged Alus as its master. But from the unit’s point of view, it appeared that the animal was also starting to get attached to him.

“It’s a boy,” Alus immediately replied, as if he’d checked before.

“There you have it, so think up a good name.”

“H-Hold on, if it’s a boy, that’s all the more reason to call it Golmance...”

“Just shut up please, Captain! Let’s bring up names and watch the dog’s reaction to decide it. He should react when he hears something that he likes,” Elina said.

“Agh...” Having had the knife twisted in him, Vizaist’s shoulders dropped even further. He sat down while holding his knees.

“All right, we don’t have much time, so be serious. We’re not calling our new member something as embarrassing as Golmance!”

Vizaist looked like he wanted to say something, but Elina’s glare made him hold it in.

The squad mentioned every name they could think of, but the Fiendog showed no interest in any of them. It was also hard to call any of them good names, and it got to the point where Alus’s suggestion of “White” was one of the top candidates.

“How about Nike? It’s what I called my cat back home,” a member suggested. The Fiendog’s ear twitched.

Elina nodded, but had to check. “Just to be sure, it didn’t have some tragic death or other thing that would be an ill omen, right?”

“She passed away a year ago, but she lived a full life! She was my only family, always waiting to greet me whenever I went back home,” the member said with a nostalgic look and tears in his eyes. To the others, though, he looked more like a sad bachelor than a cat lover. Of course with the high number of singles in the unit, there were many who sympathized with him.

Elina mulled it over, and glanced at Alus. But he only silently looked on.

Vizaist interpreted this as a sign that the decision was up to him and spoke up.

“Nike, the goddess of victory, if I recall. This is a boy, but it’s not bad. If we just think of it as a name associated with victory it will be a good sign for our unit.”

“And it’s easy to say too.” When Elina nodded, the dog’s ears twitched again and he opened one of his eyes. He looked more like he’d just woken up and less like he was agreeing with everyone, but that brought the unproductive discussion to an end.

After that, Nike was sent to the Outer World and training grounds in preparation for live combat. The unit seemed to get used to him as they treated him like another member. But unless Alus was next to him, they were reluctant to even touch him.

Incidentally, they concluded that Nike’s combat abilities were the equivalent of a D-class Fiend and that he could detect Fiends up to two kilometers away. Once he detected a Fiend, he was expected to fall back and support the unit.

Expecting an animal to not only detect but also support was asking a lot, but Nike was intelligent and showed he had the ability to make optimum decisions even without orders. Thanks to the efforts of the unit members that trained diligently even in their spare time, Nike acquired a good understanding of the squad’s formation and coordinated actions.

An unexpected by-product was that it was useful for Alus too. He was also able to rethink and learn about the unit’s concept of coordination. Of course, unlike Nike, two days was enough for him to perfectly master it in theory.

Soon, Nike’s collar was removed. It was still necessary for getting him out of the cage, but there was no longer any need to worry about it coming off in the Outer World. The leash had also been replaced with a normal leather one. Whenever Alus walked Nike, he would follow one step behind Alus.

Ever since Nike’s arrival, Alus had changed. The unit members and Vizaist vaguely picked up on it. At first, Alus would head to the laboratory’s warehouse to take care of Nike, but it wasn’t long before Nike started sleeping in the unit’s room.

The unit went out of their way to make space and even made a wooden dog house, though due to his size it was large enough for adults to fit in too.

And in the blink of an eye, it was finally time for Nike's first live combat experience. On his first mission he exceeded all expectations. He didn't get flustered and steadily and surely completed the mission. When a Fiend approached, he sensed it before anyone, pointing his head in the direction of the threat and barking. In addition, he was able to convey the distance by repeatedly barking and changing the volume. His basic movements were a result of his training, but everything else was thanks to his high intelligence.

As a result, during the clean-up operation, they killed twice as many Fiends as usual. It was clear to all that this was because of Nike. It also made the unit members who had helped with his training happy.

Once they were back in their standby room in the Outer World, everyone talked about Nike's achievements with big smiles.

They decided to hold a party to congratulate Nike and celebrate the mission's completion. Nike was given meat on a bone for the occasion. He drooled a waterfall and got right to chewing it before Vizaist even finished his speech. The party was a great success from start to finish...except for the moment when Vizaist got carried away and tried to give Nike alcohol, which Elina promptly put a stop to.

Needless to say, the excitement became an unforgettable memory for everyone in the squad. Without times like this, the Outer World would constantly wear down a Magicmaster. Even if it was just a fleeting thing, the memory would help boost their morale. Most of all, just being able to experience daily life helped ease their minds, whether they realized it or not.

Afterwards, as proof of being properly welcomed as a new member of the unit, Nike was given a new collar. It was luxurious and made of shiny leather with a silver plate engraved with his name. Alus had done the engraving himself.

Nike's neck was so thick that Alus struggled to get his arms around him. With Elina's help they were able to get it on, leaving enough space so he wouldn't feel choked by it. At that moment he let out a proud and happy-sounding howl that he never had during training.

Alus and Nike started spending all their time together, even when not on

missions, to the point that Alus would stay over in the standby room. When Vizaist saw Alus peacefully sleeping like a child his age should with Nike wrapped around him, he was deeply moved. Seeing him this way, the members understood how Alus had changed.



On their one day off a month, Alus and Nike went out to some open space within the military headquarters to play ball. It was a simple game of fetch, but using mana and magic, Alus threw the ball over a hundred meters. Since Nike was so powerful, it wouldn't have worked unless he did at least that much.

Another unit member tried playing fetch once by throwing the ball normally, but Nike snatched it out of the air the moment he threw it. With the Fiendog's powerful legs and movement enhanced by mana, he was frighteningly fast. At first they used a rubber ball, but it was quickly chewed through, so now they used a ball made out of special impact-resistant material.

Five months passed after Nike joined the unit. One day, everyone gathered in the standby room. Their missions were the same as before but they'd increased in number, which physically wore the unit down. But morale remained high, and Nike's presence played a big part in that.

Vizaist, sitting at his desk, looked over the unit and spoke with a bitter expression. "Our mission this time will be somewhat troublesome."

The unit members shrugged, as if to ask why that would be different from the usual. Troublesome missions made up their everyday life. There were practically no missions that weren't troublesome. Even so, they were proud to have made it all this way without losing anyone.

"This time, the circumstances are different," Elina, standing next to Vizaist, followed up.

"The orders this time come directly from Governor-General Berwick. We're going to clean up someone else's mess," Vizaist said stiffly. He could speak normally about it now, but when he received the orders from Berwick, his veins had bulged with anger and he'd unconsciously crumpled up the written orders.

Seeing Vizaist was getting worked up again, Elina took over in the hopes of calming him down. "This is an urgent matter. So far we've been constantly sent out to expand Alpha's territory...and I'm sure many of you have realized that most of those orders come from Lieutenant General Morwald of the Unified Offensive Command Center. All those orders go through the general staff where

he holds sway.”

Nobody was particularly surprised at that. It might be an exaggeration to say he held a grudge against them, but it was clear Morwald didn’t appreciate the fact that someone like Vizaist was producing such favorable results. And he most definitely didn’t like that the new Governor-General had appointed Vizaist to establish a new unit.

Berwick’s political base was steadily taking form, but the faction of high-ranking officers and officials from noble families still remained strong. In other words, Lt. General Morwald led the noble faction that opposed Berwick. It was rumored that this noble faction was trying to appoint a Single that would be under their control, and that they’d continued in their efforts even after Berwick was appointed.

Because of that, the unit knew that attempts to take them down weren’t uncommon, but Morwald had been letting his position do the talking lately with some very blatant harassment.

The Special Fiend Attack Unit was technically under the general staff’s control, but in reality, it acted independently. Berwick supported the unit, but the public believed that Vizaist had founded and established the unit himself. It was designated as a special unit so that it wouldn’t be under anyone’s command, which was why they weren’t required to obey the general staff’s reckless orders.

Nevertheless, with Berwick’s position still unstable, they couldn’t show any weakness in front of his political enemies. That’s why the Special Unit didn’t turn down any orders and carried out their missions with the utmost care. It was a tightrope walk, but thanks to Alus and their new addition, Nike, they’d completed all missions with no failures.

“In addition, Lt. General Morwald’s own troops have been out in the Outer World, and...this part is rubbish...” Elina let out a tired sigh before shifting gears and continuing, “Two days ago, the target they were tracking seventy-five kilometers to the southeast was lost.”

The unit members, seeing where this was going, looked at each other in dismay. “In other words, they want us to hunt it down instead?” one member

asked, addressing Vizaist instead of Elina, with frustration and anger in his words.

And why wouldn't there be? They'd been forced to do one unreasonable thing after another. And now they were even being forced to cover for the failure of some other unit, cleaning up their mess. It was truly the short end of the stick.

Not to mention that the target was apparently crafty enough to evade pursuit by a larger force, so the chance for fatalities was high. It was really the worst. However...

"That's right," Vizaist said. "As a soldier, once the order comes there's no backing down. Also, we're currently the highest achieving unit at headquarters. Harassment or not, it's a formal order from Berwick as well, meaning it's not the kind of mission we could refuse." He signaled Elina with his eyes. Her fingers tapped on the virtual keyboard on the edge of the desk, as she looked down at the documents in her other hand.

Before long, a large virtual screen appeared behind Vizaist. It displayed a map of the Outer World. In the southeast was a red dot that Elina indicated with her gaze. "From what we know, it's an A-class Fiend, the spider type Arachne. Its expected escape route..." A dotted line appeared on the screen, as she spoke and traced it with her finger.

"—!!!" The unit members reacted.

She moved her finger until reaching a place that shook the unit up. One member said, "You've got to be fucking kidding me... So they couldn't keep up with it, but they kindly managed to attach a tracking signal to the target! How much more transparent of a scheme can you get!" The blood went to the unit member's head as he shouted with exaggerated gestures.

"That's enough. Yes, unfortunately the target is on course for a restricted area in Clevideet," Elina confirmed.

When a nation reclaimed some territory, the rights to it would be determined in a meeting of rulers. Until then, as long as the region was within a hundred kilometers from the nation's border, that nation had provisional sovereignty.

That was the restricted area Elina referred to. It was like an imaginary boundary between countries extending out from the nations' borders through the Outer World. And the nation the Fiend was fleeing to was a neighboring nation Alpha wasn't on very good terms with.

Also, it should be noted that Morwald's troops weren't on an internationally recognized mission to retake territory. They were simply wiping out Fiends for Alpha's convenience. That's why it would be a huge political failure if, by their own doing, they drove an A-class Fiend into another nation's territory. Moreover, if the target came across Clevideet troops and caused casualties, the blame would fall on Alpha. It would be like they drove an injured beast into someone else's territory, one they should've killed themselves.

Berwick had likely shared the information immediately with Clevideet, and assured them that Alpha would take responsibility and resolve the problem.

"Why do we have to..." More angry words came from one of the members.

Typically, a force of Doubles was the standard for dealing with an A-class. In some cases a Single would even be sent out. However, this unit only had Elina and Alus as its Double Digit Magicmasters. There were many members with long careers but few had exceptional talent, so they were Triples at most. As for teamwork, they weren't going to lose to an elite unit composed of Doubles, but their rank average still left something to be desired.

Alus's contributions to the unit's achievements were just too big. He was currently a Double, but many in the unit felt he was a future Single candidate. However, that remained to be seen. After all, he was still a child.

Lindelph, in a cold sweat, quietly watched the proceedings. His military rank was second only to Vizaist's in this unit. And with Vizaist often dealing with things behind the scenes, he was usually the commander in the field. He was somewhat panicking at the unit's low morale. Great teamwork or not, fear and other negative emotions would definitely hinder them. The unit's usual cheerfulness was gone, replaced with a bitterness that made Lindelph uneasy.

That was when Vizaist said, as if to dispel the restless atmosphere, "Hm, you all sure look gloomy... Well, depending on how you look at it, that anger's not so bad."

“What do you mean?” the frustrated member asked.

“Just think about it. A stupid superior officer screwed up on his own. We clean up his mess...and now he owes us. Plus, we get something we can use to unseat him from his position. Wouldn’t you call that a great situation?” Vizaist showed a wicked grin.

His grin soon spread through the unit, and before long everyone was grinning. “Though it’s still a big mess,” someone jokingly noted.

With just a few words, Vizaist had quelled the frustration the soldiers felt. Lindelph couldn’t help but be impressed.

Even Elina’s doubtful expression had cleared up. She said in a vigorous voice, “Then it’s decided! The fifteen here will form a team with Captain Lindelph in command.”

“What?!”

“Hm? Are you unhappy with that, Lindelph?”

“N-No, I was just thinking that you yourself should be in charge of such an important mission, Commander...”

“I have something else I need to do here. Don’t worry, I believe in your skills. You just need to handle it like normal.”

Lindelph didn’t know exactly what it was that Vizaist had to do, but he was both happy and confused. Considering his skills and rank as a Magicmaster, he almost shook his head in disbelief, but he did have the confidence from having stood in for their commander before. And considering the unit’s morale, he felt like he could pull it off.

Then Vizaist spoke up again, giving Lindelph a final push. “I know you can do it. Listen up! I want you to kill the target without fail. I’ll have a feast ready for your return, so don’t forget that. Let’s meet again after the mission is complete.”

“Let’s meet again after the mission is complete!” the unit members shouted in unison. Their feet snapped into place as they saluted.

“Set out immediately once preparations are finished!” Vizaist concluded in a

bold voice with a rugged smile.

The members charged into the changing room, with Alus and Nike following.

Behind them, Vizaist spoke up. “Lindelph. Elina.” The two stopped and turned around with puzzled looks. Unlike his previous resolute appearance, he now had a more somber expression. Seeing that, Lindelph and Elina stood at the ready. “Take good care of Alus.”

They immediately knew what he meant. In fact, they’d been ordered to do so when the unit was established. It was something people inevitably came to understand when they were in the unit. It could be felt even if nothing had been said about it.

Alus’s latent power and potential were immensely important to humankind’s future. It was clear that he would one day become a Single. It was obvious even now. In addition to his sense for combat, he had an extraordinary repertoire of spells and power.

On top of that, they’d completed several long-term missions and his mana seemed bottomless. With most of the unit being Triple Digits, there was a huge difference in their abilities compared with Alus.

Another astounding aspect of Alus was his incredible rate of growth. Day by day, he absorbed and reflected on the experience he accumulated in the most optimum way. The unit members had been confident in their experience at first, but now there was little they could teach him and even thinking of advice was difficult, which was why it was impossible not to expect more from Alus.

A Single could influence a nation’s future. In the past, Alpha had a Single named Sisty Nexophia, and there were countless times she had helped Alpha. Especially in defensive battles—in which she excelled—she could match more than a hundred regular Magicmasters, even though she was only the ranked No. 9.

So once Alus became a Single, to what heights could he climb? And what kind of heroics would he perform? It was an irreplaceable, glorious future, Lindelph thought to himself. He cleared his throat while nodding to Vizaist, determination in his eyes.

But Elina wasn't satisfied with just that level of determination. "Leave it to me! Lindelph can be unreliable, but I'll be here too!" she enthusiastically said, puffing out her chest with pride.

She was a rather skilled Magicmaster, and Berwick and Vizaist had both worked hard to bring her into the unit. She wasn't thrilled about it initially, but her attitude completely changed after she met Alus.

At a young age, Elina had been left with the command of a certain unit that primarily focused on defensive missions under Sisty's jurisdiction. At the same time she was Sisty's student and a fierce fighter that had been through the hellfire of battle.

She had no family, and the top brass hadn't brought her under their wing either, making her perfect for protecting and mentoring Alus.

In spite of appearances, the same could be said for Lindelph. He'd been recruited for his wisdom and wit rather than his skills as a Magicmaster. They'd both been on Vizaist's mind for a while and were the first people he approached when Berwick had sounded things out with him.

The two took Vizaist's words to heart, and entered the changing room with firm expressions.

Very few bases for Magicmasters had separate changing rooms for men and women. Since most missions were urgent they typically stayed in the standby room. If the need arose, they could go into separate changing rooms before setting out.

The changing rooms tended to be simple, but they came with partitions. As such, the female members didn't have to expose themselves in front of the men so long as the men didn't peek. The Special Unit's changing room was no different. It had partitions in place and each member had a personal locker.

However, there was not enough space for Nike to fit in there. As a result, he would have to wait outside in the hallway until Alus finished changing. He would turn around a few times in the narrow hallway to try and find a comfortable position before settling in to lie down in a corner.

Many soldiers wore their military uniform, but they were allowed to adjust it

to their liking to a certain degree. They were also allowed to modify armor and weapons to make them more comfortable for moving around in the Outer World. How far they could go was limited by the unwritten rule of not compromising the dignity of an Alphan Magicmaster.

Incidentally, Alus had two lockers: one for his uniform and the other for weapons such as his AWR.

With the swiftness of one who'd completed dozens of missions, Alus stripped down to his underwear and threw his clothes into the locker. He pulled his pants out of the locker and slid into them, putting on his belt. Just as he put his hand on his shirt, he heard the curtain open up behind him.

"I'm coming in, Alus," said a soft, cheerful voice.

"What is it, Ms. Elina? I thought I'd finally been freed from you."

Alus pulled one arm through his shirt, turning to see Elina in her underwear closing the curtain behind her, looking a little guilty. Though that was just on the surface, as she felt nothing of the sort.

For some reason she took care of Alus at every little turn, even changing clothes together with him. The partition only had room for one so her entering made it more cramped, but she didn't seem to care. However, she'd all but stopped doing this once Nike joined the unit.

Right now, Elina wore underwear with lace decorations on the top and bottom. Her breasts showed off a typical woman's cleavage. With all her training she maintained a well-toned body, with a woman's ideal proportions.

But as a result of her Magicmaster job, she was constantly covered in fresh wounds. When Alus first saw Elina, he'd made a rude remark about wasted beauty. Even he realized that was impolite and apologized afterwards, but Elina said it was proof of experience in battle.

He no longer referred to wounds as ruining her beauty. Now he said that she was beautiful and meant it from the bottom of his heart. But each time he did, she would show a strange expression, as if trying to hide some uncontrollable feeling welling up inside of her. Alus wanted to run away from the situation, but she didn't seem to notice that.

“Oh, don’t be like that. Last time I just fixed your button. Besides, you never bring flash bangs or signal flares with you.”

“But the others bring loads of them, so I don’t need to, right?”

“Yes, you do. Those who neglect their equipment return as corpses,” Elina held her finger up and lectured Alus as she stood in her underwear. They were words of wisdom she’d inherited from Sisty.

“I understand,” Alus said after a pause. “That said, it’s really cramped in here, so can you get out?” He was irritated and troubled in turn. It appeared Elina’s well-proportioned body wasn’t very attractive to an eleven-year-old child. Or maybe it was because it was Alus. Actually, her appearance stood out even in the military.

He recalled her excuse at first when she began fleeing into Alus’s changing area...that men would peek at her. In fact, it had happened a few times before Alus came to the unit. The primary miscreant was none other than Lindelph, who claimed it was just a sudden urge, and as a result she’d nearly ended his life, so Alus struggled to understand why.

Elina was the strongest in the unit aside from Alus, and those caught peeking had required the services of the healing Magicmaster. Because of that, nobody aside from Lindelph had ever considered doing it again.

If she wanted to, she could have sensed Lindelph’s presence. So Alus couldn’t understand why she continued to use that flawed excuse to sneak into his changing area.

“Hee hee.” Elina smiled, a sign she was going to ignore his complaints yet again.

“Fine, let’s just hurry and change.” Resigning himself, Alus ignored her and quickly continued changing his clothes.

“I’m glad you’re so understanding,” she said, putting her hand on his head as she always did.

Alus, embarrassed, tried to brush her hand away. But the action felt different than usual, so he glanced at her face. Normally she would just put her hand on his head, but this was the first time she’d ever patted him. However, Elina’s

bright smile easily overcame his doubting attitude.

It felt off, but since he was pressed for time, Alus quietly continued to change. He pushed his head through the neck opening in his shirt despite the cramped space. As he did, he felt his arm push up against something soft. It was the same as usual, and in the way as usual.

“Hey, that tickles.” This time it must have been Elina’s stomach, as she giggled with a grin.

“If you’re going to complain, then go change on your own, please.”

As Alus heard the sounds of curtains sliding from in front of the other members’ lockers, he reached to get the next item of clothing, but stopped and furrowed his brow. A pair of thick military-issue socks, well-made but hard to get on. He always sat on the floor to get them on but with Elina here that wasn’t possible. And he was tired of Elina holding his shoulders like she always did too.

He stubbornly stood on one foot and tried to quickly get his right toes in. But they ended up getting tangled and he started to tumble from the momentum. “—!”

Elina was in the middle of putting her shirt on as Alus’s face fell into her twin hills. Since she hadn’t buttoned up yet, there was only a single layer of cloth between her breasts and the head of black hair that bounced into them. “You still have a long way to go, Alus,” she jokingly said, gently looking at him like he was a child.

If his mouth wasn’t blocked he likely would have objected in annoyance. However, he was unable to do so in the current situation.

“You need to roll up those socks a little before you put them on.” Elina shrugged as Alus wordlessly pushed off from her to get away. But then she suddenly embraced his head in her arms. She squeezed, and whispered “It’s okay” in his ear... Unfortunately, the meaning of the words didn’t reach Alus’s heart.

He felt a gentle sensation as he was wrapped in Elina’s chest, like he was enveloped in petals. At the same time he smelled a faintly familiar scent. The

reassuring fragrance didn't just appeal to his sense of smell, but encompassed his entire being, creating a sort of dream-like sensation. Having never known parents, this was probably the first time he'd ever felt a woman's affection.

Alus struggled to escape from her embrace, but eventually gave up and let his arms sink down. Feeling that mysterious warmth for the first time, he slowly closed his eyes.

Four hours later, in the afternoon, the Special Unit stepped into Clevideet's restricted area. They'd been able to reach it that fast because other units had cut open the path. Berwick must have sent a squad to wipe out any Fiends in the area.

On the way there, Nike had only detected one Fiend. It was far away enough that they just made a minor adjustment to their route and avoided it.

Clevideet wasn't as aggressive as Alpha when it came to expansion and clearing land. Because of that, the area was practically on par with the pristine wilderness of the Outer World. If they'd been in Alpha, anywhere within a hundred kilometers of the Outer World would have had scars from battle.

Shortly thereafter, they discovered the Arachne, their target. The Arachne's upper body was shaped like a human, resting on top of a massive spider. It was said to mimic the appearance of Magicmasters that it ate, but the human-shaped bodies were always reminiscent of women. However, that was just the shape. Its outward appearance was more like a featureless doll, which was really creepy.

The Fiend's body was nearly ten meters long. Its body was covered in a cracked-looking black outer shell, and its abdomen—which was inflated in normal spiders—was strangely shriveled.

The strangest thing of all was that the Fiend seemed heavily injured, on the verge of death. Its numerous legs were covered in wounds that hadn't healed, and plenty of them were severed altogether. The upper body was slumped over and lay limp. Unlike a real human, the hairline was indistinguishable. It simply had long hair that looked like a woman's hanging over what would be its face.

The Arachne didn't even move when Alus and the others arrived. Alus watched from the shade of a tree, and signaled the rest of the unit that they

would go ahead as planned. He and Elina would work together to eliminate the Fiend. The remaining members lurking on all sides would assist from a medium distance.

Lindelph, who was a little unreliable when it came to firepower, was stationed behind the Fiend with Nike, giving orders as needed through the Consensor.

With a sword-type AWR provided by the military, Alus approached the target without making a sound. His AWR was a very high quality one since he was a Double Digit Magicmaster, although everyone knew that this AWR wasn't enough to bring out his potential. In fact, he'd changed AWRs over fifty times since joining the military. And he'd defeated countless Fiends with them.

That said, the battle against the Fiend was rather easy considering what they'd expected. Alus followed up on Elina's preliminary attack with an expert-level spell and the deed was done. It was an overwhelming victory, and the Fiend, with its core destroyed, turned to ash starting from its legs. Of all the Arachne's weapons, its thread—strong as steel—was the most dangerous. But it never even got the chance to use it.

"What do you think, Lindelph?" Elina asked. It was an unusual situation. Her clothes didn't even have any dirt on them from the battle. Near death or not, an A-class Fiend should have put up more of a fight.

"Hm, it sure did go very easy for an A-class. And I'm curious about the wounds it had..."

"Lindelph, it might have gotten into a fight with a Clevideet unit," one of the members said, as they all breathed a little easier.

"Or maybe Morwald's forces really did corner it," another member suggested.

"That's not possible," Lindelph said, rubbing his chin. It was extremely rare for a unit to even be able to stand up to an A-class. Without Alus, they would've had to give up on facing the Fiend head on.

"Why is that?" Elina curiously asked him.

"Lt. General Morwald's forces aren't strong enough to face an A-class."

Hearing that, she traced her memories and let out a small yelp. She must've

remembered the data on the members that made up the forces that encountered the Arachne.

“If they fought it straight on they would have been wiped out. Saying it escaped was just for show. Although the strength of a unit can be more than its members...so maybe they really did engage in battle and it escaped.”

“You mean they put up a good fight?”

“Hm,” Lindelph said after a pause. “It’s not likely, but we can’t rule it out entirely.” But he began to doubt his own words. He rubbed his chin with a troubled expression and thought further about it. “Maybe the Arachne was attacked by another Fiend as it escaped. No, that’s hard to imagine too.”

Considering Nike’s behavior, it was almost unthinkable that there had been another Fiend on or above the Arachne’s level nearby. High-classed Fiends cannibalizing each other was something that happened only occasionally during rare circumstances, and even if that was the case, where did the other Fiend go? There were no traces of battle near them, and no signs that the Arachne had eaten another Fiend.

“That leaves an encounter with a Clevideet unit, but I find that hard to believe too. They’re not very active in the Outer World and they’ve never sent anyone this deep before. I can’t imagine that Alpha wouldn’t know if they’d started actively reclaiming land since we’re neighboring countries,” Lindelph said.

It felt like an anticlimax to the unit members, but the reality of the situation was strangely chilling. That’s why they started speculating and exchanging theories as if to dispel the feeling.

Then Lindelph noticed that the person whose opinion they should be listening to wasn’t joining in. Although he rarely participated in conversations, Alus always observed his surroundings, keeping an eye out for any abnormalities. While still a child, when it came to certain topics he was more knowledgeable than many adults.

Meanwhile, the boy in question was watching the pile of ashes that was once an Arachne scatter in the wind. Fiends weren’t defined as living beings by the academics because their biology was that far removed from any other living being. They ate, but it was mostly limited to humans, and it had already been

determined that it wasn’t for survival.

In other words, Fiends were capable of functioning without eating humans. The details were still unknown, but the current theory was that they targeted humans, and in particular Magicmasters, to take in magic genes and to evolve.

Even Fiends had a survival instinct and would fight with everything they had if they were in danger, but this one...

Lindelph walked over and called out to Alus, who stood motionless. “What’s wrong, Alus?”

“Did you find something strange?” Elina asked, jogging up to reach him before Lindelph.

“The wounds on the target... They weren’t made by a Magicmaster attack.”

“—!” Lindelph and Elina both gasped.

“There’s bite marks here and there, but they’re all shallow and small,” Alus noted. “On the other hand, taking the strength of its outer shell into account, I put a lot of power into the spell I used to finish it off. In fact, I don’t think a low-classed Fiend could even leave a dent in it. And if it couldn’t even regenerate, then...”

Elina began to say, “So you think...”

Alus nodded. “Yes, this was done by Fiends, and more than one. It couldn’t have been some kind of trap by a Clevideet unit, and Morwald’s forces probably didn’t even put up a fight. They might have managed to carry out some attacks from a great distance at best. Those kinds of attacks wouldn’t leave much of a mark on the outer shell, so they probably just let it go.”

Elina raised her eyebrows in disbelief. Even if a Fiend was responsible for the Arachne’s wounds, the wounds themselves were inexplicable. If a low-classed Fiend couldn’t break through the outer shell, it would need to be a high-classed one that did it. But since there were no signs of combat around it, that was hard to believe.

Nike jumped on the thick root of a tree and howled loudly. It was a different kind of howling that they never taught him during their training.

“What?!” Lindelph shouted, as at the same time everyone turned to look at Alus. He’d been with Nike the most, so he should be the one who understood what this howling meant.

However... “I’ve never heard that kind of howl from him. But in terms of threat level, it’s probably...”

“The highest?! But from where?”

“It’s in the direction of Alpha!” Elina quickly answered Lindelph’s question, and Alus nodded.

“We completed our mission. Let’s get back home.”

At Lindelph’s command, the unit turned back. Shortly thereafter, Lindelph approached Alus and quietly asked him a question while remaining alert to their surroundings. “Alus, I once looked into some documents about Fiends and found something interesting. Is it true that Fiends can breed?”

Alus faced forward, and he moved his eyes only to glance at Lindelph, keeping his voice down. “It’s probably true. Strictly speaking, it’s not breeding in the biological sense. There are few examples or details, but apparently it’s something you only see in specific types of Fiends. In particular, in insect-like Fiends with similar bodies. You’ve seen something like that too, right, Mr. Lindelph?”

“Y-Yeah...”

“The Arachne is a spider type, so it’s a possibility. If it did give birth to so-called children, it must have used up its energy, or rather, its mana. Given that the outer shell’s a good mana conductor, it’s possible that the shell would soften somewhat due to massive amounts of mana being released during birth.”

“So then baby spiders must have caused those wounds?” Lindelph asked.

“Baby spiders, huh...”

“What?”

“Well, Fiends can’t have offspring, so they’re more like clones that share the Fiend’s mana.”

When the other unit members began looking curiously at them, Lindelph decided to leave the rest for later and returned to his position at the end of the column.

As he did, Alus looked over at Elina and saw a hint of anxiety in her face. But in the end he said nothing.

Elina led in front with Nike right behind her. That was the Fiendog's standard position when they were on the move. There was no longer anything to talk about, and the Special Unit picked up the pace as they headed back towards Alpha in silence.

On the way, Lindelph listened to additional information Alus gave him, and seemed to be pondering something.

An hour passed, and they were within ten kilometers of Alpha's border. But soon—given the scene they came across—everyone doubted their eyes. The sky was dyed bright red. A dazzling amount of mana particles warped the air, creating a mirage-like phenomenon.

They were five kilometers from Alpha's defensive line but it looked like a battlefield. And Nike was growling the whole time at the unsettling scene.

They decided to make their way to a stronghold in the defensive line, but on the way, they had their first encounter. Catching a glimpse of something between the massive trees, they heard the distinctive shuffling sound of arthropods all around them. There were several of them, and each was larger than usual.

Lindelph ordered Alus and Elina to launch a preliminary attack on the unknown Fiends. But when he saw the remains of the first Fiend, his face contorted. "This is..."

Alus nodded. "There's no doubt about it."

The remains turning into ash definitely looked like an Arachne, although it was small in size, like a human child. There was a separate type of spider Fiend known as Alania but they were thought to be like half-bodies of the Arachne. In other words, the Arachne was the matured form of the Alania. Incidentally, because of their size and combat abilities, Alus considered the Alania to be C-

class, right in line with their official classification.

After checking the remains, Lindelph pressed on the Consensor in his ear to get more information on the situation. “It’s no use. I can’t make out the words, and the noise is awful too. Even if we get closer we probably won’t get anything useful.”

“What do we do, Lindelph?” Elina asked. “We’ll move at your command.”

The unit nodded at Elina’s words. True, Lindelph wasn’t very reliable as a Magicmaster, but his abilities as a commander were outstanding. Not to mention the more dangerous the situation, the more astute his judgment became.

Lindelph scratched the back of his head and sighed, though he didn’t appear to be as gloomy as he sounded. He was currently wracking his brain. The Special Unit was given few restrictions, so they were allowed a certain degree of freedom at their own discretion. Defensive battles weren’t the main focus of the unit to begin with, and their mission this time wasn’t a defensive one. But if there were Fiends this close to the defensive line, they’d have to join in on the action too.

That said, since Lindelph couldn’t estimate the enemy’s threat level, he struggled to reach a decision. He’d memorized the manual on defense, but since the instructions changed depending on the scale he couldn’t make any careless moves. He kept his mouth tightly shut as he contemplated their next move. When Elina stared at him, he lowered his head, letting her know that he understood.

Should we endanger ourselves for others... He suddenly recalled what Vizaist said, the true intentions of what his superior told him before they departed...the directives that should be followed. *Our top priority is Alus’s safety...but is that really okay? Besides, he’s not someone who needs our protection. The biggest problem would be if the defensive line was broken and new Fiends appeared.*

If Fiends started surging into Alpha, they couldn’t possibly say that wasn’t their mission. In that case perhaps they should hit the enemy and see how dangerous they really were... But no, Lindelph rejected his own idea. The

enemy was unknown, and they were still in the Outer World. That kind of naive thought might easily pull the rug out from under them. *I'm sure Elina would say we should take a detour and prioritize getting back first...*

Their mission to eliminate the Arachne was already complete. Lindelph thought about it some more. They had Alus on their side, someone who could be considered an ace up their sleeve. He'd also been asked to take care of Alus. So as long as Alus was safe, he'd be able to recover from the situation eventually. "All right, we'll take a detour to..." he said, starting to explain his plan.

"Mr. Lindelph, if we don't hurry, there are going to be a lot of deaths," Alus interrupted him, making this ominous statement as if it was nothing, his expression blank. It was unclear if he was actually even worried about the other forces.

Lindelph turned Alus's words over in his mind. He might just be making a routine observation. He couldn't tell how Alus truly felt. But in this emergency, he'd been reminded that a Magicmaster never abandoned their allies. He'd completely lost sight of that and felt like a child being scolded.

"Ha ha! That's true. Let's hurry!" said a unit member.

What kind of Magicmaster would hesitate to help their comrades when they were in danger? And so Lindelph reached the exact opposite answer from the first one he came up with. With Alus's potential he was a future candidate for the position of Single Digit Magicmaster. Considering the influence it would have on him, they shouldn't be abandoning their allies here. Retreat wasn't an option.

"Lindelph!" Elina shouted. Her tone was reprimanding.

But he took it in stride. "Don't get so worked up, Elina. We don't know what will happen regardless of what we choose. So why not act like Magicmasters? We specialize in killing Fiends, right? If we have allies fighting some right now, then what else should we do but help them?"

"But then we'd be ignoring the captain's—"

"He's left command to me. Of course, I understand what you want to say."

Elina sighed. She glanced at Alus. His face was expressionless without any trace of childlike emotion. It was as if his sense of danger and fear of death were both broken. From her point of view that was very dangerous...but in the end she realized that her role wasn't to bind Alus. She wasn't meant to be a protective parent either. This meant that any actions of hers that limited him would only be for her own self-satisfaction.

So even if Alus's true intentions were unclear, if he put himself in danger from his own decisions she just needed to protect him in terms of support. That was all that she was meant to do. "I understand. But are you okay with that, Alus?"

"Captain Vizaist said if there's something I don't understand, then I just have to try it. So for starters I think we should wipe out the enemy from behind."

"Ri-Right...that's true. Well, nobody knows what the right choice is. And I believe that even if it's a mistake at first, it's up to you to turn it into the right choice," Elina managed to wring out with a forced, awkward smile. In the end she knew it was just sophistry. But she still chose to say it because she respected Alus's judgment. She also believed that no matter what the risk, he really could turn it into the right decision with his overwhelming power.

"All right! Then, let's get going," Lindelph said, shaking off the hesitation still remaining in him.

Some time later, Alus and the others were rushing towards Alpha, or rather, the defensive line. But the closer they got, the ominous scenes unfolding before them told them that the situation was taking a turn for the worse.

Traces of battle could be seen here and there with corpses of Magicmasters strewn about. Looking at the devastation, it was hard to believe there were any survivors.

The unit had already dispatched countless Fiends on their way here. However, they were still some distance from the rearmost lines.

Lindelph stopped for a moment at the top of a hill and looked around with a bitter frown. "This area was the first front. But there's no sign of any battles happening nearby...meaning that the frontline's been pushed back quite a bit. Let's hurry."

Everyone felt a prickling frustration, wondering how far back the defensive line had fallen, but they quietly continued on their march. They'd already been eliminating Fiends, but they were no longer just the small Alanias. They all understood what that meant. The mass birth of Alanias had probably been the trigger.

Since the Arachne had suffered some attacks from Alpha's army, the Alanias were probably born in an excited state. As soon as they were born it was likely that they'd eaten the Arachne's body to accumulate mana, which would mean they were in a combat-ready state when they made their way to Alpha.

The Fiends' war cries and the smell of blood called forth more Fiends, causing them to invade as well. But if there was such a large-scale invasion, there must be some high-classed Fiend driving it...

A unit member shuddered from a sudden chill. At the same time Nike let out a quick bark to alert everyone to a threat. Something deadly was nearby. All the unit members focused on their surroundings, staying on guard as they kept moving.

Eventually they reached a certain location...and everyone was horrified. Trees were burning bright red. Large amounts of blood were splattered all over. The orange light of the flames illuminated the slimy ground.

What the unit members saw was a hellish picture of countless Fiends devouring the corpses of Magicmasters. It was clear there were no survivors. From the Fiends' point of view, Alus and the others were newly arrived sacrifices as they finished up their current food.

It was the worst possible situation. If it were just forty low-classed Fiends they could still make it through. However, when they saw the massive Fiend in the swarm's center, they drew their AWRs and cursed their misfortune.

Elina shouted out what everyone was thinking. "Ogre type, Roscarg! What is it doing here?!" The Roscarg's red eyes reflected the flames. A swell of dark-colored fur like a mane ran down its back. Its muscles were swollen like boulders and its arms were like tree trunks. Black claws protruded from its fingers.

The Roscarg was one of the more common A-class Fiends. Even so, there were

few records of one appearing near Alpha's defensive lines. Was it a lesser Fiend that had just recently evolved? Or perhaps it came from deeper in the Outer World in response to the Alanias. Either way, it was probably the driving force behind the large-scale invasion.

The unit froze from shock as if time had stopped. However...

"Our target is the Roscarg! Get ready!" Lindelph raised his voice.

"—!" The members finally reacted.

Lindelph snapped the unit out of their daze. They all locked their eyes on the enemy and nodded. If the high-classed Fiend was taken out here, the other Fiends would get confused. Once the leader was gone they would become disorganized, and many would leave Babel's defensive area.

However, those thoughts were soon replaced with astonishment. The unit watched as Alus jumped ahead of them, and without hesitation, made a beeline for the Roscarg with sword in hand.

"Alus! We need to work toge—" one of the members said, but stopped when Lindelph held up his hand.

Lindelph looked at Elina. "Leave the Roscarg to Alus and Elina. We'll clean up the rest."

And so a fierce battle began. Flames scorched the air as the Special Unit began to fight. They steadily cut down the Fiends' numbers, but more just sprang up from the ground and down from the trees.

As time passed, the unit members got worn down. Their pale faces revealed they were close to running out of mana. In the midst of everything, Nike targeted Fiends on the verge of mutating at Lindelph's direction.

The time it took for each Fiend to convert absorbed mana varied, but some that had eaten the first victims were already showing signs of mutation. If the process was allowed to complete, the threat level would rise dramatically. The signs included their bodies starting to change, their skin warping, and more.

Nike struck at the Fiends as they transformed, as they were left defenseless when that happened, killing all that showed signs of transformation.

Meanwhile, Alus and Elina were engaged in close combat with the Roscarg. The Roscarg manifested mana, its arms ablaze as they swung around, while Alus's sharp blade carved off bits of its outer shell. With Elina's support the two were just able to put up a fight.

Alus didn't so much as blink, as with each exchange sparks scattered from the Fiend's body. The sparks burned his own body but he kept his eyes on the Fiend.

Suddenly, the Fiend's thick legs were covered in flaming dust. Then it unleashed a kick as if trying to mow down everything around it.

Alus crouched down to avoid it, but the dreadful power of the kick spread large amounts of flames around it, nearly burning the unit members from behind. It was deadly enough to kill anyone it hit instantly. Despite knowing that, Alus still didn't falter. He simply increased his speed, eventually overwhelming the Roscarg.

Elina attacked any openings she saw as well, but ground her teeth at her inability to keep up with Alus's speed. That was when the Roscarg flinched from one of Alus's attacks, showing a momentary opening.

Not missing her chance, Elina put as much mana into her foot as she could, and jumped up. She spun several times, adding centrifugal force, then unleashed it and her mana towards the Fiend.

But the moment Alus realized what she was doing, he did something that shocked her.

"What?!" she yelped. Just before her heel drop could connect, Alus pushed her away.

Elina rolled across the ground a couple of times, but stopped herself as soon as she could and looked up. She bit her lip. The light of mana was gathering in the Roscarg's mouth. It was a beam-like attack that gathered flames before shooting them out. If it had been fired earlier, she would've been unable to evade since she was in the air.

By their nature, Fiends were uncanny beings that humans didn't fully understand. Sometimes they ignored basic survival instincts, looking to take

down their prey even if it killed them.

But the same seemed true for Alus, who'd covered her by pushing her out of the enemy's line of fire. And he was already making his next move. He swung his AWR up from below, causing the Roscarg to rear back. While it impacted hard on its chin, it wasn't enough to knock its head off. It was, however, enough to push its head upwards, causing the beam to go in that direction.

However, the price for avoiding a fatal attack was a heavy one. A dull crack rang out as Alus's AWR shattered. Alus saw that the cutting edge wasn't effective now and changed the way he held it, using the back of the blade to smash the Fiend's chin. The AWR shattered...but not because it was fragile. It had been unable to withstand the amount of mana poured into it to increase the power of its impact.

When the Roscarg brought its head back down, it glared at Alus with hatred. Its jaw was cracked open and black liquid dripped down.

When Elina saw Alus throw away his destroyed AWR, she regretted her own carelessness. Moving to assist Alus in this situation wasn't something anyone would blame her for. But from her own strict perspective it was a clear blunder, the result of which was Alus losing his weapon.

In the Outer World, losing your weapon in a situation like this could spell instant death. However, that was when—

"Alus!" Another sword flew through the air. Alus caught it. Lindelph had thrown his own AWR.

Alus's expression remained unchanged, but from Elina's point of view, new weapon or not, the situation was bad.

At first, Alus must've thought about wiping it out with an expert-level spell. But since his allies were around, he would run the risk of getting them caught up in it. Elina understood that he'd chosen close combat instead, so the circumstances weren't in his favor. But in the next moment Alus easily passed his mana through the water attribute AWR he'd gotten from Lindelph.

The sight made Elina sigh in relief. *But I thought Alus had an affinity for fire...* She'd sensed something was off, as she realized the truth. But who could blame

her when Alus had only really used fire magic before? When she understood that he could use attributes other than fire, she was amazed again at his unfathomable talent.

Meanwhile, it looked like Lindelph had already realized this beforehand. If not, he wouldn't have thrown him an AWR that would've otherwise been useless.

Alus didn't even bother thanking Lindelph, as he again leaped forward to face the Roscarg. And so their clash continued. A single hit could mean death, yet Alus handled all of its attacks.

But it wasn't as though the tables had turned. Lindelph was a third-rate Magicmaster to begin with, and his current position was due to his outstanding commanding abilities, so his AWR was for self-defense and nothing more. Therefore, he didn't have a very high quality one, and as proof of that, only shallow scratches were left on the Roscarg's outer shell while Alus's blade was screeching and cracking. Even though he was using mana to cover it, the difference in materials was too great.

Seeing that, Elina was frustrated. She needed to do something. She was a Double after all. But she shivered as she saw something. She wasn't looking at the Roscarg but at Alus. And her eyes stopped at his lips.

He's smiling...?! His smile was inappropriate for the situation and even looked somewhat sadistic. It was like he couldn't see the difference in abilities or anything else around him.

But he wasn't losing his mind from the danger. On the contrary, the large amounts of adrenaline released into his bloodstream made him feel all-powerful and ecstatic. The excitement was making him high.

"Lindelph!!" A scream rang out, breaking the momentary lull. It came from one of the members who was fighting the low-classed Fiends and was followed by their death throes.

By the time Lindelph looked over in that direction it was already too late. A deep laceration ran across the member's body and a large amount of blood spurted from their mouth, staining their uniform a deep red. It was clear at first glance that they wouldn't survive. Another member then met the same fate.

Lindelph gazed sorrowfully at the tragedies that were happening, but he quickly snapped out of it and made a decision with a pale face. Alus had lost his weapon and casualties were occurring. A high-classed Fiend that forced them into a struggle had appeared, so the best thing to do was to slow down and reorganize. “Elina!!” he shouted, preparing to tell her to get ready to retreat.

However, she didn’t react until he called out a second time. Things were getting heated, but she felt a chill. She was petrified with cold sweat running down her back. “A-Alus, we need to retreat... Alus?” Having returned to her senses, she called out to Alus. She knew there was no vigor in her voice but it was still loud enough for him to hear. But he didn’t react.

A feeling of impatience welled up. She’d feared this. She hesitated, and looked to Lindelph for instructions.

“Fine. We’ll have to pull him away by force. I’ll step in between them, so use that to carry Alus off. If he won’t listen, then knock him out or whatever it takes.”

“—! But then you’ll...” Elina’s voice trailed off as she realized the importance of her role. Then she regained her cool with a wry smile. “You won’t be able to create an opening, Lindelph. This thing is stronger than your average Roscarg,” she told him, getting ready to cut in between Alus and the Fiend.

But Lindelph grabbed hold of her shoulder. “This is an order. I’ll make an opening. I’ve been useless as a Magicmaster, so at least let me act captain-like in the end.” His hand trembled but his eyes were serious.

Looking around, no one in the Special Unit was left standing. There were no calls for help or desperate screams. Nothing but emptiness remained. Everyone must have lost their lives in the fight.

Only the three of them remained. The last unit member to scream Lindelph’s name... His will finally reached Lindelph...to at least save Alus.

The two of them had received direct instructions from Vizaist. And it had been the will of the entire unit. Alus was their hope.

Witnessing his allies dying before him, Lindelph felt both regret and the desire to atone. He couldn’t be the only one to survive. And so there was an

unshakable resolve in his eyes. This time he used his willpower to stop himself from trembling.

“So you really were a man, Lindelph,” Elina muttered. She reflected on this self-evident fact and her expression eased up a little. Her cheeks seemed to be faintly tinted by the color of fire.

“Of course I’m a man. At least let me act cool! So...if I do happen to make it back alive...”

Elina looked a little surprised as Lindelph stared directly at her. But she interrupted his words and smirked as if she’d seen right through him. “You’re saying you’re prepared to die? You wouldn’t even be able to seduce a dog with a line like that.”

Lindelph stumbled over his words, trying to correct himself, but Elina stopped him again. “I hate a man who goes back on his word,” she said sharply. Then she continued with a smile, “By the way, I have no interest in a man who chases after every woman he sees. We can discuss this in detail when we get back to Alpha.”

Lindelph’s expression quickly brightened and he ran off like a foolish boy. “Here we gooooo!!!”

He dashed into the fire like he didn’t feel the heat, and Elina quietly followed behind him.

***

Alus was excited, drunk off his death match, so in order to get him to understand that they needed to retreat they would have to snap him out of it.

However, that would leave a big opening. And Lindelph understood that Alus’s battle style wasn’t just fighting like a maniac. When Alus was calm, he would use all kinds of magic to gain an advantage, even against a Roscarg.

He’s experiencing euphoria over this. That might be due in part to his immaturity, but Alus had enough composure to enjoy the situation, which was a sign of his bottomless potential. It was Lindelph’s first time seeing Alus like this. Everything else so far must not have been enough for him. He must’ve been bored having to fight under the assumption of cooperation to protect his allies.

But the Special Unit was meant to be his home. It was an essential place for Alus to live, regardless of his outstanding talents. Lindelph couldn't and mustn't deny him that.

Right now, Alus was like a child playing with the first toy he'd ever had that didn't break after he picked it up. It seemed he was using the Fiend as an experiment to measure his power, to see how far he could push it without breaking it.

However, given Lindelph's experience as a commander and having calmly overseen the situation in its entirety, he was worried about that composure. The balance would fall apart at some point. Fighting in a playful way like that would definitely come back to bite you in the Outer World.

True, Alus appeared to be in the lead, but the battle had been going on for minutes despite him having the upper hand...and the enemy still hadn't fallen.

The problem lay with Alus. And it wasn't the quality of his AWR. Lindelph could tell that Alus was intentionally holding back.

Strong as he was, Alus was still young. Underestimating the enemy could lead to death. Anyone who'd survived for long in the Outer World knew that, but it still hadn't engraved itself in Alus. That was probably because of his overwhelming power.

That was why Lindelph was running so desperately. He was sure the battle would end soon with Alus being fatally wounded. The closer he got to Alus, the more anxiety he felt.

Alus was in some kind of manic state. He was feeling all-powerful, on top of the world. Time felt like it stretched to infinity in his brain as he analyzed countless complex strategies that would lead him to victory.

That's how an opening appeared in the middle of the fight, as he suddenly moved awkwardly. A single move from the Roscarg was all it took for Alus's body to stiffen. In a word, he was overloaded.

By then, Alus's mind had already exceeded being in the moment. He was thinking a dozen moves ahead. He simultaneously analyzed the enemy's movements, its muscle contractions, the direction of its claws, and more. It was

an attempt to pile up multipliers upon multipliers, trying to calculate a suitable outcome out of the infinite possibilities.

Naturally, this tremendous load would fry a normal person's brain. Alus's brain could withstand it because a young body was built differently. But just like a child who tried too hard to solve a puzzle and became feverish, his body was unable to keep up.

In the blink of an eye, the tables had turned. The Roscarg twisted its body and pulled its arm back. Its muscles bulged as it gathered power.

That kind of movement would normally be too slow for him, but Alus couldn't move. He felt his moment of death approaching but still couldn't move.

"Fuck!" Lindelph realized he wasn't going to make it, when a large white object passed by him.

It was Nike, growling as he jumped in. He swung down his large claws on the Fiend and deflected its aim.

A moment later Alus could move his body again. Nike filled his vision with his glistening hair as he landed on the ground, but...the moment his feet touched down, his body shook from a heavy impact. His fur and flesh were unnaturally swelling in several places with things sticking out. At the same time fresh blood spurted out and dyed the area red before Alus's eyes.

Alus realized the Roscarg's claws were tearing through Nike's body, and coming towards him. He didn't even flinch at the approaching claws. He just stood there dumbfounded, looking past the claws to stare at Nike.

At the same time, the Roscarg launched another claw attack from the opposite side. Alus was stunned, but a coincidence saved him. He'd twisted his body to reach Nike and the claws flew over him. Or rather...most of them did. Only the tips of the claws had touched him.

But to Alus it was like being hit by a bullet. One of his eyeballs was torn out along with a lump of flesh, as blood sprayed up high.

"Alus!!!" Lindelph's voice didn't even reach his ears. Alus collapsed to one knee, closing the eyelid, and ignoring the blood running down his face as he stared straight forward.

Nike was skewered and lifted in the air. Blood poured out of his wounds with no end in sight, pooling up below him. Eventually the claws were retracted and Nike fell to the ground with a heavy thud.

“Nike...” Alus murmured. His words resounded through the air but didn’t reach anyone. His focus was only on Nike, to the point of not even seeing the approaching Roscarg anymore.

He gently stroked Nike’s fur with his small hands, his fingers brushing through like he always did, even as blood poured from his eye socket. Nike was taking slow, deep breaths as Alus shook him. But after a few breaths his breathing stopped. In spite of that, Alus continued to stroke his fur, looking into his now empty eyes.

“...” An abnormal silence fell around Alus. There was no longer any emotion in his face. Blood trickled down from the eye socket, while the other eye was as usual, feeling no pain. His remaining eye was as empty as always.

It was a frighteningly expressionless face. He didn’t blink, and there was no reaction from the flames dancing around him. A line of dark red blood ran from his closed eyelid down to his chin, dripping onto the ground. “I should have just done it alone from the start. People die because I’m not alone. I should have been alone. That’s enough, I don’t need anyone else anymore... Good work, Nike.” Alus’s words were full of hate, except for the last, which were said with sympathy.

Two extreme, conflicting emotions exploded within him. An abnormal power swelled up inside of him. That power froze both Lindelph and Elina to the core. They heard a strange cry as Alus’s emotional balance collapsed.

“...!” A chill ran through Lindelph’s body. He felt a terribly bitter, numbing sensation. Grinding his teeth, he ran towards Alus at full speed as if driven by something.

The Roscarg paid no attention to Nike as it raised its giant arm wrapped in flames to slam down on Alus. Lindelph slid in and cradled Alus’s head. He then turned his back to the Fiend to protect him from a fatal blow. He squeezed his eyes shut and waited for the moment to come.

He heard a voice. In that instant his eyes snapped open, and the scene before

him made him bite down on his lip hard.

“I knew you wouldn’t make it, Lindelph...” Elina was standing between him and the Roscarg. She knew her magic wouldn’t be able to intercept the attack wrapped in flames...yet she smiled at Lindelph as the claws skewered her stomach. Heat scorched the wound. Smoke rose up from her abdomen.

“Wh-What are you doing, Elina...?”

“It’s all about the right person in the right place.” She vomited blood and panted heavily. The next moment her body moved up slightly. The Roscarg was trying to rip its claws back out.

Elina was thrown in the process, spraying blood as her body rolled, before stopping near a burning tree. Her head was turned to the side, her hair spread out like a spider’s web on the ground.

Lindelph’s teeth chattered at the sight. He bit down on his lip even harder, ignoring the blood coming out, until it took on a deathly pale color.

“Goddammit!!!” He stood up in a fury, looking like he was going to throw himself at the Fiend unarmed, but stopped as a primal emotion overcame him. Dread filled his heart, but it wasn’t the Fiend’s doing. It was coming from behind him.

The enemy that killed Nike and Elina was standing right in front of him, but his instincts told him that an even greater threat was right behind him. Even the Roscarg completely disregarded Lindelph to focus on it, and of all things, it slowly backed away as if afraid.

When Lindelph timidly turned around, he forgot about his goal to get Alus to safety... He even forgot how to use words. “—!!!”

Alus, in a daze, was staring at Elina’s still body. Tears dripped from his remaining eye, stained red by the flames. To Lindelph they looked like tears of blood.

“And again... Ha ha ha, I knew I should’ve just done it alone,” Alus repeated himself in a hollow tone that sounded loud to Lindelph’s ears.

But when Lindelph realized that was because the surrounding noises had

ceased, he raised his voice. “Alus!” His voice, though, seemed to disappear into the air. Thinking his vocal cords had collapsed, he touched his throat, but soon understood he was off the mark. He just couldn’t hear anything else. Not the burning trees, not the wind currents created by the heated air, not the sounds of Fiends roaming around him...or any other sound he should have heard.

Yet he could hear Alus’s mumbling perfectly fine. Even so, he tried to shout to let his voice reach Alus.

Suddenly, the Roscarg’s sense of danger kicked in, and it tried to get away.

—! Alus! Lindelph turned to Alus, and to his astonishment, the eyelid of his torn-out eye had lifted. In the socket was a ripped-looking wound. Then it opened wide and a crack seemed to spread through the socket. A murky black liquid poured out from the crack. It quickly covered Alus’s eye socket and dyed it a terrifyingly deep black.

Next, Lindelph sensed a big shaking movement behind him. When he turned to look, the Roscarg had fallen to one knee. A leg that previously showed bulging muscles as thick as a log was destroyed from the inside as it popped open. Black blood gushed out of the wound.

When Lindelph looked at Alus again, he could only shudder. Of all things, the cracks had spread to both eyes. The white of his remaining eye was dyed black, and the eye lacked any semblance of human-like qualities.

Somehow regaining his composure, Lindelph took one step towards Alus to get closer. But Alus held his arm out and stopped him. It was a casual motion, but it was enough to make Lindelph feel like his vision was being distorted.

No, it wasn’t just a sensation. The space around him was warping and bending.

Lindelph reached out to Alus despite his shock... However, his hand simply grabbed empty air.

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As the warped space returned to normal, the ability to hear sounds suddenly returned as well.

With his hand still in midair, Lindelph was confused for a moment, unable to comprehend what had happened. As soon as he snapped out of it, he hurriedly looked around to find Alus.

He was still in the Outer World. It was a grassy area, not too different from what the battlefield had been before the attack. So why was he here when he was supposed to be surrounded by hellfire? For a moment he thought he'd lost his mind.

That was when he spotted a collapsed figure and screamed, "Elina!! Hey! Elina!" This time his voice reverberated through his surroundings. Without thinking about it, Lindelph rushed over and held Elina up with his arms.

"What are you doing here?!"

When he turned around, a man was standing behind him. Based on his military uniform it was clear that he was one of Alpha's Magicmasters. "I don't know what unit you're with, but hurry up and fall back. Lady Sisty is making preparations on the final defensive line." The man eyed Lindelph with suspicion.

"Where am I? What area is this?!"

"What are you talking about? In fact, what unit are you even with...?" The man approached Lindelph. "Sorry, but it's too late for her," he said, glancing at Elina. He grabbed Lindelph's arm to get him to stand up.

But Lindelph shook him off. "Just answer me! How far is the barrier from here?"

The man, startled by his intensity, answered him. "The three kilometer mark... More importantly, hurry up and fall back! The directive's already been issued. It's been a while since they decided that the defensive line is being pulled back. There shouldn't be anyone else left around here."

"H-Hold on... Wait! Elina isn't dead yet! And there are still injured over there. Where are the medics! Hurry up and call them over!"

The man calmly listened to Lindelph, then put a hand on his shoulder with a sorrowful look. "Give it up. It's too late to do anything now. Besides, this is the Outer World."

“We’re not going anywhere! Just bring a healing Magicmaster to treat Elina! Please...I’m begging you.” Lindelph started off strong, but his words turned into a weak plea at the end.

Then he noticed the noisy transmission on his Consensor and jumped up, pushing his hand over his ear, willing to cling to any hope.

“C-Can you...can you hear me... Answer me...”

“Yes, Captain Vizaist! I’m fine, but Alus is... And Elina is seriously injured! Please, please send over a healing Magicmaster!” Lindelph curbed his impatience in order to convey his main points, when suddenly...

“Wh-What is that?! You’ve got to be kidding me! Hey, we can’t stay here!” The man pointed to the sky some distance away.

Lindelph’s eyes opened wide and he went speechless, ignoring Vizaist’s request for details. Countless big, black serpents were flying around in the sky. He wasn’t sure they were actually serpents, but couldn’t come up with any other way to describe them.

“Lindelph!!” Vizaist shouted, his tone reprimanding, snapping him back to reality. “You’re seeing it too, aren’t you?”

“Yes, I think that’s Alus. Please send reinforcements and medics there!”

“Understood. I will ask for details later. But are you not with Alus right now?”

“T-That’s...”

“Hello, sorry to interrupt, Vizaist,” said an unusually carefree voice.

Lindelph recognized the voice and was shocked. “Is that...Sisty Nexophia?!”

“Yes, indeed.” The answer came not through the Consensor, but from right behind him.

Turning around, Lindelph saw a group wearing long capes making their way over. In the center was a woman holding a long staff, pressing a finger against the Consensor in her ear. She walked with a gallant stride, continuing the discussion that she’d just interrupted. “We already have medics, so you won’t need to call for those, Vizaist.”

“I see. Thank you.”

“This is just a coincidence. I came to see how things were going. I’d love to ask what that thing is, but I’ll save it for later.”

“Yes, I’m aware. Are you in overall charge now?”

“Unfortunately, no. Frose is the supreme commander.”

“I see,” Vizaist said. “Either way, you are a big help.”

“That’s very honest...for you. Well, my former subordinate is on the verge of death, so I’m going to end the call here.”

“Take care of her.”

As the call ended, Lindelph slumped down on weak legs.

Three people who appeared to be healing Magicmasters slipped out of the group Sisty had brought. They rushed over to Lindelph, and Elina, who was still in his arms. Upon seeing her condition, they hurriedly began treating her.

Lindelph asked about Elina in a frantic tone, and they gestured to him that they would probably be able to save her. They would miraculously be able to save Elina after the other man had already written her off.

With a sigh of relief, his attention shifted to Sisty. Apparently she’d been keeping an eye on her former subordinate’s condition as well. However, there was neither relief nor anger in her expression. Having experienced hell itself for years, she remained calm.

The Witch was once one of the Three Pillars that included Vizaist, and they had supported Alpha. They’d built up a generation of Magicmasters and continued to guide them afterwards. However, of the three, Sisty and Frose Fable were supposed to have already retired from the military. So what could have brought them back?

Suddenly, a gentle smile appeared on Sisty’s face as she addressed Elina. “It looks like you’ve suffered quite the misfortune, Elina. But it’s the path you chose for yourself, so I’m sure you don’t have any regrets. I tried to stop you, but you were just so stubborn.”

Even as she spoke these words, Sisty looked somewhat proud. “Besides, you

still haven't introduced me to *him* . That's why you have to survive... I want to see this hope you've found. And if possible, I want to hear his introduction from you." Her tone was calm and her expression gentle, as if she were talking to her daughter.

When he heard that, Lindelph finally realized why Sisty had appeared. She didn't just show up to save a former subordinate. He'd heard that Elina went out of her way to leave Sisty's unit and join the Special Unit. Of course, it was unclear what Elina had told Sisty about "him." No matter how much Berwick and Vizaist had wanted her to join, there would've been some controversy over it.

But as it was, her judgment had been sound. Alus was without a doubt the most talented Magicmaster since the rise of Alpha. Lindelph was sure of that. In that case, he still had something he needed to do. He couldn't be the only one who fled.

"E-Excuse me!" he somehow managed to squeeze out.

Sisty turned her head and quietly looked at him. He stood facing the only one of the Three Pillars to reach the rank of Single. Behind her he saw the sky, and the mysterious black serpents still dancing over the burning forest and slithering through the trees, dying everything black.

Frustration built up within him. He couldn't wait a second longer. He'd left Alus behind. Lindelph gave a brief report on the situation, then left Elina in the healing Magicmasters' hands and gave them his thanks before turning to go.

"Stop." After his first step, Sisty's staff blocked his path.

But not even a former Single was going to stop him. "No, this is something I have to do," Lindelph declared.

But Sisty mercilessly shot him down. "Captain Lindelph, there is nothing you can do. You need to understand that there are people you can't save with willpower, guts, or foolhardiness...like you just proved."

Her chilling voice froze Lindelph like it was a spell. She was intelligent and calm, and showed undeniable power in her tone. But that wasn't all. Even now, he couldn't completely play the fool. He cursed himself for not being able to

disregard Sisty's words once he understood that they were the truth.

At the same time, he felt how truly powerless he was. In the end he was lacking in everything. His weakness had hurt Elina and left Alus alone in a deadly situation.

"Leave this to me. You and Elina retreat first."

Lindelph gulped and tried to resist one last time. "P-Please wait! Alus is still out there, and my other allies might still..."

"Captain Lindelph, it seems you still don't understand the situation. The military alone is not enough to repel this large-scale invasion. My being here is proof of that. Not to mention..." Sisty looked over at something that was happening.

And it wasn't the sky filled with black serpents. She was gazing at a huge figure looming high over the canopy of giant trees. It was a strange Fiend with a sickle-shaped neck around thirty meters tall.

"Where did that come from?"

But Sisty seemed unconcerned. "Now that's a foolish question. This is the Outer World. It's a place where strange things happen like it's normal...where the abnormal is normal."

Next, she narrowed her eyes and looked at the black serpents in the sky. They seemed to be rejoicing upon spotting the giant Fiend like they'd found prey worth hunting, and one after another they dove towards their new target.

The black serpents rushed in to sink their fangs into the Fiend. In the blink of an eye it was wrapped in a dark mist.

Then the head of the Fiend came flying out of the black mist. And the black serpents swarmed and devoured it before it could even hit the ground. It was not unlike the predation of the natural world. The serpents made from a mist without substance were eating a Fiend with substance.

"Is that...'him'?" Sisty asked.

Lindelph hung his head low and answered, "I honestly don't know. But it's very likely that Alus is involved in some way. Either way, leaving him there

would be the biggest failure in our military history. I think we should set out to rescue him right now."

"So it seems. At the very least, Elina was willing to leave me for him. We'll need to hurry, Captain Lindelph. We don't have a moment to spare with *that* here."

Sisty struck the ground with her staff. She stared straight forward with a sharp glint in her eyes, watching not the black serpents or the giant Fiend they'd eaten, but the new threat that had just appeared closer to them.

A Fiend was observing them from between the gaps in the trees. The first thing that stood out was its strange silhouette, like it was wearing an umbrella. Size-wise, it was close to a human. The body was humanoid and it had slender legs like a woman's.

As it made its sudden appearance, Lindelph asked, "What is that...?"

But Sisty didn't respond, only tightening her grip on her staff. It didn't look anything like the Fiends she knew, so it was undoubtedly a new species that was born here.

She quietly released her mana. It wasn't an explosive outburst, but more like a ripple spreading across the ground.

Before long, it covered everyone's feet. Lindelph was taken by surprise at the act, while Sisty's subordinates respectfully stepped back.

"Now, that's enough talk. Like I said before, this is already a battlefield. So let this be our perimeter and destroy any targets beyond it," Sisty calmly said, basically declaring this to be the final defensive line and that all before it was to be annihilated.

At the same time, one of her subordinates shot a red signal flare up into the sky.

"It's definitely going to be a pain in the future if we don't deal with it here. So let's start off with a large-scale annihilation spell."

It appeared to be the signal for a counterattack. But suddenly the Fiend between the trees started to shake, and an ultrasonic wave echoed through the

surroundings. It felt like the sound would burst their eardrums and pierce their brains. Lindelph and even Sisty covered their ears as a sharp pain drove deep into their heads in waves.

“Ugh...my head...!” Covering his ears didn’t seem to help, as Lindelph cradled his head and crouched down low.

Meanwhile, Sisty gathered all of her willpower and raised her staff. Immediately a storm of wind kicked up. A powerful gust blew, throwing up dust and sand.

As the wind started to push the trees, the sound finally stopped. Lindelph’s eyes flickered and he looked up at Sisty. She wore a bitter expression like she wanted to click her tongue, and for a former Single, she seemed to be lacking in composure now.

The ground suddenly started shaking. A noise rang out like the forest itself was making a racket, gradually growing louder as if something was approaching.

All Lindelph could do was to stare blankly into the darkness of the trees. It was clearly a sign that something was coming and that nothing but destruction awaited. Yet his legs wouldn’t move.

“!!!” Finally, the trees were pushed aside as a wave that provoked despair appeared, making Lindelph realize how reckless his wish to save Alus was.

The Fiends coming out of the woods numbered over a hundred, over two hundred. They were like a surging wave. An extraordinary number poured out like the gates of hell had opened and chaos itself had been given form.

Is this because of that sound...?! It was way beyond the level of a simple trigger. It was like all the Fiends in the area had been aroused and awakened to the urge to destroy. Indeed, that sound was the signal for the massive invasion that was a threat to Alpha and all of humanity.

“I’m designating that new species as ‘Siren.’”

Following Sisty’s murmur, her aide shouted, “We’re having the defensive line fall back!”

“Wh-What are you...”

“Captain Lindelph, it’s too late. Unfortunately, we’ve lost the initiative.”

When Lindelph looked, the Fiend responsible for the rampage was already gone. Once it had let out its scream, the Siren had completed its job. He also realized that he couldn’t rely on Sisty.

All the forces began to retreat at Sisty’s hand signal. Someone tried to grab Lindelph’s arm but he shook them off. “At least let me borrow an AWR!” he shouted, ignoring any strategy or calculations. He couldn’t come up with any proper plans, let alone a way to win. Even so, he had to get to Alus no matter what. It was something a rational man like him would never normally do. There was no reason involved and his judgment was gone. And he would’ve made the same decision regardless of who was left behind, even if it wasn’t Alus or Elina.

The Special Unit was all but destroyed, and he couldn’t name a group consisting only of himself as a unit. Being alone meant all the decisions and responsibilities fell on him. And the only price he could pay for his recklessness was with his life.

Sisty stared at him coldly, but Lindelph, not giving in, met her gaze. “Phew... Captain Lindelph, I won’t stop you. I won’t tell you to do whatever you please. But I will say this because you are Vizaist’s subordinate. And because Elina who was tormented to this point is my former subordinate. I thought you were a little smarter than this. You really aren’t suited to be on the frontlines.”

“Yes, I’ve gotten a good feel for my own capacity. And I hope this is the last time,” Lindelph daringly said, putting up a bold front.

“Hm, but you still haven’t shown what you really think,” Sisty quietly replied. “You look like you want to do something stupid, but that’s not quite it... That’s it! You just want an excuse to wager your own life.”

“—?!” She’d hit the nail on the head. He wanted an excuse to lose his life, to do what he could... There was a deep-rooted weakness in his heart.

When this was pointed out to him, Lindelph couldn’t say anything. She wasn’t wrong, and he felt like he was shrinking from shame. Thinking it over, those feelings might have lurked at the root of every one of his actions. Playing the fool was easier and he didn’t have to deal with everyone placing expectations on him. As a result, he’d had fewer responsibilities and he didn’t even have to

use his head. He'd been satisfied just with getting a few promotions and living modestly.

Yet he'd ended up having his talents recognized by Vizaist. He did find joy and happiness in that. It wasn't for his skills as a Magicmaster and it definitely wasn't because he'd played the clown. Instead, it was because of his knowledge and insight and the wisdom to use them.

At the eleventh hour, he finally acknowledged his own powers. He steeled his resolve and spoke up. "Lady Sisty, Alus's powers exceed even your own. Considering humanity's future, it's worth it to charge into the swarm of Fiends even if there are thousands of them. Even if the military is decimated for it."

"Those are some big words. But how trustworthy are they?"

"Elina staked her life on him!"

Sisty didn't respond, but slammed her staff into the ground. Mana flowed from her body into the staff, which astonished Lindelph.

Then something explosively swelled up in the swarm of Fiends, blowing them all up into the air. It was the ground itself that raised up, like an invisible tornado throwing them into the sky, which turned dark with the swarm of Fiends for a moment.

A smile appeared on Sisty's face as she watched the chilling sight, like all of her doubts had finally been answered. "I see. So that's how it is. That's why Vizaist put a unit together... Then that's fine."

Her decision seemed to have turned the tide. All her subordinates who were about to take evasive actions turned to look at each other.

"Oh, well. Everyone, can I ask you to make a stand here? Having the defensive line retreat prematurely might be a bad idea. The units behind us might panic, and I can only imagine how loudly Frose will yell at me."

The subordinates immediately followed their commander's change in policy and calmly got ready for combat.

Lindelph, who was responsible for all of this, gazed quietly at Sisty.

"We'll only last ten minutes or so, so you do what you can here. If we're lucky

we'll find him from here. If those black serpents move at Alus's will like you say they do, then tell him to pull back and retreat. If he can't do that, it means his will no longer exists."

Realizing what she'd left unsaid...that meant it was already too late. Lindelph was impatient. "B-But... Right, the Consensor!" He tried contacting Alus with the Consensor, but all he got back was static.

But he didn't give up, repeatedly calling out to him. Once, twice, three times. As time went on his calls took on a more desperate tone. In the end, though, ten minutes was a short amount of time.

"Time's up. Any longer is going to affect the back lines," Sisty quietly told him. Lindelph slumped over.

However...Sisty and the others who'd had the defensive line fall back and repositioned to counterattack were suddenly left in shock. And there were countless Magicmasters who saw *that* . *That* being another change that had happened with the black serpents flying in the air.

They devoured Fiend after Fiend and intertwined before explosively growing. The whole area was covered in a black torrent. In the face of their momentum, the swarm of Fiends was whittled down. It was like a small school of fish against a massive wave.

And then the whole thing came to an undramatic end. The thousands of Fiends rapidly dropped in numbers until what remained wouldn't be a challenge for Sisty and her unit, so it was only a matter of time before they were cleaned up.

It was an odd anticlimax. While many had died, it was nowhere near the expected number of casualties. And despite their sinister appearance, the black serpents were a blessing. Moreover, what surprised everyone was that Alus, the lost cause, returned. The black serpents had disappeared at some point and he returned two days later.

Everyone was still on high alert as people built up positions, treated the wounded, and brought in new equipment.

His clothes were dirty and tattered, but there were no injuries that stood out

on his body. Even his lost eye had returned to normal. Nobody could believe what they were seeing, and even Lindelph pinched his cheek to confirm he wasn't dreaming.

Only Vizaist nodded as if he understood everything and praised him for his return.

When the two saw Alus standing there not saying a word, both understood that he had lost something huge that would never return. The boy's empty eyes no longer had any light in them or reflected any emotion.

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While the invasion had been repelled, the military had suffered many casualties. The screams of those scarred by what they saw could sometimes be heard from the treatment rooms hastily set up at headquarters.

In the headquarters, two figures walked forward gallantly. One wore a white military uniform, with her long hair tied to one side and hanging down in front. It was a woman with a voluptuous figure that swayed to and fro. She wore a special-made uniform that emphasized her ample breasts, but it seemed they didn't get in the way of her movement. The fabric appropriately pushed up her breasts as she bounced with each step.

The other was a man walking one step behind while he hurriedly read through a document in his hand. "Good work on holding the defensive line the other day, Lady Sisty. We only got away with the casualties that we did thanks to you. As to be expected from one with your skills..."

"Enough with the pleasantries. Can you get to the point?"

"A-Ah, right. Forgive me!" At the sound of her fed-up voice the man flinched, and quickly apologized, before getting to the main topic. "A mop-up operation under Frose's command will be conducted starting tomorrow morning. More Fiends are gathering in the Outer World and threatening to...um...eat the unrecovered bodies. So it's important to prevent any Variants from being born..."

"Naturally. So how many squads are you sending in?"

"Well...we still don't know."

Sisty let out an audible sigh at his witless reply.

“Lady Sisty, where are you going?”

“There are a lot of things bothering me about this, and I want to meet with him one more time.”

“Who do you mean by ‘him’?”

“I’m talking about Lord Vizaist.”

“—!”

The peerless commander Frose Fable. A catastrophe-level nonconformist, Vizaist Socalent. And Witch Sisty Nexophia. The missions that had made use of these three when they were known as the Three Pillars were a thing of the past, but the man couldn’t help but stare with wide eyes as Sisty prepared to meet with the other two again.

“That’s enough talk.” Sisty turned around and continued on her way. She’d heard about Elina’s motivation for joining the Special Unit from the woman herself, but she didn’t know Vizaist’s thinking or the purpose of the unit. That said, as one of the Three Pillars, Vizaist was trustworthy. He wouldn’t do anything stupid, and she wanted to respect Elina’s will as well. That’s why she’d decided against inquiring too much...

But after the invasion, the circumstances had changed. Lindelph had shown exceptional resolve. And both he and Elina had nothing but remarkable praise for the young boy.

Yet Vizaist hadn’t mentioned anything about that trump card to Sisty. Along with the secrecy, she felt politics at work behind the scenes. She also knew that while the Special Unit had been formed by Vizaist on paper, Berwick had had a hand in it.

A certain hypothesis came to mind. She’d heard about the existence of something that Berwick considered his treasure. And she’d heard about a project that once existed in the military as well as its facilities. It was said to be a place that gathered children who were orphans of soldiers.

While an orphanage on the outside, its true purpose was finding talent among

the children and training them to become Magicmasters. In other words, it was for training young boys and girls and sending them out to the battlefield.

There was, of course, a lot of backlash within the military, and in reality the first generation had all been wiped out. So Berwick should have been working on putting the project on hold indefinitely.

Berwick, I'm starting to understand. Sisty felt like all the pieces had fallen into place. She relaxed a little. Everything had finally connected up in her mind. *Speaking of which, he played it off during our call...but I still suspect there's something more behind those black serpents.*

Captain Lindelph had said something that made it sound like their appearance was related to Alus. Perhaps it was a spell she'd never heard of before? In addition, all the high-classed Fiends had disappeared after that. Not to mention that Lindelph's serious expression had left a deep impression on her.

I'm sure of it. That entire unit was made for that boy. For Alus. The unit belonged to Vizaist on the surface, but it didn't make sense for someone who'd stepped away to work behind the scenes to come back and make a new unit. That stirred her curiosity as a Magicmaster.

Elina had left her side for this boy. She wanted to see him for herself so that she could appraise him.

Eventually, Sisty arrived at a room. The plaque near the door stated that it was the standby room of the Special Fiend Attack Unit.

As she approached the door, she noticed that it was slightly ajar. Seeing how light was streaming out through the gap, somebody had to be inside, so Sisty peeked in. "Is that..."

The commander of the Special Unit, Vizaist, was conspicuously missing. Instead there was a boy holding his knees sitting in the corner. His eyes were empty. Sisty had seen those kinds of eyes before. It was something a lot of mentally scarred Magicmasters got from battle. And who could blame him? Age-wise, he was still just a child. And the large-scale invasion had only happened recently.

He looked fragile, like his existence was fleeting and he could fall to pieces at

any moment. Yet he still maintained a distinct atmosphere of his own. Even if he looked like he might break, Sisty could feel his potential.

Once she'd confirmed there was nobody else inside, she stepped away from the door for a second and turned to the man with her. "That's enough. You can go back now."

"Excuse me?"

"This will probably take a while. Oh, yes, and Lord Vizaist appears to be missing, so could you find him for me?"

"Y-Yes, ma'am!"

After watching the man walk off, Sisty took a deep breath before opening the door. "Nice to meet you..."

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Two days later, in the evening.

A small figure stood in the vast space next to headquarters. It was Alus. His clothes were neatly arranged, and other than his expression which had become even colder than before, he showed no traces of the previous battle.

He was at the military cemetery. His black eyes reflected the dusk and crimson-colored clouds. His memory of playing with Nike next to the cemetery two weeks ago felt like a dream.

Alus stood in silence. There were hundreds and thousands of grave markers and they would only increase with each passing year. The fact that there was still so much space left for more would cause most people to feel conflicted.

Before him were the graves of the Special Unit. Many of the graves were empty, containing neither body nor belongings. Even as such, a grave was better than nothing. There were plenty of Magicmasters who were treated as having disappeared, who didn't even get graves.

Alus bent down and placed a white bouquet on a certain grave. Behind him stood Lindelph and Vizaist with downcast eyes, in mourning dress. A special promotion of two ranks was little comfort to a Magicmaster.

Officially, the credit for repelling the large-scale invasion was given to Frose

Fable and her command and to Sisty Nexophia for her fighting on the frontlines. Alus and the rest of the Special Unit were, of course, kept secret.

However, their work behind the scenes was undeniable, such that Vizaist was promoted to major general and Lindelph to lieutenant colonel.

It was an unwanted promotion from Lindelph's point of view, but he gritted his teeth and accepted it. "If I climb the ranks and get to take part in strategizing, I can reduce the casualties even more. That way I can at least pay them back a little," he'd said when he accepted it.

After a silent prayer, Vizaist spoke up. "There's still some clean-up remaining."

"I know," Lindelph replied to Vizaist's tactless words. He glanced to the side.

Alus seemed completely unconcerned with their conversation. He had already turned his small back and was about to leave.

"I'm not telling you to abandon him, but leave him be for now. The unit was made to keep this from happening, though..."

Vizaist's sigh pierced through Lindelph's chest. He also understood that it had only been in this unit, and especially with Nike, that Alus had been able to truly act like a child. That's why a grown-up like him couldn't judge how much of a shock losing all of that had been.

Alus had seen and experienced too much for his age. All the cruelty of the world had been beaten into his small body, which was bathed in the blood of those who had died.

Ever since that day he was like an empty husk. Worries and regrets no longer carried any meaning for him. However, at the very depths of that emptiness was a firm vow that wouldn't falter.

Alus had made up his mind that day. As Vizaist had said, he'd reached his own answer and the worst possible one at that. When Vizaist heard that Alus returned alone that day, he was reminded of how he'd been in the past. Before Alus joined the Special Fiend Attack Unit he'd been used like a Fiend-slaying machine, given missions to carry out on his own one after another.

Meanwhile, Lindelph felt something else. Just the fact that he was standing

there didn’t feel real. Perhaps he was still in shock... It even felt like his time in the Special Unit had been but a dream. Each time he felt that way, his heart fought back, telling him to never forget and snapping him back to reality.

But there was something else on his mind: Alus. The unit’s existence had been brief, but he hoped it had left something behind for Alus. Though by now he was afraid to even mention anything about it... If he did, he’d have the cold hard facts thrown at him whether he liked it or not.

Indeed, the Special Unit had been formed to become a place that Alus could call home someday. But perhaps their playing family had only ended up hurting Alus more, making him close off his heart.

When Lindelph thought about that, he bit his lip. As he came back to the present, he could see that Alus’s back had already become much smaller in the distance, casting a long shadow in the setting sun. The path he’d chosen was one of solitude. Ironically, having survived that battle, he had proven to himself that the best way to keep anyone from dying was to fight on his own.

Lindelph wiped his damp eyes, as Vizaist handed him a piece of paper. “What is this?”

“Read it.”

He saw that it was a request for a discharge. He didn’t need to ask whose request it was. Lindelph was shocked, but at the same time, he’d almost expected it. He’d had a feeling it would happen.

However, Vizaist just snorted like he was bored. “Hmph, looks like he knows the drill for these sorts of things.”

“What do you plan to do?”

“What can I do? This is it. The unit can’t continue with only four members left. We’ll get an order to disband soon enough, so there wouldn’t be a reason to request this in the first place. The Special Unit has already fulfilled its purpose.”

“I see.” Lindelph found it hard to process everything, but he was an adult. An adult who couldn’t come up with a single thing to say to Alus.

There was also another question that neither he nor Vizaist had a good

answer for. Was Alus's path that he'd chosen for himself the best way to use him, or should he be with allies? They knew the reason why Alus's cooperation with the rest of the unit hadn't worked out very well was because they'd been unable to keep up with his power. When they'd prioritized coordination, everyone had sensed that Alus had had to hold back.

Lindelph scratched his head with a somber expression. *If only Elina were here...* He couldn't help but make feeble complaints. How was he supposed to carry on like normal?

Sensing Lindelph's pain, Vizaist put his hand in his pocket and spoke with a bitter expression. "We shouldn't be doing anything right now. We're men. We can't be like mothers, we're not skillful enough for that. Then again, Alus is a man too. So let's just silently watch over him for now."

"Is that really all we can do?"

"Yes, for now. Lindelph, as of tomorrow you will be in charge of one region of the mop-up operation. There will be another Fiend clean-up operation soon, but we're going to let Alus rest for a while."

"I know."

"I'd love to let you rest too, but..."

"No, I understand. We're too busy and understaffed for that. Besides, I'd rather be working right now."

"I see. Well, try not to push yourself too much." Vizaist tapped Lindelph's shoulder, and then decided to give him a reminder. "Also, make sure never to tell anyone about Nike...or rather about the research."

"Y-Yes."

Nike had been a genetically engineered specimen, but recently it had been revealed that there'd been problems aside from the ethical one...basically, the lifespan of the subject. The rapid growth forcibly induced through drugs proved to be too much of a burden on its body. As a result its lifespan was just a few months, putting it close to the level of a consumable.

Vizaist first learned the truth after taking in Nike. Of course, he'd reported it

to Berwick, and put a stop to the project. Most of the test animals were freed. However, nothing could be done for the creatures that had already been created.

So Nike was able to stay with Alus thanks to Berwick's and Vizaist's discretion. Naturally, they couldn't pull them apart after the time they'd spent together. And by the time of the last battle it seemed that Nike was at the end of his lifespan.

But Nike had hardly shown any signs of it, perhaps out of a sense of responsibility. When the two men thought about that, they couldn't help but feel sad for the silver-furred unit member.

Vizaist and Lindelph fell silent, looking down at their feet. In front of them was an especially large tombstone. Alus's white bouquet rested at its base.

When they raised their eyes a little, they saw a large collar. In the center of the pedestal was a polished silver plate with *Nike* engraved on it with a knife.

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The trees of Vanalis were green and the sky seemed to go on without end. It was hard to believe this scene could be found in the Outer World. But that was when a gentle wind pulled Alus's consciousness back to reality.

He'd just finished telling the story in a heavy tone. Of course, he only talked about the parts that he knew, and Loki, who was being carried on his back, remained silent.

To her, his story was too bitter, heavy, and even painful to accept as it was. "So that's what happened..." she muttered after a long pause.

"Hm? Y-Yeah." Her reaction almost disappointed Alus. Once he'd finished talking he didn't feel much pain. If anything, he'd even felt some weight come off his shoulders. A sigh of relief escaped his lips.

"I'd heard about the large-scale invasion before. You saved my life too," Loki said, putting more strength into her arms around Alus's neck as if hugging him.

Alus had chosen to isolate himself. But in the end, his surroundings had pushed him away as well. The more he fought alone, the more prominent his

power and talents became. To put it another way, he was like a lone bird in the sky. He'd finally reached a level where it was impossible for a normal human to coordinate with him.

"Whether it's mental or technical, if there's enough distance between people they won't be able to mesh. Frankly put, it's impossible for me to perfectly coordinate in the Outer World if there's a gap in strength. Any allies would just hold me back."

He'd had firsthand experience of fighting side by side with those weaker than him. He knew that normal people needed to cooperate with other people in squads, but he'd been shown that such things didn't apply to him. So he'd written it off as mutual aid necessary for people other than himself.

"Then that's all the more reason to have accepted Lady Lettie's offer." Loki suddenly noticed how her heated words revealed her own greedy feelings. She wasn't taking his feelings into consideration. She was only saying what she wished he would do. But it was too late now to slam on the brakes.

"You're awfully eager to recommend that," Alus said, before Loki could refute it. "Fine. It seems you really want me to join Lettie's squad, but my answer won't change no matter how many times you ask. That much is clear." He stared into the distance, his gaze cold.

Loki sadly cast her eyes down. After retaking Vanalis, Lettie had invited Alus to walk by her side. She'd made the offer and put all of her feelings into it. To run across the Outer World with someone he could truly trust... She'd reached out with a helping hand.

Lettie was someone who could affirm him. That was why Alus had seriously considered taking her up on the offer. Somewhere deep down he must have wanted that kind of future. But in the end he'd turned her down.

Loki knew that Alus, as a person, had been broken a long time ago. It wasn't just his time in that squad either. His work behind the scenes was another factor.

She was aware that Alus had strayed far from the path of a decent person. Even so, that was fine with her. He was still the same as when he'd saved her. But if he was trying to change, trying to fix his broken self, she wanted to help,

even if it was just filling the hole in his heart for a moment. And she was the only one who could fulfill that role.

She was lucky that she was on Alus's back, because when he'd firmly refused, she must've shown relief.

Loki realized she was being selfish. She did feel bad about it...even guilty. That said, Alus had told her about his hidden past. She'd heard the beginnings of when he started to break. As greedy as she was, she had to repeatedly tell herself that this was enough. Perhaps she'd asked not for Alus's sake but for her own, so that she could carry the same pain as him.

However, she'd come to learn why he so stubbornly fought on his own. Maybe he wasn't aware of it himself, but Alus didn't want to see someone else die in front of him. Seeing someone he trusted getting killed by Fiends was harder than anything. So while Alus was stronger than anyone, he may have also been more cowardly.



“Sir Alus...I will always be with you,” Loki blurted out, her feelings getting the better of her.

A heavy silence fell after her words. “...I’m going to throw you off here.”

“—! S-Sir Alus?!”

“I’m joking.”

Loki looked a little relieved at that. “Please don’t make jokes like that. It’s bad for my heart. Besides, I think you should save that attitude for Ms. Tesfia.”

“What a terrible thing to say. Well, I guess I should pick who I act like that around.”

She felt like he’d evaded their discussion, but that might have been for the best. Even if they were words loaded with feelings, there were some topics she could and couldn’t touch upon. The line between the two was always vague.

Suddenly, Alus spoke up. “Well then, I bet they’re waiting for us. So let’s hurry back.”

Loki was startled. Did he mean the Institute? Her cheeks flushed as she broke into a natural grin. Even though she was on his back, she knew exactly what kind of face Alus was making right now. It was surely the usual vague smile.

I see, Sir Alus. You always say that life at the Institute isn’t bad...but I see that you really enjoy it. She was happy just to have realized that. *I think it’s so much fun I could forget all about the world outside of it too.*

As Loki raised her head, she felt a fresh breeze brush against her cheek. “Sir Alus, please speed up. I’m sure it will feel great.”

“That’s the attitude of a distinguished soldier. As you wish.”

The daily harsh missions Alus had been sent out on had slowly ground down his soul and memories. This meant that for him the past itself was a wound, which was why his mouth had been sealed tight whenever he’d tried to talk about it. Nobody would want to open that wound again.

Yet he’d undone the seal himself. Something was slowly changing inside him.

Meanwhile, he squinted as the bright scenery of the Outer World was dazzling. But it wasn't only because of the light. Right now the scenery looked a little different than usual through his eyes.

With the battle over he felt some relief. He'd also told Loki about his past. While she'd gotten a complicated expression on her face, she also looked a little happy. All of that worked together to change his outlook and that was far from unwanted.

He felt like Loki had noticed something he hadn't and showed it with her attitude. When Alus thought about it like that, his heart felt lighter. For now, although it was temporary, he had a place to come home to and people waiting for him there. Everything truly was different from the past.

As those thoughts ran through Alus's mind, he sped up.

Sixty-First Chapter

A Silent Congratulations

After the Vanalis clean-up, Alus and Loki took a few days to make it back to Alpha. Lettie should have already sent word ahead of them. It was probably the most significant battle outcome in recent Alpha history. The reclamation of Vanalis was a strategically important step for the military.

After their return, Alus and Loki passed by a battalion of Magicmasters on their way out. They were being sent to establish control of Vanalis now that the number of Fiends had been greatly reduced. They would first assist and then relieve Lettie's squad.

However, as always, there was next to no respect shown to Alus. Just a quick salute would've been nice, but in reality most showed no reaction, although it was a little different from ignoring him.

Whether they knew he was Alus or not, the Magicmasters looked away somewhat uncomfortably. And of course they would. No matter how heroic his feats were, Alus's existence and inhuman abilities were too much for his achievements to be warmly received. An innocent child would be one thing, but to adults with common sense, he was uncanny and difficult to approach. All of that was the price to pay for fighting alone.

"Well, having them start to be respectful now would just be creepy. Besides, this time it was Lettie's achievement. Her tenacity was the greatest reason for the victory. So I don't care."

"That's true."

"You sound awfully happy, Loki. Do you really enjoy seeing me being treated coldly? Talk about a terrible personality."

"—?! Should you really be the one to say that, Sir Alus?!" Loki immediately

retorted. But despite the offended-sounding question, she appeared to be in high spirits.

Although a little suspicious of that, Alus considered what to do next. First, while he had only been called in to help, he still needed to make a report. He'd leave minor details and a written report to Lettie, but he was required to report to the top brass on what he'd felt and observed. It wasn't so much a duty as it was a way for him to share the information and personal experience he'd gained with Alpha's Magicmasters. And if it was especially important, it would be shared with the other nations as well.

Upon their return to headquarters, the two quickly went into their individual changing rooms. It was a routine ingrained in their bodies that they did when they came back from the Outer World. All their actions were carried out without hesitation as a matter of course.

Right now, Alus was holding a new military uniform and furrowing his brow. The uniform he'd worn in Vanalis had gotten torn everywhere so it had to be discarded. Even so, he couldn't get used to the new uniform.

Moreover, the uniforms were standardized with no individuality. One word from him and they would prepare a unique uniform for him, but he was no longer in the Outer World. Since he wouldn't be going into combat, it wouldn't be arranged and customized to his liking and the materials would probably be ordinary.

A dull uniform was the same as a plain shirt. So when he came out of the changing room, Alus only wore the jacket of the uniform.

Meanwhile, Loki was fully dressed in the smallest-size uniform available. "That looks good on you, Sir Alus." She was probably just giving her standard impression by reflex, but he wasn't very happy about it.

"Well, thanks," he indifferently answered, unbuttoning the top button as a show of resistance. These sorts of strict atmospheres tended to bring out Alus's spirit of rebellion.

"Yes, dressing down a little can be nice too!" Loki added with a smile, unaware of Alus's thoughts.

But he couldn't figure out why Loki was so happy. He was always together with her, but right now she was in an overly cheerful mood. Thinking about it, it must have been the story he'd shared on the way back from Vanalis.

This is why I hate dwelling on the past. He regretted talking about it. Something must've been wrong with him back then. Besides, what part of that story would get her so excited anyways? To Alus it was just an insignificant story, though he'd been the one who'd decided to talk about it in the first place.

So he decided not to think about it anymore. Thinking too hard would only end up bogging him down. Alus viewed a woman's heart as forever being a black box, impossible to understand.

What kind of image did she even have of him? It must be something overly heroic and embellished. If she were to start describing him as a peerless hero or something embarrassing, he wouldn't be able to endure it.

Besides, he didn't like others saying this and that to him. Not to mention that she'd been by his side all the time at the Institute. So those words would be bound to make him feel embarrassed. In other words, there was no merit in digging deeper in that topic. He sighed.

"You seem a little tired, Sir Alus."

"Of course I'd be. Just the thought of what's to come is enough to depress me."

"What's the matter?" Loki glanced at him nonchalantly, as if she was trying to trick Alus into saying it. She tilted her head and even bent down a little in a theatrical fashion. Considering her expression and mischievous eyes, he was almost sure she was doing it on purpose.

"Okay, okay. I give up, so don't look at me like that. If I meet with the Governor-General with you looking like that he's just going to be a pain."

"Is that not good?"

"He's a shrewd one, so I don't want to show any weakness."

"If there's something on your mind, you should open up to someone," Loki said, as if saying that that someone was right in front of him.

“I can understand shame too. It’s not like complaining is going to solve anything now.”

Loki sulked like a child at that. It wasn’t the kind of conversation to have in the military headquarters, but it still needed to be expressed.

So they continued speaking in the usual manner. Maybe it was because they were in the heart of the military, but it frayed his nerves. In that respect, it was a lot easier when he’d been here with Tesfia and Alice. Alus was a member of the military, yet he always needed to stay on his guard at headquarters for some reason.

“I think that’s enough playing around.”

“I never had that intention.”

“Hm? That’s quite disconcerting...” Alus said with some surprise. What was nothing more than some trivial chat to him was apparently very serious to Loki.

...Or so he’d thought. “No, I was actually joking. But it’s not like you to be this disturbed.”

“Oh? Now you’ve done it...”

“Three centimeters,” Loki said, glancing down at Alus’s feet. “Your stride was disrupted by three centimeters.”

“Ugh!” Having something he hadn’t even noticed pointed out to him, Alus stumbled over what to say. But thinking about it, it had been unlikely that she’d actually pay attention to such tiny details.

Loki smiled like she’d gotten him, and though Alus was a little indignant, there was no helping it. Apparently, she already had the upper hand in these kinds of daily life conversations.

“Nice work out there. It seemed you had some trouble.” As soon as Alus opened the door to Berwick’s office, the man gave him words of gratitude. A new beard had appeared on his chin. “That was a joke... Well, I’ve already given Lettie all the credit. But from the sound of it, you’ve already received her report.”

There was no need to actually confirm that since he’d already spotted a group

of Magicmasters heading to Vanalis. Incidentally, as a Single Digit Magicmaster, the only one Alus had to report to was the Governor-General. However, their relationship was no longer that of superior and subordinate. It was more like they were stuck with each other.

“Normally this would call for a toast. But you’re a student, so I can’t serve any alcohol.”

As usual, his praise was just for show and his real intentions lay elsewhere. In fact, Berwick didn’t look like he was in the mood for a toast at all. That said, Alus was used to him quickly changing gears so he wasn’t going to say anything.

Because of his position he always had to consider the future; so once incidents were over they became a thing of the past, and no longer subjects of joy or sorrow. It was proof of his competence, but Vanalis was likely just another piece of the strategy game in his head. His eyes were purely on the future, including how world order would look once the Fiends were wiped out and what role Alpha would play in that.

However, Alus couldn’t stand getting caught up in his pace and having everything turn vague. “There are plenty of ways to show gratitude besides alcohol. Oh, I know. I believe some cutting-edge precision measuring devices for mana information were recently delivered to the military.”

“Word travels fast.”

“I hear they even successfully deciphered another fifty Lost Spells. It seems to be a very capable machine. So I’d like one of those.”

“Come now, the military doesn’t have that much money for research. Besides, we’ve only gotten hold of two of them,” Berwick said, objecting. And why wouldn’t he? The devices used for research into magic cost far more than equipment for the other departments.

While Rusalca arguably manufactured the best AWRs, Alpha’s mana and magic research was inferior to none. That was in large part because of their aggressive policy of sparing no expense when it came to high-quality equipment. But because of the cost, advanced research was limited to specialized military facilities.

Ironically, the background for that situation had its origins in the military's dark past...in its illegal research.

"Oh, I almost forgot. One more thing... I want security clearance level seven for the Magic Compendium."

Alus's outrageous demand made Berwick gaze at him in disgust. The Magic Compendium was a database on magic shared between the nations. On top of detailed information on spells, it even covered magic formulas and their developers.

However, it didn't include all possible spells and not all of it was public. In fact, some of the most important parts were strictly controlled and kept secret by each nation.

The Magic Compendium had several locks on access, and access was granted based on military rank. Specifically, each nation had its access key and level seven was the highest. Only a chosen few were allowed access. After all, it even included taboo spells. These were typically spells created through illegal means with high lethality. Some were only effective against humans. This went directly against the principle that magic was only meant to be used against Fiends.

Loki stood behind Alus, not letting anything show on her face. But behind the mask even she was shaken. Secrets of that level were practically mythical, and even Doubles would question their existence. They were closer to being urban legends than anything. But she did her best to hide her unrest and act naturally.

After a brief pause, Berwick curtly answered him with a sullen face. "No... I can't go that far. No matter what you've achieved, it's just not possible. If you want that authority you'll need to sit in this chair." The least he could do was to let Alus know that only the Governor-General had access.

"I believe I was allowed access before, though?"

"That was when I disclosed information on a specific spell at your request. What you're after now is unfettered access to the military's top level secrets."

A chill ran down Loki's spine as she listened. Just observing Berwick's tone and demeanor was enough to tell her how reckless Alus's demand was.

"Well, I suppose that's how it goes. I'm aware that I'm being unreasonable."

“And you’re going too far! I wasn’t sure what kind of demands you’d make... Honestly, I can never let my guard down around you.”

“You sure are small-minded. You always exaggerate and put on airs while looking for an escape. If that’s all it takes to be the Governor-General, even someone as simplistic as Lettie could do it.”

“If she heard you say that, she’d blow you away with flames.”

“She owes me big time after this, so I’m not worried,” Alus said with an unconcerned look, causing Berwick to sigh in resignation.

“I’m not sure whose influence this is, but fine... I can’t give you access, but I could give temporary clearance just one more time.” Berwick rubbed his chin and continued, “So, what are you after?”

While it was Alus’s request, the decision lay with Berwick. If exposed, he’d end up being pressed hard again—not that he was the type of person who’d take a beating lying down.

“I’ve got several.”

“Give me a break here. There’s a limit to how far you can go in the name of research.”

“Are you sure you should be saying that?”

“What are you talking about?”

“Lettie’s M2-Polaris. You provided her with a taboo-classified formula, didn’t you? Did you think I wouldn’t notice? That’s a spell I was involved in.”

“She used that?! I can already imagine the disaster that is Vanalis now.”

In reality, part of Vanalis had been scorched. The surface had gotten blown away and the ground was deeply burned. Grass wouldn’t even be growing there for a while. Anyone would feel faint after seeing the giant gouged-out piece of earth.

Still, Alus chose to say nothing more. He’d pushed through at least the bare minimum of his requests. For the time being he dropped the subject, and began reporting on the important developments. “Getting right to it, there was a strange Magicmaster in Vanalis. He was opposed to us and tried to get in the

way of the mission. He attacked Loki and left her in a pretty precarious state, so he was rather skilled."

"All the way over there? Who was it?" Berwick frowned.

Alus began talking about the snow man's ability to use the spell that altered the environment and how he'd used the Fiends in the region to interfere with their mission.

"Regarding that, the report I got from Lettie's subordinate stated that the clearly dead man's body abruptly disappeared," Berwick said.

"..."

"Did the body walk off on its own?"

"Don't make me laugh."

"He must've had an accomplice or there's a traitor in our midst. Either way, there's a high chance that there's a leak within the military."

It wasn't like Alus had no clue whatsoever. When he'd fought Elise at the Institute, her body had transformed fluidly like water and repaired any damaged body parts as if nothing had happened. He didn't think it was the same thing here, but couldn't deny that such inhuman abilities existed.

Of course, since he was keeping Elise a secret from Berwick, he'd said nothing about her before. Though he did have to say something to Berwick's joke about dead bodies walking. "I don't have any ideas regarding the body. But when it comes to traitors there's the Godma incident to consider. That culprit is still a mystery."

"Hm..." Berwick pondered the issue with a bitter expression.

"I believe that man may have been working behind the scenes. He casually mentioned Godma's name. And this is pretty much guesswork, but...I think he was probably called Enouve."

"The name that came up in relation to Godma!" Berwick exclaimed, rising from his chair.

"That's right. As you know, Godma Barhong was behind the attack on the Second Magical Institute and Alice's kidnapping."

“And Enouve was believed to have supported him from behind the scenes.” Berwick furrowed his brow and plopped back down in his chair, stroking his beard.

Shortly after his capture, Godma had been killed in an isolated cell that only the top brass was supposed to know about. However, the only mana signature that had been detected belonged to a Magicmaster who was in the Outer World at the time, a fact backed up by their comrades, meaning there was a perfect alibi.

The mana signature identification system was considered to be the most secure of all, and nobody knew how the culprit managed to get around it. Regardless if any traitors existed, traces of mana were impossible to fake.

The situation would’ve required that two people have the exact same mana signature. The mana information body used in the identification system changed as a person gained experience, so even twins would come out completely differently. The mana information body was determined by the fundamental words in the lowest layer. It was like an identifier unique to that person. As a result, Godma’s murder was still a mystery to the experts even now.

“I don’t know how that man erased Godma,” Alus said. “Whether he ordered a subordinate to...if he even has any allies.”

“So that man’s body disappearing in itself is very significant.”

“Indeed. Perhaps there really are more of them. Both Lettie and I were hoping to bring the body back for examination.” Alus shrugged. “Even if there are survivors and they want to pick a fight with the military, they know I’m here, so they’re probably not going to do something reckless.”

“Hm, neither you nor Lettie were around when Godma was killed. At any rate, I will check with the other nations regarding this mysterious Magicmaster. But I’ll be casual about it.”

“That’s for the best.” Alus nodded. It was just a precautionary measure, but it was possible that if they made information about the snow man public, it would spread confusion among the nations. After all, not only could he control the weather, but he could somehow even enlist the aid of Fiends. His motives were

unknown, and if some group were to bring Fiends into the Inner World, every citizen would panic.

But was it really possible for humans and Fiends to cooperate? They were supposed to be completely incompatible beings... Even the magic they used was similar but different. Magic was originally a fantastical power that Fiends used. Humans had only been able to imitate a portion of their power, shaping it into weapons they could use.

Like magic, there was still little that humans knew about Fiends. But Alus believed if they had a deeper understanding of Fiends that they might be able to interfere with their way of being.

When I touched the stake, if the information I felt was more than just magic but also the key to the Fiends' very existence, then... Alus thought back to when he'd fought the giant Fiend Shem Azah. Immediately upon touching the stake containing the magic formula for Kehenage, vast amounts of information flowed into his mind. He'd felt some vague sense, akin to intuition, that magic and the Fiends' way of being was somehow connected in a fundamental way. He couldn't help but feel it was the truth.

However, there was a chance that his idea was too far-fetched, so Alus shook his head and switched back to a more realistic line of thought.

But then...something occurred to him. *—!* An incident involving cooperation with a Fiend came to mind. And as it happened, Godma's existence was the catalyst for it. *On the surface, his research theme was on the elements, but the last trick he showed me was transforming into a Fiend. What if that had been his main research...?*

Transformation, understanding, and cooperation with Fiends... Alus felt like Godma and the snow man had had more than just a connection behind the scenes. His guess relied heavily on intuition, but a sense of elation rose in his heart when he thought about it. *I don't understand that much about Fiends either. Which means that the enemy knows more about them than me.*

No matter how much twisted talent they had and how skilled in magic they were, Godma and the snow man alone couldn't achieve such success. But whoever was really involved, their skills and knowledge were all but certainly

above the current national standards.

Then Loki, who had crossed blades with the snow man, gave her opinion. “I was able to confirm that he could use the ice attribute at a rather high level. He may have been injured, but Mujir, one of Lady Lettie’s most skilled subordinates, didn’t stand a chance against him.”

“That would narrow his identity down considerably... Well, it surely wouldn’t be someone employed by the military,” Berwick noted.

It wasn’t like the military managed everyone who used magic. The military only had knowledge of those in their employ. Of course, if the person was a soldier that would be a big problem. Not only would it be in violation of the pact between the seven nations, but it would also mean they were conspiring with a group that could plunge the entirety of the human domain into chaos. If they weren’t careful, even the nation the culprit was affiliated with would come under suspicion.

“The man was around 180 centimeters tall and had red hair. He was probably in his late thirties. Sir Alus decapitated the man and I saw him die before my eyes,” Loki reported, as Berwick groaned in response.

Alus took it from there. “Speaking of which, he seemed to know something about the Four Books of Fegel as well.”

That fact shocked Berwick even more. He stroked his beard, raising his eyebrows. “That hints at Kurama’s involvement. What a mess.”

“Yes, but it’s too early to say. There’s still no proof that links Kurama to the Godma incident,” Alus said.

“Indeed, but I would hope that it’s at least some members of Kurama or a subordinate organization to them. That way they could be wiped out in one fell swoop.”

“That would save us a lot of trouble. Also...”

Berwick looked at Alus in exasperation. “There’s still something else?!”

“Unfortunately, it seems the enemy has knowledge we don’t, especially when it comes to magic. So to put it bluntly, do you know of any spells that allow one

to control the climate and weather over a large area? Or spells to manipulate Fiends that could suppress their instincts to the point that they could cooperate with humans?”

“No, I can’t say I do. Manipulating the weather, though, might be related to the system we use for the Inner World,” Berwick said.

“Vanalis is in the Outer World and spans quite a large area. Well, I don’t have a clue about controlling Fiends either, so I thought I’d ask. At any rate, I’d like to do some checks. If there are any spells I don’t know about they would have to be taboo-classified.”

“So that’s what the clearance is for...” Berwick groaned. He thought for a moment and something seemed to occur to him. “What if it’s one of the spells some noble family developed on their own?”

“Ah, inherited magic, huh...the kind that never leaves the family,” Alus remarked. Tesfia Fable’s family was a good example of noble families producing excellent children who became military personnel. They were trained by the various nations’ academies and then deployed in the field. The specifics might differ, and there were a few exceptions, but it was a common trend across the nations. Because of that, the nobility and the military had a give and take relationship. Not only did the nobility have influence in the military, but they also developed their own spells that they kept hidden, a sort of secret art that stayed in their family. Like Tesfia’s Icicle Sword, it was a different approach to training Magicmasters from the way the Institute handled things.

“There might not be any spells that can control Fiends, but I can at least imagine there being spells that control the weather to make it snow,” Alus continued. “But I would’ve thought that even secret arts would be mentioned in the spell encyclopedia.”

“Well, there are exceptions to everything. There is no guarantee that all noble families have Alpha’s national interest as their top priority. That’s why the nation isn’t a monolith yet. I guess you could say that’s part of being the privileged class.”

The closed nature of noble society was an irritation to Alus. Seeing Alus click his tongue, Berwick returned to the topic at hand. “I’m sure there would be

nothing relevant on manipulating Fiends. If something like that existed, it would be used to bring a quick end to the war with the Fiends. But, all right, I understand. I'll see what I can do."

"Good. Then I'd like you to grant me temporary access to browse the headings for all taboo-classified spells of all the attributes. I'll take a look at them."

"Y-Yes, but it really is just going to be temporary," Berwick said after a pause. Despite his reluctant expression, he somehow managed to nod his head.

Alus had seen some of the snow man's tricks. He'd also learned the environment-altering spells Niflheim and Helheim based on past research, so he could predict the structural elements of that kind of spell. Thus there was nobody more suitable than him to browse the Magic Compendium and get a hint from just the headings.

"Fine...but in return, you'll have to report your findings."

Alus silently nodded. Deep down, though, he had a feeling that his search would end in vain. Despite what he'd said to the Governor-General, he had quite a large amount of knowledge, having researched taboo spells and examined the spell encyclopedia on his own. From that he could surmise that it was either a hidden spell belonging to a noble family like the Governor-General had guessed, or a spell created by someone who'd gotten closer to the essence of magic than Alus.

If it was the latter, the transformation into a Fiend and cooperation with Fiends were a lot more suspicious. And the largest clue that made him believe that was... "Governor-General."

Noting the change in Alus that caused him to address him by his title, Berwick had a terrible feeling. He furrowed his brow and faced Alus with a serious expression.

"I'd love to have the originals of the Four Books of Fegel."

"I could find a copy, but the originals would be difficult. If it was just a strange book full of ridiculous lies it would be much simpler. But if it actually contains truly important information on magic and Fiends like you say, then it's a

different story. Even if I could find it, it's unlikely we'd be able to decipher it."

"I'll leave that up to you. But since the snow man mentioned them, it's likely the enemy is trying to gather them too, so keep that in mind. If that's the case, the Four Books of Fegel could practically be considered the Testament of God."

Berwick smiled wryly. "Now that's an extreme analogy."

The Testament of God was an untouchable record of the world. In other words, it referred to the Akashic Records, the same words that Alus had uttered when he came in contact with Shem Azah's stake. It contained the truth about magic...and about everything in the world from its beginning to its end.

Its existence was closer to myth than anything. Some considered it a delusion, born from the appearance of Fiends that had disrupted everything. It was often pointed to by devotees of Fiends and by doomsayers.

However, even if the contents of the Four Books of Fegel turned out not to be the Testament of God, it was no doubt important and completely new to humanity. *To the point of approaching the Akashic Records even...* Alus thought to himself.

Fiends had stolen most of the world, leaving only a little area for humans to live in. Just a fragment of the history before Fiends remained. How Fiends appeared in the first place was still unknown. Even where they'd first appeared was unclear.

"Well, I've heard your report. Maybe it's time to turn my attention back to the Inner World." Berwick adjusted his posture in his chair, bringing Alus back to the present.

"First, I'd like you to keep Vanalis under control," Alus said. "I'd rather it not turn out like Covent." The continent of Covent that Alus had retaken was currently filled with traps like magic landmines, maintained to keep Fiends from entering. There wasn't even a force in place to protect it. In other words, the land Alus had staked his life to take back was being left vacant and unused. Anyone would think he'd been sent in there with the expectation that he'd fail and die.

"Those weren't my instructions," Berwick said. "Now that Vanalis is ours,

Alpha's control should soon be asserted over Covent."

"I hope so." Well, it didn't matter to Alus now.

"By the way, is that really all? From the looks of it there's something else too," Berwick said with a satisfied look, as he turned to Loki.

This changed the topic from the mission to a more casual conversation. Loki nodded like he'd hit the nail on the head. "Sir Alus told me about his past."

Berwick looked surprised for a moment. Then he gave her a deeply emotional smile. At that point, he began telling tales without asking Alus first, like a good-natured old man taking the opportunity of his grandson coming of age to share his favorite stories about him.

Alus felt awkward and wanted to wrap things up as soon as possible, but since Loki was listening so intently, it was hard for him to interrupt.

And so—after an excruciating amount of time—Berwick finally reached the end of his stories, and concluded by basically saying that Alus had been very unlikable and not at all adorable.

"Is that enough? We have to get back to the Institute already. And I have my credits to consider."

"It's a bad habit of yours to say something you don't really mean when things are inconvenient for you, Alus. Well, I'm relieved to hear that you're enjoying yourself."

Alus had no comeback as Berwick grinned at him. Instead, he turned around and started heading for the door. Loki rushed to follow him after giving Berwick a quick bow of thanks.

Berwick called out to Alus. "I hope we can live in a world soon where we don't have to rely on you."

Hearing this, Alus stopped and looked back. "If that's what you think...then be merciless in everything you do."

His sharp remark hit Berwick where it hurt. Alus wanted them to use all of their might to crush Kurama. But with the threat of Fiends from the outside they didn't have any forces to spare, so Berwick and the rest of the top brass

kept putting it off.

"Well, if you'll excuse me." And with that, Alus opened the door and left the office.

As he walked down the long corridor, he thought to himself, *The next stop is the Institute... It feels like it's been a long time since I last saw it. But for him to say I'm enjoying myself... How blind do you have to be for it to look like that?*

Glancing at Loki walking behind him, Alus saw that she seemed to be in strangely high spirits. She looked like she might start skipping and humming any time now. Were Berwick's stories really that entertaining, or was she looking forward to getting back to the Institute?

What a strange girl... Still, Berwick has a point, the Institute sure is more comfortable. With a dry smile, Alus started picking up the pace, leaving the military headquarters behind him.

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Hm...I see he hasn't completely given up on us , Berwick thought, as he stared at the door that Alus and Loki had closed behind them.

To be frank, his relationship with Alus wasn't that of a superior and his subordinate. Berwick was always conscious of the delicate balance that was in place since Alus felt a debt towards him. He always thought the balance would collapse if he fully relied on him.

In terms of talent and temperament, Alus wasn't the kind of person who would feel forever bound by gratitude. Getting him to agree to a mission was akin to a political negotiation, and he would have to convince Alus or at least offer something of benefit to him.

Alus had wanted to retire from the military to devote himself to a life of pursuing what he loved. That didn't look like it was going to become a reality anytime soon, and Berwick wondered what Alus thought about that. It wouldn't have been strange for him to show his dissatisfaction by leaving everything behind and abandoning Alpha.

"He probably wouldn't acknowledge it, but we owe Tesfia and Alice a lot. Oh, I forgot to tell him to give them my regards." Berwick decided to save it for the

next time when his shoulders jumped. The private line on his desk had suddenly rung.

He hurried to check who was calling and was even more surprised. It was an infrequent caller and the first time in a long while that he'd received a call from her.

He considered making it a video call, but in the end, picked audio only. "How unusual for you to contact me, Principal Sisty."

"I apologize for the sudden call, Governor-General." When Sisty called, she typically used Berwick's direct line, bypassing the regular military operators. Her voice was as beautifully resonant as ever.

"I don't mind. I just finished up over here too. And I have a hunch as to why you're calling." However, Berwick was being careful. If she was calling about what he suspected, he couldn't answer her questions directly. Making it an audio call had been the right decision. After all, he was going up against the Witch, who could have easily read his expressions. He imagined her fearless smile just from her tone.

Sisty got to the heart of the matter. "Let me cut straight to the point. It's about Lilisha Ron de Rimfuge Frusevan."

"I believe I've already given you all the information I can," Berwick said after a pause, responding with a generic answer. Just as he'd expected, he thought with a bitter expression. He heard her sigh, as he did what he could to fend off the pressure she was emanating.

"That's not very fair, Berwick. Sure, my institute doesn't turn anyone away and we did accept her as a student. Just like with Alus... You know, I'm making quite a few concessions here. I'm even bearing the burden of your suspicious scheming."

"Don't say scheme... Just call it risk avoidance in case something happens." Feeling the pressure, Berwick rubbed his chin and put up what resistance he could.

In the military, Berwick could trust very few people aside from Vizaist. As such, a former Single who was the current principal of the Second Magical

Institute would be an invaluable ally.



That was why he never pursued the identity of the mysterious attacker at the Institute. Whatever their intentions, he knew that Sisty and Alus hadn't reported everything about the incident.

Even so, it was a matter of mutual tolerance. Alus had also feigned ignorance on the matter in the past. As long as he and Sisty were on the same page, she would remain noncommittal no matter how much Berwick pressed her.

Sisty went on with a hint of resignation in her words. "I'm sure you have your own reasons, but I have to consider my students' safety. And I want to know Ms. Lilisha's background. Well, even if you tell me, I guess I'd need to stand down anyway depending on your intentions and objectives."

She remained firm in her role as principal, doing her best to extract at least the bare minimum of information. She had a good point, which put Berwick in a difficult position.

Sensing that, Sisty pressed a little further. "Berwick, why don't we stop trying to feel each other out? This is between friends, so let's forget about weighing the pros and cons here."

Berwick knew why Sisty had left her position as a Single. She'd done it for the apple of her eye, Alus. Not to mention that she'd helped him in various ways so that Berwick could obtain the position of Governor-General, so he owed her a lot.

He finally made up his mind, and carefully said, "Well, I suppose there is some risk."

"Come on, don't put on airs, Berwick."

"Sorry, but I must admit I am hesitant. I have to consider what my superior wants too."

"—! Hm, is that so."

Hinting like that was the best Berwick could do at the moment. It should be enough for the brilliant Sisty. Someone superior to Berwick must mean a person who could influence his position was making a move.

In Alpha, the only one who had the authority to directly appoint and remove the Governor-General was the ruler. So what he said just now could be construed as Cicelnia moving in the background.

“I wish I’d been told sooner, though I don’t think there are any problems yet.”

“That’s right,” Berwick said. “As long as you fulfill your duties within the scope of your role, there shouldn’t be any problems.”

“I understand.”

“I owe you one.” He bowed to the other party even though she couldn’t see him.

Alus was right. They couldn’t just let domestic terrorists be. Since there was a chance that Kurama was on the move, he wanted to wipe out any points of concern as soon as possible. And he was willing to use whatever it took for that sake, including Lilisha who had her own circumstances. He felt he could use her, which was why he took Cicelnia’s intentions into account and sent her to the Institute. In other words, if he didn’t show that kind of resolve, he couldn’t protect the nation.

“By the way, can you give Alus and Loki back to me already? I’m reaching my limit as to what I can do about their credits and whatnot. My institute never had a system in place to give credits to students who were absent for that many days.”

“Ugh...well...I’ll try to be careful.” To be honest, Berwick wanted to say that it wasn’t all his fault, but held back. It was only natural for Sisty to think that everything came from the military, but this time it had been a promise between Lettie and Alus. That said, it did greatly benefit the military, so he couldn’t act like it had nothing to do with him.

Most of all, as principal of the Second Magical Institute, Sisty’s duty was to protect her students and ensure that they could graduate, and Berwick understood that.

Then Sisty realized something. “Oh, speaking of... Was the business you mentioned earlier about Alus?”

“Ah, yes, that’s right. We just finished up a heavy conversation and he left me

with a painful truth before leaving.” Berwick let out a sigh as he complained.

“Oh my,” Sisty replied with a sly smile, not showing much in the way of sympathy.

Sensing that his little performance had been seen through, Berwick coughed and changed the subject. “By the way... Putting Alus in the Institute was the right move.”

“Oh? I’m curious what you mean by that.”

“I’m talking about the past. To think he’d share his story about the large-scale invasion with Loki...” He had known Alus since he was a child. Loki or no, he’d changed so much that it was like he was a completely different person.

“I see...” In contrast to Berwick’s parental tone, Sisty’s reply sounded somber. “Just thinking about it is exhausting. It was a day to remember for me too.”

Sisty let out a heavy, gloomy sigh. Despite having retired, she’d had no choice but to return to the frontlines, and wound up seeing more deaths at one time than she’d seen during her entire career. Anyone who’d lived through the large-scale invasion had seen things they wished they never had. Not to mention that the Special Unit that Berwick had Vizaist form had been all but wiped out.

“That’s true. Anyway, take good care of Alus.” Knowing what Sisty was going though, Berwick put an end to the topic.

“Then tell Alus to do his own part as a student. And Berwick, could you not make Alus any promises about credits without talking to me first?”

“...” He was at a loss for words. True, he’d made that kind of deal with Alus in order to get him to say yes a few times. And it was Sisty who’d had to handle the fallout. He realized he might have been treating her like a convenient tool and cold sweat ran down his back. “I’ll be more careful in the future,” he said.

It was the best he could do. Although he thought he’d been careful with Alus, he might’ve gotten carried away by the idea of reclaiming Vanalis. With that in mind, Berwick’s expression sobered.

Sixty-Second Chapter

Cloudy with a Chance of Rain

The industrial city of Folen was located in Alpha's outer perimeter region. On their way back to the Institute, Alus decided to make a stop there.

Being so close to the Outer World, the city had been built with resisting an invasion in mind. There were residential areas, but the residents there were typically looked down on as being lowlifes. Rich people and nobles tended to live closer to the Tower of Babel, so areas like these more or less attracted the lower classes.

Folen also had a lot of military buildings that had been built a long time ago, so it functioned as a spare headquarters. That's why it was considered the second defensive line.

The city also featured a defense system modeled after the Tower of Babel, though it was an inferior copy compared with the original. If Fiends broke through the first defensive line it wouldn't be strong enough to hold the flood back.

However, it wasn't because Alpha's technological level was behind the rest. That was just how great Babel was. Its power exceeded human comprehension. At the moment humanity was fully reliant on Babel, and since it was rumored that its power was weakening, the current peace was fragile.

Because of its proximity to the Outer World, Folen had a unique sense of tension that differed from cities closer to the Tower of Babel. People here were far from complacent. And the fact that the city specialized in producing AWRs and magical tools for Magicmasters was not unrelated to that.

That's why Alus liked this city. Just looking at the stores selling AWRs lining the streets was enough to get his heart beating. Since it was a detour, he wasn't

here to walk the main street and look around like before. But he did take Loki with him to let the scenery sink in for a minute.

“Sir Alus, it’s about time...”

“I know.” After gazing at the people on the streets for a few moments, Alus began walking. The two left the main street and headed for the Circle Port that was the quickest way back to the Institute.

The device silently activated...and as the realization hit that he was finally returning to the Institute, Alus looked glum. He’d missed a lot of lessons. Even though he was using the post-campus festival holiday, regular classes had already started.

He’d been working for the military, but Berwick wasn’t all-powerful. While he could help with some credits, Alus knew it wouldn’t cover all of them. “Not to mention that I was just there as Lettie’s help this time...” Strictly speaking, it wasn’t at Berwick’s request and the achievements were attributed to Lettie. Although he didn’t care about the achievements, maybe he should’ve tried negotiating with Berwick.

Alus let out a small sigh, to which Loki swiftly responded. “Are you worried about the lessons?”

“There’s that. And then there is their training...”

“I believe you told them to study on their own? I’m sure they’re practicing as much as they can.”

It wasn’t as though they’d been gone for a month or anything, so Tesfia and Alice shouldn’t have fallen too far behind. That said, Alus wanted to follow the schedule he’d made to the letter if possible. Though he hadn’t given them any real training, he felt that they’d probably reached his anticipated level anyway.

He’d noticed it before, but the two girls’ growth was extraordinary. It was a blessed position for a mentor to be in. But if asked why...Alus would struggle to come up with a reason. He wasn’t so full of himself to think that he was a good teacher. If anything, it was the opposite.

So perhaps it was because they showed a lot of potential? *Well, that’s what anyone would assume.* In the beginning they didn’t even know about mana

manipulation, but now they'd already moved on to duration, and were gradually improving their record. Before he'd set out for Vanalis they'd become able to sustain it for quite some time. In that sense, his original goal of training them to be Magicmasters who could fight in the Outer World was looking to be accomplished at a tremendous speed.

"So at least they have something to do, huh," Alus said to nobody in particular.

Loki softly sighed. "Sir Alus, worrying about those two is fine, but aren't you forgetting about that girl who transferred in?"

"Hm? The one the Governor-General sent, you mean?"

"Yes. You didn't mention her when you were making your report, and I didn't want to say anything impertinent..."

However, it would've been pointless to ask about Lilisha then. After the report, Berwick had taken advantage of Alus's asking for a reward and limited their discussion to just that. And Alus was well aware that Berwick was a tough nut to crack when he was like that. "I could easily see him just brushing it off. Also, Berwick doesn't really have any strong reasons for wanting to keep an eye on me."

"Excuse me...?" Loki tilted her head, giving Alus a questioning look. She'd first come to the Institute as a watchdog, so she struggled to understand what he meant.

"After the mock battle against Elise, Lilisha revealed part of my circumstances to that group of students, remember? She said I was helping the military like some of the more skilled third-years do." His rank as No. 1 had been kept hidden and the situation had been defused. By releasing a portion of the truth in a more deliberate manner it had been easier for the students to accept. "That made it so that we don't have to hide everything at all costs."

Even this time, the fact that Alus had disappeared from the Institute to reclaim Vanalis could be passed off as part of that. By making everyone think that Alus was a special student who sometimes helped the military on missions, there was no longer any need for him to be so nervous about his identity. "So from Berwick's point of view, he's doing what he can even as he's being

denounced by annoying nobles in the top brass. If anything, I think there's another reason for it."

"Such as?" Loki's expression remained firm. She wouldn't take Alus getting caught up in anyone's scheme sitting down. She felt uneasy and also that her anger towards the situation was justified. But she suppressed her displeasure, showing a mysterious expression instead.

Even in her stubbornness she was thinking of Alus, and he couldn't help but smile. "Well, for example, 'I look forward to your guidance and cooperation,'" he said in a joking tone, hinting at a third student joining his study group. He glanced at Loki to observe her mood.

"And would you teach her in that case?" Loki struck back with a cold and sharp retort.

Alus raised his hand, shrugging like he was giving up. "Surely not. I have no intention of doing so and I doubt she has the time for it either. It would only hurt both sides." He'd decided this after remembering his brief exchange with Lilisha. Thinking back, he thought that Sisty had successfully cajoled him into taking on Tesfia and Alice. There wouldn't be a second time...probably.

"I'm relieved to hear it. It looked like you would repeat the same mistake," Loki declared. Her steps were steady and resolute.

True, if he did as Loki said, he'd get plenty of time to spend on himself. What a reliable partner she was... However, Alus decided to flip the topic on its head. "That said, I doubt that's the approach they're going with. Either way, she's the one Berwick chose to send. She might appear to be the same age as us, but there's definitely something going on."

"Is it something to do with the Frusevan bloodline rather than the Rimfuge, perhaps?"

"I don't want to get involved with a noble family's business, so I just hope it's nothing."

"In that case, I will..." Loki began forcefully with a sharp look in her eyes, as if anticipating something unsettling.

Alus thought that if something happened she might actually lose control, so

he secretly considered putting an investigation of Lilisha into his plans. Regardless of what sparks might come flying his way, there wouldn't be any harm in doing some research beforehand. But he was determined not to stick his head into noble affairs. At the same time, he recalled the girl in question.

Lilisha Ron de Rimfuge Frusevan. She was difficult for Alus to deal with. He'd seen nobility as being nothing more than a group of malicious people, but he was beginning to understand that they were more varied than that.

In fact, he couldn't judge the nobles he'd met since enrolling in the Institute by his old standards. There was the friendly Felinella, and even Tesfia, despite appearances, differed from what he was used to. That said, he struggled to place her in the noble category. However, someone like her who was straightforward and simple, that he could do whatever he wanted with, was cute for a noble. He could only wish all nobles were as easy to handle as Tesfia was.

But in reality they were the opposite. They blocked his ability to push through, using force and scheming behind his back. In short, it was better to act on the side of caution. This time in particular, Berwick seemed to have an ulterior motive, so Alus could easily imagine getting caught up in some trouble.

If it comes down to it, Loki alone might not be enough. Well, if Berwick has taken the worst-case scenario into account, he's already thought of me fighting back and using force. So he probably wouldn't push for anything reckless.

Before long, Alus and Loki had arrived at the Circle Port leading to Beliza in the middle district where the Institute was located. As soon as they stepped onto it, their mana information bodies were analyzed and recorded. Once that was over, all information was duplicated and transferred. It was like their bodies were reconstructed after a full scan.

As mana particles filled the Circle Port, Alus muttered, "Since we took care of Vanalis, I hope we can live in peace and quiet for the time being." That was what he truly felt.

"That's true. It's been very busy lately... I'm sure we'll be able to take it easy for a while. We'll go back to normal," Loki said to console him, but Alus couldn't even tell what was normal and abnormal anymore. "Normal" probably meant

living an ordinary student's life at the Institute.

But when he thought that, he couldn't really bring himself to agree with it. Even so, the Institute was the place where he'd ended up in his attempt to distance himself from the military, seeking a more normal life. So in the end it wasn't a bad life, even if it was a little stressful and oddly busy.

Alus forcibly pushed his doubts away. But he was at least sure that the laboratory at the Institute was the place where he belonged for now.

"You could also think about it this way, Sir Alus," Loki said, holding up a finger. "Even if you can't take it easy, you can see minor problems as spicing up a boring everyday life for a change of pace."

Loki's suggestion certainly had its uses. Alus did spend most of his time doing magic-related research. And he tended to lose himself in his research, pulling all-nighters if necessary, so it was clear that he led an unhealthy lifestyle. In that case, getting caught up in trouble was a chance for him to take a break from his research, almost as a way of distracting himself.

It was easy to guess Loki's intentions. The point was that she wanted him to improve his lifestyle, to go outside and get some exercise. She'd talked his ears off about that.

Still, I feel like things are a little different than before. She shouldn't want him to get caught up in trouble. That much was clear when he'd joked about teaching Lilisha. Loki hated everything that took Alus's free time away. She felt resentment on his behalf. So it was strange for her to suddenly change her tune. *Is it going to rain? Well, in Loki's case I'm sure there would be lightning* , he thought with some amusement, before forgetting it and getting back on topic. "No thanks, I'll pass on any trouble."

"Not to worry. I'm sure that anything that befalls you won't be any trouble, and if by chance it's something harmful you can just eliminate them," Loki declared with a fearless smile. The fact that it suited her was a little scary.

"Yeah," Alus said, after a pause. It appeared there wouldn't be any change to the policy of eliminating anyone who got in his way.

Loki was being strangely aggressive. Maybe it was a result of the lingering

influence of the mission to retake Vanalis. Lettie's recruitment effort probably had some effect on her too. Lettie had acknowledged him as a human being, offering to push through with it even if the military tried to get in the way. That showed her sincerity, respect, and trust. There was no way something like that wouldn't impress Loki. That's why Alus decided it was best to obey her, and nodded his head.

Naturally there were things he agreed with as well. "I want to avoid any quarrels as much as possible. I have no idea what Berwick's thinking either. Of course, if the line is crossed, don't show any mercy."

"Of course!" Loki clenched her fist, holding it in front of her chest as a display of her motivation.

"Just avoid doing anything rash."

"Please don't worry. I know how to do it in moderation. I'll even hold back."

Alus didn't know who she was imagining, but felt a headache coming on as it sounded like she was ready to punish them. Seeing Loki's bright smile, he realized that any further conversation was pointless. He forced himself to believe that he could just leave everything to her, and moved on.

A short walk from their arrival point, and they reached another Circle Port. It would take them to their final destination, the Institute. Incidentally, only people connected with the Institute, as identified through their licenses, could use a Circle Port to directly access it.

That said, they weren't far from it. They could just run all the way there, but Loki's injuries still hadn't fully healed. With her body wrapped in bandages, she was strictly forbidden from doing any vigorous exercise. The healing Magicmaster had also told her to rest as much as possible.

After completing their last transfer, the two arrived back on Institute grounds. The hustle and bustle Alus saw around them filled him with a strange mix of relief and gloom.

It was a little nostalgic and also somewhat annoying, a setting unique to the Institute. The students didn't have much of a sense of reservation or consideration due to their youth, and as a consequence the campus was filled

with noise.

Timewise, it was just after noon. The first lesson after lunch hadn't begun yet.

The weather, artificially generated as always, was clear today with nary a cloud in the sky. The two were sneaking around a bit because of what had happened during the campus festival. Alus's abilities had been exposed during his supposed mock battle against Elise, and although Lilisha cleared it up with her little act—and it was further forgotten with Lettie's appearance—he wanted to avoid a second incident if possible.

The two decided to go to Alus's room in the research building rather than to class for the day.

Once he'd settled in, Alus didn't have the energy to return to class. That said, he wasn't going to rest either, as he immediately headed for his desk to begin his own research.

Loki hadn't fully healed yet, so she took a page from Alus's book and studied magic on her own. Their latest mission had made her realize that she was nowhere skilled enough to keep up with him...and also that a Magicmaster could easily harm someone with their powers. In other words, they constantly wielded the lethal weapon known as magic.

For that reason, the correct use of magic was always an issue, one that came up in discussions at every turn. The reason why criminal organizations like Kurama—and Magicmasters that strayed from the path—were hated was because they turned the power meant to be used against Fiends on their fellow humans. In the Outer World the concept was somewhat less adhered to, but in the human domain, magic was power that needed to be correctly used and appropriately managed.

However, Loki felt that her powers hadn't yet reached the point where their use could be questioned. She thought back to the snow man in Vanalis. He'd hurt people without hesitation and she didn't have the ability to oppose him. And if Alus had arrived even moments later, she could have died. It didn't matter how right she was, because without power she was helpless against evil.

"Still, the lightning attribute sure has a lot of taboo-classified spells," Loki said, trying to draw some information out of Alus as she served him tea.

“You could say that the attribute is suited for combat due to its nature,” Alus answered without turning to look her way, his gaze fixed on his work. He was in the middle of accessing the military’s server to gather information on taboo spells, using the authority he’d been granted by the Governor-General.

That said, he had a time limit, and it wasn’t like he was allowed to see all of the documents on taboo spells. The server also contained top secret information but the authority granted to Alus was only for magic. Any unauthorized access would immediately cut off the connection and alert the Governor-General, as well as send out a history of who had accessed the system.

Not that I can’t figure out a way or two to get around it... But for now I’ll just wait and see. With a mischievous smile, Alus’s fingers glided across the virtual keyboard and he was quickly able to find some information.

Oh, now this is... His eyes opened wide. He called Loki over and had her take a look at it. It was indirect, but it wouldn’t hurt to do something nice for his partner.

“Power spells that correspond to the vertex of thunder?! But it looks like they’re classified as taboo. I wonder what the criteria is for that.”

“Well, the criteria differs a little between international law and what Alpha classified on their own. There are spells not known to other nations.” Many of them were born from the military’s dark past...its negative legacy. They were developed for inhuman purposes, using human experimentation, and if the public ever found out about them, trust in the military would plummet.

“The people in the Inner World are carefree,” Alus continued. “They easily believe that the blades used to protect them are wielded with a righteous will and for a greater purpose.” There were spells that were configured to only work on humans, and spells that would result in slaughter if the user was careless. So why even resort to that kind of research? But it wasn’t that simple. “The common way of making new spells is to reconfigure existing spells. In other words, it constantly builds on itself, so even the base research of a horrible spell can be useful.”

“So it’s a matter of ethics, then...”

“You got it. Lettie’s Detonation could easily blow up a city if she’s not careful. It would be the perfect spell for conquering the cities of enemy nations.”

“How ironic. Magic was meant as a weapon against Fiends, but it might end up being used against fellow humans,” Loki muttered.

The thought that this was just how things were came to Alus’s mind, but he didn’t say it out loud. He’d seen plenty of magic criminals, Magicmasters who had strayed off the path, in his work in the shadows. In fact, he’d crossed blades with and killed a fair number of them. Even if they were lowlifes worthy of death, he had used his powers against people rather than Fiends as a result.

That aside, if Magicmasters began to forget what they were fighting for, their role as the ones who carried humanity’s future on their shoulders would be lost. Since they were the only ones who could oppose Fiends, that made the existence of taboo spells all the more frightening.

Alus shook these foolish thoughts out of his head. He would rather leave the image of an ideal Magicmaster to the serious-minded Jean and the other Single Digit Magicmasters. “Speaking of thunder...” he said, looking again at the list of taboo spells.

Since access was restricted, the display’s virtual screen was darker and harder to see than usual, and in order to view magic formulas and other details there were several locks that needed to be undone. Alus’s license code was enough to unlock them, but it took some time and effort. “There are fewer of the eight vertices of thunder that are taboo-classified than I thought. Spells of that class do require a high degree of affinity, so I guess it’s a practical problem since there are so few people who could use them. I imagine not even Sajik has learned one.”

No matter how much one mastered the lightning attribute, the eight vertices were in a league of their own. The expert-level spell Naruikazuchi was pretty much a trump card unique to Loki. “I can just barely use Kuroikazuchi, but it’s incredibly inefficient.”

Of the eight vertices of thunder, Kuroikazuchi was one that was less influenced by affinity. Even so, Alus was the only one who could make up the abnormally precise degree of accuracy in its construction to better suit him a

bit. In that sense, not even he could truly use Kuroikazuchi.

However, Loki just honestly praised him. “Amazing! Kuroikazuchi is an ultimate-level spell and its magic formula hasn’t even been released yet!”

Ultimate level magic was in the same class as taboo spells, and just learning the magic formula was a trial. It was said that learning it went beyond what one could achieve by effort alone. In fact, only the military’s top brass knew who could use these spells.

“D-Do you think I could learn it too?” Loki excitedly asked Alus, bringing her face closer. She acted like she’d found a secret remedy that would give her an immediate and massive boost. She only sought strength for Alus’s sake. Her intense gaze was filled with hope and expectation.

However, Alus bluntly rejected her. “That’s not possible. Considering affinity and mana consumption, it’s just not realistic. It’s not really a spell that’s practical for actual combat.” That was one of the reasons why it was only Singles who could handle ultimate-level spells. Not only were they hard to learn, but a normal Magicmaster could never handle them considering how much mana was required.

That was also why Singles were seen as monstrous. They were in a realm of their own compared to other Magicmasters.

“I see...” Despite being full of expectation, Loki had been mercilessly shot down.

“There’s no need to be disappointed. Look, for example, this... Oh, it’s also a taboo spell.” Not all of the eight vertices of thunder were wholesome spells. Even if they’d been developed to be used against Fiends, there were some that were even more effective against humans.

The current military policy was that Alpha had no need for spells that killed people. From that point of view, the very existence of Lettie’s M2-Polaris was a major threat to world peace. *But if it’s Loki, she might be able to learn taboo spells on the same level as vertices. Can I really display this data though? It might leak to Berwick...*

This was something worth pondering. If it was revealed that Loki knew a spell

like that without being a Single, it would be obvious who the knowledge came from. Berwick gave Alus access privileges because he trusted him, so it would be in complete disregard of that.

Alus scratched his head. “Well, I guess it wouldn’t be the first time.” And so he chose to copy the data. Berwick was still keeping information on Lilisha secret—probably—so it was only fair. Or not... But he could just consider it as another reward for Vanalis.

“Now then, I think that’s enough. I don’t have much time so I’ll just do a quick sweep of the rest.” Alus nudged Loki, who was peering at the screen with intense concentration. He could understand her curiosity, of course. Loki was a Magicmaster in her own right. She couldn’t help but be intrigued by high level spells, taboo or not.

“I-I’m sorry!!” Loki hurriedly apologized and stepped far back.

“You don’t have to go that far. There won’t be any problems if you watch it from just behind me. Keep quiet about what you see, though. If Berwick finds out about it he’ll just use it as leverage to make a deal.”

“Of course!” Loki replied briskly. Unable to hide her excitement, she positioned herself right behind Alus, just a few centimeters from him.

Ignoring this, Alus turned his attention back to his work. He couldn’t fool around anymore. He hadn’t asked for access privileges just for fun, but to look through the taboo magic and get a lead on the snow man’s identity. He was probably a member of a criminal organization like Kurama, but there was something strange about the magic he’d used. The spell to turn Vanalis into a snow-covered landscape, and the way the Fiends seemed to coordinate... It was clearly possible, but how?

I don’t think my chances of finding it this way are very high anyway. The spell is probably fundamentally different from the ones we use. He felt like the construction of the magic involved had been woven through a completely different way of thinking. *It’s probably also closer to the essence of magic than our modern magic is. It’s a more complete form of it.*

That was the biggest cause for concern. It was only conjecture, but it meant that the opponent’s magic was closer to the complete form of magic that Fiends

used.

The magic humans used was filled with noise from thoughts and emotions. Alus believed this was the biggest factor keeping human magic from being perfected. If that handicap could be removed, the balance between Fiends and humans would change dramatically. And the enemy had somehow managed to get their hands on that.

As he rapidly scrolled through the contents, his brain sped up too. The gap in magic between humans and Fiends was large. A prime example was the Kehenage that the ruling Fiend in Vanalis, the Shem Azah, had used. In terms of amount of mana, Alus could use spells on the same scale, but the accuracy in construction would be clearly inferior.

High level magic was practically the true nature of Fiends. It was the field they excelled in the most. As he'd shown in Vanalis, Alus could still take countermeasures, but that was problematic in itself. He couldn't protect the entirety of the human domain on his own. They didn't need to be on Alus's level, but unless all of the Doubles—no, maybe just the Singles—had enough knowledge and skills to not fall behind, he would never know peace.

The prevailing point of view was that the balance between Fiends and humans should at least be even. But there were plenty of things to worry about, such as the Tower of Babel's power weakening, the appearance of Fiends like the Devourer, and the unsettling factors they'd seen in Vanalis. The situation didn't look optimistic to him.

As Loki watched, Alus went through the ice attribute spells. A couple of them caught his attention, but as expected, the ones he was looking for were nowhere to be found.

There was one that seemed promising, but when he looked into it further he found that neither the magic formula nor its effects had been recorded. "Garb Sheep, huh. It's taboo-classified, but all it says is its name."

As he scratched his head, Loki asked, "Did you find it?"

"No, this is probably not it either. Well, it's not like I expected much to begin with." If there were any others, they would be the spells kept secret in noble families like Berwick had suggested, or perhaps taboo spells from other nations.

And if Alpha's noble families were being secretive, it wouldn't be strange for noble families in the other nations to do the same. *In that case, there's nothing I can do... No, there is still one possibility.*

An idea came to mind, but it wasn't very likely to yield results either, so he would just check it later. With that, he slid his fingers across the keyboard to close the virtual screen. "Well, at least I got to look over the taboo spells. If you see any good spells, I'll arrange a magic formula for you sometime. I can't just copy it as is, after all."

"Really?! Don't take it back, okay!"

"Don't get your hopes up. I was just thinking of messing with some formulas after getting stimulated by this. It'll just be a side project in my research."

"That's more than enough, Sir Alus!" Loki clapped her hands together and smiled, before she had a thought and her expression changed. "Don't you think this kind of guidance is more valuable than the Institute's lessons?"

"That's obvious, but it's too late to say anything now." That was why Alus tended to skip class. He hadn't planned on skipping that much, but there was no point in attending classes any more than necessary. If he really thought about it, he'd probably reach the conclusion that coming to the Institute was a mistake in the first place.

As Alus wrapped up his investigation, the doorbell rang, just when he was thinking about having a cup of tea to wind down. He could tell who it was just by the way it rang. But he'd already expected them to come, and glanced at Loki for her to get the door.

"Ah! I knew you were back!" Tesfia exclaimed.

"Welcome back. How was the mission?" Alice asked.

A small sigh escaped Loki's lips as she opened the door to reveal a smiling Tesfia with Alice behind her. It seemed class was done for the day and they'd stopped by on their way home. If Alus had told them he had some business to take care of, they'd have easily guessed it was a mission, which was why he'd left without telling them anything.

"Who told you?" Alus asked. "Only the principal would know, but I doubt she

said anything.”

“Should we not have said anything?” Alice put her hand over her mouth and poked Tesfia with her elbow.

“Um... W-Well, it’s fine, isn’t it? Alice and I are the only ones who know. We wouldn’t go telling anyone else.” Tesfia put down her bag and tried to move on to training.

“That won’t fly. If you want me to train you, answer my question.”

The two girls looked at each other. As if giving up, Tesfia spoke with a pout. “Just seeing that smug look gets on my nerves. So I really don’t want to say.”

“You’re not a child.” Alus was exasperated, but it appeared there was someone who’d told the two about their return. This was unhappy news for him.

It was hard to feel at ease if his every step was being watched. It was that kind of thing that forced him to be on guard when viewing confidential information in his private room. That said, they were military secrets, so discretion would be necessary either way. Even so, there was a big difference between having a spy constantly checking on him and not.

The same went for keeping his identity hidden. His relation to the military had been exposed, but nobody knew that he was a Single Digit Magicmaster yet.

Next, he turned to Alice. She could only laugh awkwardly and stick her tongue out a little. Apparently something had happened while he was away. “Looks like they haven’t told you to keep quiet, so hurry up and...” Alus put on the pressure.

...When another voice spoke up. “I believe I would be the one best suited to answer that.”

Tesfia and Alice turned around in surprise, while Alus and Loki just stared at the person. They’d picked up on her presence ahead of time, although she probably wasn’t trying to hide it in the first place.

Pushing open the heavy door and showing herself was Lilisha, her blonde hair fluttering. She made eye contact as if asking for permission to enter.

Was she eavesdropping or just waiting for the right moment to appear? Either way, I can't tell if she's trying to be polite, but the fact that she used her foot to keep the door from closing...and still looked for permission to come in...that's kind of half-assed.

There was a meek, almost timid atmosphere to her. "Excuse me." She awkwardly stepped in and looked around the room. "Oh, how interesting," she said, as if it was her first time in a room belonging to the opposite sex.

The way she seemed strangely impressed grated on his nerves, but Alus decided not to touch on it. The indoor area was Loki's territory, after all.

"Why are you here?!"

"Oh, don't leave me out, Fia." In response to Tesfia's sharp exclamation, Lilisha answered her in a lighthearted tone with a cheerful smile as if they were friends. Based on the way she was acting, it seemed Lilisha wasn't trying to antagonize her. As if used to it, she just let Tesfia's remarks pass on by. However, depending on how one looked at it, her attitude could be interpreted as her not even taking notice of Tesfia. It was that side of her that used others as pawns in a game without any shame in order to plot against her surroundings if necessary. If not for Tesfia's look of revulsion, anyone would think they were classmates who got along.

"Not to mention that my job is to observe Mr. Alus," Lilisha continued. "I told you that he was back as a sign of our friendship."

So she's the source , Alus thought, and frowned.

"I didn't ask you to tell me. Besides, have you ever really looked at what you're doing? You're like a stalker just sneaking around behind the scenes! Hmph! I guess that's the way the gloomy and miserable Rimfuges do things!"

"—!!" Lilisha narrowed her eyes and glared at Tesfia. Surprisingly, even though she looked to be good at sidestepping her opponents and keeping her cool, she seemed truly offended now.

Oh, so she'll react to that. She tried to maintain a friendly smile, but Alus could see how strained it was. It seemed Tesfia's existence was the reason for that. For better or worse, she and Lilisha appeared to be fundamentally

incompatible.

“This is my mission! It’s work, okay! Besides, you’re much more like a stalker than me, just casually walking into a man’s room under the pretense of training. And constantly at that! Just so you know, you’re being ignorant and inconsiderate. You’re acting way too improperly for the daughter of the Fable family,” Lilisha shouted, acting with surprising childishness.

“Looks like you’ve already dropped your mask,” Alus muttered in exasperation, which seemed to snap Lilisha out of it. She straightened up and quickly fixed her messy hair, but it was already too late. Meanwhile, Tesfia was grinning.

Seeing the two of them, the image of nobility that Alus formerly had in his head was rapidly collapsing. He no longer saw his dislike of them as indicating small-mindedness. Tesfia even looked like she was going to pump her fist in celebration, but Alus ignored her and got back on topic. He’d normally avoid this kind of thing but there was nothing else to do in this situation. “So you told these two. Actually my movements—and Loki’s—are technically a military secret, so where did you even get that information from?”

“Oh, that’s good! That way of speaking makes it seem like we’re close. I guess pretending to be students isn’t all that bad.”

“...” As Lilisha seemed to boast, Alus silently put on the pressure. After all, he was a student because he wanted to be.

Lilisha shrugged, then went on. “It’s easy to get your hands on information through connections, Sir Alus. Oh, right, titles are unnecessary...Alus. To tell the truth, my brother is in the military so I just happened to overhear him. Of course, the only thing I heard directly was about military movements. And then Lady Lettie appeared at the Institute and you disappeared with her to the military headquarters...” Her tone made it sound as though anyone could’ve figured it out.

True, it did sound simple when she put it like that, but that attitude might rub Loki the wrong way. Though it was true that he’d told her there was no need to be so formal.

When Alus glanced at Loki he saw she was silent, but her tightly pressed lips

and cold gaze made it clear how she was feeling. He wanted her to control herself, but he was afraid of what awaited in the future.

Ignoring Alus's thoughts, Lilisha continued, "But I only told these two about you because they were so persistent. I want you to at least understand that."

Tesfia ground her teeth. Unable to stand it any longer, she objected. "That's because she kept teasing us about it! Like she was flaunting information only she knew about, Al!" she said with a red face, pointing at Lilisha.

"I don't care," Alus said. "Don't look at me."

In the meantime, Alice only showed a vague smile, acting much more modestly. And Lilisha looked completely composed next to the fuming Tesfia, as if she was ready to further fuel the fire.

It was really hard to tell who was nobility between those two and Alice. If asked who was the noble, Alus wouldn't hesitate to choose Alice.

Tesfia simply didn't like Lilisha acting so high and mighty when they were the same age and Lilisha had only just transferred in. Nobles typically competed with each other when they had the time, but these two just didn't get along. From what Alus understood from Tesfia's statement, it seemed the Rimfuge family in particular was seen as nonconforming and isolated from the rest of nobility.

That's when Loki stepped in, perhaps sensing Alus's mental exhaustion. "Ms. Tesfia, we're not getting anywhere, so can you please shut your mouth for a moment? It seems Ms. Lilisha's ways upset you, but can you try not to let her bother you too much? She's just an observer sent over by the military. Nothing more and nothing less." Loki sounded like she knew about everything, but it seemed she disliked Lilisha as well, considering the strong tone she used.

"My, even you too, Ms. Loki? Is there no one here who understands me?" Lilisha asked with a sullen look, trying to garner sympathy, but nobody was going to fall for such a transparent act...

...Except for one person. "Th-That's not true. I want to be friends with you. They just don't really understand you, but I'm sure as we spend more time together that we can all get along, Lilisha," Alice proclaimed with a strange

sense of tolerance. She took Lilisha's hand in hers and looked her right in the eye.

"Th-Thank you, Ms. Alice." Lilisha wiped her dry eyes with her finger as if overwhelmed with emotion. It looked like the ending to a schoolgirl drama where the misunderstanding got cleared up and everyone came together again.

"Oh, Alice... You're always so easily fooled by these kinds of acts," Tesfia said pointedly, as her shoulders drooped. Alus couldn't help but agree with her this time. "Alice, it's not like Lilisha actually wants to be friends. She just wants to be pretend friends, so don't bother with her."

At that, Lilisha complained with an unexpectedly serious expression, "There you go, leaving me out again. Why can't we pretend to get along in spite of some circumstances and hidden agendas?!"

Alus and the others merely looked at her without saying anything, and she quietly added, "That 'pretend' was just a figure of speech."

"I understand you!" Incidentally, the only one who seemed to "understand" Lilisha's inner thoughts was a smiling Alice.

"Oh, well. Thanks for playing along with me, Ms. Alice."

"What?" Alice looked at her with surprise and confusion.

"I love this kind of thing. Don't you think it's fun? Let's do it again sometime." Lilisha's unapologetic tone probably revealed her true feelings.

"Do you even know what friends are?" Alus asked her.

"You're going to ask that?" Tesfia retorted.

But from Alus's point of view, Lilisha didn't even seem to understand the meaning of the word. She was only saying "pretend" because she didn't properly understand it. Like Alus and Loki, there was something off with Lilisha as well. Within noble society, the Frusevans were treated as pests. Alus thought he'd seen part of the reason why that was.

"I don't want to be seen as some hick. Even I have friends. Like Mama and Papa."

Everyone froze for a moment...and after exchanging looks, it was clear they all

agreed that there was, at a minimum, something wrong with Lilisha's personality. If she'd said that her only friend was the brother she mentioned from time to time, she could still pass as a little sister who only opened up to her brother. But of all things, she'd brought up her parents. Not even Alus was that out of touch with society. He couldn't even bring himself to point out that parents didn't count as friends.

"Still...to think you call your parents Papa and Mama. You have a surprisingly cute side, huh?" Tesfia said, for some reason embarrassingly scratching her cheek.

Lilisha recoiled like she'd taken a gut punch. Her face turned beet red. But in the next moment she shook off her shame and straightened her posture. The way her expressions changed so rapidly it was like her personality had an on-off switch.

In a complete change from her previous attitude, she stood straight up. "Congratulations on your return from Vanalis!" It was truly abrupt, not to mention that the region's name was also still a military secret... Her blonde hair shook as she lowered her head and gave respect to Alus.

When he saw that, Alus was convinced that all nobles were weird. "I'd like to say thank you, but save it for Lettie." At this point, he gave up on hiding it. In fact, since he hadn't received any official thanks from the military, it even made him a little happy.

That said, it was unlikely that Lilisha was praising his abilities for real. It was obvious if you followed her gaze.

"Um, what? Vanalis?!" Tesfia, with her mouth agape, looked at Lilisha and Alus in turn, the confusion clear on her face.

Lilisha spoke up with a ridiculing smile. "Oh, fine. Since you're an ignorant little first-year, I'll tell you just this once, Fia. It would be sad if you felt left out after all."

Seeing how Tesfia's cheeks were flushing red with anger, Alus looked over at Loki to get her to step in and keep things from getting worse.

"Lilisha, that redhead's brain might be empty, but we'd appreciate it if you

wouldn't start any trouble."

Lilisha shrugged, composed now, and shut her mouth. Seeing that, Loki continued to state Alus's will. "Do you understand too, Ms. Fia and Ms. Alice?"

"O-Okay," Tesfia said. And Alice replied, "Yes."

Holding up her forefinger, Loki began explaining it to the two girls with her expression full of pride. "As you might have picked up on, Sir Alus and I went to retake a certain region. To begin with, Sir Alus once retook Covent, but of all things, it was left unmaintained for a long time. It's in the past now, but back then they just sent Sir Alus in to retake Covent with no plans for what to do with it afterwards. Once Governor-General Berwick took over, Alpha finally embarked on their quest to retake the Outer World, using Sir Alus's feats and achievements as a springboard for it..."

The way Loki put him on a pedestal made it difficult for Alus to listen, but since he didn't want to interrupt her either, he remained quiet.

"That's why *that* place became much more important. It's a key location for deploying troops in many different regions. It can also be used as a base in the Outer World in emergencies. And so, half a year ago, Lady Lettie was given the mission to reclaim it."

"And that place was Vanalis?" Tesfia asked.

Loki nodded. "I will omit the details, but Sir Alus made a personal promise with Lady Lettie and ended up going out to help her."

"And you succeeded as a result...?"

A pointless question. Alus could see why Lilisha made fun of Tesfia as he took over from Loki. "If we hadn't, we wouldn't have come back."

"Oh," Tesfia said. "Well, it is Alus."

While it sufficed to convince Tesfia, Alus only wore a vague smile. Vanalis had been retaken, but there were still many questions left unanswered, so it was hard to be happy about it. Loki also knew this, but didn't let it slip.

Alice raised her hand. In response, Loki adjusted non-existent glasses like she was a teacher and pointed to her. "Go ahead, Ms. Alice."

“What kind of Fiends were there? How do you...retake a region...?” Towards the end, she realized she was touching on military secrets and hesitated. It was indeed a hard to answer question.

As such, Loki answered in Alus’s place. “Ms. Alice, I’m afraid I can’t tell you that. I’m sure there will be an official announcement eventually.”

“But even then it will just be an official notice, and it doesn’t necessarily have to be the truth.” Lilisha understood the inner workings of the military, so she got to the heart of the matter.

“You’re going to say that, Ms. Lilisha? Well, it wouldn’t be the first time,” Loki responded, unfazed as always.

Alus only shrugged. “That’s how it is. But I’ll tell you about the types of Fiends and tactics when I have some time.”

“But you can’t now? Is that because I’m here?” Lilisha’s expression darkened. At the same time, she looked strangely sad.

“You’ll just get the information from your brother anyway, won’t you? Besides, it’s pretty clear that you’ll just check whatever I say to confirm it’s valid, as well as get some extra information while you’re at it.”

“Oh, it looks like you saw right through me. But aren’t you going to play along?”

“If you’re done here, go home. You don’t have any intention of hiding it, and being observed isn’t anything fun.”

“Don’t be like that. Let me watch too. It’s not like observing is a big deal. It’s kind of a way to pass the time. If you like, I can tell my superiors whatever you want!” Lilisha’s tone was an odd mix of formal and casual, making it hard to tell how she intended to come off, but it was clear that she planned to stay.

She walked straight up to Alus. He couldn’t tell what exactly was catching her interest, but her eyes roamed all over the room with childish curiosity. Since she’d been looking around for a while, her behavior was easy to read.

“Please? I won’t get in the way of the training,” Lilisha begged, bringing her hands together.

Alus sighed and ultimately relented. “Do whatever you want.”

“Now this is what I’d expect from Alus’s room. State of the art research equipment, valuable documents... Ah, this is Lungdoberg’s magic theory! What?! Isn’t this the paper that caused a controversy at the academic conference?” Lilisha picked it up and furrowed her brow. “Not to mention that all of these books are rare. What’s going on?!”

“The Governor-General arranged it. It looks like you’re pretty learned. Normally people wouldn’t even know the names of these kinds of niche books.” Not even Alus had looked through all of the latest papers. At most, he decided what to read based on the title. Either way, they were all things that Alus already knew about, so there wasn’t much point in it.

“I only flip through anything that interests me. Even if I read them, I wouldn’t understand half of it.”

That was still impressive, and Alus didn’t hate that kind of approach. If anything, it was admirable.

Recently, Loki had started reading up on the difficult books Alus possessed, and had become able to at least discuss them. But because of his scholarly spirit, Alus tended to get carried away in such discussions, leading her to eventually give up.

Some of the books he read were considered heretical, so any discussions on those were even worse. Rare or not, they were the kind no serious researcher would even look at. “I wish Loki would learn a thing or two from you, but I’m surprised you even know of these.”

“Not to act high and mighty, but I am a noble after all. I’m receiving a fair amount of education, you know.”

Talking with Lilisha felt like a low-level discussion with a student, but her reading material was praiseworthy. Alus’s gaze naturally turned towards the other noble in the room.

“No, you’re just asking for too much,” Tesfia responded with fair reasoning.

“That’s right, so you don’t have to take them seriously, Fia,” Alice said. “Only the really weird researchers would even look at the books here.”

Alus had a thing or two he could say to that, but before he could refute her, he was beaten to the punch.

“Well, that is why Alus stands out among the researchers in the field of magic. Although that’s the extent of it, since he rarely uses his real name on his papers,” Lilisha said.

If she knew that much, Alus had no reason to say anything further. She’d done her research on him as much as she had on military information. Even so, Lilisha probably wouldn’t get in the way as long as something else caught her interest. In fact, if she was going to get into another petty quarrel with Tesfia, he’d prefer that she get distracted by taking a tour around the room.

But if by some strange turn of events I end up having to teach her... Well, I guess I wouldn’t mind just talking. Some minor worries sprouted in his heart, but Alus shook his head and denied them. He probably wouldn’t end up teaching or training her, but there was no need to be more antagonistic than usual. She could at least be a decent conversation partner.

For the time being, he wanted to avoid the situation of having to teach Lilisha magic... Alus inwardly steeled his resolve just in case.

Fortunately, that didn’t come about. Although ironically, his other worry about her causing trouble with Tesfia proved to be accurate.

After spending some time going through the laboratory, Lilisha glanced over at Tesfia, who was silently training. “Um, is that mana control training? I’ve been wondering about that for a while, and it might sound rude, but...can you seriously not do that? Do you understand the properties of mana?” Lilisha said with a straight face. It seemed she’d tired of looking around the room, and walked over to Tesfia to pick a fight. The edges of her lips lifted in a sadistic smile.

“I know that! Don’t get in the way,” Tesfia shouted back, but her tone weakened when she saw Lilisha show off her own mana control.

From what Alus could tell, her control was comparable to that of a Double Digit. For her to reach that level at her age, she must have practiced daily since childhood. In terms of pure mana control she might even surpass Loki.

Seeing how everyone was looking at her, Lilisha confirmed everyone's reactions and then covered her mouth with one hand, using her other hand for mana control to produce a simple knife shape from her palm.

It was similar to the mana blade Alus often used. Its shape fixation was acceptable and there was probably nothing wrong with its durability or sharpness either. Most surprising was that she'd managed to do something so delicate with a single hand.

Magicmasters this skilled in mana control are rare. If anything, it seems like she specializes in shaping mana. It was a high level of mana control ability, but from what he could tell, she put more focus on the ability to freely shape mana rather than on efficient mana consumption. "What's the matter, Fia? Why are you so surprised?"

"Ugh... O-Of course I'd be surprised! I've only seen Al do something like that!" Tesfia replied sharply, having been forced to admit to the difference in their abilities.

"What? I don't get it."

Loki frowned at that. "Ms. Lilisha, normal students can't even control mana. Even their understanding of mana control is vague."

"What, really?! This isn't normal?"

"Even I can only give mana a shape for a short period of time without an AWR. I have to admit that it is impressive. Incidentally, giving shape to mana as an extension of the body is still impossible for me... For now, that is."

The last bit Loki added showed her competitive nature. Either way, she was speaking the truth. Very few if any students truly understood mana and its properties or essence. Also, there was nobody other than Alus who could freely use it as a form of energy.

"I see. I'll take that as a compliment. On the other hand, I'm a little lacking on the spell side of things," Lilisha confessed with a wry smile. Admitting to her weakness was surprisingly frank of her. After all, Magicmasters rarely showed their hand.

As a result, the distance between her and the others closed a little. She could

show a strange charm or friendliness in a way.

“You don’t have to take it as anything... I was being serious. I can only acknowledge your skill in mana control.”

Alus agreed. “Yeah, what Loki’s saying is the truth. Most people couldn’t compare to you in terms of magic shaping. You must have trained for a long time.”

Lilisha hadn’t expected to be praised so much when all she’d done was to tease Tesfia. Even Alus had seriously acknowledged her. She was dazed for a moment, before snapping out of it and looking away with red cheeks. Then she called out to Alice. “Ah, Alice! Did you know there’s a trick to extending how long you can control your mana?”

“R-Really?” Alice was being used as a way for Lilisha to hide her embarrassment, but the trick did grab her interest.

Like girls sharing make-up tips, Lilisha gave Alice advice and even began teaching her a few things. Since that could lead to further progress, Loki didn’t interfere, and actually joined in to give advice.

Hm, rather than teaching Lilisha anything, it seems I won’t have to do anything for a while , Alus thought to himself, as he watched over the harmonious girls.

However, there was a stubborn redhead to the side who was training on her own, refusing to join the group. Feeling like she was being left out, Tesfia tried to extend her mana some ways out from her body as Lilisha had done. That said, if she could do something like that already, there would be nothing left for Alus to teach her. If she had the skills for it, forming a mana blade wouldn’t be hard, but Tesfia was skipping several steps so there was no way she could do it now.

I can’t watch it.

As Alus knitted his brow, Lilisha was doing something interesting with Alice. “There you go, you’re getting better. It’s impossible to grasp all of the mana in your body, so just imagine that there are evenly spaced points from your shoulders to your fingertips,” she explained. “Then try to feel the timing in

which mana runs through those points. As you do that, you'll eventually pick up the trick to it. You can feel where your mana is, and ultimately get a feel for the flow."

While she spoke, Lilisha poked Alice's arm as if dotting it. She also spoke loudly enough for Tesfia to hear. Tesfia seemed to be getting interested in it too.

"It's true!"

"See? By doing this you can feel your mana running through you the way you want it to, and that will lead to a longer duration."

That was an interesting approach. In the past Alus'd pinched Tesfia and Alice to make them more aware of the flow of mana, so this was sort of an application of that. It was a method he never would've thought up on his own.

"If it interests you so much, Fia, why don't you try it too? Just take my word for it." When Lilisha called out to Tesfia, it was clearly different from how she'd spoken to Alice. Her tone sounded a little condescending. As two nobles, there was some emotional gap at the root of their interactions.

"E-Eventually, maybe. I can do it if I put my mind to it too..."

Tesfia was still being stubborn, but Alice, who'd seen clear results, excitedly called out to her. "Lilisha's amazing! You have to train a long time to be able to do this."

Her unreserved praise properly made Lilisha feel embarrassed and happy.

Alice then turned to look at Alus. Feeling compelled to praise Lilisha, Alus shrugged and decided to go along with her. "It's certainly an interesting method. It's a never-ending challenge for anyone, but it usually takes more time for a person to get a knack for it."

"See?" Alice turned back to Lilisha with sparkling eyes and a joyful smile.

"Y-You think so? Aha, maybe so! Yeah, I'm amazing! But to think I was this amazing... At some point I've become good enough to rival Alus!" Lilisha said, pretending to be overwhelmed. It was clear she was acting like she was getting carried away in order to hide her embarrassment.

“You’re not that good,” Loki said.

“Right,” Alice added.

Meanwhile, Lilisha fiddled with her hair, a light blush showing on her face. She was like a completely different person from the one who’d spoken before the students that day. It seemed she was pretty unused to compliments when she was being herself. She wasn’t good at keeping up appearances when she wasn’t on the job.

This girl is quite... Alus got the unexpected impression that Lilisha was surprisingly simple, despite her putting up such a complicated front.

Then Lilisha took a deep breath to try and recollect herself. “But I-I really am bad at spells, so it’s just a zero-sum situation.” Because of her excitement, she began gathering mana in her palm, even though she was inside Alus’s laboratory.

Noticing this, Alus called out to her to try to stop her reckless behavior, but with her high-level mana control it didn’t take her long to finish the spell.

Just as everyone held their breath—

A spray of water came out from Lilisha’s palm. It flew up about thirty centimeters towards the roof, before losing all momentum and splashing down on the floor. “See?” she said, sticking out her tongue a bit.

Alus stared blankly. “That’s certainly terrible.”

Everyone nodded in agreement. “You’re going to have to repeat a year if you’re like that.” Tesfia’s dumbfounded statement spoke for all in the room. The Second Magical Institute wasn’t low level enough that she’d be able to pass with that kind of skill.

I see. Berwick forced her in so she skipped the entrance exam, which is why she hasn’t been exposed yet. But this is getting interesting. It looks like his aim is going to miss the mark for once. Alus wore a sly grin.

Meanwhile, Loki showed a bright smile. “To be honest, I had my guard up around you, Ms. Lilisha. But it looks like I didn’t have to worry! It might be hard for you to move on to the next year, but I’m sure you’ll find your way in some

other endeavor.”

“We’ve only known each other for a short while, but you still have a chance of getting into some other school.” Even Tesfia prodded at Lilisha with a pitying and compassionate look. That said, seeing as she was stifling a laugh at the same time, it was clear she was gloating.

Lilisha’s cheeks twitched in response to the comments.

After a moment, leaving Lilisha be, Alus glanced up from his research and noticed Tesfia continuing with her training. She had beads of sweat on her forehead, which might have looked unattractive to any onlookers. Night was already starting to set in, but her focus remained unbroken.

However, she had nothing to show as a result. Unable to watch anymore, Alus let out a deep sigh as he put his face in his hands for a moment, before he gave Tesfia some unnecessary advice. “Think of the shape you can most easily imagine. For starters, imagine tracing the outline of that shape.”

“...” Tesfia glanced over at him and nodded. She focused on gathering mana in the palm of her hand. The sheer amount of mana would put her in the top of the students in her year. Many noble students had high magic talents, but in terms of pure mana, Tesfia stood out.

Before long, mana came out of her hand like a haze. It recoiled against the power trying to suppress it, flowing out like a river.

“Looks like it’ll be a while before you can properly shape anything.” As soon as Alus said this, Tesfia’s undefined mana disappeared into the air. “Haah, haah, haah...” She bent over with her hands on her knees. Sweat ran from her forehead down to her cheeks.

That’s when she heard a laugh at her lack of results. Lilisha, still smarting from before, put a hand over her mouth to hide her big grin. “Alus went out of his way to teach you the trick, so shouldn’t you be able to do it by now? Maybe you just don’t have any talent for it?”

“Wh-What’s that supposed to mean—”

“Just as I said. You’re rash, emotional, and clumsy.” Lilisha must have seen this as a way to get back at her, as there was a lot of scorn in her words. “Well,

if you'd like, I could thoroughly teach you. That should make it easier for you...and then in return, you can, you know, t-teach me magic... Okay?"

It seemed that Lilisha wanted to make a mutually beneficial exchange. But as she extended her hand with a smile, a sudden sound rang out. Tesfia had slapped her hand away.

And that in turn froze the atmosphere in the room. Lilisha's eyes widened from surprise, but then she quickly said in an exaggerated tone, "Hey, that hurt!" She frowned as she rubbed the back of her hand.

"Oh, my. Pardon me. Are you okay? You're not hurt, are you? There there, don't cry." Tesfia had an I-dare-you look as she stared at Lilisha. Following up with a sardonic laugh, it was like she was signaling the start of their battle.

"What are you going to do if you scratched my beautiful skin?! Unlike someone as crude as you, my skin's smoothness is on a different level!"

"Oh dear, to think you'd get emotional over something like that. How improper. But this is a relief. Since our level of control is about the same, I'm sure I'll be able to shape mana before long."

Lilisha's sense of rivalry flared up at that and she raised her voice. "Someone as stupid as you could never understand the essence of mana control. What do you even know about nobility? You don't have a shred of refinement! I can imagine the pain the head of the Fable family must go through. And I'm sure Alus has a hard time having to teach someone like you."

"Hm...?" The spotlight was suddenly turned on Alus, but he couldn't deny it. In fact, it was the first time anyone other than Loki had understood his difficulties.

"Go on, Alus. Say it out loud for everyone to hear! Tell everyone how much trouble such a terrible pupil is causing you! Report to the Governor-General that there's an obstacle hindering your life at the Institute!" Lilisha demanded with a feverish look, her usual aloofness and cynicism gone.

Before Alus could even say it was too late for that, Tesfia's high-pitched voice rang out. "Al wouldn't do that! And too bad! The Governor-General has already given his approval!" She boasted like she'd won. Actually, with her hands on her

hips and her head thrown back, Tesfia looked like the real villain of the story.



That aside, while they were free to argue, Alus wasn't satisfied with being assumed to be entirely on Tesfia's side. Even so, this time he had to grin and bear it. Unfortunately, he was indeed the one who was teaching Tesfia. He was stuck with her, and it would be impossible to give up on her now.

After that, it was tit for tat as a shouting match began. From where Alus sat, it truly looked petty.

Tesfia was strong in these kinds of situations. As a result of her constantly being chastised by Alus at every turn, she'd become adept at skillfully exploiting her opponent's weaknesses and had a wealth of sarcastic and abusive words at her disposal.

Lilisha may have had the upper hand in logic, but in an emotional battle like this, Tesfia was one step above. Ironically, her time with Alus had seen her grow in a different way.

Eventually Lilisha was at a loss for words, and Tesfia was convinced of her victory. With a cold smile she looked at Lilisha with pity. "Hmph, how the mighty have fallen. Your family weeps for you, Lilisha. Let's just stop this here. It's not worth it anymore." She looked down on Lilisha like she was a pitiable fool, while pretending to look compassionate.

You didn't have to be Lilisha to get irritated by Tesfia's smug face. Alus was surprised by the way she was taking further shots at the loser. *Hey, you'd better leave it at that...*

When he glanced at Lilisha, he could see her biting her lip and grinding her teeth. He shook his head as if saying that he'd told her so.

The next moment Lilisha shouted out loud, "I hate you! I bet you're all talk and all you can do is swing that sword around without a lick of talent for magic! Y-Y-You stupid...meathead woman!" Her face was red.

It was nothing more than an emotional outburst. While she'd declared Tesfia to be a meathead, she wasn't strictly correct. True, Tesfia preferred to move her body as opposed to using her head, but the main use of her sword-shaped AWR wasn't to swing it around.

That said, fault-finding wasn't really the point of Lilisha's outburst. The two were worse than cats and dogs. It was like mixing two chemicals together and getting a powerful reaction, though from Alus's point of view it was just a student-level argument.

Nobles really are a handful , he casually thought to himself, as he scratched his head. It felt like children fighting, but to the girls themselves it was a serious deal. It was rare though to see two people hate each other so much after only knowing each other for a short period of time, so that was interesting in itself.

A fight between rare breeds like this wasn't something you got to see every day. In that sense, Alus made sure to watch from a distance so he wouldn't get involved.

Their fight looked like it would go on for a while longer, but Loki clapped her hands together as if she had a great idea. "Then how about having a duel?"

Alus felt it was sudden, but then reconsidered, and realized it was surprisingly acceptable. A duel might sound like a battle between children of two noble families with family honor on the line, but Loki was merely suggesting a simple fight to set things straight. In other words, it would be like a normal mock battle.

"I have no objections!" Tesfia said.

"Of course, neither do I!" Lilisha said.

The two girls jumped on the suggestion, making it official. Thinking about it, it almost did sound like the most noble way to settle their pointless fight. Some grudges might remain, but it would be far better than the continuation of their quarrel.

Alice wasn't used to these kinds of things, so she was flustered, but Alus didn't want any more trouble in his laboratory.

"I could ask for nothing more! It'll be over soon anyway. It's time for this sheltered princess to learn what the pavement tastes like," Lilisha provokingly said, rubbing her index finger against her open palm.

"Don't come crying like a baby to me after you've lost," Tesfia replied with a coarse grin and a thumb pointed at the ground.

It was starting to shape up to be quite the spectacle. If they sold tickets, they could make a fortune...but putting those thoughts aside, it was clear that family honor and face had been abandoned long ago.

Loki quickly signaled Alus with her eyes, and waited until she received his nod. “Then it’s decided. We will hold it when we can get some time on the training grounds. I will be in touch with the actual date, so let’s leave it at that for today.”

The two girls nodded at Loki’s courteous suggestion. Then both announced at the same time that they were going home. As they realized their voices were overlapping, they exchanged glares and looked away from one another. They had terrible chemistry but somehow still matched each other perfectly.

Since the two didn’t want to walk out the door at the same time, Alus read the room and called Tesfia over, giving Lilisha an excuse to leave first.

Once Lilisha was gone, Loki whispered into his ear, “Sir Alus, now we can get a look at what Ms. Lilisha can do.”

“?!” Alus was astounded. Loki could be quite shrewd. Sure, she hadn’t been the one who’d fueled the flames, but she’d come up with the duel idea for this opportunity. In other words, she wanted to learn what her enemy could do.

As for Alus, he’d thought Loki had only tried to resolve the situation by appealing to their youth...expecting them to clash as rivals and in the process come to an understanding, and then form a bond of friendship.

That was the ideal of youth that he’d imagined, and what he’d thought Loki was looking for, but... *Yeah, this has nothing to do with youth.* If anything, he sensed adult trickery at work.

Suddenly he recalled when Tesfia had demanded a duel with him. True, that had been the start of some sort of relationship with her, but he would never admit that it was the start of a friendship. *Either way, it’s completely pointless. If possible, I’d like to be left out of it from here on.*

As Alus grumbled internally, Alice reached out to pat the redheaded animal that was always moved by her emotions.

“Alice, I’m sorry...”

“Oh, there’s no helping you, Fia.”

It seemed Tesfia had calmed down and reflected on her actions. However, Alus couldn’t keep himself from voicing a cutting remark. “Feel free to be hot-blooded, but keep it out of my room. And to have a duel of all things... At least keep it within the realm of what students would do.”

“I know that... I’m sorry for making things awkward. Well, neither Lilisha nor I am that serious.”

“Really? Even if you’re not, she might be.” Alus looked dubious.

But Tesfia only huffed and puffed. “Of course not! We were just playing around. Besides, it’s not bad for students to get a feel for each other, although I’m going to be the one who wins. I’ll make her taste the sand of the training grounds she loves so much!”

He was at a loss for words. She had looked like she’d calmed down for a moment, only to show what a sore loser she was in the next. Alus began to think that she just wanted to make the girl she disliked surrender by force.

Tesfia wore a smug face as she prematurely declared victory, but Loki was quick to retort, “The floor of the training grounds isn’t sand.”

“I-I know that! It’s all about enthusiasm.”

“Is that so... Either way, it looks like it’s going to be a pointless contest.”

“Wha—?! You were the one who suggested we have a duel in the first place!” Tesfia fumed.

But that’s when Alice shifted her stance to agree with Loki. “Well, it’s probably going to be just like Loki dear says. Fia’s bad side came out here, but both of you were being immature.”

Her unexpected words made Tesfia panic and retort, “I-It’s fine! I’ll just bring her to the verge of tears. You saw her spell, right? It’ll be easy!”

“I don’t think it’ll be that easy,” Loki returned with a scornful look. “I just hope you’re not going to be the one on the verge of tears.”

Tesfia groaned. Even though Lilisha couldn’t properly construct a spell, her mana control was impressive. Seeing the tide turning against her, she

attempted to change topics and glanced at Alus. “Th-That aside, you stopped me when I was trying to leave. Is there something you want?”

The primary reason he’d stopped her was because he couldn’t take Tesfia and Lilisha trying to leave at the same time. That said, it wasn’t like he didn’t have anything to say. “I guess. Well, let’s have some tea first. We can talk after that.” Alus signaled Loki, who began preparing the tea.

Moments later, once everyone had a cup in hand, Alus saw that the mood had calmed down and casually began speaking. “So, Fia, the Fable family has hidden arts, doesn’t it? Are there several types of them?”

“Hm,” Tesfia said after a pause. “I’m not sure where this is going?”

Seeing her furrow her brow, Alus clicked his tongue in his mind, realizing it had been too sudden. His first attempt had completely failed. With Loki’s cold stare boring into his back, he cleared his throat with a dry cough. “Well, uh, I was thinking about new spells. I was wondering if I could find any good ideas for developing new spells for you guys. Like with the spell for Alice, where I used an application of an already existing spell. Fia, you have spells handed down in your family, so if it’s something in the same style as that, it should be easy to handle.”

“Like Icicle Sword, for example.”

“That’s right,” Alus confirmed, with Loki’s added help. He wanted to look around the hidden arts of noble families like Berwick had touched on, but stepping in too deep would get him caught up in their situations. So being cautious was necessary to avoid any trouble.

With that in mind, he had already analyzed the magic passed down in the Fable family to a degree. For example, the spell Zepel that he’d taught her was an evolution of the formula for Icicle Sword. Icicle Sword was advanced, but it wasn’t an unimaginably difficult spell.

However, its construction was unnaturally complex for an advanced-level spell. In other words, it intentionally left room for development to the next level, which was why it had been comparatively easy for Alus to build up Zepel after seeing Icicle Sword.

But there was one thing he realized. The hidden arts passed down in noble families—which he'd thought was nothing more than a way for nobles to kill time—might actually contain unknown potentials.

"I wonder," Tesfia said. "I doubt my mother would say so easily. Honestly, I haven't even heard about any next step kind of thing, like from Icicle Sword to Zepel."

Seeing how Frose had acted around Tesfia, Alus kind of got that feeling too. If he considered that not telling the daughter of inherited magic might be an old noble custom, it started to make sense. In fact, being hidden arts, it would be dangerous and irrational to teach someone who had no chance of learning it.

So I'll need to turn to my last resort...asking her directly. While it might sound impossible, Alus was currently the top Single Digit Magicmaster, and as a former member of the military he might be able to negotiate with Frose somehow.

While he pondered this, he asked Tesfia another question. "Speaking of that, Fia...the Fable family focuses on molding the ice attribute. It's an odd approach, but are there any other spells born from unique ideas like that? Say, like something environment altering...?" He was thinking of the snow man, who'd used a spell with a huge range that had transformed Vanalis into a world of silver.

"Environment altering? Wouldn't that be as hard as your Niflheim? No way, or at the very least, I've never heard of it. We combine magic and swordsmanship. That's why my AWR is an heirloom sword."

"I guess so." Even Alus felt like he'd missed the mark. If he went and met with Frose, he wouldn't want to come home empty-handed after an annoying negotiation.

"Oh, wait! It's not a tradition or anything, but the previous generation in the Fable family was known as the best swordsmanship family. Was there a term for environment-altering magic back then?"

"No, it's a relatively recent designation." Magic was constantly developed and expanded upon, with previously unknown fields opening up, which led to new designations. The Fable family's previous generation was a few decades ago.

Back then, expert-level magic wasn't even a designation. With the distinctions in magic being in that state, the concept of environment-altering magic wouldn't have existed.

"I see. But I think my mother is still hiding something. I feel like I've heard something to that effect when I was a child. And I think there are more spells handed down to the head of the family than just Icicle Sword. Well, maybe I misheard it."

Her casual way of speaking implied that her memory wasn't to be relied on. Despite her family, Tesfia was a student who worked to cover everything other than tuition and living in the dorm. She was a noble daughter, working student or not, but she had a strong sense of independence. She'd also made a bet with her mother and was continuing her student life after winning that bet.

She had carved her future open with her own powers. Thinking about it, her relationship with her mother was so strained that she'd come to the Institute on her own. Apparently she hadn't thought that she could rely much on her family to begin with.

I guess digging too much into that previous generation might be a bit insensitive. Alus thought about it again. *That snow man was using precise coordinate calculations with his own position as an axis in his magic. It resembled summoning spells and was similar to Zepel. They were the same in that they use coordinates as the base of the composition.*

Alus thought this because Zepel worked by using coordinates to freely control a summoned sword of ice. The ice sword the man had used had a complicated construct that interfered with coordinates. In addition to the ice attribute, Zepel had more things in common with the spell the snow man had used. Although that might just be a coincidence.

Seeing Tesfia tilt her head with a suspicious look, Alus spoke again. "Well, I think it might be best to go meet with your mother. I was a bit careless with Zepel, but your mother could have objections to me teaching you spells. It would be bad for your reputation if you kept learning strange spells with mysterious origins, especially if I take into account making any new spells." He conjured up a plausible excuse to go visit the Fable family.

However, Tesfia ignored his intentions and leaned over his desk with sparkling eyes. “A new spell?! What kind? Like Niflheim? Please tell me the name at least! Like Niflheim, or Niifeelheim...or maybe it’s Heimnifl?!” It appeared that Niflheim was the number one spell that she wanted to learn.

“Talk about being blatant. It’s almost refreshing.” Loki was put off by Tesfia’s excitement.

Even Alice looked exasperated. That said, she was a student and novice Magicmaster too, so new spells caught her interest as well. “Fia’s Niflheim aside, will you really teach us new spells now? Have we finally reached the next stage?”

Seeing both girls’ sparkling eyes, Alus regretted bringing up the topic of new spells. But it wasn’t a complete lie, since he did already have a few ideas in his mind.

Refusing might be for the best, but it would be an interesting research subject, and it wouldn’t be that hard for him to give shape to the ideas in his head. In some ways, he resented his own brain. “Well, once I’ve finished my own business...”

After those words left his mouth, he sensed the passionate stare of yet another person. So he resigned himself to his fate. “Fine, I’ll think up something for you too, Loki.” He’d copied down some formulas while browsing the taboo subjects, so it was already too late. It was almost like he could predict the future.

“Thank you very much, Sir Alus.”

With such a bright smile being directed his way, he wouldn’t be able to take it back. It was something he would’ve had to do at some point anyway, but he’d wanted to push it back as much as possible. Like homework for summer vacation, a new task fell into his lap.

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A few days later...Alus and Loki were properly attending class, and training Tesfia and Alice. They were settling back into their normal routine.

Like he had somewhat expected, his position in the Institute had been

protected. At the very least, nobody knew that he was the current ranked No. 1. People regarded him as someone with a promising future who performed menial tasks for the military. That was unusual but not unheard of at the Second Magical Institute with its deep connection to the military. In fact, Felinella was also working with the military, albeit under her father.

The opinions of the fight Alus had on the training grounds had split into two camps. One side thought it was excellent for a first-year student, putting him rather high up in the Institute. The other opinion was that he was far beyond the level of a student, on par with Double Digits. To further back that up, Loki, who was known to be a Triple Digit Magicmaster, was following him around, and this further bolstered the imaginations of those who had seen the fight.

Although this was closer to the truth, very few held this opinion. That was in large part thanks to Lilisha. Despite being a transfer student, she had the look of a noble with character, as well as—apparently—the principal's trust, and the influence of having a brother who was in the military. All of that combined to make her the most well-informed person on campus, always at the center of gossiping students.

Just like when she'd helped Alus out, she was skillfully controlling the rumors. Alus couldn't tell if this had been Berwick's intention, but he was grateful for it.

Moreover, the students tended to worship Felinella Socalent as a goddess. With the hero Vizaist as her father, her good manners, and excelling at both literary and military arts, she was near perfect and many believed there couldn't be anyone who surpassed her. That was mostly because the students were young.

As a result, even if they did somehow recognize that Alus's hidden powers exceeded their limited imaginations, it didn't feel real. Thanks to that, Alus's campus life remained peaceful.

However, there were a few changes. For example...

"Hello, Alus, Loki. Teach me how to study sometime!" Students passing by would call out to them like this from time to time. That would've been unthinkable in the past. Ciel had probably been the only one eccentric enough to approach someone as unsociable as Alus.

Likewise, Loki was no longer being observed from a distance by the students, as she'd turned into something of an Institute celebrity. If Alus took his eyes off her for a second, it wasn't unusual for her to be surrounded by female students talking about how beautiful her hair was or how she looked like a doll. She was being treated as a mascot, although Alus felt he was partially responsible for that.

Loki had been troubled by it at first, but lately she'd gotten better at dealing with them. Alus told himself that it was fine. He could feel that Lilisha was pulling some strings behind the scenes, maybe as part of their pretending to be students.

While in public, Alus lost track of what kind of a person Lilisha was. Just when he thought he'd seen her true colors the other day, she would wear the face of a noble lady in front of the students. Even today, she was gossiping with her classmates, and he felt strange when he saw her laughing brightly as she chatted with the others.

She looks like a normal student when she's like this. She could still be putting on an act, but he didn't think she was forcing herself to go through with her daily life in the Institute.

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No matter the time or place, those with status were seen as being at the top, and important people preferred high places. The same was true for the Second Magical Institute.

The view from the top had changed a lot in the past few years. Just from a glance, there were several new buildings, including research buildings for the teachers. The fact that specialized teachers were employed here was one reason, but this was also one of the nation's research institutions.

The library on campus was the largest in the nation. There were also many books on special subjects that were only available there, so constructing research buildings on the campus grounds was the logical conclusion for the convenience of the researchers and teachers. Not only were there former military members among the teachers, but also famous researchers who published numerous papers. The Second Magical Institute was a fantastic

center of magic research in addition to being a great educational institution.

The principal's office was at the top of the main building, and the office's owner happened to be in. Sisty removed her coat, having just returned from being off-campus, and slumped down on her sofa.

It was noon and the Institute was buzzing with students eating their lunches. Sisty let out an exhausted sigh, and poured herself a cup of water from a pitcher. After gulping it down, she looked out the large window at the end of her desk.

As the principal of the Institute that trained the Magicmasters who would carry humanity into the future, she was very busy. It wouldn't be too hard on her if she could only focus just on that, but some of the problems burdening her went beyond her role as principal. In fact, most of them did.

For example, as a result of the Institute being funded by the military, it was necessary to make various adjustments out of consideration for their mutual relationship. It was also Sisty who had to do most of the work regarding Berwick's deals with Alus. She had to soothe the teachers who didn't know why Alus got preferential treatment, and in some cases she needed to cover up the fact that he was getting that treatment in the first place.

Then there was the chaos with the incident with Godma, and the campus festival, so questions about the Institute's safety were being brought up. She'd only just finished the paperwork to increase the Institute's guard staff.

Many of the students were sons and daughters of nobles, so the problems weren't just with the students but their parents and relatives as well. Most were fine students, but some arrogantly made use of their parents' status to act as they pleased. Sisty always strove to treat everyone appropriately, but if she slipped up, she ran the risk of creating a huge scandal.

The reason she remained the principal was thanks to her career. Sisty Nexophia wasn't only a former Single and one of the Three Pillars, but at present she was also considered nobility. The ruler gave her the title of being the official first head of the Nexophia family.

That said, she had little interest in it. The weight of her name was nothing more than one of the medals that generals wore on their chest. It was just a

nice-looking badge. She would throw it away at a moment's notice to protect something important.

In noble society, every family joined a faction belonging to one of the three great noble families. But Sisty wasn't part of any of them. She was friendly with the Socalent and Fable families, but remained politically neutral.

Speaking of Socalent...she had some business with the head of the family today. "I wanted to call Vizaist, but once he goes underground it's impossible to find his whereabouts." In that regard, no one was as suitable for intelligence work as him. She tended to have his daughter Felinella intermediate, but not even she could get in touch with him.

Socalent was the head of one of the three great noble families, but his image was far removed from that of a normal noble. He was always at the forefront in the military, bold and sturdy, but as in the past, he was also unconventional and unpredictable.

"Perhaps I should ask Frose..." Sisty was thinking about the transfer student, Lilisha Ron de Rimfuge Frusevan. She'd had Loki as a previous example, but she wasn't sure what Berwick was thinking when he'd pushed Lilisha onto the Institute.

But since he'd also said that it was the ruler's will, there was no guarantee that Frose would know about it. And even if she did know, it was more than possible that she wouldn't say.

At this rate, however, it was going to turn into a mess. That was what her instincts told her. Without the necessary defenses in place, she was unlikely to weather the coming storm. And with the ruler Cicelnia's name being brought up, Sisty couldn't afford to be complacent.

Cicelnia was known to be sharp, and rumor had it she wasn't afraid to make ruthless decisions behind the scenes. She didn't hesitate to use an iron fist and manipulate from the shadows for the sake of national interest or to improve the health of internal affairs, although this was just something that was said between the higher-ups.

Ever since her inauguration, Cicelnia had enjoyed intense support from the common citizens. And she showed not even a fragment of that dark side, so if it

was true, it just meant she was all the more cunning.

Sisty had no evidence for these rumors, even with her personal contacts. It was impossible for her to find out the truth of the ruler's heart. Former Single or not, a mere principal of an institute couldn't casually meet with the ruler. Even a current Single like Lettie needed an appointment first.

Nevertheless, there was no doubt that Cicelnia was largely responsible for what Alpha was today. Hidden behind her beauty was a frighteningly astute judgment along with the decisive ability to carry it out. She looked only at national interest and logic, cutting and throwing out anything useless, which had turned Alpha into a prosperous nation. The nation's reputation as a magical powerhouse and the Institute growing as large as it had was thanks to her.

Berwick's current position was also due to Cicelnia's authority, which was why he most likely had to make way if the ruler wanted to push something through.

In that sense, Cicelnia's intentions had all been successful and produced good results. And now that she'd solidified the foundation of the nation, her next step would be...

No, I'm just overthinking it. But I heard lately that Lady Cicelnia is devoting her time to negotiating for the mining of mithril.

During the Friendship Magical Tournament, Alpha's best had eliminated the greatest threat to humanity—the Devourer—outside Balmes' border. They'd done this after Balmes' army had all but been destroyed, and Cicelnia of course knew that Alus had been part of it.

The deposit was still outside of Balmes' border, and it was possible to extract high-purity mithril from it. As someone with an eye for national interests, Cicelnia would want a part of it.

It was unclear under what circumstances Alus and the others had been sent out, but Sisty had a good idea. *Thanks to Alus, working out the rights to the mithril should be progressing just as Lady Cicelnia expects. But as to why she turned her eyes to inside our borders...*

Sisty could tell that Lilisha had been transferred to the Institute as part of some far-reaching strategy, but she wasn't sure how it was all connected.

She had gone out to find that information. However, with her busy schedule and inability to leave the Institute for too long, she'd only had a short amount of time for it.

While it may have been Cicelnia's will, it had gone through Berwick. Sisty trusted him to a degree, not to mention that the military had invested and cooperated with the Institute quite a bit. In return, the excellent novice Magicmasters and new discoveries in magic were highly valuable to the military, which was why Sisty ultimately concluded that Berwick wouldn't do anything that would negatively impact the Institute.

It might even be Berwick's own ambitious plans at work. He'd mentioned once that he was thinking of the Magicmasters who would come after them. *I wish he'd take me into consideration.* The smile on Sisty's face, as she thought back to that moment, seemed to ask just what he thought people were.

Lettie, for example, was blatantly disgusted when she'd found out that Berwick had gotten Sisty involved for the sake of avoiding risk. Sisty grinned when she recalled how Lettie had described him as heartless. If, at that time, Lettie had seriously asked her how long her plan had been in the making, Sisty would've lightly brushed it off as not a big deal. Just like how she'd answered when asked why she'd stepped down as a Single.

However, in order to carry that out, Berwick needed to be Alpha's Governor-General and Sisty needed to be the Institute's principal. The Institute functioning as it did now, by taking in the children of nobility, was part of Berwick's intentions.

One example was the system of having all the students live in the dorms. This was intended to cut them off from the bad habits and warped views of the old nobility. Likewise with a certain thing beneath the Institute that Sisty was managing.

But even these experienced and thought-out plans were just another form of insurance to Berwick. So if the situation didn't call for it, it would just end up being an unnecessary precaution. However, with Alus enrolling at the Institute and starting to grow accustomed to it, everything seemed to be working out just as Berwick had planned.

It would take more than just the military though to envision such grand plans. It would take the existence of someone who was smart as well as visionary enough to use their ideas and powers from a different position than Berwick's.

Sisty could only imagine one person who fit that description...Cicelnia. She had put Berwick in his current position, and she might even be looking at the future in a wider scope than he was.

When she had that thought, Sisty shuddered a little. But no matter what unknown movements were taking place, as the principal she at least wanted to know what might happen and make preparations.

For the time being, she would analyze which factors she could predict and try to get a grasp on the situation. "There's definitely a problem with the Frusevans behind Ms. Lilisha. Knowing their relationship with the Fable family, it wouldn't be strange for there to be some fighting."

As far as Sisty knew, the Frusevan family was a special one that was at the head of Aferka, the executive unit. "I wonder if Aferka is functional even now." She only knew of the organization from back when the power struggles between nobles were raging. The sparks of the conflict even reached the ruler. The result was that the mother organization of Aferka that served as a private army for the nobility was reorganized into an executive force directly under the ruler.

In order to put down the conflict between nobles, the ruler at the time made ruthless use of the blade known as Aferka. Specifically, many nobles were killed in a purge. At that time, they were less an executive unit and more of a hit squad. That was what she'd been able to tell about the hidden history concerning the Frusevans, Aferka, and the ruler, from checking the Institute library and whatever databases she could access.

And there was one more thing... She'd met with a living witness. That had been her main goal. Unfortunately, because of all the pompous behavior and putting on of airs, the real important discussion had to be saved for next time.

"Well, I suppose they were lonely and wanted to see their old disciple again... My teacher can be so terrible. I guess I wasn't the best disciple either." Sisty suddenly realized something and smiled bitterly. A rash disciple was one who

was more likely to grow. And also that what goes around, comes around.

Thinking back, it was hard to say that she'd been blessed by her disciples herself. And speaking of bad behavior, her former disciple Lettie had caused her quite a bit of trouble. Recently, the biggest problem child was that boy. His very existence was an irregularity, and it was almost like trouble went out of its way to find him.

Although in reality he was also helping Sisty out behind the scenes, so it wasn't all bad. But she couldn't take her eyes off him since he was such a problem child. It was a cute side of him, but then again she wasn't much better...

She exhaled. With a distant look in her eyes, she suddenly came up with an idea. *I know, why don't I just try asking Alus?* She put her finger on her chin and considered it. It wasn't a bad idea. He had a higher rank than Lettie, so arranging a meeting with Cicelnia would surely go much smoother.

Alus's existence was priceless even to the ruler of a nation. Watching Berwick's movements, it was easy to imagine that Cicelnia had used him during the Friendship Magical Tournament to expand Alpha's influence. Besides, as far as Sisty knew, there was no Magicmaster with a strange mask named Ulhava. And considering the show he'd put on, there could only be one person behind that mask.

Knowing Alus, there was no way he'd go along with such a farce just because the ruler wanted it. She didn't know what kind of deal they'd made, but from Berwick's moves it seemed that even the ruler had to negotiate with him, which was why Sisty couldn't bluntly refuse him.

As she entertained these ideas, she spotted her cologne on the shelf. She let out a sigh of resignation. In the past she'd made an attempt at seduction, only to have it completely backfire on her. "I can't. If I asked him, the negotiation would be too much work."

In the end, she decided to do what she could and make preparations for the patterns she could anticipate. She wasn't a godlike being capable of seeing all the pawns in play at once, after all.

Her shoulders slumped. In hopes of refreshing herself, she walked to the

window and continued to think as she put her finger on her lip. “Now then, what should I do? Hm? Hmmmm?!”

Sisty held her breath. At the entrance to the main building she saw three figures. In front was a boy, with two followers slightly behind him. She didn’t recognize the male follower, but the names of the boy and his female follower popped into her head. And when she saw them, her cheeks twitched. And of course they would, considering the circumstances.

“This is the worst. Why would that troublesome son of Womruina, the last of the three great noble families, decide to attend lessons now of all times?!”

Sixty-Third Chapter

One of the Three Great Noble Families

It was the middle of lunchtime at the Institute. For Alus, Loki, and the usual group, making use of the cafeteria wasn't all that unusual.

In the past, it had been Alus's habit to eat with one hand as he worked on his research. He'd always have a book or paper in his hand as he filled his mouth with a sandwich using the other hand. Compared to that, the environment surrounding his meals now had changed quite a bit. Alus and Loki were one thing, but the other two with them were very lively.

Tesfia's and Alice's fame had been on a rise ever since they first enrolled and their ranks were revealed. Nowadays everyone in the Institute knew them, not just their classmates. Whenever it was crowded, someone would often make room for them. Alus and Loki sat near them as if to take advantage of that.

Even so, in the past there had been many who'd acted distantly towards them, and given Alus especially some strange looks. At least his classmates had stopped with that attitude. Although he'd dropped out of the tournament, Alus's performance in it and his mock battle with Elise had played a big part in that change.

There was another small girl, who was in a different position from Tesfia and Alice, who'd pushed her way in between Alus and his classmates. Her cheerfulness and friendly nature made it hard for anyone to dislike Ciel. Thanks to her casually interacting with Alus, the other classmates had gotten used to him as well.

And she was in perfect form today too. "By the way, Alus, are you missing all these classes because of the military?" She didn't bother mincing words as she asked this straight out. Perhaps she was attempting to change her image as well, as she had her hair tied up at the back of her head. Then again, many girls

tied their hair back when eating pasta or soup.

As someone averse to extra effort, even going that far looked like a pain to Alus. If he had a headband or hairpin, he would take his first step as a considerate gentleman, however pigs would fly before Alus ever became that thoughtful.

On the menu today was a sandwich for Alus, and pasta with shellfish for Loki. Tesfia had the special beef stew with bread, Alice had an omelet and vegetable soup, and Ciel had a small hamburger plate.

At a glance, it all looked delicious. After all, the cafeteria in the Second Magical Institute had a wide variety of menu items, with first-class chefs who checked the taste and at times even did the cooking. Of course it would be popular.

After a brief wait, a six-person table became available. Alus and Loki sat down on one side, while Tesfia, Alice, and Ciel sat down on the other. Additionally, Felinella could be considered one of the usual group members, but she rarely ate at the cafeteria. The reason for that was clear, as whenever she did show up it created an uproar. Instead she had lunch in her classroom with her trusted friends.

But that aside, as to Ciel's question... If it was military related Alus wouldn't be able to say anything, but seeing her honest curiosity, he gave her a simple reply. "Well, something like that. Just so you know, I can't tell you anything about what it is."

As always, there was something about Ciel that made her hard to push away. Even her blunt attitude didn't make one uncomfortable. As someone who was her opposite in virtues, Alus couldn't help but feel she had a sweet character.

"How rude. I'm not impudent enough to ask for that much," Ciel complained with a pout, as if she'd read his mind. Despite her meek appearance she could be surprisingly sharp.

That said, he didn't want her digging any further. "Ciel, if you keep wasting your time talking, you're not going to finish before lunchtime is over."

"But my mouth is small, so I eat slowly."

“Me too. Fia always rushes me.” Alice sympathized with Ciel.

Neither had a large amount of food on her plate. And their actual eating pace was slow as well. Alus felt like he could understand. As he looked over, he saw empty beef and bread plates stacked on top of each other, and Tesfia was gazing at the menu from a distance. “Looks like she’s still thinking of eating,” he noted.

“Uh, well, you know...I won’t be able to focus in the afternoon classes if I don’t fill my stomach now.”

“I didn’t say you couldn’t.”

“Yes, please go ahead. I don’t think I could ever eat that much, though.” Loki, who’d finished her own meal, agreed with Alus.

“There’s practical lessons after this too, right?”

“You don’t have to make up excuses. Just eat if you want to,” Alus said in exasperation. Then he looked away from Tesfia and at the document in his hand. He wanted to be at least somewhat productive, although not wanting to waste time was also an excuse in some ways as he didn’t particularly mind it in this instance. If he really didn’t like it, he could just completely shut them out and not bother going to the cafeteria in the first place.

Suddenly Alus had the idea that maybe he only carried the documents with him to make it look like he was just going along with them. But even if that was the case, it would be a little embarrassing, so he would never admit to it.

That was when someone called out to him from behind. “What a wonderful-looking meal.”

That clear voice was beautiful and pleasant to the ear. As Alus imagined the owner of the voice, he could hear her walk up and laugh right behind him. When he glanced over, she just happened to be looking at him and gave him a slight bow, causing her blonde hair to sway. “Hello, Alus.”

“Yeah, what a coincidence,” he sarcastically replied.

“Ah ha ha, you can say that again... Sorry, but it is my mission,” Lilisha whispered the last part as she shrugged.

Apparently she was nearby so that she could keep watch on Alus as part of her mission. Nothing good would come if he kept worrying about it, so Alus let out a small sigh and accepted it with a light nod.

Lilisha next turned to Tesfia with a smile. “Oh, you still haven’t had your fill? Haven’t you really fattened up these past few days?” She spoke in the same casual tone she’d used in Alus’s room, but only after looking around to make sure nobody else was listening.

“Of course I haven’t!”

“Did you know there’s a useful tool for times like these? It’s called a scale, have you heard of it?”

“Of course I know about it!” Tesfia gave Lilisha an angry glare. They’d had an argument just a few days ago, but it seemed there were still plenty of sparks between them, ready to ignite the fire again.

Alice coughed, as the cafeteria threatened to turn into a battlefield, and Ciel rubbed her back.

“You promised to duel each other. Can’t you hold it in until then, Ms. Lilisha?” Loki said in an exasperated tone, but since their taunting was already in full swing, only Alus heard her.

The two really did have a terrible relationship. At this rate, nothing would change even after the duel. Either way, Alus didn’t want to get caught up in it.

The bickering between the two continued for several minutes. Finally, Tesfia’s face turned red and mana started to overflow from her body. She was fully ready to throw down. Meanwhile, Lilisha looked prepared to take her on if she did.

Alus wished he could calm down the two wild girls, even feeling like praying to a god he didn’t believe in. If a single spell was fired now, things would go from bad to worse.

The unnecessary use of magic in the Institute was one of the most serious policy violations. That was why it was common sense for any student to rely on duels dressed up as mock battles to resolve these kinds of disputes.

Alus checked how much time was left for lunch, gathered his tableware and stood up. It was about time to go to the next class. Following suit, Loki also stood up, as did Alice. Seeing that, Ciel pushed whatever food she had left into her mouth and also stood.

“If you’re going to fight, do it on your own,” Alus tossed out, determined not to get involved, and started walking away. If a magic battle broke out here, everyone could be forced to share responsibility.

That helped to cool Tesfia down a little, though she still looked upset. She stood up, ignoring Lilisha.

Lilisha still wore a fearless expression, but she dropped the provoking attitude, and lifted herself up from her chair.

The two girls started walking at the same time, refusing to look at each other, and using large strides.

Looking at them in dismay, Alus spoke up. “Did you change your character, Lilisha?”

“—?! What? You’re such a joker, Alus. I am somehow a noble after all.” Lilisha held her head high, walking calmly and elegantly, although it was questionable if she should have said “somehow.”

Among her friends she was seen as an elegant, if somewhat talkative, noble girl. And thinking back to her attitude and behavior when she’d relayed the principal’s message, she’d behaved like a model noble. Since she was slipping up against someone like Tesfia, though, she was going to have a hard time.

Near the exit was a long line of students waiting to return their trays. The group got in line, and after seeing Ciel off, whose line proceeded faster than the others, Alus and the rest made their way towards the exit to head to their next class.

There, however... Alus and the others got caught up in the crowd. Everyone was rushing through the exit so they were unable to move. Or so it seemed, but the truth was something different.

After some commotion, the crowd parted, revealing two figures, an adult man and woman. They were followed by one more... A boy. Based on his calm and

composed demeanor, he was probably the child of a noble family and the two adults must be his attendants.

They were making their way in a straight line towards Alus. Since they were going against the crowd, they were the ones who had blocked the flow of traffic.

Talk about a selfish thing to do when it's so crowded. Alus looked at them with a cold stare.

"Excuse us. Allow us to pass." Even now, the two attendants were pushing their way through to make way for their lord. They moved briskly, bodyguards who were experienced veterans at it, which naturally attracted Alus's gaze.

The male attendant, from what Alus could see, looked well-toned and fit. His slightly large tuxedo might be camouflaging a rugged body. He was clean and his outfit was put together well, with no slack. His neat dark gray hair and sharp eyes gave him the impression of someone who was willful and cold.

As for the female attendant, her clothing appeared more formal, looking almost like a tailcoat. She was tall and slim, and while her hairstyle was simple, its indigo blue color stood out. The way she bowed to the students with a clear-eyed gaze may have been her way of apologizing for their aggressive methods.

They were both young, still in their twenties, and their skills could be distinguished at a glance. From the way they carried themselves, it was clear they were professional bodyguards.

From behind the two adults, the light tapping sounds of the boy's shoes could be heard approaching. At first, Alus thought he might be a student, but he wasn't wearing a uniform. Instead he wore a well-tailored coat jacket with a white base color. It wasn't flashy or extravagantly decorated, but it was no doubt a classy outfit considering the quality of the material and sense of design.

The boy had blond hair of average length. His bangs reached to his brows, which elegantly added to his expression. However...

There's something fishy about this guy. That was Alus's first impression. He was far from being a good judge of character, but having grown up in the military surrounded by adults, he'd gotten a feel for those kinds of things.

It was starting to become one of Alus's mantras that he should distrust anyone who was a noble. Not to mention that Lilisha's attitude seemed to prove his intuition was correct. Her previous noble demeanor and sociable attitude were gone, replaced with caution and a cold look of disgust as she gazed at the boy.

As for Tesfia...her eyes were wide open and she was frozen stiff. Perhaps he was an acquaintance of hers in noble society. In any event, the two noble girls' reactions made it clear that Alus should be cautious.

The boy didn't flinch at their reactions, maintaining a calm smile as he walked over. His every movement was so refined that, in fact, it almost felt wrong. In a sense, the very absence of anything being out of place felt out of place. Normally, a person's way of walking would show their unique way of breathing and rhythm. That was only natural.

However, the boy didn't have that. It was like he was perfectly imitating the concept of perfection. From that, Alus could see that everything about him was fake. It wasn't that he had no openings. He had just completely removed any traces of his own personality or background. It was a creepy thing, like something else had taken on the form of a human.

Alus lightly narrowed his eyes and continued to observe him. Based not only on Tesfia and Lilisha but on everyone else making a buzz, it was clear that he was no simple noble boy. He heard the name *Womruina* flying around...so that was either his given name or family name.

But it wasn't a familiar name to Alus. Although it appeared only he and Loki didn't recognize it.

The boy stopped a few steps in front of Alus. His attendants likewise stopped behind him and bowed in unison, and he himself wore an impeccable smile. "It is a pleasure to meet you, Alus Reigin. I have heard all about your exploits." The way he phrased it seemed to hint that he knew about Alus's background and that he was the current ranked No. 1. In any case, he appeared to be an unpleasant guest.



“And who might you be?” Alus bluntly replied with an expressionless face. That should at least convey that he wasn’t feeling too welcoming.

In that moment a frightening amount of pressure was blasted down on Alus. It appeared the male attendant was releasing his mana.

Loki reacted immediately and countered by emitting her own mana. Tesfia was still frozen and Alice was looking on from afar. But at some point, Lilisha had disappeared. Her mission was observing Alus in the first place, so he figured she might have left so she wouldn’t get involved in unnecessary trouble, but it didn’t matter now.

For the time being, he casually brushed off the pressure from the man. “Sorry, but I have a class coming up,” he said, and started walking. If they tried to interfere he wouldn’t mind using force, but it was best to refrain from doing so in public. The clean-up was too much trouble.

Meanwhile, the other party stopped smiling and slightly raised his eyebrows in light surprise. It seemed that he finally realized that Alus really didn’t know him. “Oh dear, do pardon me. I am Aile von Womruina.”

“Never heard of you.”

The boy only smiled wryly at the unapproachable answer. “I suppose our Womruina family still has a long way to go. Or maybe it just doesn’t matter to you?” It didn’t look like he was upset with Alus. If anything, it appeared he was enjoying himself. He spoke politely with a bright smile.

“You could say that. I’d appreciate it if you could make way now.”

The students looking on quietly murmured in the background. Apparently, the Womruina family was far above them. Seeing Alus treat him not as an equal but as someone who was in the way filled the cafeteria with astonishment.

But Aile was strong in his own right. Even though he probably knew Alus was the ranked No. 1, he didn’t falter in the slightest. He boldly continued like he was meeting with something of a celebrity. “I was hoping that we would be able to meet at least once. But I never imagined that you would be here at the

Institute. If that was the case, perhaps I should have attended class more seriously."

"So, technically, you're a student then." Alus's gaze unconsciously turned sharper.

Aile responded with a shrug. "I have my circumstances... Well, I am still registered. It's not like it would particularly trouble me to leave, but I feel it would be best to get the necessary papers if I could. I wouldn't want those who only judge people by their titles to think I am illiterate."

"How are you going to graduate like that?"

"The Womruina family is contributing to the development of the Institute through substantial donations, you see," he said brazenly. But Alus didn't especially mind. It was rational even.

Even if Alus was special, those with talents could pick up enough knowledge by studying on their own, and in the end the qualities required of someone could change depending if they were going to the Outer World or not.

If anything, Alus just recognized this as a possible method, although there was no way Berwick would accept him buying his credits. If he did, Berwick would lose his ability to negotiate with Alus to get him to take on missions. Not to mention that bribes could easily be exposed. And in the worst case, his identity might be revealed. Finally, Sisty wouldn't allow it. Aile had probably won over some more influential teachers.

"So, what business do you have with me?" Alus asked, making it clear that he didn't have time to waste.

"Ah yes, well... Why don't we talk somewhere less crowded? Cilcila."

Her name having been called, the female attendant stepped forward and whispered in his ear. After a few words, she turned around to lead the way.

Alus resigned himself to follow them, when Aile suddenly spoke to someone other than him. "Hello, Tesfia. It's been a long time. When was it we last met?" he called out to Tesfia with his impeccable smile.

That prompted a quiet sob to leak from Tesfia's lips. She grabbed the edges of

her skirt and cast her eyes down. Her face was pale and her shoulders shook like she was trying to catch her breath. Something abnormal was clearly happening to her.

“How have you been?” Aile continued.

When Tesfia finally managed to raise her head, she desperately squeezed out her words. “Wh-Why! Why are you here!”

“Now, that’s no way to greet someone. I am actually a student at this institute. Didn’t you know?” He didn’t appear upset, though. Instead, he soothed her like she was a child.

“What, you know each other?” Alus said.

“—! You don’t know? No, it’s better that you don’t...” Tesfia’s last words were terribly weak. She then grabbed Alus’s shoulder to whisper into his ear, “The Womruinas are one of the three great noble families.”

“It’s the first I’ve heard of them.” He knew that the Fable and Socalent families were two of them, but it was honestly his first time hearing of the last one. That was in part because Alus didn’t have much interest in nobility to begin with, but also because the definition was vague.

The three great noble families tended to change with the times. A family’s history had surprisingly little impact on the whole. Instead, it was their achievements that played a big part.

There were also cases of families that were self-proclaimed as great, or where a small faction took the liberty of promoting a family to the top of the list for their own interests, so it was rather complicated. In any case, in order to be recognized by everyone else, one needed both ability and influence.

In that sense, there was no question in anyone’s mind that the Fable family was first and foremost. The current head of the family, Frose, had the skills and achievements to back that up. Not only was she one of the former Three Pillars, she’d also served as an instructor and commander for a long period of time, training capable Magicmasters. Finally, she continued to hold a great deal of influence in noble society and politics.

In terms of achievements, the Socalent family was no different. Although he

didn’t care much about the prestige, Vizaist’s extraordinary rise in a single generation was definitely worthy of his lordly title.

However, the circumstances were different with the Womruinas. The family were distant cousins of Cicelnia’s and traced back to royalty. Its founder abandoned the struggle for succession as the ruler and descended from royalty, having been granted a special title among nobles.

While things changed over time, the Womruinas had never once been left out of the three great noble families. They had a distinguished past, and economic and political power, but their biggest factor was their war potential. Even compared to the Fable family’s head who had served as a commander, and the Socalent family’s head who was an active officer, the Womruinas had considerable influence in the military. They had produced plenty of capable Magicmasters in their time, and many of the top brass had deep ties to them. They had a private army, and as could be gleaned from Aile’s followers, their pure military strength exceeded that of the other two families.

The present-day Womruina family had two sons. Aile was the second son, and hence second in line of succession.

Tesfia gave Alus this quick summary. “They’re special nobles, and not even our family can compare to them. The Womruinas are former royalty.”

“Hm, is that so.” Tesfia was white as a sheet, but Alus answered her indifferently. It wasn’t like his attitude was going to change after hearing that. In fact, he found nobles who could do nothing but brag to be unpleasant.

“That about sums it up. Now, are you done with your whispering? I’ll get jealous, Fia.” Even though Aile shouldn’t have been able to hear, he’d more or less guessed what Tesfia was talking about. He had waited for them to finish, and then slid over towards them.

“Excuse me, Alus Reigin,” he said, before casually reaching out...and grabbing Tesfia’s shoulder. His hand then moved down towards her waist and forcibly pulled her delicate body closer.

“Ah...!”

Tesfia’s body stiffened, and she finally looked up at the taller Aile. Her eyes

seemed to show not only a loss of will, but of her vigor as well.

From under his bangs, he gazed into her eyes like a predator at his prey. He muttered, “Oh dear, it looks like my belonging has gotten dirty.” He gently placed his right hand on her chin. For a man his fingers were surprisingly slender.

Meanwhile, Tesfia was unable to oppose him, like she was petrified. Aile’s stare was pinning her down, preventing her from even looking away. And as his face drew closer...her frozen body was unable to stop him. His left hand that stroked her red hair seemed to have firmly seized her heart as well.

It was the pressure of the Womruina family name, and Aile looked terrifying to Tesfia. From the moment they were born as nobles, they belonged to a hierarchy that bound even the heart. It was a form of shared sense that had been ingrained in them. So even if she understood why she was freezing up, she couldn’t reject it. Her family itself was her chain.

Everything she’d been born and raised with now weighed her down, restraining her. Even if she tried to escape, an unexpected amount of force kept her jaw in place and no words were able to leave her lips. She couldn’t refuse what approached her.

“—!!” Aile unexpectedly reacted to something.

When Tesfia closed her eyes, she could hear the dry sound of the merciless hand holding her chin getting flicked away, and a more powerful hand pulling her from Aile.

“Can you not dirty my belonging?”

Tesfia hurriedly opened her eyes and saw Alus’s face, his lips twisted into a sarcastic smile. She thought he looked far more villainous than Aile...but more importantly, he’d just called her his belonging. “Wh-Whaaaat?! Who are you calling your belonging!!!” Tesfia loudly objected, her face as red as a beetroot. “Hey, let go!” She also lightly hit Alus’s hand holding her shoulder.

Next, she pushed herself away. Fortunately, Alice was there to catch her. Tesfia had snapped out of it, but her body was still trembling. Just thinking of what had happened made dread crawl up her spine. She pulled her arm close to

her chest and clenched it so hard that it started to go pale.

Despite the unpleasant feelings she'd had, her body wouldn't move in the slightest... She knew what was going to happen to her, but she'd been unable to reject the approaching lips. It was like she'd been paralyzed... Spineless. She was frustrated.

Before she knew what was happening, Tesfia felt something hot on her cheek. She rubbed her finger against it. "Huh...?" It was a large tear. *Unsightly* , she thought, and wiped it away.

But once the dam broke, her tears flowed without end. Almost having a kiss stolen was humiliating. However, the fear of having someone she didn't trust forcibly approach her like that was even greater.

Suddenly, Alice embraced her. Her best friend who was just a little taller than her was intensely glaring at Aile in a way she'd never seen before. So was Loki. And while Ciel had left earlier, if she'd been here she probably would have done the same.

Meanwhile, Aile casually brushed their glares off, his artificial smile growing bigger, as he calmly addressed Tesfia. "That smarts. Our engagement might have been made while we were young, but did you really think it had been annulled?"

Tesfia trembled anew as old wounds were dug up. She froze again.

"After that, your mother wanted to one-sidedly revoke the engagement, but did you think that would put a stop to it? There's no way that would be the case, no matter what the likes of the Fable family might say."

"..."

Alus didn't think much of what Aile had to say. He knew that was common among nobles. But when he saw Tesfia's tears, he thought that simply writing it off as something that happened all the time would be harsh. In addition, he thought about what he'd just said and done. *Well, I guess it's not a mistake. I am meant to guide her after all.* In short, by his "belonging" he meant his student, but he didn't know why he'd put it like that.

Finally, he seemed to get fed up thinking too hard about it. "That doesn't

matter.” And so he spoke his conclusion in a truly Alus fashion. “You’ve got business with me, right? Why not give up on going somewhere else and just spell it out here? I’m not that free, you see.”

“Whatever. Like you said, my business is with you.”

“You’re already letting your refined mask slip.”

Aile maintained his smile at Alus’s blatant provocation. His smile was almost like an abyss, or maybe it was just void of human emotion. “However, let me begin with Fia’s situation. It is true that Ms. Frose’s letter of apology and request to annul the engagement reached us. But how stupid could she be? It was an official engagement, you see. She’d agreed to it initially, not to mention how much the Fable family stands to gain from it.”

With a knowing look, he continued, “Of course, I can understand your circumstances. If you were to wed into another family, the Fable family would end with Frose’s generation. That’s why I’m saying that I don’t mind marrying into your family. You could give birth to a new heir.”

Then Aile bent down and whispered to the trembling Tesfia, “Not even the Fable family would want to make an enemy of us, would they? I doubt it’s a choice you would want to make. Don’t worry, I’m sure you’ll make a fine wife. So why don’t you show me more of that pretty face of yours...”

As he approached her face, he whispered in an even quieter voice, “This brings me back. Just who did you make a promise to and what when you were little?” Aile reached out to Tesfia, who’d frozen up again. However, his hand stopped before it could reach her hair. “...”

He stared at the person who’d grabbed his hand. It wasn’t Alus, but Tesfia’s best friend. “And who are you?”

“I’m Alice. Alice Tilake!” Alice shouted in anger.

“I’ve never heard the name... Are you not even a noble? In that case, can you stay out of it? Someone of lowly birth like you shouldn’t even touch me. You would do well not to stick your nose into noble business.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. That doesn’t matter!” Alice fumed.

But Aile only gave her a chilling smile. “Ms. Alice, you would do best not to think the Womruinas are the same kind of weak nobles you’re used to seeing. I’m warning you now. You still want to attend this institute, don’t you? If you get that, then stay out of it.”

“I said that doesn’t matter! No matter who you might be!”

“No, at the very least, that won’t work for Fia as long as she is a noble,” Aile said with a smile and a smug look as he continued to draw near to Tesfia. “You don’t have to waste your time studying magic anymore. You won’t go out into the Outer World either. You will only need to stay by my side.”

“—!” Tesfia’s eyes shot wide open, but it seemed she couldn’t immediately process what he’d said. Of course she couldn’t. If that happened, the meaning of her life would be torn away from her. After all of her hard labor, she’d challenged her mother to a bet and finally won her right to continue on at the Institute. If that was taken from her, she would lose her goals and just be a simple bird in a cage.

As she stared at the ice wall that was Aile’s smile, her trembling turned into resignation and acceptance, the light in her eyes disappearing.

Seeing that, Aile once again reached out to her. When Alice tried to step in again, she felt a burning pain in her throat. Before she knew it, Aile’s male attendant had gotten behind her and was touching her neck. But he was only touching it with four fingers. He wasn’t even squeezing...yet it was enough for Alice to cough and drop to one knee.

“I warned you. Know your place.” Aile coldly looked down at Alice. Then he said, “What is the meaning of this?”

Suddenly and soundlessly, there was a figure next to Aile, leaving his attendants no time to react. Alus held Aile’s wrist tightly. “If you’re going to stop others by force, you should be prepared for it to be done back to you. I am in charge of their training, so I can’t overlook any more of this.”

“To think I’d be getting a lecture. I’m actually a year older than you, I’ll have you know... Anyways, could you release me?”

As they spoke, Alus’s grip on Aile’s wrist tightened, the pressure going beyond

the level that could be passed off as a joke.

Aile must have been feeling quite a bit of pain, yet he remained perfectly composed.

When he signaled his attendants with his eyes, Loki wordlessly moved into the path of the female attendant called Cilcila, holding her knife-shaped AWR in a reverse grip.

At the same time, the man touching Alice's throat became unable to move his legs, like they were pinned down. The girl who'd disappeared at first, Lilisha, had returned, and now had a thin thread like piano wire wrapped around his neck.

The intricately undulating thread extending from Lilisha's fingers gave off a sharp gleam. It would probably cut really well. If the man moved carelessly, he might lose his head. Even so, he didn't remove his fingers from Alice's neck.

"Oh dear. Fine then. Let's call a truce," Aile said. He looked at the male attendant, who obeyed his lord's will and removed his fingers from Alice's neck. The next moment, the thread around his own neck melted into the air and disappeared.

After confirming that, Alus signaled Loki with his eyes and had her stand down. At the same time he let go of Aile's wrist. "Sorry...is what I'd like to say, but it seems we don't have enough respect for you for that. I don't care if you're one of the three great nobles, or Womruina or whatever, but I won't stand for any more of this," Alus said, looking straight at Aile.

However, Aile himself was looking elsewhere. "Just what is Frusevan's youngest daughter doing here? Who put you up to this?"

"You seem knowledgeable, as expected of someone from the Womruina family. Mr. Aile, was it? It's a pleasure to meet you is what I'd like to say...but it's not like I wanted to meet like this. That's why I left at first. But then you had to go and cause such a commotion here."

"To think you'd protect someone from the Fable family," Aile said after a pause.

Lilisha said nothing and simply shrugged.

Then Aile finally turned to Alus. “That aside, Alus, teacher to Fia and that girl over there, I thank you for your lecture. Perhaps next time I will teach you how to treat the ladies.”

“No, thank you. It might be far removed from my area of expertise, but I think I’m doing better than you.”

“Oh, perhaps that was a lack of research on my side? Well, I didn’t come here today to anger you. I really do have something to tell you.” Aile rubbed his wrist that had been grabbed before, while looking down at a depressed Tesfia with an innocent smile.

“Then finish it up so you can leave.”

Aile let out a thinly veiled laugh, and replied to Alus in a low voice, “Ha ha, you can only talk to me like that because you have the highest rank in Alpha. I hope you understand that the second son of Womruina is going out of his way to give ground.”

“Like Sir Alus said, there won’t be a second time. Understand that any further rudeness will be the same as putting yourself in danger!” Loki sharply said.

Despite that, Aile laughed it off. “Rude, you say? You are a funny one. But I suppose I am the one asking, so excuse me, Alus. It has become a little too noisy for me to convey my business.”

“So what are you going to do? I wouldn’t mind if you just left.”

“Pardon me, but I believe it would be best if we spoke somewhere quiet. Cilcila.” Without waiting for Alus to answer, Aile urged the woman called Cilcila to lead the way.

Aile really was a selfish guy, but when the male attendant showed up by his side, Alus decided to follow. But he had something to do before that.

Seeing Alice holding her throat in pain, and Loki supporting Tesfia, he thought about it for a moment. Tesfia was a sensitive girl, and now her usual cheerfulness was gone as she seemed to be suffering from a mental breakdown.

He wondered what to say to her...but after spending a few seconds thinking,

he realized he shouldn't do something he was unfamiliar with. So he shook his head and only said one thing. "Well, just pretend a stray dog bit you and hold it in."

"—!!!" Aile reacted to this.

Even Loki was exasperated at his insensitive words. He'd told Aile that he was better at treating women, but she couldn't endure this.

"So, where are we going?" Alus asked.

But it wasn't Aile who answered. "The parlor on the fourth floor," Cilcila told him.

I believe that requires Sisty's permission... Alus thought to himself, as he looked at Aile and his attendants. Speaking of that, had they even told Sisty they were visiting in the first place? If the Womruinas were as troublesome as they seemed, she probably had her hands full preparing for the storm of complaints that Aile attending the Institute for the first time in a while would bring her.

"All right. But I have to check up on the two victims, so go on ahead."

"By all means...but this concerns Fia too, so are you sure you shouldn't bring her as well?"

"You're going to say that?"

"It was just a joke. I don't mind. Feel free to have a long talk and calm down. It seems there's some confusion going on all around. But try not to keep me waiting," Aile finished, as he left with the female attendant. The male attendant who was waiting behind Alus lightly bowed and followed his master.

After watching them leave, Alus turned around. "Thanks, Lilisha."

"It couldn't be helped with the way things were going. Still...I never expected someone from the Womruina family to come to the Institute. Oh, and just so you know, I was hiding at the start to avoid any trouble. Aile von Womruina might have acted like he knows me, but I have no deep relationship with him!"

"Okay, I get it. But you really did help. Alice would have been in danger otherwise," Alus said, as he examined the finger marks left on Alice's neck. All

four marks were bleeding internally. Alus didn't know how he'd done it, but if it hadn't been done right, her artery might have been cut. "They're even more reckless than I imagined."

"You don't want to make an enemy out of the Womruinas," Lilisha told him. "Even those two attendants shouldn't be underestimated." She then explained that the male attendant hadn't reacted very much to getting a thread wrapped around his neck. Even with his life on the line, he probably wouldn't have hesitated to kill Alice if his master had ordered it. His loyalty was abnormal.

"Either way, the worst outcome was avoided. Alice, you go to the infirmary. Leaving your neck untreated isn't a good idea. I'll bring Tesfia over later."

"Y-Yeah. Thank you, and you too, Lilisha."

"You don't need to thank me. I wasn't trying to save you or Ms. Tesfia. Terrible things would happen if Alus went on a rampage, so I had to step in." But even as Lilisha spoke, her glance shifted sympathetically to Tesfia from time to time.

However, Alus objected. "Don't talk like I'm some sort of hooligan."

"Oh, was I mistaken?"

"If I was serious, it would've ended before anyone had time to go on a rampage."

"So I made the right decision, then."

"Maybe. But they're not back to normal either." Alus looked over at Tesfia. She was in a daze from mental shock. If anything, it was worse than before. She was unresponsive and her shaking wouldn't stop.

Alus lowered his head to check on Tesfia, then groaned. Her pupils were dilated and her eyes were blank. She wasn't even trying to hide her tear-swollen eyes. Her arms hung limply at her sides. These were the symptoms of someone in shock reliving a past trauma. She was like a living doll in a trance.

"Pathetic... I just let him do as he pleased," Alus said in a bitter, self-ridiculing tone, his words disappearing into the air. It would've been easy if they'd used some flashy spells. He would have just sensed it and crushed them. That way,

Tesfia and Alice might not have gotten hurt. When he confronted the facts, he couldn't deny that he'd hesitated because he was at the Institute.

"Sorry, but Lilisha and Loki, can you help us out?" Alus asked the two girls, with his hand on Tesfia's head.

Next, he slowly and gently wiped away her tears with his thumb. Her condition resembled the symptoms of someone with mental illness, but her empty eyes showed faint signs of mana influence. When speaking of spells that influenced the mind, the dark element was his first thought. However...

"This isn't magic. It's a form of hypnosis." The mana was just the final trigger. It was the traumatic experience imprinted in the subconscious that was the primary cause of the psychological damage. He might know how to treat common injuries in the Outer World, but he didn't really know how to handle psychological wounds like these.

And Tesfia's mental trauma aside, Alus wondered if he should stick his head any further into this. Aile had mentioned an engagement to Tesfia, which meant that it was a problem between the Fable and Womruina families. A problem between nobles, meaning there was no room for him to interfere.

Even so, he couldn't deny his feelings. He'd spent a lot of time guiding and instructing Tesfia, and he'd even gotten involved with her bet with Frose. And he wasn't sure if he should brush off talks of Tesfia's future as something unrelated to him.

That was when he remembered. *"Can you not dirty my belonging?"* Then he sighed. Even though Aile's attitude had rubbed him the wrong way, he'd blown it, and really felt like clicking his tongue. His choice of words was one thing, but he'd gotten himself involved at that moment.

"Now what do I do...?" Alus blurted out to nobody in particular.

"You should do as you wish, Sir Alus. However, that man's attitude was rude, and most of all...unpleasant. That's enough to make you feel bad for anyone, even Ms. Tesfia." As a fellow girl, there was a lot Loki could sympathize with.

While Alus wasn't the most sensitive around girls, he had a few reservations about Aile and the Womruina family. "I agree. Accepting his invitation is

annoying, but I should go and settle things. After doing something about Fia," he concluded, scratching his head.

Sixty-Fourth Chapter

A Circumstantial Ally

The hustle and bustle of the Institute, even the chirping of birds...didn't register with her. Instead, only silence and endless unpleasant memories went through her mind.

She was sitting on a bed in the infirmary, her dazed stare cast down at the floor. Her mouth was slightly open, and from it came the sound of sighs from time to time. Her eyes were hollow like someone who was sleepwalking, and all she did was blink every few seconds like a broken machine.

Alice sat on a chair while Lilisha and Loki took care of her, searching for a simple first aid kit or some medicine, while Alus headed for Tesfia.

He lifted her up, using his hands under her arms, and put her down with her back towards him. Then he worked to strip off her clothing without asking permission first.

Loki and Lilisha stopped searching the shelves and their jaws dropped. Even Alice was shocked. However, since Tesfia was spacing out, she didn't seem to notice what was happening.

Alus ignored them all, unhooking her bra and sliding it out of the way. With her skin exposed, he pressed his palm on her back. Converting his own mana into a wave, he poured it into her.

It was a method that healing Magicmasters used for those who'd been inflicted with mental trauma or who were under the effects of dark element magic. By pouring in mana at the same rhythm as the patient's pulse, it was possible to improve the chaotic state of their mind and magic. It was recognized both as an effective way to treat the mind and to deliver pain relief, and was a common, albeit advanced, first aid technique on the battlefield.

Fortunately, Tesfia's state seemed to be less affected than he'd thought, as her mana soon returned to its original rhythm. If his treatment had had no effect, a professional would've had to take a look at her, but the light in her eyes gradually returned.

She slowly and quietly came to. "Ugh..." The first thing she saw was a pair of pale hills...her own breasts covered by a single white sheet. As she looked down at them, her consciousness returned. "?#@!%&*!!!"

Her mind was still a blur, but she recognized what state she was in. Upon that realization, she hurriedly hid her breasts behind both arms. "Huh, what? Why am I naked?!"



“Don’t make a fuss, it’s annoying.”

When Tesfia turned to Alus, her expression was one of complete astonishment. Her shame reached its peak, with her face going red like lava was erupting. She’d been about to scream out loud but was just able to hold it in.

Aside from Ciel, everyone from the group was gathered here and not just Alus. Once she noticed that, she was able to calm down a little. “Huh? What...was I doing?” As she struggled to recall, she noticed that her bra hook was undone. And she couldn’t move her arms or there’d be a real accident, so somebody would have to hook it for her.

After some hesitation, she weakly whispered, “C-Can you hook the bra...” As soon as she squeezed that out, she curled up from shame. The soft curve of her back created a graceful line, making the sight even more sensational to anyone looking. But she wasn’t aware of it.

“Hm? Oh, yeah.” Alus reached out with his hand, but then a figure appeared in between them like a bolt of lightning.

“Please turn away, Sir Alus!”

He was dumbfounded by Loki’s menacing look, but obediently turned around.

“Thank you for the help, Loki,” Tesfia said.

“Make sure you tell me when something like that happens. Actually, you’re rather seductive right now, Ms. Tesfia. Also, your underwear is surprisingly cute.”

“Um, that doesn’t have anything to do with this, does it? You didn’t have to say that, did you?” Tesfia felt extra-sensitive due to her defenseless state, so Loki’s stare almost hurt.

“Your flesh swells as your underwear moves... Did you put on weight?”

“You’re kidding, right? You’re just saying that to harass me, aren’t you?”

Loki smiled as if affirming that, without any sign of apologizing. But in the end, the bra was put back on without any major incidents.

Tesfia grabbed her jacket, and once it was on, she finally felt some relief.

A few moments later... “So, are you going to explain?” Alus sharply said, perhaps to regain a sense of control and cover up his blunder. Even through her confusion, Tesfia turned and looked at him.

Loki appeared next to her and butted in. “Before that, I would like to say that the fact that you know how to put on and remove a woman’s underthings is equally important, Sir Alus. But we can leave that for later.”

As Tesfia wondered how to explain things, she realized she wanted something explained to her as well. “Um, before that, why was I naked in the first place?” After asking her simplistic question, she suddenly stopped. Even though she was the one who’d asked, she wasn’t sure she really wanted to hear the answer. Her inner conflict was reflected in her expression.

“That is because you were under something similar to hypnosis cast by that Aile guy. As part of the treatment, Sir Alus...ahem, needed to remove your clothes. Fortunately, it seems the hypnosis was undone,” Loki finished.

Figuring that answered any questions, Alus got back to the topic at hand. Frankly, he didn’t want to carry this on for too long. “So, who is he? I got caught up in all of this, so I’d at least like an explanation.”

Alice, with a bandage around her neck, leaned forward with great interest. “Fia, I’ll do anything I can to help. Is it true that you’re engaged? He, uh...also said that he could get you expelled if he wanted to.”

“Sorry. It’s a problem between our families. But what he said is absolutely ludicrous. Besides, the Fable and Womruina families are at odds with each other.” As far as Tesfia could remember, all of the problems should have been resolved. From the Fable family’s point of view, the engagement had been annulled long ago. “But maybe there’s some kind of misunderstanding...” she continued with a gloomy expression, grabbing hold of her bangs. Even if that was the case, though, she couldn’t help but wonder...why now?

“What are you going to do if he can do what he says he can?” Loki asked. Like Alus, she wasn’t well-versed in the problems of nobility.

It was Lilisha, who was standing at a distance from everyone, who answered.

“If he has the documents then it would still be in effect, especially since it’s an arrangement between two of the three great noble families.” At some point, she’d begun speaking in a strangely friendly manner towards Tesfia. “Unfortunately, you’ll just have to get married. Going back on a promise in a one-sided manner isn’t going to work. Besides, the three great noble families are around to settle these kinds of disputes, so the Fable family trying to get out of it was never going to happen. Well, if it gets really complicated, there’s always the option of a discussion between the families.”

“So it’s up to a negotiation. At the very least, it’s hard to say at this stage,” Alus noted.

“But if the Womruinas have made a move, they must have a basis for it,” Lilisha added indifferently.

“Either way, we’ll need to speak with your mother to get the full details,” Alus said seriously, and Tesfia nodded. *Depending on the outcome, it might even turn out to become a full-blown conflict between the Fables and the Womruinas... No, I guess that’s unlikely.*

Alus denied the foreboding possibility that crossed his mind. Fortunately, regardless of the engagement being valid or invalid, it seemed Frose Fable’s intentions were clear. After all, she’d permitted her daughter to continue attending the Institute even if it had been the result of a bet between them. If Frose was on board with what Aile had said, then Tesfia would leave the Institute, meaning Frose’s actions would be contradicting themselves.

Besides, as someone who’d met with Frose several times, Alus knew she wasn’t the kind of woman who’d allow her daughter to marry someone like that. Of course, she could be mindful of protecting the family line above all else, but from what he could tell, she wasn’t the sort to disregard her daughter’s happiness. Nobody would choose that kind of approach. She had also been known as one of the Three Pillars, so she wouldn’t be that foolish.

“But there’s no time for that now. For starters, Fia, I want to hear what you want to do.” He honestly didn’t care how long Aile waited, but if he ignored him, things would certainly get more complicated.

“I want to stay here until I graduate and become a first-rate Magicmaster. No,

I will,” Tesfia firmly stated.

“All right, then let’s push things that way,” Alus said.

Alice nodded and Loki also agreed. Lilisha said nothing, but she probably agreed as well.

“Then let me hurry up and get ready...” Tesfia rose from the bed, but Alus held out his hand to stop her.

“No, you stay out of it.”

“Why? It’s about my family, isn’t it?!” Tesfia stared at him.

“That’s the thing, you get emotional at a moment’s notice. Not to mention...I can’t read what Aile is after. It feels like he’s hiding something, and then there’s those strange techniques.”

“You mean that hypnotic technique,” Loki said.

“That’s right. It’s probably a sort of trap that takes advantage of your mental unrest. While we still don’t know what that is, it’ll just end up repeating what happened before. It’s a crude technique, but I wouldn’t want you collapsing again. In the worst case, he could manipulate you in whatever way he sees fit. Not being an actual manipulating spell, it’s particularly nasty.”

Tesfia was at a loss for words, when Alice pulled on her arm. “Let’s leave this to Al, Fia. Just thinking of you not being yourself after you meet with him scares me.”

“But...”

“Ms. Tesfia, Ms. Alice is right. And if your heart gets broken or your freedom gets removed, any negotiation will become incredibly disadvantageous for us. From what I can tell, you must be very careful of what you say in your position,” Loki said. “So leave it to us,” she said more gently, putting a hand on Tesfia’s shoulder.

“Oh, and Loki, you stay behind too. Make sure Alice and Fia rest up for a while.”

“But why?!” Loki was aghast, but ultimately was convinced by Alus to stay behind. He was keeping her with the two so that she could protect them.

“Instead, I’ll bring with me...”

“Hm, so you’ll choose me instead.” It was easy to guess by following the flow of the conversation, but Lilisha didn’t sound very amused.

Alus smirked. “You have a way with words. I’m thankful for your help with that incident. You glossed things over when my Institute life was threatened, and even came up with an excuse for when I was on a mission in Vanalis...although I think you could have chosen something other than a suspension.”

“I am honored that you remember.”

“There’s more. You’re nobility and calm and collected compared to Tesfia. You’re not related to this, so you can stay objective, and you know about their dirty tricks due to your work.”

“I see. But are you sure you can trust me? I might move favorably for Womruina instead.” Lilisha fearlessly smiled as her blonde hair fluttered.

“Oh, you won’t do that. You wouldn’t have come back if that was the case,” Alus said. “You’re Berwick’s subordinate and you were sent here by him. If you did side with them, that would make things easy to understand. But if I’m going to use force, I’d prefer to have an excuse. In fact, it might even be the easiest way since I wouldn’t have to think about anything. I’m not sure how loyal you are to Berwick, but I’m sure you’d still want to have some work for the foreseeable future.”

“Oh, how scary!”

“And I don’t know what Berwick’s thinking, but he wouldn’t go and upset me too much. It’s been a give and take relationship. So, what are you then? Are you worthy of Berwick’s trust, or does he see you as a useful asset in the future? I find it hard to believe you got hold of some of his weaknesses. At any rate, the superior has to take responsibility for whatever their subordinates do, so he wouldn’t send just anyone.”

“My, I was sure the Governor-General had you tied up...but it seems your roles are reversed in some aspects. Also, you’re being vague, but you do trust me because of my connection to the Governor-General, don’t you?”

“That’s not all, but tying someone down means being tied down yourself as well.” Having been put to use by Berwick so many times, Alus was a bit amused. If something really did happen, he could call in a big favor. That was how they could balance things out.

There was one more thing he’d noticed. Even Alus struggled to get a good read on Berwick, which meant that Lilisha herself might not know of his true intentions. If that was the case, it would be a wonderful miscalculation... He wouldn’t need to be overly cautious of Lilisha. If he conducted himself in the right way, he might even be able to use his observer for his own convenience. There was the question of how to bring her over to his side, but if handled well, it would be very valuable to his life in the Institute.

Whether Lilisha was aware of his schemes, she only shrugged in resignation and let out a sigh.

“If we cooperate, it might change how I see you,” Alus said.

“This goes beyond my observation mission, but oh well. Fine! I will accompany you. I’d also like to treat this as doing you a favor rather than as part of my job. And one more thing... Don’t think this means that our duel is off, crying little Fia!”

“S-Says you! But I don’t like owing you anything, so I’ll hold back a little for you in our duel!” Tesfia replied with what abuse she could muster, but didn’t get to say everything she wanted to.

That was because Alus bluntly cut her off. “Now that that’s decided, let’s get going.” He didn’t want their arguing to balloon out of control again.

Lilisha nodded, and followed after Alus. However, Tesfia didn’t miss the vague, meaningful smile on her face before the door closed.

Meanwhile, Lilisha was gazing at Alus’s back when she suddenly stopped and sighed. “Things have really taken a strange turn. But that’s Alus Reigin for you... I can’t read him at all. Then again, even if I could, he can just use force. It’s so unfair. It’s impressive that the Womruina name didn’t faze him, but they’re still one of the three great noble families,” she muttered. *Besides, these types of nobles are good at attacking weak points, and even he should struggle with that. It looks like he’s thoroughly investigated Alus too.* She wouldn’t have

thought it'd be that easy for anyone to push their way into a quarrel between nobles with such insolence, even if it was the current ranked No. 1.

Then she recalled the face of that noble family's son. She unconsciously furrowed her brow and spoke with disgust. "Still...Womruina's second son is just as lowly as the rumors say." She put her finger to her lip and thought. *Well, now he knows I'm at the Institute too... Frankly, I don't want to get involved, but I can help a little.*

She didn't have any plans to side with either of them. She would just stand at Alus's side for the moment.

Lilisha decided on how to proceed without showing any hesitation. As she started walking again, her eyes met with Alus's eyes. *That's the face of someone telling me to hurry up... Yes, yes, here's your reliable ally.*

She chuckled to herself and walked towards Alus at her own pace, as he waited for her with a sour look.



Afterword

Thank you very much for picking up this volume. Long time no see, Izushiro here. This series has finally reached eleven volumes. I am very grateful to all of my readers for coming along all this way on this journey.

From here on, I'd like to comment on this volume, so be warned of some spoilers.

Now then, we're at volume 11, and we finally touch on some of Alus's past. There were some voices raised to tell it sooner, but I had my own thoughts and decided to save it until now.

Yes, back then Alus had a lot of contact with women, which is why he has a high tolerance, so to speak, towards them. Although I'll omit the details...

The cover art puts a big focus on the past, but the present is included as well of course, with a lot of new developments for Lilisha, a light novel original character. As those of you who have already read the book can tell, she might have a more important role in the next volume. The story will progress rapidly, so please look forward to volume 12.

Next, I would like to give my usual greetings. Thank you very much to Miyuki Ruria for the beautiful illustrations in this volume too. The drawing of young Alus was inspirational enough to make me want to write a spin-off with him as the main character. And then there's Elina. I have long been awaiting an illustration of her, so I thank you so much for the amazing design.

I would also like to thank my editor-in-charge, and everyone else involved with the work on this book.

And thank you dearly, the readers of *The Greatest Magicmaster's Retirement Plan* , for your support. I will do my best to finish the next volume as soon as possible, so I hope for your continued support.

Finally, I would like to use this space to report on one more thing. Actually, a

new manga called *The Greatest Magicmaster's Retirement Plan: The Alternative* is being released! In charge of the manga is Yoneshirokaru, and it is expected to be serialized soon in Square Enix's manga application, *Manga UP* ! I'd love to go into detail on everything I love about it, but it would be much too long, so I'll make this brief.

Not only do they bring out the coolness and cuteness of the characters, and the punch of battles, but the rich scenery and expressive faces are all highlights. I believe it will allow you to experience the world in a new way. So, without further ado, please look forward to *The Greatest Magicmaster's Retirement Plan: The Alternative* !

That will be enough for this time. I hope we can meet again in the next volume's afterword.

I would be grateful for your support of both the novel and manga versions in the future.

—Izushiro


Nike
A Fiend-detecting dog born through an experiment. He forms a bond with Alus, but...?
Lilisha
A mysterious transfer student. Her full name is Lilisha Ron de Rimfuge Frusevan, and she comes from a family with a shady history.
Tesfia Fable
A beautiful Magicmaster under Alus's guidance and a user of the ice attribute. Although she comes from a renowned family, she has a less than noble side to her.
Alus (When he was in the Special Unit)
Alus in the past. Even at eleven years old, he was a genius with an overly serious personality.
Alus Reigin
The current No. 1 soldier and the greatest Magicmaster. For a certain reason he is attending the magical institute as a first-year student.
Elina Ovril
A female Magicmaster in the Special Unit who especially likes Alus.


"You still have a long way to go, Alus."
Elina suddenly embraced his head with her arms. She squeezed harder and whispered "It's okay" into his ear... Unfortunately, the meaning of the words didn't reach Alus's heart.

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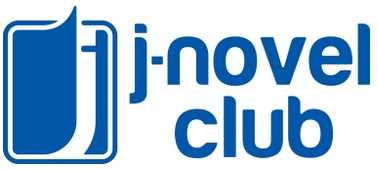
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The Greatest Magicmaster’s Retirement Plan: Volume 11

by Izushiro

Translated by Warnis Edited by Jan Suzukawa

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