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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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In the Wedge of Sin

In a certain land in the Outer World...

All man-made objects were being worn down by time. Even what little remained was being stolen away by the never-ending flow of time. Before long, the fragments that humanity remembered of the past world would completely disappear.

Even in the Inner World...nobody recalled how the world had once been. When the Fiends appeared, all records were lost. If there were something that stirred the will of the seven nations to be directed outward...a will for exploration and adventure outside the known, then perhaps humanity could still be saved.

No. No matter what world, or what threat appeared, humans would always quarrel with one another. At best, it was reason and intelligence that suppressed the seeds of conflict. So once they lost their grip on that, they would begin to impose their ideas and ideals on each other. And in the end, they would use force to bring the other side to its knees.

Since territorial conflicts occurred even between animals, perhaps conflict was inseparable from the essence of life. It wasn’t a matter of high or low intelligence. Or rather, the higher the intelligence, the more cunning and sophisticated the methods used to make the other submit.

What were the standards and the models? Once collapsed, restoring humanity was a difficult task. Even something as simple as what they should base the rules on became far more vague.

The tentative rules that had been set up were simply bonds to keep them in check. Basically, they were doing the same things now as they did then.

Regardless of how much the Fiends cornered them, they would repeat the same mistakes over and over. Even though they may shout that it must never happen again, they still retraced the same steps.

If that was karma—the karma of humanity and the Inner World—then the seven nations were like the resting place where they had cast away their sins in the darkness.

Dozens of kilometers outside of Babel's protective barrier, built to straddle the grand nation of Iblis and the sturdy nation of Clevideet, was a building that stretched not up but down, spiraling into the depths of the earth. Its name was Trojan Prison.

It was an inverted cone-shaped prison that reached several hundred meters down, with holes dug horizontally into the walls to form the cells. Inside were magic criminals too horrible to house within a nation's borders. The seven nations had a pact to send their criminals there. Everyone there had such long sentences that they'd likely never be allowed to see the sun again. The deeper they were, the more serious their sins. Those at the very bottom, the worst of the worst, were beyond the reach of the sun.

The prison was made with plates that didn't allow any mana to leak through. All prisoners were also forced to wear collars that prevented them from letting mana out or constructing any spells. Anyone trying to escape would have to contend with that. Even if they somehow broke out, there were no people or buildings anywhere near them for several dozen kilometers. They would be wandering the Outer World ruled by the Fiends without the ability to use mana or spells.

The seven nations supposedly did not have the death penalty. Without it, the suspected higher-ups who'd conducted inhuman experiments and plans could continue to be exposed. In other words, if they were executed, then the true state of what had happened would never be revealed.

However, that was just an excuse. In reality, everything was left untouched in the darkness of vagueness and irresponsibility. But that wasn't the only example. The political system of the seven nations was formed to divert the people's attention from the myth of safety that was the Inner World. It was

merely an illusion of peace; all threats were concealed, hidden in the dark, and the truth was skillfully manipulated to keep public awareness focused elsewhere.

In that sense, the Trojan Prison was a wedge of the darkness that was humanity's karma, driven deep into the ground.

"Warden, Dr. Kwinska is descending into the no-contact zone again. What should we do?" In the surveillance room, a new guard spoke to the prison warden in an exasperated tone. He wore a flawless uniform and his shoes were polished and stainless. It was as if he were the embodiment of the prison's strict system. Nobody would ever visit a remote place like this so there was no one to see him, but his appearance alone made him look like the perfect guard.

The man had been posted here half a year ago. Even though he was a newcomer, he was only in his thirties so it wasn't really seen as a demotion. But it was still like a bad roll of the dice.

While it was a top secret prison run by all seven nations, its personnel consisted mostly of people from Iblis and Clevideet due to its location. The new guard was no exception as he hailed from Iblis. He'd been shocked at how remote the place was, having risked his life just to get here.

"Just let the professor do as she pleases. As long as she does what she has to, we can turn a blind eye to it to some degree. Besides, nothing good can come from getting involved with that mad scientist. Make sure you remember that." The warden, wearing a uniform that looked like it would rip apart any moment now due to his bulging muscles, let out a heavy sigh.

As expected of the warden of a top secret prison, his strength was authentic. Although he'd had to give up his rank when he became the warden, he had originally been a Single Digit Magicmaster candidate. But that was why he'd been appointed in the first place. In other words, his outstanding ability was the most effective way to ensure the safety of the guards.

Even so, it was natural to prepare for any eventuality. All of the guards here, no matter how small their job might be, were strong enough to hunt powerful Fiends in the Outer World.

Incidentally, the guards rarely left the prison. They only left when Fiends

approached the prison due to unforeseen circumstances, perhaps once a month. In those rare cases, the Fiends were usually eradicated instantly by a strike force.

The other times were when the prison was being supplied. Bringing in food and other supplies was a big job and the guards were often sent out to help. Overall, they had little opportunity to make use of their Magicmaster powers. So perhaps it was a demotion after all.

The warden then spoke again as if he'd remembered something. "When did the professor's favorite guinea pig die again?"

"I believe they were already dead by the time I was appointed...though it doesn't seem the report has reached the nation yet."

Indeed...Dr. Kwinska's guinea pig. It had been a long time since her image on the monitor screen had moved a muscle. Her cell in the deepest part of the prison was probably filled with an unbearable rotting stench by now.

"Well, it doesn't matter," the warden replied dismissively. "Nobody's going to care who or how many die here. After all, those who are here have no way of 'serving the people' other than that. And it's not like they'll get out of here before they die...or even after they die."

"Ha ha, that's true. Oh, it's almost time for the prisoners' meals."

"Already, huh. Hey." The warden glanced at the clock on the wall, then gave orders to the surveillance chief in the room.

The chief adjusted his military cap, saluted, and sounded an alarm loud enough to echo throughout the prison. "Warden, how much should we distribute today? The consumption has been rather intense lately. At this rate, our supply will be eaten up and we won't last another month."

The amount of food that was distributed changed on a daily basis at the warden's whim. Lately, however, due to certain circumstances, several days' worth of food had been eaten through very quickly. Being as remote as they were, once they ran out of food it would take a while before they could be resupplied. When that happened the prisoners would get less food, and in the worst case, nothing at all for several days. It was a situation that would happen

when there were delays in getting supplies, but this time it could be even worse.

The chief estimated that a quarter of the prisoners might even starve to death. However...

“Give out everything that’s left today,” the warden said in an almost cruelly clear tone.

“Understood.” The chief’s lips twitched slightly, but he crisply gave the instructions.

The new guard, who nervously listened to their exchange, frowned and furrowed his brow. He almost opened his mouth for a second but hesitated. As a newcomer, he had no right to interfere with the warden’s decision.

The prison actually hadn’t been constructed just to contain the worst of the magical criminals. No matter how serious their crimes were, it wouldn’t have been worth the trouble to build such a huge structure in the Outer World. The prisoners confined in Trojan Prison were top-class convicts, and even though there was no death penalty, they would undergo a punishment more severe than death.

For those who used magic, the provisional punishment was the harshest and most severe. Special tubes were stuck into their bodies that continuously drained mana from them. The length of the procedure depended on the severity of the crime, but for prisoners on the lowest level, the pain continued for as long as they were awake. Mana was drained out of them until just before they reached their limit...then the device would automatically shut down when the mana ran out, and turn back on when they recovered, making it a gruesome punishment with unending pain.

The stored mana was overseen with strict safeguards in the control room, and was sent to the Inner World through an underground pipeline after Dr. Kwinska gave her approval. Mana was first collected and compressed, and then the pipeline would be activated several times a month in the morning hours when the Fiends were less active.

After some hesitation, the newcomer finally spoke up. “Warden...is that because of the delays in restoring the pipeline?” He had heard that the pipeline

had ruptured a few months ago and that engineers were being sent over to fix it. He'd also heard that it wasn't going well.

The warden lightly nodded in response. "The Fiends have been strangely active lately. So we need to gather and compress as much mana as possible for the next transfer. That's what the food is for. So we'll let them eat their fill of the last of the food."

"But if it runs out..."

"They'll have to fast for the time being. If something unforeseen happens as a result, it can't be helped."

"But if that happens, won't they get desperate and use their last bit of strength to riot and break out?"

"If they could do that, I would be long gone. Don't forget about the collar around their necks. Even if they tried to, they couldn't release enough mana to construct a spell. Whoever invented that was a genius," the warden explained to the new guard, while shrugging his massive shoulders. "Not even I can remove the mana-sealing collar. If you try to remove it by force, or it detects mana above its limits, it explodes. And even if they somehow deal with that and manage to escape, they would be stuck in the Outer World with only their physical abilities. Do you think they'd be able to make it back to the Inner World alive?"

The guard shook his head. It would be impossible for someone who couldn't even use basic spells to survive in the Outer World that teemed with Fiends.

History showed what had happened to those who'd attempted to oppose Fiends without magic. That was how the population and number of countries had been drastically reduced, and why they were stuck living inside the small Inner World.

"That said, the professor said that we're almost at capacity," the warden continued.

"Yes, the professor's still in the restricted area too. Should I call her back?"

"No, it's fine. I'll go down there personally. While I'm at it, I'll take a look at the gloomy faces of the prisoners with one foot in the grave."

“U-Understood. Please be careful.”

The only surveillance in the deepest part of Trojan Prison—the fifth layer—was through monitors. None of the regular guards wanted to go down there to begin with, and only a restricted few were even allowed, including the warden and Dr. Kwinska.

On the lowest layer of the prison were the worst magic criminals of the seven nations. It was truly like the bottom of hell. Just entering it could be considered extremely dangerous.

The warden’s footsteps echoed through the hallway. Right now the prisoners were eating the food he’d ordered the chief to hand out.

Normally, food was one of the biggest pleasures in prison. In Trojan Prison, the only thing that could be heard was the sound of the prisoners gorging themselves on their sustenance. But when the warden descended the spiral stairs, the prisoners stopped making any sounds whatsoever. They forced their mouths shut, even as they suffered from their mana being drained, so that they wouldn’t stand out.

At the end of the bulkhead was a hole leading down. As it opened, moist stagnant air came pouring out.

The warden ignored it and continued down. The faint stench of death grew worse the farther down he went.

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In the darkness of the bottom layer, a strange discussion was being held.

“How about you clean out that corpse already, Professor. It’s been there a long time. Well, I’m used to it by now. Frankly, I can’t even tell anymore if it still stinks,” a strangely fearless man said from his cell. In this prison he was the only one with enough composure to speak with normal-sounding emotion in his voice.



“Huh, well, it does smell a little. But it’s not that bad. I’m used to these kinds of smells, you see. Hee hee, phew...haah.” Meanwhile, standing outside the cell was a woman in a slightly stained white lab coat. She took a cigarette out of her mouth to draw a deep breath. “This kind of rotten smell puts me at ease.”

“Well, in that case... Did you find a new guinea pig to toy with, Professor?” The prisoner happily chatted away with a sneer on his face from the other side of the iron bars, which were engraved with a magic formula. The man’s voice was the only sound in the pitch-black darkness. Outside the cell was a blinking red light that showed his mana was being drained.

Since he should be experiencing unimaginable pain, his relaxed tone was inexplicable. Dr. Kwinska put the cigarette back in her mouth, as she indifferently looked towards the back of the cell.

Her dull hair was dry and without luster, and her dirty lab coat made her look rather shabby. Her eyes were also empty like she’d lost interest in everything in the world, even more so than the prisoners in the cells.

Maybe the only difference between them was who was in chains. For her, this was hardly a treasure trove of fresh material and discoveries that would inspire research. She might as well be a prisoner herself, trapped by weariness and her own decadence.

And so she would head to the bottom layer on a whim, and toy with people’s bodies to kill time. It was her little way of distracting herself. “No, I’ve gotten bored messing with guinea pigs. Not to mention that the mana tank is almost full. So today is more of a pleasure trip.”

Exhaling smoke, the professor turned her clouded eyes to the prisoner. Thanks to the lit cigarette, she could faintly see the man chained to the wall in the cell. She then casually walked up to the iron bars and looked him over.

The man laughed a little, seeming to have his own thoughts about what she’d said. “Hmph... You’re quite the villain yourself, Professor.”

“Oh, not as much as all of you. Well, the ‘waste’ from my human experiments not only reduces the number of mouths to feed, it can also serve as rat food.

Without it, they might eat up our precious food supply. But perhaps I'm the winner after all. You just kill, but I enjoy killing. It's hard to judge who is worse."

"I'll never understand why you're not in a cage," the man sarcastically said. At the same time, he could hear the sound of a small critter running in the corridor. It was unclear how they had gotten in, but Trojan Prison had a rat problem. The sound disappeared into the quiet cell next to the man's cell.

Soon after, he heard sounds of delight as the rat found some food. It was a small janitor scavenging for decaying flesh...

"By the way, little prisoner. What would you wish for when you die? Like, what would you want for your final meal?"

"Nothing. When I die, I'll die in silence."

"A good answer." The professor smoked the last of her cigarette and flicked the butt at the prisoner. For just a moment, the light of the cigarette falling onto the floor illuminated the man's rough figure. "I would choose coffee or a smoke. But I couldn't wander around with a cup, so I guess it'd be a cigarette."

That's when the sound of footsteps approached the professor from behind. "I've told you time and time again... No casual contact with the prisoners, Professor." The warden said the last part more forcefully and towered over the professor as he looked down at her. His eyes beneath his military cap were chilling.

"If it isn't the warden... Good work coming all the way down to the bottom layer like this. Oh, is it already time?"

"Closing time's not an issue. More importantly, how are the adjustments to the tanks going? I got a report that they're about to fill up."

However, the professor kept her eyes on the prisoner and her back to the warden. She also pulled out a new cigarette as she spoke in an uninterested tone. "You're going to tell me that, Gordon? Not to worry, it'll be full in another minute or so. I'm more concerned about the ruptured pipeline...!"

Suddenly, the professor's face was smashed into the wall. A flurry of red bloomed. The warden had grabbed her small head from behind and driven it into the wall.

Blood stained the wall's surface, dripping down to the floor and pooling there. Anyone could see that death had been instant. However, the warden responsible for it was as calm as could be. There was no emotion in his eyes.

"That sure was flashy, Gordon."

"It was the least bit of mercy I could show her. Even if I let her live, the freed prisoners would've beaten her to death after this. I'm sure she's thanking me with tears of joy in the afterlife." As a finishing touch, the warden half crushed her body into the wall, and closed his eyes.

The next moment, a loud alarm sounded throughout the prison, signaling an emergency. The mana storage tanks had reached their limit. The light on the panel near the cell went out. The provisional punishment had stopped.

"I've got the signal from Mekfis. What are you going to do, Dante? Are you going to help?" The warden opened his eyes, and casually questioned the man in the cell.

"One of Kurama's executives, huh... It's worth considering. Still, I would've liked to have talked with Dr. Kwinska a little more. Not only did she seem to know something about the ruptured pipeline, but...about our escape plan too."

"Oh, so she wasn't just some mad scientist. In that sense it was a bit of a waste. But do you really think that lunatic would have helped?"

"Well, I'm grateful for what you did," Dante said. "We couldn't have her watching us, after all."

"It was just in case. It's better that nobody knows the truth about the pipeline."

"The pipeline was ruptured to fill the mana tanks. A survey team will be sent out from the Inner World, but they won't make it in time before the tanks fill. The sequence of events up to the breakout is straightforward. But if there was any miscalculation, it's that the warden of Trojan Prison is also connected to Kurama. You leaked the plan, didn't you, Gordon?" A freezing glare pierced Warden Gordon through the shadows.

"Don't be so upset. I worked hard enough. And unfortunately, I only have a passing acquaintance with Kurama."

Dante shrugged at the warden's blunt answer. He shook himself, then stood up. At the same time the needles and tubes used for the provisional punishment fell off. "No matter. Still, I'd love to see the face of whoever appointed you as warden."

"It was the brainless clowns of Clevideet who sent me here. I plan on paying them a visit later."

"That sounds good. Personal grudges can be trusted. I'm curious about Kurama's intentions for taking advantage of the situation, but more importantly, now's the time to celebrate our freedom!"

Suddenly, his cell made a sound and opened.

The cell next to his did the same, and the one after that, and so on. The cries of guards who'd rushed to the scene could be heard in the distance, but were quickly drowned out by the joyous shouts of the freed prisoners.

Dante gave them a sidelong glance as he scratched his head. "That Mekfis bastard, huh. Well, I didn't need their help to escape. I already had preparations made. But if they were able to see through it, that's a little interesting. Maybe I'll have a chance to greet them before long. I was planning to return to the Inner World for a minute anyways."

"For revenge?" Warden Gordon asked.

"Oh? Yeah, that's not bad. Very fitting for an escaped convict. But while I didn't like being locked up here, I've been thinking about this and that." Dante was practically half naked due to how worn through his prison uniform was. His build was so big that it was hard to imagine he'd been stuck in prison for so long.

Glancing at the red emergency light, he walked over to the dead Dr. Kwinska who was buried into the wall. He then crouched down, scooped up some of her blood with his finger, and licked it. "Yeah...hungry or not, blood is still disgusting."

"What are you doing?" asked the warden, frowning.

"That said, it doesn't taste particularly off either... Huh. I predicted that the professor would've been mixed with a part of Mekfis, but I guess I was wrong,"

Dante muttered, giving the blood another lick as if tasting wine.

“So is it this one...?” Next, he peeked into the neighboring cell, but the only thing there was a rotting corpse hung up on chains. “Guess it was just my imagination,” he concluded, shrugging.

He found it a little confusing. The professor had shown signs of knowing the truth behind the ruptured pipeline. But he had no way of confirming that now, and he didn’t have the time to poke any further into it. “All right, it’s time we get out of here, guys.”

Several people walked into the hallway as Dante spoke. Each one a convict.

“I should make my own move,” the warden muttered. “Everything’s gone as expected so far...” He looked up.

Something came falling down, accompanied by the sound of breaking glass. Falling dozens of meters down through the stairwell and onto the floor...were several people. They were the guards who’d been in the surveillance room on the top layer.

Among them was the newcomer guard. Having crashed onto the floor, their bodies were twisted and broken, a big pool of blood forming beneath them.

“Sorry about that, newbie.” The warden had only told his inner circle about the plan. And the other guards were probably being slaughtered by prisoners venting their grudges. But it was an inevitable sacrifice.

As if he’d just remembered, the warden gave Dante a bunch of keys. “Here, use these to remove the collar.” Only the warden was allowed to carry the keys.

However, Dante only grinned and shook his head. “I’ll be fine for now. Give it to the others who just stepped out of the boxes. But the guys on the fourth layer are different... Don’t give the keys to them. It’ll be better for them to keep their collars. There will be some ways to use them.”

“Hm? What are you thinking, Dante?”

“You’ll find out eventually. And one more thing. This will sound strange, but you should obey it. Warden, you put on a collar as well.”

“...?” But he followed Dante’s instruction. He and his inner circle put on

mana-sealing collars. From there, they finally moved into action.

The Trojan Prison's closed gates were flung open at last. The number of convicts stepping into the Outer World for the first time in a long while easily exceeded one hundred. All of them were serious magical criminals who'd been practically exiled from their nations.

Even so, it wasn't all of them. Many had been crippled by the provisional punishment, and even with the cells open, could only stare at the walls and floor with vacant eyes as they muttered to themselves. The ones still able to stand were more or less physically and mentally damaged, with wobbly legs and pale faces.

However, Dante was walking around with folded arms as if he'd never received the provisional punishment. His appearance stood out among all the other notorious criminals.

"What next, Dante?" A woman called out to him in a resonant voice as she approached. She didn't flinch even when standing close to a giant like Gordon.

"First class criminal, Mir Ostayka. A renowned assassin with more than fifty kills to your name...wasn't it?" Warden Gordon said, as if confirming her identity.

The woman showed no signs of answering and only gave a bewitching smile instead. Unlike the other convicts, Mir had already stolen a guard's clothing and had boldly opened up the front to show off her cleavage. She also had what appeared to be a stolen AWR at her waist.

Dante glanced at her, then spoke to the warden. "Let her help out too. It's in exchange for breaking her out."

"You heard him. You didn't need to go through the trouble of introducing me to everyone, Warden."

Looking around, Dante saw that not only had his own allies gathered, but so had other criminals not related to him. From his fearless smile, they sensed that he was the mastermind behind the escape. That was just how Dante liked it. "I'm always looking for loyal workers. That said, I can't bring all of you... Let's hold a selection," he finished in a low voice, to which Gordon nodded.

Gordon lined up the prisoners and removed the mana-sealing collars from those that Dante signaled to him.

Eventually, a tall and lean man stepped forward from the line. Dante gave him a look that asked what he wanted. At a glance, he was nearing his sixties. He looked healthy, as if he'd kept up his training even while undergoing provisional punishment in his cell. His hair was gray, but uneven in length like he'd cut it upon his release. His dark eyes and sharp glare gave him the look of a seasoned criminal.

The man's voice was hoarse. "Mr. Dante, I'm Vector. In spite of how I look, I am from the fourth layer and quite confident in my skills. I won't forget the debt I owe you for freeing me."

Dante silently stared at the man as if appraising him.

"However, I have something I need to prioritize. I swear I will group up with you afterwards, so order me to do whatever you want."

"Yeah, I don't mind. You look pretty useful. So feel free to enjoy your revenge, or your hunt or whatever it is after refreshing yourself, Vector." Dante grinned, then looked over at the warden and Mir. "Now then, I think that's enough. Let's head for the Inner World. The Fiends might be tough, but it could be interesting depending on how they're handled, especially with these numbers."

Dante continued, now speaking to the crowd of convicts in a clear voice, "Once we reach the Inner World, you're free to run wild, or get to the cities and hide! Either way, there's no future for us unless we reach the human domain. I also have an idea as to what to do about the AWRs...so let's get going."

Thus the former prisoners began making their way towards the Inner World, with Dante in the lead. He wore a pasted-on smile. "Look, the Fiends are coming..."

A large number of humans had stepped into their territory. There was no way the Fiends would overlook such an excellent opportunity. It didn't take long for a dozen or so of them to appear, including some B-class ones. Battle soon broke out between the front of the group and the Fiends.

In the midst of the chaos, Dante and his group retreated in secret, and

watched over the battle.

“They’re putting up a pretty good fight for makeshift weapons. It was worth letting them eat up before starting everything. Is this what you were after, Dante?” The warden glanced over at Dante. He’d figured that the plan was to have the small fry clash with the Fiends first to save on strength and reach the Inner World with minimal attrition.

However, Dante smiled fearlessly. “You’ll find out soon enough.”

The inmates who were fighting at the front had had their mana-sealing collars removed and were able to put up some resistance. But they hadn’t fully recovered either mentally or physically from the provisional punishment. A minor boost to morale wasn’t enough to beat their enemy. One after another they fell to the Fiends, as blood splattered in every direction.

“Fuck! Dante, help!!!” Seeing the others around him fall, one inmate turned to Dante, seeking help.

While the Fiends feasted on their victims, Dante slowly walked up to the man, paying no heed to the gruesome scene. “You’re asking for help? Don’t be stupid. You’re destined for a Fiend’s stomach too.” He grabbed hold of the man’s neck with a single hand and easily held him up, then threw him into the mouth of a Fiend approaching from the side.

As his skull creaked between its strong jaws, the man squeezed out a final “Why would you...” before meeting his end.

Dante and his crew remained unharmed as the Fiends devoured the inmates. Even when he’d walked over to the man, the Fiends had ignored him completely.

He wore a creepy grin as the man’s skull was crushed. He pointed at his own neck as if to reveal the reason why. It was the mana-sealing collar that Dante had chosen to keep on. He’d realized an unexpected use for it... It had the special property of preventing any mana from leaking out of the body.

Fiends in the Outer World had the habit of choosing their prey based on mana. Humans inherently had mana in their blood, which was why Fiends tended to ignore animals and go for them instead. Of course, the Fiends had

normal vision, but if easy prey was right in front of them, they wouldn't bother going after something that wasn't hostile and that they didn't sense any mana coming from.

There would still be a risk that Fiends might attack anyway, but if they did, they could just remove the collar to fight properly. This was the strange plan that Dante had put into action.

"I see. What a brilliant idea. You're able to effectively use what would normally be discarded as sacrificial pawns," Warden Gordon murmured to himself, impressed by what he saw.

Mir, Vector, Dante's inner circle, and the other chosen convicts didn't seem very disturbed. Seeing the results, the ones who hadn't had their collars removed had realized that they were actually the chosen ones.

Meaning that the ones who'd been so happy about having their collars removed were the ones who weren't thinking straight. It was then that they finally realized that Dante hadn't removed his own mana-sealing collar. The fools who'd jumped at the chance were cut down one after another.

Behind Dante, there was laughter at the victims who'd taken the initiative to become bait for their sake. And as the chosen ones laughed, they understood how cold the worst of the worst in the fifth layer truly were. Even as they felt chills run down their spines, they couldn't help but laugh in the current atmosphere. At the same time, a clear hierarchy was established between them and Dante.

"Next is the repair site for the ruptured pipeline. They might have noticed not only what just happened at the prison, but that something's going on with the Fiends. So we're going to kill the entire repair team and take their equipment and food."

There was no longer anyone left who would go against Dante's chilling orders.

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At the horrific scene of the pipeline repair site, with blood splattered everywhere, Dante mentally reviewed the surrounding area.

If they were to take the shortest route to the Inner World from here, Iblis was

closest. However, the nations differed in their vigilance, including how detailed and frequent their patrols were in the Outer World. Iblis was a large nation that was active in eliminating Fiends, so Dante chose to go for Clevideet instead, which would give them a relatively smaller risk of being discovered.

But he didn't start moving that way immediately. It was hard to enter the protection of Babel's barrier without being detected by any nation. And there was no time to casually probe for a spot where it was thinner, not to mention they'd stand out with their numbers and appearance. So Dante decided to enjoy some rest while they waited for a certain person.

"Hm, judging from how you look, it seems I am a little late."

A person who had suddenly appeared out of nowhere approached Dante and spoke in an aloof tone. "Looks like things went well for you. I was having a good time myself and just accidentally happened to overdo it. Dear me..."

"Sounds like a good time to take a breather," Dante replied. He looked in the direction of the voice.

The voice belonged to a beautiful man with long hair. He wore a dazzling outfit as if attending a formal ball. The first impression was of a gentle nobleman, but considering they were in the Outer World, that would just be far too unnatural. "Ha ha, I'm glad to see you haven't changed much, Dante. I'm also relieved that Gordon seems to remember me."

Having the attention suddenly turned on him, Gordon's expression was sour. "Mekfis, don't think I've started working for you. This is just an alignment of interests. I'll be doing as I please."

"Yes, I know. And you're free to do so. You were practically another inmate yourself, after all. In that dark prison, I suppose the only difference between guard and prisoner was what side of the bars you were on. It must have bored you to death." Mekfis wore a thin smile, but suddenly closed one of his eyes and pressed the point. "But I will have you fulfill our requests. I thank you for your cooperation," he finished with a civil smile, not letting any of his thoughts show as he bowed like a gentleman.

"Congratulations on your freedom," Mekfis continued. "However, that being said..." He looked around with a deliberately troubled expression. "There are

more here than I had anticipated. At this rate we'll stand out too much, and there are some who are even dragging us down that are mixed in. Fortunately, there's no problem with your back up. A certain noble is lending a hand, you see. Of course, only a minimum amount of supplies and a safe house is being provided."

"A noble?" Dante asked. "Who is it?"

"Someone known in Alpha. Well, they want your fighting power I imagine."

"Hm, I'll take whatever help I can get, no matter who they are. So...are we reducing the numbers?"

"Yes, I think so. Ah, but there's no need for you to sully your hands, Dante. To be frank I am feeling quite on edge. After all, a precious figurine was crushed the other day, not to mention their head being blown off in such a tragic manner. And they were working so hard to create a snow landscape cold enough to freeze anyone to the core."

With a graceful smile, Mekfis volunteered himself. He looked at the convicts with an icy stare, assessing them. As eyes full of madness glared down at them, they flinched. His appearance was that of a graceful young nobleman, but the bloodlust he emitted for just a moment made the hardened criminals cower like prey facing a snake.

Mekfis made his first choice. And he didn't need a cue to execute it.

The man who was targeted sensed the bloodlust and clenched his fist in reflex, preparing for a fight. During the attack on the repair site, his collar had been temporarily removed, so he was now able to use mana. His survival instincts kicked in next, and he readied the strongest spell he could use as quickly as possible. But he was given no time for that, as his spell was dispersed.

"Ugh..." The man recoiled and his upper body stiffened. In the blink of an eye, Mekfis had closed the distance.

He gazed at the man's face in appraisal. "Is that as fast as you can react? As expected, you won't be needed."

"—! Ack?!"

In an instant, Mekfis's hand had plunged into the man's mouth and in the next second removed his jaw. Once Mekfis's fingers touched the back of his throat, his head fell off as if it had been cut in a circle.

The sudden act made the other convicts shudder and tremble. Mekfis gave them a sidelong glance and muttered, "To think you'd jump over something like this... You are all hardened criminals, aren't you? So show me how bold you can be."

Mekfis next turned to another man. The second he sensed that, the man turned around to run away.

But before he could take a single step, he'd been stopped. His head was grabbed and his neck twisted. With a *snap* , his vertebrae shattered and the skin of his neck was nearly ripped off. With the bones supporting it now broken, his head dangled by a single piece of his skin.

Seeing that, those who understood the situation reacted. Believing they would be next, they chose to strike first.

In a split second, another convict extended his palm towards Mekfis's head from behind. A ball of fire appeared at his fingertips. He was aiming to hit him directly in the face. But before the man knew it, his fireball had disappeared, and Mekfis's thin finger had gone through his ear. He'd at least managed to try and put up some resistance before his eyes rolled back and his body trembled slightly.

"You're not needed either," Mekfis said in amusement, as he pulled his bloodstained finger out of the man's ear. When he did, blood spurted out of the man's ears, nose, and mouth, and he collapsed in place. It was like his blood had boiled and shot out of his head. The large amount of red spewing into the air looked like a fountain of blood.

Mekfis went on to dispose of several more without any trouble before wiping the blood off himself with a handkerchief and strolling up to Dante. "I still feel like there are too many, but dealing with any more would be a waste."

Dante had been watching the slaughter with a warped smile, as if it was a good show to forget the boredom of prison life. "So did you find any of the blood to your liking?"

“Unfortunately not. If possible, I’d like to test the blood of that woman...as well as some of yours, Dante,” Mekfis said with a crescent-shaped smile.

“Ugh...you’re even worse than you look,” Mir spat out, and even Dante wryly smiled as he shook his head.

Mekfis’s expression returned to his normal, creepy smile, and he bowed graciously. “I look forward to the next time we meet.”

Sixty-Sixth Chapter

Where the Will Is

Small bits of happiness accumulated in everyday life. Chewing on them was fine, but he seemed to have forgotten to swallow them. Being frugal, he kept rolling them around on his tongue, soaking in their lingering taste. In order to keep savoring the taste of happiness, he might have neglected reality.

That was how Alus had thought of himself lately. But it wasn't like he had no regrets. After all, he'd gotten involved with the troublesome bonds of nobility. He let out a heavy sigh.

He didn't need Loki to tell him that getting involved with Tesfia and the others would mean eventually being caught up in it himself... He knew that. However, this time it was his own fault.

As he thought about that, he waited for Lilisha to catch up. Seeing her strangely light steps, he looked at her with a bitter expression.

"Is there something on my face?" Lilisha asked with a prim expression, her hands behind her back.

"No, I'm just annoyed that it would come to this."

"Oh, you're the one who chose to do it. It's not even a proper complaint."

"I guess I can't deny that."

"Well, let's just go for now. There's nothing to do until we talk with the young son of Womruina."

"That's true. I guess you can say something constructive sometimes."

"I think that 'sometimes' part was unnecessary."

"No, not really," Alus quipped, as he reluctantly continued walking.

At the end of the long hallway and some stairs was the parlor. Aile—the troublesome second son of the Womruina family—waited there for Alus's arrival.

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After Alus and Lilisha left the infirmary, Tesfia weakly looked down. Alus and Loki weren't the only ones who'd been feeling gratitude about their everyday life. Tesfia and Alice were the same. Tesfia also realized how precious her time with Alus and Loki had become.

That was why, when the two had disappeared without saying anything the other day, she'd felt like that daily life had faded away, even though she had more or less understood that it was due to a mission. She'd been truly relieved and happy when they returned from Vanalis.

Thinking on it, it was a rather indulgent story. The Institute was ultimately a temporary training ground for the teaching of Magicmasters. Yet she was having the time of her life. She couldn't help but look forward to each and every day.

So the shock of having that collapse at its very foundational level made her struggle to even stand up. More than anything, it reminded her that she was in no way ready for the unexpected. As depression and confusion set in, she felt an intense regret over having been so carefree up to now.

Feeling unsteady on her feet, Tesfia collapsed onto the bed. She covered her face with her arms and muttered to herself, "I'm pathetic..." As a Magicmaster, it was natural for Alus to be far ahead of her. But as a noble, she should be more resolute. That's what Alus would consider when he saw how she acted.

Yet in reality, he was constantly saving her, to the point that he was now getting involved with noble business.

Just what was she doing? Alus was always protecting her and she couldn't help him at all. It made her feel gloomy and small inside. So her true feelings happened to leak out.

"What are you saying now after all this time?" a silver-haired girl asked, tearing into Tesfia. Loki sat on a stool with her legs dangling, spinning herself

around. With how small she was, she looked like a bored child. “I have a thing or two I’d like to say myself, but this is what Sir Alus decided on. If he’d really found it troublesome he would’ve withdrawn, but he chose not to. So why don’t you think about the reason for that?”

“Does that mean he’s let his guard down a little? That we’re closer now?” Tesfia murmured, while covering her eyes.

Loki furrowed her brow in annoyance. “Listen up. At the very least you’ve been deemed worthy of that much effort! But it’s nothing more, so don’t get full of yourself. Above all, you got Sir Alus involved in your own problems. So, Ms. Tesfia...”

“Wh-What?”

Loki paused for effect as she stopped spinning, and stared directly at Tesfia with a serious look. “Please brace yourself. Now that he’s getting involved with quarrels between nobles, there’s no turning back. No matter how it turns out, you’ll have to take responsibility as one of the parties involved. Make sure you don’t forget that.”

“Yes,” Tesfia weakly answered, after a pause.

The previous events had come at her like a bolt from the blue, so she’d been taken by surprise. While she was a child of the Fable family, one of the three great noble families, she wasn’t the head of the family.

Loki didn’t know much about noble society to begin with, so getting involved or giving advice would be too much for her. However, she did know how to be prepared, and what kind of mental attitude to have when making a decision.

On the surface, this problem was one that should be resolved by the Fable and Womruina families. But more specifically, it was Tesfia’s problem. So for her to put the right foot forward, she needed to show her resolve. “Meaning...a show of will.”

“Huh? What do you mean?”

“It was nothing.” Loki masked the intent behind her words with a cold attitude. She felt that giving her any more would be helping her too much. If Alus were here, he’d probably tell her not to give Tesfia too much advice. If

Tesfia relied entirely on others, she would end up powerless and unable to move forward.

Frankly, I never imagined that Sir Alus would go that far. And to think he'd take Ms. Lilisha with him. That was the problem. Lilisha had maintained a neutral position, and Alus had gone ahead and taken her with him to meet with Aile anyway.

Lilisha was nobility and she understood how the world of nobles worked. Her presence would help the negotiations, but bringing someone with an unclear stance was a double-edged sword. With the Womruinas being one of the three great noble families, there was no guarantee that the Rimfuge or Frusevan families weren't working with them behind the scenes. If that was the case, negotiating with Aile would put Alus in a perilous situation. In other words, it was as foolish as a rider taking a horse into battle without gripping the reins.

"I'm sure there won't be any time to be carefree in the future, so get whatever rest you can to recover mentally and physically. Since you're so helpless, I'll stay here a while."

"Yeah, thank you, Loki." Tesfia felt a weight drop off her shoulders. Despite Loki's patronizing words, she could feel the kindness behind them. And when she felt it, her heart eased. The wound in her heart hadn't fully healed yet, but she could deal with the tingle that remained.

"I'm here too, Fia," Alice said, following Loki's lead.

The presence of the two girls reassured her, but Tesfia couldn't just rely on them, especially as a noble. She couldn't show any more of her disappointing side. She might have realized that a little late, but she had two people that supported her, so she should move forward by her own strength.

She closed her eyes, then moved her arms from her face and jumped out of bed.

"A-Are you okay, Fia?" Alice asked, sounding worried.

Tesfia responded with a firm nod. *I wonder why... There should be nothing but anxiety, but I feel a little relieved.* It wasn't just because Loki and Alice were by her side. It was like a small fire had been lit inside of her, keeping her core

warm from deep within her soul.

Ahh, this is Al's mana , Tesfia thought to herself. His mana wasn't still circulating in her body, but she could feel a comfortable warmth in her back where Alus had placed his hand to calm her down.

She put aside the part where he'd seen her naked. If she didn't, she wouldn't be able to focus on anything else. And just remembering how she'd been a while ago made her shudder. Self-loathing washed over her as she thought back to her attitude. She'd been depressed, brooding, and frozen in place, unable to move forward.

Tesfia couldn't forgive that weakness of hers. At the same time she was a little scared. But...things were different now. *Ah, my back is hot. No...my chest? ...Huh?* As the reason for her rapidly beating heart became clearer to her, Tesfia's cheeks turned pink. But she felt relief too, as if having confirmed the emotion. It only made her blush harder though.

She crouched down and put her hand on her chest so the other two couldn't see. Then...she became embarrassed over how late to the game she was. Even so, her heart beat wildly, to the point that she was worried the others could hear the sound.

"Are you okay, Fia? Does it hurt somewhere?"

Her best friend's consideration startled and almost pained her. "I'm okay, don't worry." Fanning her burning cheeks, she inwardly apologized to Alice over and over. "More importantly, what about you, Alice? You got hurt because of me."

"This is nothing. Also, it's not your fault, Fia!"

"What?! But..."

"Like. I. Said. It's not your fault, Fia." Alice left no room for dissent. She wouldn't let Tesfia blame herself.

"Th-Thank you."

"Jeez, you always get hung up on strange things. It's nobody's fault. In fact, let's just make sure things are resolved well and then nobody has to take

responsibility in the first place. I'll do whatever I can to help!" Alice said, admonishing her friend in the usual manner, as she showed no regard for her own injured neck.

"Yeah, thank you. I mean it." With her head cast low, as her way of repaying her friend, Tesfia focused on the words and finally returned to her usual bold self. "It might be wrong of me to say this, but...Alice, Loki, lend me your strength."

"Of course!" Alice replied.

"What? No thanks," Loki said.

"Huh?" Tesfia felt like she'd been left high and dry, her mouth amusingly wide open.

Loki, ignoring the flow of the conversation, had completely surprised them with her refusal. There was a pause before her lips trembled like she couldn't hold it in any longer, then she smiled mischievously as she continued. "Like I said, I refuse. But while I won't personally help you, I can't sit still if Sir Alus is moving. I-In other words..." She gazed at Tesfia, who was slow on the uptake, and let out a grand sigh. "In other words, I can at least accompany you a little."

"Um, meaning...I can rely on you a bit?"

"Yes, it's fine! Why do I always have to spell everything out for you?" To tell the truth, Loki's decision was based on the changes Alus had gone through. Though she was reluctant to admit it, these two were probably one of the reasons. Without them, Alus wouldn't be able to fully return to his usual everyday life. "Although it doesn't really matter how enthusiastic you are since nothing will begin until Sir Alus returns."

"Yeah, I know that. It also looks like Lilisha is helping too?"

Loki wanted to fix Tesfia's misunderstanding immediately, but she let it be for now. Both she and Alice were misjudging Lilisha. From what Loki could tell, that girl wasn't just a noble, a soldier, and Alus's observer.

After Lettie had warned her, Loki had made sure not to judge Lilisha by her appearance. In fact, it was strange for Lilisha to have been chosen to keep watch on Alus since she didn't have the ability to use magic. It was possible that

she'd just been acting, but there'd been no reason for her to pretend in that situation. She felt like there was more to it.

But she could be trusted at least to the point where her betrayal wouldn't hurt. That's what Loki had decided after seeing Lilisha's behavior and actions thus far. If she'd had harmful intentions towards Alus, she'd had plenty of opportunities to harm him directly. And if she'd tried, Loki would have put her body on the line to stop her when Alus took her along with him.

That said, her head hurt from thinking too much. Lilisha couldn't be fully trusted as an ally, which complicated the situation. And Loki had her own thoughts about the recent changes in Alus as well. "I just hope it ends peacefully."

"Wait, you mean it might not? Al made it sound like a pain, but...he was pretty calm, wasn't he?"

Loki looked exasperated at Alice's question. "That's because you two were involved. It means that Sir Alus has acknowledged you to some degree. He might complain, but he'll take on your troubles. Not to mention that Sir Alus has changed a lot lately."

Despite her tone, she felt reassured by the changes in Alus. But there were still sides to him that were unchanged. In particular, he wasn't skilled enough to please everybody, not politically and not socially. "Sir Alus might be close to his limits by now. That rude noble was clearly getting on his nerves."

"...?" Tesfia was confused.

But that was as far as Loki would talk about troubling matters. *Sir Alus is someone who has done a lot of fighting and work behind the scenes, after all.* If Aile really was annoying, it wouldn't be unthinkable for Alus to use force, even if he was fighting the Womruina family. From her point of view, if there was some bloodshed, or even in the unlikely possibility of death...the Governor-General and Alpha would do anything in their power to protect the ranked No. 1.

Even in the worst-case scenario, he would receive a greatly reduced punishment. And if Alus was unhappy about that and left the nation, no one could stop him. But it was unlikely that he would be so reckless, considering

how he'd behaved before. Loki recognized that, and decided that thinking something like that would happen was pointless in the first place.

However, the other two somehow seemed to have picked up on Loki's baseless fear. "Loki, can you not say something so scary?" Tesfia asked.

"But Fia, what if Al took Lilisha with him in case he wasn't able to restrain himself?" Alice teased her, though it was a somewhat realistic-sounding possibility. Of course, she'd meant it as a joke.

"Not you too, Alice. I-If something like that happens..." Tesfia's face turned pale with fear.

"Oh, it should be fine. Don't take it so seriously."

Tesfia glared at Alice, who scratched her cheek. Alice wore a forced smile and slid her eyes to the side to look at someone.

Loki sighed. "I was the one to bring it up in the first place, but it's unlikely. Well, if Sir Alus actually does something, it will be the other party's fault for pushing him that far."

Although if he could get away with anything, Alus probably wouldn't have quietly accepted everything that had happened at the Institute. But in any event, he wasn't an easy card to control, not for the Governor-General, the ruler, or anyone else. Loki concluded that Alus had taken Lilisha with him to find a way to settle things peacefully. "Anyway, don't waste your time worrying over nothing. And it's about time you got some rest, Ms. Tesfia."

"Y-Yeah, okay..." But Tesfia struggled with sitting still and doing nothing. She wasn't even sure what to do anymore. If she tried to think about what could happen and how to deal with it, there would be no end to it.

However, her top priority was the Womruina family's movements. As the Fables were one of the three great noble families, Frose had often taken her when she was a child to interact with the Womruina family.

However, she had long forgotten about it. Or rather...tried not to remember. When she touched on that part of her past, she felt a sharp pain in her heart. At the same time, a throbbing headache hit her, and she gasped. Her body tensed up, and she groaned as she pressed down on her temples. *Why...? I can't*

remember anything.

Suddenly, there was a loud shattering sound that blew through the infirmary. It came from the main building Alus and Lilisha had gone to. One could guess what had happened from the distinctive sound. The window must have been broken and thrown up countless shards that had rained down onto the ground.

The three girls instinctively flinched. Once the sound stopped, they looked at each other with twitching cheeks.

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A few minutes earlier...

Alus casually walked towards the Institute's parlor, which seemed strangely far away.

It was unclear what Lilisha was thinking—or perhaps she was just being irresponsible—but she looked like she was enjoying herself, while Alus couldn't hide his lack of enthusiasm. That was mostly because he was aware that he was doing something out of character for him.

I wonder if I can justify this bothersome situation somehow. I'd like to at least gain some kind of advantage for myself. As to being out of character, he felt as though he'd let his emotions get the better of him, and even had some embarrassment mixed in.

On the way, Lilisha had given him a summary of the Womruina family, but he'd only responded half-heartedly as they walked down the hall. He was even starting to feel nostalgic for the hustle and bustle of the campus festival.

Alus felt his mental strength being sapped from the seemingly never-ending troubles coming his way. Although this time, as Lilisha had pointed out with a smug look, it was a situation he had created out of his own volition. So no matter how much he tried to justify it, it wasn't convincing.

"So what are you going to do? The time for resolving it peacefully has already passed."

Alus looked a little bitter at Lilisha's question. Normally, Tesfia should have taken the matter into her own hands. That would've been better for her sake

and for his. But he'd easily understood that the situation was beyond anything she could handle.

Not to mention that Aile had something dangerous about him. It was probably his unusually skilled way of controlling an opponent's mind and draining them of their energy. Alus had clearly felt it when he'd confronted him.

When it came to manipulating others, the ruler, the Governor-General, and Sisty came to mind, but Aile was doing something different. It was something born of a distorted and malicious mentality. Aile believed it was normal for those above to look down on those below. It was the arrogance of nobles taken as far as it could be.

That's why Alus had given him the cold shoulder. But this time Tesfia was involved. She was exceedingly simple for nobility, so Aile was practically her natural enemy. In fact, just meeting with Aile had cut away at her mental resistance.

So it was far too early for her to be able to deal with him. If she lost, Tesfia would have to abandon the way of the Magicmaster...everything she'd worked for thus far. And it wouldn't even have been by her own choice. It would've been the result of getting manipulated and pushed into a corner, which made it completely unreasonable.

If it had been what the Fable family wanted, then Alus wouldn't have gotten involved. But from what he'd heard, it seemed the Womruinas were one-sidedly pushing for it. They believed they could do whatever they wanted by using their influence, so this event was like the very embodiment of the arrogance of nobility that Alus hated. It had touched on his anger, meaning that it had gone beyond what he could allow.

So now I'm pretending to be a hero of justice. It's not even a funny joke...

Alus recalled his feelings... How he'd cut away everything unnecessary including compassion and efforts expended on others' behalf. Everything but himself was inconsequential...or it should have been.

So did that mean that he'd been sympathizing more with Tesfia and Alice because of the time he'd spent teaching them? No, he needed to analyze and understand the situation correctly. *In terms of effort, I've actually put in a lot of*

work. So having some hotshot noble ruin that would be the worst.

Moreover, their growth had been spectacular. Their potential had far surpassed what Alus had first assumed it to be. With the right training, they would be able to make remarkable contributions upon their graduation.

He'd seen glimpses of it at the Seven Nations Friendship Magical Tournament. Before then, Alus's impression of them had been "not mediocre." But lately he'd started to enjoy watching them grow.

Although that would've been unbelievable to his former self. Restricting his comfort zone to the Institute would have been unthinkable before, when he'd only known the battlefield. So even if it was unproductive, his peaceful Institute life had been more comfortable than he'd thought.

Loki was here, as were Tesfia and Alice, and even Felinella. And while her allegiance remained unknown, Lilisha added some spice to his daily life as well. Even moderate changes to his peaceful life felt refreshing now, when in the past he would have been bored out of his mind.

Of course, he hadn't asked any of them to get involved at the start. It had just happened in the flow of things. And now he was reluctant to let it go. It had become worth something to him.

Alus scratched the back of his neck, as if getting himself fired up. "So she wants to become a first-rate Magicmaster, huh..." He thought back to what Tesfia had said.

He'd just been saying it to himself, but Lilisha answered him anyway. "But first rate? That's such a vague goal." She made it sound like she was ridiculing Tesfia, but her tone of voice revealed more complex emotions.

It might be Tesfia's ideal, but it was like playing pretend, or looking up to heroes and princesses. Novice Magicmasters would eventually become soldiers. And ideals couldn't guarantee anything in the Outer World where harsh reality ruled and the strong feasted on the weak.

While Lilisha wasn't the same as Alus, he could sense that she wasn't just some naive and sheltered noble. So to her, Tesfia's purity seemed childish, as if she was dazzled by the ideal.

Then again...Alus could kind of understand it. “Yes, there’s still plenty of stuff left to fill her empty head with.”

Alus’s bitter expression had changed to a calm one, as if he’d resolved something inside. A first-rate Magicmaster... Like Lilisha said, it was a very vague goal. Tesfia had used the expression because she wasn’t satisfied with her own strength. The path and its nature were just as vague as her words.

But he could hear her inner voice speaking. She wanted to become much stronger. She greedily desired strength, and she was willing to use that strength for the right reasons.

She probably already knew that strength was more than just mastering magic, and now Tesfia was trying to change even more. Her mind and body were slowly maturing. It was likely that she had a vague awareness of it herself.

That was why she’d looked at him with earnest eyes. She couldn’t leave this place of learning yet. It was because Alus accepted her sincerity that he was walking forward with this, even though he knew it was troublesome.

Finally, he reached the first step of the staircase that would eventually lead him to a strange and intertwined destiny. At the top of the main building was an area where students were the least likely to go. The only things there were the principal’s office and other management offices.

Of course, with a floor that size, there were also rooms for visitors. Moreover, all of the rooms had countersurveillance measures and were spaced farther apart than was necessary. The white wallpaper in the rooms seemed to glow by itself, which would leave most students awestruck. In a way, it was like a sanctuary that was intimidating to them. But it was nothing to Alus.

When Alus and Lilisha arrived, he could sense the presence of people in the parlor. A plate next to the door identified it as the “Number 1” room. Also, the fact that the room’s light was on told Alus that this was where their uninvited guest was.

He’d reached for the door knob when the door opened from the inside, revealing a woman. “I didn’t think the principal would be here...”

Sisty turned to Lilisha first, as if to put him in his place. Her gaze was tired and

the way she hunched over made her look older. She then looked at Alus and sighed, saying in a hushed but insistent tone, “Not you again. You troublemaker!”

Even though he understood the circumstances, it was still a little painful for Alus to hear. He shrugged and tried to come up with an excuse. “Well, it’s the Fable family’s trouble this time. And aren’t you the one who told me to teach Fia? So it’s not unnatural for me to get caught up in her problems.”

“Ugh, that’s... No, just what are you talking about?”

“I was only acting in good faith. And there hasn’t been any actual problem yet.”

“There’s been more than enough already! This is an incident! The Womruinas are one of the three great noble families, do you understand that?!”

“Of course.”

“I explained that part to Alus myself,” Lilisha put in, acting like a teacher’s pet.

“Even if you told him, I don’t think it meant anything to him...but thank you, Ms. Lilisha. I’d like to avoid any more trouble... I already have my hands full...” Realizing it was pointless to continue, Sisty cradled her head in an exaggerated manner and took a deep breath as she leaned against a nearby wall. She was being a little dramatic, but it did look like things had taken a toll on her mental state.

Seeing that, Alus awkwardly scratched his cheek. “It probably won’t cause any problems for the Institute. Besides, you wouldn’t want a student to leave against her will either, would you?”

“Well, no,” Sisty said with a sullen expression. She must have felt a sense of conflict between her teacher position and her position as director of the Institute. However... “Are you certain you can finish this without leaving any possibilities for future trouble?” She grabbed Alus’s shoulders and stared at him with a serious expression.

“You’re overreacting.”

“No, make sure you remember this...the Womruina family is just that

powerful. Even you would do best to be careful."

"Even so..."

"If you take it somewhere else, I will do whatever I can to help."

"Thank you. Then I won't hesitate to rely on you," Alus replied.

"What! At least hesitate a little...okay?"

"And to think you were one of the Three Pillars."

"I have my position to consider. I'm just a hired employee, a public servant. At this point, if things get worse, there's nothing that I can do on my own. But that doesn't mean that I want Ms. Tesfia to leave the Institute. I can't relax for even a second..."

"Oh, just hearing that is a relief," Alus said with a smirk.

Sisty puffed up her cheeks. "Don't you dare tease me! But knowing you, you probably have some sort of plan in mind. So I'm just not going to worry about it," she sarcastically concluded. She slapped Alus on the back. "Apparently, he just wants to speak with you, Alus. I'm sure that he'll let Ms. Lilisha sit in though. I won't be present myself, so Ms. Lilisha, try to cover for Alus. He hates nobles, you see."

"Yes, I am aware of that, ma'am." Lilisha smiled, again the honor student.

Feeling there was no use in talking any further, Alus put his hand on the knob before turning around. "Sorry, but I don't have any plans or cards up my sleeve. I'll be stepping onto the battlefield empty-handed for the first time in a while. Not that I'm going to give any ground."

Having shown his resolve, Alus stepped through the door with Lilisha and closed it on a dumbfounded Sisty, as they went inside to meet the dangerous visitor.

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After the door closed, Sisty made her way to her office, but then decided to turn around. Oddly enough, her steps had a bounce to them despite her previous attitude.

She knew it was inappropriate considering the situation, but even so, she couldn't stop her face from relaxing into a small smile. "Well, Alus, it looks like you really did change. I could hardly believe my ears when Berwick told me. I wonder why it's so exciting to see a child grow up."

She thought back to when she'd questioned Berwick about Lilisha's background. At that time, Berwick had also mentioned that Alus had told Loki about his past. It might look like a small thing to an outsider, but for Alus it was a big step forward. Seeing the change in him, Sisty felt like she'd achieved her purpose as an educator. It wouldn't resolve the present problem, but it was still something to rejoice over.

A bright mood overcame her, like she'd returned to active duty. Or perhaps...like she'd become younger in a way.

Although he'd never admit it, Alus had given up calculations and prospects of the future in an attempt to do what he felt was right. And his motivation had had to do with his relationship with a fellow classmate. They had formed a kind of bond.

Oh, how nice it is to be young. Alus had said that for once he didn't have any cards up his sleeve. It wasn't much different from being reckless. Of course, the rashness of youth probably played a part in it. Just this once though, Sisty envied that youth. She wanted to touch it and be inspired.

Maybe being a little stupid wasn't all that bad. In this day and age, there were very few who could act on what they felt was right, instead of holding themselves back with thoughts of self-preservation and self-interest.

What's this? Did maternal instincts somehow awaken in me? I can already imagine my peers making fun of me. Sisty narrowed her eyes and tried to restrain herself. She could understand why Lettie was so concerned about Alus. The more difficult the child, the more adorable they were.

The edges of Sisty's lips curled up into a slight smile as she walked. "Maybe I should cut loose a little." She mischievously held a finger to her lips.

However, it was only for a few seconds. After a slight tilt of her head, her expression returned to normal, to that of the Institute's mature, cautious, and farsighted principal. But who could blame her? That was the insurmountable

gap between someone truly young and an adult who had already grown old.

“If something does happen, I’m sure Berwick will get involved. He does owe me quite a bit. But what to do if the Womruina family’s donations dry up...?”

Frankly, the donations from the Womruinas were so much that the Institute couldn’t afford to overlook them, though the reason they accepted them was because they were nobles. And the Womruinas were related to the current ruler, Cicelnia, which would make refusing them even more difficult. “Well, if it happens, it might be a good opportunity.”

Muttering to herself, Sisty made up her mind, and walked back to the principal’s office with light steps.

Sixty-Seventh Chapter

Coiling Wiles

Inside, the parlor was surprisingly plain. It was exceedingly simple with nothing that really left an impression. It was equipped with the minimum of furnishings: sofas, a heater, a table with some tableware, and nothing more. Since these rooms were also where they accepted student applications, perhaps this was intentional so as not to intimidate or overwhelm the students.

In this rather uninteresting room was Aile, not looking particularly irritated or arrogant at the moment, as he gazed at Alus and Lilisha. A pair of sofas stood in the center of the room with a frosted glass table between them.

Aile sat in the middle of his sofa. He leaned back and smiled as he spoke. “I’m relieved to see that you didn’t stand me up.”

Alus gave him a scathing look as if asking him whose fault this was. “Even if I wanted to, there’s nowhere to hide here. It’s a pain, but if you stay at the Institute, it’s only going to cause the principal more anxiety. And that would become even more bothersome for me,” he added, glancing at the two attendants behind Aile.

If Alus had knocked before, one of them—most likely the female attendant Cilcila—would have opened the door for him. She had a similar presence to the Fable butler, Selva. She was clearly accustomed to serving and attending.

Meanwhile, the male wore an attendant’s outfit. He was good-looking and gave off a rugged impression. His presence was strong as if he’d seen countless battles. At Alus’s estimating gaze, the man cast his eyes down.

“That reminds me. I believe introductions are in order before we begin.” Aile looked behind himself and used a hand to indicate the woman. “This is my personal attendant, Cilcila Cikolen. She also works as my bodyguard.”

As expected. Alus nodded. He'd anticipated that the two would be able to fight as well.

The introduced party put her hand to her chest and politely bowed with a refined and elegant motion. Alus imagined she'd repeated the gesture thousands of times. *Based on her movements, she's definitely skilled. But why are talents like these gathered around someone like this?*

Of course, it was proof of the Womruina family's great power. They weren't just rich and influential, but the number and quality of their soldiers was far above the rest. The two present here were probably among the top ones.

When the woman spoke, her voice was as clear as a bell. "Pardon my late greetings, Sir Alus. Considering the circumstances, I hope you can forgive me. This was a rather sudden proposal by Master Aile, you see..."

"That's enough," Alus said bluntly, raising his hand to stop her. There was no point in accepting a token apology. He had no use for the lengthy preambles that nobility enjoyed.

"You mean it's my fault? You don't need to be so prickly, Cilcila." Aile smiled wryly.

But Cilcila's expression remained unchanged. "As somebody who is forced to accompany Master Aile's every whim, there is no end to my struggles."

"I'm afraid that can't be helped. That's just who I am. Even so, I am grateful for your continued loyalty."

"As you please." Cilcila repeated her usual phrase in a formal tone.

With an awkward expression, as if he'd just remembered, Aile pointed to the other attendant. "Next is this man... Well, he's purely a bodyguard. He may be an attendant like Cilcila, but the tea he makes is just undrinkable."

"Excuse me, Master Aile. I don't believe I will get another chance to brew tea," the man calmly replied. He took a half step forward and gave Alus a probing look. "Sir Alus Reigin, I have heard the rumors. It is an honor to take part in an audience with you. Please refer to me simply as Orneus. I am pleased to make your acquaintance."

“Likewise,” Alus said after a pause. The man’s words were polite, but he didn’t sense any sort of respect. If anything, his assessing stare left more of an impression. He nodded back to Orneus, thinking to himself, *Just Orneus, huh. I wonder why he’s not giving his last name.*

Technically, Alus had the higher position here, so proper manners would dictate that Orneus give his full name. Either he didn’t have a last name to give or he had a reason for not revealing it.

For the time being, Alus sat down on the sofa, sensing Lilisha moving to stand behind him. Instead of sitting down like Alus and Aile, she stood in recognition of her position. She was showing modesty, but also that she had no intentions of interfering with their discussion. As nobility, she understood manners and customs far better than Alus, and she’d concluded that getting involved in a problem between the Fables and the Womruinas was a bad idea. In any case, her main role was to be a witness to the meeting.

Now then. Alus looked to Aile hoping they could begin, but Aile took it as criticism of Orneus’s rude behavior. He smiled again. “I do apologize. Orneus can be a bit uptight.”

The way Aile jested about it grated on Alus’s nerves. Orneus’s attitude was actually more honest and sincere than that. There wasn’t sincerity or anything like it in Aile’s words. In the end, it was all just a guise. He wasn’t letting a single thing show in his expression, which was why Alus felt that everything Aile did was fake and suspicious. His perfect poker face made it seem like Alus wasn’t dealing with a human, but some kind of alien being. “I’m not really angry. But I don’t think we need to introduce ourselves, including Lilisha.”

“Of course. There’s nobody here who doesn’t know who you are. But...Ms. Lilisha, was it? She does concern me. More than anything, I don’t understand her presence here. If the Rimfuge family gets involved, it won’t be a problem between two families anymore, will it? And does the head of the Rimfuge family know about this?”

Lilisha had expected as much. With the other party being a member of one of the three great noble families, he would know where she was weak. So she gave him the answer she’d already prepared. “The head of the family doesn’t

know.”

“So you’re doing this on your own accord.”

“Yes, but I don’t believe it will be a problem. I might not be from one of the three great noble families, but I do bear the names of both Rimfuge and Frusevan. I am also accompanying Alus at the wish of the military. Seeing how you are being very rough with a Single Digit Magicmaster, please just consider me as a neutral third party.”

“Ah, I see. Then there shouldn’t be any problem. Governor-General Berwick does seem to have a sharp nose, but this is fine. If anything, your presence should make this go smoother.”

“Thank you very much.”

Aile calmly raised his hand. Tea must’ve been prepared at some point, as Cilcila wordlessly placed steaming cups down on the table. “It’s not the cheap stuff you get here. We always bring this with us.”

Since Aile seemed to be recommending it, Alus decided to try it. The tea was made from high quality leaves with a mellow fragrance that tickled the nose. But the fragrance alone wasn’t enough to give it a passing grade. Thanks to Loki preparing tea on a daily basis, his tongue had become rather refined. In his opinion, tea just being expensive wasn’t enough... However...

“These tea leaves come from the fields in the Urugaru region of northern Halcapdia. It’s not a blend, but a pure product with a rich aroma,” Cilcila fluidly explained.

Alus took a sip, then immediately put the cup back on the saucer and let out a sigh of relief. “To think it could be this different...” It tasted just as great as it smelled.

“It is brewed at the right temperature and there’s a trick to pouring it...but with leaves this good, I can guarantee the taste.” Cilcila’s voice was monotone, but there was a hint of pride and joy in her words. She was confident when it came to tea.

“The world of tea is pretty deep.”

“Yes, I personally picked these leaves out. But that doesn’t mean that the leaves are everything. Being able to brew good tea with poorer quality leaves is also a matter of skill. That’s another major point worth bearing in mind—”

“R-Right.”

Cilcila was getting worked up and continuing on, overpowering Alus.

“Okay, I believe that’s enough, Cilcila,” an exasperated Aile intervened. “I’m sorry about that. When it comes to tea, she just doesn’t know when to stop. After all, she’s... What was it again?” He glanced at Cilcila.

“A tea master!”

“Right, that’s it. She has acquired almost all the qualifications when it comes to tea. In any event, her enthusiasm knows no bounds.”

“I’m also a certified tea advisor, so if there’s something you don’t know, I can answer any questions you have.”

His first impression of Cilcila had been that she was quiet, but Alus had been shown an unexpected side to her. But she did seem to realize by now that she should hold back from going on any further.

Alus had come in with a sense of resolve, but he couldn’t help but feel that he’d been tripped up at the start. Lilisha felt the same. An awkward mood filled the parlor.

Aile clapped his hands, as if signaling they were starting over. “Let us get back to the topic at hand.”

Alus felt he’d gotten caught up in Aile’s pace and kept a sharp gaze on his face, not intending to give up anything.

“Sir Alus, Alpha’s greatest Magicmaster. I’ve come to greet you personally...although it does concern Fia too. From what I’ve discovered, it seems you’ve been teaching her directly. Which is why I felt the need to discuss her future with you.”

However, Aile’s tone of voice and demeanor made it clear that it was just a formality to him. And he had no intention of hiding it. “So to get to the point, I will be taking Fia. I assume you have no complaints.”

Alus crossed his legs and replied plainly. “Sorry, but that’s not going to happen. I won’t let it.”

“Hmm, to be honest, I didn’t expect that answer. This was a miscalculation. I was sure you wouldn’t want to get involved in these kinds of problems. Or perhaps you’ve taken a liking to Fia?” Even as he spoke, the soft expression on Aile’s face didn’t change. It was doubtful that Alus’s behavior had really been unexpected.

“Taken a liking to, huh... Well, you can interpret it that way.” By which Alus meant that he’d acknowledged Tesfia’s talents and potential. But when he flashed an insolent smile at Aile, the gentle expression disappeared from Aile’s face and he raised an eyebrow.

Oh, looks like you do have a human side too , Alus sarcastically thought.

Tesfia’s will aside, to Aile it must’ve felt like a ripe fruit meant to fall into his hands had gotten snatched away in midair. Anyone getting in his way was something that couldn’t be overlooked. “I assume you are aware that by saying that, you will get caught up in the middle of this.”

Behind Alus, Lilisha twitched a little, but he ignored her. She must have wanted to warn him about the change in Aile’s behavior, though Alus was aware of it as well. “Of course.”

“May I ask what drives you to go that far? The Alus Reigin I’ve heard about isn’t the kind of person to get deeply involved with these kinds of worldly matters. I’ve also heard that you hate noble society so much that you turned down any talk of a peerage being conferred.”

“You’ve done your homework. I hate to admit that you’re on the mark, but I figured I’d take the opportunity to teach a naive young boy a few things. To be frank, no one would accept having someone else decide the future of the pupil they’ve taken the time to train.”

Upon being told that, Aile unexpectedly put his hand on his chin as if he’d never heard of such a reaction before.

“Not to mention that it directly concerns my interests. In other words, I’ve spent time on her so that I can take it easier in the future.” Aile had practically

invaded Alus's territory. Alus was intervening with the intention of not going along with Aile's reasoning.

The edges of Alus's lips curled up into a smile. "But if you were to show me something embarrassing like you and Fia being in love with each other, or a bold proposal that Fia would accept, not even I would be wild enough to interfere."

"Ha ha, that would be difficult. We're not exactly engaged because of love." Aile didn't hesitate to reveal he had no feelings for Tesfia. And it wasn't out of ill will either. It was just how nobility worked.

Lilisha seemed to agree and had no objections to this.

"Even so, she is quite the beauty... I see, it seems my research into you was a little lacking. So what do you intend to do, Sir Alus? Perhaps you will kill me with one of those techniques you use behind the scenes?" Aile calmly asked, with an innocent smile.

So...he even knows about my dirty work. Alus was a little annoyed at the Womruinas' outstanding investigative abilities. He had another job, that of eliminating Kurama executives and other serious criminals and terrorists. This was all under direct orders from the Governor-General and was supposed to be top secret. If they knew about that, then the Womruinas had a deep connection to the military, similar to that of the Governor-General.

But Alus couldn't let anything show. So he simply replied, "No, I won't do anything on my end. How I act depends entirely on you. As nobility, I'm sure you understand."

A significant change came over Aile's expression for the first time. The edges of his lips went down and any gentleness disappeared from his face, leaving only a blank look like a mask. "Then I'd like you to understand that the Womruinas are not nobility, but royalty. You're the one who needs to steel his resolve, Alus. Any more than this will cut down your lifespan. Knowing that, are you prepared to fight a family that once was king? There is nothing in this for you."

"Resolve? Sorry, but I've never made a decision without resolve in my life. So let me tell you this. You are not the one who decides whether my choice will

benefit me in the future. And I can't stand having my efforts be wasted, especially this time. And finally, I couldn't care less if you're nobility or royalty."

Aile stared at Alus in bewilderment. His lips twisted up in a crescent-shaped smile. "That's right, you don't even obey the ruler's orders. But this is different. If you get involved in this, you will have to follow the rules of nobility."

Alus had come well aware of that. He remained calm, but Aile continued to argue. "My engagement to Fia is formally promised in writing and signed by both families. Do you understand what that means?"

That was one of the major points of concern that had been mentioned before, and it was the basis of what Aile was claiming. Of course, he hadn't produced the so-called writing, so it was possible that it was just a bluff. Even so, it was a strong card to play.

As proof of that, Lilisha's expression turned a little severe. But that was as far as they would go with it. From here on, they would negotiate rather than intimidate and threaten each other.

"So, you mean you have a certificate then?" Lilisha asked in Alus's stead.

"If not, I wouldn't have come." As expected, there was no sign that Aile was bluffing. He continued with an unruffled expression. "If Fia becomes mine, the Fable and Womruina families will eventually become one... The Fable family will be absorbed into the Womruinas and a glorious future will await both of them."

"...!" Lilisha looked shocked. A simple marriage was one thing, but it was a completely different matter if they were going to unite. The head of the Fable family, Frose, would never allow it, but the Womruinas seemed to be scheming behind the scenes. It appeared that Aile was willing to go to any lengths to accomplish what he wanted. Lilisha had been somewhat calm to this point, albeit a bit nervous, but now her expression had changed.

Although Alus could sense the atmosphere had changed, he wasn't familiar enough with how nobility worked, so he confirmed it with Lilisha. "Lilisha, what does this mean for our talks going forward?"

Lilisha presented a complicated expression at his question. "There are no special rules of negotiation. Just about anything can be used as a bargaining

chip to ensure a successful negotiation. But...” She hesitated to continue. With Aile’s intentions now clear, it was no longer just a matter of Tesfia’s marriage. It concerned the political balance of Alpha itself.

Two of the three great noble families might merge. If the political marriage took place, it would have a tremendous impact on the balance of power in the noble world. And as a result, the Womruinas would become more powerful than ever.

When Lilisha thought of that, she was glad she came. Nobility and politics were inseparably connected, and if the Womruinas gained even more power, their influence would start to rival the ruler’s influence.

The position of ruler was typically hereditary, but it reflected the will of the people to a degree. Furthermore, they couldn’t ignore the nobility and high-ranking bureaucrats. Meaning that if the Womruinas saw Cicelnia as a problem, they had ways of pulling her down from her position. The senate—where nobility and bureaucrats gathered—would be key for such moves. By absorbing the Fable family, they could use their influence as a foothold to completely turn the situation in their favor.

Naturally, such events would lead to chaos, opposition, and conflict. Lilisha felt a chill run down her spine as she imagined a terrifying future. *The Womruinas originate from the royal bloodline. But so far they’ve just been satisfied with being one of the three great noble families, showing no signs of expanding on their power. So why would they suddenly change? Either way, they must have been preparing for this for a long time. If they’re not careful, they might even overthrow Alpha itself. Forcefully overthrowing the state is a crime, but by upsetting the balance of power, it would be possible to do it legally.*

As if to confirm Lilisha’s unease, Aile lifted his hand to signal Cilcila. She immediately pulled out a small rectangular box from her pocket and opened it. Inside was a thick piece of parchment, rolled up and tied with a golden thread. “This is the original deed of engagement between the two families.”

The document was unfurled and placed on the table, and Lilisha moved faster than Alus to confirm its authenticity. Alus glanced at her from the side, and saw

visible frustration on her face. “Is it real, Lilisha?”

“If it was fake, that would be forgery of official documents and a major crime. I can’t tell if the signatures from both families are real, but...it bears the seal of the senate. Proof that they’ve witnessed and approved it.” Lilisha stared intensely at the parchment, as if to burn a hole in it, but she could see no flaws. It even had the signature of a guarantor.

Lieutenant General Morwald is the guarantor?! A powerful noble with a high position in the military had even signed it. He was the leader of a faction that opposed the current military system, and was also Berwick’s political opponent.

Lilisha was at a loss for words. The bad feeling she’d had before was starting to feel very real. The Womruinas’ preparations also made it seem like it was too late to stop it. It was clear that everything had been planned well in advance. So the completeness of the deed made sense. While an engagement between noble families was a serious deal, it usually didn’t require such a thorough deed.

For the time being, Lilisha returned to her original position. “I’ve confirmed other pieces of proof before. So it appears to be authentic.”

“I see,” Alus said.

However, both Alus and Lilisha had realized something about the head of the Fable family, Frose Fable. Specifically, with such a detailed deed in place, it made no sense for her to want to go back on her daughter’s engagement. In other words, that meant that this deed was...

While it was only speculation, the two came to the same conclusion: *It’s a deception.* There must be a dirty trick in play. They also needed to consider the hypnotic suggestion that Aile had planted in Tesfia. Alus had sensed slight mana traces inside her. Not to mention that Aile probably wouldn’t hesitate to use such means.

But the irrefutable fact was that the document before them was legally valid. That meant that there was next to nothing that Alus or Lilisha could do.

When Cilcila rolled up the document and placed it back into the box, Lilisha had yet another bad feeling. Like the political world, the military world was built on a delicate balance between noble families. The Governor-General had

considerable skills to be able to maintain such a balance, but Frose Fable's and Vizaist Socalent's assistance was also a great help.

Aile and the Womruina family were looking to change the current system. If that happened, there would no doubt be a major upheaval in Alpha. With this much evidence their aim became transparent. This was no mere quarrel between two of the great noble families. The Womruinas' ambition was clear as day. They were practically staging a rebellion against Alpha.

What was even more troubling was that it appeared to involve the top brass in the military and political spheres as well. The ruler was the symbol of Alpha and was sometimes even referred to as a living god. Alpha becoming a major nation was all thanks to the Arlzeit family to begin with, and to turn on them was simply foolish.

Lilisha's expression darkened as she cursed inwardly. *Traitor!* She was shaken as she predicted a terrible future. And that, combined with the bad feeling that she'd had, meant that what happened behind the scenes here was of the utmost importance. Since Alus didn't even know the rules of nobility, that made things even harder for him to resolve. "We will need to confirm that the deed is indeed genuine first. Not to mention that the Fable family has no representative present. So we can't grant your request at this time." She desperately made her point in Alus's stead, doing what she could to try to change the disadvantageous flow, even though it was likely to fail.

"I don't believe its credibility can be questioned, although I can accept that you can't acknowledge it that easily. However, I have an alternative suggestion. In other words, let's make a deal." Aile paused for a moment, then smiled. "I want you, Alus."

"Wha—?!" Lilisha was astonished, and looked at Alus.

"I refuse." Alus shot down the offer without hesitation.

Lilisha was relieved to hear that, but she was exasperated by Aile's audacity. He was acting like a big shot on a different level from the engagement. Alus siding with the Womruinas would seriously upset the power balance. If that happened, the engagement itself would be completely pointless. "That's far too unrelated to this matter!" she exclaimed. "And Singles are a force to be

reckoned with in the military! It's just out of the question, don't you understand that?"

Aile played stupid at her overbearing words. "Is it? I'm not the head of the family yet, so I was just speaking off the top of my head. Besides, I merely offered another idea, so that's quite the attitude to take. Also, Singles being under the direct control of the Governor-General is just a matter of convention. There aren't any laws that dictate the practice. And above all, you can't call Sir Alus an official soldier anymore. He's a student at the Institute. If anything, that's a bigger problem."

"...!" Lilisha fell silent, as Aile's point was right on the mark. Alus was technically still a soldier, but his current circumstances and position were vague and there were some difficulties involved. It was a special exception made in acknowledgment of Alus's extraordinary powers. She more or less abandoned her neutral position to make her point. "Are you planning on making an enemy of the military?" She practically glared at Aile.

"That's not my intent at all. And it was Sir Alus who asked to be discharged from the military due to the expiration of his service, wasn't it? The military forced him to stay, I hear. Wouldn't you say that's a problematic attitude to take towards a hero who staked his life to serve the nation?"

As Lilisha was rendered speechless again, Aile pressed his advantage. "You should consider your own position here. I'm sure your brother has told you about your 'family business.'"

"?! What are you..." Lilisha's voice trembled slightly.

Aile turned to Alus. "By the way, do you happen to know what kind of work the Rimfuge family does behind the scenes, Sir Alus?"

"What are you talking about?" Alus didn't really have any interest in it, but answered anyway.

"Hmm. Perhaps you'll understand if I mention Aferka? They're well known in that line of work... The executive unit that works directly under the ruler. Although it's been some time since the ruler kept a hand on their reins, they're still quite active."

Aile then turned to Lilisha. “The current head of Aferka is your brother. How does he see you? Perhaps he has the same appraisal of you as that mediocre Gill? And how did that turn out?”

He was merely talking, but Lilisha’s condition changed as more blood drained from her face with each word. She held herself while her shoulders trembled.

“Perhaps you are going to get discarded too?” Aile said, as a finishing blow.

Lilisha’s pupils dilated and she staggered, as Aile gave her a chillingly cold smile. The blade of words that had hurt Tesfia now chipped away at Lilisha’s spirit as well.

Aile had skillfully made use of the Womruinas’ information network to strike at her vital points. In addition, his words conveyed mana that disrupted and bound Lilisha’s mind. Lilisha was surprisingly fragile. “Just like your incompetent brother, you’ve been shoved into the military as a disposable pawn, haven’t you? How pathetic.”

Lilisha’s knees finally buckled, but before she could collapse, a hand reached out to her. Alus stopped Aile with a cold tone. “Hey, leave it at that. She’s here as a witness and I’m the one who brought her. So don’t get too full of yourself.” His voice was low but conveyed power. This opponent wasn’t just cunning; his methods and attitude were repulsive. And he wouldn’t stand for it. It already felt like it was pointless to negotiate.



“It was just starting to get interesting too,” Aile replied nonchalantly. “I’m sure you would benefit from hearing it.”

“No, I have nothing more to listen to... Are you ready to protect your master?” The latter was directed not to Aile, but his two attendants.

Alus raised a hand and cracked his joints. Without hesitation, Cilcila stepped in front of Aile and Orneus kicked up the table between Aile and Alus.

As the sound of breaking glass rang out, a surging wave of Alus’s mana filled the room.

Sensing the danger, Orneus tried to move the heavy table, but was unable to before it was swallowed up in a powerful shock wave of mana that assaulted Aile. A thick wall of mana had appeared before Alus, which was then pushed forward as a wave towards Aile.

Cilcila shielded Aile with her body as Orneus jumped in from the side. He put his hands together and then thrust them out, deflecting the wave to either side like a breaker.

However, that wasn’t the end of it. The glass shattered against the walls, and the furniture in the room was thrown up into the air.

With the sounds of the furniture slamming back down onto the floor, Aile looked around the room with a smile on his face. Then he turned to gaze at Alus. A small laugh leaked out, as he motioned for his two attendants to stand down. “How scary. The ranked No. 1 truly is awe-inspiring. But a threat is nothing more than that. It will be difficult to make me tremble just from throwing mana my way. So, sorry Orneus, but can you not make a move yet?”

“Tsk.” Alus bitterly clicked his tongue. As expected, the boy before him was abnormal. A normal person would falter or even faint from fear, but even in this situation, Aile had calmly observed how far Alus was willing to go.

“Unfortunately, you’re the opposite of emotional. It seems that bit of information was correct. You wouldn’t snap over something like that. Or rather, it was nowhere near enough for you to lose yourself in anger... You’re almost

inhumanly coldhearted. So in a way, that makes you trustworthy, even in a situation like that. Like I said before, I've investigated you, and it would be wise not to underestimate my power."

While Alus wasn't a fan of Aile's analyzing of him, he remained quiet and simply stared at the self-satisfied boy.

"Well, I'm willing to forgive this much. It was more a light greeting than anything. And I went a little too far myself. So I apologize for that." Despite his words, Aile gazed at Lilisha with a smug smile.

In spite of the fierce exchange, she wore a vacant look in the middle of the now ruined room. Her stunned expression was similar to Tesfia's. However, if there was a difference, it was that unlike Tesfia and her family situation, Aile had plunged his fangs into Lilisha's very personal vulnerability.

"Hey! Keep it together! Don't react like that and take everything he says seriously."

As Alus said that, the light returned to Lilisha's eyes. He was a little relieved to see it, since it'd be a pain if she lost it as well. At the same time, he recalled something that had happened before. That sharp reaction she'd shown when he'd unconsciously reached out towards her head. She'd looked ready to scream and curled up to protect herself. She always appeared carefree and bold, but in reality she was delicate and timid. Like she was always scared of something.

Alus was typically dense when it came to these kinds of things, but he felt like he vaguely understood her. At the very least, it was clear that she was more complicated than she appeared on the surface.

"I-I'm fine! I was just a little surprised." Even now she kept up the facade, but from what Alus could tell, the amount of sweating she'd done made it obvious that she had been shocked.

Seeing how things had calmed down, Cilcila spoke up in an exasperated tone. "Master Aile, dealing with the aftermath of fighting in the Institute would be troublesome. Surely you don't intend to drag in the Witch too?"

At her gentle reprimand, Aile's devious smile disappeared. "That certainly

wouldn't be good. I would've loved to have observed a portion of Alpha's greatest Magicmaster's power up close, but oh well. Unintentionally angering people is a bad habit of mine," he said in an almost playful tone.

"You're playing with fire. No matter how many lives you have, it won't be enough."

"For better or worse, a single one has been enough." Aile brushed off Alus's statement, even though Alus still looked ready to fight.

Cilcila remained vigilant and Orneus was still as aggressive as before. He was only barely obeying Aile's order not to make a move. The dense mana coming from his person clearly wished to do the opposite.

"There won't be a second time."

"I'll take that to heart. Especially since it seems you're not just a Magicmaster tamed by the military either," Aile responded in a calm tone, as he looked over the disaster that had swept through the room. "However, the appointment and dismissal of Governors-General are up to the ruler. If your actions here are reported to her, it might be used against Berwick later. Incidentally, the Womruina family prides itself on such political maneuvering. Unfortunately, if something were to happen, neither the Governor-General you're indebted to, nor even you yourself would be able to retire peacefully."

If Berwick fell from his position, the forces covering for Alus would naturally weaken. But Alus frankly didn't care even if he was exiled from Alpha. If anything, it would be like a wish come true.

Things would be different though if Berwick got involved. If Alus left the military, he would prefer that all debts be repaid first. Himself aside, he would want to prevent Berwick from being blamed.

Of course, Alus was more or less sure he'd repaid his debt. But even so, if Berwick were to disappear now, Alus's own future would be clouded in darkness. In addition, it would allow for the unwanted rise of the detestable boy in front of him. *Is that why he did all of that in public?*

Alus even entertained the idea of killing Aile and his two guards, but that would be difficult. He couldn't use any flashy spells in the Institute, and then

there was all the commotion that had happened earlier. It wouldn't have been strange for annoying onlookers to have gathered outside after his burst of mana sent objects flying down from the top floor, though he'd used his sixth sense to confirm that there was no one directly below.

As if seeing through Alus's calculations, Aile addressed his two attendants. "Don't worry, you two. He is smart, so he doesn't even need to consider the consequences of killing me here. Of course, that's only for right now," he concluded, but his words also served as a light check against Alus's possible moves.

With a fearless smile, Aile looked at Cilcila covering him and Orneus who was ready to fight. He took a few steps forward, stepping on the glass shards as if to provoke Alus a little.

"!!! Master Aile, any farther than that is..."

"Like I said, he can't touch me right now. So we can't touch him either."

"But..."

Aile ignored Cilcila's worries with a smile. "Now then, it seems my prediction is on the mark, isn't it, little watchdog?"

"If you're so confident in your psychological analysis, you should watch your mouth. You seem to have a high opinion of my patience, but it might just be too high. If you cross the line I've drawn, you might find your head separated from your body."

"Hmm, while I am interested in where that line lies, I'm not cowardly enough to fall for such an obvious bluff. However, the Institute is under the jurisdiction of the principal. Just like how you won't play into my hands, I won't play into yours."

With Sisty politically siding with Berwick, if there would be a scandal in the Institute, she might do whatever it took to cover for Alus. Aile was taking that into consideration.

"Aren't you sly."

"I will take that as a compliment."

Aile interpreted Alus's remark as ridiculing him, but Alus had been half-serious. While it was just for an instant, Alus had unleashed a shock wave of mana with killing intent. Yet Aile was acting like nothing had happened.

It wasn't so much composure as some kind of abnormality that allowed him to remain calm in the face of death. The boy was probably extremely detached from his own life, or maybe he'd been born with something broken inside him. His brain was just wired differently, allowing him to bypass instinctual fear. He was someone worth fearing in a different sense than Alus.

At any rate, it was clear that Alus had already lost the chance to try anything, including cheap provocations.

"It's a little messy, but how about we chat a little?" Aile said, shrugging as he looked around the room.

"I don't mind."

"I am glad to hear it." As usual, the only thing Aile showed was his pasted-on elegant smile.

Beneath that smile, Aile considered this his first win. By making it through Alus's bluff he'd gained a slight advantage. Also, Lilisha still hadn't recovered from her shock. She wouldn't be interrupting him again for a while. As a result of this subtle bargaining, the negotiations had become more favorable to him. *It felt like walking a tightrope from up high without a lifeline. But I was the one who managed to walk all the way to the other side.*

Aile pondered how to proceed from here. If he immediately cornered the other party...how likely was it that Alus would go beyond bluffing and truly use force? He evaluated the prowess of the greatest Magicmaster and compared it to that of his own people. *It would be rough* , he concluded. Even some of the strongest of the Womruina family's forces, Cilcila and Orneus, wouldn't stand a chance against Alus in a magic battle.

For the time being, he'd been able to confirm Alus's personality...or more specifically, his inhumanity and almost instinctive sharpness. It seemed to be true that even the military struggled to rein him in. In reality, nobody could truly control him. He could reject the military and even the rules set down by the nation. It was all but clear that he had no intention of obeying someone of

the Womruina lineage either.

That was something that Aile couldn't stand. He'd encountered plenty of strong people who'd stood against him before. He had crushed each and every one of them. Not with his own power, but through his overwhelming authority.

Authority to control the many beat the power of the individual. If the opponent had the strength of a thousand men, then he could just send ten thousand at them. That was the principle that Aile followed. And if the opponent still refused to become a pawn, they would just be erased. No matter how strong they were, they would have no choice but to bow down before the many.

The strong one who stood before Aile now was different from the others. He was an overwhelming foe, incomparable to all the ones who'd fallen before Aile thus far.

But that was exactly why Aile hoped to win him over and use him as a pawn. After all, it was thanks to Alus that Alpha had built up a top-class record of eliminating Fiends. Alus was an essential trump card for rising to the top of the power struggle in Alpha.

Cicelnia had once thought the same and approached Alus, only to fail to completely control him. But Aile had been sure he'd be able to achieve it.

However, he'd been taught that such thoughts were just an illusion. In front of him was a man of unshakable will, an iron wall. But that didn't mean that he'd given up. Instead, he'd found his resolve. Now was the time. As someone who sought to rule, this was a trial he needed to overcome to reach the next step.

That was why Aile was doing everything he could to put on a good face. This was a plan he had long envisioned. He smiled feebly, as if he'd just come up with this idea. "How troubling. It seems we just can't come to an agreement. But I have no intention of getting into a fight with a Single. I hope you can understand. Although...I suppose there is one method, especially if you wish to annul the engagement with Fia."

Alus stared at him, saying nothing.

Aile continued without flinching. “It’s a traditional method to resolve quarrels in the nobility.” He paused, as if trying to figure out Alus’s intentions. He couldn’t afford to let the other side think this was a one-sided proposal. Now it was his turn to coldly stare at Alus.

“Continue,” Alus said, after checking on Lilisha. Once he’d observed her expression, he decided to at least hear the details.

Aile pretended not to notice their silent exchange, and nodded. “You might not know, but it is a method that has existed since long ago. Nowadays people try to solve everything with money and a distribution of interests, but don’t you think that’s a little shallow? Many are poisoned by this trend as a result and believe that being rich is what the noble class is all about. And this concerns two of the great noble families. That’s why I believe a formal approach would be appropriate. The method I speak of is the arbitration of nobles...Tenbram.”

Lilisha’s eyebrows twitched at the word, but Alus had never heard of it before.

“You don’t hear about Tenbram often these days, but a hundred years ago the competition was used frequently. In the past, when trouble arose, nobility would compete in chess or sports or table games rather than with the bloody use of force, and the final arbitration was based on the results. Of course, they would have representatives as well. Tenbram was one such competitive game.”

“Please wait,” Lilisha said. “If you’re going to use Tenbram, then you will need to decide on specific rules that both sides agree on first.”

“Oh, you’re going to interject here?”

“...!”

Aile overpowered Lilisha, but Alus stepped in to cover for her. “Hold on. If you’re not going to let Lilisha speak, there’s no point in having her as a witness.”

“Ah, right you are. Pardon me. However, I have a deed detailing my engagement to Fia. If you’re asking me to let that go to waste, then I’ll need you to yield a little. Of course, I’ll even overlook your earlier act of intimidation as a bonus.”

Alus glanced at Lilisha. She didn’t say anything, but seemed to express with

her eyes that there was no other choice. He knew little of noble rules in general, let alone Tenbram. That was why he'd had her accompany him in the first place. If that was her conclusion, then he had no room for objection. "I'll leave that up to Lilisha."

"Then...in order to ensure fairness, the Tenbram should fulfill two conditions at least."

"Hm? And what are they?" Aile asked politely.

"The first is, of course, to hold on and receive the Fable family's agreement. As for the other, I want the Frusevan family to serve as the judge." Lilisha's intent was clear. She wanted to keep watch on the Womruinas so that they didn't bend the rules or results, or try to cheat. Even though she might not rule in Alus's favor, if cheating was discovered on Aile's side, she could prevent him from using his authority to crush any accusations.

"The Frusevans, you say? Are you sure? You seem pretty close to Sir Alus." Aile put a finger on his chin and gave her a quizzical look.

"Of course, I swear on my family name to remain neutral for the Tenbram," Lilisha proudly declared. As Aile looked to be pondering this, she whispered so that only Alus could hear, "It could be beneficial for the Womruina family, but it's in accordance with the rules of nobility. If you refuse this, there will be bloodshed."

Bloodshed, huh... It sounded ominous, but he couldn't help but think that it would be quicker that way. But this was a problem between nobles. He wasn't a member of the Fable family, so while he was Tesfia's representative, it wasn't his place to stir things up. "Got it," he told Lilisha.

Lilisha smiled at him. "So assuming the Tenbram goes through, let's see what both sides are after. We want the annulment of Tesfia Fable's engagement."

"Yes. And I want Alus Reigin's freedom...or more specifically, that he be removed from Governor-General Berwick's command, who will relinquish any power or authority over him. Of course, after that I will have Alus sign a contract of employment with me of his own free will. Perhaps as my new bodyguard? And don't worry, your salary will be even better than it is now."

Lilisha was speechless. In effect, Aile was trying to exploit Alus's vague position in the military and then hire him for his private army once he'd been separated from the military.

It wasn't just unconventional. Depending on the interpretation, it was a clear hostile action against the Governor-General. In addition, since the two of them had huge influence in Alpha, it could even be seen as treason. As Lilisha had feared, Aile probably didn't care if he caused a storm of chaos.

She wasn't the only one surprised by his statement. His attendants were also taken aback. Orneus raised a single eyebrow, peering at his master's expression before turning to observe Alus. Cilcila barely suppressed a yelp. Then, as if a bad feeling she'd had inside had come true, she saw a distinct look on Aile's face.

She had been serving Aile since she was a young girl, long before Orneus arrived. Because of that, she thought of him as a little brother, though she would never say as much. The Cikolen family had served the Womruina family for generations. Without exception, anyone born in the family was trained to become a first-rate servant from the age of six. They started with physical training to protect their master, and were also provided with the knowledge and education one expected from nobility, as well as the art of socializing and anything else needed to serve their master.

Cilcila had succeeded at all of that grueling training. As a result, it had been more than ten years since she'd become the Womruina family's second son's attendant.

In their casual conversations as master and servant, she almost always saw Aile as an innocent boy. This was why she believed that the expression he showed on a daily basis reflected his true nature. While he'd grown up a little twisted due to the enormous power and influence of his family as well as the indulgence of those around him, Cilcila believed he was a normal boy who meant good, as he seemed to show her when they spoke alone.

But at times, Aile showed a side that not even she understood. On the surface he remained as elegant as a noble should be, but his heart was locked up in a small room of ice. Neither Cilcila nor his family was allowed in there.

When that side appeared, Cilcila would feel a chill run down her spine. He

would be as crafty as a sophisticated adult. At the drop of a hat, he would display unworldly intelligence and an abnormal sensibility.

All of those things made Cilcila feel a little uneasy about Aile. At times she thought that his hidden abilities far exceeded what she could imagine. She didn't think he was a monster, but he was impossible to figure out. When she thought of where his future was headed, she almost felt like trembling. It was a dark path that he would walk as he followed the clever plans he'd made in that room of ice.

Cilcila had no way of knowing what he sought beyond the darkness. It was possible that she could always stay at his side and support him so that he wouldn't be isolated. However, she would need to keep chasing after him so that he wouldn't leave her behind as he walked down his path.

She feared that she would one day lose sight of him...that he would be all alone on his dark path. And that was the only thing that truly frightened her. It wasn't a hunch or gut feeling, but she still feared that it would happen one day.

Yet she didn't take action or admonish her master. Something akin to despair or resignation kept her mouth shut, even though she knew it was the same as turning a blind eye to the coming catastrophe. And so she forced herself to believe that the innocent side that Aile showed was his true self.

But now that illusion was falling apart. Now that she'd been made aware of the reality, she was almost glad that it had happened. Aile was a free being who ran rampant, fearless of any and all, his vessel immeasurable to the ordinary man. That was why he could remain unconcerned in the face of any storm, and smile even in the midst of blood and mud. It was surely the essence of his personality. Then, as his attendant, it was Cilcila's duty to embrace and accept it.

Perhaps it would be better to call it sympathy. It was exactly what a compassionate older sister would do to support her dangerous younger brother. At any rate, she used her resolve to push down her astonishment.

The conditions Aile had put forth were exorbitant but correct. Alus Reigin was a trump card, an absolute in Alpha's possession. Moreover, he was the strongest individual protecting humanity. The one who got their hands on him

would have enormous power not only over Alpha, but the future of humanity as a whole.

But that was why no one person could possess him. The military would never permit it. No matter if Aile had the blood of the Womruina family in his veins, it shouldn't be possible.

At the same time, Cilcila felt her master might be able to accomplish it. In Aile's path, there were sure to be huge obstacles and unimaginable loneliness. Not even the head of the Womruina family could see a glimpse of their second son's thoughts. Her master had taken a step forward, and Cilcila gazed at his back...wondering how grand his ambitions were.

On the surface, he was likely wearing his usual graceful smile. For Cilcila it was so easy to imagine that she didn't need to see it for herself. And so she let out a soft sigh and thought to herself, *Phew, what a bother. But I alone must always stay at his side. Yes, that's exactly what I will do, no matter what you say.*

For a moment, Aile's gaze flickered as he awaited the other party's response...and Cilcila stared at his back in support.

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While Lilisha was at a loss for words, Alus remained silent. He was considering the conditions that Aile had stated. But not whether they were possible... His thoughts were on a different level.

He had no particular objection to leaving Berwick's command. He had a feeling, though, that he would be able to do so anyway if he graduated from the Institute. And there were several other ways. Of course, he wouldn't take such forceful measures while he was still indebted to Berwick.

"Okay," Alus answered, showing no expression.

It was such an unexpected answer that Aile looked puzzled for a moment.

Even Alus would admit that something was wrong with him. But he was the type of person who would make these kinds of decisions without hesitation. He wasn't being negligent. He had calmly examined the risk and reward. Above all, in his mind, this was a cold calculation. He was prepared to use his power as the greatest Magicmaster to push his own way through, even if he had to bend

reason a little. He would continue on the path he'd chosen even if that meant a rain of blood would fall.

Alus could show restraint with Berwick, but if it was someone he didn't like such as the boy before him, he had no such reservations. That's why he didn't hesitate to speak in a grave tone. "However, I'm betting my life here. It's no fun if only the Fable family benefits from this. So I'd like to add another condition. I assume you have the same resolve."

"Of course. I never expected that acquiring the greatest Magicmaster would be a cheap deal to begin with. So what more do you want from me? As long as it's not for me to drop dead here and now, I won't hesitate to accept any condition."

"Well, that's a shame."

Aile wryly smiled at that, but didn't seem particularly upset. "It might be a shame for you, but I hope you can settle for something else." Not only was he extraordinarily calm, he even seemed to be looking forward to hearing what Alus would demand.

Alus's sharp sense of smell picked up the scent of a broken human. He once again thought that Aile was not a sane person in many ways. At the same time, he felt he wouldn't need to show a shred of restraint in what he would say.

Meanwhile, Aile eagerly awaited Alus Reigin's next words. As far as he was concerned, the deepest desires of the heart couldn't be hidden so easily. They could show themselves at any moment, in any place. So to Aile, seeing through the true nature of a person was simple, even in a trivial exchange.

Conditions given in situations like these tended to reveal a person's wishes. When it came to money and influence, the Womruinas were top class. For a commoner, they could pretty much make the impossible possible. As a member of the family, Aile had had plenty of people state their wishes before him...when making wagers, during audiences with him, in official meetings, on the streets, and so on...

When it came to Tenbram, it was always the most boring things. Money, women, power. Such things meant nothing to Aile. He would brush them all off with a bored expression, and then crush those low-life wishes in the Tenbram,

making sure they never came true.

But in front of him now was the ranked No. 1 Magicmaster, different from all who'd come before him in the past. Aile couldn't even imagine what he'd ask for, so his heart was leaping for joy. *What will he wish for? Money or power...? No, I recall him liking rare books and documents, so something like that? Perhaps something for Fia? What about his greed or lust? No matter what it is, it will show your true nature. However...I'm sure that nothing he wishes for would demoralize me. Wealth and power, though... Perhaps a woman? Then maybe he'll want Cicelnia. Ah, that wouldn't be bad. She would get in the way, anyways. Having two monsters getting along would work out for me.*

Even if Alus asked for something incredibly mundane, it wouldn't be enough to diminish Aile's appraisal of him. It would be only one answer from him.

But Alus's next words made Aile doubt his ears. His elegant smile fell apart into an expressionless face.

Alus had to repeat himself. "...Didn't you hear me? Then I'll say it one more time. Don't ever appear before me again. If you see or hear my name anywhere, back off immediately. Make sure your name isn't mentioned by anyone who has anything to do with me. The next time I see your creepy face, I won't be nice enough to warn you before I kill you."

"Wh-Why you...?!" An angry voice shouted out, but it belonged to Cilcila, not Aile.

However, Aile interrupted her by raising an arm. Cilcila frowned and wondered why, but she saw his eyes were opened wide. Alus's answer must've been completely unexpected, as she'd never seen Aile look like that.

"No, well... I can see why the Governor-General and the military have their hands full. You're experienced and straightforward. It's easy to tell what you like and hate. It's as though you've declared that you'll cut down anyone who touches you. I see. Those who violate your territory will immediately have the tip of your blade pointed at their neck."

Cilcila got goose bumps at Aile's manner of speaking, but the boy seemed to be enjoying himself. The next moment, the exact words she'd feared came out of his mouth.

“I like you even more.”

“I’m not taking part in this drivel. State the time and place,” Alus bluntly said.

Even at this, Aile’s expression remained the same, as if it was the only one he had, and he couldn’t stop smiling. “Since it’s turned into such a big deal, I will contact you with the time and place at a later date.”

“All right. Anything else?”

“Nothing right now. Just... I do hope you don’t bring these talks of Tenbram to the Fable family, only to come back with their refusal.”

“Don’t worry about it.” After saying this, Alus walked over to the door and opened it. “If there’s nothing else, I’m leaving.”

“Wha—?!” Once again, Cilcila raised her voice at his outrageous behavior. Aile’s lips twisted into a smile at her unbecoming and hysterical tone of voice. She was still enraged, but with Aile like that, she reluctantly held back. Instead, she scowled and turned her face away with such force that her braid swung around. Her ears had a slight redness to them.

“Don’t fret over it, Cilcila. We are the ones who suddenly barged in. Now then, I look forward to our next meeting. After all, the stakes are so high that I’m as excited as a child. I am in a fantastic mood right now.”

Alus had nothing more to say. He leaned against the wall next to the door and nodded towards the exit, in effect telling them to go home.

With an amused smile on his face, Aile passed by with his group. “Just so you know, I hope you can overlook a little bit of offense,” he said in a quiet voice.

But Alus didn’t reply. His attention was already on somebody else. And it wasn’t Cilcila, who was glaring at him in anger. Instead, he was watching the man behind her—Orneus.

He was the only one that Alus had been on guard for. Cilcila was certainly a top-notch fighter. She’d reacted to Alus’s unleashed killing intent with blinding speed. But Orneus had left a lasting impression on Alus for another reason. Cilcila had been in shock, but his reaction had been a little routine. While Alus had braced for it, Orneus had strangely lacked assertiveness. He couldn’t tell if

Orneus had seen through his killing intent as a bluff from the start.

Once Alus heard the door close, he shut his eyes. While he'd supposedly been acting as usual, he'd felt heat building up deep inside him. He was staying behind to let that heat cool down.

"Should I say something?" Lilisha asked, concerned about his tired attitude.

"Useless."

"What did you just say?" Her ladylike atmosphere disappeared and her cheeks twitched. She'd been putting up a bold front.

"What were you doing, playing into his hand at a crucial moment? If his mental interference had continued, you would've been in trouble."

"Th-That's because I have my own circumstances..."

Alus lightly brushed off Lilisha's angry stare, and shrugged as he looked around. "For the time being, we'll need to come up with an excuse for the principal. Actually, why not make the guy responsible for this situation pay?"

"I'm not so sure. Bluff or not, you were the one who was out of control."

"I was just checking them out."

"And is that what you're going to tell the principal? Would you like me to tell you what she'd say?"

"Nah, no need," Alus briefly said, as he gazed at the furniture that had fallen down and broken on the floor.

Lilisha sighed. Then her expression turned serious and a little dark. "To sum it up, we were completely overwhelmed."

"Half of that is because you broke down at a critical moment. I'll keep it from Fia and the others out of pity, but if you've got something to hide at home, at least try to cover it up."

"I can't say what it is, but you're not far off. I don't think it would be possible to hide it from the Womruinas anyway. Besides, it's your fault for provoking him...or maybe not? Well, thinking about it, it would've been the same result no matter who was there."

Alus didn’t think it was as one-sided as Lilisha seemed to, but she was right that it hadn’t ended in their favor.

“That look on your face tells me you regret getting involved in something you shouldn’t have.”

“You’re right about that.”

“But settling on Tenbram was at least a decent end. If the Womruinas are serious about going at the military, you would have been caught up in it anyways. That way, bloodshed would have been unavoidable. Not that I know what you’d do if that happened.” Lilisha’s expression darkened again. She then peered into the face of Alpha’s greatest Magicmaster.

Alus leaned against the wall, not answering her.

Sixty-Eighth Chapter

Seizing the Shadow in the Turmoil

The light chill of morning passed over the skin like a soft caress. It hadn't been long since the sun rose. At this time of year, the average temperature inside Babel's protective barrier was around fifteen degrees, but in the early mornings one would want some warm clothing on.

Alus wore a black coat as he headed for the transfer gate. Next to him was Loki, all dressed up and carrying a pochette. However, both were wearing black clothing, which gave them a disquieting atmosphere.

At their side was a redhead wearing a white coat and casual clothing. She leaned against a wall with downcast eyes. Tesfia Fable was at the center of the turmoil and didn't look like she'd gotten a good night's rest, as there were bags under her eyes.

Alice stood next to her with a concerned look, but she'd only come to see Tesfia off. For a certain reason, she wasn't coming with them to visit the Fable family.

Speaking of others, one who was involved, Lilisha, was nowhere to be seen. She'd volunteered to be a judge for the Tenbram, and apparently needed to coordinate with her family. Her mission to keep an eye on Alus was limited to within the Institute, so she would be off-duty until he returned.

"How long are you going to be so upset, Ms. Tesfia?"

Tesfia furrowed her brow. Loki was rubbing her the wrong way as if to tease her. "Who wouldn't be upset when something like that happened all of a sudden?"

Last night, Alus had met with Tesfia and asked her to contact her family. However, it was Alus who'd done most of the speaking with her mother, Frose.

He'd explained things to Tesfia in advance, so it didn't take long, but he'd thought that he should tell Frose what had happened with the results of the negotiation.

Frose had quietly listened on the other side of the call, but didn't raise any objections as to how things would be decided with Tenbram. Instead, she'd apologized for the mess her daughter had gotten him into, as expected of a former military commander. In the end, she'd invited them to the Fable mansion to explain the situation in more detail. And so Alus and the others were making their way there early in the morning.

Tesfia wasn't looking forward to going home. She sighed. "Do you two have a rule that you always have to wear black?"

"I am just matching what Sir Alus picks. I do have clothes in more colors than this."

Tesfia had tried to strike up a conversation, and Loki had unexpectedly answered her. As she'd spent nearly all her time at Alus's side since she'd enrolled, her mental strength had seen considerable growth.

"You look pretty solemn yourself, Ms. Tesfia, like you've mentally prepared for this."

"If I wasn't being summoned home by my mother, I would've picked more casual clothing. But yeah, I'm feeling bummed out," Tesfia muttered, as her shoulders slumped.

"Well, it's not like I can't sympathize with you. It's all Sir Alus's fault for his outburst in that room."

"That's not... Never mind." Alus felt the prickle of sarcasm coming from next to him and tried to object, but soon closed his mouth. This was already the third time she'd brought this up. The situation wasn't in his favor, and even if he tried to object, he'd be backed into a corner by Loki's sharp tongue.

"In the end, the parlor was destroyed, things did not end peacefully, and we were able to see once again why negotiating is not in Sir Alus's character."

"Yeah, but it's all my fault for being good for nothing." Tesfia's shoulders slumped even more.

Loki glanced over at Alus and covered for her. “You really are half-baked... If you’re going to do it, then please make sure to finish the job. Now, cleaning up is going to take twice the effort.”

“Yes, yes... Hm?” If one calmly analyzed Loki’s words, they sounded less provoking and more like she was telling Tesfia to go as far as she could. Maybe by “cleaning up” she meant going as far as to kill the other party? That would be quite disturbing. “Loki, if you do that, you’re going to put me in a bad position,” Tesfia quickly intervened.

“Not at all. You would be much better off if the other party completely disappeared from the world, wouldn’t you, Ms. Tesfia?”

Tesfia wore a reproachful look as she objected. “If you actually do that, there won’t just be blood. It would become an all-out war involving all of nobility.”

“So just wipe out the whole family,” Loki answered calmly.

“Why do you two have to be so violent!”

“What are you talking about?” Alus asked. “I haven’t said anything.”

Tesfia raised a hand to stop him, then took a deep breath to calm down. “It’s already over, so nothing’s going to come from complaining.”

“Yes, indeed. By the way, Sir Alus, we got a big bill for the parlor from the principal this morning.”

“I figured it would come to me. Well, I do plan to pay it.” It was an outrageous amount, but Alus was ready to accept it. In fact, if it stopped Loki’s attacks, he would even be willing to pay it in one lump sum.

Eventually, Alice saw that the noisy exchange had come to an end, and stepped in. “Come on, Loki dear, Al did his best too, so let’s leave it at that. Besides, if he hadn’t gone, I would have!”

“Aliiice, thank youuuuu!” With a whimper and tears in her eyes, Tesfia embraced her friend.

“Hey, don’t flap around too much. The transfer gate will be better able to accurately determine the coordinates if you actually focus,” Alus told her. He grabbed her by the shoulder and pulled her closer. Tesfia yelped as she was

torn away from Alice. “If you’re like that now, I don’t want to imagine what happens next.” He let out a heavy sigh as he activated the transfer gate.

“Goodbye, then. Good luck, Fia. Take care of her, please!” Alice waved at them from outside the transfer gate. She had tried to insist on going with them to the Fable mansion, but Tesfia finally managed to talk her out of it. She was happy at her best friend’s offer, but she didn’t want to get her involved with nobles.

It was a lot for a commoner who wasn’t even a soldier to be involved with Tenbram. With that in mind, Tesfia had asked her to stay behind to explain their sudden absence from the Institute.

“We’re going, then. We’ll be right back, okay?” With Tesfia’s self-doubting voice ringing in their ears, the three disappeared.

After several transfers, they arrived in the area that was closest to the Tower of Babel. It was the neighborhood that was farthest from the protective barrier, making it the safest. Because of that, nobles, the rich, and other special people lived here. This was also where the Fable family lived.

According to Tesfia, a servant was going to come from the house, so until then they would wait at the meeting place. Once at the house, they would discuss matters with the Fable family and come up with countermeasures for the Tenbram.

Incidentally, Alus was sneaking in his AWR, Night Mist, under his coat, and Loki had several AWRs tucked under her casual clothes...just in case.

After confirming there were no suspicious people around, Alus called out to Tesfia. “Should I assume that you know about Tenbram too?”

“Uh... Is a general outline not enough...?” Tesfia timidly replied.

Alus gave her a cold stare as if he’d expected as much. “Of course it’s not.”

“But I’ve never even seen a real one, and it’s only really been brought up a handful of times.”

“I see. So it’s not a game held for the public. I’ve only skimmed through references of it in books, but what I can tell you now is that my participation

won’t determine the outcome.”

“What?! Why are you saying that? So why did you settle on those terms?”

“I figured it was the only way to reach a compromise. That Aile is pretty sharp. It felt like he was seeing things two, three steps ahead. If things had gotten more complicated there, it would have ended in a worse way. I had to read the mood.” The odds had been stacked against them as soon as the engagement deed was produced.

“I can imagine.”

“Anyhow, the Tenbram comes first. From what I’ve gleaned from old documents, the most common type is the chess type. The basic idea is that two sides use the participants as pawns to move the game along, and one side loses when the Master is defeated. Based on that, the rules are simple...although this is old information. There’s probably a modern twist to it.”

Another difference between the old and the new was the addition of magic. It was essentially a form of strategy game. Judging from Lilisha’s reaction, it must have had quite a lot of depth to it. “The problem is that Tenbram was mainstream over a century ago. It might have been used behind the scenes as a means of arbitration, but nothing has been made public about it.”

A century ago, the Fiends had not yet appeared, and humanity was split between several countries in conflict with each other. It was a time when bloodshed was commonplace, so it was easy to guess that Tenbram would’ve had a violent side to it that went beyond a mere game. It was less a competition and more a proxy war.

That’s when Loki asked a question. “You mean before magic saw rapid development?”

“Of course. That’s the problem this time around. Magic combat will probably be as important as hand-to-hand combat, although I get that there’s more differences to the modern Tenbram, so we’ll need to confirm that. At any rate, the Master’s plans will play a bigger role than an individual’s power.”

When she heard that, Tesfia turned pale and broke into a cold sweat. “H-Hold on! Who’s going to be the Master?”

“That’s obviously going to be...” Alus stared pointedly at Tesfia.

“You’re joking! I told you that I’ve never played Tenbram before, and barely even listened when people talked about it.”

“I bet. By the looks of it, you don’t have a clue how to lead a group in hand-to-hand combat either.”

“N-No...”

“Well, with humanity turned against the Fiends and magic at its current heights, it’d be a surprise if you did know how to fight people. But when it comes to that traditional Womruina family and that shrewd Aile, it wouldn’t be strange for them to be an exception.”

“Then our odds are...”

Alus gave the panicking Tesfia a light chop to the forehead, and sighed. “Don’t panic. There’s still plenty of time before we get a date from them, which gives you time to read up on everything about Tenbram, especially on what’s prohibited. Losing due to foul play would be no laughing matter.”

“O-Of course! My everything is on the line here.”

“So you better get motivated, and I’ll do what I can too. However, this isn’t someone you can beat with something you just learned. Any orthodox strategies will be blown away.”

“What?! But then how do I...”

Before Tesfia could continue, a black magic car rolled into their field of view and stopped just in front of them.

The door opened, and out stepped the elderly butler that served the Fable family, Selva Greenus. Despite his age, he stood straight as an arrow. He wore spotless white gloves and exquisitely maintained leather shoes. He was the perfect elderly butler in all ways.

Selva greeted the group with the same soft, calm expression that he’d worn when he had fought Alus on a certain night. He held a hand over his chest and bowed.

Alus responded with a nod. However, Tesfia was still gripped by anxiety and

seemed to be in a daze. It was her first time seeing Selva in a while, but her legs were frozen. She looked small and vulnerable, so he called out to her over his shoulder. “Like I said, I’ll give you a hand. My life’s on the line here too, so we’re going to win no matter what.”

“Y-Yes!”

Alus smiled wryly, and straightened his back as if he was a recruit standing before a drill sergeant.

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After a couple of hours on the road, Alus and the others were finally seated in the Fable mansion’s parlor.

Incidentally, Alus had previously met with the head of the family, Frose Fable, and he’d also fought Selva before, so he wasn’t nervous. But he’d been a little surprised that after they’d passed the gates, it had taken them five more minutes to actually reach the house.

There were several beautifully landscaped gardens on the grounds. Except for the paved pathways, trees and colorful flowers and beautiful green grass covered the rest of the space.

Aside from the main mansion, the estate also had two separate mansions nearby, as well as another building that looked like a training ground.

The garage alone was big enough to park a dozen magic cars. The scale was too different from what Alus was used to. He didn’t let it show on his face, but when Selva saw Loki’s eyes open wide, the elderly butler smiled at her surprise.

It was a wonder Tesfia hadn’t grown up to be just another arrogant noble with all of this. Alus was tempted to imagine that the traditional noble family was just a front for illegal dealings behind the scenes.

He sat down on the sofa that was not too soft and not too hard, and gazed around the parlor. It was far more lavishly decorated than the ones at the Institute, with paintings on the walls, and other works of art he’d never seen before. It was like he’d wandered into a different world.

Tesfia, meanwhile, was nervous. It was hard to believe that she was simply

about to meet with her mother.

After preparing tea for everyone, Selva left to get his master. For a while, a heavy atmosphere hung over the three sitting on the sofa. Loki picked up her cup of tea, and—hoping to change the mood—recommended that Tesfia do the same, but Tesfia only waved her hand.

As usual, Alus paid her no heed and took a sip. She may have been nervous, but it wasn't like he couldn't understand how she felt.

While Frose had allowed Tesfia to stay in the dorms, she was known to be a strict woman. Not only had she been a military instructor, but she'd also protected the family name for many years. Alus had understood that from previous conversations, but it was still clear that this family's parent-child relationship was far from the norm.

But it's not like their relationship is frozen solid , Alus thought. He knew that it wasn't as if Frose had no love for Tesfia. However, Frose's way of expressing that love was very much what could be expected from a noble.

That said, Alus had no intention of getting involved in their relationship, and so he decided to brush it off.

Naturally, the Fable family would want to avoid deepening any strange relationship with the Womruina family, which was why—regardless of what Frose thought—she and Alus would be in agreement regarding this problem.

Just as Alus put his cup down on the table, there was a knock on the door, and the atmosphere in the room froze over. Tesfia's shoulders twitched. Selva quietly opened the door and a woman entered the room.

"Mother, I-I have made a judgment without your guidance..." Tesfia said with a trembling voice. She bowed.

However, the head of the Fable family, Frose Fable, gave her a faint smile. She walked over to her and placed a hand on her head. "I'm still relieved to hear that you didn't succumb to the Womruinas' power and authority. Perhaps you are now finally aware that you will become the next head of the family. I am also partially responsible for this, although I never expected they would bring up the engagement now of all times."

While Tesfia looked relieved, Alus and Loki were still seated with their eyes cast down. Alus may have negotiated with Aile, but he was still an outsider. He believed Frose wouldn't particularly take a liking to someone who was trying to get involved with the Fables' affairs.

However... "It has been a while, Mr. Alus. I am grateful that you helped my incapable daughter in her time of need." Frose's tone was unexpectedly gentle.

"Not at all. I am an outsider who may just have stirred things up more." Alus wasn't naive enough to lower his guard. He observed Frose carefully. However, her smile showed no sign of waning, so perhaps she really was grateful to him, which meant that what he would do next would come naturally.

Since Alus had already given her a brief explanation of the circumstances, his remaining task was to get her to approve of the Tenbram, as well as to gather information from her and come up with countermeasures. As the head of the esteemed Fable family, Frose should be able to provide the facts he needed, as well as advice. After all, her daughter seemed completely useless in that regard. So Alus couldn't help but have high expectations for Frose.

Frose gracefully gathered the hem of her dress in her hands and sat down facing Alus. "Before we get to the main topic, can I confirm something with you, Mr. Alus?"

"What is it?"

"Can I take it that you don't intend to hide your ranking anymore?"

Alus lightly nodded without looking at Loki. If the head of the Fable family got serious, it wouldn't be a secret that could be hidden anyway. Not to mention that those in her circle of friends were all people who were close to Alus, such as Sisty. There shouldn't be a problem with letting her know. "It's not like I was trying to hide it from the start, and it's hard to say I can even keep it hidden at the Institute. Ranking aside, it's already known that I'm related to the military."

"I see. Now I understand why Sisty asked you to mentor my daughter." Frose had been ninety-nine percent sure about it, but there had been a little bit of doubt. Now that it was gone, her expression cleared up. "I'd been thinking about what Lettie had said, but now I understand why. If that was the case, you should have just said so sooner, Mr. Alus. This was quite the detour."

The moment Lettie's name was brought up, Alus realized that he couldn't hide anything from her. Frose was probably aware of most of the circumstances, including Alus's personal history. Their earlier exchange was just a final confirmation and probably the reason behind the added respect. After all, to Frose, Alus was no longer some stranger getting involved with her daughter. He was Alpha's greatest Magicmaster. "Sorry about that. I was given a firm warning from the principal."

Next came formal apologies from Frose and Selva, which Alus casually accepted. However, nobody had yet realized that there was a definite difference in understanding between Alus and Frose. It all stemmed from what Lettie had said in the past: "Allie's all mine."

Frose hadn't been especially convinced before, but things were different now. She'd been looking all over for a worthy partner for her daughter, but it seemed her daughter had had the more discerning eye.

It was less suspicion and more of a hunch. When Tesfia had informed her of the outbreak of a problem with the Womruina family, her sixth sense had kicked in. While their conversation had taken place through a screen, when Tesfia started explaining about Alus, her expression had subtly changed.

Frose had been somewhat surprised, but she found it reassuring that her daughter was becoming more like a woman. She'd considered Tesfia to still be a child...though she did feel a little hesitant since Lettie was a friend of hers.

But as the head of the family, she was resolved. This was something important. It was a battle to carry on the lineage of a distinguished family.

That's why Frose abandoned her noble's dignity to say the next words, all the while convinced that things were proceeding in a way that would lead to a happy outcome. "Please do take care of my daughter, Mr. Alus."

"Y-Yeah, it feels a little late for that though. It's something that I asked for, after all." Alus's reply also straddled the vague line of misunderstanding, further complicating matters.

Frose brought her hands together with a bright smile. "My, my, you did...? I suppose it's the wild blood of youth that is the decisive factor in these kinds of things. And so Fia effortlessly just..." She cast a meaningful glance Tesfia's way.

The girl tilted her head in response. “What?”

“Indeed, youth is worth so much on its own,” Frose muttered to herself.

Alus felt danger. She was surely under a false impression. “Mrs. Fable, before we get started, it seems you’re misunderstanding something.”

“Oh, you don’t have to be so formal. If by ‘misunderstanding’ you mean... Does that mean that you’ve already...”

“Huh? Ah, so that’s what you mean. In that case, the deed is already done, but don’t worry. There were no problems and nothing was wrong with her body afterwards.” Alus was referring to his lifting of the suggestion Aile had placed on Tesfia, but his words were inadequate to the task.

Frose looked surprised, but seemed to reach a hasty conclusion before giving him a generous smile. “...I see. Of course, there is no problem if it’s already an established fact. Well, normally there would be, but nowadays, not bothering with those things is just the way the world is, isn’t it?” She was in such a good mood that she didn’t even notice the suspicious looks on the faces of Alus and the others, and continued chatting largely to herself.

Alus didn’t know what she meant by *established fact* , but it was difficult to stop her flow. In the end, he caught Frose’s attention with a couple of coughs, but it had taken quite some time. “Hold on a minute. There is nothing going on between Fia and me.” It was only after Frose’s monologue had continued long enough for the tea to cool that he was able to get these words in.

Frose looked dumbfounded. Alus jumped on the chance and hastily continued. “It happened as we were speaking with Aile von Womruina. He planted some kind of hypnotic suggestion on Fia that I had to remove. I also had her take her clothes off that were in the way at the time.”

Alus didn’t have enough self-awareness to realize that he didn’t need to say the last part. In the first place, on the battlefield, there was no distinction between man or woman when treating injuries. To him, it was no different from a doctor asking that a patient remove their clothes for an examination.

As Loki listened in, her expression changed multiple times over. Tesfia herself sat quietly on the sofa, as red as a ripe strawberry. She was unbearably

embarrassed, but couldn't muster a single word.

"Ah...how can my daughter be so pathetic." When Frose finally understood everything, she gazed up at the ceiling in an exaggerated manner, and sighed.

Selva's trimmed mustache shook in amusement. "Ha ha, that is most reasonable. The young lady is still a dreaming maiden in that regard." He turned to Tesfia. "When it comes to modesty, you carry the qualities of a lady of the Fable family."

"That's not good enough," Frose said flatly.

It looked like things were going to drag on like this, or rather that Alus was going to get dragged into it, so he tried to cut it short with a quick apology. "It was a rash act on my part. But there's no doubt that planting that suggestion was dangerous." He wasn't well versed in noble society, but if someone told him that seeing a girl's skin was reason to get married, he would be extremely annoyed.

His swift handling of the situation had been meant to address the danger, but it seemed there was no reason to be concerned about Frose's reaction. "Please don't worry about it. It's my fault for not recognizing the ambition and danger of that family. If anything, I would like to thank you again. But this is a good opportunity to ask about Fia."

Sensing that the topic was about to be revived, Alus firmly shook his head. "I've said the same thing to Lord Vizaist, but I have no intentions of that."

"So even Vizaist has tried... But as the ranked No. 1, wouldn't that be a problem in itself? I'm sure the Governor-General won't stay quiet about it." It might sound trivial, but in fact it was important to preserve the bloodline of humanity's hero and the world's greatest Magicmaster. As a noble who was familiar with the tradition of lineage and passing power down to one's children, Frose didn't hesitate to ask about it.

"No, you can assume that this is something that has been discussed with the Governor-General. I have my own circumstances."

"Hmm, circumstances, is it..."

There was somebody who was more concerned about that than Frose,

namely the redhead sitting next to Alus. Tesfia glanced his way with a curious look, as if asking if he already had someone in mind. However, she wasn't sure why she was that interested in the first place.

At any rate, Alus always had the excuse of postponing anything until his mysterious special ability could be explained, and so he made himself clear. "I'm not going to go into the details here. It's not an exaggeration when I say that it's top secret."

Frose shrugged, and finally backed off. "I understand. But is it for your entire life? Or will it be resolved at some point?"

He responded to the question by stating the facts. "Who knows? I hope to resolve it someday, but god only knows if I actually will, and I have no clue when it might happen."

Frose sighed. "Understood. Then I hope that god will fix it all on a whim someday."

"I thank you for your understanding. As of now, I'm not ready for that sort of thing, nor do I have any intentions for it." A shadow crossed Alus's face for a moment and he cast his eyes down, before raising his head again. He hoped they could move on to the main topic.

Tesfia seemed a little relieved to hear what he'd said. Meanwhile, Loki looked like her soul had left her body. But that was just for an instant, as she soon returned to her usual calm expression.

That aside, everything so far had been like a prelude, yet the head of the family had a relaxed attitude—almost too relaxed. Alus glanced at Frose quizzically, but she kept a vague smile on her face. He couldn't come close to deciphering what she was thinking...aside from her hopes of pairing him up with her daughter.

So he decided to change the direction of the conversation himself. "Let's return to the Tenbram. I believe you already know what's at stake." Frose should have agreed to it knowing the conditions, but Alus wanted to check just in case. He explained that the conditions were the annulment of Tesfia's engagement and his own possible change of command and affiliation.

Frose nodded. “Yes, I’ve heard. But the Tenbram won’t be held.”

“And why is that?”

“Fia’s engagement has already been annulled. That Womruina son picked a rather sloppy fight with no justification for it.”

That brought up the question Alus had been thinking about. Apparently, Frose was convinced that the annulment had already taken place. Yet Aile had shown them a legally valid deed of engagement. *I suppose I’ll need to confirm the facts first.* It was bothersome, but since Lilisha wasn’t here, he had no choice but to ask Frose himself. “Mrs. Fable, the engagement between Aile and Fia hasn’t been annulled. The other party presented me with the original deed. Lilisha, the daughter of the Rimfuge family, was there to witness it.”

Frose suppressed her surprise, only showing a dubious look. “What does that mean, Mr. Alus? I have already annulled the engagement. The deed was destroyed. I saw it take place before my very eyes.”

No wonder she looked so certain. “It might have been a fake.”

“...That is possible. In which case, it must have taken place back then. What a dirty trick to play!” Frose exclaimed. It was the rule that an administrative official under the senate’s jurisdiction be present during signings of all important documents between noble families. “I see... They must have bribed the official,” she concluded, her voice full of irritation.

Perhaps they’d used a hypnotic suggestion, or the official had simply been bribed, but there had been only one chance to switch out the deed. When the deed was annulled, it had been passed to the official to blot out the signatures. That must’ve been when it happened.

“Then what does that mean?!”

“I’m sorry, Fia. This was a blunder on my part. Annulling it is still my wish, since I have no intentions of being taken in by the likes of the Womruinas.”

“Mother, I’m partly to blame too. I don’t have many memories of the Womruina family, so that must’ve been when the suggestion was planted. As the next head of the family, I will easily thrust something like this aside!”

Alus found Tesfia's spirit admirable, but his own life was at stake too. He would be in trouble if she wasn't motivated. Although Tesfia was still unreliable, Frose seemed committed to making her the next head.

"All right. This is something we can't afford to lose," Frose said. "Fia, focus on the threat at hand first. The Womruina family can't be allowed to do what they please with the Fable family."

"Y-Yes!"

"Still... Now you've gone and done it. This time you've completely crossed the line, young son of Womruina," Frose muttered, shaking her head.

Aside from her bewilderment, there was another thought in her mind. It was, in a way, a unique opportunity. After all, the other side had managed to get Alpha's—or rather the world's—greatest Magicmaster caught up in this business. While Alus might not have been entirely willing, he was taking the initiative to help. That meant that in the coming showdown he would fight side by side with her daughter. In the battle of a lifetime, with both their lives at stake, the tension created by striving towards a goal against a common enemy would surely deepen the bond between them. So even her inexperienced daughter was certain to have a chance...in more than one way.

While Frose might have rushed to a conclusion before, she was sure that Tesfia wasn't against the idea. If Tesfia was able to win on both fronts, the Fable family's future was all but assured.

Most of all, Frose had a trump card. It wasn't the generosity, endurance, or philosophical stance of a noble family. It was that she was already resolved to do what was necessary to fulfill her deepest wish of preserving the family.

Frose closed her eyes and thought of a lone katana stored within the mansion. The Fable family was known not only for their long line of Magicmasters specializing in the ice attribute, but also for traditionally using katanas as their AWR. Even with AWRs continuously seeing new developments, they continued to protect the hallowed sword of their ancestors.

The katana Frose was thinking of was possibly their most treasured heirloom, passed down through the generations. It was not only an AWR but a work of art. Its value was immeasurable. It had once been said that selling it would bring

in enough to buy a small country. She'd even heard tales from her grandfather that the current head of the Womruina family had asked to buy it, an offer which he'd naturally refused.

Frose considered using it for trade if the worst came to happen, although losing it in her generation would not only ruin the family name but also stain the Fables' history. She would never be able to face her ancestors. Even so, she had the resolve for it. Moreover, she was prepared to take the blame and step down as the head of the family if it came to that.

Her expression turned dark for a moment...but in the next she'd shaken off all gloom. She then began to plan a strategy for the sake of her daughter's future and the future of all those related to their family. But in truth, even Frose had only heard of Tenbram a handful of times, which was something to be uneasy about.

Fortunately, there was someone present who possessed the wisdom of the elderly, whose help would surely be of use here.

Selva obliged his master's gaze, and smiled. "For the young miss's sake, I will gladly wear these weary old bones out." He then began a long explanation, and with his knowledge and Frose's input, the basics and theories of the traditional game were revealed.

Tesfia listened intently, making sure not to miss a word, and Alus focused as well.

As the lecture reached a lull, Alus spoke up. "That said, I'd like to take this opportunity to ask you something, Mrs. Fable." The way he was indirectly confirming her mood was the result of his unfamiliarity with how to speak to nobles.

Frose suspiciously narrowed her eyes for a moment, before smiling gracefully. "Of course. I don't mind, although I don't know if I can answer."

"No problem, just answer what you can. And I'd like to talk to you in private." Alus glanced at the redheaded girl and Selva.

Tesfia tilted her head in confusion, but Frose seemed to understand his intentions and smiled wryly. "Then we can talk in peace and quiet in my study

later. But I am a little tired, so let's take a small break."

Frose began to get up, when Tesfia called out to her. "But, Mother...!" She wanted to get as much information and plan as much as possible for the Tenbram.

Seeing Tesfia's anxious look, Frose gave her a reassuring smile. "Fia, I won't tell you to relax, but you should be careful not to get too on edge. At the very least, you know the basics of Tenbram by now. Let's each take our time gathering information and planning our strategy. If we drag this meeting out, it will be ineffective. We haven't even received a date yet from the Womruinas, so there is still plenty of time. Selva, I know things will get busy, but I hope you can gather information as well."

"Of course, Master Frose. I won't miss anything."

Then, as if she'd only just remembered, Frose said, "I'd like to ask who will be participating in the Tenbram from our side..." It was clear what she really wanted to know when she glanced at Alus.

"I would participate if asked. If not, I wouldn't have gotten involved in the first place," Alus replied in a blunt, self-deprecating tone.

Meanwhile, Loki, who'd been watching their exchange, quickly raised her hand. Once she'd gotten their attention, she spoke up. "If possible...I would like to be of help too."

Both Tesfia and Frose looked surprised at that. Frose said, "My, you too, Ms. Loki?"

"Yes, but I will leave it up to Al's decision. I would appreciate the opportunity to participate in the Tenbram."

She looked at Alus, who shrugged in return. She wasn't supposed to be a participant, but she'd listened closely to Selva's lecture as if mentally taking notes. In that case, there was no reason to refuse.

Loki continued after a small cough. "Well, Ms. Tesfia is so unreliable that I'll need to lend my support too, to make sure she doesn't hold Al back. I'm also certain that there's something I can learn from a traditional game between nobles."

“L-Lokiiii!” Tesfia’s eyes teared up. She looked ready to jump over and hug Loki, but the small girl brushed her off.

Frose gazed at the heartwarming sight with a smile. “I see. What a reassuring ally. Then please do lend us your strength.” The way she gave Alus a meaningful look made it seem like she’d been going to urge Loki to join anyway. She must have known about her loyalty to Alus and had been planning to make use of it.

Alus stifled a sigh, as Frose continued with a cool expression. “I’m glad to see that you’re surrounded by such good friends, Fia. Please take Mr. Alus and Ms. Loki to the guest rooms, although they may stay in your room too, if you’d like.”

“What?! There’s plenty of rooms, so we don’t have to... Wait, are we staying the night?” Tesfia asked, somewhat panicked.

Of course, it came as a bolt from the blue to Alus and Loki as well. The topic hadn’t been brought up in yesterday’s call, so they had no change of clothes.

In return, Frose firmly declared, “As the head of the family, I can’t well send you back without proper thanks. Sorry, but please think of it as the hospitality of nobles, Mr. Alus and Ms. Loki. There’s also the matter of thanking you for the Seven Nations Friendship Magical Tournament.” On the surface she spoke politely, but there was pressure behind her words. It seemed that complicated procedures were always involved where nobles were concerned.

Even if Alus wanted to refuse, he still had to listen to the so-called thanks Frose had mentioned. At any rate, he could only give one answer, considering the timing. “I understand.” He felt like he’d played right into her hand and answered in a resigned tone.

Frose smiled brightly, and turned to the elderly butler at her side. “I’m glad to hear it. It looks like the dinner preparations won’t go to waste, Selva.”

“Yes, it’s very fortunate. The chef put in more effort than usual when he heard that the young miss was coming with her friends.” Selva broke into a smile, and added, “In fact, all the servants of the house have been busy preparing the welcome since yesterday.”

From their well-coordinated back and forth, it seemed that their stay had already been placed on the schedule. Once Alus had agreed, Frose turned back

to Tesfia. “Fia, take them to their rooms.”

“Yes.” Now that it was decided, Tesfia lost all willpower to fight back and accepted it. “Okay, come with me. I’ll take you there.”

As the group made their way out of the room, Frose casually asked Alus, “Mr. Alus...are the Rimfuges really getting involved in this?” Her voice was calm, but clearly she had something on her mind.

“You mean Lilisha.”

“Yes, their youngest daughter. So she really did transfer in... To be honest, she’s one of the things I’m worried about. I heard from Fia that she’s involved in the Tenbram too.”

After negotiating with Aile, Alus had pushed Tesfia to call her family. She must’ve told her mother about it then. “That’s right. The reason Tenbram was settled on was partly because she offered to act as the judge,” Alus said. He’d never meant to hide it in the first place.

“That family is different from the usual noble family.”

As Tesfia had once explained, the Rimfuges had several branch families and the Frusevans were the original family. It was clear from Tesfia’s behavior that other nobles thought of them as a nuisance. But Alus didn’t know the reason for it. The only thing he could think of was that dark side that Aile had mentioned.

“Can she really be trusted? I believe there is quite a lot of risk in involving the Rimfuges,” Frose said with a troubled expression. She was probably thinking of what would happen if they did win the Tenbram.

Alus picked up on the discord between the families. “True, Lilisha and Fia have a pretty iffy relationship, but I have nothing to do with that. At the very least, she’s helped me in the past. Also, she’s a little interesting.”

“So you’re saying that she’s interesting...not trustworthy?”

“She came to the Institute for the sake of keeping an eye on me at Governor-General Berwick’s order. And as I’m sure you realize, my future is on the line as well. So I would find it hard to believe that she’d do something that would put the military at a disadvantage. Of course, that all depends on the Governor-

General having a firm grip on her reins."

"I understand. So she can be trusted to a degree then."

"She's been very considerate this time around, and I think she volunteered to judge on her own accord without consulting her family first. After all, she's gone to talk with the head of her family to get their approval." In fact, there was one more reason for Alus's decision. Aile had mentally attacked Lilisha. If she was working with the Womruinas, there would've been no reason for him to do such a thing. He decided not to tell Frose about it though.

Frose put her finger on her chin to think. A lot of what Alus said about Lilisha was based on his personal judgment, but that was questionable, considering how little he knew about nobles. It seemed unwise to involve other families given the risk to the Fable family. *Besides, no matter what Lilisha's intentions were, we can't know how the Rimfuge family will act. The Womruinas' influence is not to be underestimated. And then there's the current gossip at the palace...*

Seeing Frose's tense expression, Selva poured a fresh cup of tea to help her unwind.

Frose narrowed her eyes as she smelled the fragrant tea, and took a small sip. "It would be hard to change what's already been decided. I understand the matter of Ms. Lilisha. I will wait for their notification." Since there was nothing else they could do but wait, Frose postponed the issue.

After that, Frose and Alus exchanged some small talk, before Frose finally said with a smile, "Well then, Mr. Alus, I will call for you later."

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Once Tesfia and the others had left, only Selva and Frose remained behind, making the room feel deserted. Even with many servants and guests around, being surrounded by family heirlooms and antique furnishings while maintaining the family's prestige was sometimes stifling even for Frose. Thinking about it, the fresh breeze from the outside was probably brought in by Tesfia.

"Master Frose, do those rumors bother you?" With a mysterious expression that he hadn't shown Tesfia or Alus, Selva spoke in a serious tone.

“Yes. The more unpleasant the rumor, the less likely it is to be just a rumor.” Frose sighed, as if to expel that negativity from her person. Her daughter had finally expressed her own will and had Alus supporting her. But she had made a major life decision on her own, so there was no way she could enjoy her tea in peace. “It’s true that the palace has been stirring under the surface lately.”

“Perhaps it’s a sign that the ruler will be making her move soon.”

“It’ll be the coming of the Witch God, and if we’re not careful, we’ll get caught up in it too.” Alpha’s ruler, Cicelnia, was known for her youth and her beauty, but most of all for her sharp mind. That’s why she wasn’t just a beautiful symbol to be revered. At times, she got involved in internal and external affairs and stirred things up as she pleased. She had nothing to be ashamed of as far as her birth and upbringing were concerned, and she wasn’t afraid of powerful people. That’s why Frose referred to her as the mythological Witch God, daring and arrogant.

“There’s no harm in proceeding with caution. Even if it’s in small doses, it’s good to have information flowing to us,” Selva noted.

“Yes, I’m sure she’ll go through the proper channels when dealing with the nobles that she trusts, at least.” That said, Frose felt like she would get the rug pulled from under her if she trusted the rumors too much. It was difficult to tell if the bait hanging down was even real or not. After all, the source of the information was questionable. It was said to be from the palace or the upper echelons of the military, but even with Selva’s efforts to confirm it, they had no conclusive evidence. “Normally, I would love to just laugh it off, but not even you were able to find the source.”

“No, unfortunately. No matter what thread I followed, they all ended up with ‘a close aide of the ruler’ as the source.”

This was why Frose couldn’t completely drop the rumors from her mind. She sighed. “When it rains, it pours.”

Right now she was faced with a decision that would test her mettle as the head. If she made a mistake here, the Fable family would be ruined. This wasn’t the first time there’d been disturbing movements in the military. The top brass included some high nobility and others who wouldn’t hesitate to break the law

and even Berwick couldn’t contain them.

Even so, it was far from being a situation where the ruler would have to intervene directly. So what would make Cicelnia move? Alpha was already a powerhouse known for its magic prowess. It was without equal when it came to the number of Fiends eliminated and areas of territory reclaimed.

“Master Frose, there are countless possibilities. It will be nearly impossible to deal with them all.”

“I know. The best choice would be to stay cooped up inside and wait for the storm to become apparent. But I have a bad feeling about this rumor. It’s circulating around, but on the surface, nothing has happened in the palace yet.” Frose spoke her mind, while suppressing a bitter smile. “Say, Selva.”

“Yes, Master Frose?”

“If Lady Cicelnia were to make a move...do you think it would be an arrogant noble who would make it happen?”

“It’s hard to say, but I believe that would be the most likely cause.”

“I don’t suppose he’s involved in any of this?”

“Do you mean Sir Alus? True, if it’s him, I don’t believe he would show false humility or be overly considerate regardless of who he was dealing with.” Having fought Alus before, Selva had caught a glimpse of his capabilities. That was why he was practically convinced that he was the Single Digit Magicmaster that Alpha was keeping secret.

It was unknown why Alus had suddenly enrolled in the Institute, but through some strange circumstances, he had started to teach Tesfia. Selva was grateful, and didn’t want to make any strange assumptions.

“Don’t worry. It was just an idea I was entertaining. I don’t seriously believe he’s involved. But he did say something odd before, didn’t he?”

Selva realized what Frose was trying to say. “I see. There was something he wanted to ask you directly, wasn’t there, Master Frose?”

“Yes. Just what would he want to ask me?”

“I’m afraid that’s not something that an old man such as I would know. But if

it does interest you, perhaps it would be best to clear any doubts as soon as possible, although the answer might be anticlimactic."

"I guess I will call for him sooner rather than later," Frose said. She sank down into the comfortable sofa. "Thinking about it, this isn't the first time there's been turmoil behind the scenes in the palace. That ruler is too sharp and she can't sit still for long."

"Ha ha, perhaps I should take a deeper look."

"That would be playing with fire. Not even you would be able to infiltrate the palace, and neither could anyone else in the Inner World. As long as that spotter is by the ruler, she'll be able to see through any strange movements."

"Ah yes, Lady Rinne, was it... I was only mentioning, however, that it's been a while since you last visited the palace for a courtesy visit."

But Frose's expression remained troubled. "That would still be no different from playing with fire."

"Is that so..."

No matter what move Cicelnia made and for what reason, she wouldn't do anything that would hurt her relationship with the Governor-General, at least not while her interests were aligned with his. Cicelnia had been right when she'd pushed Berwick to take the position of Governor-General. "I would like to keep an eye on things for a little longer. But first, I will listen to Mr. Alus's question after a short break."

Frose stood up to leave the luxurious parlor and go to her study. As she reached the door she turned around, having thought of something. "Selva, I want you to gather information not just on the Womruinas, but also whatever you can about the palace. Anything at all, no matter how trivial it may seem."

"Understood." The elderly butler bowed deeply as he watched his master leave the room.

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When they'd driven by the huge gardens before reaching the mansion, Alus had thought it was a bit much, but he hadn't been surprised. But walking

through the mansion now, he found it was a world beyond his imagination. Regardless of how much money he had, he would never have dreamed of building such a huge mansion. That was why the almost shocking experience was so refreshing to him.

Alus looked around curiously, as they walked down a long corridor lined with door after door. Just how many rooms did the mansion have?

Tesfia was a little dumbfounded to see him like that. “It’s not that unusual.”

“I rarely visit mansions of the nobility, nor have I any interest in them.”

“Huh... Well, most of the rooms aren’t being used right now. All of the servants live in a separate building. Only Selva and the chamberlain live here now, I guess?”

“What a waste,” Loki bluntly said.

“Once beyond a certain level, most nobles’ houses are pretty similar. There’s nothing bad about having more rooms for social gatherings,” Tesfia said.

“Is that how it is...”

Tesfia looked at Alus. “I honestly don’t know if you’re being sarcastic or actually surprised.”

“I just thought it was a good opportunity to learn a little about nobility.”

“Hm. Well, I can tell you what I know.” Tesfia guided Alus and Loki through the mansion, repeatedly looking back as she talked to them. Each time she did, her side ponytail restlessly swayed back and forth as if revealing her feelings. After a while, she stopped in front of a room.

“Is this your room? Good, let me in for a minute. There’s something I want to ask you.”

“What?! I-Isn’t that a little wrong?”

Alus thought she was bad at feigning calmness. The way her eyes darted around revealed how much she wanted to avoid having him enter her room. As for the reason...

“We already know that your room is a mess, Ms. Tesfia.”

“Ah.”

Loki put her hand on the door knob and twisted it without hesitation. A click sounded, but Alus stopped her by raising his hand. He turned to Tesfia. “If you really don’t want us to, we’ll stop.”

“Mmmm... W-Well, I haven’t used it in over half a year, so it could use some tidying up. W-Wait just a minute!” Tesfia squeezed in between Loki and the door, and slipped her head inside to take a peek. Not satisfied with that, she leaned further in to get an even better look at the room, sticking her butt out in the process. Eventually, she pulled her head out of the gap and breathed a sigh of relief, oblivious to how she’d looked. “That’s fine, but...why do we have to talk in my room?”

“Just simple curiosity,” Alus said. “By the way, I wouldn’t care even if you had underwear lying on the floor.”

“I would! Not that there would be! I just said I’d left it empty for half a year, so there’s no way that would actually be true!” Tesfia’s face turned red at Alus’s insensitive remark, as she objected to what he had to say.

That’s when the silver-haired girl pushed Tesfia even more. “I think it’s possible.”

“Just what do you two think I am? I admit I might be a little lacking in femininity when it comes to keeping things clean, but I’m not that bad!”

“Then you wouldn’t mind...” Alus said.

“R-Right.” Tesfia came to a decision. She cleared her throat and reluctantly opened the door, and Alus and Loki stepped in.

“Just what you’d expect from a noble’s daughter,” Alus said.

Loki agreed. “It doesn’t leave anything to be desired.”

The room was not only spacious but luxurious. Among the various furnishings was a queen-size bed with a canopy. Due to the room’s size, however, the large bed didn’t have an overwhelming presence.

Alus had seen the dorm room that Alice and Tesfia shared, but this was three times as big as that room for two. Another door in the room was flung open for

ventilation. It was a walk-in closet with plenty of tailored dresses inside, but also an elegant collection of casual clothes.

“It’s unexpectedly clean.”

Loki’s muttered statement was quickly followed up on by Alus. “The chamberlain is probably just a stickler for cleaning.”

“Ugh...” It seemed Alus had hit the mark, as Tesfia groaned in response.

Ignoring Tesfia, Alus looked over the room once more. Not only was there beautiful furniture, but the room also featured mementos of her time spent here. No matter how neat and tidy the room was on the surface, some things couldn’t be hidden, and they were reminders of what the room’s owner was really like.

There was an old bookshelf and desk that she must’ve used when she was little. A worn woolen rug. A small sofa. Stuffed animals on the shelf and nightstand.

Alus felt like he could understand why Lilisha had looked around his laboratory. “Is this...Alice?” He picked up a photo and smiled. The photo showed a slightly younger Tesfia and Alice from a few years ago. Alice had the same kind and soft expression, but as expected, Tesfia looked a little cheeky.

“Ms. Alice looks cute... She looks like she’s twelve or thirteen,” Loki said, as she stood next to him and stared at the photo. Like Alus, she had grown up in the military, which was why she didn’t have any pictures or other tangible keepsakes. When she’d moved into Alus’s laboratory, she’d only needed a single bag for her personal belongings. The small bag contained everything she’d ever owned, all that she’d accumulated over her life.

However, this room contained more things than Tesfia could ever carry. It was almost dazzling to look at.

“What, Alice is the only cute one?” the redheaded girl asked with a blatant pout, cutting Loki’s sentimental thoughts short.

“It’s vexing, but you used to be pretty cute too.”

“Hee hee, really? Wait—you mean I’m not now?”

They both turned to Alus for his opinion, but he only gave a safe answer. “Well, they were both pretty cute back then. Also, Fia didn’t have any wrinkles then.”

“I don’t have any now either!”

“No, on the way here you were frowning a lot,” Alus said. He looked at the picture again with a serious expression, wondering if he’d ever been like that...but quickly rejected the idea. He hadn’t been. When he was that age, he’d been killing Fiends and even working behind the scenes. He thought back to those days and easily confirmed that he had no such fond memories. His past was like a black and white photo, void of any emotions. “They look like they’re having fun,” he murmured. The words just slipped out.

Loki was painfully aware of what Alus was really thinking. Because she knew his past, there were things she could say. And so, with a soft smile, she chose words that would touch his heart. “They really do, Sir Alus.”

For a brief moment, there was an intimate and calm atmosphere between them. But it was soon destroyed by a quizzical redhead. “What are you two doing? You’re acting strange.”

“I don’t want to hear that from you,” Alus shot back, and put the photo down. He sat on the edge of Tesfia’s bed. There was a light rebound, as if it had springs or something else in it. Of course, he had no complaints about the comfort.

“Don’t just sit down on my bed. You haven’t even taken your coat off.”

“Don’t complain about the small things when you don’t even do the cleaning yourself. And there’s barely anywhere else to sit. First of all, I’m sitting here because it’s easier to talk this way.”

“Fine. So what did you want to talk about? Ah, before that...” Tesfia sat down on the sofa and straightened her back. She was blushing a little and fidgeting. “Um... Thank you very much for everything that’s happened. It probably would’ve been a disaster if I was alone. No, it definitely would have been. You even came all the way to my home...even though you hate nobles, right? So...I’m sorry,” Tesfia finished. She fiddled with her hair and wore an awkward smile.

Alus and Loki both looked disinterested. “Pick between thanking or apologizing,” Alus retorted.

Loki went next. “Yes. Rather than apologize, just say that you’ll do everything you can even if it kills you. Even if it’s a lie, you’d still be worth ridiculing that way.”

“Ah, um...hmm?”

As Tesfia tilted her head in confusion, Loki felt like being mischievous. “Just so you know, Sir Alus isn’t going to lend his help for free.”

“Hey!” Alus reproached Loki for casually saying something so unscrupulous. “I may have wound up getting caught up in it, but Aile was probably planning on going after me eventually anyways, so it would’ve been the same outcome.” It may have been that the entire incident had just been a pretext for Aile to get Alus. Either way, it was thanks to Lilisha that they’d been able to get the best possible outcome from the negotiations. “Well, don’t worry about me. Just make sure to thank Lilisha afterwards.”

“Oh, no thanks!” Tesfia held her palms out in front of her, refusing to thank Lilisha in any way.

Alus was exasperated. Her attitude was due to personal feelings and grudges. In a sense, she was still juvenile.

Seemingly aware of that herself, Tesfia awkwardly continued. “Kidding, just kidding. I will...but only after I’ve beaten her up in our duel.”

“Wow...” Loki gave Tesfia a cold stare for her closed-mindedness.

“What? It’s just a little payback! Besides, I already thanked her once. What does it have to do with this?” It seemed Tesfia couldn’t be honest about Lilisha. She wouldn’t call them rivals, but they were both nobles around the same age and each had her own pride to protect. It was something Alus and Loki couldn’t understand.

In the end, Alus let go of the topic for now, as there were more important things to discuss. “Then I’ll ask about some other things you won’t like, okay?”

“Uh... S-Sure, if you need to.”

“Got it. First, I want to hear about your father.”

“...! He passed away when I was little.” It happened when Tesfia was too young to have had memories of him.

She’d answered surprisingly easily, and it was an answer Alus had somewhat expected. “I see. So he was a Magicmaster?”

“Yes, that’s what I heard from my mother. He passed away in the Outer World. I don’t really know the details, but apparently he wasn’t very high-ranked. My mother was the rightful heir to the Fable family, so my father married into the family.”

“Hmm. So what attribute did he use?”

“I think it was wind. It shouldn’t have been ice at least.”

“I see...” There was no requirement that the head of the family be a man. Instead, the condition was to have mastered the highest class of the spell passed down in the family. And since the father had died early, Frose had had no other children besides Tesfia. In other words, Frose was training her to be the successor because she fortunately had an affinity for ice. That was partly why she’d been allowed to stay at the Institute, in addition to Frose having seen her capabilities at the Friendship Magical Tournament. “So is it possible your father had a sibling or apprentice that could use the ice attribute? A very capable one, I mean.”

“I don’t think I’ve heard any stories like that. But what’s with the strangely meaningful question...? Is there something important about my father?”

“I don’t have any conclusive evidence, so I can’t say yet.”

“Well, okay.”

As they spoke, Alus removed one possibility from the list in his mind. He was thinking about the mysterious snow man they had encountered in Vanalis. The red-haired Magicmaster had used an environment-altering spell. He’d also used a spell similar to Zepel, the spell Alus had devised for Tesfia.

Alus had made some changes to the original spell in order to create Zepel, but it was similar to the magic passed down in the Fable family. Specifically, it was

an advanced form of Icicle Sword. He'd suspected that the snow man might be Tesfia's father or someone related to him, but that might have been too obvious a guess. Tesfia's father had used the wind attribute, and even if there'd been someone who was close to him, they wouldn't have been able to take Icicle Sword to the next level using normal skills.

There was no doubt that the snow man was a skilled master of the ice attribute. To use an environment-altering spell of that scale required vast amounts of mana, yet that man had had no problem cornering Loki and Mujir, and even had enough strength left to fight Alus. In retrospect, Alus's decision to kill him immediately had been the right one.

Loki saw the fierce glint in Alus's eyes as he recalled the bloody memory. She asked a question as if to soften the atmosphere. "By the way, is that how nobles do it, Ms. Tesfia?"

"Do what?"

"You said your father married into your family, right? So, you know... Do they take special considerations to pass down the parent's affinity?"

"Hm?" Tesfia was strangely slow on the uptake when it came to these kinds of topics.

Loki hesitated to state it more clearly. She tried to think of other ways to phrase it, but the more she considered the delicate side of relations between a man and a woman, the redder her face became.

Seeing that, Alus said it instead. "In short, she's talking about marriages to keep the bloodline alive. In other words, producing children to continue the family."

"Wha—?!" Tesfia trembled, and her ponytail swayed back and forth. Her mouth opened and closed, like a fish on land.

"I guess it depends," Alus said. "I imagine that the Fable family mainly hones its swordsmanship and combines it with magic. You can tell by observing the shape of Icicle Sword." It was also why the head of the family needed to have an affinity for ice magic. And further, it was expected of them to maintain the secrets and traditions of the family. "However, excessive demands that the

head be excellent at magic can lead to a troublesome situation. It feels old-fashioned and outdated."

"Do you really have to put it like that?!" Tesfia frowned at Alus's cold remark. The tradition he called outdated was a source of pride for her, an inseparable part of how she saw her family. She also understood the hardships that her mother went through as the head of the family, so she couldn't leave it alone.

"Don't get caught up on everything I say. It's not like I hate every single thing about nobles. I do have a somewhat favorable impression of the Fable family, including looking after a certain inadequate daughter."

"I-I get that!" Tesfia groaned, as she was caught between her sense of duty and her feelings.

Alus scratched his head. "All right, all right. If the lady doesn't like it, I'll take it back. But in terms of only producing excellent Magicmasters, it's a logical step."

Unlike one's store of mana, affinity was often determined at a young age and based on experiences. Because of that, one couldn't fully ignore the impact of genetics. Light and dark—the two elements—were an exception, but as to most attributes, a child would inherit the same ones as their parents had. The current theory was that childhood experiences accumulated as magical information in the body.

"I-I thought so! Tradition and blood are important." Tesfia nodded in agreement, but then lowered her eyes. "But I do think there are harmful effects too, like you say, Al. Since the head of the family has to pass down the inherited magic, the Fable family needs to protect its lineage. My mother has to go through a lot. Learning the highest class of the spell is supposedly very hard...I think..."

Her voice ended weakly because she hadn't really heard anything about the highest class of the spell from Frose. To the public, Icicle Sword was the Fable family's forte, but she figured that the actual hidden arts behind it were something beyond that. Icicle Sword was an advanced spell, but it wasn't that difficult to control, and moreover, Tesfia had already learned it. She found it hard to believe that it would be enough to become the next head.

"Zepel's a spell that I developed, after all. But there's probably something

similar to it.”

“Hmm... My mother is very strict, so even if I ask, I don’t think she would just tell me.” A deep crease formed on Tesfia’s brow as she thought about it.

Loki couldn’t help but notice that. “Ms. Tesfia, I don’t want to say too much, but I think you should focus on the Tenbram for now. Sir Alus will be participating, so I don’t want anything to go wrong. I will help too, of course.”

“Y-Yeah. I know, but...”

“You’re bound to get anxious and waver when you try to pursue two things at once. Not to mention that thinking about two things at the same time doesn’t suit you. So you need to decide on one thing to do, and then focus just on that!” Loki declared.

Tesfia raised her head and smiled a little. “Thank you, Loki. Okay, I’ll be myself.”

“That’s more like it!”

The two girls nodded at each other. They had gotten a lot closer. Alus felt like Tesfia had stopped triggering Loki so much, and Loki had started to understand Tesfia’s personality. Also, in the past Loki had only cared about Alus, but a change was happening inside of her. Alus himself had learned that real change was hard to notice on one’s own.

“Hitting it off is fine and all, but the Tenbram isn’t the only thing happening here. My main concern is elsewhere. But for the time being, that’s enough about your family magic and your father. It’s about time you took us to our rooms.”

“Okay.” Tesfia nodded, and with that, they were done talking about things in her bedroom.

After walking through the mansion for a while, Alus and Loki were shown to a guest room that was completely furnished like a hotel room. The servants must’ve been sent out ahead of them to prepare everything.

Tesfia gave Alus and Loki a quick explanation about the room. “The door locks from the inside, and there’s only one bed in this room. There’s another room

down the hall that Loki can stay in."

"Alice used to come here from time to time, right?" Alus asked. "What did you do then?"

"Well, she stayed in my room..."

"I see. Well, since you're both girls, why not treat Loki the same way sometimes?"

"Sir Alus?! I don't mind staying in your room as always." Loki said this like it was the most natural thing in the world.

Tesfia's eyes opened wide. "Really?! D-Don't tell me you share a bed too..." She covered her mouth in surprise.

"Hey, don't say anything that could be misinterpreted!" Alus looked at Loki. Then he turned back to Tesfia. "Don't worry, we have separate rooms, well, partitioned spaces more like. Actually, you already knew that."

"R-Right. But you won't be sleeping in the same room here, okay?" Tesfia crossed her arms and deliberately winked as if to hide her embarrassment. "Anyways, about sleeping in my room...of course Loki is okay. We're both girls, and we almost never get a chance to talk just the two of us like this."

"Um, I don't need or want any such chance," Loki curtly said, rejecting her.

But Tesfia acted like she hadn't heard her. "All right, so Loki is staying in my room."

"S-Sir Alus..."

"Fia, just a trivial question, but as a historic noble family, do the Fables have any distant relatives?"

"Hm? Well, of course. There's always some relatives you don't know who greet you at birthday parties. A lot of them aren't nobles but they're still part of the family, I guess. We have almost no regular interactions with them."

"All right, just wanted to ask."

Tesfia left, pulling Loki along with her. Alus chose not to say anything as he saw them off. He hoped they would be able to use this opportunity to get along

better, as Tesfia had said. This would probably be Loki's first time talking with a girlfriend while staying overnight. Tesfia and Alice got along exceptionally well, but Alus hoped that Loki could also have a more normal life. He waved at them, as if he'd done a good deed, and threw a casual "See you later" at Tesfia's back.

Inside his room, Alus hung up his coat and lay down on the bed. He rested his mind and body for a while.

A knock came on the door. He'd said that he wanted to ask Frose something before, so he was more or less expecting this and wasn't surprised.

When Alus opened the door he found not a maid, but the butler Selva. "Sir Alus, preparations for the meeting have been completed. Please come this way."

"Got it."

That was all that needed to be said. Only their footsteps rang out as they walked through the mansion. Alus wondered how many rooms they'd passed by as they finally reached Frose's study.

As expected of the head of the family's study, the room had a modern yet relaxing atmosphere. The wooden textured walls and furniture gave the room a warm feeling that was subtle and not overbearing. Mixed in with the almost nostalgic scent of parchment and ink was a fragrance of flowers that tickled Alus's nose.

"Go ahead, Mr. Alus. Please have a seat." Frose Fable, the head of the family, greeted Alus and offered him a chair.

The chair was not too soft and not too hard, and offered perfect comfort. As a grand noble's office, unlike Berwick's office, Frose's study was quite tasteful. Since Alus had just had tea, he declined Selva's offer to pour him another.

"Does it interest you?" Frose asked. She'd noticed that Alus was staring at something.

"Yes." It was a single katana hanging on the wall. While it was resting in its scabbard, it was easy to imagine that it was a famous sword with a history from its make and overall atmosphere. "Is it an AWR?"

Frose honestly responded to Alus's frank question. "It is, but at the same time it's not. It is still too incomplete to be an AWR."

"I see. Does it have an inscription?"

"..."

"It's a secret? Now I'm suddenly very interested. May I touch it?"

"Can I ask you not to? It is our most precious family heirloom."

"Ah. What a shame." Alus had half risen from his chair, but sat back down.

Frose smiled a little. "Once it's in Fia's hands, you can touch it as much as you want," she said, implying that intimacy with Tesfia would be necessary first.

But regardless of whether Alus picked up on her meaning, he chose to steer the topic in a different direction. "It's pretty similar to what Fia already uses."

"Yes, well, that one is another family heirloom. Before she received it, it hung up there with that katana. It's been passed down in our family for several generations."

"I see." Once Alus heard that, a doubt rose in his mind. Normally AWRs were created as such from the start, regardless of their shape. That's why, unlike normal weapons, materials like steel weren't used but other materials that were better suited for conducting mana.

Of course, magic formulas could be inscribed and engraved in steel too, but if the material was unsuitable the magic would often fail to manifest. But in that respect, the weapon he was looking at was strange. From what Frose had said, it was originally forged as a normal katana before being turned into an AWR. If it was incomplete, however, then it wasn't suitable either as a normal weapon or an AWR. It was like they were ruining the value of the family heirloom. "For generations... So a number of people have used this AWR?"

Typically, the higher performing an AWR was, the more specialized it became. It would be customized to suit its user as much as possible. The user's mana information would pass through it countless times, so the material itself would acclimate to them. In other words, the more use an AWR saw, the worse its performance became, and the flow of mana would be disturbed. The katana in

front of him would've been used by each generation of the family, so while it might be an heirloom, in terms of utility it should be practically useless.

"Does it have any special properties or mechanisms?"

In reaction to Alus revealing his curiosity with his questions, Selva spoke up as if to stop him. "Sir Alus..."

His tone was soft and natural, but there was a gravitas to it that startled even Alus. Realizing once again that Selva was not a normal person, he apologized. "Excuse me. I asked too much."

Frose wore a generous smile in return. "Oh, it's fine. It's not like there are any special methods. The katana Fia uses wasn't engraved with a magic formula until she became its owner."

"So until then..."

"Yes, it was just a normal katana. Only the basic formula has been engraved, leaving it unfinished on purpose. That katana... Its name is Kikuri. It was the one that both my predecessor and I used in order to get used to handling a katana before we got our own AWRs. It was a tradition of sorts."

This was the first time Alus had heard the name of Tesfia's AWR. It almost sounded like a person's name. "Hmm."

He'd never really taken notice of nobility before, but there was something he'd felt upon visiting the Fable family. It was the weight of years of family tradition. He felt it even from the mansion itself with its historical appearance. Just as the study felt nostalgic and relaxing, perhaps just existing for a long time was enough to give something value and meaning.

But he wasn't going to reconsider his stance on most nobles, nor would he tolerate their arrogance and narrow-mindedness. He did feel like he could understand why ordinary people respected and admired them though.

It was unclear how Frose interpreted Alus's silence, but she suddenly smiled, and seemingly opened up to him. "Mr. Alus, I will tell you this because it's you. Fia knows this too. The Fable family has both a head and a secret heir. The former succeeds the family, while the latter inherits the craft."

She carefully began to explain things to Alus, as if teaching him the customs of nobility. “Blood is what is valued most from the head of the family. And the secret heir to the craft is known as the Ertlade. It’s what you would call an old tradition. It is preferable for the head of the family to also be the Ertlade, or rather, that is our dearest wish,” Frose concluded, with a fragile, sad-looking smile.

But Alus found it a little suspicious. “From what I’ve heard from Fia, I take it that you’re both, Mrs. Fable?”

“Strictly speaking, I am not. As I said, the qualities expected from the heir to the craft are different from those required for the head of the family. As I’m not the secret heir to the craft, I am not a complete heir in that sense. To be honest, I was planning on not fussing over the secret heir in my generation.”

That was probably why she wanted to have Tesfia take over as the head of the family and be ready for marriage as soon as possible. She’d made a quick judgment that her daughter didn’t have the talent. If Tesfia hadn’t had an affinity for ice, she probably would have only been given an education to become the next head of the family and not been trained to be a Magicmaster.

Frose took a piece of paper on her desk and slowly ran her pen across it, as if trying to explain. “There are two lines of powerful inherited spells that could be considered perfect. Icicle Sword is the initial stage for one of those.” The practitioners would complete the initial stage and pick up the techniques needed to handle the perfected form. Be it Icicle Sword or other inherited spells, all of them carried strong possibilities of being stepping stones to the next level.

“So the rightful heir is one of those Ertlades that has mastered the perfected inherited spells?”

A heavy mood filled the room when Alus asked this question. Frose wasn’t offended though. Rather, she had picked up on the nuance behind his question. He’d touched on the heart of the Fable family’s secret. She paused for a moment, then exhaled and faced Alus head on. “How much have you noticed?”

“I had a vague idea when I was playing around with the formula for Icicle Sword. So Zepel really was something similar, then? I made it after I saw Icicle

Sword.”

“How horrifying. I’ve never encountered a Magicmaster like you before. Your combat skills and ability to analyze the structure of magic are to be envied. Please do use those talents to teach Fia a thing or two.”

“I’m more interested in my own work,” Alus sharply said, trying to prevent Frose from diverting the topic back to Fia again.

Frose wryly smiled, and looked a little resigned. “Yes, as you have surmised...the path that Zepel indicates leads to the right answer. Specifically, I felt that Icicle Sword was well sublimated and it connects to the next step. It’s even been improved to better suit her fighting style.”

“As expected, the relative position of the caster was the key.” Alus nodded in satisfaction. It was different and unexpected, but oddly refreshing.

“That’s true, but there’s one more thing that I hope you won’t tell Fia. My abilities as a commander aside, unfortunately, I don’t have much talent as a Magicmaster. Even when I was on active duty, I couldn’t handle spells that required such complex coordinate adjustments. That’s why I’m not the heir to the craft. Still, to link movements of the body to the coordinates is quite the drastic move.”

“It’s an approach that works for Fia. The basics of swordsmanship that she’s picked up from practicing on her own works as a foundation for the spell.”

“Being able to work directly for something might be her biggest talent.” Frose had decided to back off and watch over her daughter’s journey to become a first-rate Magicmaster after seeing her use Zepel in the tournament. She’d known that that was the path to the Ertlade.

Even so, Alus’s knowledge and skill had played a big part in Zepel’s development. In that sense, Frose saying that she didn’t know a Magicmaster greater than Alus was without a doubt the truth. He was teaching her—that was true—but still, he was using that power for a single girl. It could even be considered a waste of talent in a way. Just how much power did Alus have?

As Frose smiled somewhat bitterly at him, Alus made a request. “I’d like to get your permission regarding teaching Fia a new spell.”

When nobles taught their children magic, they typically had their own way of doing things. Alus hadn't cared much when he'd taught Zepel to Tesfia, but since he was face to face with the head of the family now, he figured he would confirm it with her first. The fact that he'd started thinking about inherited magic and the social rules of nobility and their way of being meant that coming all the way to the Fable estate might not have been a waste.

"That's... But maybe...it's fine?" It seemed Frose couldn't give an immediate answer. Her question wasn't for Alus, but for the butler standing by her side.

The elderly butler smiled with amusement and responded to his master's question. "Well, well. I believe it would be fine to leave matters in Sir Alus's hands. His abilities are beyond what an ordinary person could imagine. It's no mystery why he takes no notice of the son of Womruina."

Frose nodded at Selva, and turned back to Alus. "Typically, it's customary for the magic training to take place within the family, and usually she would have to open that path for herself. But this incident does concern your future as well, so I have no choice but to ask for your help. It's truly unbecoming for one of the three great noble families." Frose lowered her head to Alus.

As a former military woman, she understood that developing a new spell was normally a large-scale project that required many people and a great deal of time to complete. That was especially true for powerful and useful spells.

However, Alus wasn't particularly concerned with his own efforts. His worries were about something different. "It's nothing to lower your head for. It's not like I'm creating a new spell from scratch. But it might end up serving as a hint for the expert-level inherited spell. Would you still be fine with that?"

The new spell Alus was thinking of would be based off Icicle Sword just like Zepel. That said, Tesfia did have good intuition and was blessed with talent. And as the only daughter of the Fable family, the new spell might give her insights on the theory and fundamentals of her own family's specialty. He had taken all of that into account before asking for permission.

"Of course, that would be fine. Fia is already on the second stage of knowledge of inherited magic, so she's practically mastered one of the inherited spells. I have no intention of getting in the way."

“Glad to hear it,” Alus said.

He felt a weight come off his shoulders and started to lean back in his chair, but Frose’s next words turned his expression serious again.

“Leaving Fia aside, let’s go back to what we discussed before. Just how much do you know about the Fable family, I wonder. The questions you’ve asked are ones that can’t even be revealed to most of the family...although if you will take on the Fable name, I wouldn’t mind telling you everything.” Frose’s light-red lips turned up in a smile with her last words. This time it would be Alus’s turn to fall into a trap with no escape...or so she thought.

“No thanks.” Alus bluntly rejected her offer. “As I said before, I can’t even imagine things like that right now. And I don’t think someone who’d be shallow enough to marry into the family just to get their hands on a secret art would be suitable for your daughter. Besides, to me, Fia is just someone to teach, a student and nothing more.”

Frose shrugged at his curt reply. “I wonder what that girl would think if she heard that... Oh well, Selva said something to that effect before, but it seems he was right. You’re very stubborn, or just inflexible on that point.”

“I’ll just pretend I didn’t hear those insulting words. It’s something I get a lot,” Alus replied with an unconcerned expression.

“Well, it was worth a try,” Frose said with an exaggerated sigh. “But if she wants to leave her family behind and live as a single woman, I would have no objections. Do try to remember that.” She stared at him seriously.

But Alus just nodded. “Then let’s leave it at that. And just in case—if I do happen to be teaching Fia an expert-level inherited spell or something similar—should I be cautious?”

Frose only smiled. “Well, it is the Fable family’s magic. Even if it’s just one of many spells, I think it would be impossible even for you to accidentally replicate or surpass it.”

“You sound convinced of that. It really makes me want to challenge it.”

“Ha ha, how frightening. But if I conclude that Fia will be able to learn the inherited magic, then I will teach her eventually...as long as she doesn’t stumble

before then.”

Alus gazed at Frose and considered what she’d said. *I guess that means she doesn’t fully believe in her daughter’s potential yet. I suppose that’s to be expected from a former commander and instructor. She’s thoroughly cautious and keeps a coolheaded stance.*

At one point, there had been a large gap between Frose and Tesfia. The reason Tesfia felt like her mother had given up on her, and why Frose had decided there was a limit to her daughter’s abilities, was because Frose had witnessed a Single Digit Magicmaster with monstrous abilities fight before...Sisty. As a result, she’d been made aware of her own lack of strength.

Ever since then, Frose had given up on Tesfia’s career as a Magicmaster. It was a logical but coldhearted decision, and it determined how Frose saw the world. That was why she was able to objectively and unemotionally observe her daughter’s potential.

It seemed that Alus finally understood how much talent was demanded in order to master the use of the Fable family’s inherited spells. *But if it’s that powerful, it could be considered ultimate-level magic by today’s standards. Now I’m suddenly interested.*

He’d avoided being roped into the Fable family, but his interest had been thoroughly captured. In fact, the Tenbram might just have been an excuse to visit the Fable estate for this reason. He’d wanted clues as to the snow man he’d encountered in Vanalis, or rather the environment-altering magic that he’d used.

Berwick had already hinted at the spells that nobles kept to themselves. And the Fable family was well-known for producing Magicmasters with an affinity for ice magic. Considering those two factors, even Alus had found it worthwhile to step into the territory of the nobles he disliked so much.

He’d asked Tesfia, but didn’t receive information of any real value. So now he thought about the head of the family. He didn’t care about most things, but when it came to AWRs and knowledge of spells he’d never seen before, Alus could be very greedy and aggressive. Spells he didn’t know...be they created through personal construction, or a vast amount of mana, fundamental talent,

or if Lost Spells were involved... Just the thought of it made Alus excited.

Getting secret information from the head of the family would no doubt give him clues. *How should I attack this?* When it came to feeling others out, the head of a noble family was better than most. Roundabout methods wouldn't open the door to the information he wanted, but if he wasn't careful, he would wind up stepping back into the topic of marrying into the family.

After thinking for a moment, Alus turned to Frose and began. "It seems the topic has been derailed. Now that I have permission to teach Fia new magic, let's leave inherited spells aside. I want to talk about the reason why I came here. It wasn't the Tenbram, but another incident. It concerns a mission that I was on a little while ago."

Alus chose to go with a frontal attack. If he explained his participation in reclaiming Vanalis and his encounter with the snow man, he hoped that Frose would part with some valuable knowledge. The mission was a military secret, but Frose was formerly with the military. She would understand the importance of what he told her and was trustworthy enough to keep the secret.

Sure enough, Frose immediately responded to Alus. "Oh, is that so? Perhaps I should have Selva step out?"

"No, it's fine. It wouldn't hurt to get the opinion of a fierce warrior too."

Frose read Alus's intentions, and gave Selva a look that said to stand by.

"We've finished reclaiming Vanalis, and knowing you, I'm sure you've already heard about it."

"Of course. I heard that Lettie took command. She was quite obsessed with that place. Now we have another foothold to strike from in the Outer World, so I'm sure Governor-General Berwick is excited."

Alus nodded. He gave Frose a meaningful look, and as expected, it was enough for Frose to understand everything.

"Ah, I see. You were there too, Mr. Alus."

"I'll leave that up to your imagination. But I'm not sure that even you have heard about this... There was actually a battle against a hostile power."

“By hostile power, you mean...not a Fiend but a human?” The sharp-witted Frose immediately guessed the truth from his choice of words.

He was glad she was quick on the uptake, and continued. “He was very strong and mysterious. Of course, I quickly eliminated him.”

Frose narrowed her eyes. Having been in charge of a battalion, she understood the gravity of the situation and how unusual it was. “Any chance that it was another nation’s Magicmaster? ...I guess not.” From the way Alus was acting, she knew that killing the opponent hadn’t been an accident.

Alus shook his head. “He displayed clear hostility, so I cut his head off, but afterwards his corpse vanished. I’m not being ambiguous when I say that. I mean that he disappeared.”

“So what do you want to ask me?” Frose’s tone was firm.

Alus felt like he was the one being questioned, but he answered without hesitation. “He was probably attempting to sabotage the attack on Vanalis. There was only one main culprit, but judging from the situation he wasn’t from another nation, nor was he related to Alpha. Not even the military has been able to identify him. The only clue is the magic that he used. It was a spell that not even a Single like me had seen before.”

Beyond that was information that the Governor-General had warned him not to share, but Alus didn’t have much choice. “I got in touch with the Governor-General and did some research on my own, but I couldn’t find any taboo spell that corresponded to it, so I figured I’d look into the inherited spells of nobles.”

“So why did you choose the Fable family?”

“From the fact that he used ice magic...and also my hunch.”

“Your hunch, you say.”

“Call it a coincidence if you want, but I don’t know many nobles.”

“But that’s not enough for me to tell you the characteristics of our secret inherited spells. Don’t misunderstand me. I want to cooperate as much as I can. I do owe you a lot, after all,” Frose said sincerely, proving that she wasn’t speaking with politics in mind.

“I understand your circumstances, but I do believe you might have some valuable information. I was hoping to hear at least a fragment of it.”

Frose put a finger to her lip as she thought about it.

That was when unexpected aid came from the side. “Master Frose, if I may be so bold, I wish to ask the same. It doesn’t seem to be unrelated to the military, which you still have connections to.” Selva politely bowed his head.

At first glance it appeared that Selva was siding with Alus and helping him, but the truth was probably different. From Alus’s point of view, it seemed like they were following the steps of a predetermined plot.

“That’s unusual for you,” Frose told Selva quietly. There was an atmosphere of consideration and harmony in the air. After a moment, she spoke again. “Then how about this, Mr. Alus? What is your reasoning for believing that the mysterious enemy used a spell from our family? Just saying it’s because he used ice magic isn’t enough. You called it a hunch, but surely there’s more. So can I ask you to explain that in detail? After hearing what you have to say, I will decide what to tell you.” In her mind, she was making a concession.

Talk about shrewd. She wants to wring all the information out of me. Alus had already gone beyond what Berwick told him to keep quiet about, so he needed to think about it. The other party had the upper hand in terms of what they would say, so he wondered if he should take her up on her offer.

He just couldn’t get used to the roundabout and hinting ways of nobles. He wanted Lilisha around for times like these, but he had the feeling that it would come back to bite him in the ass if he kept using her as he pleased.

Alus sighed. “I understand.” In the end, he decided to be frank and hope that the other party would be fair. He then began to explain the details to Frose, starting with the enemy’s appearance, height, age, and everything else he’d been able to confirm with his own eyes.

Then he spoke of his theories about how the body had disappeared, from the idea that the man had had companions to more unlikely ones such as using a psychological trick to make it seem like he had died.

Alus said everything he could think of, but without any evidence they were all

just theories. Moreover, neither Frose nor Selva could come up with convincing theories either, so they returned to the topic of the magic that the snow man had used. “Aside from the big spell in question, the man used another spell. He created an ice sword that floated in the air that he freely controlled. I thought its shape looked similar to Fia’s Icicle Sword. And the coordinates changed with the movements of his body, which is similar to Zepel. I suppose that’s why I associated him with the Fable family.”

“I see,” Frose said. “But the biggest one was the environment-altering spell that turned Vanalis into a snowscape.”

“Yes. I believe that snow had a special property. It could obstruct other spells to a degree, and by using that it was possible to detect through the snow on the ground.”

Alus talked about all of it, but he’d still left one thing unsaid...and that was how he believed that the man was working together with the Fiends. Fiends and humans were mortal enemies. He didn’t know if it was even possible for them to cooperate. But he decided that it wasn’t something to lightly discuss.

Frose remained silent for a full minute, as she fell deep into thought. Finally she said, “I understand. Thank you for the detailed information. I hope you understand that what I’m about to say can’t leave this room. The spell you mentioned is indeed an inherited spell of the Fable family.”

“!!! So what kind of spell is it?” Alus’s eyebrows went up.

“Before I tell you, I want you to promise not to disclose anything you hear. Not even to Fia.”

“Yes. That goes both ways in any event. I’ve touched on a lot of confidential military information.”

Frose nodded. “Strictly speaking, it’s a spell that the head of the family acquired two generations ago. It’s called Garb Sheep.”

?! I saw that in the taboo spell list. It was just the name, but that’s strange. Something on the level of Icicle Sword was one thing, but the highest level of inherited magic was never supposed to be revealed. Even Berwick had said that spells like that wouldn’t be recorded in the Magic Compendium. “That’s

strange. I saw a spell by that name in the list I mentioned earlier. Why would it be listed in the Compendium? And as a taboo spell, at that."

"Yes, normally not even the names of inherited magic would be revealed. It's a custom of nobility in order to maintain superiority over other nobles. But on the other hand...sometimes information is offered to the Magic Compendium in return for something," Frose said with a meaningful look.

"Is that so... I can't say I know much of the inner workings of nobility."

"I imagine not. The Fable family's power and status were established by bargaining with the ruler and Governors-General. However, only one person has mastered Garb Sheep, but despite that, he was never acknowledged as the secret heir to the craft."

Alus listened carefully, silently absorbing this information.

"Be it how to learn it, the price to pay, or its overly powerful effect...I'll just say that there was a problem with one of those. At any rate, Garb Sheep functions as a detection spell, but there's more to it than that. According to the records, it could indirectly destroy large forces of hundreds or thousands of people."

"I'm interested in the construction formula. I could look at the Compendium again, but unfortunately the magic formula wasn't recorded in it."

"It wouldn't be. Mr. Alus, the name for Garb Sheep has probably been removed from the list of taboo spells. That was the kind of deal that was made."

Alus furrowed his brow and tried to decipher what Frose was saying. By removed from the list, she meant that Garb Sheep shouldn't be recorded in the Magic Compendium. That was probably a pact that was made with Berwick. So why had it been in there the other day when Alus had looked? And unnaturally enough, it was just the name.

Berwick set me up. He must've figured that the name alone would be enough to lead me to the Fable family, or maybe I'm reading too much into it. But if it really has disappeared from the Magic Compendium, that confirms it. Alus felt like Berwick had completely led him around by the nose.

“Now, if you would like to hear more, I would like to make another deal.”

“Is that so... Then I’ll leave it at that. Thank you for your time,” Alus said with a shrug. “I have the feeling that if I hear the rest of the story, I won’t be able to turn back.”

To be honest, Alus didn’t want to owe this shrewd head of the family any big debts. She appeared to have relented on getting him to marry into the family, but who knew when she’d bring it back up again? She could be strangely persistent, like once she’d decided on something she would do what it took to achieve it. It was easy to imagine that she’d be as capable as Sisty when it came to such maneuvers, as to be expected from one of the Three Pillars. That said, he did have one more reason for it.

“Oh, is that so?” Frose muttered with a wry smile, as Alus stood up. At the same time Selva moved without a sound, and elegantly opened the door to see him out.

“Thank you too for the useful information, Mr. Selva.”

“Not at all. This is the least I can do for you, Mr. Alus, for looking after the young miss.” The elderly butler gave Alus a deep bow, and Alus returned it with a nod.

“I had fun today. Let’s talk again sometime, Mr. Alus,” Frose called out to his back.

“Yes,” Alus answered reluctantly, before quickly leaving the study.

Jeez, who knows what kind of information she’d pull out of me if I’d stayed any longer. Alus suddenly felt exhausted. His footsteps reverberated down the hall as he rubbed his neck. “She’s not the head of the family just for show. She’s protected the family all on her own.”

Not only was Frose sharp and capable of overwhelming people, she was once a fierce military instructor. He could sympathize with Tesfia for having such a person as her mother. *Although I can’t imagine Tesfia being able to follow in her footsteps. I can only see the family collapsing in three days if that happened.* He couldn’t help but think of Tesfia’s usual face when she was flustered by Loki’s sharp tongue, and cracked a smile. “Now I’ll retreat to my room and rest.”

Alus trudged down the long, long hallway to his guest room.

Sixty-Ninth Chapter

Midnight Blood Feast

After a short rest, it was dinner time at the Fable estate.

In the dining room was a long table with an elaborate array of dishes lined up. Surprisingly, dinner wasn't as silent of an event as Alus had expected, as even the servants joined in for a buffet-style dinner.

There was a rather tedious explanation of the dishes by the chef, but it wasn't as formal as he'd imagined based on what Tesfia had told him. It was probably part of the host being considerate, not that Alus could display the perfect table manners of a noble even if asked to.

It was a grand feast with everything from meat and vegetables to fruits. There was also a variety of beverages ranging from high-quality spring water to juices, wine, and tea.

Light conversations were held and the dinner ended in a harmonious atmosphere. Alus was guided afterwards to the large bathhouse where he could wash away the rest of his fatigue. He was able to view the large garden from his bath. As he exhaled and relaxed in the water, he lost track of time, and night was soon upon him.

As for Loki, she'd entered the baths ahead of Alus to lie in wait for him, but Tesfia came and took her away.

Tesfia wore a bright smile as she said, "The night is still young..."

Loki pleaded for Alus's help with a desperate scream, but he saw her off in silence, pretending not to hear her.

Tesfia's bedroom was sure to be blooming with girl talk tonight, and filled with a sickeningly sweet smell. Of course, that would be if things went according to Alus's selfish ideals. *This is part of what it takes to learn what is*

normal for girls. So do your best, Loki. He could at least cheer for her in his mind. Besides, it would help to distract Tesfia from what was happening.

"She has a tendency to worry too much." When it came to that redhead, her expressions and emotions changed every five minutes, making it impossible to tell if she was being positive or negative. She was practically both extremes at once. *At any rate, she's almost completely unlike her mother. Perhaps she got it from her father?* Alus wondered, as he got out of the bath and returned to his room.

That said, he didn't have anything to do there. The only things he had to kill time with were the book he'd slipped into his pocket and the AWR he'd brought with him just in case. And he'd already finished doing maintenance on Night Mist. An AWR really hadn't been necessary for visiting the Fable family, but his fight with Selva the last time and Womruina's creepy side had made him cautious. He didn't think it was likely, but didn't want to be unprepared for a sneak attack in case Aile had changed his mind.

After checking behind the curtains and around the room, Alus eventually lay down on the bed to relax and think about the Fable family. "Among nobles, their obsession with katanas stands out a little. Do all noble families have a talent like that? No, I can't say I've heard anything like that from Lord Vizaist."

Vizaist Socalent was the Magicmaster in charge of the intelligence unit. He wasn't too fixated on the noble status he'd built up in a single generation, even boasting how he wouldn't hesitate to let it go if necessary. In that sense, Alus couldn't use Vizaist as a standard to measure other nobles by.

At any rate, it was clear that the Fable family valued not just magic but swordsmanship as well. *There were combatants among the servants too.* He'd been convinced of that during the dinner. Although it was concealed, there were unmistakable hints of their training in their mannerisms and gestures. They'd also had eyes that were too sharp for mere servants.

However, most of Tesfia's maids didn't know how to fight. In fact, Tesfia seemed to treat them like friends or older sisters.

The combatants on the other hand look very well trained...and not to fight Fiends, but people. Selva was probably the one who'd trained them.

There was also the inherited magic and secret heir. Alus was beginning to understand the Fable family. He'd been hating nobles all this time, but up close he could see that they were people too. They could cooperate and exchange information, so they could be useful. That alone made the visit here worthwhile.

That was especially true in terms of information, particularly as to the identity of the snow man. The details were still unknown, but he had an idea of what was going on. When Alus had explained the man's appearance and the unique impression he'd gotten about the man's mana, he hadn't overlooked Frose's reaction. The head of one of the three great noble families couldn't fully hide her disturbance, so it must have been quite shocking for her.

Frose had caught herself and returned to a normal expression, which made Alus realize how serious it really was. That was why he hadn't delved too deeply into it, and had left upon receiving the overview on inherited magic.

Still, that reaction... My sense was that she wasn't so much surprised as that it was something she already knew, and that my report had maybe contradicted some knowledge that she'd had. However, he didn't think he'd see any more development from prying into it at the moment. The fact that he'd learned about the Fable family's inherited magic was actually more significant.

So far, Alus had created all kinds of spells upon deciphering a multitude of Lost Spells. He'd reported many of the creations to the right organizations and had them listed in the Magic Compendium, but he'd also kept some secret for his own use.

The Fable family's inherited magic, as well as Frose's attitude, made him feel challenged. His curiosity as a researcher was being stirred, and if possible, he wanted to reach out to that tall peak. Just imagining creating a new spell to bestow to Tesfia that would be on par with—or even surpass—the family's inherited magic was making his heart leap.

As far as Alus could tell, the group of inherited spells might be an extension of the same spell. In other words, Icicle Sword was just the entry point, and a hint of what lay beyond was probably hidden within its composition.

Just thinking of what points would be key was fun. If he had a pen and paper,

he could probably theorize until morning. In fact, in Alus's mind he'd just been thinking about it for a while, but when he looked at the big clock on the wall it was already a new day.

"I guess too much quiet isn't all good." He was in another family's house and thinking about magic research. It was practically a disease for Alus. He decided that he should sleep, so he stopped thinking and closed his eyes.

Some time had passed, when Alus's eyes suddenly shot open. When he glanced at the clock, it hadn't even been an hour. In the Outer World sleep was always being interrupted by sudden events or Fiends appearing, but having the same thing happen in the Inner World was depressing.

He looked out the window and confirmed that the reason wasn't all that far away. *I don't know who they are, but they're not even trying to hide their mana. What a strange visitor this late at night...*

Alus pondered what to do. He couldn't just do as he pleased in someone else's house. He expanded his field of view and tried to get a sense of his surroundings. Since it was Alus's own power and not a detection spell they shouldn't be able to sense it, but that wasn't guaranteed against someone exceptionally skilled at mana manipulation. Taking that into account, he kept his range as limited as possible, to just within the Fable estate.

! I see that their response to sudden visitors is nothing to scoff at. Alus viewed the three-dimensional map in his brain, and picked up that several people in the house had already noticed and had run outside.

Leaving it to the Fable family's people would be best, but now that he'd woken up, he couldn't fall back asleep. So he decided to get some fresh air and have a look at things while he was at it.

Since he was just going to take a look, he left his AWR behind and put on his coat. Then he jumped out the window.

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Inside the mansion, the household quietly shifted to a state of alert. The servants of the house, still dressed in maid's clothes, followed the instructions of the chamberlain in responding to the suspicious intruder.

That said, it wasn't guaranteed to be an enemy, so only two maids equipped with antipersonnel equipment under their clothing went out to ostensibly greet their guest.

The visitor had appeared near the estate's massive front gate. When the two maids arrived, their surroundings were lit up by the lights on the side of the road. "What business do you have here this late at night?"

The figure stood beside the shadows cast by the iron gate. The words that had been spoken by one of the maids were somewhat calm and soft, the bare minimum of politeness for a guest.

However, in the next moment...both maids were left speechless. The lights only illuminated the immediate area so they hadn't noticed at first, but of all things, the ten-meter-tall giant gate had been destroyed. It was as if a massive beast had run rampant.

They didn't need to show any courtesy to this guest anymore. Moreover, the visitor wasn't dressed in a fashion that was fit to cross into the Fable family estate. They wore a rag over their head that covered their face completely.

The maids exchanged looks. "It is already late at night. The head of the family has turned in for the night, so we ask you to return another day," one said. Both reached for the weapons concealed under their clothing at the same moment.

Perhaps sensing some killing intent from the maids, the intruder reacted for a second, giving away a glimpse of their face. What the maids saw was that the intruder was a man in his fifties. His hair was a tangled mess and his gray skin was dried and cracked in places, which gave off a suspicious atmosphere.

"If you won't listen, we will be forced to take action," one of the maids warned. Her eyes were full of suspicion and irritation at how the other party wasn't perturbed in the slightest.

In the next moment, the man flipped the rag off and crouched low. His thin arms reached out and a dull light glinted from his hands. "My business will be concluded quickly, and that will be the end of it." His hoarse voice was filled with resentment as he looked at the two maids with dry eyes.

Immediately, the maids drew short swords from their waists. The magic

formula on them blinked. They were ready to fight back.

However, the man leaning forward didn't give them a chance to attack, as he quickly dove in between them.

The man's dead-looking eyes shot a glance at one of the maids. Despite the maids being ready to fight, the man had moved so fast and without warning that he'd thrown off their preemptive attack.

Their defensive instincts then kicked in, and they swung their short swords. There'd been a slight delay, but they swung at the man who'd appeared to be within their range...and at the same time they realized their blunder. *He made us swing...!*

In a fight to the death, their bodies had moved by reflex, creating a fatal failure. They had moved as their opponent had wanted them to. It was the fastest path of attack that they could take. Yet...

"Ack." "Ugh." Their faces twitched as they felt sharp pains run through their arms. They'd swung at him, yet all of the strength in their wrists had disappeared as blood spurted out of them.

The maids dropped their short swords at practically the same time and unleashed kicks as a counterattack. Although they'd only been serving the family for a few years, they attacked as one thanks to their training.

Unfortunately, their kicks aimed at the man's head from each side swung through nothing but air, and in return their other legs were swept out from under them, leaving them in midair.

Their necks were grabbed by the man, who easily held them aloft. They weren't even able to breathe as he strangled them.

"Agh!" The maids grabbed the man's arms to try and pull free, but at best they could only scratch at the back of his hands. No matter how hard they tried, they couldn't free themselves.

As their vision blurred, they could see a silver clawlike weapon between his fingers. That was probably what had cut their wrists before.

Young women or not, the man had easily lifted both of them up. He spoke in a

casual tone. “It seems my skills have dulled. I should have cut a few millimeters deeper. I suppose I need to warm up a little more.” A twisted smile appeared on the man’s face as he reflected on his performance. “Speaking of which, it’s been a while since I was with a woman, and these two look just the right age. Not quite my type, but... Ah, it seems I’ve gotten quite old with time. I’ll have to enjoy myself enough to make up for the time I’ve lost.”

However, the gasping maids couldn’t even hear the man’s vulgar voice. If he squeezed a little harder or if more time passed, they would either lose consciousness or die.

The man smiled, as if things had gone as planned.

A figure then appeared, without making a sound, behind the man. “Sorry, but I’m going to have to ask you to let those two go,” Selva Greenus said in a soft voice.

Standing under the lights, he wore a well-made tailcoat. His white gloves, polished shoes, and pressed shirt made him the perfect image of a butler.

“I’ve been waiting for you, Greenus. Oh, how long I’ve waited. I almost gave up so many times, but now here you are...” The man threw the maids away, and an almost childlike innocent smile appeared on his face. “...Right in front of me!”

Selva answered him in a low voice. “You’ve gotten old, Vector.”

“Indeed. But so have you.”

As they spoke, Selva signaled the coughing maids with his eyes, and they fell back while holding their throats.

The man called Vector paid them no heed, his full attention on Selva. He wore a bright smile. “I’ve spent decades in a dark cell...but when I imagined getting a chance to kill you, it wasn’t so bad.”

“I believed you to be dead. You had a tendency to screw up.”

“Then why did you betray us back then?! If you had done your job... Do you know what happened to Aferka?!” Vector exploded with rage.

But Selva was unfazed. “Of course. Aferka was unable to replenish its

personnel after the defections, and that, combined with internal conflicts, caused the organization to collapse. Through some twists and turns the organization itself survived, but it was completely changed in substance, and ended up under a certain family's control. Well, it was a good way of getting rid of them."

"And all of that is because of your betrayal, Greenus! Because you left..." As Vector recalled what had happened, his expression twisted with anger. To him it had been a tragic fall from grace. "All I know is killing, and Aferka was the only place I belonged! Because of that my life went wrong!"

Selva stood quietly as Vector fluttered his fingers with all his strength, as if trying to rip something apart with his claws. That was a habit of his that Selva was familiar with. It was a gesture he made when he was truly angry. He hadn't changed at all from the past.

"Back then...why didn't you just kill me?!" Vector paused, but when Selva said nothing, he closed in on the other man with a glimmer of sorrow behind his anger.

Quite a while back in the past, the conflict between nobles had been more intense, like a bloody civil war. The political center had become practically lawless, and a storm not even the ruler could control had hit the nation.

At that time Selva had managed the executive unit, Aferka, or rather he had controlled it together with a woman. However, he had ultimately betrayed Aferka.

"What happened to you...? Why would you hesitate to kill a single brat with those bloodied hands? You never even had anything to do with the Fable family. Tell me, how could you kill your own parents, but leave that child alive?!" Vector raised his voice, as if emphasizing how that was far more cruel.

Selva took the abuse in silence, not responding to any of it. "So you were captured, Vector."

"Yeah, after I killed my seventieth. Ironically, it was Aferka that arrested me. And that woman looked down on me with pity the entire time," Vector muttered with distant eyes, his gaze unfocused. "That's enough! Everything went wrong since the moment you let me live, Selva!"

Who knew where Vector's memories were wandering off to? His dry eyes looked like they did decades ago when he was a new member of Selva's unit.

Selva let out a deep breath. He'd assumed that Vector was dead, but here he was, a shadow from his past standing before him. He'd probably broken out of some prison somewhere. Moreover, if his words were true, then he had killed seventy more people before being arrested. Former Aferka member or not, the punishment for such crimes would surely be longer than a lifetime. "I understand," he said quietly. "Then let us continue from where we left off. Not that I have as much leeway as I used to."

Vector, whose mind seemed to have returned to the present, promptly answered him. "You're damn right! That's why I came here. Neither of us is fully prepared. I'm a mess, as you can see."

Hearing the grief in Vector's voice, Selva felt some pity and a hint of regret. He really should have killed him back then, before his life could fully derail in the way that it had.

Looking back, all of his memories were covered in mud and blood. But there was one thing that he didn't regret in the slightest, and that was the decision that led to where he stood now. His decision to abandon Aferka and serve the Fable family with everything he had.

"Even your way of speaking has changed, Selva," Vector spat out. He hated him for living such a carefree life while he'd been locked up experiencing hell.

"Of course. I am a butler. It is expected of someone who serves the Fable family," Selva calmly said, in spite of Vector's pent-up frustration.

Aferka did not allow betrayal. That was an ironclad rule. Traitors were always purged by the other members...yet the leader himself had broken that rule.

But thanks to that, he'd protected a young girl. Even though he would have to stain his hands with the blood of his companions, the salvation that he'd seen for just a moment became the light of his life. That little girl was now the head of a noble family, and a mother. And the daughter was just like the girl he'd met, strong and noble.

"Look at me, Greenus. I will kill you, and then I will kill everyone in the Fable

family. Then I... We can return to how it used to be."

"Sadly, that won't be possible, Vector. That is not to say that you are powerless, but there are just some things in this world that the dead cannot do." With his back ramrod straight, Selva held his hands behind his back, concealing any trace of killing intent.

It was the assassination squad's style to take lives quietly and solemnly. There was no room for honor or flashiness. The essence of an assassin wasn't in the hunting of their prey, but in the art of concealing even their soul, and in the silence of their will. They couldn't allow their opponent to so much as sense the tempo of their breathing.

"Is that so? But I know the weapon you use. And while my skills have dulled, you've gotten old," Vector retorted. He threw away the cloth that was around his head and leaped at Selva.

Selva remained unmoving as his former companion charged at him. But he was skillfully manipulating the thin threads with his hands behind his back. He deployed the threads between himself and the approaching man. Once touched, the steel threads would cut into flesh as easily as water soaked into skin.

However, Vector swung an open palm at the steel net as if he'd expected it. Using his claws, he pulled at the net. It would be difficult to tear it apart with just his claws, but through the instantaneous impact of the AWR the magical tension reached its limit, and the steel threads were unable to maintain their structure.

"A fine AWR," Selva said.

Having torn through all the threads, Vector finally came into range. But in the next moment, he hit the brakes.

He had run simulations of this feint over and over in his head while in prison. Once Selva's attempt at intercepting him failed, he would aim for the legs next. Killing his mobility was a textbook move.

The steel threads headed straight for Vector's legs. The sharpness of the threads might appear to be the biggest threat, but the tips were sharpened as

well. That was possible because the threads themselves were made up of mana.

While the threads were sharp, they didn't really shoot out that powerfully. As power was poured into them from the base, the inevitable bends and turns the threads took robbed them of some of their force. Knowing that, Vector raised his foot and kicked the tips of the threads. The soles of his shoes were equipped with plates that were good mana conductors. Depending on the mana that was poured into them, they could easily smash steel threads.

He knew all the possibilities that could happen in a battle against Selva because he'd had a long time to think about it in prison. However...

"Argh!" The impact felt like an iron ball had slammed into his leg. Vector's face contorted from the unexpected hardness of the threads.

Selva's thread rippled and its center twisted like a whip. It formed a loop to catch Vector's wrist. Vector immediately pulled his hand back and used his claw to cut the thread.

"Hah...hah..." If he'd been a little slower, his hand would be flying through the air. He'd avoided a fatal situation but had still touched the thread, and blood spiraled down his arm. As expected from Aferka's former leader, Selva hadn't allowed time to wilt his skills.

Vector felt an odd combination of happiness and sadness. His face twisted into a complicated expression, almost like a crying smile. His body had aged considerably and any youthful vigor had long since faded. Through the decades in prison, the only thing left to him had been despair as he'd felt himself age. The pain in his heart had been far harder to bear than the provisional punishment.

Even though Vector knew his limits, he released his remaining mana. But he wasn't going to cast a spell. In Aferka, spells were considered flashy and unnecessary. Instead, what had been required of them was a high level of mana control to kill their targets swiftly and quietly. It wasn't like he couldn't handle casting spells, but he'd decided that when he finally confronted Selva that he wouldn't use such moves.

Soon the mana he expelled gathered around his shoulders, and took on some kind of shape. It flowed like a liquid, moving towards his hands with a pale glow.

Before long his hands were covered in a thin, wet layer of mana. The mana with unique properties dripped from his fingers.

“This reminds me of the past, Vector. You used to be arrogant and neglected being diligent, but I can tell the results of your tireless training from that mana transformation technique.”

“Of course. But you won’t get the chance to see it again!”

“It’s truly unfortunate, Vector... I really am sorry.”

A steel thread came from out of nowhere and wrapped around Vector’s right arm. This time his arm fell to the ground without giving him a chance to react. “AAAAGGHHH... Impossible!!!” He tightened the muscles of his arm to stop the bleeding, as he stared at his cut arm with shock. “Why?! H-How did you... Where did that thread come from?!”

He desperately backed away from Selva, leaving bloodstains on the paved stone ground. Defeat and death were approaching. Sensing that, Vector started running in an attempt to escape for the time being. But then—

He fell forward and landed face-first onto the ground. He thought his feet had gotten entangled and tried to step on the ground to support himself, but couldn’t feel his foot at all.

When Vector looked, he saw bloodstains splattered all over the ground. With bloodshot eyes, he viewed the trail of blood that led to a black and red clump of something a few meters away. He immediately realized that it was his leg. His right calf and everything below it had been cut off.

“GREEEENUUUUS!!!” Vector screamed. His face was contorted, but it wasn’t from pain. His scream was born out of rage and despair. “WHAT DID YOU DO?! WH-WHAT DID YOU DOOOOO!”

With his remaining left arm and leg, he crawled and squirmed like an unsightly bug, as Selva calmly looked on. There was no longer pity or any other emotion in his eyes. This was his former face as an assassin. “Vector, you could never do anything to begin with. The moment you stepped inside this estate, your life was forfeit.”

“A-A trap...?”

The Fable family had its own combatants, like the maids. However, their strength was inferior to that of the protectors of other noble families. To make up for that, Selva had spread his magical threads all over the entirety of the estate.

“S-So the threads I could see were just decoys...”

The cold expression on Selva’s face didn’t change, and he didn’t respond. But Vector was already convinced. The thickness of the threads could be changed so that some could be seen while others remained hidden. Something like that was easy for Selva who’d been creating threads for so long.

In reality, Vector’s conjecture was pretty much correct. But it was a feat that was only possible with Selva’s skill and his complete understanding of the estate grounds. However, if traps like these remained spread out all the time, no one would be able to walk around the grounds. That was why Selva had implanted the same gimmick as was contained in his gloves in the street lights and trees of the garden. If called for, he could pass mana through them to create threads from all directions without a sound, transforming the garden into a spider web.

Under the dim light of a street lamp, Selva gazed down at the crawling Vector with an icy look.

“It’s not over, not yet...!” Vector leaned on his left arm like a strut and forcibly pushed himself up on his folded left leg. Using his leg like a spring, even as his body threatened to collapse, he swung his remaining arm.

The distance was too far for him to reach Selva. But he couldn’t give up. He couldn’t resign himself. He also had the last trump card of an assassin...pride.

Mustering his willpower, Vector tried to shoot out with his claw, but this time his left arm flew through the air and landed before Selva.

He was out of options. With only his left leg remaining, Vector sat down as if to rest. “Tell that nagging old hag I said hi.”

“Yes.” After a short pause, Selva’s fingers strummed a thread that stretched out like a bow at eye level. As soon as the thread vibrated, countless more threads were released and sped towards Vector.

“Sel...va...” In his last moments, Vector’s wrinkled face smiled. It wasn’t red

blood on his cheeks, but...

Selva turned his back on what was once the body of a man, as blood splattered and bones and flesh crumbled. The sounds of the body being destroyed reached his back.

For some reason, he couldn't shake the feeling that Vector must have wanted to die as an assassin. His voice in those dying moments had held the same nostalgic tone as in the past. Selva wondered if there was even a shred of salvation for his soul. But ultimately, those who killed people would face the same end. It was a cursed fate...what they deserved.

"In the end...nothing can be overturned." Selva's resigned words disappeared into the void of the moonlight. "Thinking about it, I've been alive for a long time. I'm sure it's been enough. All I can do now is watch over the young miss as she grows up."



There were only two ladies in Selva's world. The daughter was the spitting image of the mother when she was younger, and he hoped that she would grow up to be the same. But it seemed she was choosing a slightly different path from her mother.

That was a future to look forward to as well. Having been able to devote himself to the Fable family, Selva was willing to accept any ending. He'd never expected that he would get to die a peaceful death.

"Now then, I must report this..." he muttered to himself. But he sensed a presence outside of the destroyed gate that prevented him from doing so.

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What to do... Alus had watched Selva's battle from the shadows, and missed his chance to make a move. He'd seen glimpses of Selva's abilities when they'd fought before, but it seemed his eyes hadn't been quick enough to see everything.

However, I sensed that killer's atmosphere before. That was why Selva had been able to tell that Alus was cut from the same cloth as him.

On the surface that was correct; but in reality they weren't the same. Alus had been shown the difference that age made from observing Selva's perfect work. *The effective area is from three to thirty meters. Inside that range, no ordinary foe would stand a chance.*

In addition, there had been almost no adjustments to the advance preparations for the battle. Moreover, the opponent seemed to know of Selva's abilities. Even so, the difference in power was clear. He had also secured the tactical victory with his traps.

Even though they were just decoys, the threads were thin enough that an amateur would struggle to see them and get lured into the trap instead. Not to mention that Selva hadn't shown Alus during their fight that he was able to freely adjust the sharpness and thickness of the thread. *He never showed me his hand.*

Alus was learning that a haphazard analysis of an opponent's abilities was dangerous when the opponent was highly skilled at mana control. In his fight with Selva he had been able to deal with the situation by using his keen sense of mana, but to decide that he was superior when his opponent hadn't even gone all out was pointless.

Also, Selva hadn't even used anything aside from the steel threads. The Fable family's butler had extraordinary strength. *If we fought seriously in this estate...would I be able to win?* Perhaps because he'd now witnessed Selva's way of killing, this disturbing thought popped up in his mind.

In the past, Alus had accomplished missions that involved killing dangerous criminals, though lately he hadn't had such opportunities. When he did, he abandoned all emotion and moved in a mechanical fashion to take out his opponent. Killing was the only thing on his mind. He blocked out any other choices, and used whatever means possible to achieve his mission.

Am I like that too? His former self was cold, emotionless, and expressionless.

The old butler was a complete human being. He combined killing with an everyday life. There was no longer a gap between the two for Selva, no room for doubt to enter. His mind had been focused on one absolute thing, taking nothing else into consideration. With no hesitation, there was no middle ground. He didn't allow those who needed to be killed to survive.

"Oh." Alus felt a strange excitement in the air. His entire body trembled from it. He could feel his mana swell in response, which he hurriedly restrained. It was like he was no different from Tesfia, who was ruled by her emotions.

That aside, it seemed that Selva and the other man had known each other. It wasn't like Alus had no interest in that, but he was an outsider, and wouldn't ask any boorish questions.

Seeing how the man had easily taken out the two trained maids, he must've been quite skilled. Yet he couldn't even lay a finger on Selva. *Womruina's two servants were pretty skilled too, so maybe all noble families are like this.*

Maintaining a personal army was a privilege of nobility. Alus wondered why that was so when Alpha had a regular army, but perhaps it was necessary. Considering how people with no qualms about killing just showed up in the

middle of the night, maybe it wasn't only necessary but essential. *It must be rough being a butler for this family. You have to be that skilled at combat to even be up for the job.*

But those impressions aside, Selva would've noticed Alus's presence by now, so he should show himself before he was mistaken for being someone who was working with the intruder. *I guess I should have offered a helping hand if I was going to be discovered anyways. But it would have been careless to appear when the traps were still out... Hm? There's still more.*

With his field of view, Alus had noticed them quicker than Selva. It was the presence of those who lived in darkness, the same as the intruder. Were they additional enemies?

Figures soon appeared from between the trees, visible under the dim light of the street lamps. One man stepped forward as if representing them. He had swept-back short blond hair. Normally that would make him stand out, but for some reason he blended in with his surroundings.

The man was tall with ferocious slanted eyes. Alus could tell he was aggressive from how his center of gravity was leaned forward slightly. He also noticed his vigilant gaze.

In a spur of the moment decision, Alus leaped from his hiding place and landed next to Selva. "Excuse me for coming from the shadows. I saw the whole thing."

As expected, Selva seemed to have sensed him coming, as he gave a light bow. "Pardon me. It appears that I have awakened you from your rest."

"Not at all. I was able to learn a lot, so let me help you a little as thanks." Seeing a good opportunity to move his body, Alus relaxed the reins on his mana. He didn't have his AWR with him, but he wasn't planning on using any flashy spells. He was inspired by the fight to the death that he'd witnessed and unleashed dense mana, more motivated than usual.

However, the blond man spoke up as if to beat him to the punch. "Oh, so there was a Single around. But don't get so worked up. We ain't here to kill you. Our business is with that...lump of flesh."

His speech was as rough as his appearance. As loose-lipped as the man was, Alus was calmed by the fact that he seemed to understand his position. It also appeared that he wasn't here to help the first man, but had chased him here to stop him.

"I was going to kill him if he wasn't listening, but there's not even a head to bring back. You sure got in the way this time, Selva Greenus." The man clicked his tongue and stepped out into the light proper. His tone was still rough, but there was a degree of class to his clothing. It was formal, like a uniform of sorts. However, he still seemed like a street thug from his atmosphere and manner of speaking.

Alus and Selva both observed the man. "I have done nothing but deal with a ruffian that invaded the estate. Or should I perhaps have waited for you to arrive and capture him?" Selva quietly asked, as he eyed the broken iron gate.

The blond man's lips twitched, but Selva had the advantage. "Nah, in the end you saved me the time and effort. His death was convenient, actually."

Selva narrowed his eyes at the violent tone of the man's voice. It seemed that the man was on the side of justice, chasing down an escaped Vector, but he didn't speak like a member of a security force. "I apologize for not living up to your expectations. After all, this is a prestigious family that doesn't allow outsiders entry without permission. And you...don't appear to be a worthy guest."

"Hmph, you just don't get it, Selva Greenus. Or should I call you Aferka's former bloodstained blade? You're only allowed to draw breath because of the mercy of the Advisor. Make what remaining time you have left count and don't forget the code. Before long I'll get the order, and when I do, I'll come to kill you." The man pulled his hand out of his pocket and pointed to himself with his thumb as if to boast. "Or so I'd like to say, but there's a protocol to these things. Tsk. No matter, we'll meet again soon."

Did he come here just to make a death threat? In which case, it wouldn't be strange for the man to be killed himself.

However, Selva held his hand out before Alus. It was clear that he didn't intend to let Alus get involved any further.

“I’ll just have to be patient. See you then!” The man disappeared from sight. It was like his shape had melted into the shadows of the trees, and before long even his presence disappeared.

It was quite anticlimactic for Alus who’d been raring for a fight, but Selva remained silent and appeared to be deep in thought. “Selva, I guess I got too involved there.”

“Not at all. I’m the one who should apologize for allowing an esteemed guest to see such an unsightly thing.” Selva bowed so deeply that it made Alus hesitate.

In the next moment, three maids appeared behind Selva and Alus, and lined themselves up in a row. The situation had been made known throughout the mansion, and they’d come to reinforce him after some preparations.

The maid in the center bowed to Alus before speaking. “Mr. Selva, we have arrived. Where are... Ah, I apologize for disturbing you,” she said, after a glimpse at the horrific scene where the problem had been dealt with.

“It is quite all right, Chamberlain Sithaima.”

The other two maids gave off an eerie impression. Their eyes were clouded over like they were drug addicts in the slums. And while they were dressed like the other maids, their expressions remained unchanged, showing no friendliness.

“Hest, Eight, clean that up.”

“Understood, Chamberlain,” the two maids replied in perfect harmony.

From what Alus could tell, the first two maids that Vector had handled were equivalent to Triple Digit Magicmasters. But these eerie two appeared to be as skilled as Doubles... Actually, he realized that he couldn’t compare them, as he didn’t get the impression that they were Magicmasters. They were much more trained in the art of killing. Simply put, they were specially trained to kill people.

As for the chamberlain, Sithaima, she wouldn’t even let Alus sense her latent potential. She didn’t give off the impression of being strong like Hest and Eight. But based on how she hadn’t even raised an eyebrow at the lumps of flesh and splattered blood, she was no doubt used to such things.

Noticing Alus's unreserved gaze, Sithaima looked at him again. "Sir Alus, I apologize for not being able to greet you at dinner. I hear you are Lady Fia's friend." She looked to be in her forties, wore a friendly expression, and spoke in a mild tone. Her hairstyle was simple, with her bangs parted to the sides and the rest tied up in a bun at the back of her head. Her bonnet also blended in perfectly with her overall image, although the plainness gave her a cold impression. She looked less like a maid and more like a housekeeper.

Actually, she looks strong too. Magic fights are one thing, but her subordinates wouldn't lose to your average Magicmaster in a fight to the death. I doubt that the Fable family is looking to start a war...so what exactly is the purpose of gathering so many strong people?

The truth was that it had been Selva's decision. Compared to other noble families, the Fables had a small number of personnel, but Alus had no way of knowing that.

While Alus pondered these things, Selva ordered the chamberlain to take care of the rest of the cleanup. He looked at Alus. "You must be wondering why," he said, omitting the subject, but Alus could tell what he was referring to. It was exactly what he'd been thinking. "Even the noblest of blood cannot stay pure in this world. It is hard to say it is a world where those who value justice will always rise to the top. Also, one cannot say that being righteous is always the right thing to do. The Fable family does have its own share of enemies."

"I know what you mean. But I'm impressed that Fia..." *Turned out the way she did* , Alus wanted to say.

He'd left it vague, but Selva understood what he meant. "The young miss has been kept unaware. That is why I have instructed them to avoid any unnecessary contact with her."

That's why they hadn't appeared during the dinner. Thinking back on it, there had only been normal maids around Tesfia. That was to be expected, as Sithaima aside, the other two maids had a darkness that even an amateur could sense. It was the dark side of the Fable family.

"So I would like you to keep what you have seen and heard from the young miss. While they are maids now, in the past they lived lives that they couldn't

tell anyone about. I took advantage of Master Frose's kindness to bring them in," Selva told him with a smile, as if he pitied the two maids.

"If that's what's necessary, then it was a wise decision."

"Indeed. They do try their best, always watching over the Fable family from the shadows. Oh, I believe you wanted to know about something else?"

Alus nodded, so Selva began to speak. "It's not something you can tell others, but that man was a former 'colleague' of mine. This was a punishment for my past deeds, in a way."

In other words, he was a fellow assassin from back in the day. Alus understood. There was something between him and Selva that allowed them to understand each other without words...perhaps as people who lived in the darkness, people who wore a different mask. "What did he come here for?"

"For me. For what happened in the past. I believe I'll need to talk about that first. If you were watching from the beginning, you'll know that he was Vector who was once a member of Aferka."

"Aferka..." Alus muttered, digging through his memories. It was a term that Aile had mentioned during their negotiations the other day. Back then, he'd suggested that Lilisha had a connection to them.

"Aferka is a private army that was used when the conflict between nobles was at its fiercest. Its primary purpose was the assassination of important people and doing work behind the scenes. It began as a combat group that was trained by a certain noble family."

Alus could sense Selva's hesitation. The past was a bitter memory for him, something he'd rather keep locked up. That's why he didn't want Tesfia to know.

"In any case, it was only natural that the authorities would take notice as powerful families were crushed by force. And so Aferka was reorganized as an executive unit under the ruler."

The conflict had been settled by the ruler's intervention, but that was just the superficial reason. Those who didn't fit in were purged by the ruler's new blade...Aferka. As such, almost all noble families that were still around today

were those that had survived the period of oppression by the ruler.

However, the criteria for the purges were still unclear. Aferka had been put into action against more than just hostile factions.

“Of course, destroying a powerful noble family completely was difficult. So instead, their resolve would be undermined by a flash of the blade during negotiations. The families that were wiped out were used as an example in those negotiations.”

Alus didn’t have much interest in politics, but now that he’d gotten caught up in a problem between nobles, he listened intently to what Selva had to say.

“And as a result, the nobility became more cunning and clever. They targeted each other’s weaknesses. On the surface the conflicts died down, but every family took measures to protect itself, and the Fable family was no exception. Aferka still remains, but the organization has undergone a major transformation, so the current ruler no longer has the power to intervene through force.”

In reality, however, Cicelnia had a royal guard. But as far as Alus knew there was no one of note in the group, aside from Rinne. But Rinne’s specialty was in detecting, which was a result of Alpha concentrating its forces in the military.

So perhaps Cicelnia was trying to get more involved with Alus because of her weak position. She didn’t want a soldier, but a reliable guard like Rinne. *It seems I’m pretty popular.* While muttering this nonsense to himself, Alus continued to listen to Selva.

According to Selva, it seemed that Aferka was responsible for capturing or eliminating unstable elements within the nation. But he appeared to have become convinced of that only a few moments ago. “It’s not just Aferka either. Vector looked like he’d been in prison until recently. His emaciated appearance further backs that up. Yet the fact that he showed up here suggests...”

“That he escaped.”

“Yes. I am all but convinced of it.”

“Which raises the question of where did he escape from?” There were plenty of prisons in Alpha that Alus could think of. There’d also been a lot of major

incidents occurring lately. The Inner World was only peaceful compared to the Outer World. Normal criminals aside, there had been cases of magical criminals causing hundreds of deaths. “At the very least...I haven’t heard of anything like that happening in Alpha.”

“Neither have I,” Selva said. “I believe I will look into it later.”

He and Alus exchanged looks. They had a lot in common, and could more or less understand what the other was thinking.

If it didn’t happen within the Inner World... There was a rumored Pandora’s box of sorts, secret and hidden by a veil, containing the dark side of all seven nations. *I thought it might be possible, but...a special prison that exists in the Outer World? I don’t know though.*

When heinous magical criminals such as Kurama executives were captured, there was a problem with where to keep them. There was danger involved in holding them within the nation. There might be breakouts or they could get freed by allies. In the unlikely event they were freed, they could start going wild with magic.

Alus rubbed the back of his neck, as he spoke to Selva with a serious expression. “Things are starting to look ominous.”

“I do apologize for getting you involved in this, Sir Alus.”

“It’s fine. Like the Tenbram, I decided to observe the fight on my own. Speaking of which, who was that blond man?”

“At the very least, he wasn’t with the military.”

“Yeah, if he was with the military, he wouldn’t be that lacking in discipline.”

Selva laughed a little at Alus’s remark. “Ha ha, indeed. However, that man was strong. He knew when to withdraw...and his eyes told more than his mouth.”

“I see.” Alus wanted to ask about the blond man’s relationship to Selva. He’d known both Selva’s name and a past alias of sorts. And then there was the “Advisor” that he’d mentioned.

But Selva was tight-lipped when it came to that. Alus only received vague statements from him, as if to evade the question. “I cannot cause you any

further troubles, Sir Alus. Besides, this is something that happened on the Fable estate, so please leave the rest of it to us." He spoke politely, but in reality, he meant that he couldn't tell him any more.

"I understand. Then it's not my place to crash the party." Alus left it up to Selva, as he had some degree of trust in him. And it wasn't just because they'd talked through their fists. They'd both lived in the underbelly of society and respected each other.

Most of all, Selva supported the difficult path that Tesfia had chosen. Their interests were aligned, and in that sense, he was more trustworthy than Frose.

Selva was quietly walking back to the mansion with his arms behind his back, as Alus walked behind him. Suddenly Selva's metronome-like precision walking was disturbed, and he muttered in a low voice that even Alus might have a problem hearing. "Sir Alus, perhaps you would listen to this old man ramble to himself."

He slowed down a bit. His atmosphere was gentle, as if telling a story to a grandchild. "It's about the inherited magic of the Fable family that was discussed yesterday."

"—!" Alus was startled that the Fable family butler would start talking about the family's secrets. It was no doubt a topic that would go against the will of the head of the family. Knowing that, he'd called it "rambling to himself."

With his measured pace, Selva looked up at the mansion before them. "I will say this because it's you."

"I thought you were talking to yourself?"

"Ha ha, so I was. But before I do, please know that Master Frose told no lies."

As Frose was the head of a major noble family, Alus hadn't been able to get valuable information from her without making deals, but he did feel respect for her. But now Selva was stepping over her intentions to tell Alus something that would surely be for Tesfia's sake. Understanding that, Alus kept quiet and waited for him to continue.

"It is true that the Fable family has several privately developed spells that are passed down in the family. The future looks bright, I am told. But because the

blood has been diluted, or for some other reason, only two people of the previous generation had the qualities required to handle the more advanced inherited spells."

Selva stated the facts, as a shadow crossed his face. It was as if he wished to share the knowledge of the family's history with someone who might carry it on. "Master Frose put in a lot of blood, sweat, and tears, of course. However, the inherited magic is not allowed to be passed down through instructions, or even through showing the initial stages. It is all to be self-taught. But no matter how long she worked on it, she could not achieve it, and so Master Frose finally gave up on the path of a Magicmaster and decided to serve as a commander."

He took a deep breath before continuing. "Ever since she lost her husband, Master Frose has protected the family first and foremost. It wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that she became obsessed over it. And after wearing herself down with her training, she ultimately gave up on learning the inherited spells. I'm sure her pain was unimaginable. At least, it was far more than anything I could imagine."

Selva smiled. "However, the young miss's existence helped to support Master Frose. Back then she was so small, she would cling to my leg whenever something happened. She was proud of her mother, and even at a young age she wished to help in whatever way she could. Even now, I can vividly remember her earnest eyes."

"I don't think she's very different now. Maybe she hasn't actually grown up."

"Ha ha, perhaps not. But that is one of the young miss's virtues." Selva wasn't quite a coddling parent, but he wasn't far from it. "With her eyes finally awakened to a new presence to protect in the young miss, Master Frose retired from the army. But she was involved with so many squads and projects that there were a lot of obstacles to overcome. However, Master Frose is someone who doesn't bend once she has decided on something. After dealing with all of the obstacles, she gave her resignation letter to the Governor-General."

The Governor-General at the time was probably Berwick's predecessor. It might have been Berwick himself, but Alus didn't want to interrupt Selva.

"And so...she made a deal. In order to get the military to grant her retirement,

Master Frose presented them with the magic formula for an inherited spell that she had a general grasp of."

"I see where this is going. That spell was Garb Sheep."

"Yes. But I heard that not even the spell's name remained in the Magic Compendium, and that only the Governor-General has access to the details."

"Now I understand how Garb Sheep came to be recorded in the Compendium," Alus said. "It's just a guess, but it was probably the Governor-General's scheme that ensured the name was there for me to see. Mrs. Fable seemed to be aware of it too. That leaves the connection to the snow man we encountered in Vanalis."

"I am afraid that I don't know about that. But of all the inherited spells that the Fable family possesses, Garb Sheep is indeed one of them. The line of spells, however, differs from Icicle Sword."

"If I see the magic formula, I might be able to find a clue."

"I cannot say any further. Only those with the right to inherit the final form of the spell may know."

Alus fell silent for a moment. The snow man had used a spell that was incredibly similar to Garb Sheep, an inherited spell of the Fable family. Doubts and vague guesses swirled around in his head and formed complex patterns. "Let me confirm something, Selva."

"What might that be?"

"What does Mrs. Fable know about the snow man?"

"I am afraid only she knows. There is nothing I can say. But from your description, I can think of one who fits. However, they have already passed away."

"—! Is he related to Mrs. Fable? Is there any chance that he is actually alive?"

"That is not possible. It has been a long time since the head of the family of two generations ago passed away. I hear that he lost his life in the Outer World."

"So he was Mrs. Fable's grandfather." Anyone capable of powerful magic,

noble or not, would sometimes be sent out to the Outer World. In fact, it was expected of nobles. Frose and Sisty would likely be sent to the Outer World if an emergency happened.

Alus glanced at the elderly butler, but couldn't read anything further from his expression. But for the time being, he should thank him. "Thank you very much. That's enough for me. It's vague, but I have an image of the person now, or rather, their ability."

However, it was still too soon to reach a conclusion, so he held off on that for now. Thanks to Selva, he'd learned a lot. *Now I really want to know what Garb Sheep's magic formula looks like. Since the Governor-General is involved with the name appearing in the Compendium, I'll need to negotiate with Berwick to get another step closer.*

As Alus played with that thought, Selva spoke up. "And one more thing. This concerns the young miss as well."

Hm? Perhaps this is what he's really after. Considering Selva's position, it was only natural that Tesfia was precious to him. In other words, the valuable information from before might have been a prelude to this. Alus braced himself, wondering where this was going...

"Only Master Frose knows what I am about to tell you. Please keep this to yourself."

Alus silently nodded, but he had a bad feeling about it.

"Aside from Garb Sheep, Icicle Sword is part of another line of spells that has a final form. However, Master Frose does not know what the final form looks like."

"That's because Mrs. Fable gave up on the pursuit, isn't it?"

"No. She has determined the magic formula."

"What do you mean? If she knows the formula, then she should have a grasp of its final form."

"It means that she is unable to decipher a portion of it. More specifically, a Lost Spell is involved. But there is no doubt that the Eltrade, the secret heir,

once mastered the spell. That is why Master Frose assumes that it can be learned by following the necessary steps."

"Interesting. If you ask me, the thing about Lost Spells is that they might require a completely different approach." Selva's words were stirring Alus's curiosity. If possible, he wanted to dig deep and ask questions until the sun rose. Curiosity aside, there were some strange things when it came to inherited magic. "If that's the case, I don't understand why she's holding back so much with Fia."

"As the head of the family, she has her dignity to maintain. And then there's the mother and daughter relationship to take into account. It can be more difficult than the hardest of problems. Moreover, Master Frose has placed her hope in the young miss again, hoping that she will be able to master the complete form of Icicle Sword."

That was probably because Tesfia had learned Zepel. In fact, that spell was the reason why the distance between mother and daughter had shortened. Alus felt he understood that as well, since he'd been involved in that. But there were still questions that were left unanswered. "Even if a Lost Spell is involved, she might be expecting too much of Fia."

"That is what I wish to ask of you, Sir Alus," Selva said with a serious expression. "I admit that my personal feelings are involved, but I ask that you help to prove that the young miss is the rightful heir through the spells that you devise."

"Hmm? I thought that there were proper inherited spells in the Fable family, and that the rightful heir was determined by mastering those spells."

"Indeed. That is what both the young miss and Master Frose desire. But...something doesn't feel right. The spell can't have been created more than several decades ago at its oldest. While there is no doubt that it was completed and had a practitioner at one time, it is strange that it can't be deciphered, since it was created during a time when magic was much less developed."

"I see. I would agree with that."

"Master Frose said before that you would be unable to replicate the spells, much less surpass them. Of course, the highest inherited spell in the line of

spells for Icicle Sword is one of them, and the reason why Master Frose said that is because they are close to true magic."

Selva's unexpected use of the term made Alus fall silent. True magic... In other words, magic close to what the Fiends used. It was supposedly a realm beyond human reach. But since the Fable family member who accomplished it was human, the contradiction could perhaps be resolved.

However—even with Alus's knowledge and intelligence—he couldn't let his guard down, which was why he needed to choose his next words carefully. "I can't say that I fully understand, but I'll do what I can to make the new spell that I teach Fia rival...no, surpass the Fable family's inherited spell."

"Thank you very much. In my opinion, it would be best for the young miss to abandon the path of wearing herself out to obtain such a questionable spell. With your help, there will be a new page added to the Fable family's inherited magic. Moreover, I hope that she can discard the social rules and show a new path for the family, even if she doesn't become the secret heir. I am sure that such a path remains for the young miss. I am really sorry for all the troubles that she has caused you, Sir Alus."

"I don't mind. It might have been pushed onto me, but I do understand the value of the information I've received." Alus had gotten even more information than he'd asked for. If anything, that extra information was worth more.

"I am glad to have been of assistance," Selva said. He bowed to Alus for the umpteenth time today.

When Alus returned to his room it was almost morning. The night sky outside the window was beginning to lighten, as he collapsed into bed.

He'd absorbed so much information that he would need to rest his brain before he could sort it all out. Yet his feverish mind kept analyzing it. He tossed and turned, unable to fall asleep. When he looked up at the ceiling, he was reminded that he was in someone else's house. At times like these, he could use the skill to sleep anywhere that he'd developed in the military. As sleepiness finally started to set in and he curled up in bed, he suddenly realized something. *Now that I think about it, Loki didn't show up.*

The next time he opened his eyes, it was already noon. It was well past his

normal waking time. He'd truly had a good rest.

After confirming that Loki hadn't returned from the other room, Alus smoothly prepared for his day. As he stepped out of his room, one of the maids was walking towards him, and Tesfia appeared at the other end of the hallway.

"It's already noon. You look like you slept well."

"Well, it was a really comfortable bed," Alus said sarcastically. He couldn't tell Tesfia about last night's events. He didn't know for sure, but he felt like the maids would've been able to clean up the bloody scene without leaving a trace of what had happened.

"Good morning." A young maid bowed to Tesfia and smiled at Alus. She was carrying a basket with neatly folded clothes in it. "Please accept this change of clothes," she said cheerfully, and put the contents of the basket in Alus's hands.

"Y-Yeah..." That's when he realized that he was still wearing the clothes he wore yesterday, rather than the pajamas that had been prepared for him. And since he'd gone to bed right after last night's events, they were now wrinkled.

"Thank you, Minasha," Tesfia smiled.

"Then I will take my leave. Ah yes, regarding the schedule for today..." The maid called Minasha raised a finger with a refreshing smile.

Alus could tell she had a friendly and positive disposition. Her voice was full of energy, a far cry from Hest and Eight from last night.

She fluently explained the day's schedule. "...So please get dressed as soon as possible. I will prepare a warm meal, so please come to the dining room when you are ready. Why not have lunch together?"

Once Minasha finished speaking, she spun around, leaving Alus dumbfounded. "If you will excuse me," she said, and left while humming to herself.

Alus sighed. "Are all the servants here this strange?"

"Hey, I can't overlook that." Tesfia looked ready to protest, but the chamberlain aside, the combat maids didn't have much contact with her, so he wouldn't get anywhere by trying to explain it.

“Ignorance is bliss.”

“What’s that supposed to mean? Whatever, just hurry up and change.”

“Since we’re at it, why don’t you come in?”

“If your hobby is showing yourself while you change your clothes, I’ll take you on.”

“Oh?”

In the past, Tesfia probably would’ve blushed and pushed him back into his room, but maybe she had more composure in her own home, as she snapped back at him in a way she hadn’t before. Perhaps she’d developed a level of tolerance and was no longer fazed by the thought of watching Alus change.

Alus guessed that she thought she had defied his expectations. “Well, there was something I wanted to talk with you about anyways, so how about you come with me then?” As he started to walk back into his room, he pretended to unbutton his shirt.

“W-Wait, you’re serious?!”

“You should be used to it.”

“Of course I’m not!” This time, Tesfia’s ears turned red from embarrassment. She blatantly puffed up her cheeks and crossed her arms to hide her disturbance.

That was when Loki finally appeared. “She might act pure, but please be careful, Al. She’s really perverted on the inside.”

“Ah, Loki. You’re pretty slow to wake up today,” Tesfia said.

“That’s none of your business.” Loki had come from Tesfia’s room. Her hair was a disheveled mess and her eyes were bloodshot. It was pretty clear she hadn’t slept well and was in a foul mood. “You look like *you* had a good night’s sleep, Ms. Tesfia. I bet you must have had a wonderful dream...” She appeared to be holding a huge grudge. Her tilted head and tired eyes gave her the look of a character in a horror movie.



“Guess I’ll go get changed.” As if driven by a light sense of dread, Alus decided to return to his room.

Minasha had prepared a silk shirt and trousers. Seeing how it was all black, she must’ve taken Alus’s preferences into account. It went without saying that the material was of high quality.

Once he stepped out of the room again, Tesfia took the lead and began walking ahead, while Loki came next to him and whispered, “What happened last night?”

“I thought you’d notice.” She hadn’t appeared, so Alus had figured she’d been fast asleep, but it seemed she was aware of the situation.

“Of course! But...” Loki puffed up her chest, but soon directed an annoyed look at the redhead in front of them.

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Loki had been stuck in a one-sided girl’s talk with Tesfia last night, which had mentally exhausted her.

Shortly after falling asleep, she sensed a strange presence outside just after Alus had, which woke her up. However...

“—! What?!” Someone was holding her tightly in their arms.

When she came to, she saw Tesfia’s slovenly, sleepy face next to hers. “You little...!” Loki struggled to break free, but Tesfia then wrapped her legs around Loki’s thighs to lock her down. While Loki was stuck, she sensed that Alus had jumped out the window. The more she panicked, the more strength Tesfia used in her arms and legs to hold her. “Ms. Tesfia!”

“Mmmm...”

Loki was unable to move as Tesfia’s face drew closer. “—!”

When the two girls’ lips were so close they were almost touching, Loki turned her face away so hard that she hurt her neck, but fortunately she dodged the attack. “Hah...hah... If you go any further, I’m seriously going to hit you.”

Tesfia mumbled something, and turned around in bed while still holding Loki.

I should be able to free myself now... Wait. She suddenly noticed that her pajama top had shifted and was rolled up near her chest. The same went for Tesfia, whose stomach was now exposed. “Ah...!”

When Loki let her guard down, Tesfia rubbed her cheek against her. At the same time, their bodies pressed closer together...and she could feel Tesfia’s body heat directly.

Tesfia’s cheeks were turning red, but judging from her slack jaw, she must’ve been having a pleasant dream. Or perhaps it was an improper dream.

Loki was relieved when she felt Tesfia’s hold loosen, but it was only for a moment. Just as she thought she was being let go, Tesfia’s slender arms swiftly and fluidly moved again. Loki felt a hand being inserted under her pajamas. “Ahh?!”



Her body was still locked down by Tesfia's legs. She tried to push her off by using her arms, but Tesfia wrapped her free arm around Loki, ensuring a firm hold of her small body.

Fortunately, Tesfia's hand was just touching her back, but Loki's relief only lasted for a moment. The hand started caressing her skin, like Tesfia was petting a kitten. "...!"

"Huh? Hee hee, it's so warm..."

Next, the legs around Loki's thighs started to wriggle up and down. Then Tesfia's toes caught onto some cloth...and Loki's pajama bottoms started sliding down. "I won't let you do that!!! Ah, hey...!"

Loki noticed that her underwear was starting to be exposed, and struggled even harder. When she did, Tesfia finally stopped. While Loki hadn't fully escaped her predicament, she had a chance to breathe. *Still...the fact that Ms. Fia's breasts are surprisingly big is infuriating.* She wasn't being held down as tightly anymore, but because they were so close, Loki could feel Tesfia's twin hills directly. Perhaps she was the type that looked slender in clothing?

A sidelong glance revealed to Loki some cleavage worth envying. Tesfia was a little sweaty, but it was strangely charming even though they were the same sex. Her white skin had a healthy reddish-pink glow, making it stand out in the dim light from the moon.

Loki's cheeks twitched. She glanced at Tesfia. With her small face and good figure, anyone would see her as a beautiful noble lady, as long as she didn't open her mouth.

She looked down at her own breasts to see if they were getting any bigger. "There's just no letting down my guard! This means that Ms. Alice and Ms. Felinella are even bigger!" *Ms. Tesfia is turning into a bombshell...*

Some wicked thoughts entered Loki's mind for a moment, but she decided that now wasn't the time for that. *Now's my chance...*

Loki got ready to slip out of Tesfia's grasp, but Tesfia quickly reacted like she

was fully awake. Perhaps because she'd sensed Loki's movement, she tightened her hold on Loki.

"—!" As a result, their bodies were pressed even closer together...and in the next instant...

Loki felt a strange sensation on her ear. When she realized what was happening, her face turned red.

"Nom♪" Still asleep, Tesfia made a cute sound and playfully bit Loki's earlobe.

"Uhhh..." The more Loki struggled, the more Tesfia's arms and legs squeezed down on her. In the end, her struggle continued.

In the morning, Tesfia let out a sweet "Al..." This made Loki strike her by reflex, which finally freed her.

Incidentally, despite the heavy strike from Loki, Tesfia let go of her but remained asleep.

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"So because of that lustful beast, I was unable to come to your side, Sir Alus," Loki said with a snort.

Tesfia overheard her. "Who's a lustful beast! I was fast asleep so I don't know, but you better not have done anything strange to me!"

"If you're going to listen to people badmouthing you, at least listen to all of it! You're the one who was doing something strange!"

The sound of the two girls arguing became unbearable as it echoed in Alus's head. "I'm going on ahead." He gave up on watching over the pointless fight, and walked in the direction of the dining room to get a late breakfast or snack.

Seeing Alus leave, Loki chased after him, saying to Tesfia over her shoulder, "Say whatever you want, but I'm never sleeping with you again!"

Loki quickly caught up with Alus and walked by his side. "So about last night... What happened?"

"There was a commotion in the garden, but I can't say more right now."

Loki understood, after seeing how he glanced at Tesfia when he said that.

Then the person in question walked up in a carefree manner and asked what was going on. It wasn't as though Alus had been told to keep quiet about the entire incident itself, but since Selva hadn't told Tesfia, he wasn't going to either. If he recalled, Selva wanted to keep Tesfia away from the dark underbelly of the world. *How naive. Just hiding it will be much more difficult.*

The future head of the Fable family couldn't stay ignorant of the ways of the world forever. Tesfia should've learned a thing or two from the extracurricular lesson and the Godma Barhong incident, but she would eventually learn about the world's darkness whether she wanted to or not. But if he was going to go that far, then Alus might really have to prepare himself to marry into the Fable family.

He sighed. "I see Selva has a hard time."

"What does Selva have to do with it?"

"I mean that you need to keep it together."

"I-I know that...!" Tesfia pouted at Alus's remark.

Alus planted his hand on her head. "Just being strong isn't good enough to reach the true heights."

However, Tesfia unexpectedly put her hand on his, and stared back at him. "You mean that I don't just need to get stronger, but learn about a wider range of things, right?"

Alus looked a little surprised. Then he smiled at her. "That's right," he muttered, and cast his eyes down. Perhaps what he'd told Tesfia was actually meant for himself as well. "At any rate, the Tenbram against Womruina is just a point on the road. We're going to shoot right past it."

"Understood!" Tesfia laughed, and playfully saluted.

Alus heard a sigh from the one on his other side, but he chose to ignore it, deciding that it was better that Tesfia was full of spirit than not. At the very least, it was far better than another pointless argument.

The group reached the dining room and had something to eat before receiving a lecture on Tenbram from Selva. Later, they somehow ended up

being guided around the estate on a tour. It felt to Alus like they were just trying to keep him here, but he chose to go with the flow and not complain about it.

Alus and Loki were guided around by Tesfia and a few maids. They were all normal maids, but after last night's incident, it was inevitable that there'd be several combatants dressed as maids in the vicinity as well.

When they were taken to the AWR vault and workshop, Alus spent quite a bit of time with the family's technicians. They discussed magic formulas engraved in AWRs and exchanged all kinds of valuable information about them.

Alus had the sense that he was being used by both the Fable family and its technicians, but he couldn't complain since their discussions had been meaningful.

In the end, the group returned to the Fable mansion for dinner. And so night fell once again, to the point that it was so dark that they couldn't see where they were going without street lights. But since they'd already contacted the girls' dorm, there was no need to rush even if they arrived back after the curfew.

As Tesfia would need to train for the Tenbram, it had looked like she would stay behind, but she was told to stay at the Institute until Frose called for her. As such, the three of them returned together.

"It's pretty late... Sorry." Tesfia apologized because her family had dragged them around until it was after dark.

"Don't worry about it. I've been ready for it since your mother learned about my rank."

"That might be true, but the principal told me not to speak about it." Tesfia looked discouraged, and even her side ponytail drooped low as if in sync with her.

"It's a little late for that," Loki said. "If Mrs. Fable seriously looked into Sir Alus's rank, she would've found out about it soon enough. With her connections to the military and position as the head of a grand noble family, it would be easy. It might even be a good idea to talk with the Governor-General

about spreading it far and wide, so that even fewer people would dare mess with Sir Alus."

"Loki, I don't think that would help," Tesfia said.

The group chatted as they passed through the Circle Port and traveled to the middle area of the Inner World. They would arrive back at the Institute at a late hour.

As they hurried to the next Circle Port, Alus suddenly turned around and stared into the darkness. He saw nothing...but the strange presence he'd been sensing had disappeared. *It's finally gone.*

He'd felt as though he'd been watched from the shadows ever since they'd left the Fable estate. The presence disappeared when they transferred between Circle Ports, but once they stepped out of the port, another presence would appear.

Alus thought that the observers changed, but they'd kept their distance so he couldn't tell if there was one or more of them. But from what he could vaguely pick up, there were two of them. If so, they were putting in a lot of effort for mere surveillance. He couldn't be sure, and he'd thought that it was just his imagination at first, but now that the presence was fully gone he knew he'd been right.

"Is something the matter, Sir Alus?"

"Did you notice it, Loki?"

"Notice what?"

"No, never mind," Alus said. He kept walking. *But who was it? Considering the situation, someone from the Womruinas? Or someone from Kurama, or someone else with a grudge against me. No...it feels like I'm overlooking something.* The unease made his thoughts run faster.

Unaware of Alus's thoughts, Tesfia set the Institute as the destination on the Circle Port. In the next moment, they were surrounded by mana light.

Even after they reached the Institute, Alus's steps were heavy.

"Sir Alus, what is the matter? Does it have something to do with what you

asked before?”

“It’s hard to say. I’ve had this feeling that I’ve been watched since we left the Fable estate.”

“—! You mean even now?!”

Alus stopped Loki from panicking and activating her mana sonar. “No, it’s fine now. They took their eyes off me partway through, and it’s better that we don’t let them know that we noticed them. But I don’t know who’s behind it.”

“Perhaps it has something to do with what happened yesterday.”

During their tour of the estate, when Tesfia had stepped away on some business, he’d told Loki what had happened. “I don’t know. It’s also possible that the Womruina family is trying to pull something.”

“I wouldn’t put it past that family.”

The two spoke quietly until Tesfia questioned them. “What are you two whispering about?”

Loki looked at Alus. “Maybe they’re not watching you, Sir Alus, but rather, the key figure in the Tenbram...”

“Hmm, you mean her? It doesn’t feel very likely.”

“But it is possible.”

As they gazed at each other, Tesfia tilted her head.

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“What! No way! Something like that happened yesterday?!”

Seeing as it was already past curfew and there wouldn’t be any harm in delaying Tesfia’s return a bit longer, Alus explained what had happened the night before. He also told her that someone had been watching them just now.

He did feel bad since Selva had chosen not to tell Tesfia, but if she got dragged into something, Alus figured she deserved to know. He kept quiet about the inherited spells, though.

“And you were there, Al...?”

“Of course. There’s no way I wouldn’t notice it.”

“And I couldn’t go because of you,” Loki told Tesfia.

“Ugh, a-anyways...!” Tesfia pushed down her guilt and awkwardly tried to change the topic. “I still find it hard to believe that somebody would hold a grudge against Selva... I knew he was skilled, though.”

Loki leaned close to Tesfia and peered into her face. “Perhaps Mr. Selva is different from the image you have of him in your mind?”

“Y-Yeah. Selva has always served our family, and he’s loyal and reliable. He’s always been nice to me. He’s more family than a butler.”

“Fia, how much do you know about Aferka?”

“I’ve only heard that Selva used to be a part of it. He didn’t tell me directly, and because it seems like he doesn’t want to talk about it, I haven’t really pushed the matter. But I didn’t know that it was such an amazing group before. That explains his skills.”

Tesfia had been surprised at first, but she was still a noble. She’d heard about the conflict of the past. She could be sharp at times, so she’d vaguely sensed that some of the servants were actually combatants, and also that Selva was hiding something.

“Sir Alus, that attacker was an Aferka member, wasn’t he?”

“Yeah, Selva seemed to recognize him. Apparently they used to work together. But the blond man who came afterwards talked about some ‘Advisor’ and how he’d be back...”

“But we don’t know if that has anything to do with the mysterious observer or not,” Loki noted.

“Maybe they’re under the Womruinas’ orders to come after me? Like, when I’m alone?” Tesfia asked. “Maybe I shouldn’t go back to the dorms tonight.”

“I doubt the Womruinas are that stupid. They suggested this match because they were sure they could win, so there’d be no point in trying to cheat like this. Without the leader, the Tenbram can’t be held in the first place. And if it’s a serious match, I doubt you could win by default,” Alus said.

As the three stood and talked, they felt the presence of someone behind them. Loki and Tesfia turned around, surprised, and Alus glanced at the person in question.

“Oh dear, when did you return? I can’t say that I appreciate a group of students gathered after curfew having a secret talk.”

“What’s this, the principal herself on patrol? How zealous,” Alus said dryly.

Witch Sisty, the principal of the Second Magical Institute, only smiled. Not many could bear the shadows of night as gracefully as she did. “Yes, well, I am both principal and educator. It’s part of my responsibility to keep my eye on delinquent students and give them guidance.”

From her words, Alus wondered if Sisty had been the observer from before. *Keep your eye on them, is it? It certainly feels like she appeared with perfect timing... No, maybe I’m overthinking it.*

“Now, why are you looking at me like that, Alus? Did you miss me when you were away from the Institute? It’s okay, I can spoil you a little,” Sisty said. She closed one eye in an alluring fashion and folded her arms, before raising them to push up her breasts.

Alus would normally give her a cold stare for pulling such a prank at her age, but this time he just looked at her.

“Wait, what? What’s going on?” Of course, Sisty had meant it as a joke. Alus seemed more serious than she’d expected, so she awkwardly laughed and scratched her cheek.

Judging from her reaction, it was unlikely that she had been their observer. Alus sighed. “I understand. Then let me ask just one thing. Were you watching us just now?”

“Huh? Yes, well, I happened to see you all gathered here.”

“So it wasn’t you...”

“Indeed,” Loki said. And Tesfia nodded, and added, “So it seems.”

Sisty frowned, feeling left out of the group. “What are you talking about? How rude! Don’t you know that you should be a little more considerate of your

elders, Alus? I'm only patrolling at night like this for the safety of the students because it's been dangerous lately!"

"Good work, then." Alus's blunt words were hardly consoling. Instead, they had the opposite effect.

"Besides, haven't I been very cooperative with you this time, meaning ignoring your sudden absence? I have to consider my own position. If you don't understand that, then I wouldn't mind explaining everything very slowly to you, Ms. Loki, and Ms. Tesfia in my office!"

Hearing that, Tesfia immediately apologized to Sisty. "I-I'm sorry. I just got back from my home, s-so I have to hurry back to the dorm!" She wanted to avoid getting a good scolding by a former Single Digit Magicmaster that she respected.

That's when a dumbfounded Loki intervened. "Ms. Tesfia, I don't think that's what she's talking about. Isn't that right, Principal? Well, please calm down, I will explain it properly later."

A frowning, pouting Sisty finally backed down. "You will? Then that's fine. But what happened to make you take me for some Peeping Tom?"

"Apparently, Sir Alus was watched by someone the entire way back from the Fable estate. We were talking about who it could have been when you happened to appear."

"I see. But couldn't you sense it as well, Ms. Loki?"

Loki sadly shook her head. "No. I never noticed it until Sir Alus brought it up."

"I told her not to use detection magic to prevent them from realizing that we'd sensed them. Well, something violent happened at the Fable family estate, so I was on guard."

Sisty seemed to understand. "All right. But I don't like the idea of something so dangerous. I'm glad nobody's hurt, but I think I need to hear the details. I also have something else I'd like to talk with you about, Alus."

She apologized to Loki and Tesfia, but wouldn't take no for an answer. The two girls looked to Alus, who nodded, and then they left for the laboratory,

leaving Alus and Sisty alone in the dark night.

“So, to what do I owe this honor?”

“Why don’t we take a walk.” Without another word, Sisty began to walk in the opposite direction from the laboratory.

After a few minutes, she sat down on a bench and offered Alus the seat next to her. “Say, Alus. I treat all of the students in this institute as my children. They are all young fledglings that will eventually leave the nest. But no matter how precious they are, if they are harmful to this institute, that’s a different story.” She wore a thin smile and her words were chilling.

Alus wasn’t so insensitive as to make fun of Sisty here. He listened carefully in order to understand her intentions. “I don’t think I’m following, but...are you talking about me?”

Sisty didn’t answer directly. Instead, she smiled. “Well, you are certainly a problem child. But Lettie was quite the problem child herself in the past. She had no problem with giving me a hard time.” She looked almost nostalgic as she said this.

So who was she referring to as harmful?

“From now on, I won’t think of you as a student, but as the Institute’s—as my —ally.”

“You just rephrased that like it was nothing. So I’m your ally. Then who’s the enemy?”

Sisty paused for effect, then said, “If I were to say... The Governor-General.”

“Are you serious?”

“Yes, of course.” Sisty’s expression was calm. “You might not know, but you are in the center of this commotion. Even now, you’re getting embroiled in Berwick’s gamble and scheming.”

“Is that so? Sure, the Governor-General does a lot of work behind the scenes, but I’m not seeing where this is going. I doubt he can control what the Womruinas do.”

“Who said anything about the Womruinas? They’re a problem in their own

right, but they're not the main problem I'm talking about. I've been doing a lot of research into this. The really bad situation might already be in motion."

"This doesn't sound like the kind of conversation to have outdoors. But what exactly are you wary of?"

"Aferka. I'm sure I don't need to say anything more."

Alus stared at Sisty, acting calm by reflex. He'd heard that name quite a bit in the past few days. From what Selva had told him, it had been reborn as a different organization. But that also meant that the former assassination squad still existed.

He also recalled the relationship between Aferka and the ruler. While it wasn't as tight as before, they were still connected by a thread that couldn't be cut. So the principal might be getting pressured as well. Not only did the Institute have a deep connection to the military, since it was a place for training Magicmasters, but it also had strong ties to Alpha as a nation.

Then Sisty asked an unexpected question. "Alus, about Ms. Lilisha... This might sound like a strange question, but is Lilisha Ron de Rimfuge Frusevan a useful person to you? Like I said before, as the principal I have a responsibility to keep my students safe. But if she crosses a certain line, no matter who she is, I won't show any mercy to someone who threatens this Institute."

"She was only sent to keep an eye on me. With Loki becoming my partner, she's pretty much her replacement, or rather, an attempt to keep up appearances."

"On the surface, at least," Sisty said vaguely.

Her intentions were still unclear. Alus wondered why she would bring up Lilisha now, but he was starting to get the picture. The truth might be just what he imagined. In order to confirm it, he threw a frank question Sisty's way. "And under the surface?"

"Ms. Lilisha is a member of Aferka. She was brought in by the military in the hopes that she would become the reins to keep the Frusevans—who control Aferka—in check."

Alus had more or less understood that Lilisha was connected to Aferka based

on her reaction during their negotiations with Aile. That she was an Aferka member was well within expectations.

"But it's not working very well. I don't know how much you know, but Aferka is practically an independent organization at this point. However, they still have the fangs of an executive unit, so right now they're like a bloodthirsty beast on the loose, and their targets are arbitrarily decided by the current leader."

"And the military and nobles won't tolerate it." Alus's slight surprise was immediately calmed as he recalled his memories.

Lilisha had once told Tesfia that the Rimfuge family was a little different from other nobles, and the Frusevans in particular. Not to mention that the man who had appeared at the Fable estate was probably an Aferka member, and not from the past organization, but the present one. His goal had been to capture or eliminate the attacker, but that alone wasn't enough to see them as being out of control.

"I'm not so sure," Sisty said. "Aferka is quite an influential force now, and is considered a risk to Alpha. If Ms. Lilisha were to put the wishes of her family above Berwick's expectation for her to keep the organization under control in the future..."

I see. Alus raised an eyebrow, and Sisty's eyes narrowed as she stared at him, as if she was urgently seeking his answer. *If the principal determines that Lilisha is dangerous...then what's going to change?* The answer wouldn't just affect Alus but Tesfia as well. If Lilisha was removed from the Institute, it might affect the balance of power between the Fables and the Womruinas in the upcoming Tenbram, meaning that cutting the connection with her now wouldn't be very beneficial.

But even if she was thrown out of the Institute, her promise would still be alive. Her decision to be the judge for the Tenbram would likely carry a lot of weight in the noble world, so she wouldn't be able to step down due to her personal feelings. And with Alus's power, he could pressure her to keep her promise, even if he didn't want to go that far.

His brain ran at full speed trying to figure out the right solution. He pondered how to answer the question of whether Lilisha was valuable to him. In total, it

took him less than a split second to reach his conclusion. “I suppose it’s neither.”

“...?” Sisty looked taken aback.

“To be honest, it doesn’t matter,” Alus continued. “If she wants to observe me, she can do it as much as she pleases. And if not, that would be fine too.”

“A logical decision. I know it’s not becoming of a principal to say this, but I’m glad that you’re not being swayed by emotions.” Sisty’s own face was expressionless and had a coldness to it that blended in with the darkness.

“So what are you going to do?”

“I won’t do anything. That’s a decision in itself. Aferka was involved in the Fable family incident, right?”

“Where did you hear that?” Alus found it hard to believe that the Fables would give out information that easily, so how did she find out about it? Considering that and her well-timed appearance just now, Sisty was again a prime suspect for being the mysterious observer that had watched him on the way back from the Fable estate.

“You need to become better at covering your reactions. You’re very easy to read right now. I don’t even have to go out of my way to observe you, as it takes one to know one. At any rate, you’re not planning on lending Ms. Lilisha a hand, are you? I’d think that would be the right decision.”

Alus was a little shaken, as he’d been taken in by Sisty’s coaxing. He used his military training to ignore it. Just as always, making use of Sisty was one thing...but even if he didn’t, nothing would change, so he kept a cool head. “I don’t want to waste any effort, regardless of what happens to her. What about you?”

“I feel like I’m being brushed off, though,” Sisty complained, feigning ignorance. But she understood that it was the bare minimum of effort that was required.

During the campus festival, she’d helped to cover up information on Elise when she’d barged in. If Elise’s past were to be revealed, it would shake the foundation of Berwick’s position. Having been in the military, Sisty could easily

guess what would happen next.

“But why did you ask what I thought? Were you thinking of lending a hand, depending on my answer?”

“That’s not possible,” Sisty replied firmly. “It’s not that I won’t help, but I can’t. However, I can choose what information to give you.”

“There’s still more then... Well, even if you don’t tell me, I could just ask the Governor-General or someone else.” Alus saw a sly, satisfied smile appear on Sisty’s face. “You mean that’s just what he wants?”

Sisty didn’t say anything, but held up two fingers and then bent them down. “Do you perhaps want to save both of them? If you contact the Governor-General, that possibility will disappear. Like I said, this is the Governor-General’s gamble. It’s a gamble because it’s unlikely that everything will work out perfectly. Which is why, regardless of what the outcome is, it will be within his expectations and hurt him as little as possible. But that might not be the case for you.”

The way Berwick was being made to look like the sole bad guy was so that the other person involved—who was coming from a different perspective—wouldn’t be noticed if something went wrong. If Berwick was the only one who got on his bad side, Alus would just have to call in his old debts. Sisty’s self-interest, while overly naive, had led her to take this action. “It sounds like you’re pressing the point. So let me ask. Are you telling me to lend Lilisha a hand?”

“I won’t go that far. I can’t be responsible for what she does outside of the Institute. I’m sure you can tell since Berwick’s already gotten you involved, but we’re at a crossroads.”

In other words...a point of choice. Alus felt that Sisty was giving Berwick too much credit, but then again, it did sound like something he could do. “And you’re saying that he considered all of that when he gave Lilisha the mission to keep watch over me?”

Sisty’s lips curled up, and Alus took that as affirmation. It appeared that Lilisha hadn’t been Berwick’s choice because she and Alus were around the same age. Their similar ages were only a coincidence. However, Berwick had taken

advantage of that coincidence to plan everything out.

Even if that was the case, and everything was proceeding as Berwick had planned, Alus wouldn't go back on his word. He had his hands full and had just gotten into it with the Womruina family. Any more was too much to bear, even for him.

If he was on his own, he could just brush off the falling embers and ignore anything trivial. That was the rule he'd lived by...up until now, anyways. But that line he'd drawn was starting to break down.

It's a gradual erosion... Alus clicked his tongue in his mind. It had started coming undone when he chose to help Tesfia. He could come up with excuses and the like, but in the end they all contradicted each other. With enough leaks, the dam would eventually burst. There must have been a structural weakness from the start.

"So what are you going to do? Stick your neck out before it's too late? He'll have expected that too."

Alus sighed. "Like I said, I don't care. But I'll ask you anyway. What do you mean by too late?" He stared at Sisty's face, trying to get a read on her.

"It might already be too late to choose, so maybe I'll tell you," Sisty said, putting on a few airs as she gazed into the distance. There was no longer any need for considerate and deliberate leading of the conversation. Now that the prey had stepped into the trigger zone, all that was left was the final push, so she wouldn't need to use evasive words. Greatest Magicmaster or not, the boy before her had only recently come to the Institute, and he was anguishing over such a trivial matter...and all because he had little experience in dealing with other people. So Sisty would need to guide him.

Above all, there was only one choice she wanted him to make. She decided to tell him everything she'd just learned from her caring old teacher. "Ms. Lilisha is not in her dorm room now, due to circumstances concerning her family's job for her. She's probably headed for the Fable family estate as a member of Aferka. I'm sure that's all you need to know. Now, I want you to think about this. It's something only you can do. You understand what will happen if Ms. Lilisha clashes with the Fable family...don't you?"

Hearing that, the light of emotion disappeared from Alus's eyes.

Sisty simply stared at him, ready to accept whatever decision he made. She also had a general idea of what his answer would be. But if possible, she hoped that he would betray her expectations.

"What benefit would be in it for me? Nobody can really put me at a disadvantage. Even with the Womruinas, I can just eliminate everyone in the end."

Sisty's shoulders slumped at his monotone voice. Indeed, nobody could violate Alus's freedom. He didn't need anyone's patronage to walk freely anywhere in the world.

Right now, he was just tagging along with ordinary people trapped in the mundane world. She'd hoped that his life here had provoked some kind of change...but that hope had been for nothing. While there'd been some change, she'd misjudged the root of the problem. Neither she nor Berwick had truly understood the darkness deep down inside of him.

"I see." That was all that Sisty could manage. Her disappointment ran deep. Even though Alus hadn't made the decision she'd hoped he would make, no one could say that it was wrong. She couldn't blame him for her hope that his answer would've been different.

"Is that all?"

"Yes, but can I ask one last thing?"

Alus said nothing, so Sisty continued. "I was hoping that you would help Ms. Lilisha. Of course, I'd like to repay the Fable family, but only you can do that. There is something, however, that is even more important. Are you all right with this? I thought you swore to never let anything important be taken away from you. Will you let the tragedy of the massive invasion repeat itself?" Sisty faced the overly powerful student without fear, just as she used to when she would put her hand on his head when he was a boy. He'd grown a lot since then, but his body was still not quite that of an adult. She could still manage to put her hand on his head.

"Are you telling me to save everything?"

“No, but at least what you can reach. Your hands should still be able to reach her. You’re also the teacher of those girls. Wouldn’t showing your cool side to them be worth it?”

“Not really. I’ve never once called myself a teacher,” Alus replied. His eyes were cold.

Sisty stared back at him.

In the midst of the dark veil of night...their eyes silently clashed.

Seventieth Chapter

The Brand of a Defect

The light leaking into the room helped to calm her mind. Dusk gave the sky an ominous reddish-black color. Each second, the darkness came creeping closer.

She silently walked through the room, as if she was a trespasser. While it was in fact her room, she wondered at times who it belonged to. No matter how much time she'd spent here, she could never get used to it.

Immediately after finishing preparations, she realized what the problem was. The difference between this room and her room at home was too hard to reconcile, despite her having ordered all of this furniture herself.

Lilisha looked around the room that had been specially prepared for her stay at the Institute. A feeling of melancholy came over her. She'd never been so aware of her depressed feelings before. As a result of coming to the Institute and interacting with others her age, she'd experienced a wider range of emotions, which made it hard to change gears now and get back into the family "business."

She silently removed the bottom panel of a drawer, pulled out what was hidden there, and stuffed it into a bag. It didn't bear the slightest resemblance to the uniform she currently wore. Instead, it was the outfit that she wore in the underworld that concealed her family business.

She would be returning to her family home today. But for the time being, she remained a student and wore her uniform.

Leaving the dorm, she greeted friends she passed on the road, when she suddenly had a thought. "What was the name of that girl I just passed again?" Just trying to remember it proved bothersome. *Oh well* , she thought, and stepped into the transfer gate.

She exited at her destination in the middle district. This area didn't resemble a large city like Beliza. If anything, it looked more like the countryside.

There were some old wooden buildings scattered around that gave the impression of the good old days. Houses and apartment buildings were surrounded by lush greenery, and there were chic shops mixed in. So there was a kind of mosaic pattern of blocks that were behind the times and ones that were more modern.

Eventually, Lilisha stopped at a building and slipped through the door, making sure she wasn't noticed. A short distance from the entrance was a reception desk that had a plain look. A partition was in place to ensure that neither party could see the other's face. There was a simple opening for confirming how many nights the guest would be staying and for paying.

Here, everything was paid for in cash to avoid tracing. Lilisha put several coins on the desk with a practiced hand. In total, it was thirty thousand Deld.

A hand from the other side of the partition took the money, and in return, put down keys for a room. No words were exchanged.

There was a set price for hush money. Nothing more or less was to be added to the room's price. If the amount was even the slightest bit wrong, it would violate the unspoken agreement and the guest would be thrown out.

Lilisha opened the door to an old room and stepped inside. The floor creaked and the furniture looked worn out. Even the sheets left much to be desired. No one would stay here if they had a choice. Considering the room's interior and the service, the price was fairly high, and no locals had anything good to say about this place.

However, these lodgings did serve a purpose for a certain group of people. After all, as long as the employees were paid, they would ignore most things that happened in the rooms. That alone made it a valuable place for those who lived in the underworld. In addition, the owner was known to be an information broker, which made him a valuable source to Aferka.

She threw her bag onto the bed and pulled her clothes out from it. As she stripped out of her uniform, Lilisha thought, *It's about time to give up on this place. I'm starting to be recognized around this neighborhood. And I'm pretty*

sure those people from before are in the same line of business as me. As she recalled what had just happened, she stopped in the middle of changing.

After Lilisha had finished paying, a group of five people entered. Most were wearing such shabby clothing that she could almost smell the stench. But there was another reason they'd attracted her attention.

Among the group of men was a lone woman with an overwhelming presence and atmosphere. She wore a strangely bewitching outfit and her body presented the full charms of a woman. Her air of dignity was such that she was far beyond the image of a prostitute earning a living at a run-down inn. To put it another way, she was like a queen among rowdy men.

To add to the odd sight, the men's arms—visible through tears in their clothes—were covered in scars and tattoos.

All of that made Lilisha suspicious. She wondered who they were. While she had no way of confirming it, she was sure they lived in the underworld just like her. *Let's not think about it.* As if trying to be rid of the perfume she'd smelled when she'd passed by the woman, Lilisha hurriedly finished changing.

She now wore a jet-black bodysuit, with a cloak made of anti-magic fibers to block mana. The lower half of her face was covered by a mask and there were concealed weapons in her sleeves and hem. Finally, she put on special gloves woven with threads that were good conductors of mana. These threads were also used in the creation of AWRs.

In full business mode, she started by sending a report over the comms to a predetermined location. "Beginning mission." Without letting anyone see her, she jumped from the window down to the ground, and sprinted through the dark back alleys.



By the time she arrived at her destination, darkness covered the area to the point that it was perfect for completing her mission. Being dressed in black, she blended in with the darkness, and her cloak prevented her from being detected through mana.

She wouldn't need to be this cautious for a normal mission, but against a target this skilled, her preparations had to be perfect. Failure was not an option.

The pressure threw Lilisha off her rhythm. Even she could tell how sweaty her palms were. She identified the mansion beyond the garden with a special telescope.

They're on high alert. There were several women in maid uniforms around the mansion. Based on how they looked and moved around, they were no normal servants. *But I've found a way through.*

Lilisha had spotted the magical steel threads spread out around the garden. They were deliberately focused in areas with little security to lure invaders in. Aside from the threads in the air, there were also loose threads across the grounds, making for a double-layered trap. If an intruder paid too much attention to the threads in the air, they would wind up triggering another trap on the ground.

A normal person would miss it...but not me! Indeed, to Lilisha, these traps had no meaning. With a fearless smile, she made her way through the garden to the mansion.

A few minutes later, having slipped through the security net by avoiding both the mana threads and the patrols, Lilisha successfully reached the mansion. She felt rushed, but repeatedly told herself that the mission had to succeed no matter what. She couldn't let her brother down anymore.

Moving from the garden to a corner of the mansion, Lilisha clung to the wall and blended into the shadows. She'd wanted more time to prepare, but the unexpected urgency of the order had given her little time, so she'd had no choice but to sneak in. It was a bit forced, but it was fine as long as she could kill the target.

However, if there was a miscalculation on her part... *According to the information I heard before, the Fable estate has weak security. It's well known in noble society.*

Surprisingly, the inside of the mansion was buzzing. Lilisha snuck close to a back door and listened to the voices inside. This appeared to be a waiting place for the servants. She could hear the maids talking on their break. From what she could tell there were two of them.

"Well, I better get going," one said. The door opened and light from the inside streamed out. When the maid turned to lock the door, Lilisha came up behind her and strangled her. She counted down in her mind, and as she reached zero, the maid passed out, the strength leaving her body.

Lilisha held her up, then pushed her into a nearby bush. She opened the door just enough so she could slip inside. She drove her knee into the other maid's solar plexus and suppressed her without making a sound. These two were normal maids, but if they'd been like the ones in the garden, it would've been much harder to put them down without killing them.

First, I need to find my target. From what she'd seen outside, the target should be inside the mansion. The minimal amount of information she'd gathered beforehand pointed to that.

She entered the mansion proper and scanned for shadows that she used to weave her way through the home. The stealth skills instilled in her from birth ensured that no normal person passing near her would detect her.

In recent years, many important people had taken measures to protect their homes and facilities against magical concealment and similar acts. That's why those in the assassination business were using old-fashioned physical techniques, weapons, and the latest in anti-magic equipment to stay effective. A skilled assassin would also use high-level mana control that was difficult to detect through magic and extraordinary athletic abilities to sneak through surveillance. After that, they'd use analog combat techniques and arms to take down their target. Assassins didn't need magic when all it took to kill someone was a pen inserted into the carotid artery.

Lilisha jumped up the stairs in a single leap, and clung to the wall to minimize

her silhouette. She barely extended her head out to peer down the hall.

A maid crossing the hall at the far end suddenly stopped for a moment. Perhaps she'd picked up on a strange presence... However, it didn't matter. Now that Lilisha was this far in, all that was left was action. Because of that, her resolve didn't waver.

If she's noticed me, I have no choice but to do it. But let me see how it turns out...

The maid, though, only stopped for an instant. She soon disappeared down the hallway.

Lilisha was relieved. Next, the door that was in front of her opened and a woman in her forties came out, wheeling a cart with trays on it. Unlike the maids from before, she wore a long black dress with a white apron, and her hair was bundled up inside a bonnet. In other words, she wore the outfit of an orthodox attendant. "Oh yes, I almost forgot..." she muttered. Then she called for someone on the floor below, but when an answer didn't come right away, she turned the cart around.

The gesture seemed oddly theatrical. *Did she notice me?! No...* Lilisha vigilantly observed the woman, but didn't see anything that indicated that she'd noticed her. There was nothing unnatural about her behavior, and Lilisha was also pretty confident in her own skills, so...

At the very least she hadn't been spotted. Thanks to her cloak, there was no need to worry about being detected through magic either. She'd ended up being caught between a rock and a hard place, but nothing bad had happened, and she'd already moved behind a window curtain.

"Good timing, Hest." The woman in the head covering called out to the maid that had stopped for a moment. Lilisha had thought she'd left, but she'd actually been working on something that Lilisha couldn't see from where she was.

The woman in the head covering pushed her cart over to the maid. "I must make a report to Master Frose. Can you take this cart back?"

"Understood, Chamberlain."

The chamberlain gave the cart to the young maid called Hest. When she did, the cart started to sway and the sounds of dishes crashing together echoed through the hallway.

“Oh dear, be careful not to break anything,” the chamberlain said. She put a hand on Hest’s shoulder.

Hest’s mouth bent in an eerie shape, and she nodded with what could hardly be described as a smile. Her skills as a maid were probably below second-rate. Considering how unsociable she looked, she wasn’t well suited for the job. But she was still young, so maybe she was just getting started. That was Lilisha’s impression as the two parted ways.

The chamberlain headed off in the direction that Lilisha was going in. Hest, pushing the cart, followed the chamberlain’s original path. Lilisha crept after the chamberlain, while paying the utmost caution. Since she’d mentioned reporting to Master Frose, she was no doubt going to meet with the head of the Fable family, so Lilisha’s target must be there.

An unexpected opportunity had presented itself to take the shortest distance to the target, and she suppressed her impatience. This mission had been given to her as a chance to redeem herself. Her blunder was that she’d gotten involved with other families on her own accord when she’d volunteered to be the Tenbram referee, even though she was an Aferka member. Even if she maintained a neutral position, there was a risk of being caught up in the quarrel between the Womruinas and the Fables.

That she hadn’t consulted with the head of the family beforehand was seen as a problem. As a result, Lilisha had received a terrible reprimand from her older brother. With a voice laden with disappointment, he’d called her a disgrace to the family and had dismissed her as useless. Even now, she could clearly recall him telling her that she needed to learn her place.

As a member of Aferka who bore the names of Rimfuge and Frusevan, as she thought on it now, her words and deeds had been too rash. Her father—the current head of the family—had heard about it from her brother. However, her actions during the negotiations with Aile had been purely intended to prevent the Womruinas’ recklessness from spreading confusion throughout the nation.

The Rimfuge family had to consider that, which was why her being a referee for the Tenbram wouldn't be a problem.

And yet...her brother had reprimanded her and given her a mission so that she could clear her name. If she accomplished this assassination mission, her blunder would be overlooked. That was the order that her father gave, which was conveyed to her by her brother. It was an old code in Aferka that shame should be rinsed away with blood.

This wasn't Lilisha's first job for Aferka, but she'd had next to no experience operating alone. But so far things were proceeding smoothly.

She followed the chamberlain through the large mansion. When the chamberlain stopped in front of a room, Lilisha concealed herself in the shadows.

The chamberlain politely bowed and entered the room. *That must be Frose Fable's study.* Lilisha quickly approached the room. An assassin must never be noticed until their blade had already struck down the target. Lilisha firmly believed in that principle. She poured mana into her gloves, extended the weapon she specialized in—mana steel threads—and pulled herself up to the ceiling beam just above the door.

Not long after, the door opened again and an elderly man stepped out. He had snow-white hair and deep wrinkles. This was no doubt the Fable family butler. With his hands folded behind his back, he walked down the hallway with firm steps.

Lilisha silently descended to the floor. His back was to her. She extended the steel threads, intending to attack in a single bound. It would end in an instant. All she had to do was to wrap the threads around his neck from behind.

But in the next moment, the butler spoke up. "Hest."

The door next to Lilisha broke through, as a figure flew out. Splinters from the door scattered all over. The woman called Hest unleashed a sharp kick that sliced through the air.

Her leg rapidly approached Lilisha, accompanied by wood chips. Lilisha immediately put up her arms to protect herself, but it wasn't enough. Her

bones creaked as what felt like a lump of iron slammed into her body. It blew her away, sending her through a window and outside.

“Ack?!” Lilisha protected herself from the glass shards raining down on her, as she spread out her threads to pierce the wall and slow her fall. The forceful movements made her arm muscles hurt, but it was far better than slamming into the ground. She managed to regain her posture and braced for landing, but...

She looked up. A dark figure plummeted down with the moon shining brightly behind them. Lilisha belatedly realized that they were trying to keep her away from the head of the family. The figure was a woman, her skirt fluttering in the wind.

But that wasn’t all. She raised her supple leg up high as if pulling a bowstring back, and the ax kick—combined with her falling momentum—was too much for Lilisha to block with just her arms.

She immediately turned her attention to the approaching ground, steeling herself for impact. The moment she hit the cobblestones, intense pain ran all through her body, which had bounced once after landing. Unable to endure the pain, Lilisha coughed up blood and rolled to the side to avoid any follow-up attacks.

When she sat up, she saw the maid standing before her. Her eyes were clouded, not reflecting even a slightest bit of moonlight. Nor was there any gloss to her tightly pursed lips, leaving her with none of the typical charm of a maid.

This sucks... Ow?! Her ribs were probably cracked. Fortunately, they didn’t seem to be broken all the way through, but she wouldn’t be able to escape like this.

First, she needed to defeat the enemy before her and open a path. With that in mind, she stood on her shaky legs and bit her lip. Before long, the iron taste of blood filled her mouth.

Lilisha shifted the mask covering her mouth and spat out the blood, while carefully observing the maid. “That maid uniform doesn’t suit you at all,” she said, putting up a bold front. But her opponent showed no reaction, so her front

was in vain.

Suddenly, the sound of a window opening came from above. Lilisha looked up and saw the first maid that had attacked her, Hest, removing the broken window frame. She then jumped out without a sound, her skirt fluttering in the air until she landed.

I might have been able to do something against one, but two...? Lilisha adjusted her mask. Her body hurt and her heart raced, but she analyzed her enemies as calmly as she could.

At the very least, they were a cut above the guards outside. Her sense of danger was warning her about them. Even so, she had no choice but to resolve herself. She pulled her gloves tight as a sign of that.

“Oh, so that is your AWR, is it?”

Lilisha spun around. Standing there was the white-haired butler she’d seen on the second floor. He cast a long shadow behind him and was stroking his beard with interest.

When did he get behind me? Now it was three on one. She could do nothing but curse herself for being careless. She positioned herself so that she could respond to the pincer attack.

But unexpectedly, when the two maids saw the butler, they straightened their backs and relaxed their postures.

He nodded at the two. “Good work, Hest, Eight.” Then he looked at Lilisha again. “No wonder you could slip through my traps. It seems I was naive to not consider other thread users.” With a fearless smile, the elderly butler surveyed Lilisha from head to toe. “I see. Considering the type and number of hidden weapons... I am your target, am I not?”

A chill ran down her spine. *He saw through me immediately!* Indeed, the mission given to her by her father was to assassinate the Fable family butler, Selva Greenus. She only realized now that something was odd about the mission, but she would never have been allowed to question orders in the first place.

“Hest, Eight, follow Chamberlain Sithaima’s orders and return to your

positions. It's possible that she's just a diversion, so I will handle this alone."

The two maids looked beyond Lilisha to Selva. In response, he smiled. "I won't let her escape," he said, to put them at ease. "I will speak with Sithaima directly later."

"Understood," the maids replied in perfect unison.

"Also...have someone come by later with cleaning utensils. We wouldn't want the winter roses we've put so much effort into growing to get dirty."

Hest and Eight nodded, then bowed, before leaving without a sound.

So it was a setup to smoke me out. But this is pretty convenient too. Lilisha was relieved that her expression was hidden behind a mask. She didn't know if she could clear an escape path, but at least it wasn't hopeless anymore. Her target had set the stage himself, so she had no complaints. Even if she couldn't escape, she could at least restore her honor by killing the target. Lilisha, mindful of the mansion behind her, stood and faced her target, Selva Greenus.

"Now then, trespassing, damage to property, and attempted murder of servants. You're not going to get away with this. Just like Vector, your attempt at retaliation is careless."

Lilisha's eyebrows twitched. Since he'd brought up retaliation, it was clear that he already knew who she was.

Selva Greenus had betrayed Aferka and killed his past allies, so he would need to pay for that with his life. Aferka was expected to be a blade that cut through all betrayal, treachery, and misfortune. "I don't know who this Vector is, but your bloodstained past can never be erased. So you should have known this day would come," Lilisha told the butler with the annoyingly composed expression.

It would be one thing if he'd become a hermit hiding away, but for him to casually work in a noble's employ would upset anyone in the underworld. No one who'd once bathed in blood under Aferka's name would be free again. That was one of the promises made by the ruler when they'd reorganized the dangerous organization known as Aferka. As such, all defectors were to be eliminated without exception.

Lilisha didn't know how he'd been able to see through all of that, but she

surmised that Selva did shady work for the Fable family. Vector was likely someone whose grudge he'd earned during his work.

Selva stood with his arms behind his back, while Lilisha held her hands together in front of her chest. Thin threads stretched through the air from Selva's fingers. "If possible, I would've liked to have extracted some information. But if you don't know about Vector, then I more or less understand the situation. Your attempt to shed blood in this garden is enough of a crime, so... Very well."

He bent the ring finger of one hand. Along with the smell of winter roses, there was a thick scent of murder in the air. His masterful technique meant that his opponent couldn't even sense his breathing. The atmosphere was saturated with bloodlust. The end result would spell death for one of them.

That outcome—which could no longer be overturned—as well as the smell of fresh blood, made Lilisha shiver.

While the elderly butler was composed, Lilisha's eyes darted back and forth. It was as if the butler had removed his filter of emotion. What was needed to kill her was ruthlessness and relentlessness. All he was thinking about was how to end her life.

Lilisha dropped low and quickly pulled her arms back. Steel threads tore through the ground and cut up the wall behind her, causing a spider's web of cracks to form in it. The wall collapsed immediately and rubble fell down, but it changed direction from Lilisha who was directly below it to Selva who stood in front of her. Considering the unnatural movement, it was clear that threads were moving the rubble. As proof of that, the rubble that was shooting towards Selva like bullets had faint silver threads behind them.

Selva's sharp eyes had picked up the slightest of reflections from the moonlight. It was an offensive move that used not the sharpness of the threads, but the weight of the objects they had pierced. Their speed meant that getting hit by just one would result in a broken bone at the very least.

However, he didn't budge. It wasn't until the storm of rubble was right before his eyes that he finally moved his fingertips. When he did, every single piece of rubble came to a perfect standstill in the air.

The difference between Lilisha's and Selva's abilities in manipulating threads was tremendous. Selva had wrapped threads around the rubble and pulled them taut to fix them in midair. After a short pause, the rubble was torn asunder into even smaller pieces and scattered to the ground.

"—!" Seeing that, Lilisha released the threads tied to the rubble and swung her hands. Accompanying her beautiful, dance-like movements were yet more threads extending out from her fingers. The silver glow of the threads gave color to the darkness.

But just spreading threads around her was meaningless. Even so, she extended as many as she could, one for each finger.

"Oh?" Selva let out an interested murmur, as if wondering what would happen next.

As the threads spread around Selva, Lilisha swung her hands so fast that the movements were conveyed all the way to the tips of the threads. The threads undulated and then bounded up into the air.

Next, some of them crossed paths, creating a complicated pattern, as Lilisha's arms moved without hesitation and so quickly that they were a blur. Suddenly, their movements stopped. "Thread Manipulation Technique *‹‹Emhaydos››* "

Before Selva knew it, there was an octahedron-shaped crystal in front of Lilisha. The woven threads shone silver under the moonlight. "Hmm... Not bad for child's play," he said, seemingly scoffing at her elaborate technique.

"—! We'll see how long you can keep your composure!" Using the tip of the crystal as footing, Lilisha jumped up high. As if in sync with her, the crystal flew up as well. It soon overtook her and arrived at its destination far above Lilisha. Immediately after, the crystal followed her arm movement and crashed down towards Selva. "A simple line might not be possible, but you won't be able to block this!" Mana steel threads were originally a hidden weapon specialized for cutting, which was why this wouldn't be entirely unexpected.

"You are good with your hands, if nothing else...but that won't kill anybody." Selva gazed upward, his expression unchanged. In response to the attack he merely flicked his wrist, as if to say that it wouldn't work on him just because she'd woven the thread into a shape.

However, Lilisha smiled beneath her mask. *I did it!* She wasn't just showing off little tricks. She'd had her own intent behind this attack.

Selva's casual response was exactly what she'd hoped for. It was a sign that she had the upper hand. Just before the crystal Emhaydos had finished falling, she had cut the threads from her fingers. When she did, the shape collapsed and the threads burst. All of the woven threads were released and scattered in all directions. The ground would be split and the trees cut as the sharp threads attacked the surrounding area.

It was a big move that would hit not only Selva but everything around him as well. The whiplike threads could slice anything apart and would probably partially destroy the Fable mansion.

Lilisha was convinced of it. But just then she heard a deafening sound. The tops of the tall trees were neatly sliced, and vermillion sparks flew from the cut surfaces of the iron lamp posts. The artificial mana leaked out, causing twinkles of light that lit up the darkness.

She was speechless. She strained her eyes and saw a wide web of threads as high as the roof of the Fable mansion that was stretched out. It was like an impromptu protective net. *That blocked all of it? No way!*

Selva must have put it up when Lilisha jumped up high, having read what her next move would be...which meant that his skills far surpassed her imagination. Moreover, it wasn't only meant to protect. The razor sharp threads were also a trap that would cut the falling Lilisha to shreds.

Lilisha barely managed to shift her posture. She slipped through the web and landed, but her chest hurt from the various attacks she'd received. In that moment, Selva's steel thread struck like a whip.

She immediately weaved threads together to block it. But the impact was too great and a part of her shield burst. *It's so powerful! And there were no preliminary motions.*

Lilisha needed to make large gestures such as flicking her hand or wrist, or swinging her arm, to use her threads. While it might be magical, it still had the properties of string, so basic manipulation relied on movements. Yet...

Selva calmly brushed off her glare and maintained his posture with his hands folded behind his back.

He's concealing the motions of his hands! But that's not all. Right now he just weaved several dozen threads to create a thick rope to use as a whip...! Even a normal steel thread could cut skin with enough momentum. Meanwhile, a mana steel thread could cut just by touching the skin.

However, that would rely entirely on sharpness. For example, if the target wore heavy armor it wouldn't be anywhere near as effective. Because of its threadlike properties, it wasn't suited for use in impact attacks. But the next blow from the thick rope being reinforced with even more thread would surely have the destructive force of a sledgehammer.

Screw you, you old coot! Lilisha cursed. She ignored the alarms her body was giving her and gritted her teeth.

"How fragile. It seems there is a considerable shortage of assassins, or perhaps I am just being underrated. Then no matter how pathetic and frustrating it may be...I should rejoice that only assassins of this caliber are being sent to us," Selva ridiculed Lilisha.

Lilisha's veins popped as she burned with anger. "Why you...!" She counterattacked, but Selva didn't fail to notice her hands shaking from emotion.

He sidestepped her thread. As Lilisha's stance was broken, the tree to the right of her rustled and something fell down from it. It was steel threads weaved together with the mass of a gigantic hammer.

Surprised, Lilisha once again tried to block with a weave of threads. But a single heavy impact was enough to undo the hardening of her threads.

The follow-up was equally quick. Selva undid the hardening of his threads and pulled them upward into the leafy branches above Lilisha.

This is bad! She didn't even have a chance to listen to her instincts that blared a warning as a second attack came. From all directions came solid wires that struck like whips.

She swung her arms fast and manipulated the threads coming from her fingertips. Lilisha created a sturdier net than before and deployed it in a

spherical shape around her. She managed to hold her own, but her obviously inferior skills weren't going to change. As soon as one part fell apart she quickly reinforced it, but that was it. She was trapped on the defensive. Even so, as she struggled to breathe, she looked for openings in her opponent.

For several seconds, Lilisha was stuck protecting herself. She'd formed layers and layers of steel threads around her, as if wrapping herself in a cocoon. "Hah, haah, haah...ugh." She gulped once to try and calm her ragged breathing.

Creating magical steel threads required strength and a sense of modeling, but it was nothing more than an extension of Lilisha's daily training. The problem was her stamina. Manipulating threads for long periods of time was the most difficult thing.

But now that she'd woven such a solid shield, her defenses shouldn't be broken that easily. She needed to buy some time to recover her stamina. With that in mind, she observed her target through the small gaps in the cocoon. *This isn't even an assassination anymore.* It had derailed into a pure killing match. Moreover, her situation was overwhelmingly disadvantageous.

Because it was a fight to the death, though...she still had a chance to turn things around. If she was putting her life at stake, even a single opening could be fatal for her opponent.

She racked her brain, trying to come up with even one idea to defeat him. An unfamiliar sound reached her ears...a loud noise like wires creaking. Lilisha immediately realized it was her cocoon being wrenched open.

Her cocoon was twisting and deforming. Of all things, Selva was inserting his threads into the tiny gaps and intertwining them with Lilisha's threads, pulling them out. At the same time, a few of his threads attacked her cocoon. With tears happening here and there, it didn't take long for her protective web to take on a strange shape.

H-How is this...! Fear welled up inside her. *I won't be able to maintain this for long!*

Superficial damage could be fixed, but if the main spindles that supported the cocoon were destroyed, it would only be a matter of time before it collapsed. Lilisha manipulated her threads and desperately tried to prevent that. However,

more and more of Selva's threads were invading her defenses right before her eyes. Her cocoon was being eroded at a pace that she couldn't stop. She simply didn't have enough fingers. They were coming from in front, behind, below, and above... All of her work and mana put into forming her defenses was falling apart.

The strain on Lilisha's mind and body soon manifested itself physically. The sensation in her fingertips faded and the blood flow stopped, turning her fingers pale. Her shoulders felt unbearably heavy. Her bones creaked like a ton of weight was pushing down on her. If she continued to keep her threads up, her fingers would break.

"Ugh..." She gritted her teeth, then realized that a sharp pain was running through her left arm. It felt like a scalpel had cut into her. At the same time the strength left her hand, and the portion of the cocoon weaved by that hand collapsed.

"—?!" When Lilisha looked, she saw a thin thread had entered through her wrist and was buried under her skin. She instinctively released all her mana steel threads and formed a small mana blade with her right hand, thrusting it into her left arm at the thread's insertion point. She picked up the tip and pulled the thread out.

Her skin was rent from elbow to wrist as the thread came out. Lilisha grimaced from the blood loss and intense pain. "Aaah, ugh..." Her whole body was covered in cold sweat and her left arm hung slack with blood running down it.

She stopped the bleeding with a steel thread around her arm, and as she endured the pain, tears started forming in her eyes. Once she stopped the bleeding, she quickly sutured the cut with more thread. She was losing less blood, but it didn't help her to recover her mental fortitude.

Lilisha had never thought of thread being used in a tactical way like that. Her treatment method had been a spur of the moment choice based on her opponent's tactics. Just imagining where that thread had been headed made her shiver. At any rate, she believed her emergency measure had been correct.

Her clothes felt strangely heavy. Normally, the weight of sweat-soaked

clothes wouldn't bother her. *Our skills in thread use are too different. Should I run? But where to?*

She experienced a moment of weakness and felt like her heart was about to break. The inside of her collapsing cocoon was a fragile cage and escape was impossible. As her consciousness began to fade, she checked on her condition. Several ribs were broken and the laceration in her left arm made her reactions slow. It would be difficult to use any more mana threads since they required delicate manipulation.

Even so...she couldn't retreat. Lilisha bit her lip as if trying to pull herself together. *I thought of escaping, even for a moment? Me?*

The edges of her mouth lifted up, as she forced a fearless smile. As long as it was a matter of kill or be killed and not simply winning or losing, there was no need to retreat. With a brave wave of her right hand, she manipulated her threads to cut down the trees in the vicinity.

"Oh, it seems you've found your resolve. But you never stood a chance to begin with. At best, you could repent for all those that you've killed, but from the looks of it there could only be a few. I'm sure you wouldn't even struggle to remember their faces." The difference in proficiency wasn't only in their abilities as thread users, but also in their careers as assassins. Selva could see right through Lilisha's lack of experience.

"If you think this is enough to kill me, you must really be naive. Even though we walk the same path, you lived in the easy times of a peaceful period."

"Ha ha, how long has it been since I last heard such sarcasm? How ridiculous. You should save lines like that for when you've forgotten how many targets you've eliminated. Not that it's anything to brag about." Selva brushed off Lilisha's bold front, and brought his fingers to his mouth to chide the fledgling assassin.

Meanwhile, Lilisha shook the five threads attached to each hand, though since her left hand was practically useless it was only a bluff. However, any assassin would be prepared for the possibility of failing their mission and being cornered...which was why there was always a trump card prepared.

Lilisha hid a small crystal in her hand. She was aware that she lacked skills,

and using this item in conjunction with her threads was something she'd prepared to compensate for it.

Yet...Selva's posture was the same as always, but behind him were an innumerable number of threads swaying to and fro.

The sight chilled Lilisha to the core. At best she could manipulate ten threads. The number of fingers available was supposed to be the limit of any master. However, this old man before her who'd retired from assassin work long ago was manipulating several dozen at least. It was like he was showing off his power, emphasizing the clear gap between them.

"That's why you're so vexing!" Lilisha moved the fingers of her left hand while swinging her right hand. She fished out an oversized piece of rubble from the pile created from the wall's collapse and threw it at Selva. It was as large as an adult's torso, but just as she predicted, it was sliced to pieces and crumbled.

Every assassination was carried out by thrusting at a momentary opening. And for a simple killing, just an instant's opening would be enough to settle the fight. Using the last of her strength, Lilisha concealed her left hand's threads in the shadow of the rubble.

No matter how skilled Selva might be at manipulating threads, if she could score a critical hit that would be the end of him. She didn't need hundreds of threads to cut off his head, which was why she'd proceeded under the assumption that she'd be seen through.

The threads wrapped around pebbles of the rubble. Lilisha focused as hard as she could and launched the pebbles towards him like speeding bullets.

However, Selva took a half step back and avoided all of them.

Next, she turned her wrist and dropped more pebbles flying through the air straight down towards Selva's head.

But he easily dodged them. The pebbles crumbled into dust as they slammed onto the cobblestones. He stomped on the still-exposed steel threads.

"—!" With or without shoes, stepping on threads that could split stones was insane, but the reason why he could soon became clear. And Lilisha clicked her tongue in her mind. The soles of his shoes had been strengthened with perfect

mana control, making them sturdier than steel plates. If not, his legs would've been sliced apart, shoes and all.

"How sad to think that this is all you can muster..." Selva had made his choice after the difference in their skill levels became obvious.

While he'd done so to show off the leeway he had, his scorn would be fatal. *I got him.* A twisted smile appeared on Lilisha's face.

She had used her right hand to forcibly throw a large piece of rubble. Three of the threads she'd used were broken, but two were still working. Sneaking those threads closer, she released the crystal from her hand, which slid down the threads to Selva's feet.

As Lilisha collapsed, she mentally scoffed at him. All that was left was to push it up just a little closer and let the mana within burst out. After that, countless shards would surely pierce through Selva's body. The explosion would send them in every direction, but the damage would be minimal with enough distance. She'd measured the distance where it would kill her target but leave her alive. Now all that was left to do was to wait.

The split second it would take felt like an eternity, and as she looked in the direction of her trump card... "Huh?!" Lilisha let out in a wild voice. After all, she saw a person that couldn't have been there.

He'd suddenly appeared right between her and Selva as if he'd teleported, and grabbed hold of the crystal like it was just another pebble. He wore a black coat and black clothes underneath, so his outfit would blend into the shadows...but because of the mana around him, he faintly glowed in the moonlight.

Alus?! Lilisha was overcome with confusion. She was supposed to remain aware of his movements. The report she'd gotten from the Aferka observer had said that he'd left the Fable estate and made it all the way back to the Institute. She'd even moved the time of the assassination just in case. Even if he were to return for some reason, there was no way he could've made it back before everything was over. Also, he had no way of knowing that she would be assassinating Selva to begin with.

Her eyes met with Alus's as she hid the confusion she was feeling. She wore a

mask to hide her identity, but that was bad in its own way. Right now she was just some nameless assassin to him. If he were to use his full power to remove the dangerous element, she would be turned to ash before she could move as much as a finger.

This is the worst... She felt like vomiting. Everything had gone so smoothly at the start too. How did it turn out like this? Maybe she was cursed to never do anything well.

As she ground her teeth, Alus knelt on the ground with his arms thrust out in each direction. One hand held Lilisha's crystal, and then he put the other behind his back where she couldn't see it. Either way, her only option left was to activate the crystal.

But if she did so now, neither of them would emerge unscathed. It was likely that she would lose her life.

Cold sweat ran down from her forehead. She made up her mind, and slightly moved her finger. In that moment, Alus opened his palm to show her, as if he'd seen right through her.

...! The crystal was completely coated in Alus's mana. At the same time, Lilisha lost the magical sensation of the triggering device linked to the movement of her fingers. She couldn't activate the crystal or any kind of remote control.

Lilisha cut the threads from her right hand and created new ones from the two fingers that still worked. She swung the threads at Alus. The infiltration plan she'd staked her life on had been trampled, and she gave in to her anger.

Just as she'd aimed, they wrapped around Alus's arm, and she pulled with enough force to send his arm flying...but for some reason it didn't budge. Normally, the arm would be easily sliced off before he could even feel the pain. "...?!" Lilisha panicked and put more force into it, but then felt something touch her neck.

In the next moment, Alus moved. He drew his AWR with his other hand, and in one fluid movement he threw it towards Lilisha's neck.

She couldn't dodge a blade flying at that speed. Sensing that her death was imminent, Lilisha closed her eyes. With a *snap* , she could feel the vibration of

something right next to her neck cutting through her skin. When she realized that it was Selva's steel thread that had been wrapped around her neck at some point, she felt blood ooze from the slight cut.

Since when...? Pointless questions whirled around in her head, but the fact that she'd fallen into the trap was all that mattered. She'd doubled and redoubled her plans and traps, but in the end she didn't hold a candle to Selva. A circle of death weaved by Selva had been wrapped around Lilisha's neck and she hadn't even felt it.

All he'd had to do was to put a little strength into his finger to end it all, which meant that her life had been in the palm of his hand from the start.

Lilisha was aghast. She released her mana steel threads as her head drooped. She wasn't going to resist any further. It wasn't a matter of life and death after all. She couldn't even get on the stage of this battlefield. In order to show she'd given up, she removed her gloves and raised her hands.

While keeping an eye on the assassin, Alus spoke up. "Sorry about getting involved, Mr. Selva, but it appears that I'm not unrelated to this. I also have a debt to repay." He said the last part with some emphasis.

Based on his behavior and words, Alus wasn't siding with either one. At first he'd sealed the crystal and saved Selva, but then he'd cut the thread that was meant to kill the assassin.

But Selva neither blamed him nor got angry. He simply and calmly stood down. "Is that so? In that case, I believe it would be best to hear the situation."

"Sorry about getting you involved in my circumstances."

"That is quite all right, if it is Sir Alus's request. However...I can't make such a decision at my own discretion."

What Selva meant was clear to Alus. He felt the presence of mana that indicated there was one more involved. Perhaps they were just watching from afar, or maybe they had something in store. Either way, it felt like they were prepared. Not to mention with the wall collapsing and the maids getting ready for battle, it would've been impossible for the commotion to have gone unnoticed. While this person was out of sight, a certain chill in the night air told

Alus that he was undoubtedly correct.

But the cold feeling disappeared after Selva's words, as if acknowledging Alus's claim, meaning that permission had probably been granted.

"Get out of here," Alus said to the assassin who was wounded all over.

The assassin showed surprise in their eyes, but quickly understood, and made haste to get moving.

In that moment, the maids gathered round moved as well to prevent their escape...which Selva stopped with a hand signal.

At that, everyone stopped. No one would get in the way of the assassin's escape. The inexperienced assassin disappeared into the shadows surrounding the estate.

After confirming that her presence was gone, Alus finally felt a weight drop off his shoulders. No need to continue playing a role...at the very least, he was relieved that he'd made it in time. Running at full speed and taking shortcuts between the Circle Ports had paid off.

There would've been nothing worse than to rush all this way and get involved, only for it to have been too late. If I'd been a little slower, she would have gotten killed by Selva. The assassin was no doubt Lilisha. It had been a guess at first, but when Alus saw the mana steel threads it turned to conviction. When she'd faced Aile at the Institute, she'd used a thread made from mana to keep one of his servants in check. *The situation is just as the principal said. And she's definitely an Aferka member. Talk about a nuisance. Berwick's probably involved, but how dare he just send someone like that my way?*

There was no way Berwick hadn't known about her background when he recruited her into the military...meaning that it was a scheme he was well aware of. His intentions were unclear, but it was probably another one of his political maneuvers. Perhaps he wanted the Rimfuge or Frusevan family to owe him a favor, or maybe he wanted to rein in Aferka.

Thinking about it, there'd been unnatural signs along the way. After all, the Fable family's inherited spell wouldn't normally be in the Magic Compendium. Berwick's involvement with Garb Sheep was all but confirmed.

What a cheap trick. Anyways, once I'm done here, I've got to thoroughly deal with Berwick. I'll have him cough up everything.

Once Alus decided that, he felt the chill returning on his neck. He turned around and looked up. A figure was standing on the half-collapsed second floor...Frose Fable, wearing a cape.

He suddenly felt a little depressed. Selva had been on the verge of finishing the assassin he'd lured in and all of his efforts had gone to waste.

Resigning himself, Alus returned Night Mist to its scabbard. With heavy steps, he dragged himself over to a smiling Frose, who was waving at him to come and explain the situation.

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Lilisha shivered in the darkness. She'd been saved by Alus, but did not return to the inn she'd changed clothes in.

Right now she was hiding in a certain basement. The mission had failed. That truth was crushing her heart. She bit her lip at her incompetence and tasted blood in her mouth.

Alus's appearance wasn't the direct cause of the mission failure. In fact, he'd saved her life, and in exchange she was irrevocably branded as a failure.

No. She shook her head. Regardless of his presence, she couldn't have beaten Selva. But that didn't mean that she would thank Alus. She hadn't asked him for his help to begin with.

The biggest opportunity that was granted to her by Alus showing up was another chance to kill Selva. Next time she would do more research and preparations, and finish him off. That was why she didn't feel gratitude towards Alus at the moment.

To Lilisha, her top priority was accomplishing the mission her brother had given her. But would there really be a next time?

When she considered that, she didn't dare face her brother. The fact that she'd betrayed his expectations scared her, and as a Rimfuge, being unable to live up to them made her miserable.

The Rimfuge family was made up of five branches. The head family was the Frusevans, who had once been given the responsibility of leading Aferka by the ruler. While there were five branch families, they didn't live on the same grounds. They were scattered all over Alpha, mainly within the inner district where the nobles and wealthy people lived that was the farthest from the barrier, or elsewhere in the heart of the middle district.

The headquarters of the Frusevan family was in the inner district, but closer to the outskirts. The building was showy and luxurious on the outside, but once inside, the glamorous atmosphere of nobles was nowhere to be found. Excessive decorations were kept to a minimum and the furnishings prioritized function over all else. There was pretty much nothing that reflected the owner's tastes.

Visitors would receive the impression that the owner had played it safe and not revealed their tastes. It was almost like a model home, furnished to keep up appearances as one of the Rimfuge families and nothing more. The plan was more or less a success. Only a few nobles and the ruler knew of the Frusevans' relationship to Aferka. Even after being absorbed and reorganized by the ruler, they had managed to hide their bloodied fangs under the cover of a noble family.

Lilisha was in the basement of a remote house that the Frusevans owned. She'd only just returned, and the first thing she did was to treat her broken fingers. Or rather, she forced the bones back into place, biting down on a handkerchief to endure the intense pain. Then she used a splint to hold them in place.

As she treated herself, she felt the presence of someone behind her... A member of Aferka had come to get her. Since the member had entered without knocking and was hiding their presence, it was like a shadow had crept up on her back.

Lilisha glanced behind, and finished changing before quickly standing up. She would be appearing before the head of the family. Just thinking about it made her go pale. She would have to report that the mission had failed.

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The only light came from the fireplace. Aside from the occasional *pop* , it was eerily quiet. Members of Aferka silently stood in a line.

She knelt with one knee down on the floor. In front of her were several mainstays of Aferka with their faces hidden behind veils or masks. And in the center, sitting on a chair larger than the others, was not the head of the family but her own brother...who was effectively the leader of Aferka.

Because of Aferka's origins, Aferka's leader held more authority than the head of the family. The head of the family was more or less a figurehead to present to other nobles. As such, it was her brother and not the head of the family who was the supreme decision maker. His authority was immense as he ruled over the five families of Rimfuge.

"Ah, I see. As I expected, again, you accomplished nothing. And you even ran away without so much as wounding the target. At this point you're not so much a failure as you are pathetic."

Lilisha, who'd kept her face lowered, sensed something was off in her brother's words and hurriedly raised her head. Indeed, it was as if he'd known she would fail from the beginning. In fact, it was almost as though he'd hoped for it.

"What? Is there something you want to say? What could a loser like you possibly ask for?"

However, her brother's chilling scorn crushed her slight doubts in an instant, and her expression turned to despair. "Brother... N-Next time, I swear..." Lilisha prostrated herself, pushing her forehead into the floor. She didn't put much thought into her words. They'd just come out by reflex, like the squeal of a weakling about to be punished. Just like she always did when she failed to live up to her brother's hopes, she was begging with all her might for him to give her another chance.

"Enough." But his cold voice showed no trace of brotherly affection.

"B-Brother, please...!"

"I don't want to hear that word again. I won't think of some defect as my little sister. No...thinking about it, I've never once thought of you as such."

Her brother had even given up on ridiculing her and spoke as a matter of course. Lilisha was at a loss, but still raised her head and repeatedly pleaded. All she could do was to apologize over and over again like a broken record.

“I told you it was your last chance.”

“I-I am sorry, the next time I swear I’ll...”

“Why didn’t you die?”

“...What?”

Lilisha’s brother, Rayleigh, leaned on the armrest of his chair and looked down at her like she was a mere pebble on the side of the road. “If Selva Greenus had killed you, we would have had a cause, even if we would have to bend the truth a little. Lilisha, why are you alive?” The eyes staring down on her held a hint of confusion in them, like he was regarding someone who was supposed to be dead.

Lilisha’s throat was sore and she hung her head low, not even able to squeeze out any words. Her only worth now was to die. Her soul was trapped in hopelessness and fell towards the depths of hell.

There had never been any expectations of her to begin with. She wondered what she’d even lived this long for.

Then she knew. She hadn’t desired anything specific like her brother having hope for her or praising her for her work. She just didn’t want to be unwanted. She’d wanted a role to live in the Frusevan family...a pillar to cling to.

Lilisha couldn’t even shed tears. Her extreme despair numbed her sadness, and all she could do was curse her incompetence and ineptitude.

“As expected, the problem is how poor your mother’s blood is.” His words didn’t blame her, but instead put the responsibility on her mother. But there was no malice in his words. As proof of that, he sounded like a scholar analyzing the results of some experiment. “Speaking of which...Gill was the same.”

Lilisha had two older brothers. Rayleigh was technically the second son. The eldest, Gill, was currently exiled from the Frusevan family. The reason was simple: he was deemed to be useless. He was inferior even to the other branch

families.

Gill, Rayleigh, and Lilisha had the same father but different mothers. More specifically, Gill and Lilisha's mother wasn't the first wife. Rayleigh was the first wife's child.

Ever since Lilisha could remember, the half-siblings had been raised as Frusevans. Rayleigh was exceptionally talented. Everyone said it was because he'd inherited the blood of his very talented mother. He'd had the caliber to lead Aferka since his youth, but Gill did not, despite being the eldest. Not only did he lack talent for fighting, but he didn't even have the necessary skills to accomplish missions for Aferka. Lilisha recalled him being constantly reprimanded by her father.

"Lilisha, what did you think of Gill being in the military?" Rayleigh suddenly asked.

"What?" She raised her head in surprise.

"He didn't abandon his duties and leave the family like he made you believe. After his repeated failures, he was exiled from the Frusevan family...at my suggestion."

"Then my brother was...!"

"Yes, it was all because of his weakness. Despite being born into the main family, he couldn't even be counted among the lowest of them. The military could at least find some use for a defect like him."

"—!"

Suddenly, Lilisha heard stifled laughs from the members standing in the line... Eventually it turned into unreserved scornful laughter that echoed through the room. She was astonished to learn the truth. "Th-Then...was I put in the military because...?!"

"I was expecting more from you, so talk about a disappointment. If you can't even die, you're not needed in this family. We're getting rid of you, Lilisha."

"Ah...ahh..." Embracing herself, Lilisha crumbled apart.

As her face turned pale, somebody walked up to her. He was the head of one

of the branch families. As he looked down on her, he spoke of the customs of the Rimfuge family. Anyone who was of no use to Aferka when they reached a certain age would be sent out of their families after a decision by the council of elders.

“I-I...” Though Lilisha had known the possibility, it was a truth she’d wanted to reject.

However, even as she trembled, Rayleigh crossed his legs and said with an indifferent expression, “Since I pitied you so much, I didn’t even bother to tell you that this was a decision made by the council of elders. Well, not that I would want to talk about my family’s shame. After all, the main family has now produced two incompetents.”

“Ugh...” Lilisha could do nothing but groan, but Rayleigh said nothing.

Meanwhile, the man from the branch family twisted his lips into a sarcastic smile, as he leaned against the wall with a haughty attitude. He had blond hair and was the second most powerful person in Aferka after Rayleigh...Aferka’s second-in-command. It was that power that allowed him to show a coarse attitude. “Nobody ever expected a damn thing from you,” he said coldly. “The compassionate Advisor even gave you an education in the hope that there’d be some use we could make of you, which is why Lord Rayleigh even tried this time.”

Lilisha put her hands on the floor and stared at its cold, polished stone surface lit by sparks from the fireplace.

Then two Aferka members stepped forward, one on either side of her. They hauled her to her knees and held her there. She looked at them, but because of her extreme shock she couldn’t recall if she’d seen them before. “B-Brother, wh-what are you...?!”

Still seated in front of her, Rayleigh placed his elbow on the armrest and rested his chin in his palm. There was no sympathy in his eyes whatsoever, but at the same time, Lilisha was unable to look away.

She felt a tug on her back as the men forcibly tore her clothes open, exposing her porcelain white skin, upon which shadows danced from the flames of the fireplace.

“Stop, no! Brother, please!” Lilisha struggled as much as she could, but it was like her arms were fixed in place by iron bars.

An impact struck her head with a *thud* . She was grabbed by the hair and her face was pushed down onto the stone floor. Through desperate effort she was able to move her head a little.

The sound of iron being scraped reached her ears. Her disheveled hair hung down, narrowing her vision, but she could just barely see something red in the fireplace. A brawny man pulled it out, and confirmed its burning red tip before roasting it further over the flames.

It looked like a steel rod...but the tip had a pattern with a strange crest. It was a brand. Lilisha’s eyes widened at the sight of it. Tears fell and stained her cheeks. “Brother! Stop them, I can still be of use! S-So please...”

“Stop pleading. Gill at least burnt his skin on his own, yet you need someone else to do it for you. So let this time’s failure be branded on your back.”

Her brother’s voice no longer sounded human. Lilisha screamed. Her teeth rattled and she managed to move her neck to look behind her. She saw a man holding up the red-hot brand. The sight of its glowing red pattern filled her vision. “AAAAaaahhh!!!”

Her scream echoed like the roar of a beast. The sound and smell of skin being burnt filled the room. The brand pressed on her back glowed with the light of mana and expanded further. The pattern had only been the size of the palm of one’s hand, but it spread up her back and down to her waist, marking her failure in a way that would never disappear.

By the time the process had finished, Lilisha was unconscious and frothing at the mouth. She was left abandoned on the cold stone floor.

***

The ruler of Alpha resided in the palace, a place that could be considered worthy of being called a den of demons. The policies that were drafted, approved, and implemented in that political center supported the nation and were intended to make it more prosperous.

Yet recently, there was something odd about the staff. It was like they were

being whipped into a frenzy of work every second of the day. Despite that, most were proud to work under the beautiful ruler, almost abnormally so.

The corner of the palace where the ruler slept was overwhelmingly luxurious and a true sight to behold, although it made sense considering her transcendent beauty and rumors of her being the incarnation of a mythical goddess.

That description was by no means an exaggeration, as when she appeared in front of the people some would even worship her. It wasn't the kind of beauty that provoked men's lust, but rather that which caused them to fall to their knees as if overpowered by the divinity of her beauty.

The ruler of Alpha, Cicelnia, was currently in her room. She wore revealing clothes that showed her ample cleavage as she lay on a luxurious sofa, unable to keep herself from grinning. She couldn't contain her excitement.



In an attempt to compose herself, she turned over. As she did, the long hem of her dress got a little disheveled, but a few wrinkles didn't bother her.

Her aide who would normally scold her was currently out of the palace. That also meant that there was nobody to provide an iced drink to cool her excitement, but that was a trivial matter. The bit of information that her aide Rinne had conveyed to her was the reason why this beautiful ruler had such passion in her eyes.

"Oh, Alus, Alus..." She whispered the name of the ranked No. 1 over and over, as if a maiden in love. At the same time, a smile appeared on her lips. It was truly a comfortable feeling to entrust herself to the joy that overflowed from her. Moreover, as a player in this massive game, whether Alus would notice her trick added a thrill that gave her goose bumps. It was the perfect spice.

While the young ruler didn't enjoy walking a tightrope herself, she loved to watch others do it. "If everything's going this smoothly now, I'm almost scared what will happen later. This is wonderful, Alus. The fact that you're moving exactly as I'd hoped you would makes me feel like you're still dancing in the palm of my hand." Cicelnia buried her face in a pillow to stifle her almost creepy laugh.

Noticing the strange behavior of the ruler who was absorbed in her own world, the other person present in the room opened their mouth. "It sure does seem to be going as planned. But you know that whenever things are going well, there'll be some big pitfall that turns up that you overlooked before."

The speaker was a white-haired old woman with a cane. She reached over to the chessboard and moved one of the pieces. "There. It's your turn now."

It appeared that they were in the middle of a chess match. Cicelnia had probably put it on temporary hold while she rejoiced over Rinne's report. The old woman had pretty much put a damper on her high spirits, but she wasn't particularly angry. "Ah, there is nothing that feels as good as this. It's so fun I'm getting chills. Don't you agree, Miltria?"

The old woman was Miltria Tristen, who was once feared as the Witch,

although that name had since been passed down to her disciple. However, with the passage of time, her appearance was becoming more suitable for her former alias.

She was a legendary figure in the world of Magicmasters and the master of the current Witch, Sisty Nexophia. On top of that, she was also a founding member of Aferka and served as one of its captains. She was an embodiment of Alpha's history, of its light and darkness. She'd led a quiet life recently, but the reason she was visiting the palace now was...

"So, young Cicelnia, are you all right with my wish? I've dragged this old body all this way to stop Aferka and save that girl."

Cicelnia got off the sofa and removed her shoes. In her bare feet, she walked up to the table with the chessboard. "You don't have to worry about that, Miltria. Alus is moving just as I'd hoped, so everything will be fine."

"Is that so. Well, that's a relief. They might call me the Advisor or whatnot, but I'm getting old. These youngsters don't listen to a word I say anymore...especially not that Rimfuge lad. Aferka would probably have been better off disappearing when they were being condemned by the previous ruler."

"Having an old-timer from Aferka like you cooperating with me was truly a godsend. Although you might end up being treated as a traitor by the organization that you helped create."

"Hmm... That would depend on who the real traitor is. Aferka has changed. Even after it fell into the Rimfuges' hands it was fine, up until the current head... Sheesh, getting old is a scary thing."

"Well, it was fortunate. Like I said before, even with your help, the youngest daughter of Frusevan still might die."

"Yes, it seems that we've avoided the worst outcome. Then I have nothing more to say on that. So what are you going to do?" Miltria asked, as she urged Cicelnia to make her next move on the chessboard.

The pieces on the board were in position to take Cicelnia's own in the next turn, as if suggesting that this time it would be Cicelnia who would risk losing

something. She carefully looked over the board. *To lose something... Well, Lilisha Ron de Rimfuge Frusevan is an insignificant piece to me.*

Whether Lilisha lived or died had no impact on her plans whatsoever. That possibility was what had made Alus move, but the important part to her was Alus and not Lilisha. *Berwick read the situation better than me. But a local victory doesn't mean much. What matters is seizing the king, which means there are no signs that I'll lose... Ah ha ha, this is the best! Why is it so exciting to be in a situation where there is complete freedom, Alus?*

Cicelnia ignored the chessboard and smiled in a rather slovenly fashion. Possibly there was even drooling involved. If Rinne saw her like this, she would no doubt give her a severe scolding. *Though without Rinne here, it feels a little underwhelming* , she selfishly thought to herself.

Right now, Miltria was here instead. The plan was to have her stay until the incident was fully cleared up. However, Cicelnia couldn't get carried away. An unexpected element had wormed its way into the plot she'd written. That element might end up as an open seam that could unravel her plans, so she felt it necessary to question Miltria about it. "By the way, I had expected that Alus would contact Berwick. Isn't it strange how Sisty could know so much, Miltria?" Cicelnia's well-shaped eyebrows furrowed slightly, and her tone was a little chiding.

The former Witch had more or less upset the ruler, but she showed no signs that she was keeping secrets. "My dear disciple came to visit for the first time in a long time, you see. How could I refuse to lend a helping hand?"

Cicelnia sighed. "Hearing you say it so openly kills any momentum. The warriors of old really are fearless...or perhaps it's your age?" Whether Alus would save Lilisha was the thing she'd looked forward to the most. The choice itself had no impact on her plans, but it was an interesting climax from a story point of view. But she wouldn't be amused if the result had been influenced by unnecessary interference.

Seeing the ruler pout, Miltria spoke as if trying to console a selfish grandchild. "Cicelnia, I only gave Sisty a small hint. It was the bare minimum I could give as the Advisor for Aferka. Ultimately, it was up to Sisty herself as to how to use

that hint. She has a pretty good nose, that one."

"That's enough. I will just leave it at that. Well, he's probably vaguely aware of it, but it was me and the Governor-General who thought to get Alus involved. And it's not like him saving Ms. Lilisha was a negative thing...not that it was positive either."

A mischievous smile returned to the ruler's face. Regardless of whether Lilisha managed to survive, both she and Miltria saw the current Aferka as a problem. This was why Miltria's proposal had been a timely offer. Either they would tame it as the former ruler had, or if they couldn't do that, then... Cicelnia didn't mind either way. Even if that meant that the Frusevans, or rather all of the Rimfuge families, were to disappear from Alpha.

In other words, she wanted to bring Aferka out into the light of day and remove their fangs, before disciplining them herself. If the mad dog returned to its rightful place that would be fine, but if it broke from its leash and escaped, it would be disposed of.

Since Cicelnia's father—the former ruler—had died suddenly, things hadn't been properly handed down, and Aferka already had a tendency to act on their own. This was why she'd decided to discipline them, but the pawns she'd had on hand lacked the power for it. So she'd decided to use Alus. It was also meant as payback for Alus embarrassing her at the rulers conference.

At any rate, Alus crushing Aferka's plans was a big step forward. Cicelnia wasn't about to allow mere former guard dogs to do as they pleased in her nation. *Eventually we'll also need to curb the Womruinas too. They're former royalty, so if they weren't going to get involved without an invitation I was going to overlook them. No matter how distant the bloodline, there should be a clear division between the ruler and nobility.*

The Womruinas' sudden moves had actually surprised her. She'd known for some time that the family had treacherous feelings towards the ruler system. As of late, they'd shown some disturbing movements, which had prompted Cicelnia to choose them to be the antagonists for her brilliant victory in a display of her power.

Moreover, a sudden connection between the Womruinas and Aferka had

further upset Cicelnia. Incidentally, Lilisha had been integrated into the army and still failed to notice their movements, and she'd even ended up offering to be the referee for a Tenbram. As such, Cicelnia had no way of knowing the tragedy that had befallen Lilisha.

But frankly, I don't think I can expect them to put up much of a fight. Although that Aile looks like he might entertain me. To think that he would contact Alus directly, ignoring Cicelnia and the military's watchful eyes... Though his decision to bring Alus into the fold as part of the plan to pull Cicelnia from her seat was a logical one.

Cicelnia was only able to maintain her supremacy over the other nations thanks to Alus. It was also thanks to Berwick, who held the authority to issue commands to Alus. She'd known from the start that Alus and Aile wouldn't get along, but she was honestly relieved that he wasn't the kind of unprincipled man that would blindly follow Rusalca's ruler, Lithia.

In the end, everything had fallen into its rightful place to build up the perfect balance. For Cicelnia, that was easy to manage. The factions within Alpha needed to be controlled as well. She had no intentions of getting along with the Womruinas, or the Fables or Socalents. While they were cooperative for now, she didn't want them to gain power and become more impudent either.

Cicelnia thought of the primary reason why everything was going so smoothly. It was none other than Governor-General Berwick's counsel that had played such a big role. Ultimately, he probably understood Alus the best. Just like he'd anticipated, Alus had moved to save Lilisha. Cicelnia had thought it was a fifty-fifty chance herself. Considering the results, it was a complete defeat.

But she was still vexed that he'd managed to turn Alus's attention to the Fable family by dangling a single taboo spell as bait before him. *Perhaps I should keep a closer eye on Alus myself.* Lilisha, the youngest daughter of Womruina, was keeping an eye on him as per her assignment and reports were being shared with her as well, but it couldn't hurt to confirm it through another path.

Neither Sisty nor Berwick knew of those under Cicelnia's control at the Institute. Perhaps it was time to increase the number of eyes and ears. Rinne was known as Alpha's Eye, and she used her magic eye to keep watch on

various movements within the nation, but even she had her limits. Her watching Alus in a way that he wouldn't notice was good enough.

As such, even she didn't know what had happened at the Fable family estate. Considering how Sisty had contacted Alus with perfect timing, how he'd decided to run back to the estate, and what she'd heard from Miltria, all Cicelnia could do was guess. *Well, knowing everything in the game would be dull* , she thought.

Even with all of her schemes, most of the time reality didn't exceed the realm of being a simple game to her, which was why she tended to think, analyze, and deal with all things as such. It was a bad habit of hers. The fact that she knew this just made it all the more unmanageable. Not even the Womruinas' movements threatening to put a blade to her throat was enough to scare her.

But it wasn't like she was superhuman. She was a normal woman, and she was capable of feeling fear. At times, she even felt lonely protecting the throne on her own. She might have always been looking for someone who could understand and share in her feelings, position, and loneliness. For that, the person would need to be of the same caliber, appreciate her talent, and be powerful enough to be able to take her life if they so desired.

Right now...there was perhaps one such person. She also knew that her stance of using people as pawns would anger him. *I really didn't mean any harm. But if I do anger him again, I wonder what I would have to do to make him forgive me.*

It might not be a bad idea to probe for something he—Alus—might want. He had no interest in money or power, so he might ask for something completely unexpected. That was a point of common interest Cicelnia shared with Aile.

As she thought about it, her bewitching smile grew stronger, offering a glimpse of the darkness within her heart.

Suddenly, a voice pulled Cicelnia back to reality from her self-absorbed fantasy. "You seem to be having quite the enjoyable delusion, but do be careful. That villainous look strangely suits you."

"Oh, dear me." Cicelnia covered her smile with a folding fan. Feeling mischievous, she continued. "Speaking of villains, I think you have quite the

potential for it too. You are helping out with a plan that might result in destroying the Aferka that you built up."

However, Cicelnia knew that while she only saw it as a game, it was a real battlefield where people would stake their lives. After all...

"Don't jest about it. The Rimfuge kid who's in charge of it now, Rayleigh, is said to be a real monster and the strongest ever in Aferka. Sheesh, he hasn't even a fraction of the cuteness of the Lilisha that I trained. Who would have expected him to exceed Selva in his prime?" Miltria lamented, with a hint of sadness in her voice. Her expression was nostalgic.

"Selva... Ah, he's the Fable family butler, isn't he? But I really only have one way to measure strength. If I had other measures, perhaps I would be a little more careful," Cicelnia said arrogantly.

The only measure Cicelnia had was Alus. His personality was what it was, but he wasn't the ranked No. 1 because he was eccentric. After he eliminated Demi Azur, she had become convinced of his strength.

Moreover, she wasn't actually underestimating Aferka that much. But the moment she'd worked Alus into the plan, she had decided that it didn't matter how strong the opponent was.

In fact, Alus had reluctantly stepped into the Fable family's problems and helped Selva out, and had even saved Lilisha's life. That seemed to have sparked a fire between him and Aferka, but that was actually convenient for Cicelnia. *I can't say it's all clear, but there shouldn't be any need to worry about the Fable family anymore. Now the game is set. All that's left is to checkmate Aferka's king... I wonder what Alus will do then* .

Miltria looked at her, and new wrinkles appeared on her already creased forehead. As long as they reached the expected destination, the ruler didn't mind the casualties that resulted along the way. Discarding small things must be trivial for her. "You are a little twisted. Don't you get it, missy? This was a big gamble that staked the whole Fable family. Worst case, my pupil Lilisha dying wouldn't have been the end of it. The entirety of Aferka's blade could have assaulted them. If the Fable family had been destroyed, the Socalents and other families related to them wouldn't have stayed silent. In such a situation, if the

Womruinas were to move in full force, Alpha's army would be split in two. If that happened, there wouldn't be any missions launched to the Outer World. It would've gone far worse than you expected. I'm getting tired of it all. I don't want to see any more blood at my age." She showed some human emotion, a sure sign that she'd gotten old. She'd seen far too many deaths.

However... "You have a funny way of saying that. It's not like I'm some kind of weirdo who gets excited seeing blood. I don't want anyone to die, but it's an unfortunate truth that people die so easily. And rulers are in the position of constantly choosing to kill the few for the sake of the many. If there was a path to save everyone, I would be willing to abdicate..." Cicelnia's expression suddenly became subdued, and the way she cast her eyes down made it seem as though she was seriously concerned about how fragile the world was, like she grieved over her own limits as a human.

But then her tone changed. Its coldness sent a chill down the back of even a sly old dog like Miltria. "The Fable family is not without blame. After all, they took in Aferka's former leader Selva Greenus. There is no way you can embrace a blade that shed so much blood without getting blood on yourself. But I'm no monster. That's why I'm reaching out a helping hand like this. I'm not the one who wants to see blood, they are."

"Aw, how kind."

Cicelnia frowned at the old woman's sarcasm. "Miltria, I'm repeating myself, but...I need to keep an overhead view, one that's higher than anyone else's. From up here, it's hard to tell people's faces apart sometimes. They all swarm around like ants. It's impossible to tell who's good and who's bad, who should be saved and who should be discarded, just from a quick glance," she said seriously. But her eyes were cold and lacked humanity.

Then she giggled playfully. "But there are still precious people, which is why I have no intention of discarding everything. Nor do I have the means to save everyone. That's why I'll overlook Lilisha out of respect for your feelings. And I believe I understand your stance on Selva Greenus. You want to change the codes passed down in Aferka, don't you? Blood having to be repaid in blood is an obsolete code that's stained in blood and death...right?"

Miltria just nodded in silence. As Aferka's Advisor, she'd been protecting Selva from being designated as a target. But by now her authority had waned. She wasn't only involved in this plan because she had compassion for Lilisha, but also because she thought if Aferka's system was changed, Selva would benefit from it.

Even if Aferka were to disappear entirely, Miltria wouldn't particularly mind. Unless the old tree fell and decayed, nothing new could bud. Considering the fact that it had grown off of blood, it was all the more important that it fall.

"Lilisha and Selva... That makes two people. Asking any more of me would go beyond indulgence and into the realm of arrogance. I'm being plenty generous considering the number of lives you've snuffed out."

"It's just as you say." Miltria cast her eyes down. Perhaps she'd been too blind to her own shortcomings and playing innocent just now didn't suit her.

Ignoring Miltria's reaction, Cicelnia recalled something, and selfishly changed the subject. "Speaking of which, Miltria..." The beautiful ruler's face brightened as she gazed into the old woman's eyes. The luster of her smile appeared eerie to Miltria. "If you knew that Aferka and the Womruinas were working together, you have an idea of the inner workings, don't you? For example, that illegal drug...Ambrosia. Also, who is cooperating with them."

Ambrosia was an undiluted drug made with unknown ingredients. Even the dreaded mana-enhancing drug Chemical Boost was said to be a version of it that was dozens of times more diluted. And while Cicelnia had kept it vague, she was especially interested in her last question. She sensed some unknown cooperators in the shadows. Besides, this plot was too big for it to be just a single eccentric nobleman, even if they were from the Womruinas. Based on the scale, it wasn't mere resistance but a straight-up rebellion.

However, she couldn't imagine they would be so naive as to think that bringing her down would put all of Alpha in their hands. That indicated that an outside military force was probably lending support.

"Well, I'm retired, you see, so I'm not quite familiar with the current situation. But from the looks of it, you're already putting out feelers through another route, aren't you? Then like I said before, I've already told you everything I

know.”

“I see. Then that’s fine. Now, I wonder when Rinne’s next report will come in.” Cicelnia spoke in a casual manner, even though the other party was also a leader and an elder on top of it.

Miltria struggled to understand the personality of this unusually young ruler, whose intellect was far beyond the norm.

***

“Phew...” A sigh of exhaustion escaped her lips. Lately, Rinne had been so tired. She was sure the cause was that the ruler she served had been so upbeat, like an innocent girl, every time she’d submitted her reports lately.

Even for one of the top spotters in Alpha, keeping an eye on Alus was nerve-wracking. After all, even with her Eye of Providence, Alus showed signs of noticing her surveillance. There were practically no signs of mana, yet she was well aware of the heights that Singles were at and just how hard it was to keep them in check. She felt like she could understand why people sometimes called them monsters.

She had been watching him from over a hundred meters away, but had still been sensed by Alus as he made his way back from the Fable estate. Although she wasn’t the only one observing him, so possibly a colleague’s unexpected blunder had caused trouble for her too...

Rinne had reported it to Cicelnia, but apparently Cicelnia already “knew,” which made her wonder if she had precognitive abilities. She was truly a frightening person, and her slave-driving ways were equally frightening. Because of her unreasonable request, Rinne would need to go somewhere that made her feel extremely tense, and even that her life may be at stake.

Right now she was headed for the border with Clevideet. Being a border zone, it was a relatively remote area. The terrain here was barren wasteland and dark green forests. There were no houses or even military installations to be seen.

However, when she finally arrived at her destination, she was blindsided by an unexpected discovery. *There really is a mansion here...!*

The house stood in the shade of a forest, surrounded by weeds. Rinne

suspected that it was an illusion created through magic, but confirmed that it was indeed a real building. The deteriorating walls looked like they were ready to collapse, but it would at least serve as a shelter from wind and rain.

It might have been a villa used by nobles in the past. Even so, that must've been at least a half century ago.

Rinne, in the maid uniform that was her work outfit, pushed aside the tall brushes and made her way to the house. All kinds of vegetation grew in what was once a garden. Among them were white flowers that stood out because of their numbers and appearance. In a way, the former garden had a sort of rustic beauty.

She had on a long skirt, which was bound to get dirty even if she was careful. *Oh, come on...why does it have to be a place like this? Even if you're nervous about unwanted attention, there have to be better places than this. They say you can't see the forest for the trees, but that doesn't mean you have to hide in an actual forest!*

While grumbling in her mind, Rinne struggled to make her way through the vegetation that reached to her waist. On top of that, the ground was muddy and dirtied her recently polished shoes. *This is the worst... Still, did it really rain here recently?* But as she got closer to the mansion she forgot about it, and refocused herself.

She reached the entrance and peeked inside the door that had been left slightly open. The inside was pitch black, like something you'd expect from a haunted mansion. *I'm not sure what's scarier...ghosts or Fiends.*

After entertaining this pointless thought, Rinne muttered a soft "Excuse me..." and stepped inside. At least the ceiling and roof didn't look like they might collapse. Being made from stone, they still kept their original shapes. The way the door creaked behind her was like the muffled scream of a ghost from the past. The interior was large, as expected from a noble's mansion, but it felt strangely oppressive because of how dusty household goods and furniture were scattered all over the place.

That was when a voice called out. "So I was followed after all. I thought you'd attack right away, but you sure wasted a lot of time. It seems you have a

minimum of manners at least.” The unexpectedly youthful voice came from the shadows. In the next moment, suspicious orange mana light filled the room and revealed the figure in the darkness.

It was the person Rinne had come this far to meet. Her appearance was that of a young girl. She looked like a child who was acting like a big shot as she sat on a wooden box with her legs stretched out. The girl wore a large red robe that was too big for her, especially around the arms. Betraying her appearance, however, were the vast amounts of mana that overflowed from her. It crawled across the floor and filled the entire mansion.



If she had any intentions of harming Rinne, her coming here would have been like a moth flying to the flame. Yet despite the danger being known, she had been sent here anyway. Frankly, Rinne couldn't deal with it. She tried not to be overwhelmed and clung to her resolute pride as the ruler's aide. "It's a pleasure to meet you. I was sent as a messenger from Lady Cicelnia. My name is Rinne Kimmel." With an impeccable smile, Rinne curtsied. In the process, she noticed a dry leaf on her skirt and brushed it off. "Ahem. Once again, it is an honor. I believe this is our first time meeting face to face, Lady Minalis."

Rinne appeared friendly, but on the inside she felt like her heart might stop at any moment. After all, she was dealing with an executive of the largest magical criminal organization in the seven nations. She was just a spotter...fighting wasn't her strong suit, and if she said the wrong thing she would be killed in the blink of an eye. However, her master's orders were outrageous. She wasn't allowed to humble herself before this formidable opponent and needed to keep up a superior stance.

"I've abandoned that name. Ah, you're the one I sensed in Vanalis, aren't you? So how do you know that name?"

Rinne's smile twitched at the sudden sharp look from the other party. The atmosphere felt prickly, as if the air had frozen around her. "The mock battle with Sir Alus at the campus festival was recorded. Of course, that doesn't mean that all of the audio was recorded, but as to Lady Cicelnia, well..."

"So only you and your master know then." The way she put it, it sounded like she was confirming that she'd only need to kill the two of them to erase that name from memory. While the words might sound threatening, her cute appearance and voice dampened most of the intimidation. Depending on who was listening, she might even have sounded like a young girl going through her rebellious phase.

At any rate, if she had abandoned her name, then Rinne would use a less lofty form of address. "Yes, Ms. Elise." She didn't forget her business smile either.

Elise furrowed her brow, taken aback by her attitude. "I can't figure it out. What did you come here for, to wake up a beast in hibernation? If you're a

pursuer, I don't understand why you're alone. I imagine it's about what happened at the Institute, but why now? It's been long enough that I've recovered my mana."

"No, I don't believe I could oppose someone who could fight so evenly against Sir Alus, no matter how exhausted you might be."

After fighting Alus, Elise had escaped. The military pursued her, but in the end she'd shaken them off. Rinne had actually been one of her pursuers, but she'd started off late and worked on her own. If Elise had been trying to leave Alpha using the shortest distance possible, then Rinne wouldn't have been able to catch up.

Fortunately, thanks to Elise taking complex routes to shake them off, she'd been caught in Rinne's web. And so she'd escaped into this abandoned mansion.

Cicelnia could've organized a unit to go after her, but preferred to avoid any large-scale magic combat so close to the border. The footage had already been shared with Cicelnia, who understood that driving Elise into a corner would only result in a mountain of bodies.

Although if she'd been that shortsighted, she wouldn't have sent Rinne as an errand girl. Instead, Rinne's master was much more cunning and sadistic. The first thing Cicelnia did was to wonder why Alus had let her escape. In fact, she'd sent out Alpha's Eye to pursue her without hesitation the moment she heard that Alus had let her go.

Kurama was a common enemy for all the nations. The entire top of the organization consisted of first-class wanted criminals. Even the members below them were more skilled than the average Magicmaster.

Even if she looked like a girl in her early teens who had nothing to do with criminal organizations, the ruler would no doubt find clues as to her identity if she looked into it. In fact, Alus letting her go only further supported the validity of those clues, meaning that Cicelnia had sent Rinne here while being mostly sure of her identity.

But before Rinne could continue, she needed to protect herself. "If I am killed, it will be conveyed to the ruler immediately." That was a bluff. "And if she

knows that, or if I go missing, Sir Alus might actually get serious."

"I see. So you're his favorite or something then?" Elise asked with a snicker.

"Favorite or not, he has taken quite a liking to me." As Rinne said this, magic formulas appeared on both of her eyeballs. The magic eye...and the reason she was known as Alpha's Eye.

"—! Providence, the eye that can see through all?!" Even Elise looked surprised, but after a moment's pause, an innocent smile of relief formed on her face. The mana that was spread throughout the mansion dispersed. She propped her elbows on her crossed legs and rested her chin on her hands, displaying a little bit of interest. "Let's hear what you have to say, all-knowing messenger of the ruler."

"I'm glad that you are such an understanding person."

And so, in a remote border zone with nobody else around, a conversation proceeded that would never be leaked to the outside. There was no need for either side to posture or get emotional, and information was passed on in a smooth manner.

However, their deal caused a slight ripple in the mind of the former Single, Elise. She felt hesitation, relief, resignation...and just a little bit of hope. In the end she'd sided with criminals, but the last expression she'd shown was one of regret. She wasn't repenting for her own deeds, but rather cursed her ironic fate, wondering why she'd taken the wrong path in life.

Once Rinne had left and Elise was alone again, she closed her eyes and recalled the past that she could no longer return to. Even after so many years, the intensity of her regret showed no signs of weakening. The depths of the sins that bound her soul turned into the dark of night that painted the mansion and surrounding forest black, and an eerie silence hung in the air.

Afterword

Long time no see. It's Izushiro. How did you like *The Greatest Magicmaster's Retirement Plan* , volume 12? There's plenty I want to say, but that would be difficult due to the space I have.

First of all, I would like to thank all of the readers that have read this far. I know it's early, but I would like to immediately move on to the usual thanks. Thank you very much to Miyuki Ruria for taking the time out of their hectic schedule to draw the illustrations for this volume. The color illustration of Cicelnia is my top recommendation.

Moreover, thank you very much to my editor and to everyone else involved in this work for their continued support.

I would also like to give my heartfelt thanks to all of the readers that have supported this series.

Finally, I have an important announcement. The first volume of the manga version of *The Greatest Magicmaster's Retirement Plan: The Alternative* by Yoneshirokaru will finally be on sale starting February 5th! I would love to speak about this too, but the remaining space... Just one thing: it is looking great! So I hope for your continued support for both the light novels and the manga.

—Izushiro


"No, I have nothing more to listen to."
A surging wave of Alus's mana filled the room.


But a local victory doesn't mean much.
What matters is seizing the king.

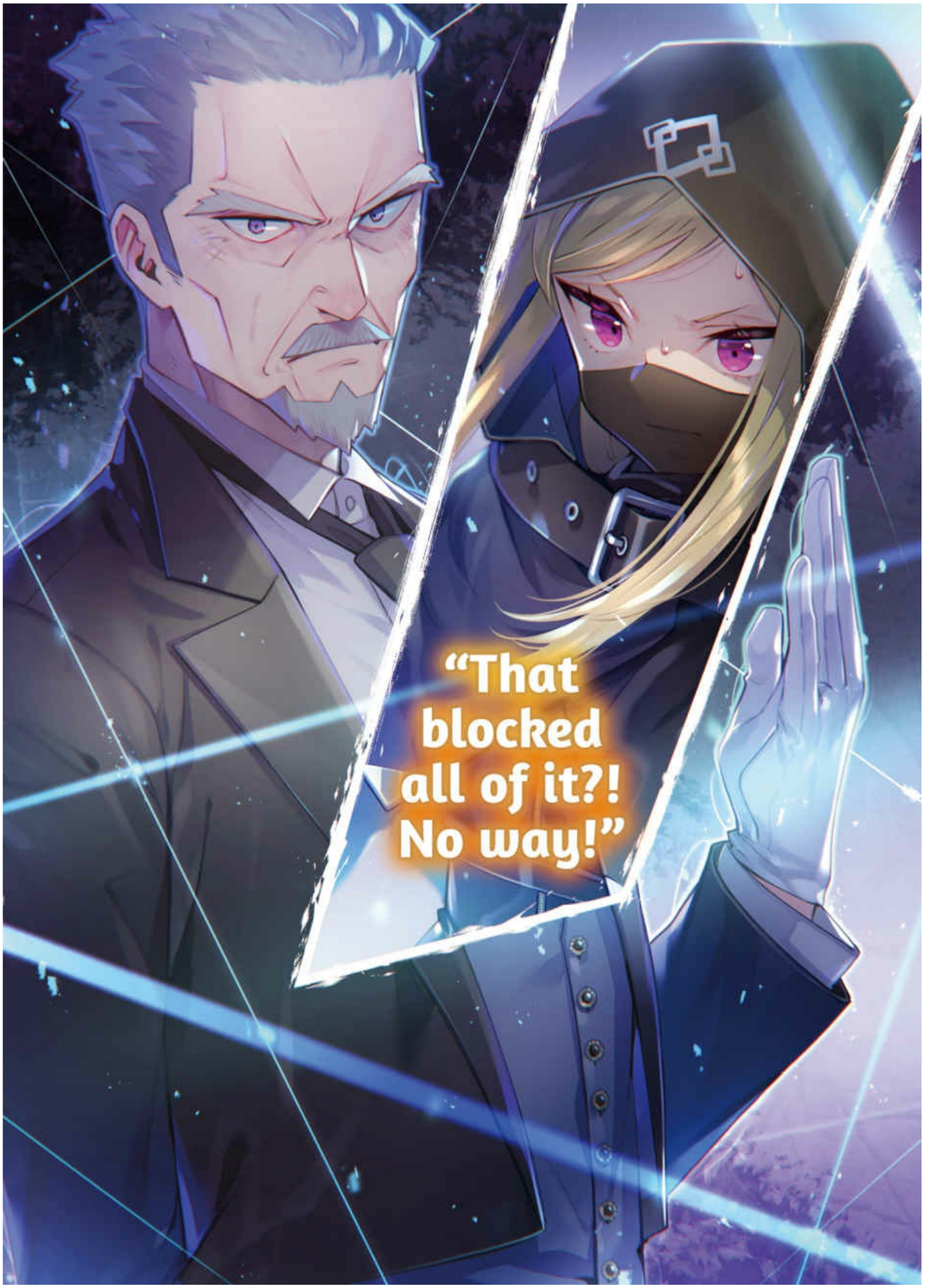

"That blocked all of it?! No way!"

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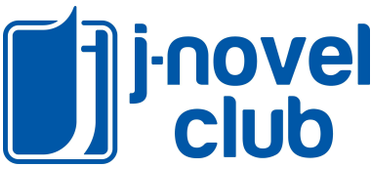
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The Greatest Magicmaster’s Retirement Plan: Volume 12

by Izushiro

Translated by Warnis Edited by Jan Suzukawa

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