



IZUSHIRO
ILLUST ▶ RURIA MIYUKI

THE GREAT MAGICMASTER'S

RETURN PLAN

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RETIREMENT PLAN

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The Greatest Magicmaster's Retirement Plan

C O N T E N T S

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Seventy-First Chapter

Flight of the Dead

It felt like I was wandering around in a hot, sludgy cauldron.

Time spent living brings about experiences that change a person, and those experiences accumulate within the soul.

Likewise, my heart is covered in a shell of experience to protect it from the outside world.

Surely everyone else protects their hearts from the outside world with such a thick shell too.

Yet my feet were stepping on such a shell stripped from the soul...



She walked down the street with vacant eyes.

The night air made the sweat on her skin uncomfortably cold. Her body felt like it was burning, every part of it searing hot. The cold sweat stung from time to time.

She continued to wander barefoot and without direction, dragging her legs as though escaping something.

Despite the pain, her body was trying to distance her from her home.

Beneath her ripped clothes, welts on her back emitted heat.

“Haah haah haah haah...” She couldn’t even tell where the sound of breathing was coming from. Was it something she was actively doing or just something echoing inside her mind?

Perhaps it was the sound of the shell that had been protecting her falling apart along with her life.

Without support from her soul, Lilisha just continued walking. She didn’t

know how many times she'd almost fainted or how far she'd walked.

Despite her blurry mind, the heat from her back wouldn't let her forget what had happened several hours ago. With a look of dread, Lilisha turned around.

She'd been abandoned, disposed of, relieved of the only duty she wanted, and branded as a failure. Her back continued to sear.

"I no longer have a place where I belong..." she murmured as she continued to wander like the dead on the road to Hades. Having been exiled from the Frusevan family, she couldn't think of a single reason to exist.

She had been dominated by and dependent on her brother, desperately preserving her own existence within the meritocracy that was the family trade. But just being able to secure the name of a place where she belonged had granted her relief.

She had been a part of Aferka. That just made her all the more dependent on her role there.

It had been the only way her brother would acknowledge her.

Her oldest brother had disappeared from Aferka. His departure had come about for more reasons than just his repeated failures at missions, the primary being that he rejected killing. That was the same as rejecting the meaning of not just Frusevan but Rimfuge as a whole.

In truth, Lilisha had considered her eldest brother despicable from the moment he'd joined the military. Abandoning the duty of Frusevan to walk down a bright path by himself was no different from spitting on the entire Rimfuge clan.

But at the same time, she had not been surprised it was the inevitable path her kind brother would choose... Indeed, she'd already known he would.

Pain and exhaustion clouded her mind, but for some reason she was thinking of her eldest brother, Gill, whom she had pushed into a corner of her mind a long time ago.

She both understood and scorned him. However, Rayleigh said that, just as he had done to her, he had exiled Gill and branded him a failure.

It was selfish, but she felt like she could now understand how Gill felt. Her eldest brother must have also tried his best to become part of Frusevan but ultimately failed.

That said, the family trade exceeded the realm of what was normal. In their family, they were taught mana control and dark skills, learning what they would need to kill from childhood.

Perhaps both Gill and Lilisha had just had some defect from the start that kept them from remaining within the family.

Lilisha had done everything she could to make up for that failing. She'd never skipped her daily training, had tutors give her extra lessons, and had desperately practiced her techniques.

As a result, she had gradually gotten better at killing. But all her targets had been scum that not even the military wanted to stain their hands with. So it hadn't been difficult for her to write it off as a form of justice.

But as a member of the main branch, Lilisha's talents had been lacking. Even compared with the other branches, she had been weaker than anyone. When she would think about that, she felt beyond inexperienced and even sorry for herself.

That was why she had wanted to be of at least a little use.

She had considered Rayleigh her god. Being acknowledged by him would have been the highest honor and was her foremost wish.

She had devoted her everything to that, yet that altar of her faith had crumbled so easily. The shell she'd spent more than a decade building had been ripped off...and now an unbearable pain assailed Lilisha with every step.

Dragging her body and pain with her, Lilisha walked.

And finally, she arrived...

Seventy-Second Chapter

Scarred Soul

After returning to his laboratory, Alus thought back to what had happened last night.

Even though he was doing some research, his mind always returned to the same place: the chain of events that had happened around him that night.

After the discussions around Tenbram had wrapped up, he'd gone back to the Fable mansion and ended up saving Lilisha, who'd snuck into the mansion.

He didn't know if intervening in Selva and Lilisha's battle had been the right choice. But if he hadn't, Lilisha would no doubt be dead. Although he'd only known her for a short while, it was clear that she wasn't strong enough to take on the Fable family butler. And since she'd snuck in as an assassin, there was no reason for Selva to show any mercy.

Maybe I shouldn't have meddled. No, was I made to meddle? Well, not exactly.

Sisty's words may have pushed him, but in the end, Alus had made the choice. He hadn't expected her to bring up the tragic invasion, but there had been more to it than that.

However, everything was working out too well. It was like he, Lilisha, the Fable family, and even Sisty were dancing in the palm of somebody's hand.

"If that's the case...just who is the puppet master directing this strange play...?" The corners of Alus's lips raised ever so slightly into a smile.

Was there some strange plot at play? If so, it was being cleverly hidden so as not to appear so on the surface. Whoever was behind the scenes was intelligent and skilled at using people.

The performers of the play appeared to be acting of their own accord, but he couldn't help but feel that someone in the shadows was pulling all the threads.

The biggest proof of the puppet master's skill was that the performers themselves didn't realize they were playing their parts.

Like the principal said, it seems that Berwick has a hand in all this, thought Alus.

If Lilisha was part of the plan, Berwick, who'd been the one to send her to Alus, was clearly guilty. However, unraveling Berwick's plans was like traversing through a huge, complex, and mysterious maze. Berwick was skilled in politics and at reading others to the point of manipulating them. It would be difficult for even Alus to expose what his true intentions really were.

But if Berwick was the one who had planned it all, it wasn't very like him.

Regardless, if Alus could discern what the ultimate goal was, he might be able to follow the path that led to it.

"Sir Alus...you're not concentrating on your research," Loki pointed out, seeing right through him. He still hadn't told Tesfia and Loki what had happened when he'd turned back to the Fable family mansion.

"I was just thinking about a little something I'm worried about, but hopefully it's nothing."

If Berwick was involved, he wouldn't have gotten Alus caught up in it for no reason. So it was safe to assume there was some kind of intention behind it.

That said, he wasn't completely confident in his interpretation, so there were no actual guarantees.

At any rate, Berwick was at the top of the military and Alus was still a soldier.

Their past bound them to each other, and Alus knew that if Berwick wanted something of him, blatantly refusing would be no different from throwing a tantrum like a child.

Because he was not familiar with the subtleties of people, Alus had failed to realize there was more going on in this chain of events than what was on the surface until Sisty had told him. Since there hadn't been any clear malice behind it, his instincts hadn't warned him.

It just feels like there is no clear aim here. There's no heavy-handedness trying

to push everything to the outcome they desire.

That is to say that there was no fixation on the outcome. Even though the plan itself was quite meticulous, he couldn't sense any urgency. Though Sisty had given Alus information, it was still up to him whether he would save Lilisha or not, and that would be a gamble for whoever was behind the scenes.

And yet he felt that there were guardrails in place to keep everything from veering too far off the path.

Yeah, it's probably not just Berwick. I can see someone twisted behind this.

Alus cursed the still-invisible mastermind, shook his head to clear out any doubts, and let out a sigh.

"See...you are not listening at all, are you, Sir Alus?" asked Loki.

"Hmm?" Alus responded, still distracted. "Well, no matter how much I think about it, I can't take any actions myself. Besides, we have something else we need to do."

"I don't understand the context, so I will just say 'sure.' In the meantime, if you don't say something, those two will never start their training in earnest, Sir Alus."

"Hmph." Alus looked over and saw the usual scenery in the laboratory. "You're still tripping over the basics of mana control and yet you slack off?"

Tesfia and Alice were supposed to be doing their daily training, but like Loki said, they weren't focusing at all.

They must have heard Alus, though, because they stopped and looked at each other.

"I know this is important too, but..." started Tesfia.

"Yeah, it's an important time for Fia, right? Shouldn't we be thinking of what to do on that Tenbram?" asked Alice. Alus had told them why they should prioritize training over thinking about plans for the Tenbram, but there was no way for them to stay calm with Tesfia's life depending on it.

While he understood how they felt, Aile still hadn't supplied any details on the Tenbram. So, lacking knowledge, there was a limit to what they could do.

So Alus reached his conclusion.

“No, just continue to focus on your training as usual. Mana control will be a foundation you will always have use for.”

To be frank, he wished Tesfia at least understood the general gist of Tenbram, but she'd have to make up for that with some personal study.

Right now, Alus's own interest lay with the Fable family's inherited magic.

Frose Fable's words had sparked his inquisitive spirit. According to her, it was impossible for him to learn the inherited magic. He couldn't replicate it or even arrive at something similar by accident. Alus refused to take that lying down.

“Are you sure you're fine with that, Fia? You don't act like it's urgent, but you both might end up having to quit this institute.” Alice couldn't get the risk of the Tenbram out of her mind. It was a natural concern.

“Well, yeah, but at this point things will happen the way they happen. With Al acting like that, even I get taken aback.” Tesfia scratched her cheek and smiled wryly. But it looked a little like escapism to Alice.

“You mean it's Al's fault? But I'm the only one who's left out...so I can't help but get worried,” said Alice, sounding a little sad. As an outsider, she hadn't been told anything, but perhaps that was why she had been able to take the situation more seriously than anyone.

“Ms. Alice, this incident is certainly a big problem. I understand how you feel; I feel the same. I am just not saying it out loud.”

Loki furrowed her brow as she spoke. Her words seemed to express her confusion over Alus's indifference to the matter. Even so, she continued, trying to be positive.

“But thinking about it, there might not be any need to be so serious about it. Sure, losing the Tenbram will spell the end of Ms. Tesfia's life. And there would be considerable demerits for Sir Alus too. Even though the rank of No. 1 doesn't bow down to the Womruina family, just having him owe them a big debt would send considerable ripples through the political sphere. And that might result in Sir Alus losing some freedom. However, not even the military could fully restrain him, so I doubt even the Womruina could do anything to him.”

Loki let out a somewhat anxious sigh.

“However, the reactions of the top brass of the military and the high-ranking officials who understand Sir Alus’s power do bother me. Who knows what they’ll do when it comes down to it...”

Tesfia picked up on Loki’s doubt.

“Hmm, I don’t really know much about the military, but nobles connected to the military usually see that as a problem.”

“It could invite conflict between nobles after all,” explained Loki. “Do you two know what benefits Alpha gets from having the current rank No. 1?”

“Noblesse oblige, the duty of the nobles and the responsibility of those with power. Many nobles tout such a slogan, and they wouldn’t stay quiet. And the rank No. 1 Magicmaster is a strategic trump card against Fiends, so having somebody like that attend the Institute...” Tesfia muttered to herself. Her words were sensible and hit the nail on the head.

“That’s right. The existence of Fiends is always the top priority for the various nations. In other words, having the greatest Magicmaster means a lot in terms of national politics and diplomacy. Of course, I am just a normal soldier, so I am a bit of an outsider. But if something were to happen to Sir Alus, his surroundings would suddenly get a lot noisier. If that happened, this daily life will be blown away,” Loki responded at a rapid pace.

Of course, Alus would rather pass on all that. In fact, owing the Womruina’s a big debt while also causing such a scene would only add insult to injury. He didn’t even want to imagine how long he’d be dragged into military and political troubles.

“Well, if that happens, I would just abandon Alpha,” said Alus.

“Excuse me?!”

“Hmm?!”

Tesfia and Alice were both bewildered by that response, but Loki was calm.

“It might be bad news for you two, but that is the kind of thing he might do. If that happens, neither the military nor the head of the nation would be able to

stay calm.”

Abandoning the nation sounded bad, but strangely enough it would be the start of Alus’s retirement. The peace and quiet it would bring would be convenient for him. It might mean dumping his two students, but abandoning the nation was no doubt within the realm of possibility.

In fact, he just happened to have business in Rusalca. He’d received an invitation from its ruler, Lithia. They would no doubt welcome him for a long-term stay.

“No, no, no. You can’t just do that!”

“Don’t you think you’re jumping the gun, Al? That’s going a little too far, right, Fia?” Alice looked at Tesfia, who was desperately nodding her head in agreement.

Alus coldly looked at them and spoke bluntly. “Well, I doubt that’ll happen. I was just caught up in all this, and frankly I’m just hoping it turns into something interesting. I’m pretty motivated, you know,” he said, remembering some of the reactions Lilisha had shown during his negotiations with Aile.

Alus wasn’t well versed in politics, but Lilisha had clearly sensed the various schemes Aile was planning.

Even the whole deed of engagement was just another of the nobles’ many wrongdoings to him. He wasn’t trying to be righteous or anything, and he’d left everything about the Tenbram to the Fable family anyways so he had nothing to do.

Seeing Alus’s confident, almost arrogant, attitude made Tesfia shrug as if to tell Alice, “See?”

“Fine, if Al says so...” said Alice. “But it’s still an important matter for both of you, so don’t take it too lightly okay? Make sure you seriously think about it.”

“Okay, okay. But what happened to the training?” Alus brushed off Alice’s warning and urged the two to get back to their usual training. He soon stood up and assumed his customary teacher mode.

To tell the truth, their mana control techniques had improved considerably

recently. But the world wasn't easy enough for them to survive on that alone.

“Right... I would like to have you two, and Loki too, focus on learning a new spell. Of course, you should still continue your mana control training separately.”

With those words, the atmosphere completely changed.

“A new spell?!” Tesfia and Alice exclaimed at the same time. “Really?!”

They broke into smiles, curiosity filling their eyes as they leaned forward as if pushing Alus to continue. Even Loki was visibly excited, elated at the chance to learn new spells.

Typically, you start rejoicing when you've fully mastered it. But we can't really afford to take our time.

Generally, it took a mind-numbingly long time to completely understand and trace the construct of a magic formula. Right now, the mainstream method was to rely on the AWR's function while imagining what the spell would look like after manifesting, but the simplification of the spell reduced the level of completion.

Alus couldn't help but have his doubts about that kind of mass production-like method, but he didn't exactly have the time to open up study groups either.

In the end, Alus ultimately had to simplify things as he explained the steps in an attempt to get them to understand.

Still, he couldn't help but coldly look at the three rejoicing girls.

How was it that he couldn't motivate them without doing something like this? He felt like he'd glimpsed the stupefying nature of the creature that was a Magicmaster. In a way, Magicmasters were the kinds of people who became obsessed with magic. Because of their talent, they sought proof that they were more competent than others. As a result, they tended to get a sense of superiority once they picked up a new spell. But aside from Loki, these other two were novice Magicmasters, and any superiority they felt would be destroyed after a quick trip to the Outer World.

“Alice, your first step is to learn how to freely control the device in your AWR,

those three rings. I'll give you the formula on paper later, but if you get the order wrong it will just take more time to learn."

Alice's AWR, Shangdi Fides, was very high performing. Even its three rings were AWRs of their own. So when she used it, she was practically controlling two types of AWRs at once. The rings were the heart of the AWR, and their performance was made possible because of the meteor metal they were made from.

As such, mastering their use was essential and unavoidable. More specifically, Alice's most important task was to learn remote mana control and to project magic formulas.

"Next is Loki. Well..." When it came to Loki, Alus was a bit hesitant. Someone with her level of experience had already mastered the bare minimum. She was a diligent student who never skipped training, and she'd even learned to fight with her mana sonar.

Loki had a phenomenal sense for learning magic, shown by her aptitude for detection magic. The reason Tesfia and Alice could use so few spells was because they themselves weren't sure what kind of magic they would need. Due to a lack of experience, they couldn't determine what they needed on their own, and it took longer to learn because of their unrefined practicing methods.

For example, if Tesfia were to start learning an expert-level spell now, it was doubtful she'd finish in a few years or even before she graduated. It depended on the spell, but typically advanced-level spells and above required not just effort but another talent too. Even people with the same affinity had strengths and weaknesses, and trying to learn a high-level spell that didn't suit them was almost always just a waste of time.

"Well, I can't say I'm not a little worried, but I'll have you learn one of the vertices of thunder..."

"You mean Black Ikazuchi!" Loki's excitement shot up. Unable to withstand it anymore, she stood up. Her eyes shone like stars.

"Mmm, that's still a little early, or rather, too difficult," Alus responded.

"Th-Then what?!" Even though Alus had kindly denied her, Loki's excitement

didn't cool off. Right now, the most powerful spell she could use was Naruikazuchi. It was the highest class of magic in the orthodox lightning attribute, a high-level spell that made an instantaneous lightning bolt.

However, not everyone could learn the spells that made up the vertex of thunder. Without natural talent and extraordinary qualities, they were impossible to master. Moreover, Alus didn't know of any more users of the vertex of thunder aside from Loki. That was just how rare the spells were.

"I will have you attempt to learn one of the spells that still hasn't been acquired by anyone," Alus told Loki.

"Wh-What kind of spell is that?" asked Loki. "I don't know much about them. Your Black Ikazuchi is the only other one I've seen."

"I bet there's no other Magicmaster who can use it," said Alus. "Plus it's top secret; it's not even accessible in the Magic Compendium. Normally, it would be impossible to even catch a glimpse of the magic formula. Incidentally, the thunder name comes from the thunder god in folklore. The typical perception is that nobody can use it. Surprisingly there are quite a few spells like that out there."

Of course he hadn't asked when Loki had learned Naruikazuchi.

Once Alus finished explaining, Loki's eyes darted around, afraid of any questions. However, the other two girls' eyes sparkled with interest.

Other attributes or not, magic was magic, and Tesfia and Alice were dying to know more.

"Hey, what level of magic is that?"

"Well, the name is still a secret, but I guess it would be ultimate-level. But since nobody's mastered it, it's difficult to grade it. Regardless, all eight vertices of thunder are exceptionally powerful. So at the very least they are all expert-level."

"Ooooh!"

"Wow!"

Alus wasn't sure how to respond to their exaggerated reactions. They were in

awe of the frightening power of an unknown spell, but they also gave Loki a somewhat sympathetic look.

After all, Loki was about to challenge herself to acquire such a spell. Based on their own experience training under Alus, it was easy for them to imagine that it would be a grueling trial.

However, Loki herself was as excited as a child; her breath was ragged.

“Loki, you already have a basic aptitude for it, so you can take your time to learn it slowly. But it’s not something very easy to learn, so keep at it.”

“Yes! I swear I will live up to your expectations!” Loki was all fired up. Her frustration over losing to the snow man in Vanalis pushed her forward to take on a trial that would be like trying to scale a sheer cliff.

Loki is a Magicmaster through and through, Alus thought. That was a fact. Loki’s eyes were not just that of a veteran soldier but also those of someone who had only just started on the path of magic...just like the students at the Institute.

Alus let out a sigh as he sensed a pair of eyes staring at him as if to ask, “What about me?”

Looking at Tesfia, he frowned. For some reason he felt tremendous anxiety.

He’d known Tesfia since he’d enrolled at the Institute, but he felt like she hadn’t matured much mentally.

So when he felt reluctant to teach her anything due to her “Me too, me too” appeal, he wasn’t trying to be mean. For Tesfia, it was her normal mode of operation. This redhead tended to wear her emotions on her sleeve, for better or worse.

At the Fable family estate, Tesfia’s mother hadn’t even tried to hide that she wanted Alus as a son-in-law. But it seemed Tesfia still had a long way to go before she could be considered a full-fledged lady.

“Fia...you study up on Tenbram, I guess,” he instructed her.

“...”

Tesfia’s shoulders dropped at Alus’s curt answer, and Alice patted her back to

try and console her. Loki was ignoring her, unable to find any words to say.

When Alus looked Tesfia's way, she didn't just look disappointed, she was starting to tear up.

Ugh... Alus started to feel guilt welling up. He'd only been making a bad joke.

But to think she'd seriously cry. Was it really that much of a shock? he thought. He reflected on his actions as he scratched his head. He couldn't very well say nothing, but snapping back wasn't a good idea either.

Loki quietly watched from the side as Alus looked unusually distressed.

She felt a little mischievous, but it was a refreshing feeling. Ever since coming to the Institute, Alus had started showing different expressions... In a way, it moved her and she enjoyed her new hobby of watching his expressions when he was troubled.

Meanwhile, Alus finally steeled himself and walked up to the crying girl.

He reached out and planted his hand on top of her red hair.

It was a blunt gesture, but it was his way of hiding his embarrassment.

"Sorry. It was just a little joke. I've got a task for you too."

"Really...?" An unexpectedly feeble voice asked. Her reaction only perplexed Alus more. Moreover, Alice was still patting Tesfia on the back as a form of backup, which put the odds against him.

"Y-Yeah, really." He was being cautious, as if he were dealing with a sulking child.

As soon as Tesfia saw that his reply had become more concerned towards her, she grinned.

"You said it," she said, confirming their promise. Alice smiled too, as if to indicate that it was just an act, and celebrated Tesfia's tactical victory.

Alus sensed the deceit, but he wasn't particularly irritated.

Normally he'd slam a fist down on her head, but the real tears in Tesfia's eyes made him hesitate.

While it had started as a performance, she'd put too much emotion into it

and really ended up crying.

Alus was a man, and being weak to a woman's tears came with the job. Therefore, he couldn't bring himself to get angry.

But he wasn't sure what to do about this atmosphere.

Is this my fault...? I don't get it.

While Alus was somewhat dismayed, Tesfia wiped her eyes.

"Huh? Aha ha. H-Hang on. Huh?"

"Fia, are you really crying?" Loki interrupted them with an exasperated look. "Oh my."

"Is that enough of this farce, Ms. Tesfia?" asked Alus.

"Yeah. Well, I was just thinking I was going to be the only one who wouldn't get a new spell. Phew. I'm fine now. All right! Let's hear it, then."

Her eyes were a little red, but she was acting normal again. And so the curtains fell on the girl's inconvenient, cheap farce.



Alus cleared his throat, hoping to also clear the strange atmosphere before returning to the topic at hand. “I’m planning to have you learn the Fable family’s inherited magic.”

“Huh?! But I thought only my mother knew that,” said Tesfia.

“Of course I don’t know the details. But your mother has given me a hint, meaning that she’s acknowledged that Zepel is one of the steps to the final completed version,” explained Alus. “Well, technically it’s just very similar and not an exact match.”

In fact, from what Alus could tell, Icicle Sword’s composition was more complex than it needed to be. But by analyzing it and applying magic theory to it the intended path for it became clear.

Since magic formulas were a very straightforward system, the next step would inevitably lead to Zepel or something very similar.

That meant that when those with the nature for it learned Icicle Sword, it would ultimately lead them to the complete inherited spell. However, it was doubtful if any researchers would be able to analyze the magic formula and notice the unnatural parts mixed in.

Alus’s conjecture was that Icicle Sword was prepared as a basic step to let the user learn ice sculpting. The reason he thought so was that the sculpting part of the formula was left vague. It had been left open to interpretation, which had probably been Frose’s intention when she’d taught Tesfia Icicle Sword. So Tesfia’s sculpting skills were in large part thanks to her efforts and exceptional sense.

Zepel was the stage that followed after that. To use it, one had to pick up the skills to manipulate the ice magic through spatial coordinates.

It’s quite the kind design once you figure it out. It’s carefully set up to reach the final form as you improve on it, Alus thought after explaining it to Tesfia.

Once she’d heard everything, she spoke with a lively voice. “Difficulty aside, that means it’s a challenge from my mother!”

“I’m not so sure about that, but there’s no doubt that she wants you to learn

the inherited magic,” responded Alus.

“So maybe it’s maternal love, then?” countered Tesfia. “In the end, my mother’s still the only one who knows the inherited spell in the Fable family nowadays.”

“Hmm? No, that’s not...” From what Alus had heard, not even Frose had learned one of the inherited spells. So it was likely that Tesfia’s mother didn’t even know the complete form of Icicle Sword that Tesfia was after.

According to Selva, they’re fine with treating the spell I come up with as the inherited spell, but what to do...? Well, I’ll let whatever happens happen.

The inherited spell that Frose had been trying to master must have been quite advanced at the time. In fact, it was so futuristic it could have surpassed even modern magic theories. But even the talented Frose had been unable to master it.

With their level of technology at the time, how had people come up with such an idea? Although there were many mysteries draped around the Fable family’s inherited spells, Alus’s curiosity was fully focused on the complete version of Icicle Sword.

Just what kind of power will the completed form of Icicle Sword have...? It’s only natural that I’m curious about this mysterious magic since I don’t even know when it was invented.

Alus wanted to at least grasp the basics of the complete form, for starters. He would consider whether or not to teach it to Tesfia once he had a clue what the formula looked like.

And there was one more thing.

This is just a hunch, but Zepel probably isn’t the last step. There should be more ahead of it. But just reaching the next step should be fine, Alus thought to himself before continuing.

“About that, Fia. Frose hasn’t mastered the inherited magic either. She said so herself.”

“No way! Ah, but...” Tesfia seemed to realize something and puzzle over it.

“Hmm? Is there something else?” asked Alus. “Frankly, your family matters are unimportant right now. With the Tenbram ahead of us, it wouldn’t be a bad idea to learn a more advanced spell and learn to protect yourself from danger.”

“Y-Yeah...” Tesfia apologetically cast her eyes down, prompting Alus to smile.

“Hey, redhead. Just so you know, your task this time is the hardest. But if you’re able to master the next step, I’m sure Frose will rejoice. It does seem to bother her—parental expectations, you know.”

Of course, when it came to living up to expectations, Tesfia was already performing admirably, like she had during the Friendship Magical Tournament. But it wasn’t Alus’s job to tell her that. While Frose would rejoice, Selva would have apprehensions about an unfamiliar inherited spell.

“Really?! My mother feels that way...?” Tesfia’s jaw relaxed and her eyes sparkled. She was really happy to learn that her mother had high expectations of her. Although he’d made such a conjecture, he still felt that the bond between a mother and daughter was inexplicable.

While Tesfia was intelligent, she was also slow to catch on. This time he was going to teach her everything in a detailed manner, forcing the knowledge into her head. If possible, he wanted her to find her own foothold as soon as possible.

But if he were to just hand over some papers with magic formulas all over them, her brain would surely overheat. It was easy to imagine steam coming out of her ears.

He wondered if it was okay to talk about Fable family secrets such as inherited magic around Alice and Loki. But Frose probably didn’t expect him to reach the next step so soon anyways since she hadn’t placed restrictions on him.

Even so, he chose to say the bare minimum and keep the formula hidden from Alice and Loki. Of course, he planned on having the two of them not tell a soul about their own spells.

Once he’d made the arrangements, Alus turned back to an excited Tesfia.

“Sorry for not living up to your expectations, but it’s not Niflheim I’ll be

teaching you. Besides, regardless of what the inherited magic's ultimate goal is, you'll get there eventually by partially fulfilling the requirements..." Alus trailed off. "But you really love this kind of thing, don't you?"

"Huh? Uhm...did it show on my face?"

"It was clear as day," Loki added with a blank stare. That prompted Tesfia to rub her face and forcibly collapse her expression.

Alice smiled wryly seeing her do that. "You really love that spell, don't you, Fia?"

"Well, it's expert-level magic and it's a great ice spell that you can't really overlook. And it shows you a world of ice that is just overwhelming."

In Alus's point of view, while Tesfia might not have been terrible at it, it was clear that she didn't have a solid grasp of magic theory. Besides, she had a tendency to know everything from the outline. Though she might be able to learn, if it was a question of whether theory suited her or not, Alus concluded the latter.

"You'll touch on that at some point, but this time it's a different spell. Although in a sense it's rarer than Niflheim."

"Huh? What is it? Come on. Don't put on airs. Tell me."

Alus frowned at her impatience, but it was too late to complain about that. "You're going to learn Cocytus."

"Ah! There was that spell. It was what Ul...uhm, Ulhava, used during the demonstration at the tournament..." she said in a pretty evasive tone, hesitating to say the name for a moment. She then awkwardly looked away as if trying to hide something.

Alice stepped in to help Tesfia.

"Oh, it was that person with the mask... I wonder who that could be...?" She said in a monotone voice, her acting terrible.

Two glances came at Alus, awaiting his reaction.

The Magical Martial Arts Demonstration was an event that had taken place during the Seven Nations Friendship Magical Tournament. And Alus had

participated in it under the false identity of Ulhava.

He tried to be considerate.

“It’s not like I was trying to hide it. But just so you know, it was the ruler who came up with that name. So if you say anything stupid, you’ll be punished for leaking state secrets.”

He’d said it as a joke, but the two shuddered and insisted they didn’t know anything.

“That’s enough of acting strange. I’d rather pretend it never happened, but it’s too late for that,” Alus continued with a bitter expression. That was when Loki stepped in to assist.

“Sir Alus! That’s not true at all! You looked very valiant and that mask really suited you!” Loki clenched her tiny hands.

Tesfia quickly read the room and added her own affirmation. “Yeah, that was cool in its own right!”

Loki had praised the strange mask Alus had worn during the extracurricular lesson too, so he thought maybe her fashion sense was just questionable... But if he thought too much about it, he had a feeling that he’d see a side of Loki he’d rather not. So for the time being, he just gave a simple reply.

“I see.”

Tesfia let out a sigh of relief, glad that nothing more had come of it.

“But I really didn’t notice right away, right, Alice?”

“Yes, you stood out quite a bit, so it was when we were thinking about it later,” confirmed Alice.

“Yeah, it was only when we looked at Loki’s reaction...you know?”

Alus could understand where Tesfia was coming from. Loki had a tendency to outwardly express her emotions. Since it had been Alus’s big day and she’d been so overly excited, it had made it obvious to those around her.

But for some reason I still have that outfit on hand... I’ll have to make sure Loki doesn’t see it. It had been delivered from the palace by express mail, but

there was no sense in questioning every move Cicelnia made.

“No matter. There’s no time so let’s get back on topic. It’ll probably be quicker to show you.”

He signaled to Loki to bring his AWR, Night Mist, over, then he stepped away to a more open space as the two other girls looked on. Thinking about it, he felt like it had been quite a while since he last taught them magic like this.

“Because of the complexity of its structure, Cocytus is classified as an expert-level spell,” Alus explained as he pulled on Night Mist’s chain and held a ring with his other hand. The ring started glowing blue.

Before long a small nucleus of mana appeared in the palm of his hand. Eventually briar-like vines grew out of it and started wrapping around it. It was much smaller than what he’d shown during the Magical Martial Arts Demonstration.

Alus glanced at Loki, who threw a knife covered in mana. It sped towards the nucleus but was suddenly wrapped in ice briars and frozen in place.

“This is Cocytus, a spell that senses specific mana within a range and freezes, stops, or nullifies it.”

It was accurate to say that the workings of mana were sealed in the spell-construction process. It was a powerful spell that sealed the link between caster and spell.

“It’s incredible. But isn’t this...?” Tesfia started. Then she tilted her head and directly asked what was on her mind. “Isn’t this focused more on defense? It doesn’t look like a very offensive spell. Like it’s more suited for passive tactics.”

“So you noticed?” responded Alus.

“Yeah, but this is supposed to be an expert-level spell like Niflheim, right? Wouldn’t that actually be better because you can use it to attack?” Being able to ask whatever was on her mind was one of Tesfia’s virtues.

Alus nodded gravely.

“Well, it’s not like I can’t understand what you mean, but they both have their own advantages. If you could learn Niflheim, that would be fine, but I proposed

this because that looks like it would be too difficult.”

“You mean that Cocytus is a substitute spell?” That was hard for Tesfia to swallow.

When comparing the effects and phenomenon each spell manifested, as well as how much mana each consumed, the two were completely different. But as Tesfia had pointed out, there were several spells that appeared similar to Cocytus at first glance.

Loki appeared to agree, but didn’t say anything. However, she did give Alus a questioning glance, meaning she couldn’t understand the point of learning Cocytus.

“I’ll repeat myself: This spell has its uses, and it’s no doubt an amazing spell. Stepping back a little...nobles typically have inherited magic that they don’t tell anyone about. Some are even categorized as taboo, their very existence classified. There are several reasons spells can be considered taboo, not just that they are lethal against people. Some are treated as such because they are useful but risky. In other words, they are both difficult and costly to use.”

Alus took a deep breath and focused on the mana flowing through his body. When he exhaled, his breath turned into a white mist.

“I’ll only do this once, so make sure you don’t miss it.” As he released Cocytus, Loki’s knife thawed and fell to the ground. As it fell, Alus reached out a finger towards it.

This time the knife froze entirely. However, the effects of the spell were clearly different. When he removed his finger, the knife didn’t continue to fall. It was frozen in air as if time itself had stopped.

“Huh?! What did you do!” Tesfia looked astonished. Alus wordlessly rubbed his fingertips together. The spell had been activated for less than a second, but his skin still tingled. Even momentary use resulted in frostbite, a side effect of the spell that reflected on the user. Requiring more than just mana made it riskier than other spells.

“This is the real Cocytus,” Alus said. “It’s powerful and it will ignore any half-hearted barrier to freeze even time and space, but in return, it hurts the caster.

I don't have much affinity for ice, so I get frostbite. Its range is also very limited."

"Sir Alus, are you okay...?" As he explained, Loki took Alus's hand and worriedly looked at him.

"It's not a big deal. I wouldn't make such a blunder over a mere demonstration."

Loki sighed with relief as she warmed his finger with her hands.

"This is the spell that you used in Vanalis, isn't it?" asked Loki.

Alus wordlessly nodded. He'd used the same spell to rip a leg off the Shem Azah. However, due to the narrow area of effect, he'd only been able to manifest it on the surface of the Fiend's body.

The spell came with the limitation of only a small area around where the caster touched. As a result, Alus's hands were in danger of serious frostbite after using it for only a few seconds against a swift opponent with wings. Meaning that casters without ice affinity were in danger just from using it. In exchange for the risk, it exhibited a tremendous effect.

Although seeing how it practically interferes with space itself, it wouldn't be strange for it to be categorized as space-control magic, Alus thought. Well, I suppose it's an effect associated with the phenomenon of freezing.

The more extreme spells became, the more their effects and ranges exceeded human frames of reference. They exceeded the realm of attributes, with several examples of high-level spells changing the laws of physics or controlling space.

And with such spells, mana control became all the more important.

"Do you get it? The Cocytus I showed first was nothing more than a camouflage for the real version. It's a little complicated, but there are cases like that too."

"Al...why do they have the same spell name?" Alice stepped in to ask.

Since it was a good change of pace, Alus answered her. "It's probably to keep the spell from spreading and to keep some second-rate Magicmaster from attempting it. Normally, it wouldn't be strange for a spell like this to be

classified as a taboo spell, but the fact that it can be controlled to some degree is what keeps that from happening. However, the caster can still put their allies at risk, and things can go really badly if someone uses it carelessly... They might even self-destruct.”

The explosive types of spells that Lettie used were probably similar.

“But Fia is going to be practicing that, right? What if she self-destructs...?” Tesfia shuddered at Alice’s words and her expression was complicated. Alus’s explanation had brought the spell’s huge risk to light and ended up betraying the expectations she’d selfishly held.

It was a double-edged sword, and since Tesfia would be using it herself, she wasn’t confident she wouldn’t screw up.

“She’ll just have to be careful. Besides, Fia has the aptitude for it,” he answered Alice, then directed his response to Tesfia herself. “It’s an ice spell, and the groundwork from Icicle Sword and Zepel will help a lot. And since mana control will play a part in it too, it’s not like you can use it yet. It’s no doubt a spell that will suit the next step of your family’s inherited magic. And I don’t have to come up with a new spell either.”

“H-Hmm... Okay, I’ll give it a shot.” Tesfia finally nodded, her expression serious, having made up her mind.

“That said, I can’t just teach you the formula as is. This is an ultimate-level spell and not something known in the wider world. So I’ll only give you the foundation, but make sure you can at least use it in your fingertips like I just did.”

“So you mean that as long as I control it, it’s not dangerous? Okay, got it! In fact, I’m itching to try it!” She clenched her fists and her cheeks were flush with her enthusiasm.

Seeing that, Alice couldn’t help but intervene.

“But, Al, rather than that dangerous-sounding spell...why not look for the inherited magic and teach her that when you find it instead? I’m a little curious about what kind of spell the inherited magic is.”

“Hang on,” said Tesfia. “Even if you find out, you can’t just teach me as is. Not

even Icicle Sword's magic formula has been made public."

"I know. Frankly, I still don't know what the final form would look like. The only key for the necessary structural elements is Icicle Sword. At best, I could guess what the next step is. Besides, this is a task you must do. As long as you meet the necessary conditions, I'm sure Frose would love for you to learn the complete inherited magic."

Alus also had another reason to teach Cocytus to Tesfia: it could strongly interfere with space within its range of influence. It wasn't a secondary effect of the spell manifesting but a trick built into the formula. If Tesfia could grasp and understand it, she would surely find it useful when proceeding to the next stage of the inherited magic.

"Besides, I'll pass on Frose glaring at me for a lack of consideration. I've created a fair share of spells and earned a fair share of grudge and jealousy."

"Hmm, then I guess it can't be helped..." Alice eventually relented and accepted it.

"Well, Al can read magic formulas, so it's pretty reassuring. But there's no point if I don't do some of it on my own," Tesfia said.

"Then let's get back on topic," said Alus. "First of all, Icicle Sword is characterized by its intricate sculpting of the ice sword."

However, to Alus that sculpting was artistic but not practical. So if he were to use Icicle Sword, the sword would have a much simpler shape. That said, Tesfia was certainly skilled at sculpting, and even Alus acknowledged that.

"Next, the key to Zepel is grasping spatial coordinates and sequentially rewriting them. In your case, you link the movements to your body—your arms and limbs—to forcibly resolve it."

"Ha ha ha..." Tesfia let out a forced laugh when Alus gave her a cold stare. Accurately grasping the spatial coordinates required a great deal of skill. As someone who wasn't very good at thinking about complicated things, Tesfia was better suited for the rough method she was currently using.

Next, Alice raised her hand and asked a question. "B-But Fia is using it, so it'll be fine, right?"

“True, as long as she can use it, there won’t be any problems.” Alus nodded and continued. “But the Fable family’s inherited magic doesn’t end just from learning the spell. In a way, the process of learning is also a form of training. In fact, you could say that it’s more important to go through all the steps and learn the theory behind it. I don’t know if it’s something your ancestors came up with, but it’s an interesting learning process for a family renowned for its ice magic.”

If such academics were part of the Fable family’s traditions, it helped explain Frose’s love for training.

“Anyways, the Fable family’s inherited magic has techniques and theories that need to be learned in steps. From the examples so far, those techniques are sculpting and understanding spatial coordinates and rewriting them. The next step, as far as I can guess, is spatial interference by using the freezing phenomenon of the ice attribute.”

“I see. So that was the point of the Cocytus you just demonstrated.”

“If you’re going to challenge an ultimate-level spell right off the bat, you won’t have finished by the time you graduate. So I will create a formula that only meets the necessary requirements. I’ll limit the manifestation area to your fingers, and I’ll add a time limit restriction too just like my own.”

“Objection! I want a spell that can actually be used!” Tesfia raised her hand and complained. Apparently she wanted to take on the proper version of the spell.

Following Tesfia’s exceptional student behavior, Alus shut her down like a teacher.

“Overruled! Your mother wants to give you the proper education as the future head of the family. In that sense, mastering the magic formula will secure your place in the family. It’s the necessary qualifications for you to call yourself the secret heir, the Ertlade. Besides, I’ve promised to turn you into Magicmasters who can fight in the Outer World. This is just another part of that. Whether you’re the rightful successor or the Ertlade doesn’t matter. But if you become the rightful successor, your entire situation will change, not just with Womruina.”

As for Frose, even if she were to give up the family estate to someone, she was too uneasy with Tesfia the way she was now. Alus had no intention of getting very involved, but Tesfia learning the inherited magic would also qualify her to become the next head of the family.

“So my mother is even thinking about that. I see.”

Perhaps she felt something behind her mother’s usual cool demeanor. Tesfia wriggled her body like she was embarrassed.

“All right. I’ll do it!” she said “Will one month be enough?”

“Don’t be foolish. If you could do that, you’d have more talent than me,” Alus said in an exasperated tone.

But Tesfia had a tendency to exceed his expectations. She was the type to learn by doing and would sometimes pick up things at extreme speeds.

“I might fiddle with the magic formula a little, but it would be very impressive if you mastered it in a month. Knowing that you’re all talk and gusto, I’ll keep my hopes low.”

In spite of those words, Tesfia immediately got excited.

However familial expectations aside, learning the real Cocytus was no easy task, even with an affinity for ice. Not even Alus could draw out the full potency of that spell. In his case, he was only able to reproduce some of its power by making up for the missing qualities with his extensive knowledge of magic formulas and space manipulation. It was said that this spell could freeze a portion of the world itself, that it would spell death for everything including time itself, and that it was one of the most extreme effects of magic within the ice attribute. The spell could literally seal a part of the world into eternal silence.

Anyways, I’ve arranged a pretty high hurdle, but I wonder what will happen.

This was Alus’s latest challenge. So far, Tesfia and Alice had overcome the hurdles he had prepared and done so without ever hitting a wall. Their talents had left Alus in wonder, but if they could overcome this trial, he would have no choice but to acknowledge their talent as the real deal.

Will they have the talent to rival Loki, I wonder, thought Alus.

Perhaps Frose's instructorial nature had infected him, because he felt something resembling elation welling up inside of him. The sensation caused the edges of his lips to rise.

After that, Alus took Tesfia and Alice to the training grounds, where he spent two hours teaching them their new spells. When it came to learning magic, without some guidance in the beginning they tended to waste time.

In Tesfia's case, the beginning was crucial. She excelled in other ways, but she was careless and tended to make a lot of mistakes in the beginning.

In fact, the first thing she tried was to use the spell Freeze from her fingertips, but it was just a beginner-level spell that was nothing more than a cheap imitation of Alus's demonstration.

As a result of her improved mana control, she'd picked up tricks like these. Alus couldn't help but think that either way, she had a long road ahead of her.

Loki, who was considerably skilled to begin with, didn't need to go over the magic formula that Alus had given her for long.

That said, a complete understanding was still necessary because she was attempting to learn the most complex kind of magic. Such a challenging spell would only manifest itself thanks to the foundation in place from her efforts and understanding of theory.

Looks like I can't take my eyes off Loki either. Just what will she come up with and what will she make.

For the first time since leaving the military, Alus felt some fulfillment. He felt like he'd found something aside from fighting to look forward to.

And finally there's Alice...

Alice had been given the task of learning how to control the rings of her AWR. It was the kind of field where someone who excelled at studies shone. She needed to search for a solution on how to best control the rings, be it by constantly changing the spatial coordinates or by incorporating them into the structural elements of the spells.

Shangdi Fides was an excellent AWR, and it required something different from Alice than what it asked from Tesfia or Loki.

Initially Alus was only going to give them a brief lesson to avoid taking up too much of his time, but it was human nature to want to see things through.

As he supervised the three girls' training, he self-deprecatingly muttered to himself, "Looks like I'll end up using my time researching three different spells for the time being."

His mumbles quietly disappeared amid the girls' shouts and clamor.



"Ow." That was the first word from Tesfia on their way home.

"M-My body's completely..." Her arms were as heavy as lead and she felt numb with each step she took. She was even leaning forward a little like an old lady.

"I-I didn't think I'd get this tired... Wh-What about you, Alice?" asked Tesfia.

As Tesfia stumbled forward, Alice reflected on the day's accomplishments. "I think I got the hang of it on the first day. We can't have Al hanging over us all the time, so I think it was great to grasp the general idea early on."

First she had been taught the crux for focusing so that she could learn how to control the rings. As a result, she felt like she'd be able to get over the first hurdle without much difficulty.

"I wish I could do the same," said Tesfia, rubbing her tired shoulders. "I still haven't gotten it. I don't really understand how you're supposed to freeze space."

The distance from the training grounds to the girls' dorm wasn't all that far, but right now it felt really distant to her.

"But Al said you already have the foundation down."

"It doesn't feel like it though. If I ever get the feeling I can do it, I'm sure the rest will come quickly."

"Heh heh, where is that confidence coming from? You should start by not

freezing your fingers.”

It appeared to Tesfia that her strict best friend wasn't going to overlook her half-confident attempt at a bluff.

“Ugh...come on!” she said, glaring enviously at her best friend, who'd gotten results before her. Then she let out a sigh. “Well, simplified or not, it's based on an ultimate-level spell. I can't even properly use expert-level spells, so I don't think I'll be able to do it right away.”

Alus had explained that ultimate-level spells were so advanced that it was questionable if even Singles could use them. Although since they were military secrets, it was difficult to confirm which spells Singles could use, but even when looking at Doubles within reach of the Single Digit rank, only a handful of them could use an ultimate-level spell.

And right now, Tesfia was learning one such spell. Even with Alus's help, it was not so simple. “I wonder how long it will take.”

“I don't know. But knowing Al, he wouldn't teach us something that's impossible for us right now,” said Alice.

“I wouldn't be so sure. He might just give up in the middle of it and tell us to practice on our own until graduation.”

“Hmm... Still it does look like we have a long way to go.”

Their shoulders slumped at the same time.

“By the way, did you hear how things went for Loki?” Tesfia threw out the topic as an attempt to shake off the heavy atmosphere.

“Hmm? No way. I couldn't possibly ask her.”

Unlike them, Loki had been an active-duty Magicmaster before coming to the Institute. So the training she was doing to acquire a new power was almost completely different from anything the two of them knew.

Every single time, she would focus on her task until she ran dry of mana. She was dead serious, and the air around her was tense. Alice couldn't casually talk to her.

The two shuddered at how far Loki was driving herself into a corner on the

first day. It was probably the right attitude when learning magic. And the two of them realized they were still stuck thinking of themselves as students.

Although she hadn't done any heavy exercise, Loki had been drenched with sweat as she made her way home.

"If I recall, she was working on a very advanced spell too, right?"

"Yeah, I think it was one of those flashy spells called a vertex of thunder. It's a different attribute so I don't know much about it, but it seems to be an ultimate-level or at least an expert-level spell."

Normally, ultimate-level wasn't the sort of term that would appear in student conversations. In fact, lessons only went as high as expert-level.

Of course, any Magicmaster who climbed to the upper ranks might hear the term every now and then. But if any of the teachers overheard it, their eyes would open wide from surprise. However, the girls themselves weren't very aware of this since they were always with Alus, an existence far outside of the norms.

"But trying to control multiple devices at once must be dizzying too, huh?"

"Ha ha, I'm not sure if using all of my brain is enough. Oh yeah, also can I ask you something later?" Alice turned a pair of pleading eyes to Tesfia.

"Wh-What...?"

"Can you teach me how you set spatial coordinates with Zepel?"

"Sure, but I don't think it will be much use."

"Yeah, I know...because it's your own style." Alice smiled but said nothing, well aware of it.

But Tesfia wasn't very happy having been seen through. When Tesfia fell silent, Alice peered at her face. Suddenly a provocative smile appeared on Tesfia's face. She raised her arms and made a gesture to attack Alice with a roar. In the face of that, Alice let out a shriek mixed with laughter and ran.

"What do you mean by 'I know'! Jeez! Get over here, Alice!" For the last stretch back to the girls' dorm, the two girls forgot all about their exhaustion and ran in a flurry of excitement. The students on the road stopped to watch

them with looks of amazement.

Ignoring them, Alice took off in a half run, with Tesfia in hot pursuit.

Thank you, Alice. Tesfia thanked her friend in her mind. Just like Alice knew, so did she.

She knew that Alice had teased her a little to cheer her up since she'd been feeling down lately. Alice was trying to help her forget about the Womruina family even if it was for just a short while.

Having spent so much time together, she understood why Alice acted the way she did. That's when she realized something. Perhaps Alus had given them such hard tasks so they wouldn't have to think about Tenbram for a while.

Since the time and details still hadn't been announced, perhaps he was trying to free them from constantly thinking about such things and give them a chance to reinvigorate their spirits.

However, thinking like that right now was just insensitive. So she reconsidered and quickly looked forward again.

With a cheerful voice, she chased after Alice with light steps. Before long, she caught up to and wrapped her arms around her best friend.

Once they got back to their room, they took in a brief moment of normalcy.

Tesfia was particularly mentally exhausted, but being able to rest in her room calmed her down. If she were alone, she would have been stuck in a spiral of negative thoughts. She couldn't be as brash as usual in these kinds of times.

They both took showers to rinse off the sweat they'd worked up and changed into something more comfortable. After drying each other's hair, Alice carefully combed Tesfia's red hair.

This was the same as usual as well. While Tesfia was attentive to her appearance, having Alice assist with the things she couldn't reach helped. Today she felt closer than usual to Alice.

As they walked to the cafeteria, they exchanged casual conversation. Tesfia felt light and free from any weight.

She couldn't avoid the topic of Tenbram around Alus or Loki, but when it was

just the two of them, Alice was considerate and didn't touch on it. Most of all, she didn't have to listen to their knee-jerk reactions telling her that everything would be okay.

While they made their way to the cafeteria, another girl noticed them and called out.

"Are you getting something to eat?" she casually asked.

When the two nodded, she smiled in return.

"I see. You two are always so close. Speaking of..." The girl's face suddenly clouded over.

"Ms. Lilisha still hasn't come for dinner. Did something happen? I'm in the room next to hers, but it looks like she was out. Just a little while ago, I sensed her presence, but it felt like something was wrong. So I called out to her through the door, but I didn't get a reply. I was wondering if she'd at least come out to get something to eat for the evening, but..."

When they heard that, Tesfia and Alice looked at each other.



Shortly thereafter, the two stood in front of Lilisha's room in the girls' dorm.

"Despite what you say, you do look after people, Fia." Alice whispered into Tesfia's ear.

"What else am I supposed to do after she stirred my interest like that. Besides, Lilisha went with Al to negotiate with Womruina. I still don't like her, but I do feel a bit of gratitude."

"Sure."

"Jeez, she should at least make a friend she can rely on for times like these, or we'll just end up getting sent instead."

"Oh, you're never honest, Fia." Alice smiled again, prompting a somewhat blushing Tesfia to turn her face away and reach towards the buzzer to Lilisha's room.

But no matter how many times she pressed the button, no response came

from inside. So the two exchanged looks again.

“She did say she felt a presence in the room. That means she’s back, right?”

Lilisha had a room to herself, so it couldn’t have been a roommate. The girl saying that she felt something was wrong felt all the more valid now.

“If you’re in there, answer already! You can only get dinner at the cafeteria for so long,” Tesfia shouted, giving up on the buzzer and knocking instead.

But there was still no answer. However, when Tesfia pushed her ear against the door, she could feel the presence of someone inside.

Losing her temper, Tesfia put her hand on the doorknob. The door moved with ease as if it had never been locked in the first place.

Tesfia and Alice exchanged confused looks yet again. There was a limit to how careless one could be. After nodding their unease to each other, they opened the door and peeked inside.

The inside was dark, the lights off.

“We’re coming in.”

“Fia?! Uhm, Lilisha, are you there? The cafeteria is about to close, and...” Tesfia stepped in first, and Alice timidly followed, making excuses as she did.

However, there was still no response. Past the door and inside the room, they found complete silence.

Tesfia sighed and looked around. Her hand unconsciously reached towards the light switch and touched it.

The next moment, they heard strange breathing inside the room. A faint, peculiar smell drifted over from farther inside the room. It was a smell typical of plants, like grass being ground up.

“Lilisha, what are you doing? If you’re here, just answer,” Tesfia said, flipping the switch.

With the lights on, she saw a person-shaped lump lying on the floor covered by a blanket.

She caught a glimpse of blonde hair poking out from under it, so it was easy

for her to imagine it was Lilisha.

“Something’s wrong, Fia!” Alice yelled in a fluster and rushed past Tesfia.

When she realized what was going on, Tesfia followed Alice and rushed up to Lilisha.

The blanket around the girl was rather dirty. The legs sticking out were bare and covered in mud. She could also see small scratches here and there. But what stood out most was that the window was wide open.

“Lilisha!” Alice got down on her knees to tend to Lilisha. She moved the blanket covering her head, but when she saw Lilisha’s complexion she was left speechless. She was as pale as a ghost. Trying for a response, Alice shook Lilisha’s body. That’s when she noticed Lilisha’s violent convulsions.

When she touched Lilisha’s forehead, she exclaimed, “She’s burning up!”



She tried removing the blanket altogether, but it wouldn't move. On closer inspection, she found that despite being unconscious, Lilisha had a firm grasp of the blanket, like she was unintentionally hiding herself under it.

"Alice, I'll run to get the nurse," said Tesfia.

Alice only nodded in return and carefully reached her hand out to Lilisha's hand. She slowly uncurled Lilisha's fingers one by one, finally freeing up the blanket.

Shocked into silence, both Alice and Tesfia were chilled by what they saw.

Their lips quivered. It felt like their hearts were being squeezed as breathing became harder and their hearts started beating faster.

Alice was blindsided, and her body shivered. Tesfia gasped and quickly covered her mouth.

Beneath the blanket Lilisha's skin was red and blistering. It was no accident as was clear from the marks. Lilisha's white back held an eerie brand, an unsightly burn that spread like a claw.

Neither of them could look away, and their jaws hung wide in horror.

She must have been tortured. The spiderweb-like shape of the brand made no attempt to disguise the blatant malice of whoever was behind it.

Until now, the girls had been blissfully unaware the world could be this cruel. They had thought the only enemies that existed were Fiends. As novice Magicmasters, they had only pursued a simple-minded idea of justice.

A thin membrane had protected their naive worldview, but this violent act had blown it away. A cruel reality and the hidden malice of the world assailed the two girls.

A moment later, Alice returned to her senses.

"Fia! Hurry!"

"Ah, y-yeah!" Alice carefully picked up Lilisha, careful not to touch the burn.

Tesfia ran to get help, but a thought entered her mind for a moment. Was it okay to show the mark on Lilisha's back to others?

She quickly realized what was most important and shook the idea from her head. Right now, Lilisha's life was the priority. Considering the critical situation, public opinion was the least of her problems.

As head of the dormitory, it was Felinella who settled the commotion.

The dorm, of course, had a nurse. Unfortunately, she was out on other business, so once Lilisha was brought to the infirmary Felinella treated her instead. As she moved her hands, Felinella spoke to Tesfia and Alice who worriedly looked on.

"The medicine's not strong enough. Unlike the infirmary in the main building, there's only medicine for scratches and what's prescribed for illnesses. Illumina is getting the nurse, so why don't you two go tell Mr. Alus about what happened?"

"Huh, Al?" Tesfia asked with a quizzical expression and Felinella nodded with resolve. Her tone didn't allow for refusal, so Tesfia swallowed any further questions.

Once the two girls rushed from the infirmary, Felinella furrowed her brows.

"This doesn't look good..." Although Felinella had finished disinfecting the wound and administered some simple first aid, Lilisha's forehead was sweating profusely.

In addition to her studies, Felinella assisted her father, Vizaist, with his work leading the intelligence department; she'd picked up the medical knowledge used in the military. Because of that, she understood what these burns meant.

She would have to report this to her father later, but she couldn't let Lilisha die here. If something were to happen, it would cause a huge uproar.

This might just happen to coincide with the case we're working on. This is exactly what my father was worried about, she thought.

The intelligence department had an extensive information network both inside and outside of the nation, and they also helped gather information for the jobs that Alus did behind the scenes. Because of that, Felinella was inevitably forced to pay attention to all kinds of things. Thus, she knew that the military's interference around Alus had recently reached a point where it had

gone too far.

To back that up, there was strange intel from the royal court that said the Fable family was trying to root out the truth.

The person Vizaist had paid the closest attention to was Lilisha. The other day, Alus had gone out of his way to return to the Fable family and intervene in the fight that had happened there, saving Lilisha in the process.

However, after Alus had saved her—considering Lilisha’s dark objective for breaking into the Fable estate—her failure had likely led to punishment.

As Felinella silently pondered the situation, she sensed the presence of more and more students gathering outside the infirmary, worried about their classmate’s safety. But once Illumina came back with Alus, they would be able to drive them away together.

First I will need to confirm how Mr. Alus will react. That will determine what the intelligence department does next. Depending on what happens, I might not even have time to contact my father.

Sensing a slight presence, Felinella focused and released her mana into the air.

Tesfia and Alice had probably reached Alus’s laboratory by now. Even though they were far away, with her talents in the wind attribute, Felinella could clearly sense the presence of someone with overwhelming mana coming this way. And also...

Oh? Now this is unexpected, Felinella thought, sensing not just Alus but the pressure of the principal’s mana in front of him.

Something seems strange. Felinella could sense the two waves of mana swirling around and trying to overpower each other.

What was going on? It seemed like the two were clashing. However, it was only for a moment, and they soon seemed to calm down. Alus’s intense emotions confronting the principal seemed to fade as they moved on to hold a discussion instead.

Felinella let out a sigh of relief. Apparently, it had safely resolved itself. Alus’s

mana parted from Sisty's and continued moving towards Felinella and the girls' dorm.



When Tesfia and Alice came flying back from the dorm with the blood drained from their faces, Alus and Loki were a little puzzled. They had been on their way to eat something too, but their appetite disappeared at the following words:

“Lilisha has been seriously hurt.”

“She collapsed in her room.”

Tesfia's and Alice's words were disconnected but told the story when combined.

Once he heard that, Alus had a bad feeling about it. At the same time, he felt something like pain at the back of his head, like his emotions had been hit by a rock.

“What kind of state is she in?” he asked in a stiff tone, and Tesfia and Alice took turns answering.

They told him about the horrible burn marks on Lilisha's back and how they were no accident.

Loki, standing behind Alus, couldn't help but feel her chest tighten when she heard the details of what had happened to Lilisha.

At the same time, as a spotter, she could also feel the pressure Alus emitted increasing as the gruesome report continued. It was like he was trying to restrain the mana and emotions welling up inside of him.

If it were to be released, Tesfia and Alice would no doubt collapse from the pressure. Regardless of Alus's intentions, they would be like nothing more than saplings caught in a storm, falling to their knees. In the worst-case scenario, their Magicmaster qualities might even end up compromised.

“Then she told us that she would call for a healing Magicmaster...a-and to come tell Al in the meantime.”

“Who?”

“Feli.”

Alus fell silent, and neither Tesfia nor Alice tried to make eye contact with him.

They were shrinking away from his stiff expression, and they were unsure of his inner thoughts. To them, it didn't look like Alus was particularly worried about Lilisha or obviously angry.

However, the two of them were just unaware of what was going on deep inside his mind. Although there were no obvious signs, Alus was in fact feeling inexplicably aggravated. They also had no way of knowing that his frustration was directed towards the source of the problem, whose very existence was uncertain.

The atmosphere continued to get heavier and heavier. The pressure Loki felt before was blanketing the whole room, and Tesfia and Alice ended up on the receiving end.

They unconsciously started sweating from their foreheads and their legs trembled. Loki shouted, “Sir Alus, these two have nothing to do with it!”

“I know...” Considering they were facing Alus head-on in that state, they were holding up surprisingly well. The pressure must have been overwhelming.

She knew she was being a little pushy, but Loki let out a sigh and took Alus out of the laboratory, heading for the girls' dorm, leaving the two girls behind.



“Sir Alus, just to understand the situation, allow me to ask...what happened between you and Ms. Lilisha before this happened?” Alus hesitated at Loki's question but finally decided to tell her.

He explained that Lilisha was an Aferka assassin who had attacked the Fable mansion, that he'd intervened and saved her when she'd been cornered in her fight against Selva, and that all that was probably part of a much bigger plan where even his actions were just another cog in the wheel.

“If you had only told me a little earlier...not that I think that I could have done anything,” lamented Loki.

“The Governor-General’s probably involved. I don’t know if it’s Berwick’s intentions, but Lilisha is probably just a sacrificial pawn, both to Aferka and to the mastermind of this plan.”

Lilisha’s life had been left entirely up to Alus. But regardless of what he did, it wouldn’t have a major influence on the overall outcome. Alus didn’t like that one bit. It wasn’t so much Lilisha’s life but that he’d been forced to play the role in this trivial game.

Loki didn’t say anything.

But the next moment, Alus’s storming mana spilled out again.

This was because a certain person had suddenly appeared in front of him.

“I took you at your word, and this is what I get.” Alus pointedly said, fearlessly.

“I know what you want to say...” Sisty said in an apologetic tone as she slowly descended from riding on the wind.

But in contrast to her words, her eyes were dauntless. Moreover, as a former Single with the title of Witch, Sisty had vast mana of her own. It clashed with the storm of mana Alus was releasing. She could understand how he felt but didn’t intend to get pushed around either. Real hostility or not, a Magicmaster releasing vast amounts of mana in front of another Magicmaster was a sign they intended to use magic. It was like drawing a sword.

As the two clashed, Loki looked sorrowful.

It was like Alus was the destroyer of order and Sisty was facing him to protect the Institute.

Some in the military feared Alus’s power. At the same time he was used as a convenient blade. But no matter how much he contributed, he was always treated like a dangerous beast.

However, Loki had sworn to always be his ally, even if that meant Sisty becoming an enemy...

So Loki let her mana gush out in place of words. The mana took on the form of lightning, sparking around the surrounding area like the tail of a dragon.

Principal Sisty...why are you standing on that side! Loki thought.

Why was she opposing Alus? Why was she releasing her mana as if confronting him?

Loki walked to Alus's side, keeping a vigilant gaze on Sisty. She then pulled out her knife AWRs and pointed them towards Sisty.

The act made Sisty gaze in wonderment. She was the absolute authority in the Institute, but she could feel Loki's determination when she directed clear hostile intent towards her. However, she had sworn to always be his ally, even if that meant Sisty became an enemy...

"Sir Alus?" Alus had thrust out his arm to bar Loki and stop her.

Perhaps because of Loki's own killing intent reaching him, he'd managed to calm down, and his surge of mana stopped. Sensing that, Sisty restrained hers as well.

Loki had done her job perfectly. While Loki had no qualms about turning her blade on Sisty, her turning into the voice of emotion, calmed down Alus.

"I know that confirming Lilisha's condition is more important. But I'd like you to clear up the misunderstanding between us," demanded Alus. "If you have any intention of doing so, that is. Perhaps I was just jumping to conclusions, but I'm not feeling very happy right now."

"Yes, I know. I was on my way to check on Lilisha too, but before that, allow me to explain. Just so you know, I didn't leak that information to you because I expected things would turn out like this."

From her words, Sisty accepted that she shared some part of the responsibility.

While Alus had saved Lilisha's life, the result had caused tragedy to befall her. Sisty had a vague idea of what was going on.

"What do you know?" asked Alus.

"Well, why don't we talk about it as we move?" Sisty wore a mysterious expression as she walked forward.

Giving Loki a small smile, she lined up next to Alus. Alus silently accepted it

too.

And so they walked towards the infirmary in the girls' dorm. On the way, Sisty was the first to speak.

"First, I'd like to apologize. This is partially due to my oversight. I slipped up at the finish line. I never imagined he would purge his own sister."

Alus's eyebrows moved at her words.

"Purge. That makes it sound like Lilisha wasn't just a member of Aferka."

"She wasn't. Lilisha's brother, Rayleigh Ron de Rimfuge Frusevan, led Aferka," said Sisty.

"So if she was the leader's sister, was it some kind of political struggle?" asked Alus.

"I don't think it was anything that dramatic. However, he is dangerous. Thinking he wouldn't purge his own blood relative... That was my blunder," Sisty spat out in remorse as she bit her nails.

It had been difficult for Sisty to investigate all of Aferka alone, and she'd also neglected to do so because she knew part of the plan. She'd avoided stepping out of line and adopted a passive stance, which had backfired on her.

Alus fell silent for a moment.

It seemed Aferka was quite the fierce organization. Perhaps this meant that anyone who failed a mission even once was removed from duty and disposed of as useless to the organization. They were assassins who lived in the shadows, after all. If dragged out into the light of day, they would no longer be assassins but brutes whose hands were stained with blood.

However, sometimes assassins were enforcers of justice in modern times. Such justification was often for military or state actions behind the scenes. In those cases, even though it might be illegal, there was no small degree of assurance in place. For example, this was the case when Alus took on such jobs. Only the worst criminals and villains were his targets. Based on Alus's own experience, most cases required a quick response with the assassination carried out in secret. Moreover, Vizaist's intelligence department often moved in the

background too, as was also the case with Godma Barhong.

At any rate, the requests brought to him were typically about punishing evil. However, this time with Lilisha was different...

Alus unhappily furrowed his brows as Sisty spoke of her regret. Indirectly pushing Alus to save Lilisha's life was the best option she had.

Thinking about it, Alus wasn't without blame. If he hadn't sent Lilisha home back then...

He hadn't thought she'd been a sacrificial pawn at the time, but thinking about it, Aferka had probably anticipated that Selva would kill her. So he should have realized that she would be made to accept the blame when she returned in one piece without succeeding in her mission.

Tsk...! Alus clicked his tongue in his mind—at the situation and at the fact that he couldn't help but feel frustrated by it.

"Principal, you said before that the Governor-General was involved with this. Berwick might just be another pawn in play... Does that mean that it's Cicelnia who is pulling the strings?" Alus bluntly referred to the ruler, and he wasn't going to let Sisty evade the question.

"That's what I think too. Well, it seems Vizaist is on the move as well. I doubt that he doesn't know anything about it."

Alus said nothing. It was Felinella who had instructed Tesfia and Alice to tell him about Lilisha's condition. He wasn't a healing Magicmaster, so she must have had her own intentions. As Vizaist's daughter, it wouldn't be strange if she knew something.

At the same time, Sisty was shrewd to imply the involvement of Vizaist Socalent. She was probably thinking that she could get off lightly by getting Vizaist caught up in it.

Alus coldly stared at the wicked smile on Sisty's face. "You're saying that Lord Vizaist is helping with the situation?"

"Hmm... No, I don't think so. He may have been investigating the situation on his own or have stumbled upon it by accident." Sisty denied the idea but

confessed she'd tried to make contact with Vizaist lately.

"So whose side are you on?" asked Alus. "I don't really have the time to do an interview to see if you're friend or foe."

"Now that I've been given the chance to explain myself, I can't just sit back and watch anymore," said Sisty. "I hope you haven't forgotten that Ms. Lilisha is my student. That's why I can't ignore this situation that she's been dragged into. Of course that means I will cooperate with you," Sisty explained with a serious expression. She then turned around to speak with Loki who was carefully observing her.

"Just so you know, Ms. Loki, I am this institute's principal. No matter how much I might trust Alus, when he's letting his mana out like that, I have to at least make a show of fighting back. It's not like I expected him to go wild, but if something happens, it's my job to protect this institute. I hope you can understand," Sisty said with a smile.

Like she said, if something were to happen, Loki probably couldn't stop Alus. When she calmly thought about it, Loki realized Sisty had taken on the role of restraining Alus in her place.

"I understand. As you say, if Sir Alus were to head to the girls' dorm like that, even if he didn't go on a rampage the waves of mana would make students collapse one after another."

Loki shrugged, and Sisty smiled in return.

"What am I, some wild dog without a leash?" Alus cut in. "I don't mind blowing up the dorm, you know? Besides, did it ever occur to you that maybe I unleashed my mana to get you to come meet me?"

"Oh, if that's the case it's quite the wild method. I don't think such a way is very laudable," responded Sisty.

"Yeah, yeah. I get it." Alus shrugged at Sisty's theatrical tone and let the matter slide. He couldn't muster the energy to get angry, and he'd secured the promise of Sisty's aid as an individual rather than as the principal of the Institute. That would have to do for now.

Loki also appeared to be relieved that she didn't have to make the principal

an enemy.

“So what happens next...?” Loki asked, and Alus and Tesfia answered in turn.

“First we check on Lilisha’s condition.”

“Yes, I fully agree with that.”

Thus the Institute’s strongest student and the principal once called Witch Sisty made their way to the girls’ dorm together.



“I’m glad there weren’t any problems on the way here,” Felinella said, welcoming the three with a smile.

Alus wasn’t entirely sure that his qualms with the principal had been so thoroughly resolved, but seeing how relieved Felinella looked, he couldn’t bring himself to give her a sarcastic reply. Sisty answered in his stead. “Yes, indeed. But, well, Alus is a boy, after all.”

“That’s true, Principal. He is indeed.”

Alus wasn’t sure why the two of them were getting along so well.

But as the only boy there, he started feeling uncomfortable and decided to change the topic by bringing up his purpose for coming.

“So how’s Lilisha?”

The healing Magicmaster nurse wore a stern expression as she answered him. “To be frank, it doesn’t look good. Too much time has passed since the burns, and since it wasn’t very sanitary, they might be infected to boot. Fortunately, medicine from the infirmary in the main building has been brought up, and repeated use of healing magic should see some effect, but...”

Noticing her fall silent, Felinella picked up where she left off. “That is just how bad the injury is. It’s a girl’s body, so normally we’d like to be more considerate, but this is an emergency. I think it would be best for the two of you to see it for yourselves.”

The two of them nodded, so Felinella moved over to the bed and slowly pulled down the blanket so that they could see Lilisha’s back.

“This is...” When he saw the brand on Lilisha’s back, Alus narrowed his eyes. From his time in the military, he’d picked up a knack for discerning between injuries, but that didn’t mean he was very happy to see an injury filled with so much malice.

“A curse mark,” finished Sisty.

“Yes.” Felinella affirmed it as well.

Loki slowly raised her hand. “Uhm... What is a curse mark? Based on its name, is it some sort of dark attribute spell?”

Alus furrowed his brows as he answered. “No. Well, it used to be one in the past, and in the underworld it was quite useful for torture and identification of prisoners and captives. Finally, a method was created to carve it into the body without using the dark element. This brand is probably the result of one such method.”

“I-I see.”

Lilisha’s back was wrapped in bandages, but the strange and eerie mark spread out beyond what they could cover.

Loki looked at the mark with a gloomy feeling. Felinella continued, “I think it is just as Mr. Alus says, but it appears to be different from a normal curse mark. For starters, it’s banned by international treaty. I’m quite knowledgeable but I’ve never heard of this type before. What about you, Principal? With your years of—ahem, with your experience—you should know more than us.”

“Hey, watch what you’re saying! Well, I’ll just pretend I didn’t hear that this time. But like you said, the curse mark is forbidden nowadays. It’s been years since I last heard rumors of it being used. The underworld’s not exactly my field of expertise, so please don’t expect too much from me. However, there are a few things I know.”

With that preamble, Sisty sat down on a nearby chair. Her complexion didn’t look good, but she was relieved to hear that Lilisha’s life wasn’t in danger. Letting out a deep sigh, she lowered the volume of her voice and recalled old memories as she began speaking.

“There are various theories on the origin of the curse mark. Some say it was

created before the appearance of Fiends by a magic researcher employed by a noble with a taste for torture. The fear of magic in the past was so great that it wasn't unusual for people to think of sealing mana. The curse mark was developed in earnest after that. It wasn't all that long ago, but the acceptance and research of magic was much slower than it is now, and such powers were the subject of discrimination and persecution."

Alus had an idea of the era that Sisty was referring to. Ironically, modern magic had seen dramatic developments due to the appearance of Fiends. With the intent of eliminating Fiends, mankind actively studied and adopted the power of the magic that Fiends used, and their knowledge and skill in the field increased tenfold.

Sisty was no doubt referring to the dawn of modern magic. At best guess, it was around the time the seven nations were founded and humanity faced its greatest threat with the attack of Cronus. Moreover, it was around that time that inhuman magic experiments were being carried out and most of the taboo spells were developed.

As the dawn of a new era was chaotic, the stance on magic and Magicmasters had still been uncertain in the various nations. While Magicmasters were revered as heroes, they were also feared and seen as overly dangerous beings, and many people demanded strict oversight or removal of them. Of course, Sisty wasn't completely familiar with what had happened at the time, having learned much from documents and other sources.

"The main purpose of the curse mark is to impose a magical restriction on the person it's branded on. Like Alus said, it was once a dark attribute spell that has since been developed so that even non-Magicmasters can easily use it. In other words, its unique concept developed when magic and magical techniques were not yet differentiated. If I were to explain it, I'd say it's a conceptual magic tool not too different from a special magical circle."

Sisty paused her explanation and looked to Alus. "By the way, can you tell anything from looking at this pattern?"

Alus stared at the brand on the part of Lilisha's back not covered by the bandages.

They were calling it a brand out of convenience, but in reality some kind of magical power had spread out a unique pattern over her skin.

Like Sisty said, he could glimpse the old age of the technique. Because of that, something felt out of place.

“This is unnatural. It’s different from the modern concepts of magic, and it’s different from typical magical techniques too.”

“Yes, there’s a code to unlock the limits put on her magical information.”

“I see. A Fundamental Word. If it’s not unlocked properly, it will end up destroying the informational body.”

Alus referred to the informational body that defined a person’s experience and qualities. Mana is a mass of personal information, and at its deepest level it is fundamental information made up of Fundamental Words.

With a displeased look, Alus turned to the Magicmaster nurse.

“Can you tell what kind of effect this curse mark has on the body?”

However, she shook her head to tell him that she didn’t know.

“I see. In that case, we can assume that she was branded with this curse mark by Aferka.”

“I’m sure that’s true. Aferka served the ruler directly in the shadows. They no doubt have dark techniques and secrets shared only between them. It wouldn’t be strange for them to have curse marks for torture, restraint, compulsion of will, silence, and more. I can’t think of anyone else who would have any reason to brand Ms. Lilisha either.”

That only left the question of what the curse mark’s effect was.

Felinella was the one to answer Alus’s concerns.

“Mr. Alus, if I may? Aferka is an executive unit under the ruler’s direct control in name alone, and in the past they were nothing but thugs. So I believe it has a silencing effect to protect any secrets. I’ve also heard that it has a form of mana lock that reacts to specific mana wavelengths, so it can neutralize magical criminals.”

Felinella seemed to keep things a little vague as to not overstep her position as a member of the intelligence department.

A little surprised, Alus asked, “Is that all? Are there any restraints on hostile acts or forbidden acts?”

“As I’m sure you are aware, that sort of magic falls under mental domination. When it comes to controlling or guiding the mind, wouldn’t it be impossible for anyone but a highly skilled user of the dark element?”

“So at the very least, it reacts to certain mana wavelengths to bind what she can do. Talk about annoying.”

There, Loki spoke up to confirm something. “So does that mean that while her mind might not be restrained, there are large restraints on her use of magic?”

“Yes, when she touches on the restraints it will trigger a penalty-like change in her body, like the inability to emit mana or the inability to construct spells,” answered Alus.

“Then Ms. Lilisha won’t...?”

“Yeah, in her current state, she won’t be able to act as a Magicmaster. With strain put on her Fundamental Words, it could even lead to the collapse of her mind.”

If it was just some jamming magic, Alus could have done something about it. When it came to magic, Alus rarely fell behind.

However, this technique was problematic even for him. Lilisha’s own Fundamental Words were directly interfering with her mana. If he carelessly fiddled with it, he could end up killing her chances as a Magicmaster himself.

In that case, there was only one way to save Lilisha.

“Feli, you used the word ‘lock’ before. If there’s a lock, can it be unlocked?”

As Alus tried to get information out of her, Felinella turned to look at the girl on the bed... Then she turned towards the person most likely to have the answer, Sisty.

“Are you hoping for more of my ‘years of experience’?” Sisty asked with a sigh. “Young people nowadays really don’t know how to flatter someone. Well,

many curse marks are made to be removed by the person who marked them. Typically a key of some sort is needed.”

“But it doesn’t have to be something physical, right? Perhaps it could be a password or a procedure using mana.”

“Well, it’s not going to be some password, but otherwise yes. It could be an old-fashioned magic tool as well. But like I said before, Ms. Lilisha is my student, and I won’t hesitate to help her,” insisted Sisty.

“Years of experience or not, I thank you,” said Alus.

Sisty sighed and said, “Just to confirm... Alus, how far are you planning to go? You are already pretty involved. You might not be able to turn back if you go any deeper. So are you sure?”

“I don’t want to hear that from you. I’ll admit that I was naive too. It’s not like I’m trying to play the Good Samaritan, but I do have part of the responsibility for what happened to Lilisha. So I’ll see things through to the end even though it shouldn’t matter to me.”

Alus turned to look at Sisty with resignation. He was being more assertive than usual, but he didn’t forget to add a few more words. “And, Sisty, you’re in the same boat. Those words from before weren’t a lie, were they?”

“O-Of course not. Besides, I’m the one who pushed you to make a decision. Well, you can trust me to back you up.”

“I suppose you mean you’ll support from behind. And you call yourself a former Single.”

“I have my own circumstances...okay?”

“Anyways, you will be supporting this, for better or worse. Now, Feli.” Alus turned a sharp look to Felinella next. “How much do you know? Based on everything you’ve said so far, you know more than what’s on just the surface.”

Felinella’s smile deepened as she met Alus’s gaze without concern. “Yes, if you don’t mind me sharing, I will gladly cooperate. My father has some thoughts on the matter as well, so I doubt he would object.”

“Oh? Lord Vizaist too? But he’s under the Governor-General’s command. And

he should have plenty of political enemies due to leading the intelligence department. If he were to involve himself with this matter in public, his position would be in danger.”

While their relationship with Lord Vizaist was one of give and take, Alus was grateful for the help he’d gotten. Even if he ignored that Vizaist was Felinella’s father, he didn’t want to get him caught up in this. That was true for Berwick too, but depending on the circumstances, he might end up in an uncomfortable situation. Berwick might be a sly, cunning old man, but he wasn’t the kind of person to bring unnecessary chaos to Alpha. Alus could trust him on that point. So perhaps he had ended up being caught up in the situation too.

But Alus’s thoughts aside, Felinella smiled at his question and gave him a brief answer. “My father told me to do as I please. And I would love to do so of my own will. However, complete cooperation is a little...”

Felinella’s expression clouded over with regret.

“Sounds like something that’s hard to say.”

“Yes. Right now there have been no messages or directions from the Governor-General, so cooperating with you wouldn’t even be considered a violation of military regulations. My father was ready to call the whole Socalent family to arms...not to mention that the noble sphere is involved in the political balance of this incident. However, my father has some circumstances to consider.”

“Hmm?”

“Actually, an emergency top secret concern has arisen, and everyone in the intelligence department aside from me has been sent to investigate.”

“...A general mobilization of all of his forces, huh?” Alus’s eyebrows twitched. It must have been quite the situation, but he didn’t ask Felinella about it. Looking at her pained expression, it was clear that she couldn’t say anything.

“Then that’s that. It’s heartening just to hear Lord Vizaist say that. Besides, this time around we might end up stepping into the dark side of the noble sphere. Just having the backing of a great noble family is reassuring.”

“Oh? I’m a noble too, I’ll have you know. I’ve had peerage conferred on me.”

Sisty pointed to herself in jest, but Alus was cold.

“What’s somebody who’s only a noble in name going to do? The Socalent family might be up-and-coming, but they are already one of the three great noble families. They’re just on a different level.”

“Do you really think so? Because I used to have a lot of political influence in the past.”

Alus found the sight of an older woman pouting like this very questionable, not to mention that she was bragging about her past... He was exasperated but chose not to press it.

Besides, staying here too long might affect Lilisha.

Leaving the healing Magicmaster nurse behind, Alus and the others left the room.

With an air of a secret political meeting, the four of them headed for the girls’ dorm parlor.

Students gave them quizzical looks but that only increased their sense of solidarity. Now there was no need to skulk around; they could openly fight back.

The furnishings in the parlor were plain, although the vases had a strangely cute design that stood out, as it was the girls’ dorm.

After entering the room, Sisty sat down on a chair. Seeing that, Felinella smiled wryly and went into the kitchen attached to the parlor to prepare tea. That left Alus and Loki, who sat down opposite of Sisty.

From here, they’d likely have an unreserved discussion for nearly an hour. Alus just wanted to get to the point and go home, but there were several things he wanted to check on, so that wasn’t going to happen soon. Most of all, he couldn’t have her pull the rug out from under him at the last moment.

After all, Alus’s next action would be retaliation for this situation. He hadn’t lost all calm, but inexplicable feelings were swirling inside of him. Having seen that symbol of malice, the brand on Lilisha’s back, he couldn’t turn back. Or rather, he’d decided not to.

Besides, I don't want all that time and mental effort I've spent around Lilisha's troubles to be a waste, Alus calmly told himself.

Right now he was angry with Aferka and wanted to protect Lilisha. Having confirmed his feelings again, Alus spoke to Felinella's back as she was making tea.

"Hey, Feli. You don't have to worry too much about us. Loki and I will be going home soon anyways."

"Oh, don't say that. Despite the circumstances, it has been a while since we last spoke. I want to spend some more time together, even if it means keeping you waiting a little. Please just consider it a foolish woman's feelings."

Felinella looked back with a small smile.

Seeing Alus sit back down on the couch, Sisty flashed a wicked grin. "Looks like I've found Alus's weakness!"

"Don't expect the same thing to work for you," Alus returned sarcastically, but Sisty's smile remained.

"Oh, I wonder. To think the rank No. 1's weakness was women."

"Cut it out..."

Alus wore a surly expression as Loki pulled on his sleeve and whispered into his ear. "Sir Alus, if you don't focus you will just end up getting pushed around."

"...Indeed." Loki was right. It would be pointless to get caught up in her banter and end up with insignificant results. Alus pulled himself together and began anew.

"So going back to the topic: what do you know, Principal?"

The abrupt question gave the principal a confused look. "What might you mean?"

"There is another possibility for lifting the curse mark on Lilisha, isn't there? That is to find another person... There should be someone outside of Aferka who has influence over curse marks."

Spit it out already, Alus bitterly thought to himself. This Witch was shrewd.

Even in this situation, she still wasn't showing her full hand. Alus sensed that she still had a powerful card to play. However, the cautious Witch was still indecisive about whether or not she should put her chips down on this hand. Something important regarding the Institute was likely hanging in the balance...

So Alus would give her a push. To get the shrewd principal to put her chips at stake and truly share her lot with Alus and the others.

Realizing Alus's intentions, Loki turned sharply to glance at Sisty as well. Loki still hadn't forgiven her for opposing Alus before. And the girl wondered if Sisty had told the truth about having no other choice as protector of the Institute. She still didn't trust Sisty, nor did she know what was going on in the principal's mind.

So this was the perfect chance for Sisty to clear herself of Loki's suspicions, a unique opportunity to redeem herself. With those intentions in mind, Loki resolved not to miss even the slightest change in Sisty's expressions.

"Wh-Why are you two giving me such scary looks?" Sensing that the odds were against her, Sisty let out a dry laugh.

Felinella held a freshly poured cup of tea in hand and innocently looked at Sisty's face as a bright smile graced her own.

"What's the matter? The students are proud to have you as our principal and admire your contributions to mankind. I still have great respect for you. But don't tell me you have got a guilty conscience about something."

"Not you too, Ms. Felinella?"

The three teamed up on her and narrowed their encirclement. Finally, Sisty broke down, glanced at the three, and sipped her tea out of despair.

"Fine! I just have to tell you, right? There is somebody who knows how to remove Ms. Lilisha's curse mark..." After a meaningful pause, Sisty tilted her head and scratched her cheek as though questioning who it was herself. Then she put a finger on her lip, acting like a stereotypical airhead.

"It pains me to even ask, but are you making fun of us?" asked Loki.

"You don't know when to give up, do you?" Felinella added.

Loki and Felinella cornered the evasive principal.

“If you’re having problems opening your mouth, maybe I should help? Fortunately, I happen to have a teaspoon right here.”

“Aaahhh, stop it!” exclaimed Sisty. “Fine, I’ll tell you, okay?!”

She paused before hesitantly saying, “It’s Lady Cicelnia.”

“Noted.” Felinella added with a composed expression.

Jeez... Alus had, frankly, expected as much. And based on Felinella’s reaction, she seemed to have as well.

The day Alus had returned from the Fable family estate, Sisty must have been waiting for him, pretending it was just a coincidence. She’d guided Alus to make the decision of whether or not to save Lilisha and had made it sound like it was all part of Berwick’s plan. However, Sisty herself must have sensed Cicelnia was present and chosen not to make her own existence known.

Alus, of course, knew that Sisty and Berwick were old acquaintances. That was why a few things she said hadn’t quite made sense to Alus, because he knew Berwick well.

Berwick wasn’t entirely innocent either. He was probably part of it. However, Alus found it strange that the Governor-General of the military was getting involved with the affairs of nobility and the palace, which were under the ruler’s jurisdiction.

The forced approach would have put the Governor-General’s own position in danger in the midst of the internal turmoil in the military. In addition, Berwick was getting Alus involved to this degree, which was uncharacteristically careless of him.

So if Berwick was involved in such an unlikely way, then perhaps he was just another pawn on the board. And there was only one person in all of Alpha who could treat the Governor-General like a pawn: a beautiful demon who wore the sublime skin of a goddess.

The image of the ruler covering her mouth with a fan to conceal her coarse expression popped into Alus’s mind.

Of course, Alus didn't think the brand on Lilisha's back was made by the ruler's orders. But at that point, she likely had a better view of the whole thing than Alus did. So it was likely that she had known long ago that Aferka was out of control and had planned to use Lilisha as a sacrificial pawn but let it be.

"Now then, Sisty. Now that you've opened your heart, you can finally tell us everything," said Alus.

"What? I was going to cooperate. Just so you know, I already knew what you were up to."

Sisty stuck out her tongue in spite, and Alus continued in exasperation.

"We need you to say it out loud. Well, even with your help, I'm the only one who actually has to make a move. But either way, I'll need to meet with the vixen...right?" He asked Sisty to emphasize his point.

But Sisty was in for a penny, in for a pound; she answered him directly with no intention of running away.

"Yes, Aferka might be running rampant but they were under the ruler's direct control. Lady Cicelnia might be able to influence them in some way. And considering Aferka's origins, it's possible that she knows how to remove the curse mark herself. Then again, you directly forcing your way into Aferka might work too."

Having listened until now, Felinella stopped drinking her tea and shared her opinion.

"Sadly, I don't think it would be a good idea to mess with Aferka with how they are now. Rotten or not, they represent the dark side of this nation, so expect that they've taken all possible measures to maintain secrecy. So maybe the use of force—no, I can't imagine that torturing anyone in a position to know would yield any results. And there's no guarantee that you would be able to achieve any goals if you barge in with uncertain information."

"That's true. But I am certain that there is a way to lift this curse mark," Sisty asserted.

"Either way, we should avoid fighting in the nation, right? If we send up smoke when it's not necessary, the military will come in to put it out. So hitting

up Cicelnia first would be the right thing. There just happens to be more that I want to ask her too.”

Felinella furrowed her brow at Alus’s words.

“Well...I have no objections to you doing it yourself. As a Single Digit Magicmaster, getting in touch with Lady Cicelnia should be quite possible for you as well. However, directly going against Aferka is too risky. Aferka is also controlled by the Rimfuge family...so you would be stepping into particularly dangerous territory.”

That shocked Loki back to her senses. “That won’t do! I don’t want Sir Alus to be in an even worse position!”

“Indeed. If you barge into the Rimfuge estate without any justification, the blame will fall on us,” said Felinella.

Alus said nothing.

“The problem is that there’s no proof you can use to corner Aferka. Even if we put up Lilisha as a witness after she wakes up, it’s too weak of a basis if they play ignorant. The curse mark is most likely related to Aferka, but as they report directly to the ruler, they have various exemptions in place. In fact, the assassination business is only possible because some of the higher-ups in the nation are unofficial patrons.”

These kinds of stories could be twisted any which way by noble authorities. Felinella acknowledged the achievements of the current system while also touching on the necessity of the dark side as she continued. “The ruler two generations ago created the foundation for Aferka. A group of misfits were unofficially reorganized and made into the Rimfuge’s family business.”

“I’m impressed you’ve managed to find out that much,” Sisty said, her voice deflated, as if witnessing something vaguely frightening.

Felinella’s reply was but a silent smile.

“So it would only give the antiestablishment groups material to attack Lady Cicelnia with?” Loki asked as if to confirm the answer she’d been given from the start.

For better or worse, none of the individuals here had any objections to the military's current policies. Even Alus saw them as slightly better than before.

Cicelnia's judgment in appointing Berwick probably played a big part in that. But they couldn't go public with everything. It was as if an invisible will had intervened to keep all of these disturbing elements at bay.

Felinella's expression was unreadable, and Sisty stepped in.

"Meaning that it's too risky to pursue Aferka in the open. If it links back to Lady Cicelnia, this nation will fall. I understand your concern, Ms. Felinella, but it's not like we don't have any options. After all, I'm sure the Fable family will make a move behind the scenes."

"Meaning that the incident with Lilisha and retaliation against Aferka are different," Alus said and pondered for a while.

Selva had indeed shown signs of sparing Lilisha. Alus got the feeling that Selva was overlooking Lilisha's personal mistakes and leaving the aftermath to Alus.

But there was no guarantee that the Fable family would be that tolerant of Aferka. A family of that scale wouldn't stay quiet after having assassins sent at them. Nobility had the privilege of hiring private armies of Magicmasters for such cases.

Which means that...

As if reading Alus's thoughts, Felinella muttered to him.

"If that happens, the worst case is there will be a conflict between nobles. A silver lining is that such a thing would make it easier for Mr. Alus to move. The Fable family would have a justification in the assassin sent at them. And Mr. Alus is close to their daughter, Fia. You're also in the same boat in the upcoming Tenbram."

The envious tone in her voice made it sound like she wanted to be close to Alus too, but Alus had more important things to think about. Of what she said, her knowing about the Tenbram was the most surprising.

"I see. My relationship to the Fable family," Alus said under his breath.

Sisty seemed to have already surmised as much as she sighed and spoke in a

bitter tone. “According to my source, an advisor to a certain organization was likely guiding them to this outcome from the inside. And they don’t seem to know that they’ve slipped up. By the way, Alus, who do you think will end up being the final arbiter if things turn sour between the nobles?”

“In the past it would be the various kings, and in the present it will be the ruler, no doubt,” he responded.

With Sisty’s response, Alus started being able to see the plot of the matter.

As I thought, the plan incorporated me into it. And the Fable family got dragged into it too.

Even Selva’s past had been skillfully put to use. Cicelnia’s goal was still unclear, but the costs were clear. For one, Lilisha was on the verge of losing her life...

Alus scratched his head and stopped thinking for a moment. “Feli, can you secretly look up Aferka’s movements?”

“I don’t think it would be too difficult,” responded Felinella. “I have been serving in the intelligence department for quite some time, you know. Besides, it seems they’re starting to leave the shadows.”

“Meaning?” Loki asked back.

Felinella answered as she refilled Sisty’s empty cup.

“Sacrificial pawn or not, sending Ms. Lilisha to attack the Fable family is a large change for them. Even though she’s in a unique position, she is still the younger sister of the most powerful member of Aferka. It completely ignores the risk of her being captured and her identity being discovered. We didn’t probe too deeply into it, but my father was very suspicious when he received this information. It’s a bold, aggressive move. Almost like they’re trying to provoke us.”

Alus nodded in understanding.

Whenever he took on work in the shadows, he worked together with the intelligence department under Vizaist. The information he brought was always highly reliable. So if he’d confirmed this information too, then Aferka was no

doubt changing.

The organization draped in shadows was taking steps out into the light. But for those who lived in the shadows, the light would be blindingly bright. That was why when blinded, their steps were uncertain and could easily go astray.

Gradually, an idea of the whole started to form for Alus. Just how many pieces were there on this gigantic and invisible board, and who were they?

Alus and Lilisha, who had been sent by the Governor-General, were two of them. And since Lilisha was involved, Aferka was likely part of it too. It was also very likely that the Fable family was being used.

What about Womruina...?

Alus put his hand on his chin and pondered.

There was Aile von Womruina. The engagement problems couldn't be part of the plan too. After all, the engagement was made too long ago.

However, while Alus had visited the Fable family due to Aile, he'd also gone in search of the taboo spell Garb Sheep. It was a frighteningly powerful spell that a red-haired man had used to cover Vanalis in a layer of snow. After searching for leads, Alus had ended up at Fable.

In fact, he'd gotten his information from the Magic Compendium. Governor-General Berwick had been involved in that part, so he had probably been guiding Alus.

"It looks like I'll need to make a move. It might be a very sticky situation," Alus said to nobody in particular.

Sisty immediately retorted, "Just so you know, I won't participate in anything disturbing, like killing or the likes. My duty is to protect the Institute."

She maintained the stance that she was retired from the military and now served as a teacher.

"It's not like it's bound to get violent," said Alus. "It's only possible considering the situation."

"Really? But you're on board with the Fable family part to get retaliation for what happened to Ms. Lilisha, right? Just what are you planning on doing to

them?" asked Sisty.

Alus could only hold his tongue and narrow his eyes. He didn't have any intention of turning it into a slaughter, but at the same time, he wasn't going to get too caught up on justifications.

"It's true that I've been in an uncharacteristically rough mood," he said. "But I'll only give them a little rough patting...that's all."

"A patting, is it?"

Alus sighed as Sisty gave him a suspicious look.

"As you can see, they've gone far beyond anything reasonable," he responded. "If Lilisha has anything in mind for Aferka, then I'll help her to a degree seeing as I have part of the responsibility here."

Alus continued in a quiet voice, "Then there's the matter of what happens afterwards."

He then looked back to Sisty. "Well, all you have to do is give us the necessary information. You've already promised to cooperate, so all you have to do after that is help in whatever way you can and take responsibility if something does happen."

"You really are twisted," she said after a pause.

"I'll take that as a compliment," Alus answered. "Or so I'd like to say, but I don't want to hear that from you. Besides, I think I'm being pretty compromising here."

"Okay, okay. I get it." Sisty raised her hand in resignation and shrugged.

It was hard to tell if she'd accepted it or just given up.

"Thanks to you, I was able to get an understanding of Cicelnia's plan, although her ultimate goal is still unclear," said Alus. "So, what are you going to do, Feli?"

"Please allow me to accompany you, Mr. Alus," she answered. "My father has already told me I am free to do as I like. Even if it happens to stray a little from what's suitable for a lady."

Felinella said the rather unsettling line with an elegant smile.

“But as I mentioned before, my father and the rest of the intelligence department is busy with other matters, so you shouldn’t expect any personnel support. So I will be cooperating on my own...unless that is not acceptable for you.”

Rather than asking if he expected more support from the Socalent family, she was asking if she alone was enough.

Of course, Alus was well aware of Vizaist’s and his subordinates’ achievements. But when it came to their fighting abilities, Alus could only guess based on the glimpse he’d seen at the Godma incident and the matches he’d seen at the Institute.

At the very least, they wouldn’t slow him down.

Felinella herself had quite the confidence and her own thoughts on the matter. She placed her hand against her bountiful chest and looked at him with pleading eyes. It looked adorable, even playful, which was appropriate for a girl her age.

Normally, she was the extraordinarily beautiful student council president, who took care to always act in a suitable manner as a perfect lady, so this change had an overwhelmingly destructive power that any man would struggle to resist.

While giving off this new vibe, Felinella looked directly at Alus with beautiful amethyst eyes.

After a brief moment, he said, “It’s fine.”

The words naturally flowed out of Alus’s mouth, having been overwhelmed. The silver-haired girl next to him let out an exasperated sigh.

Alus would have loved to insist that it was inevitable, but he gave up since it would only sound like an excuse.

“Mr. Alus, abilities aside, just the presence of someone from the Socalent family on the scene could be of help. I believe my father gave me permission in such a case.”

“I see. Well in that case, Feli and Loki come with me,” said Alus.

“Yes!” Felinella’s happiness was like a flower in full bloom. At the same time, she fearlessly spoke.

“Mr. Alus, I do understand quite a lot, and I won’t let Aferka get the better of me.”

“I see. Well, I’ll not ask just what it is that you understand,” said Alus.

Frankly, he’d love to settle things on his own, but the girls likely wouldn’t forgive him. Both were fully ready to do whatever it took to support him in the rare possibility that he were to fall into the traps of noble society.

He was also a little uneasy about Loki when it came to battle against other people. So Felinella’s aid was perfect in that sense.

In the past, he likely would have considered both of them as a hindrance, but now their presence was somewhat reassuring.

He’d been planning on making his move tomorrow, but due to these twists and turns, he decided to have Felinella move first and wait for detailed information from her.

After the meeting, Alus and Loki returned to the laboratory where Tesfia and Alice were patiently waiting. Alus apologized for scaring them with the release of his mana and gave them a brief explanation.

Loki also explained that Lilisha had snuck into the Fable family estate. Her purpose being an assassination wasn’t very peaceful, but seeing the curse mark on Lilisha’s back made it clear to Loki that there were more circumstances at play.

However, clearing it all up was no easy task, and it took a while for Alus to explain everything.

He also ended up having to make a round trip to the girls’ dorm to escort Tesfia and Alice back. By the time he returned it was quite late.

That night, Alus was deep in thought as he lay in bed. There were several questions in his head. He stared at the plain ceiling and let his thoughts sink into the depths of his consciousness, as it had been quite some time since he’d last had the chance to properly relax.

If things get violent in the coming days... Alus coldly thought as if it were someone else's problem.

Thinking about it, he hadn't had a lot of chances to fight against humans since coming to the Institute. Incidentally, when he took on jobs of disposing of violent criminals, Alus closed the lid on his human thoughts or feelings. Taking their place was cold and logical routine.

It was like flipping a switch, and any resistance against killing disappeared immediately and his mind instead focused on how to kill his target in the most effective way possible.

He was thinking of just dealing with it in the usual way and let out a sigh. "I guess I can't help but let out a sigh."

His feeling of unease wouldn't go away.

I just keep getting thrown off my game. Maybe acting out of character and saving her was a mistake, he thought.

But it wasn't like he regretted it. He had no doubt he'd made his choice by his own will. So why did he feel so bewildered?

It might sound cruel, he thought, *but in the end I guess I didn't wholeheartedly want to save her. In that case...for whose sake would I follow my own emotions to save? For whom would I feel anger, or emotions, for and not hesitate to unleash all of my power...*

Human emotions stirred within him. Even so, he could not name this tingle he felt in his heart. He had felt a small storm of emotions when he saw the brand on Lilisha's back.

What a pain. It's like I'm not meshing with people lately... he thought.

If his past self had been in this situation, he would have considered it laughable. He hadn't felt anything for others, but now he was moving of his own accord for them. No matter how much he thought about it, he couldn't find a logical reason for it.

It was a complicated equation of emotions, even if he were to forcefully substitute one side with retaliation against Aferka, he couldn't find a motive

that neatly fit in on the other side.

If I could let my fury take over, let my anger run rampant... No, would that even be right? thought Alus. *What am I even trying to do?*

His head hurt. Covering his eyes with his arm, Alus agonized over the inexplicable emotions. That was when he felt a faint presence.

Under the dim moonlight streaming in through the curtains on the window was a silver-haired girl in pajamas. Loki's face was peeking in through a gap in the door.

Their gazes met beneath the silver light.

She had an apologetic expression and nodded at him ever so slightly. Even so, she wasn't leaving, and instead chose to come inside the room.

"Sir Alus..." she began.

"What?" he asked. "You're not normally up this late?"

"Do you think so? Normally, you would never act like that in your sleep."

"What?!"

The way she put it made it sound like Loki was sneaking into Alus's room when he was sleeping... He would notice if Loki was watching him sleep from afar, so it was just a joke. Probably.

But such farcical preambles aside, Loki was looking at Alus with a very calm smile.

"That was quite the serious expression just now," she said.

"Ah, so you noticed. Say...do you think it's only natural to save Lilisha?" Alus threw a frank question at Loki without any context.

In the past, he would have discarded the decision to help her since he wouldn't have seen any logical reason for it. Like he told Sisty, he had no obligations to go that far.

But now... Before he knew what was happening, he was making a move to save Lilisha after she was chased out of Aferka.

Lilisha was quite the beauty, so it would have made more sense if there were

some ulterior motives at play. It was a conundrum to Alus that he could not solve himself. Loki made no attempt to hide her smile as she walked up to his bed.

“I think it really might just be natural,” she said. “I think it means that she’s in that category for you. I believe that there is a special kind of power that is born when two people meet and interact with each other. You could call it destiny.”

“Destiny, huh? It’s such a vague word,” Alus replied.

“Although I can’t really accept that it is only girls who gather around you,” she muttered, sitting down on the edge of the bed.

A moment later, Loki’s expression turned softer. A big contrast to how she had been in the Outer World. For Alus, it was difficult to tell if she was being affected by the sweet air in the room or if Loki was maturing in her own way.

“Nothing is going to change,” Loki said, “so I think it’s best if you do as you please. At the very least, I felt anger well up inside me when I saw her back. It would have been one thing if it were a scar she got in battle as a Magicmaster. It would have been proof that she had managed to cling to life in a battle to the death. But that mark is an eternal insult to those who seek to improve their magic. I don’t know if that’s from some sort of code in Aferka or because she made some kind of mistake that she was judged for. But I can’t think of any reason a girl in her teens should be forced to bear such a thing. At least not from what I’ve seen from her in the Institute...”

Loki only spoke of inside the Institute as she surmised that Lilisha had stained her hands already with her work behind the scenes. Her understanding of assassinations and the like was still shallow.

But Alus couldn’t think of Lilisha as the same as him. After seeing her fight against Selva and her usual behavior, he could tell that she was not as committed as he was.

She had the technique, but she couldn’t keep her heart in check. She would hesitate, which made her lag behind.

She was not a natural-born assassin.

Perhaps that was why he sensed that she had put an almost obsessive

amount of effort into her mana control. Rather than relying on overwhelming talent like Alus, she was a normal person polishing her skills to a higher level through sheer effort alone.

“Sir Alus, if I may be so bold to ask...” Loki spoke up trying to be as cheerful as she could. “Once everything settles down, can you add Ms. Lilisha to our group of merry friends?”

“You sure have taken a liking to her,” Alus remarked.

As someone watching from the side, Loki could tell that Lilisha was the kind of person Alus wanted to have by his side to make up for what himself was lacking, like with Tesfia and Alice, whose presences greatly contributed to Alus’s change.

That was very welcome to Loki. But at the same time Loki had her doubts.

She had thought it unnecessary to make allies within the nation, but with all of the problems concerning nobility lately, it made Alus realize how powerless he was. Brute force was one thing, but neither Alus nor Loki could cross swords with the tricky noble world.

Besides, if there was one point that made Loki accept Lilisha, it was that she could personally agree with the objective that Lilisha had mentioned in the Institute, even if it was more of an afterthought since Alus had already made up his mind.

“Ah, uhm, that’s not what it is. Besides, wouldn’t that be you, Sir Alus? This has nothing to do with liking her, I just believe she is necessary,” said Loki.

Alus could only smile wryly at her answer.

“I just agree with your intentions,” she continued. “I’ve also been thinking about why Governor-General Berwick would be complicit in this kind of recklessness. If there are political circumstances on the Governor-General’s level for his actions, I sure don’t comprehend them. But since he sent Ms. Lilisha as an observer, doesn’t that mean that he has intentions other than just the plan in motion?”

“Am I supposed to accept that speculation as truth?” asked Alus.

“But Ms. Lilisha said from the start that her objective was to protect your position in the Institute,” said Loki.

Moreover, Lilisha had said that she would eventually go on to spread Alus’s name and status as Single Digit Magicmaster throughout the world.

Due to his age, Alus Reigin’s existence and name had been kept hidden, but Lilisha had been laying the groundwork to proudly announce him as the Greatest Magicmaster, who stood at the top of all paths of magic and was Magicmaster to the world.

Loki agreed with that plan. She believed that Alus should be brought out of obscurity and be more widely known.

At any rate, Loki felt that Lilisha’s words should be taken as the Governor-General’s intentions. But what about Lilisha herself? Was she just obeying Berwick, or was she also taking Aferka’s intentions into account, working as a double spy?

Although that question would remain unanswered until Lilisha woke up, there was a lot about Lilisha’s personality that was still unknown.

Even though a lot of things had happened since she came, it hadn’t been that long ago that she first arrived. If Loki were asked if she really knew Lilisha, she would have to shake her head.

Alus looked at Loki’s expression... He had a slightly different view on the whole matter. He could keenly sense some parts of Lilisha’s personality from their mutual meeting with Aile, from how she had fought Selva, and the state of her mana.

There were a few things that came to mind when he caught a glimpse of the real her. The first was that she had an insolent and arrogant attitude—and cowardice filled the gaps between those traits.

He felt that her true personality was hidden within that aspect.

The time she flinched and shrunk when he reached out towards her head left a particularly deep impression. It was completely different from when she pridefully teased Tesfia or smiled in the guise of nobility.

It was surely the hint of an unhappy upbringing.

Lilisha most likely did not have a single shred of pride in her assassination work. She was unable to become a doll without wishes or a heart. She just wanted acknowledgment. She couldn't help but depend on something or someone.

That was far too humane a weakness for an assassin, but that was most likely key in interpreting Lilisha's true personality.

When Loki saw Alus had stopped to think again, Loki made up her mind and suddenly lay down next to him, her hair falling on her face.

"What a cold place to sleep," she said.

Alus was unsure how to answer, and the short hair covering Loki's eyes kept him from reading her true intentions.

So he had no choice but to be blunt. "That's how they all are."

"No, it's very cold," she said. "So I'm going to sleep here tonight." Her face was hidden by her hair, but there was a clear blush on her cheeks.

"No, this bed doesn't really fit two people." By the time Alus finished saying that, Loki had already slipped in bed.

Apparently in her mind this was already the default course of action. With her determined attitude and quick movements, Alus was too slow to stop her.

He wondered how many times in his life he'd actually slept together with someone. But that thought soon disappeared as he felt the warmth of her small body.

Alus just lay down, giving up.

Because of Loki's small size, the bed was big enough to fit them both, but there was only one pillow. Alus unconsciously moved his head to the edge of the pillow, and Loki put hers on the other side.

Silence returned to the room, and Alus realized that Loki had seen through him. He'd be lying if he said he didn't have any worries or concerns for the future.

When he was doing work behind the scenes, he never had to think about anything. Rotten criminals and others beyond the reach of the law were nothing more than pebbles on the road to him, and the only problem in his mind was how to most effectively get rid of them.

Thinking about it, he'd always pushed the job of judging what was right onto someone else, while he made no decisions of his own. It was only now that he finally realized that this might be the first time ever that he was unable to see the future of his actions.

Or perhaps it wasn't quite worries or concerns that he was feeling. He was still firmly convinced that he would be able to do whatever he needed. However, everything hanging in the balance and their values were starting to be too much for Alus to understand.

So far, he'd only ever had to take responsibility for himself. Everything was simple and delightfully easy to understand. All he had to do was determine if something was black or white, beneficial or detrimental. All decisions were instantaneous.

But no matter how hard or how often he thought about this, he couldn't figure out whose sake this was for, or for what. He'd never imagined it would be so difficult to make decisions once he took himself out of the equation. That's why he'd divide everything into two groups—hostiles and everything else—then eliminate only the enemies. That kind of shortsighted thinking seemed appealing and fast.

Still, retaliation, huh...? he thought. *Just what do I even know about Lilisha. I tried snapping like a student, but it's pretty embarrassing in retrospect.*

While there was some shake-up involved, it did feel almost refreshing. There was a sort of undeniable beauty to youthfulness and single-minded honesty.

And frankly, it didn't feel that bad.

"I hope everything can be resolved without any bloodshed, Sir Alus," said Loki.

"Y-Yeah, me too." Loki's casual comment made Alus's heart leap for fear that she had read his mind, and he replied with a safe offhand comment by reflex.

Without incident... he thought.

In terms of likelihood, there was practically no chance of that happening. It was nothing but wishful thinking. But if it was possible to achieve... The experience could open up a new path for Alus who knew only blood and power.

Alus took a deep breath to forget about the small warmth at his side and focus on sleeping. No further words were exchanged and both of them slept in a warm bed.



The human domain was limited, and the classes of people who lived within it were varied. They ranged from commoners to rich nobles and members of the upper classes that included former royalty. And even Alpha had quite a few nobles and prestigious families.

The Frusevan family, which that girl belonged to, was actually only a small part when you looked at the entire picture. But for Lilisha, who had a tragic upbringing and had always been trapped in a mental cage, it was the entire world.

When Lilisha finally opened her eyes a few days later, she was lying in an inorganic, cold bed in the infirmary because that was where the majority of medical equipment was available.

However, once her condition stabilized, she was left to rest up in the girls' dorm infirmary. When she woke up, she wondered why she was there.

The ceiling was unfamiliar, but then again even her room in the dorm felt that way to her. She woke quicker due to the unique smell of medicine. When she arose, her body was sluggish and weak.

There was no one else in the infirmary.

Lilisha was wearing an unfamiliar white gown, and she could tell that underneath she was wrapped in bandages.

A change of clothes somebody must have brought from her room sat on the bedside table. With unreliable movements, she managed to change her clothes and move back to the bed.

Her memories started to return, and she recalled why she was here. Clear memories brought back the pain and fear of her back being burned. And the smell; she remembered that too.

Lilisha had to wrap her arms around herself to fight off sudden core-shaking chills.

I'm unwanted, she thought, useless garbage. I'm sure Gill must have felt the same despair.

As the oldest brother in the family, it was probably even worse. The Frusevan family had been the leader of Aferka for generations. At the same time, they were the representatives of the Rimfuge family.

Their main role and value were as assassins. Using thorough resourcefulness to read their target's weaknesses, their strength and skills were in killing.

It didn't matter if they were related to the leader or not. In fact, the only thing blood relations brought Lilisha was even harsher training.

There was no love, only duty. It was a twisted ideal that was impossible to understand by logic.

It was a cursed family lineage. Those words had never felt truer to Lilisha, who was no exception to the twisted upbringing.

Aferka's role as an executive unit could be divided into two parts: monitoring their targets and carrying out the assassinations.

Lilisha had heard that in the past they would end disputes between nobles behind the scenes or crush conspiracies in advance. Nowadays, their primary task was to eliminate unstable elements within the nation, expanding on the instructions given to them by the previous ruler.

However, the organization had been corrupted, and Lilisha was aware that they were drifting away from their original reason for existing. In fact, she couldn't remember them ever receiving a direct order from Cicelnia.

Besides, it was strange for Cicelnia to order the elimination of the scum and trash that Lilisha had dealt with. When Lilisha had been obeying her father or brother's orders, she hadn't had the perspective to notice that. It was only now

that she vaguely understood what was going on.

And now that she did, she couldn't squeeze any words out of her dry lips. She didn't know what her missions had even been for. She thought all of her targets were human trash rather than actual Magicmasters.

Just the other day she'd been given the order to kill the Fable family butler, Selva, which was clearly out of her league. When she'd managed to crawl back with her life, her brother had asked why she hadn't died, making it clear that she hadn't been given an order but rather a death sentence.

An indescribable void filled Lilisha's chest. She felt empty, like she had lost her identity.

And the brand of a failure on her back labeled her a nobody. Attachments and familial standings, all significance that had once come from the name Lilisha Ron de Rimfuge Frusevan...were gone.

Now she was neither noble nor assassin. She was just Lilisha.

Like a newborn, she had no purpose or goals, no past or future. Everything was a blank void.

My brother was right. I should have just died, she thought.

The only place she had belonged had discarded her. She'd been thrown out of her home, and she couldn't find any motivation to live.

She didn't know if it was because of her own worthlessness or from the despair of losing everything, but before she knew it, lukewarm drops were running down her cheeks, landing on the bedsheets.

She even found herself wishing that Alus hadn't saved her even though she knew it was unreasonable to blame him. If anything, she should be thanking him, but she just couldn't bring forth any gratitude.

It was thanks to him that she'd gotten away with her life, but it had been for nothing in the end. Her brother had been expecting her to die rather than return.

There was only one thing she didn't understand, and she felt that if she could find the answer for that, she wouldn't have to care about herself anymore. She

could become truly empty, someone nobody had expectations of and who didn't wish for anyone to expect anything from her. Then, she could even consider just dying somewhere where nobody would find her.

That was why she wanted to answer the remaining question as soon as possible: why had she returned to the Institute?

She'd always clung to her family, Aferka and her brother, yet after everything happened, she'd ended up in the Institute for some reason. She'd obviously felt like she had to escape, but she wondered why it had been the Institute she'd set out for with her blurred vision and hazy mind.

I can't think. My mind's running in circles. She pressed on her forehead to try and answer but none came.

At that moment, the door was flung open, interrupting her thoughts and bringing her back to reality.

Lilisha thought it was a rather rude thing to do in the infirmary of all places and that someone coming to visit should open the door with a little more care. But it seemed to reflect her visitor's mood.

"Ah, Sir Alus. You should at least knock before you..." a familiar voice said, while the person in question ignored her and walked in with large strides.

"How are you feeling?" he said. His black hair fell over eyes narrowed in displeasure. Even though he asked how she was, he gave no hint of friendliness and didn't actually seem the slightest bit worried.



"Alus Reigin," Lilisha muttered his name with vacant eyes and a voice empty of hate, hostility, or any feeling.

"You look awful, but at least you woke up." They were curt words but just what you'd expect from Alus.

Lilisha turned her whole body towards Alus to give him a self-deprecating smile. "Yes," she said. "But I have no intention of thanking you. I guess it doesn't matter that you got in the way of my mission when you saved me either. Just look at me."

But she admitted with a hoarse tone, “I know that it’s not anybody’s fault.”

“Well, it’s not like it’s your fault either,” said Alus.

Lilisha immediately shook her head as if to say that he was wrong. She looked like she also wanted to say something but she remained silent. She felt an urge to contradict him, but she couldn’t find the words.

Loki directed a pitying gaze at her. She held a strange belt in her hand that caught Lilisha’s attention. It looked like something meant to strap down heavy luggage, but she couldn’t figure out why Loki had it.

As she wondered what it was for, Alus spoke up. “So how are your injuries?”

He was to the point, as usual, but she didn’t mind.

“It feels quite a bit better,” she responded. “Was this your doing?”

It wasn’t like she thought Alus had healed her injuries since he wasn’t a healing Magicmaster. But she had been carried to the infirmary, and she thought Alus had done that.

In that case, maybe I really should thank him... she thought, and her body relaxed just a little. The pain that pulsed around the shape of the mark on her back, however, remained.

Alus’s reply was indifferent. “No, it was Tesfia and Alice who found you.”

“I see...” she said, glancing down.

Alus mercilessly continued, “You can thank me after all this is finished. So I’m sorry, but you’ll have to come with me. It’s best to be quick with these sorts of things.”

“Huh?! What do you mean...?” Lilisha asked weakly.

Her blonde hair was in disarray. The usual vitality in her eyes was replaced with dark circles. The confident and impudent impression she usually gave off was completely gone—she just looked bruised and battered.

Alus stuck his arm in her bed, not waiting for an answer.

Before she could exclaim, he lifted her up. Lilisha was surprised by how powerful he was, but she didn’t have the energy to resist.

“What are you going to do with me?” she asked.

“Nothing,” Alus responded. “You still have something to do. You agreed to be the referee for the Tenbram. I have my own reasons that I won’t let you withdraw halfway through.”

“You don’t have to worry, then,” said Lilisha. “The promise won’t be broken. I’m sure the Rimfuge family will arrange for a standin.”

“And I’m telling you not to screw around,” said Alus. “It wasn’t your family that promised but you yourself. So take responsibility.”

After a momentary pause, Lilisha raised her voice like something inside of her had suddenly snapped. “Th-There’s...just no way!”

But Alus coldly shot back, “We didn’t make a promise with Rimfuge. We made a promise with you. Don’t think you can back out of it now.”

It sounded like he was admonishing her, and Lilisha found herself stumbling for words.

The role of referee could be replaced by anyone doing the bare minimum as long as they maintained neutrality. It didn’t have to be Lilisha. Yet Alus was insistent that she—and she alone—do it. So just what was his plan?

“Aren’t you being a little too hasty if you’re going to take me with you like this?”

Alus shrugged and put Lilisha back on the bed, sitting with her upper body raised. He called over Loki. “Loki, help out.”

The silver-haired girl nodded and walked over to the bed, belt in hand.

“Also... It’ll be too hard to stay in that position,” he said as if talking to himself.

Then he turned his back and crouched down. He used his body like a brace to support Lilisha. Loki fastened Lilisha’s body to Alus with the belt.

Lilisha just leaned against his back. She didn’t even have the energy to complain anymore. Regardless of what he might say or what might happen to her, she didn’t want to cause any more problems for others. She felt she was no more valuable than the trash in a back alley.

“Besides, I wasn’t expecting any thanks from you to begin with,” he said, and she heard the heavy sound of the equipment around his waist as he took on her weight. “This is all because I was too naive.”

“That’s enough!” Lilisha said, devoid of emotion. “My brother was disappointed in me coming back alive in the first place. He never had any expectations of me from the beginning. If anything...”

She helplessly planted her cheek against Alus’s shoulder and whispered to Alus that she was a sacrificial pawn whose death had been the entire point.

Alus had known as much for some time.

Now, he didn’t know what to do to rouse her spirit and get her to stand again. He glanced over to Loki for help, but she was silently strapping Lilisha’s body to his back, not letting her emotions show. She wasn’t really the type to give advice, so she was likely just as stumped as he was.

Oh fine, Alus thought to himself, and ultimately an uncomfortable silence filled the infirmary until he was ready to give Lilisha a piggyback ride.

When they left the infirmary, it was 7 a.m. and there were students here and there in the girls’ dorm.

With Lilisha on his back, Alus left the dorm and then the Institute.

“Uhm, where are we going...?” Lilisha asked in a faint voice.

Alus gave a short answer. “The palace, where this nation’s ruler is.”

Alus had ignored all paperwork and hurried on ahead for the sake of meeting with Cicelnia as soon as possible. They ran through byways rather than traveling by Circle Ports, where they would stand out.

As the wind whistled past his ears, Alus thought of the girl on his back. While he’d acknowledged to both Sisty and Lilisha herself that he’d been naive, even he was a bit surprised that he’d gone this far.

He was subconsciously feeling more responsibility for this matter than he’d realized, and it was due to Lilisha’s current state.

She had a way of being rather close to Alus that was similar to Tesfia. She didn’t fear him or humble herself before him, and while he thought she could

be impudent, it was also comforting somehow.

Perhaps that was why he felt like helping her. Like Loki had said, it was natural for him to want to save her.

The words of the principal weigh heavy... thought Alus.

Slowing down a little, he called out to the girl on his back. "Hey. Are you sleeping back there?"

"You must be joking. I've done nothing but sleep." Her response was weak, but it held a hint of her old vitality, which made Alus smile a little.

"I've been thinking... Do you have any plans after this?" he asked.

"Are you saying that out of spite? I'm a woman who was thrown out of her family and knows nothing but backstabbing. What kind of plans could I have? Are you going to take responsibility for me?" Lilisha's emotions erupted, but she quickly recollected herself and apologized. "Sorry."

"Maybe I will," said Alus. "I did get involved in your business, so I'll take responsibility for that. I owe you too."

"What?!" exclaimed a bewildered Lilisha, unsure how to interpret his words.

"I'm talking about the negotiations with Womruina," said Alus. "And like I said before, you took on the role of being the referee for the Tenbram."

"So that's what you were talking about," Lilisha responded, more indifferent this time. But Alus wasn't paying attention.

"First, I'll get rid of that curse mark, and then we can talk," he said, showing his unshakable will. He didn't even care if it meant making an enemy out of Aferka and the five branch families of Rimfuge.

Loki, who'd been quiet all this time, spoke up and expressed everything she'd been bottling up. "Ms. Lilisha, if you've been ousted, I think it's high time for you to make a decision on what you wish and what you feel you should do next. Sir Alus plans to tag along with you until the end."

It was rare to see Loki make such declarations. Lilisha was not as well acquainted to them as Tesfia and Alice, so she wasn't really someone Alus would consider an absolute ally. And even though Alus had briefly talked about

siding with Lilisha last night, Loki's reaction was unusual. And she continued to speak out of character.

"Even if that means crushing Aferka," Loki firmly declared.

Lilisha's face, however, twisted into a grimace, and it took a moment before she spoke. "I don't understand. I'm worthless. Not even my brother needs me! I have no grudge against my family or Aferka, even this curse mark is just something I deserved! This all happened because I'm useless!"

Tormented by self-condemnation, Lilisha lowered her eyes as if to look away from the grave truth and escape her fears...

But Alus chose not to take that into consideration. "Don't run or hide. Face the truth head-on and make your own decision. If you didn't want that, why would you have returned to the Institute with that kind of injury?"

Lilisha was silent. If she knew the answer, she wouldn't have any troubles. That was, in fact, the last question she wanted an answer to.

Once she found the answer, she would finally be able to become completely empty, free of obligations or desires. She'd be freed from trying to find a purpose in being here. At the end of her emotional confusion was a spiral of negative emotions where self-sabotage led to further self-sabotage, and nothing mattered to her any longer.

She felt so worthless that she questioned the point of living. She believed that once desperation got past a certain point, even going on living was like a torture.

So which choice to make didn't matter, as the very decision was troublesome to her.

She entertained the thought of removing her hands from Alus's shoulders and stealing the weapon on his waist to cut off the belt keeping her in place.

Then she could be free. She could plummet off of the edge of the world and return to nothingness, where she wouldn't have to remember anything.

"Will you stop it already!" Suddenly, a shout reached Lilisha's ears.

She flinched and timidly looked over to Loki, who glared at her before saying,

“Ms. Lilisha, you’re more of a child than anyone else. You can’t make any choice of your own if you’re depending on someone else to survive. Do you still not understand?!”

Loki’s words so perfectly struck the core of the matter that they pierced Lilisha’s heart.

“What?! Don’t act like you know everything,” she shouted. “You’re the one who’s dependent on others!!! Whenever anything happens, it’s always Sir Alus this, Sir Alus that! It’s disgusting!”

The biting words made Alus come to a stop.

However, Lilisha’s quick anger had already calmed. Her words had struck back at Loki, but now seemed to hurt her as well. She looked like she might cry at any moment.

“I, uhm... I feel like I’m looking into a mirror.” Broken up, muffled words escaped Lilisha’s lips, but her weak voice was canceled out by an angry surge of mana filling the surroundings.

Loki’s fists were clenched so tight her nails had cut into her hand. If Lilisha hadn’t been on Alus’s back, Loki might have even taken a swing at her.

“Don’t lump me together with you, when all you can do is surrender your will to others and not decide on anything yourself!” exclaimed Loki. “I chose to devote my everything to Sir Alus on my own! I wouldn’t trust anyone else to live and walk by his side! Loki Leevahl made that oath to the world!”

Lilisha was speechless.

Loki’s balled up fist trembled as she held it in front of her chest and spoke of her lofty oath. She looked straight ahead, unashamed and boldly puffing out her chest.

The sight made her small figure look larger than usual, but any further would probably be a problem. Alus gave Loki a look to make her stop.

That said, the strength of Loki’s words made even Alus flinch. There was plenty he wanted to say in the face of such heavy loyalty. He felt he’d just seen the core of Loki’s soul.

Lilisha's jaw dropped. She was stupefied, unable to say another word.

After saying her piece, Loki felt a little better, and she was able to calm down under Alus's gaze.

"Do you understand?" she asked. "Sir Alus is going this far because the last place you asked help from was the Institute. Your personal reasons don't matter. After your horrible burns, the place you ran to was the Institute. I don't know what happened before you got here, but at the very least I thought you liked this place. Wasn't this the place you wanted to return to? Because you could be yourself?"



Loki continued to line up her words as Lilisha was silent.

“Doesn’t that mean that the Institute is the last place you wanted to be? Wasn’t this the first place where you could escape the constraints of your home and exist as you pleased?”

As someone at Alus’s side, Loki could understand that he too had lost his place and was, in a way, searching for another.

After many twists and turns to blend in, he had finally come to terms with his new place, the Second Magical Institute. For people like Alus, Lilisha, and even Loki, who had all been raised in places exempt from common sense, the Institute offered them a calm atmosphere.

While Lilisha was a noble, she wasn’t an average upper-class girl. Her path was completely different from Tesfia’s and Felinella’s. She’d been taught how to kill and had worked in the shadows.

In that sense, she had more in common with Alus than those two.

Lilisha had probably been searching for something that the other students had but she alone lacked. Loki had seen Alus sometimes look so bright when he was with Tesfia and Alice. So surely Lilisha was looking for that same thing that the ordinary students had obtained without any difficulties.

Lilisha hesitated when she came into touch with the normal and obvious for the first time. She was unaccustomed to it but somewhat happy too. That was why she had returned in the end. Not even she had realized that the Institute was the last place she had.

Quiet tears flowed down Lilisha’s cheeks as Loki finished speaking. The question of why she had returned to the Institute melted away.

Lilisha had thought that once that moment arrived nothing would matter anymore and that her remaining strength to survive would disappear.

But reality was different.

She had thought that Rimfuge was the only home she had, but she’d already found a place where she belonged. In her short time at the Institute, a fragment of bliss had welled up inside of her empty heart.

Her friendly conversations with the students had started as an act, but like Loki said, Lilisha had truly enjoyed herself.

It was the same with her dorm room. It had been the first time she'd ever had to consider decorating. As a result, her room lacked unity and style, looking no different from a cheap hotel.

She'd also realized she hadn't had many of the experiences other girls her age had.

After much deliberation, she changed her room to a simple monotone color scheme. It wasn't the kind of room where she could invite anyone over.

The room was like a mirror of herself.



Whenever I woke up, I never thought of it as my own room, but that room was me... Lilisha realized. She made no attempt to wipe away her tears and smiled a little.

At first, it had been pure white, like it was newborn. She'd tried adding something herself, but the room had remained pure white, with no sense of her and no details.

It was just like what Lilisha was like inside.

That was why it never really felt like her room... She'd chosen and arranged the interior herself, but not a single thing in there represented her life.

It had been a faceless room because Lilisha's life hadn't given her any color.

Upon that realization, Lilisha's complexion brightened up as if her tears had washed everything away.

It was something only someone like Loki, who had witnessed Alus's change up close, would have been able to point out. She had sensed Lilisha's loneliness and hidden envy, connected it onto Lilisha's inner feelings, and put it into words. It would have been an impossible task for Alus, as he couldn't even reassess himself.

Admiring Lilisha's feats, Alus spoke.

"Don't think about anything unnecessary. You only have to do what you want now. You just have to figure out what that is and how to go about it. You definitely have enough time for that."

In response to Alus's matter-of-fact statement, Lilisha closed her eyes tight, squeezing out the last of her tears.

"Yes, I still have to monitor you, so I'll have to stay at the Institute." She blinked her wet eyelashes and smiled brightly.

Out of habit, Alus put his arm behind his back and planted his hand on her head.

Rather than recoiling in fear, Lilisha took a moment to savor it with an embarrassed smile.

Alus sighed in relief. “Now, let’s go. We’re going to hit up Cicelnia’s place.”

“Wait, what?!” Lilisha asked in a panic. “We’re going to have a direct talk with the ruler?! I didn’t hear about this!”

She sounded like she was back to normal.

“I only mentioned going to the palace, but that’s the plan. That’s what I’ve decided,” said Alus.

“I will accompany you wherever you’ve decided to go, Sir Alus!” Loki fearlessly agreed.

With that Alus took off running.

“Ah... Am I clinging too?” Loki quietly asked, but Alus ignored her.

Seventy-Third Chapter

Those Who Lurk in the Shadows

This recounts when Alus returned to the Fable family estate just after allowing Lilisha to escape.

The head butler, Selva, and the chamberlain, Sithaima, were gathered in Frose's study. Ever since employing Selva, Frose had anticipated that something like this might happen.

What she hadn't expected was for it to take around thirty years. When the time came, it felt like a long time coming. Any surprise was surprisingly little.

Selva, of course, apologized profusely for the trouble he'd caused as the one who had invited Vector and Lilisha in and for leaving Lilisha's fate up to Alus, who had ultimately let her escape. However, Frose didn't seem to care and brushed off Selva's concerns.

"I'm sure Mr. Alus must have had his own plans," Frose said. "If that girl was from Aferka, she must have gotten him caught up in some other problems. At any rate, raise your head. Your excessive apologies are unnecessary, Selva. I knew this was trouble that would come eventually. Preparations were put in place, and I've built up strength in this house for that sake."

"As you wish. I am deeply moved by your magnanimity." Selva bowed once more.

The chamberlain next to him put on a thin smile. "In any case, she was a trivial opponent. Her goals and movements were almost transparent. She was less of an assassin and more of a child playing hide-and-seek. Selva, you could have just left it up to Hest and Eight."

Sithaima snickered and smiled bigger.

Selva responded, "No. They would have just killed her right away. Besides, she used the same mana threads as me..."

Selva looked down and his expression softened. The supposed assassin was around the same age as Tesfia. She was clearly still inexperienced, and her naivety and youthfulness was almost heartwarming.

Anyone looking in on this scene would see a good-natured, smiling old man who. But of course, Selva hadn't just gone along with Lilisha for amusement.

Frose nodded in understanding. "I see. Good decision. It would be foolish to ignore obvious suspicions, so you had to fight to get a glimpse of her real skills and intentions."

"It is as you say," answered Selva. "By fighting the assassin myself, I was able to see a lot of things. And the person who trained her was most likely Miltria Tristen."

"Was she one of the tops when you were in Aferka?" asked Frose.

"Yes. I didn't think she was still alive. In any event, seeing Sir Alus's behavior, it was best that I fought her," Selva explained in a suggestive way.

Frose had an interest in Alus as more than just a potential candidate for her daughter's husband. Selva knew that, so he'd taken Alus's intentions into consideration and left the assassination up to him so as to not twist his relationship with the Fable family.

And if Miltria Tristen were involved, it would be unwise to have carelessly laid a hand on the inexperienced assassin.

"Yes, well. Things became a little complicated," said Frose, "but if you decided to let her roam, then that's fine. So, Selva, there is something else, isn't there?"

Selva and Frose had known each other for a long time. Even if he didn't put it into words, she could tell that there was more.

Sure enough, Selva lowered his eyes and mentioned what he thought was very important information.

"There's still no certain information, but a certain person's presence is in the shadows of this incident."

After a moment, Frose leaned forward and got straight to the point. "From how you put it, I take it that it's that tomboy ruler. That does make sense. The

timing just matches up too well with the Tenbram. By the way, Selva, what is the connection between Aferka and Womruina?”

“I am looking into it now. But I still don’t have all of the details. I am also looking into the other attacker... It shames me to say that he was my old acquaintance, Vector. I believe he had just broken out of captivity. However, the threads of my investigation were cut off in the vicinity of Hedshiram in the middle district.”

Hedshiram was an old-fashioned, lonely country town in the middle of the civilian areas of the human domain. It featured mainly wooden houses and had nothing to see.

“Hedshiram... It’s never been the slightest bit suspicious before,” said Sisty. “I hear it’s quite safe due to its low population. So?”

“Well, there are several suspicious people there, and they are quite skilled... Isn’t that so, Sithaima?” Selva said, handing the initiative over to the chamberlain.

In a very clerical tone, Sithaima began to explain. “Yes. It is just as Mr. Selva says. I have photographs of a group of five men and women leaving the inn.”

Sithaima placed rough-quality pictures on the desk.

“To think such dangerous ruffians are still within the human domain...!!!” Frose narrowed her eyes and furrowed her brow.

“As you can see,” continued Sithaima, “this woman noticed the photographer. Considering the angle and such, I would say it was a picture taken from over two hundred meters away.”

“Not many could notice someone from such a range,” commented Frose.

“This woman is Mir Ostayka. She is a serious magical criminal who has killed dozens of people. According to the security forces database, she resisted arrest and died,” Sithaima stated as a matter of fact.

“That sure is suspicious,” said Sisty. “And if the tracks end here, does that mean...?”

“Yes,” said Sithaima. “I have lost contact with the informant after they sent in

these pictures. My lady, should we check the military headquarters database?”

That was, of course, illegal, but Sithaima didn't hesitate to make her suggestion. Frose shook her head. She already knew what they would find. Any criminal with a similar record would no doubt have the same details in their record—or no information at all.

Lately, there had been a strange rumor circulating concerning serious magical criminals. According to the rumor, for more than a decade, there had been an increasing tendency by the military to treat apprehended serious criminals with complete secrecy. And some who were listed as dead were actually still alive.

The criminal database was shared by the seven nations and managed by a common system, so the reason for this was unknown.

The rumor went on to say that the criminals were secretly rounded up and sent to the Outer World. Since criminals obviously wouldn't be given weapons, it could've been a really roundabout death sentence, since only death awaited them in the Outer World. But there was no real need to do something so violent, so the information lacked credibility.

Frose had thought the same until now.

“Mir Ostayka...a supposedly dead magical criminal...is alive and partying with some friends after being released from prison? Surely there had to be better people to bring back from the dead. Criminals, of all things... I don't think God is using his miracles correctly,” Frose spat out, sarcastic.

Suddenly, Selva whispered, “By the way, Master Frose, have you heard of a secret prison in the Outer World.”

“Ah yes...the Trojan Prison, wasn't it?” said Frose in a quiet voice. “I thought it was only a rumor.” She furrowed her brows.

“Yes,” said Selva. “Where there is smoke, there is fire. Perhaps it is real... If we assume that Vector was imprisoned there, the pieces of the puzzle begin to fall into place. However, if it is in the Outer World, wouldn't escape be all but impossible?”

“If this Trojan Prison exists, then it would have been made and managed by man. Nothing could truly be impossible. I can only hope these are needless

worries.”

Frose contemplated for a while...but Selva soon saw the change in her expression that meant she had come up with something. And it was Frose Fable’s nature to take action without hesitation.

“Let’s make a move of our own,” said Frose. “I thought it might be bad timing, but perhaps the situation is in our favor. Sithaima, please leak this information to our ruler. But be as discreet as possible.”

“I completely understand,” said Selva.

Sithaima kept her eyes down and bowed respectfully.

This sort of foreign intelligence work was primarily Sithaima’s job. While Selva had served the family longer than anyone else, his main job was to serve guests, manage the house business, and assist the head guard.

Sithaima, on the other hand, was not just the chamberlain but also performed a role similar to the head of the household personnel. As such, she was primarily in charge of managing those who worked in the house.

As the head butler, Selva was, of course, involved in the hiring process, but Sithaima handled most of the managing and education afterwards.

Like Selva, Sithaima was a loyal servant to Frose, and most importantly, she didn’t allow any personal emotions to get in the way of her work. She could be trusted to do her job perfectly.

“Then I will take my leave, my lady.” Sithaima said and turned to leave the room with the same graceful gesture as Selva.

Before she left though, Selva called out to her. “Chamberlain, I will borrow a few of your personnel afterwards.”

“You originally brought them here, so by all means,” responded Sithaima.

“While they might know how to fight, they are still maids of the house, and I don’t want to leave you shorthanded by taking them without notice.”

Sithaima smiled at Selva’s consideration. “Mr. Selva, with all due respect, the reinforcements you are counting on are those who have been trained in combat like Hest and Eight yes? If that’s the case, they can’t be assigned to delicate

work in the house anyways. They have ruined over a hundred pieces in the house including vases, paintings, carpets, expensive furniture, and dishes.”

“I thought you were training them?” Selva asked after a brief pause.

“I have,” said Sithaima. “However, you appear to have a habit of finding very clumsy personnel.”

“Oh my. I’m ashamed. Perhaps it is my poor upbringing. My previous occupation being what it is, I am still lacking in a lot of places as well.” Selva, clearly disheartened, stroked his white beard.

But Sithaima calmly responded, “Not at all. You are accomplishing the lady’s desire to expand the Fable family fighting strength. But that doesn’t mean that we can afford to put the finances in dire straits. As such, I am having them do work they are more suited to for now.”

At that, Selva remembered the recent attack. Hest, Eight, and the others had been in charge of some sort of clean up in the mansion. However, they had been careful not to come into contact with any of Tesfia’s guests.

He realized their mission hadn’t been cleaning and security but rather just the latter. Any cleaning was apparently just for show.

“To help you save face, I don’t just have them do security work. They are a great help for things like pulling around carts of dishes and utensils, carrying bags, and other heavy work,” said Sithaima.

“I see,” said Selva. “Thank you for your consideration.”

It seemed that the people he had picked to increase the number of workers and one day replace him weren’t much use outside of combat. Selva was sullen, but Sithaima paid him no mind as she left the room to get to work.

“Now then... I think we’re done here, Selva.”

“Yes, Master Frose.”

“To think there were things even you find difficult. And that disheartened face...! It appears Sithaima is the only one who could bring out that side of you.” Frose chuckled.

“I’m afraid I have no words to express my regret,” said Selva.

“I don’t mind,” said Frose. “You brought in Hest and Eight, and they’re doing a good job in general. While the cleanliness of the house is important, I wouldn’t be able to sleep in peace without good security. If they could only smile a little more, I wouldn’t mind them serving Fia. Right now, Minasha is the only one I can trust with that. Perhaps we’ll need to wait for them to grow up a little more.”

“Indeed,” agreed Selva. “Perhaps they need to learn how to smile naturally.”

“There’s no need to rush. They need to repair the walls, windows, and doors this month,” replied Frose.

“I deeply apologize for that,” Selva said, letting out a rare sigh.

While it had been while uncovering the attacker, Hest had damaged the doors and windows. As the one to give her the orders, it was Selva’s responsibility. He had expected better of them, considering their skill.

“I will say it again,” said Frose. “I don’t mind. From my experience as an instructor, some property damage is not a big deal if it allows rookies to grow. But I do wonder how long they will stay rookies. I suppose that’s their charm, though.”

“I am honored by your generous views, but I will refrain from telling those two. I fear they might just misunderstand.”

“Ha ha, surely they are not that slow. No matter, I take it you will be leaving too, Selva?” Frose asked.

“Yes,” Selva responded. “I let Sir Alus save face back then, but this is a different matter. An attack on the Fable family cannot be forgiven. I suppose I should consider myself fortunate that it happened now while I am still able to move to some degree.”

“You’re right,” agreed Frose. “So don’t hesitate to bring anyone who can help crush Aferka. This might just be the perfect time to sever ties with your past. I don’t know what the ruler is planning, but we can use her silence on the matter to our advantage. We just need to act like we’re protecting ourselves against danger.”

They would ingratiate themselves with the ruler by leaking information about

the escaped convicts and their whereabouts. If that was enough to distract her, it was all the more fortunate.

But Selva was a little concerned about Frose's intentions.

"Remember, Aferka was once the previous ruler's right hand," he said. "They get special treatment, and there's no telling what the higher-ups will decide to do. If we make any careless moves, there will be consequences, great noble family or not."

If push came to shove, Selva was prepared to reveal his bloodied past and resign his position to settle things. If his connections to Aferka became public, he would have an excuse for going after them that wouldn't involve the Fable family.

"Selva, I know that you are worried, but I decided long ago that I wouldn't forgive anyone who threatens to harm the Fable family. And you've been a member of this family since long ago. Our family motto is that all who serve are equal. Besides, I hear that Lady Cicelnia has already parted ways with Aferka—she never really did like all that bloody stuff—so they are already nothing more than a headless corpse. Even if they're crushed, nobody will say that we killed them."

"If you are resolved to go so far." Selva bowed his head.

"Not to mention that we would be third-rate nobles if we went to war against outlaws completely unprepared," Frose said with a fearless smile.

However, some unease still gripped Selva. He knew Frose had some sort of plan, but he felt like she was underestimating Cicelnia to some degree.

Despite her young age, Cicelnia was exceedingly smart. If anything, she was much more cunning and politically skilled than most of the old nobles, who had done nothing but age.

No matter what, Selva couldn't allow disaster to befall the Fable family. Frose had barely finished speaking when Selva said, "Then I will carry out my role without fail."

Frose knew he would no doubt cross a dangerous bridge, with heavily unbalanced risks and rewards.

“I’m sorry for the trouble. Selva,” she said. “I’m sure that you already know this, but there’s still the Tenbram after this. It seems Aferka’s not entirely disconnected from that either, so if things go well it might end up in our favor. In any case, Fia can’t take on Womruina without you.”

“Understood,” said Selva. He knew that thanks to her military background that was her roundabout way of saying she wanted him to come back safe. “So what should we do about the estate’s defenses? I was thinking of leaving Hest or Eight behind.”

“Like I said, don’t concern yourself with that. Just take both of them with you. That is an order,” said Frose. “Aferka’s target is not me but you. Even if I misread them and another attacker comes here, you don’t have to worry. Sithaima will deal with them. And I may have left the military, but I’ve still got it too. Besides, as they’ll be busy receiving your courtesy call, I doubt they’ll have much time for anything else.”

“I understand.” Seeing the head of the Fable family’s composed smile, relieved Selva, and he deeply bowed once more before leaving.

Preparations took two whole days. On the evening of the third, it was finally time...

A somber atmosphere enveloped the Fable family estate, but the silence was eerie and strained.

Selva, still in his usual butler outfit, wore a calm smile as he looked back at the people lined up at the entrance of the mansion: six battle maids stood in orderly formation, each dressed in an outfit closely resembling a maid uniform but darker.

Although the clothes were tight, they hid weapons beneath them. And while they were easy to move in, they were still somewhat flamboyant. That made them different from the old Aferka that Selva had been part of.

Those chosen had particularly stood out to Selva. They were experts in not just antipersonnel combat but also assassination. They may not have taken part in many large-scale battles, but Selva had trained them himself to be skilled at gathering intelligence. And they could all fight if it really came down to it.

They had been raised in the festering hive of malice that is the slums, a world where people stole and killed to survive. And even though every day of their early lives they had been at risk, none of them were rotten or corrupt.

Now they were practically Selva's granddaughters, just like Tesfia.

Even so, despite the many years they'd been together, he could count on one hand the number of times most of them had smiled. But he'd come to terms with it .

Regardless of their clothes, they lack the charm of girls their age. Once this is settled, I'll need to give them thorough training on how to smile, he thought, taking a look at the maids' faces.

"Now then, let's get off our backsides," he said out loud. "The head of the family won't forgive anyone who threatens the Fable family. That said, this problem stems from my own personal matters, and I am afraid you have been dragged into it."

"All of it is for Lady Frose and Mr. Selva's sake. Shall we slaughter them with a smile?" Hest took the initiative to answer.

Eight spoke next, her expression a vacant stare. "We will kill all enemies. But can I ask something?"

"What is it? It's rare to see you ask questions, Eight," said Selva.

"What we do if we find thread-using troublemaker again?" asked Eight. "The chamberlain was angry. Said not to give her a second chance."

"It seems you still have that broken speech," said Selva. "How many years have I not told you to correct it?"

Selva smiled wryly at the other two. Among the maids, Hest and Eight were particularly skilled if also particularly lacking in emotions and humanity.

"But yes," Selva continued, "back then I left it up to Sir Alus to handle. But if she shows up as an enemy again, there is no need for mercy. Kill her."

There were no second chances when it came to a noble's tolerance. If she made a second move against the Fable family, whether she was trained by Selva's former colleague or not, he would show her no mercy. The reaper didn't

retract his blade once thrust at your neck repeatedly.

“Although I hope it doesn’t come to that, I assume you have no objections,” said Selva as he put on his symbolic white gloves and turned his back to the maids. “The other night was only a warm-up... It’s been a while since I put my skills to full use. Let the hunt begin.”

As the sun set behind the horizon, evening darkness set in, turning the ground black and leaving only a red afterglow. The sky slept and people rested. It was the time when assassins became more active, the darkness their battlefield.

Seven shadows disappeared into the melancholy of the night.

Through several coincidences these past few days, the Fable family had managed to get a grasp on Aferka’s movements.

Aferka had originally been a political specter, an invisible entity. Then they and many other radical elements had been buried in people’s minds, and as its name had disappeared from the political scene those who knew it even existed became scarce.

As someone once known as Aferka’s Bloodied Blade, Selva felt an ironic twist of fate hearing that name again and knowing he was going to do battle with them.

They seem to have lost their minds, he thought. Do they abhor the darkness so much that they’ve deluded themselves into thinking they can just walk in the light of day?

Right now, Selva and his subordinates were watching a residence of the Rimfuge family that occupied a fifty-meter square area in the woods. Tall trees lined all four sides, limiting the view.

This property was located in one of the few places in the human domain where nature still existed, a green belt of vegetation that separated the middle district and the area the wealthy lived.

Compared to the Outer World, it was meager, but it was more than enough for Selva and the battle maids to conceal themselves. Ironically, the very trees meant to block outside views became the perfect hiding place for people like them.

Knowing this, Selva always took meticulous care of the Fable garden to prevent giving any intruders any place to hide. He was extra careful to keep any trees or large bushes from creating any blind spots near the mansion. In that sense, the security here seemed rather lax for Aferka.

Oh, how Aferka has fallen, he thought. Even the quality of their guards seems to have declined.

As Selva lamented this fact, he sensed something moving around above them. He looked and saw a lone man hanging off a thick branch of the tree. He frantically clawed at his neck, where Selva's thread was wrapped.

He desperately moved his mouth, but as he was being choked, no air came out. When he struggled and kicked with his legs, Selva loosened the thread around his neck slightly.

"Now then, I have several questions for you. I trust you will answer them."

"Ack...ugh..." The man couldn't even breathe properly, but he struggled to break free from the mana steel thread and escape.

In the midst of it, he turned his bloodshot eyes to Selva, seemingly pleading for mercy. Selva frowned and gave him a cold glare.

"What is with those eyes? Are you begging for your life?" Selva asked. "I've changed my mind. You don't need to answer anything. I have no doubt your answer would do nothing but disappoint me. You are a member of Aferka, aren't you? So brace yourself, youngster."

The man made a final guttural sound and breathed his last. His head slumped down, and a discolored purple tongue peeked out from his open mouth.

"Mr. Selva, I finished one off too." Like a hunting hound coming back with its prey, Hest dragged over a large man by the neck.

Her breathing was calm and her expression unchanged. As usual, there was no emotion on her face. Even her respectfully addressing Selva seemed to be just a formality, so Selva knew better than to expect any more words from the unsociable girl.

"Well done, Hest. But it looks like you won't be enough on your own."

“No problem,” she responded.

They were only getting warmed up, but it was enough to measure Aferka’s current strength. Selva hadn’t expected it to go this well.

It wasn’t like the Rimfuge families were all gathered in one place. Due to their family business, they had hideouts everywhere. They had put their sights on this location because the information gathering had gone unexpectedly well.

Selva had had a few of his subordinates stake out this mansion, and he’d come to believe it was the home base of Aferka’s leaders, the Frusevans.

Their reactions when Frose put her plan into action had proved him right.

As soon as Selva and the others were informed, they made their move to neutralize the estate’s guards, who easily fell for basic diversions and were just as easily hunted down.

Still... Something is strange. This is too easy, thought Selva, a long career’s worth of intuition kicking in.

At first, he’d let himself think that Aferka had just become weak, but it was strange that they’d be so defenseless. Plus, the member he’d just finished off just a moment ago was noticeably far from well trained. He’d let his bloodlust give him away, while practically claiming he was a member of Aferka.

“What about Eight?” Selva asked Hest with a furrowed brow.

“I am back,” responded the person in question suddenly.

There were bloodstains clearly visible, even on her dark clothes, not because she’d been in an intense battle but largely because of how she killed.

“Eight, stop playing around after killing.” Selva couldn’t help but criticize her. An assassin should be swift and efficient.

Even though Eight was the least emotional among the combat maids, she looked a little guilty when Selva reprimanded her, and for a moment after that, she looked a little happy, even though it was hard to tell.

“I will bury,” she said.

“That’s not the problem. Are you sure they are even a part of Aferka?” asked

Selva.

“Ah.” Hest gave him a dumbfounded look after a momentary delay.

Selva was dismayed. “So you didn’t confirm it? I don’t understand youngsters.”

Hest didn’t really seem to mind. “Don’t worry; he had enough skills to kill people. So no problem,” she answered.

“I see. Now then, we’ve killed several of them already. Will they fall for our provocations?”

Even in the dark, Selva’s vision was sharp as he observed the mansion.

“Oh, that was faster than I thought,” Selva muttered.

At that moment, one of the maids was knocked off her feet and slammed to the ground, her head held down. There was a heavy sound, like a rock crushing a rock.

“!”

Distracted by that, Hest and Eight reacted slowly to the rapidly approaching assailant. They quickly threw up their guard before a powerful impact hit both of them.

Hest braced herself, but unable to kill all the momentum, she was pushed back and her legs dug gashes into the ground. After a few meters, she kicked off the ground to forcibly cancel out the impact, flew into the air, and landed.

Eight had been thrown into the air by the impact. She’d grabbed a nearby tree trunk and managed to regain her posture.

“Oh?” Selva alone wasn’t flustered. He simply observed his opponent with his arms behind his back.

The arrogant-looking blond man in front of him looked familiar. He’d appeared after Selva had finished off Vector for attacking the Fable family estate.

Like before, he had a cynical, irritating tone. “I went out of my way to give you a warning that we would be back, but you came to offer your head directly,

huh?”

While he glared at Selva, he raised an arm and wriggled with his fingers. That arm had blown away both Hest and Eight. He had inhuman strength.

The hand was covered in a hint of mana. However, since Selva didn't have to strain his eyes to recognize it; it was quite unusual.

Is that some sort of body enhancement through mana? wondered Selva. *Still this power without a weapon is...*

Selva couldn't recall seeing something on this level before.

Well, I can see why tools would be unnecessary. I suppose this means that, slow or not, assassination techniques are advancing even now, Selva thought to himself as Hest and Eight lined up behind him as if nothing had happened.

But Selva simply smiled at the man and said, “Those are quite some skills. I believe you are Aferka adjutant Elvi Aristedt...unless the information we gathered is wrong, that is. Please don't mistake this for some sort of chivalric joust. We are here to kill, and yet we'll give you a moment. Ha... Excuse me.”

Selva couldn't help but let out a laugh.

“You bastard...!”

The veins in Elvi's temple bulged, and he roughly concentrated mana in his hands, a move that was a far throw from an assassin.

“Oh, you want to begin already? I'm glad to see you're quick to get to the point, Elvi Aristedt. Now you will die.”

Elvi's eyes were wide open. He cracked his fingers and roared, “You senile old fool! Your fighting style has already been leaked!”

At the same time, Hest and Eight disappeared. A moment later, Hest jumped skyward and attacked from above, and Eight swung around behind him and attacked from a blind spot.

They fought in perfect coordination, carried out with exceptional speed and complete silence.

“Tsk!” Elvi clicked his tongue at the realization that even Selva's subordinates

were quite formidable.

“Payback,” said Eight as she filled the hand behind her back with power.

After that momentary pause, she swung a knife hand sideways, relying almost purely on force.

Instinctively sensing that the chop was far beyond normal, Elvi twisted his body and used his mana-clad arm to avert the hand rather than block it. As expected, the impact was so great that his arm would have been ripped off if he had taken the hit directly.

Instead of bracing, he’d skillfully escaped the impact by letting his body slide with the momentum. But that ruined his stance, and Hest followed up, unleashing an attack too quick for the eye to follow.

She thrust her hand forward like a spear, her five fingers equipped with a sharp claw-type AWR.

Elvi blocked the thrust with his hand, catching the claws and twisted his wrist. Just as he thought it had worked as planned, Hest’s entire body spun. Instead of resisting, she followed the momentum, twisting her body in the air and quickly jumping back.

Even though they’d gained the upper hand with Eight’s attack, the fight was an even match again. Hest and Eight put some distance between themselves and Elvi. Their expressions were completely unchanged despite failing to finish him off.

Selva watched from a distance and quietly muttered, “Oh, martial arts, is it? An interesting use of mana.”

“This ain’t a fuckin’ show, old man!” Elvi’s shouted as he took a kung fu stance.

It seemed that Elvi didn’t just use the mana on his arms for offense. It changed shape depending on the shapes he made with his fingers, which could create an ironclad defense to repel even magic head-on.

It wouldn’t be easy to get through, even with Selva’s mana steel threads. But the shield was made for one-on-one fights, as Elvi’s ability wasn’t suited for

fighting multiple people at the same time. Elvi would no doubt be at a disadvantage fighting Selva, Eight, and Hest at the same time.

“What, three on one? Fucking cowards!” Elvi spat out.

Selva only smiled.

“What a strange thing to say. Like I said, we are just here to kill. I believe I’ve said this before, but you speak too much for somebody who walks the path of the shadows. And you do a lot of barking. You don’t happen to be a watchdog, do you?”

“Don’t get so full of yourself!” Enraged, Elvi leaned forward to attack, but before he could do anything, he immediately tilted his body to dodge something he’d noticed. “Kuh.”

A red line of blood ran down his cheek where the thread had grazed it.

“Oh? I’d hoped to lop your ear off, but it seems you have fine intuition,” taunted Selva.

Elvi really wasn’t well suited to a career as an assassin. He was highly emotional and easy to upset. Selva, naturally, exploited this weakness.

“Now then, I would like to wrap this up. I can’t spend all that much time on just you.”

Selva signaled his subordinates with a look, and Hest and Eight kicked off the ground.

“What?!” Elvi let out a yelp of surprise at the attack.

Not only did they have assassins’ skills, but they fought with highly refined martial arts as well. In fact, despite the mana wrapped around his arms, Elvi felt like Hest and Eight had the upper hand when it came to fighting people.

Selva picked people exceptionally well.

In any case, with all three of them fighting together, each had enough power and speed to be fatal.

Eight in particular hit with so much force she could crush the outer shell of a Fiend.

However, even she had limitations, and her punches weren't equally effective against everyone.

Flesh rumbled and air burst as they exchanged blows at an unbelievable speed, and Selva listened to the delightful sound with relief.

Hest's martial arts were no match for Eight's, but her claw-type AWR made up for it.

Oh... It looks like he won't just let them push him around, Selva thought, sensing something strange in Elvi's movements.

Even while fending off the barrage of attacks, Elvi seemed to have a trick up his sleeve to turn things around. It most likely rested in his mana-clad arms, but not even Selva could predict what he would do.

Plus, the man's ability to hold off both Hest and Eight made Selva reassess his initial judgment.

At the very least, he has some bite to back up his barking, he thought. *But...that won't be enough, youngster.*

Even now, Elvi had taken advantage of a brief opening, and his fist was headed for Eight's face. Eight dodged, and her counterattack was unleashed with twice the force of her opponent's. Elvi tried to catch the blow in his palm...but the sleeve of his uniform burst open.

Just as Elvi sensed something wrong and used a hip movement to pull back his center of gravity, his arm shot backward as if it had been hit by a cannonball. He fell back a few steps, but immediately took his stance again.

"Are you a monster?!" he demanded.

His intuitive jump back had been right. His arm would have been destroyed if he'd done nothing. He was saved by his martial arts expertise, but since Eight wasn't alone, even that glancing blow put him at a disadvantage.

Hest's claws slipped out of the shadows in Elvi's blind spot and tore at the flesh of his right flank.

"Ack!" Elvi rolled away.

Coming out of the shadows, Hest gave him a sidelong glance as she picked

pieces of cloth and flesh from her claws.

“Where will it hit,” she muttered.

This was the first time she had spoken since the battle began.

“...!!!” Shortly after those words, Elvi understood what she meant. He’d lost the use of one of his hands.

“Bingo. The right arm,” Hest said, confirming her answer.

Beads of sweat formed on Elvi’s forehead. He didn’t know what had happened. He couldn’t even pour mana into his completely useless right arm. It was like it had been petrified.

This was one of the effects of Hest’s AWR: Magdala, the Six Paths.

The claw on the middle finger had the ability to paralyze someone’s muscle tissue and mana pathways, but the effect of the seal was always random. As a general rule, it was limited to one place per person.

Potential targets were not just the limbs but the senses as well, but since it struck at random, it was not always a big advantage. Depriving someone of their sight or hearing in the middle of battle was one thing, but the sense of smell or taste didn’t do much good.

Fortunately, this time it sealed Elvi’s right arm, a fatal blow to someone who relied heavily on enchanting their limbs.

“So you use the middle finger’s Animal Realm. It picked a good spot,” Selva extolled.

Strength left Elvi’s arm, and it hung limply down from his shoulder, the flow of mana shut down and the nerves paralyzed.

But while the effects were powerful, they wouldn’t last long. Magdala’s other flaw was that it was, in essence, five AWRs strung together, and each claw could only handle the spells that corresponded to it.

This meant all of Hest’s resources were gathered in her five fingers. As such, it was time to finish things quickly.

However...

Selva looked at Hest drawing closer to her prey and frowned a little.

That's right, he thought. Hest is...

Hest's fighting style was sly and merciless. She weakened her opponent and gradually cornered them.

Meanwhile, Elvi, her prey, cursed in anger as his arm hung down.

"What the fuck? What did you...? Oof!"

The moment he focused all of his hostility on Hest, Eight saw her opening and snuck up in the shadows and landed a blow. With a strange toothy smile, she swung her fist through, but it wasn't as lethal as before.

That's why, while Elvi was blown away and blood rolled down his lips, he could stand back up.

There was a reason her punch didn't pack the same power as before.

Eight had a special ability that allowed her to replicate any attack she had. More specifically, she could evaluate and re-create any spell she saw for her own use but at several times the force, making it even more powerful.

This included all forms of magic; even if it was a barrier spell, her special ability let her measure the mana poured into it and transform it into power for her next attack.

Since Elvi's strikes were not just physical but used magic as well, he was the perfect target. However, the loaded attack could only be used once. To use another, she needed to witness some other spell or mana-clad attack.

It was an unusual ability, but it was one that was always one step behind.

In the sense of using mana, Eight's ability was close to a normal Magicmaster's, but Selva couldn't understand the logic behind it no matter how many times it was explained to him.

Neither Hest nor Eight had the right personality to become proper Magicmasters. That was why Selva had chosen to train them, to sharpen such unique blades and elevate them to greater heights.

"Fuck! Why'd you have to attack when we're so busy? Cut this shit out

already!” Elvi roared, overcome by emotion.

Selva calmly observed him. He saw the mana in Elvi’s other arm swelling and his bloodshot eyes burning with rage. Selva read his opponent... It was in that moment that Selva became convinced that Elvi’s attention was focused purely on Hest and Eight.

Emotions had swallowed the reasoning in his mind, and Elvi was no longer on guard against Selva. It was the perfect chance to entangle the wounded mark with the threads of defeat.

“*«Black Rope»*” Selva snapped one of his hands imperceptibly fast. In response, the mana steel threads buried under the ground shot to the surface and weaved into a thick bundle.

The threads, now thick as a rope, weaved through the middle of Hest and Eight and turned black. They were easily capable of splitting a body in half and now moved faster than the speed of sound.

At the same time, Hest and Eight were closing in. Eight caught sight of Selva’s Black Rope, and its power projected into her right hand. Her muscles tensed as if made of steel. However...

“Hmm?!” Selva let out a surprised grunt.

Selva had been certain Elvi was distracted, but just before the trap sprung, he leaped out of the way of Black Rope. Fractions of a second later, Hest and Eight unleashed their attacks.

They had anticipated that dodging Black Rope would break Elvi’s stance. Eight leaned forward and unleashed a right hook, but even if he defended against it again, he couldn’t sidestep it like before. And if he took the impact at all, it would crush his wrist and more.

At the same time, Hest attacked with Magdala from the left, her body low to the ground as she swung her claws upward.

They were both unsuccessful.

Eight’s fist was not just parried; Elvi unleashed a counterattack. She barely dodged, and the blow glanced across her cheek. Before Hest’s claws could stab

him, he stepped on her wrist and kicked her in the chest with his other foot.

Though surprised by the counteroffensive, they quickly got back to their feet.

As Elvi was about to follow up, steel threads as sharp as blades shot out from around him and tore through the area. They gouged the earth and sliced the trees.

It was a deadly tempest of high-speed steel threads that was difficult to even see. But after the trees and leaves had fallen, there was no sign of Elvi.

“What a miscalculation,” Selva said seriously. “I thought he would be too hot-blooded to even consider escape.”

Did I misjudge him? he thought. *Even if I did, that sudden change at the end was strange.*

Seeing the fight, Selva had no worries that Hest or Eight would fall behind in a battle. Elvi was skilled; he even covered his blind spots. But the moment he had sensed his overwhelming disadvantage, he quickly made an escape.

It appeared to Selva that in that moment Elvi’s abilities had all suddenly been enhanced.

But a sudden growth so powerful didn’t seem possible, especially in the midst of battle, while cornered and unable to even focus, facing desperate odds.

But Selva of all people knew it was not possible to comprehend more than a tiny fragment of everything. After all, even that strange martial art that relied on mana was unknown to him.

The only thing that he could say for certain was that in that moment, Elvi’s speed had surpassed that of Hest and Eight. And it was this sense that something was unusual that made Selva hesitate to order the two to chase after Elvi.

When Elvi was definitely gone, Hest and Eight returned to Selva. They should have been upset, but neither of them appeared frustrated as they expressionlessly awaited further instructions.

“How is your injury, Eight?” asked Selva.

“It smarts,” responded Eight as she rubbed the scratch on her cheek.

“I see,” said Selva. “He seemed to do more than simply wrap his arms in mana, so there might be something more to it.”

Noticing how much Elvi’s abilities had skyrocketed at the end had almost made Selva question if the man had been hiding his true abilities when fighting. But Selva didn’t think he seemed so duplicitous; plus, he had been cornered and at his limit.

Rimfuge used to research the human body, thought Selva. One of his studies had dealt with limiter theory...

While Selva didn’t really know the specifics, he’d heard that it was research on the latent power of the human body.

In fact, research on magic and mana was a common practice among several influential noble families. Several of them created their own secret magic, the Fable family included.

So it wouldn’t be strange for the five branch families of Rimfuge, the ones behind Aferka, to have all sorts of dubious knowledge and skills.

“Mr. Selva, should we continue the operation?” Hest asked in a clerical tone, bringing Selva’s attention back to the present.

“No, let’s cancel it. The others are still not back, and we don’t know the true depths of the enemy. Elvi was clearly nothing more than an adjutant. Our target is the leader, but he doesn’t seem to be here. He doesn’t have many guards, so they might be dealing with something else. Now that I think about it, Elvi did mention being busy.”

Not wanting to overstay his welcome, Selva decided it was time to call the mission off. When the scattered battle maids returned and lined up, Selva noticed that two were missing.

One had been slammed into the ground by Elvi’s ambush. Judging from the devastation around her body, the other was also almost certainly Elvi’s doing. It had likely happened before he’d encountered Selva, Hest, and Eight.

Her body was covered in blood, and nearby lay the corpse of an Aferka combatant. Elvi must have struck right after she’d defeated them.

“Eight, you follow Elvi. He is most likely headed for their headquarters. But make sure not to do anything hasty,” commanded Selva.

“Kay,” Eight acknowledged quietly and disappeared. As she left, anxiety showed on Hest’s usually inexpressive face as she watched her friend go.

After securing the belongings and having a makeshift funeral for the fallen, Selva and the others stopped at a farmhouse barn they had found earlier. Waiting for them there was another maid.

She’d been sent as a messenger from the mansion, but that fact was somewhat unusual. To keep the Fable family separate from this conflict with Aferka, Selva had refused any contact from them unless it was something.

Knowing Frose should be well aware of that, Selva suspiciously confirmed the contents of the sealed letter brought to him.

He said nothing, but his expression visibly changed as he read through it.

“Is there a problem Mr. Selva?” Hest asked, her face again blank.

“Yes, this has become a serious matter. There’s no worry about repercussions reaching the Fable family, but the situation is worse than that. This will greatly interfere with the noble society... I see, so this is what the ruler was after...”

Selva’s brows furrowed, and new wrinkles of deep and unfathomable concern were etched on his forehead. Hest simply stared at him with emotionless eyes.



Seventy-Fourth Chapter

A Free Pawn

Alus was making his way towards the palace, carrying Lilisha.

Once they made it past the middle district, which spanned the largest area, they could run unnoticed. The problem was that the next region was where the wealthy upper class lived.

Positioned near the lake that surrounded the Tower of Babel, the palace was surrounded by fences for several kilometers, with checkpoints set up at key points. A license code was necessary at each, and anyone without appointment would be turned down and marked for surveillance.

A first-rate Magicmaster was in charge of palace security, and a portion of the security force consisted of reemployed veterans, so it was as strictly guarded as the military headquarters.

The question was how to break through all that.

“So you haven’t thought of anything?” asked Lilisha, scornful. “You did get in touch beforehand, didn’t you?”

Alus wanted nothing more than to ignore her, but the conversation wouldn’t go anywhere if he did.

“I can’t be bothered to go that far. Besides, she’s probably already noticed we’re here. If we try to play by the rules, we’ll just be sent off,” Alus explained, keeping his face forward. But he tapered off at the end. “Actually, is security normally this tight? You’d think there was a terrorist threat or something.”

“There’s no way the ruler’s palace would be unguarded! As a Single Digit, haven’t you guarded it yourself? Where did all that momentum in the beginning go?” asked Lilisha.

“Aside from a few times when she was out of the nation, like for the rulers conference, Lettie was in charge of that. Anyways, it’s going to be a pain to

break through by force.”

From a concealed location, Alus and Lilisha were looking at the defensive formations when Loki forcibly stepped between them.

“Whoa?!” exclaimed Lilisha.

“Ms. Lilisha, you can confirm the situation without clinging to Sir Alus like that. And we’d like to avoid fighting in the first place.”

“Won’t that be difficult? Just breaking through is already a crime,” Lilisha muttered as she gave up her position to Loki.

As a matter of fact, members of the general public and those without business weren’t allowed to even so much as approach the palace. Even when using a Circle Port, it was impossible to reach without a special code.

“Well, let’s try walking up like normal,” suggested Alus. “If they refuse us, then I’ll just have to push my way through.”

“Wow, that makes me incredibly uneasy... Even with Ms. Loki’s help, what are you going to do if something happens?” Lilisha wore a wry smile and didn’t sound too displeased about the idea.

But there were beads of sweat on her forehead. Alus, aware that he was pushing her too hard, felt the need to check her burn again.

“I’m taking a look.”

“Huh?!”

Alus moved around behind Lilisha and pulled her shirt up. It was tactless, but even Loki felt the need to take a look. So Lilisha curled up and closed her eyes in embarrassment, waiting for them to finish staring at her exposed back.

“There’s a faint trace of mana,” said Alus.

“It’s a little warm, but it’s not so bad that I can’t move,” said Lilisha.

“So we still don’t know the principles or mechanisms, huh?” answered Alus. “At any rate, we should hurry to remove it.”

Suddenly Loki noticed something. “Ah, so you’re not wearing a bra.”

“What?! Well, I’m wrapped in bandages... You know that. Actually! Both of

you lack any tact!” said Lilisha.

“I was just saying. It was simple curiosity.” Loki replied, serious, prompting Lilisha’s cheek to twitch.

Loki paid her no heed and let out a sigh. “Still, why must there be so many women gathering around Sir Alus who must so easily expose themselves.”

“You little—?! Don’t lump me together with those innocent little girls. I’m not going to start screaming over being seen.”

“That’s a problem in its own right, isn’t it? In other words...you’re easy,” said Loki.

“Who are you calling a slut?! I’m the same as others...in that regard,” said Lilisha.

“I know that you’re trying to be subtle,” responded Loki, “but I didn’t need a report on your status. All I am saying is that you need to learn to be bashful.”

“What the hell?!”

Alus spoke coldly to quell the girls’ rapidly heating but pointless argument.

“Let’s hurry. It’s good that you’re full of energy, but we don’t know what effects the brand will have if it’s interfering with your Fundamental Words. It’s best not to drag this out. You got that, Loki?”

With that, the three left their hiding place and walked up to the checkpoint nonchalantly.

Several guards stood on each side of the massive gate. Word spread among the guards as they spotted Alus and the others in the distance. As Alus’s group got closer, more and more began to gather.

Eventually the guard in the front called out to them. “Sorry, but stop right there. You are from the military, aren’t you?”

“That’s right,” said Alus.

“Things are rather dangerous nowadays, so we would like to start by patting you down.”

Three guards walked over and began to check them.

“What’s this?” one asked.

“Hmm? It’s a normal AWR. I’m a Magicmaster, so it’s not a problem,” said Alus.

“That’s not how this works. No weapons are allowed into the palace. On whose orders are you here, and what is your business?”

The pat down was done away from the gate to be cautious. Even if Alus and the others were to make a move, they couldn’t quickly get through the checkpoint. And while the guards were acting unconcerned, they had AWRs at their waists.

“I have business with Lady Cicelnia,” said Alus. “No orders or appointments.”

For a moment, the guards stopped their pat down. The guard checking Alus turned to the others and discreetly shook his head. The others returned with a gesture in kind.

“Where did you come from?” the guard asked.

That’s when Alus realized his slight oversight. The guard was likely talking about a Circle Port, the only official route to the palace. Since Alus had bypassed that, it was only natural they were suspicious.

The guards at the gate were quickly checking the security system for any malfunctions. The man in front of Alus tensely held one hand at his waist and held out the other for the Magicmaster’s license.

“Loki, did you bring yours?”

“Ah, I forgot,” Loki replied, monotone

She was such a hammy actor that Lilisha’s cheeks twitched. It was clear that Alus and Loki had no intentions of going about this peacefully.

With this realization, Lilisha bumped into the man checking her and let out an “Ahhh!” as she dramatically fell.

“Hey, what do you think you’re doing?!” he demanded.

“That’s my line! Just where do you think you’re touching?!” said Lilisha.

“What is with that? You’re using this search as an excuse to grope me! You’re

the worst! Uhm, ah yes, as a senior secretary to the Governor-General, I will make sure to report this to the proper authorities! Now make way!”

“H-Hold it! What are you...?”

Lilisha acted indignant and began walking towards the checkpoint. Loki caught on and raised her voice as well.

“How shameless! This is an abuse of authority, and I won’t stay quiet about it!” She gave her checkpoint guard a sharp kick and knocked him out.

Alus chopped the back of the neck of his guard and followed Loki and Lilisha. The remaining guard pulled out his AWR and held it up high, trying to launch a flare to signal an emergency, but he was easily stopped.

Loki turned around and held the palm of her hand towards him. The next moment electricity ran through his body. It wasn’t very strong, but he’d be paralyzed for a while.

Seeing all that, the guards at the checkpoint were swift. A group of guards emerged from the guardhouse.

“So, what do we do next?” Lilisha asked

Alus calmly replied, “We’ll just have to break through by force. I’ll hold back enough to just knock them out.”

“Ha. Well, I guess it’s better than overdoing it. Wait a second.” Lilisha stopped Alus from making his move and spoke to the approaching group.

“This is all a misunderstanding! They used the pat down as an excuse to grope us!” she said. “We had no choice but to resist! We would like to make an official complaint at the palace, so please make way!”

“Who do you think will fall for that?” asked the guard.

Lilisha shrugged. “Well, I did give you our excuse—I mean objections. Okay, Alus, you can take it from here. But it will all go to waste if you seriously hurt anyone.”

Alus acknowledged her words, then stepped forward to take the lead. He didn’t actually plan to attack them directly. He just needed to prevent them from getting in the way.

Alus's steps never wavered as he pushed through the group wielding all sorts of AWRs. He released enough mana to control the entire area and freeze most of the guards in place. They were prey before a predator.

However, these guards were also high-ranking Magicmasters who weren't about to flinch before any attacker, and a few were able to withstand Alus's pressure and put up some resistance.

"Don't hold out too long. I'm wearing myself down holding back this much." Alus said, giving the few able to move a sharp glare, which made them turn pale and freeze as well.

Despite all of that, there was one last man, likely the captain, who stood before Alus and refused to budge. It was clear he was the strongest person at this checkpoint.

He wielded a sword and wore typical armor. As someone who likely had quite a bit of experience in the Outer World, he could sharply sense Alus's overwhelming power.

"N-No matter your business, you will not pass without permission," the captain managed to squeeze out with defiance.

From behind an indifferent Alus, Lilisha applauded in awe of his guts.

"I'm being very compromising with the ruler here. You have no reason to know this, but she started this. I didn't come here to attack, but depending on your attitude, I might end up having to use magic."

That meant that a Single Digit would get serious.

But even though he was breaking into a cold sweat, the captain shook his head. "It goes against my duty! Regardless of who you are... Even if you are on the level of a Single Digit Magicmaster!"

Alus narrowed his eyes, impressed. Despite the overwhelming pressure, the guard refused to budge. He was truly exemplary.

However, the situation being what it was, Alus's eyes turned frosty as he put his hand on his AWR. Just then a woman's clear voice spoke, breaking the tension. "Mr. Alus, we have been expecting you."

Alus looked over to find Felinella elegantly walking up behind the guards.

Before he could ask why she was there, he spotted the ruler's aide, Rinne Kimmel, with her. The situation confused him.

Rinne looked over some of the guards that had collapsed. She put her hand on her forehead in exasperation and said, "You are as reckless as always, Sir Alus. Captain, you can let him pass. We wouldn't want him to do any more damage. That would only lead to rumors that the palace guard is unmanned."

"Understood!" said the captain as he saluted, an expression of relief evident on his face for only a moment.

"Thank you for your service." Alus casually flashed his license as he walked past the captain.

"I knew you had it on you. You really are the worst." Lilisha exclaimed, but Alus ignored her. Next to them, Loki also showed her license as she passed through the checkpoint.

"It's just more efficient to go about it this way. When you understand the workings of the military, you know they'll just call their superiors and you'll end up stuck for an hour otherwise."

Lilisha smiled, but she didn't admire Alus's actions. It was a cunning that only those who'd lived through a harsh world learned. But while Lilisha didn't want to take after him, it was a lesson worth learning.

Seeing Lilisha's expression, Felinella spoke to her. "Oh, Ms. Lilisha. Are you feeling better already?"

As her senior, Felinella asked her out of concern, and Lilisha decided to greet her in kind with a fake smile. "It's a pleasure to meet you, Ms. Socalent. Yes, I'm all better now. Thank you."

Felinella saw through her, but like the kind senior she was, she stayed calm instead of getting upset. "I'm glad to hear it. I was really worried, you know. I'm the dorm supervisor too, so I paid you a visit once when you were resting."

"I see." Lilisha gave a standard response, but she was perplexed by the negative feelings welling up inside her towards her kind senior.

But she didn't have to think too hard about it. *Felinella Socalent. She is a model noble lady through and through, but something feels strange*, she thought.

Lilisha had a feeling that she was wrong but still kept her heart closed. But despite her wariness, she held her hand out to give Felinella a handshake, which felt even stranger. It was one thing for her to respond to a person's handshake, but she never held her own hand out. When she realized what she was doing, Lilisha bitterly began to pull her hand back.

Oh, that was close, she thought. *This person is scary in a different way...*

Felinella had a maternal quality that had naturally softened Lilisha's stubborn disposition. As a noble, she would be skilled at maneuvering personal interactions, good and bad. And now her goodwill was directed Lilisha's way.

Lilisha, who was skilled at observing people's faces, could sense that Felinella wasn't simply acting as a model noble lady; she also had an open mind.

"Nice to meet you, Ms. Lilisha." Felinella wrapped her hands around Lilisha's hand before she could pull it back.

In the end, they shook hands despite Lilisha's reluctance, but she turned her face away, as if to escape Felinella's soft hands and warmth.

"M-Me too..." said Lilisha, awkward, like someone trying to hide her embarrassment.

Seeing the interaction, Alus asked from the side, "What are you doing?"

Lilisha instantly turned red all the way up to her ears and let go of Felinella even though, for some reason, she felt like she wanted to hold her hands forever.

"More importantly, Feli, why are you here?" Alus continued, glancing at Rinne.

"While I was looking into Aferka, I came across a problem and hoped to report to you," said Felinella.

Before Alus could point out that they could just use the call function in the license for that, Felinella continued, "I judged that it would be best to meet with

you directly. So I arranged with Ms. Rinne to wait for you here.”

She smiled in a way Alus couldn't understand while introducing Rinne. Of course, this wasn't Alus's first time meeting Rinne. She'd called him to meet with Cicelnia in the past, and they'd worked together in the Outer World.

Aware of that or not, Felinella gently urged Rinne forward in spite of her seemingly not wanting to get involved.

“You don't have to say anything, Sir Alus,” said a reluctant Rinne, avoiding meeting Alus's eyes. Unlike the proper Alpha's Eye he'd seen before, Alus found this version of Rinne rather awkward and unexpectedly cute.

“It seems I am quite hated,” quipped Alus. “I have no intentions of blaming you for anything, but if I get shunned any harder, I feel like I'll lose the chance to take a look at those eyes of yours.”

“Then do as you please,” said Rinne. “No matter what you ask, I am just a pawn anyways.”

“Oh, a pawn, are you? So you're at least aware that you are standing on that woman's game board,” said Alus.

“That was a slip of the tongue,” Rinne said after a moment, shoulders slumping as she shut her mouth.

Felinella took pity on her and intervened. “Mr. Alus, I understand how you feel, but please don't bully Ms. Rinne.”

Alus wanted to say something, but Rinne beat him to the punch. “Just so you know, I am the oldest one here.”

Alus completely ignored her statement and continued, “So how do you know Ms. Rinne, Feli?”

“Through some correspondence,” answered Felinella. “It's not like we're old acquaintances, but we did become friends recently. She has a lot of hardships, so I can sympathize with her.”

“So an older lady working at the palace complains to a younger student. What was that about being the oldest again?”

“Sir Alus, a man shouldn't be finding faults in a discussion between women.

Besides, I only spoke a little with little Felinella on our way here,” responded Rinne.

“Please, I told you to stop adding ‘little’ to my name.”

Felinella and Rinne seemed to have formed an almost instant bond, and their voices bounced off one another in harmony like they were two schoolgirls.

Alus had never seen anyone talk to Felinella like that. It was almost as refreshing as it was unexpected. Noticing his stare, she looked a little bashful.

It was Loki, feeling left out, who decided to wash away the peaceful mood by bringing up a more important topic. “Ms. Rinne, will we be able to meet with the ruler after this?”

That was enough to bring everyone back to reality.

Typically, as a fellow spotter, Loki would show more respect for the ranked No. 2 spotter.

Rinne greeted Loki and waited for her to return the greeting before speaking. “Indeed. Lady Cicelnia has already given an order to let Sir Alus through to the palace.”

“I bet,” Alus quickly responded.

Alus has already known it to be true, and the reason Rinne was there. Alus knew it was impossible to hide from her Eye of Providence, and he noticed they hadn’t encountered anyone else after leaving the checkpoint.

The palace was the center of politics in Alpha, and it never slept. It was unreal for surveillance around the palace to be so lax.

“But, Ms. Rinne, you get it, don’t you?” asked Alus. “I’ve been pretty lenient with her horseplay, but this time she crossed the line. What happens next depends on Cicelnia’s answer...”

“Of course. But I believe speaking directly with Lady Cicelnia will help you understand.” Rinne cast her eyes down and solemnly conveyed some hopeful words.

“I wouldn’t be so sure. Like I said before, I’d rather not have a falling out with you.”

“That goes both ways, Sir Alus. It is rare for somebody to have a scholarly interest in my magic eyes. Not to mention all the contributions you have made as a researcher. So I’d like to ask you to be gentle,” Rinne said and deeply bowed to Alus.

After a long pause, she raised her head, wearing the perfect neutral expression of a ruler’s aide. Alus struggled to read anything from the complicated smile.

“Well anyways, I only have one matter of business. I’m sure you’ll understand too, Ms. Rinne.” Alus pointed his gaze to Lilisha, who simply gave Rinne a soft stare of her own and nodded.

“Then please go ahead,” Rinne said, opening a grand set of doors they had just reached.

The throne room was ahead, majestic and luxurious but also draped in seriousness. It was the room used for conferring peerage and awards. Thick columns lined the room, and a crimson carpet gave the floor color. The decor was old-fashioned, but the room was a practical culmination of dignity.

“Welcome, Alus.” Sitting on the throne was Cicelnia, as beautiful as ever, welcoming him with a dubious smile.

People called her a living goddess and a messenger from the heavens because she was as beautiful as can be. Her smooth black hair flowed down past her shoulders with a lustrous, mirrorlike sheen.

Facing that beauty, Lilisha lowered her head and got on her knee. Felinella did the same.

Keeping your head low when facing the ruler was a remnant of the past, when no one could look at the imperial visage without permission. Today, it was more of a formal ritual.

“What? Do you want me to tell you to raise your heads?” Cicelnia, known to be a friendly ruler, was fed up with that old tradition. She sighed and looked over to Rinne.

Seeing the aide nod, she resigned herself.

“Yes, yes. Please raise your heads,” she said. “This is some really outdated etiquette. Now then... Felinella Socalent, a visit from the Socalent family is both rare and unexpected.”

“I am honored to be granted an audience with Your Highness.” Felinella’s clear and dignified voice reverberated in the room. She gave a perfect noble response, completely calm and courteous without betraying any emotion.

“Oh, you’re pretty enough to make me a little jealous. If I recall, you are a student in the Second Magical Institute, just like Alus.”

Sensing from Cicelnia’s light confrontational phrasing that some warm-up political dealings had begun, Felinella cast her eyes down. “Yes, it is a privilege to be close to Mr. Alus. At times we share the same lunch table.”

The corners of Cicelnia’s eyes twitched at the topic.

“However, isn’t that a little imprudent for a noble daughter, especially the daughter of the renowned Lord Socalent?” asked Cicelnia, using her preferred form of address for Felinella’s father.

Cicelnia continued, “Your family makes up one of this nation’s pillars. The daughter of that family getting closer than necessary to the greatest Magicmaster in the nation will lead to unwanted speculation from others.”

Cicelnia was implicitly telling Felinella not to stir up noble society for no reason. But the same advice could be given to Tesfia, who was part of the Fable family, another of the three great noble families

Cicelnia’s words seemed to be based on personal feelings rather than well-meaning advice. Alus heard the verbal sparring and sensed a quarrel forming over something trivial, but he was unable to determine what exactly it was about.

Meanwhile, Felinella fired back without faltering.

“With all due respect, we are a family established in my father’s generation, a lowly upstart if you will. As such, my father has repeatedly told me that if my words are deemed unworthy of noble society or if my position creates unnecessary conflicts or restrictions, he will humbly give up his position.”

Vizaist was willing to quit being a noble if it interfered with his daughter's future, and he wasn't bluffing. Alus had heard something similar from Vizaist directly. He only maintained his position because Felinella would someday join the military as a Magicmaster.

He was a doting parent if ever there was one.

"Ha ha, your courage to say that before the ruler is commendable," said Cicelnia. "It's normally not something to be praised, but there is nobody here who would call it insolent. However, Lord Socalent is vital to the military and must at least have a noble title. I understand your resolve, but you would do best to consider if it's really wise to simply follow your own wishes."

The atmosphere changed as Cicelnia finished speaking. She stared down at Felinella with a sharp gleam in her eyes.

Felinella raised her head, undaunted. "I see no reason to even entertain the thought. Just being in this place with Mr. Alus is the greatest statement of my determination."

It was as if Felinella and the entire Socalent family were stating they would stand by Alus's side throughout this entire series of events.

Despite Felinella's bold statement, Cicelnia's face was expressionless.

Then Cicelnia narrowed her eyes, looked down at Felinella, and icily said, "Learn your place. You go too far."

She rested her elbow on the throne's armrest and planted her cheek in her hand, staring at Felinella. After a moment, she exhaled loudly and made a show of changing position to lean into her throne.

"You say outrageous things despite your cute face. Good grief, a certain unsociable person sure is sinful," Cicelnia said, hiding her face behind a folding fan.

In their little war of words, one thing had become clear to Cicelnia. Unfortunately, not only did Felinella Socalent have nerves of steel, she was also a "maiden," who was no doubt standing with Alus. She was an unnecessary pawn in Cicelnia's plans. And her personal feelings for Alus had the potential to be a problem.

Through the gaps of her folding fan, Cicelnia looked behind Alus as well. Standing there was the girl with silver hair, Loki Leevahl.

Cicelnia had information on Loki, so she didn't see her as much of a problem, but based on her behavior during the brief war of words, she was yet another "maiden."

Good grief... This goes beyond just sinful. It's a mortal sin I say. Cicelnia thought, looking back to Alus himself.

He showed a different reaction.

He seems oblivious as always, thought Cicelnia. *This isn't just some lighthearted story about a popular lady-killer.*

Still, Felinella's stubbornness weighed on her mind. For Cicelnia, who also was also obsessed with Alus, or rather his power, this was the only variable she couldn't account for.

Cicelnia noticed one more girl who had come and pulled herself together. When she looked at Lilisha, the edges of her lips curled up a little. It hadn't all been miscalculations.

There is a lot to consider, but the bigger the gamble, the greater the fun, thought Cicelnia. *And leaving them for last will be the best. Well, first will be Felinella Socalent. I suppose I should give this cute little student a good patting.*

The Seven Nations Friendly Magical Tournament had proven that Felinella was one of the strongest students in the Institute. And while she was the daughter of the Socalent family, it wouldn't be very fun if the ruler simply had the upper hand in a war of words because of political dealings.

A maiden's feelings were on the line.

But Felinella was straightforward and open about her feelings. She wasn't embarrassed to put them into words either, wielding them like a weapon at Cicelnia.

Felinella only wanted to stay near Alus's side so that she could one day be helpful... Regardless of what lay behind that desire, Cicelnia didn't intend to step on to the same playing field.

Well, it's not like I have the qualities of a "maiden" in the first place. Still, it is exciting to experience something new, thought the ruler. *I don't know what this girl thinks my feelings are, but she took the initiative to put me in check.*

Cicelnia knew that seeing everything as a game was a bad habit of hers, but she couldn't help but find the unexpected reaction fun. Shaking her head, she fought the desire to play with the girl's genuine feelings for her own leisure.

That would be despicable, and Cicelnia found herself taking a liking to the girl before her.

"Well, no matter. But back to the topic of dining with Alus in full view of everyone," Cicelnia said and left a meaningful pause.

Felinella made full use of the opening. "Oh, there is nothing strange about it. After all, whether Mr. Alus likes it or not, he tends to stand out quite a lot. I am merely concerned as somebody who understands his circumstances and as a senior at the Institute. Or do I perhaps need the ruler's permission even for that...?"

Cicelnia didn't overlook Felinella's sharp phrasing. "Yes, that's right. It is necessary."

For a moment, Felinella said nothing. She couldn't believe the ruler had said that with a straight face—and with Alus present. He notoriously hated being controlled or restrained.

Cicelnia had said what she had despite that. Even if she expected him to balk at needing her permission, she had things she wouldn't compromise on.

However, Cicelnia just smiled, enjoying Felinella's reaction.

"Oh don't think too hard about it," she said. "It was only a joke. Alus is an individual before he is the nation's Single Digit Magicmaster. I wouldn't be so unreasonable. And he always does such a good job, despite me pushing him to do the impossible... I fear he might secretly hate me." With a sorrowful smile, Cicelnia gently continued. "Ah, this is all just me talking to myself, so don't mind me, please."

At this point, Felinella began to consider quitting. She did not enjoy chaos, but as a noble and an honor student, she couldn't completely disregard Cicelnia's

will.

Cicelnia said that her permission was needed to even dine with Alus. She'd soon say it was a joke, but it gave Felinella a glimpse into the ruler's mind.

And that glimpse showed signs of the immensely beautiful ruler caring for Alus. While Felinella had no intentions of bending when it came to her feelings, as a noble under the ruler, she knew that acting stubborn and inflexible weren't options.

Felinella finally accepted a cease-fire of sorts with a new understanding of how deception powered the military and the nation's central government. She couldn't help but feel a lack of power.

"I understand what you are saying," Felinella said after a moment. "Please don't worry about it. Mr. Alus is not that mean."

Her words were pure lip service, but she did her best to sound as respectful as possible. She always made every effort to act like a proper lady in front of Alus.

The situation was settled for the moment, but the only one who had gotten a read on the seemingly casual conversation between the two was Rinne. Alus and Loki had only caught half the nuance, and Lilisha had been breaking into a cold sweat from the beginning.

Aferka had once been under the direct control of the previous ruler and, therefore, more affected by their influence. So Lilisha was hypersensitive to the intentions of the ruler. As she watched the conversation, Lilisha had shrunk back in fear, wanting to prostrate herself before the ruler and apologize for her acquaintance's rudeness.

Completely opposite of her, Alus took a step forwards towards Cicelnia without a care. While he didn't understand what was going on beneath the surface of their exchange of words, he did know that it had come to a pause.

Alus was forceful. "You know what I'm here for."

"What a greeting, Alus. How long has it been since you came to the palace of your own volition? As I recall, you haven't even attended any awards ceremonies...so it has been quite a while now," Cicelnia said, trying to look distant.

Alus wasn't going to let her play with him. He continued in a cold tone, "I don't have the time to waste on pointless conversation."

There was probably nobody who could beat Cicelnia at the art of manipulative communication, with and without words. Alus considered it a preemptive action to prevent her from seizing the initiative.

"Do you really think you can feign ignorance after getting me involved like this?" he said. "Don't look down on me."

"Wow... Don't you think you are being a little too harsh?" responded Cicelnia. "It's not like I wanted to anger you. I have my own circumstances to consider, and you would just refuse if I asked for your cooperation anyways."

"Of course I would. You even went ahead and used Berwick for it."

"Oh, you've got it all figured out already. I suppose I should apologize, then. I'm sorry, Alus." Cicelnia lowered her head but stayed seated. The insincere gesture was only a formality, and she didn't even feign to look guilty.

"I'm glad you can understand what's on my mind. You think that's enough to make me feel relieved?" Alus asked.

Cicelnia shrugged. "Oh, is it not enough? Don't be so glum about it...okay, Alus? Oh, I suppose it can't be helped. Would you like to hear the details of my plan?"

"Yeah, I want no more part of it," said Alus. "But it'd be a pain if you just continued to sidestep the details, so I'll get straight to the point and ask what I want to know."

"I already know what you're after, so let me just give you the answer. It's about Ms. Lilisha isn't it?" Cicelnia's lips curled up into a smile and she snapped her fingers, signaling a new person to enter the room.

The sound of a cane tapping against the floor rang out as an elderly woman in old-fashioned garments stepped in.

"Ms. Miltria?!" Lilisha croaked, eyes wide, when she first spotted the woman. But her surprise soon softened into nostalgia.

Alus wasn't particularly surprised as he repeated the name in his mind.

Miltria... Miltria Tristen?

He quickly pulled up in his mind what he knew about a person who seemed to fit the description. If he recalled correctly, her name had appeared on a list of important magic researchers. She had put forward the theories of group unification and parallelization of formulas.

Alus vigilantly stared at the elderly woman who was gently smiling at Lilisha.

"I have caused you trouble, Lilisha," the woman said.

"No... This is all because of my own failings!" Lilisha answered. "I was a terrible disciple, and now I have been chased out of the family. And because you covered for me, your position and status..."

"It is nothing for you to concern yourself with. It was time for these weary old bones to retire. And I didn't see eye to eye with the current leader."

From their exchange, Alus understood what kind of relationship the girl and the old woman shared, but he couldn't help but feel wary about her sudden appearance.

Meanwhile, Cicelnia held her upturned palm out for introductions.

"Ms. Miltria here is a great pioneer who I brought over with special treatment. She is the former Witch and currently Aferka's adviser. In the past she was their commander-in-chief."

"Ha ha ha, I am nothing but an old hag now. And calling me 'commander' is a bit misleading," said Miltria. "In the past Aferka was run by two people. Back then there was so much work to be done..."

Miltria looked like she was about to begin reminiscing about old times, and Cicelnia gave her a reminder. "No long stories please."

After nodding, Miltria stared at Alus. "So you must be Alus. You look pretty dashing. I can see why Lilisha has taken a liking to you."

"Huh?! I-I don't really..." Lilisha exclaimed in surprise.

With a gentle smile, Miltria shook her head at the girl. "Lilisha, you may not be an official disciple, but this hag hasn't gone so senile that she can't see through your heart. I can see through your situation too. It's not like rumors

within Aferka wouldn't reach me as the adviser."

"O-Oh..." Lilisha quietly muttered in response.

Miltria turned back to Alus. "Hmm, Alus is it? From what I hear, you are attending Sisty's Institute. To think Sisty is in the position to teach the young. Time goes by so fast lately. Just the other day she stopped by to visit me... Speaking of, I suppose Sisty would be Lilisha's fellow disciple."

Alus only narrowed his eyes at the revelation. It was at this moment he became convinced that this elderly woman was Sisty's source of information. No wonder Sisty found out about Lilisha's movements as an assassin of Aferka.

Lilisha was also surprised. "The principal is your...?"

"Yes. That is why she inherited the alias of Witch," explained Miltria. "Like the ruler said, that was my title in the past. Well, she is a cute little apprentice in her own right. You are less suited for using magic, so you were trained differently, Lilisha."

"I-I see..."

"It is important to look at a person's aptitudes when teaching," continued Miltria. "But that aside, I caused you a lot of trouble too, Alus, so I am sorry. And I thank you for saving this child."

"If you're talking about what happened at the Fable estate, it's just the natural course of events. Not to mention that your disciple, the principal, completely took me for a ride. Although it was partially by choice," said Alus.

"Ha ha ha, is that so? Then it seems that you saved Sisty as well in a way. Which would mean that my two disciples owe you a debt of gratitude. Lilisha is like a granddaughter to me... She just happens to be unfortunate in a lot of ways."

Even though she had only been a temporary mentor to Lilisha, Miltria had treated the girl like her granddaughter and held complex feelings about the situation.

"There's no need to thank me. It was just the natural outcome," said Alus. "Is that enough? Because I'd like to continue. Since you're the former top of

Aferka, this'll be quick. You know more about the curse mark than we do, don't you? So why don't we start by having you look over the state that your favorite disciple is in."

Miltria nodded, serious. Cicelnia probably hadn't invited Miltria to treat Lilisha, but it seemed like Alus's guess was correct. Only a brief explanation was necessary before Alus signaled Lilisha to come to the chair in front of Miltria. Lilisha faced the backrest and sat down.

Miltria had a rough idea of Lilisha's state just from looking at her, but she reached out and touched Lilisha's outer garment with her wrinkled hands.

Alus wondered what diagnosis she would give. As the former head of Aferka, it was possible that Miltria might know how to remove the curse mark entirely. As he watched with interest, Lilisha glared at him.

"Hey! If you keep looking, you're going to see everything," she said, pointing her finger in another direction, hoping he would turn away.

"If you like I can cover my eyes," said Alus.

"Not enough!" she shouted.

If he disobeyed any further, Alus was likely to make an enemy of every woman present. He turned right and looked at the silver-haired girl.

He couldn't tell what exactly Loki's silence meant, but he felt a pang of guilt when she openly sighed. She probably wanted him to tell him to be more sensible, and he had a feeling a lecture on a woman's heart was waiting for him later.

"Hmm, so this is a curse mark? It's not a form of magic, is it?"

At Cicelnia's words, Alus started to turn towards her, but Loki forcibly held his head still. So Alus answered her without looking.

"I thought you of all people would know. It's the brand of an outcast that Aferka placed on Lilisha."

There was a gasp as his words. Cicelnia had been avoiding thinking about what had happened to Lilisha, and this was the first she'd heard about the curse mark. Cicelnia may have had a sheltered upbringing, but she wasn't the kind to

be shaken by just anything. This mark was so bad she flinched.

“I knew about it, but I didn’t expect it would be this bad,” Miltria muttered.

“Do you get it now, Cicelnia?” asked Alus. “We’re here to remove Lilisha’s curse mark. Since Aferka used to work for the ruler, I figured you would know something about it.”

Cicelnia slowly answered, “I don’t. Obviously I never received anything about Aferka from my predecessor. I’ve never given them any direct orders.”

Cicelnia became the ruler at a young age when her father, the previous ruler, passed away due to illness. “But I understand why you’d think I’d know. Miltria, what about you?”

“Hmm, if the curse mark has spread this much, you must have really rejected it,” said the Witch.

Lilisha said nothing. She hung her head and tried to hold back tears.

She had always striven to be a member of Aferka, but at the very end she had rejected it. And that very rejection had caused the brand to spread across her whole back. She felt like her inner self had been exposed, but she also gained a deeper understanding of herself.

She had killed so that her brother would acknowledge her, with no regard for her own will. But that will surely remained. If not, she would have died at the Fable estate as her brother had commanded, and it wouldn’t have been a shock to learn the truth.

So in the end, it wasn’t that she couldn’t live up to expectations but rather that she wasn’t able to become a true member of Aferka.

However, now she was no longer so weak that all she could do was tremble. Lilisha looked up at her mentor and in a loud voice she spoke. “Yes.”

Miltria looked at Lilisha like she would a grandchild. “I see, I see. You did your best. So leave the rest to me.”

According to Miltria, the strength of the curse mark was influenced by the branded person’s mental state. When Lilisha had first received the mark, her mental state had been very fragile due to her dependency. As a result, the curse

mark had become powerful and affected her both physically and mentally.

Miltria summarized Lilisha's situation for Alus and the others.

"Since the curse mark has spread out this much, it will be impossible for her to use magic. And she will be unable to reveal anything about Aferka's internal workings. Lilisha, refrain from doing anything careless until it is removed. If you aren't careful, this will become even worse. It could even spell the end of your life as a Magicmaster."

Alus asked her a question. "The curse mark shouldn't be a darkness spell. Can it really do that much?"

"Yes," said Miltria. "Aferka has an initiation ritual nowadays. They drop their blood on a magical tool and make an oath. The prospective recruits then drive in a wedge that will interfere with their basic magical structure. Because of that, they can be prevented from ever using magic or releasing mana ever again. It was actually worse when I was there. Anyone leaving Aferka for any reason was immediately branded a traitor. Instead of being given a curse mark, they were put on the purge list and would be hunted down for the rest of their lives."

The old woman called it the fate of assassins, an ironclad rule for those who lived in the shadows in order to maintain order. Without a chain to bind those who kill, the organization could never survive.

"I see," said Alus. "Actually, before Lilisha ever did, a man named Vector attacked Selva. Although rather than being an order from the organization, it appeared to be personal emotions that drove him. He was a former member of Aferka."

"Vector. He was quite devoted to Selva in the past. Either way, I doubt he still lives. How unfortunate he was." Miltria, suddenly nostalgic, narrowed her eyes as if thinking of examples to share.

Before she could do so, Cicelnia intervened. "I believe you should save that for later. It is true that I chose not to do anything about it even though to some degree I understood the risks that Ms. Lilisha would take."

"So you admit it," said Alus.

"Yes, but I swear that I did not know about the curse mark. I don't believe an

apology will be enough to make up for it, but I will do what I can,” said Cicelnia. “For starters...”

Lilisha put her outer garment back on and waited for Cicelnia’s next words.

“There is one conjecture I can make. And that is that the person who applied the mark should be able to remove it.”

Alus had thought as much. He nodded, waiting for her to continue.

“Another is that if a magical tool was used in conjunction with the curse mark, then another magical tool is most likely needed to remove it. The palace’s treasure vault has an area with items left behind by my predecessor, who had a deeper relationship to Aferka. There might be a tool there that could be the key.”

If there were sets of tools to place and remove curses, the ruler may have given Aferka the half of the set to create a curse, but he very likely would have held on to the part of the set that removed it.

“Is there really a guarantee that it’s a magical tool?” asked Alus. “It’s entirely possible that it could use a magical system to remove it.”

“Like I said, this is just conjecture,” said Cicelnia.

Alus doubted Cicelnia, but Miltria agreed with her.

“From what I have seen, it’s very likely. The previous ruler didn’t trust Aferka that much because he knew its origins. Ultimately he shunned their power and reached out to purge them. It is very possible that he left behind a form of insurance just in case.”

“Got it. So is there anything I can do to help?” Alus asked.

Cicelnia shook her head. “That’s admirable of you, but unfortunately, only the ruler and their aide are allowed in the treasure vault. Sorry, but you are going to have to wait. I will have all of my subordinates search for it.”

“I see. I thank you.”

Cicelnia’s eyes showed her surprise, but she said nothing. After a mere moment, her charming smile returned, but her gaze on Alus seemed unusually frail.

“I never expected to hear those words from you. You must be pretty angry. I anticipated that you would be. Of course, I learned from our last encounter and have stopped thinking of you as my belonging, but you are Alpha’s greatest blade and power. So you will always be needed no matter what.”

She spoke without a fragment of compassion, bluntly stating the facts. “Alus, I am serious too, seriously thinking about this nation.”

Cicelnia was finally facing Alus with her true feelings and shedding all pretense. Rather than pandering to the Magicmaster before her, Cicelnia opened her heart and chose to say how she truly felt.

Alus sensed this and focused his eyes on her. He wasn’t going to overlook a single word or the slightest movement.

As if to test her sincerity, Alus asked a piercing question. “Serious? What is? Pulling the strings behind the scenes like it’s a game? If you arbitrarily put people on your game board and fret about how many pieces you have and whether you’re winning or losing for fun, you’re crazy.”

“You’re going to question people’s sanity? Am I the crazy one, or is it the world? If you ask me, it’s both,” said Cicelnia. “What’s so wrong with controlling the country like it’s a game? That’s a ruler’s privilege. What am I even supposed to see in this tiny little space? What am I supposed to find in the ways of truth and sincerity? I’m crazy...? That is a pretty normal thing for you to say.”



The words sounded emotional, but her voice was calm. She had already reached a conclusion in her mind. Her words might be strange, but they were obviously sincere. That was no doubt that they were how she truly felt.

Alus could understand her; he was also shouldering a heavy duty and obligation. And to deal with it, he had distanced himself from the world of Magicmasters, which had put the responsibility on someone else. But she was the ruler.

He may have been the greatest Magicmaster, but he was still an individual. The ruler existed for the nation, meaning she had to give up the ways of a person and function as a political machine.

“I don’t know if I’d call it normal, but I see you’ve finally dropped the pretenses. In that case, I’ll follow your lead. So let me ask: how many pawns are there on this board? And what’s the outlook for the future?”

“I’d like to say that I don’t know or care—and it’s not like I’m omnipotent and able to predict the future—but since you’ve saved that girl, I will use my authority as a ruler as well. This is because it’s you, Alus.”

“That’s excessive praise. Are you planning on leaving everything up to me?” he asked.

“No, I’m just doing this because I want to. It’s not like I’m telling you to obey, but could you please turn that hostility away from me? It’s because I’m not all-powerful that I’m serious about this, using my own means to strategize in what you call a game.”

After that speech, Alus couldn’t blame her. Or perhaps she had set it up so that nobody could. Methods aside, she did what she did for the sake of her nation.

Lilisha had been caught up in those plans, but it might serve as a chance for her to break free from Aferka. The curse mark was unexpected, and while Cicelnia seemed indifferent, it was possible she had thought that far ahead.

“For the time being, I will assign a healing court Magicmaster to Ms. Lilisha. In addition to searching the treasure vault, there might be some more information that can be learned that will help in removing the curse mark, so I want you to

rest in the palace for today.”

“O-Okay! I cannot thank you enough for this kindness,” said Lilisha.

“Don’t worry about it,” said Cicelnia. “Like I said before, I hold part of the responsibility for your situation. Just as Alus has, I’ve chosen to help you of my own will.”

After a deep bow, Lilisha left the room with Rinne and Miltria.

When she passed by Alus, she whispered to him, “Thank you, Alus.”

Alus gave her a warning instead of a reply. “Nothing’s been solved yet, so don’t let your guard down.”

He’d judged that Cicelnia was telling the truth, but that didn’t mean he would take everything she said at face value. Cicelnia was torn between being a ruler and an individual. He knew she wasn’t someone so easily touched, so they needed to be prepared for possible disaster.

“Alus. I will do what I can to help, but contacting Aferka is a surer way. Searching the treasure vault could find something, but it’s still only a possibility. The person who branded her would definitely know how to remove it,” Cicelnia suggested, like she was making pleasantries.

“I would have done that if I could,” said Alus. “Even if I knew where their leader was, I doubt they’d peacefully allow me to see him. Or maybe you’ll introduce me? Actually, how much do you really know?”

“Could you stop being so blunt and show more reverence?!”

Cicelnia furrowed her brows, but Alus wasn’t bothered in the least.

“If you want more respect, show the appropriate amount of sincerity. Once everything’s in place, then I might consider it.”

“Is that so?” Cicelnia asked. “I’m getting pretty tired myself. I never expected Sisty to interfere this much, but that’s Miltria’s fault too.”

“I don’t care. Besides, you invited her, didn’t you? If someone who’s supposed to follow you moved on their own, isn’t that because you lack the virtue?” asked Alus.

“But that’s because I’m still too young as a ruler. I don’t have experience. I’m not important enough to push someone of Miltria’s caliber around,” said Cicelnia. “It’s the same with Aferka. The handover was incomplete to begin with, and I never made any proper contacts, so they probably won’t listen to me at all. My point is that, unlike Lilisha, they’re not an organization that venerates the authority of the ruler anymore. Say, Alus, why don’t you help me?”

It was hard to tell if she was being serious or playful right now, but he could tell that she wasn’t truly enjoying this game from the bottom of her heart.

“There’s no time. I said before that I was serious. That’s the truth,” Cicelnia continued.

“That’s not enough to trust you,” Alus answered. “Besides, even when asking for help, you don’t plan to reveal everything, do you?”

Cicelnia’s reply was a tight smile. He held back the urge to click his tongue. He knew it was actually unusual for a person in a position of authority to openly talk about their thoughts.

Even if it made their subordinates uncomfortable, being uncompromising when necessary was the quality of a top official. And Cicelnia’s forte was her ability to talk and have political dealings without revealing her true intentions.

“I don’t mind if it’s temporary, but just once could we join hands?” Cicelnia whispered, her face in shadow.

She was afraid of Alus’s rejection and hesitated to offer her hand.

Alus looked for grounds to base his decision on. He glanced at Loki and Felinella, who were still in the room.

Felinella remained silent, keeping her opinion to herself. That was one of her virtues.

Loki furrowed her brow, looking a little bewildered. She was afraid that Alus would just be used as a pawn again, but her stare told Alus that she would respect his decision.

Alus made his decision.

Right now he was in the Institute.

At first he thought that he'd been forced in there, but not anymore. With the passage of time and a variety of experiences, he'd reached this place through the accumulation of decisions.

He had changed.

But it didn't feel all that bad. Even if the path he had taken looked like the long way around, it wasn't a bad one. So surely this would be the same.

It's fine. Alus thought, like he was reassuring both Loki and himself.

He'd come this far to save Lilisha, so he intended to see it through to the end. This prepared him to take some risks, even if it meant joining hands with the Lord of Pandemonium.

"Phew, I feel far more at ease with Berwick's requests," said Alus after a pause. "Cicelnia, how many times have I moved for your sake? If I remember correctly, I wanted to be done with it. But this time it's in return for helping remove Lilisha's curse mark."

Alus slowly walked forwards. Cicelnia nodded slightly and held her hand out. Alus lifted her slender white hand and held it in his palm.

"Yes, that is enough for me. I only wish this was at an official event," the ruler said.

"Don't be too greedy. You've started to understand how things work too, right? If you'd just stood with your head held high, demanding my cooperation in exchange for saving Lilisha, I would have refused immediately," Alus said bluntly.

Rather than getting angry, Cicelnia just smiled. "I am glad to hear it. I almost slipped and said exactly that. Then we have an agreement, and I will borrow the strength of the rank 1 Magicmaster."

"But don't overestimate me. It's not like I'm omnipotent."

The two casually exchanged words with faint smiles.

"Feel free to dismiss what I am about to say as idle nonsense, Alus..." Cicelnia suddenly began. "If pawns only ever moved as preordained, the world would be

a little worse of a place. True potential is always outside of the norm. Perhaps that is the meaning of hope. Once this is all over...convince me that this was for the best.”

After those profound words, Cicelnia fell silent.

With that, Alus and the others were taken to extravagant guest rooms to spend the night.



Under the curtain of night, when everything was completely dark and the people had finished their dinner and were about to go to sleep, Cicelnia returned alone to the throne room and sat down on her cold throne. Tilting a glass of wine to her lips, she gazed out at the tranquil world, her expression somber.

“Everything is fine when I can be engrossed and move the pawns without a care, but why am I brought back to reality when the game doesn’t go as planned,” Cicelnia muttered to herself, drinking the contents of her glass in a single gulp. She reached out for the wine bottle on the nearby table to pour another glass.

“But even that is within expectations, isn’t it?” said Rinne, who seemed to have been waiting by the side. She slowly stood up and retrieved the empty wine bottle.

“Oh, but this is just my first drink,” said Cicelnia.

“Or so you say completely shamelessly,” said Rinne. “Normally you never drink.”

“I suppose. But that Felinella...she noticed my intentions.”

“I’m sure she did,” agreed Rinne. “But she still didn’t say anything. She has a clever side to her—like you, Lady Cicelnia.”

“Indeed. That is Lord Socalent’s daughter for you,” said Cicelnia.

“You don’t call him Lord Vizaist, do you?” asked Rinne.

“Titles should go with family names. He appears to be going by that name, but that is only in the Magicmaster world.” The ice in Cicelnia’s glass clinked, and

she nodded to Rinne. “Things are hard for both of us.”

“In my case, it’s because you work me so hard, Lady Cicelnia. But it’s not like I wasn’t prepared for it the moment I decided to work for you.”

Cicelnia quietly took a sip of her wine, then handed the rest to Rinne so as to not get too drunk. Rinne wasn’t particularly tolerant herself, but she decided to gulp it down.

Cicelnia was still young, a fact that even Rinne sometimes forgot. Because of her unique position and superior intelligence, she was always forced to think and plan far in advance. Fortunately for all, she had only used her brain to make the nation more prosperous. But anyone who saw her frail body could see that the weight might be too heavy for her to bear.

“Wouldn’t it have been fine to tell Sir Alus everything?” asked Rinne,

Rinne believed that despite Alus’s disrespectful attitude, he seemed like he could be discreet when necessary. Otherwise, he wouldn’t even be there.

Of course, Cicelnia probably expected that and knew deep down that she could entrust everything with Alus. But she was scared. She had always ruled in isolation.

Rinne saw that Alus was the only one who could get close to the young ruler. And while she was starting to acknowledge that, she wasn’t ready to trust him with all of her heart.

Rinne saw both of them as very similar: they were both perverse.

Well, it is Sir Alus after all, she thought.

Even so, Rinne never wavered in her decision to follow this ruler for the rest of her life. She just wanted to stay by her side and protect her. But she wasn’t arrogant enough to think that she could help heal her ruler’s loneliness.

Rinne understood that she couldn’t support Cicelnia all by herself, and she knew Alus could fill the role that she couldn’t. She couldn’t help but cling to the nonsense idea of Alus becoming the ruler’s personal bodyguard.

With this thought, Rinne suddenly called out to the ruler, tense. “Lady Cicelnia...”

Cicelnia saw Rinne's serious expression. "I thought it was about time. I'm glad it happened before I caught a cold."

"I hope that there is not a repeat of that time Sir Alus intimidated you," said Rinne.

"What a fun joke. Rinne, as planned, you leave too."

"Are you telling me that, knowing that I won't obey?" Rinne asked with a smile, indicating she would stay.

They had discussed Rinne leaving before but decided it was dangerous. Plus, she had no intention of leaving the ruler behind.

Rinne put a hand over an eye and glimpsed countless views. Her special ability, the Eye of Providence, let her watch over the palace grounds and inside the palace.

Suddenly a shadow appeared, where moments ago only Rinne and Cicelnia had been.

After a pause, the figure spoke with a low voice that was distinctly male but also calm and pleasing to the ear.

"It is a pleasure to meet you, Princess Cicelnia il Arlzeit." He gave a plain greeting, but there seemed to be some sarcasm behind the use of the title "princess."

While Alpha used a different naming system than other nations, if using such titles, it would make more sense to call Cicelnia "queen" rather than "princess," even if she hadn't yet been crowned.

His words, given with a faint smile, indicated his refusal to recognize Cicelnia's authority. But Cicelnia brushed it aside.

"If that is supposed to be sarcasm," she said, "it lacks an edge, second son of the Frusevans—no, I suppose you have become the rightful heir now, Rayleigh."

The long-haired, blond man wordlessly took a step forward, displaying his androgynous features in the moonlight that filtered in from a window. At the same moment, several black-clad figures appeared in the darkness behind him.

"Know that you stand before the ruler!!!" Rinne shouted in a thunderous

voice, but the black-clad figures responded by throwing knives with black blades.

It was dark, but Rinne was able to swat them all down with a swing of her arm thanks to her magic eyes.

She covered her arm in a sharp mana blade. There was quite a bit of magical backlash to her if someone sensed her sight from afar, but it wasn't much of an obstacle when they were close.

"Insolent curs! I will protect the ruler with my life!" she exclaimed.

"No, you have already fallen into our trap. How simple," Rayleigh whispered.

At that moment, the knives that had fallen to the floor began emitting an ominous glow.

"«*Veibind*»" The figures who had thrown the knives said together in strangely coarse voices.

Four mana ropes shot out and bound Rinne's arms. They wrapped around her body and tightened like a snake.

The more she struggled, the tighter the ropes became. Eventually, she was struggling to breathe and fell to the floor. Rinne realized that the knives she had swatted down all had a single magic formula engraved on them.

They had thrown the knives to make it look like an ambush, but that had only been one part of the attack.

"Wha—?! Lady Cicelnia, please escape!" begged Rinne.

However, Cicelnia just stared at the attackers expressionlessly, as if she hadn't heard Rinne.

"I didn't know that a professional assassination organization like Aferka would use such roundabout methods," she said.

"Don't worry," said Rinne. "Before long, there will be a mountain of dead bodies within the palace."

"Oh, it feels like I've been bitten by my pet dog... Well, not that I ever kept you."

Rayleigh ignored Cicelnia's sarcasm. "Now that we are face-to-face, I am convinced that there is a monstrous mind lurking beneath that beauty. As I thought, Womruina is better suited for our goals and intentions."

"A monster is not the kind of word you should use to describe a young woman. Regardless, you want to change them? You must be blind. But to think you would develop such ambitions the moment you learn to take off your own collar..." Cicelnia continued.

As she spoke she appeared casual and composed, but out of the corner of her eyes she saw Rinne's collapsed form. Cicelnia felt a chill run down her spine, but she couldn't let the insolent assailants see her concern.

She leaned into her throne, putting on a brave face in front of her would-be assassins. Secretly, she couldn't help but feel that she looked pathetic. She felt cornered, about to be fully exposed. A self-deprecating smile formed on Cicelnia's lips.

Rayleigh coldly stared at her as he continued. "I suspected you would move to eliminate us eventually. But to think you would be this blatant about it? What a frightening woman you are."

Suddenly Rayleigh cast his dark eyes down and began to rapidly fade as if he was melting into the darkness.

Even Cicelnia could sense that death was approaching her. Within a few seconds, he would surely be standing next to the throne to thrust a cold blade into her heart.

She gripped the armrests and felt the beads of sweat on her forehead. She regretted not at least having a dagger on hand. Even though it would be useless, she wanted to fight back.

Instantly, her breathing became shallow and she unconsciously began counting down the seconds she had left in her mind.

In a moment, Rayleigh completely disappeared, and Cicelnia saw a flash of silver appear as the tip of the assassin's blade curved towards her neck. It was on a trajectory to pierce her neck, but Cicelnia merely coldly observed it, determined to maintain her smile until the very end.

The next moment a loud metallic sound rang out as Rayleigh's sword was deflected by something that appeared from the side. The momentum threw it just to the side, and it grazed Cicelnia's cheek before stabbing into the throne's backrest.

Seeing the strands of black hair that were cut dance through the air, Cicelnia became convinced that her gamble had paid off.

Filled with overwhelming relief, all of her strength left her body. She probably couldn't even stand up, but she couldn't afford to look unsightly. As the ruler, it was her duty to stand as the curtains fell... That was the only responsibility that Cicelnia had to fulfill in this situation.

Determined, Cicelnia looked around. She saw that the chain of Night Mist soared around her, forming a protective barrier. The moment he realized that this is what stopped his blade, Rayleigh jumped back from the throne, fearing a counterattack. He took a defensive posture and slowly retreated to where his men were lined up.

"That was a close one, Alus," said Cicelnia.

"You're the one who planned this, you vixen," responded Alus.

"Oh, I wouldn't be so sure," Cicelnia playfully said as she slipped behind Alus, unable to hide her trembling hands.

"What happened to playing games? You've gone from spectating to making big gambles," he demanded.

"My game is still proceeding as planned, I'll have you know," the ruler assured him.

"Then why cross such a dangerous bridge?" Alus asked.

"I always take my games seriously," she said. "I'm not the excessively cautious type. Be it a game or otherwise, if I deem it necessary, anything and everything is a chip to be gambled or a pawn to be used. That even includes myself. If it's necessary, I'll cross as many bridges as I have to, even if they happen to be on fire."



Cicelnia stared at Alus with clear eyes and a fearless smile, completely masking her complex feelings. “That’s just what a ruler is. If I was satisfied being just an accessory, I wouldn’t be sitting on this throne.”

Once she had become the top of a nation and admired for her beauty, Cicelnia had given up the idea of a peaceful life.

However, her determination was evident in her choices, such as making Berwick Governor-General. Alus tried to figure out what she was thinking and if the plans she had in her mind were worth risking her life over.

She had me come to the palace and stay over for the night for this exact situation, he realized. She had already taken her life being targeted into account...

Alus found getting caught up in Cicelnia’s plans to be nothing but a nuisance. If her plans really were for nothing more than to kill time and have fun, he didn’t mind fully abandoning Alpha. However, he still didn’t fully understand her true motives.

First, he held out his hand and interfered with the binds around Rinne. For him, it was as simple as disturbing part of the spell construct.

Once freed, Rinne spared barely a glance of thanks to Alus as she ran to Cicelnia’s side. Rinne was practically the only loyal retainer Cicelnia had and the only one who could be relied on in a fight.

Any move Cicelnia made would have an effect on the nation’s nobles. Unfortunately, those nobles relied on their military power to suppress her. Nobles were given the authority to have private armies, while Cicelnia had practically no direct subordinates equivalent to elite guards.

Now that the Womruina family and other families that strongly opposed her were showing turbulent movements her lack of forces seemed even riskier. Cicelnia had cut her way through using intelligence and political maneuvering, but the limits to that were starting to show.

Alus closed his eyes. If he thought about it, it wasn’t hard to understand. Cicelnia was isolated and alone, but she’d learned the limitations of solitude.

Alus had originally planned to leave as soon as they could do something about

Lilisha's curse mark...

But now he stuffed away his frustration and looked over the man with the lean build and flowing golden locks. This enemy stood tall and keenly observed his surroundings.

Alus wondered why he could smell out his peers with such conviction. He recognized the eyes of those who didn't think anything of killing and the expressions of those who made killing a part of their daily life. Those carried a form of darkness that never disappeared.

The man deliberately raised his head and spoke in a quiet, emotionless tone. "So we had only stepped onto an already prepared stage. Even we are your pawns, it seems. I thought we had camouflaged our actions more than well enough, but it seems I underestimated the Alpha's Eye."

Next, he spoke to Alus. "The current rank 1, huh? It doesn't look like you will let us kill you so easily."

Cicelnia looked over at him and the tension in her jaw eased a little. She smiled. "However, this is the first and last time the spotlight will be on you. After this, you will tumble off the stage."

"And this is why you gave the order to apprehend us," marveled Rayleigh. "That ingenuity is truly frightening."

"Yes, Aferka's attack on the Fable family was a blunder. Even though you used Ms. Lilisha as a sacrificial pawn to provide justification, it was not a plan that should have been set in motion in the first place. Those who dwell in the shadows can never stand in the sun. You need to remember your place and stay in the darkness."

Cicelnia had given an order forbidding all the nation's nobles from fraternizing with Aferka, as well as to capture its members or assist in the effort to do so. However, that would never be made public.

She had made no official decree nor stamped a seal on any order. It was a simple and very private announcement to the nobles who had sensed the recent developments in the palace. And those nobles, uncertain what would happen, showed discretion and refused to talk.

That said, Cicelnia had purposefully been selective about whom she told. Of course, she hadn't told anyone from any of the Rimfuge families. As a result, rumors that the ruler had given the order to capture Aferka had spread. Sensing that the ruler had beaten them to the punch, they had begun to panic.

"I see. So while we aimed to destroy the Fable family, who is very cooperative with you, you were a step ahead of us..." Rayleigh said quietly.

"As a result, you all hurried out of your nest like vipers in an attempt to bite the king."

Alus quietly listened as Cicelnia's plot was explained.

I bet the timing's all up to Ms. Rinne, thought Alus.

While Cicelnia made good use of the Eye of Providence, her meticulous planning showed that she had most likely anticipated the attack would come today. She had thought things through to a far deeper degree than even Berwick would have.

She lacked consideration for those caught up in her plot, but perhaps some level of insensitivity was necessary. After all, the ruler had risked her own life on a gamble just now. Even if she'd believed Alus would come save her, it had still been incredibly dangerous.

Seeing how this worked out, we'll end up with one of the results that Cicelnia envisioned in the end. But this situation wouldn't have arisen if I hadn't saved Lilisha.

Alus, who was keeping Cicelnia at his back to protect her, glanced over his shoulder.

"So this is the best choice?" he asked the ruler.

"I don't know," Cicelnia answered. "But it is one of the forecasts that Berwick made. I was just trying to think of ways to handle every potential situation and anticipate all the possibilities. Now that we are here, I think this was the only route possible."

"Including a chance to remove Lilisha's curse mark?" Alus asked.

The person with the key to remove the mark was the person who branded

her in the first place. Cicelnia had said that they might find clues in the palace's treasure vault, but she knew that search was unnecessary. After all, Aferka's real leader, Rayleigh, would be coming.

"Yes, there was just an attempted murder on the ruler of this nation, but I'm sure the mastermind behind it also holds the key to Lilisha's case. Two birds with one stone, as you say. So you better capture the culprit, Alus."

"You really are twisted," Alus said after a pause.

"I do feel bad about this, my dear knight," said Cicelnia.

Alus snorted dismissively, but just for the moment he decided to accept the role. "You just sit there and wait."

"Yes, that was the plan all along. So please do protect me until the end," said Cicelnia.

"Just shut up," he said.

Alus nodded at the throne, then faced Rayleigh again. Alus had saved her once. He wasn't going to let her die in front of him.

As Cicelnia returned to her seat on the throne, a defensive wall made by the chains of Night Mist immediately formed around her.

Alus flipped his internal switch so that he could immerse himself in combat. It had been a while since he had had to focus so intensely, and he felt his consciousness sinking into himself. It sank even deeper than usual, to the deepest, darkest places, where not a single stray thought could interrupt him...

Ah yeah, I can't kill him until I get him to remove Lilisha's curse mark. Even that thought seemed directed at someone else as he reached a trance state...

Rayleigh held a thin dagger in his hand and vigilantly observed Alus. Alus noted not just the magic formula engraved on the dagger but its unique shape as well.

Sensing his intentions, Rayleigh spoke. "You're trying to undo the technique performed on my foolish younger sister? How eccentric to think of fixing Lilisha and using her again."

Rayleigh had already lost all interest in his sister. His words lacked not just

hatred or contempt but any emotion whatsoever.

“That’s not the kind of line a lured-in insurgent would say,” said Alus.

Rayleigh didn’t fall for Alus’s taunt. Instead he replied matter-of-factly, “I don’t care if I am called a rebel now. If I can dethrone her, the new ruler will become a leading figure in history. We are only doing our solemn duty.”

Even as he talked about murdering the ruler and creating a new leadership system, Rayleigh showed no hints of his own aspirations or desires. He spoke in such monotone it was hard to imagine he even had emotions.

“Well, it doesn’t matter. You’re just an assailant in the end. I’m going to wrap this up quick and have you remove Lilisha’s curse mark,” said Alus.

“I see, so that’s your main goal... Then do your best to stop this assailant, Alus Reigin.” Rayleigh quietly held his dagger, looking less like an assassin than a Magicmaster. It was an eerie impression from the leader of an organization so smeared in blood.

Alus remained on guard, focusing on Rayleigh’s movements with narrowed eyes. In the next moment, Rayleigh raised one of his hands, and his subordinates ran towards the doors on the left and right.

Their goal was most likely to kill anyone on the ruler’s side within the palace, but as they reached the doors, they were blown back by an intense shock wave. Their bodies rolled across the floor.

“In a hurry? Sorry, but you’re going to have to stay with us for a while,” said their attacker.

“Do you like making flashy entrances, Ms. Felinella?” asked another.

Felinella came in through the right door. “You are the one giving our guests too grand of a welcome, Ms. Loki. I was scared you would damage the palace.”

And from the left door came Loki.

Aferka’s members began to slowly back away, realizing instantly how strong they both were.

Alus didn’t take his eyes off of Rayleigh as he spoke. “Are you okay? They might be weak, but they’re still professional assassins. Don’t force—”

“Mr. Alus, I did promise that I would help as much as I could, didn’t I?” asked Felinella. “And please don’t compare me to your average student.”

“Well, I noticed the abnormality and made my move first.” Loki puffed out her small chest in competition.

When Alus had sensed the attack coming, he had left the room without a second thought. He hadn’t had the time to tell the two anything, but it was only natural for Loki to notice his movements.

An Aferka member broke into their conversation with a hateful remark. “Tsk, you’re nothing but mere Magicmasters!”

These words were to make it known that the attack had only worked because it had been a surprise. Aferka specialized in fighting people, so they could not believe they would be inferior to Magicmasters, especially not two little girls.

“Oh, you shouldn’t underestimate us like that, it will only bring you shame. You think these slim arms are so weak they couldn’t harm a fly? But that is where you are wrong. They are more than enough to squash tiny bugs like you,” Felinella said with a smile, swinging down a thin rapier-like AWR.

Immediately, the spiraling magic formula on its surface began to glow vividly.

“You’re talking too much, Ms. Felinella.” Loki looked exasperated, swiftly constructing a spell, not even giving the enemy a chance to talk.

The attack blew a huge hole in the wall of the throne room.

Next, her body draped in electricity and enhanced by magic, closed in on the enemy and kicked one of them through the hole.

Felinella shrugged at Loki’s preemptive attack and looked over at Alus. “We will handle these people, Mr. Alus.”

As she spoke, Felinella created a wall of wind and blew several of them outside. Alus nodded in response. A surprise attack was one thing, but in a direct fight, Aferka didn’t stand a chance.

The outcome was already decided.

Alus used his field of view ability to check within the palace. Rinne was probably aware of the situation, and Felinella and Loki had probably figured it

out as they chased the enemies outside. The palace practically deserted.

Cicelnia must have seen this coming, thought Alus. That is the palace is empty of people.

“Why don’t we start too. Your crime is the attempted assassination of the ruler,” said Alus.

Rayleigh’s expression hadn’t changed even when Loki and Felinella appeared. He had only watched Alus and Cicelnia.

The sounds of combat were already coming from outside. The ground rumbled and dust dropped down from the old pillars and ceiling. When it cleared, Alus and Rayleigh immediately closed the distance to each other without warning.

Pulling a chain with him, Alus freely manipulated his sword. Even as he did, the chains around Cicelnia remained as they were.

Alus and Rayleigh exchanged a series of high-speed blows. Each impact echoed and flashed through the throne room. A single direct hit would mean death.

Dodging a thrust from Alus at the last moment, Rayleigh slashed at the Magicmaster’s temple. Alus parried it by raising his elbow just in time. This broke Rayleigh’s stance, creating a chance for Alus to go on the offensive...but Rayleigh was strong and wouldn’t let that happen so easily. He unleashed a sharp kick at Alus’s abdomen to cover his opening.

He’s certainly skilled, thought Alus.

It was a battle of initiative. For an exchange of this level, a single blow would decide the outcome. They had to be careful not to create any openings or to miss one from the opponent.

Alus grabbed his opponent’s leg in front of his abdomen.

“...!”

The kick had a lot of impact behind it, but it wasn’t anything he couldn’t take. Even though he was forced a few steps backwards, he took it without problem. As a bonus, Alus got a better grasp of Rayleigh’s martial arts abilities.

“You sure have some interesting moves despite the blank face,” Alus remarked.

Rayleigh’s kick had mana behind it, multiplying its force by over a dozen times. If Alus hadn’t responded by covering his own palm with mana, his hand would have been shattered.

It seemed like very precise mana control. But Alus immediately sensed that it wasn’t only mana control at work. Mana alone couldn’t amplify strength several times over.

This is not just mana control. For just a moment, mana information was mixed in... he thought.

It didn’t make sense. Rayleigh hadn’t used body-enhancing magic, nor was it pure mana control either. Alus had expected that anyone strong in Aferka would have been trained thoroughly in mana control.

Rayleigh lowered his stance slightly, and in the next instant physical mass disappeared and his mana information blurred in Alus’s vision.

“Tsk!” Alus had braced himself, expecting a quick attack. But realizing he had been taken by surprise, he looked back over his shoulder. Rayleigh was already quite a bit away from him.

His target was Cicelnia, and just Cicelnia.

The throne room was pretty wide, but it was no more than the size of a section of the training grounds. When Alus realized what Rayleigh was after, it was already too late to give chase. Alus merely pulled his AWR and punched the chain attached to it.

While from that distance, it would be difficult for Night Mist’s chains to protect her, Cicelnia showed no reaction when Rayleigh suddenly raced towards her with a deadly blade. The reason for her lack of concern was soon clear.

The chain that Alus had struck hard rippled and transmitted a wave all the way to the chains around Cicelnia. Before Rayleigh’s blade could even reach her, whiplike blow after blow assaulted him, as though he’d been intercepted by a swarm of guards.

Rayleigh repelled them all, but he couldn't close the last bit of distance to Cicelnia. Rayleigh was busy defending himself against the chain when Alus closed in on him from behind.

"Don't look away in the middle of battle," Alus said.

Despite the storm of chains, Alus wasn't slowed in the slightest. He extended a mana blade and thrust at his enemy's back, but he never felt the sensation of hitting.

Rayleigh was slippery, and he disappeared. Instead, the blade made its way towards Cicelnia and stopped just before her eyes.

The next moment, blood sprayed from Alus's arm.

"I see," said Alus.

Rayleigh had dodged but had managed a shallow slash on Alus's arm. Alus immediately turned towards Rayleigh, who somersaulted backwards.

Alus increased his focus even more, recalling the sensation he usually felt when working behind the scenes. He formed a mana blade with his second hand and, without pause, resumed his high-speed attack against Rayleigh with his dual blades.

"Let's pick up the speed a notch." Alus swung the blades faster than before, their clashes were now faster than what a normal person could even see.

The attacks were so fast there was no time to even blink, and Alus's speed was gradually grabbing the advantage. Slashes started to appear on Rayleigh's body, but thanks to his last-minute dodges, they weren't fatal.

But even small wounds would add up. The victor would eventually be decided by the accumulation of maneuvers. Like a chess computer, Alus's mind analyzed vast archives of moves to neutralize an opponent as quickly as possible. And with machinelike processing speed, a strategy to put his opponent in checkmate was rapidly being constructed.

As Alus's victory seemed to become a mere matter of time, Rayleigh changed the way he held his dagger. The next moment, strange mana wrapped around his hand.

To Alus the hand appeared to suddenly warp and blur, but it wasn't just an illusion. Another arm and weapon had actually appeared and was attacking Alus at the same time.

Alus locked blades with one of the daggers, but in the blink of an eye the other dagger had stabbed into his arm. As blood splattered again, Alus kicked to get some distance.

Blood ran down his left arm and dripped from his fingers to the floor. Alus wasn't surprised, but he wanted to confirm something...

"To think you could duplicate with mana to this degree," said Alus. "Feels like I got beaten at my own game. Or maybe it's the properties of that AWR. At any rate, it's not something a human could do."

Rayleigh had exceeded Alus's mana control, and created another arm and dagger through mana. It was like his elbow had grown another arm.

"So you can see through my Ash-Covered Corpse," Rayleigh said bluntly as he flicked his dagger to remove the blood.

A ghostly mass of mana appeared from his back as if his soul had left his body. It was probably a mana information body—and Alus could just barely see it—but it was very incomplete.

It was a hazy clone of sorts, a bizarre existence that grew out of Rayleigh's back. It most likely had an artificial personality that allowed it to create magic on its own. However, rather than looking like a mirror copy of Rayleigh it looked feminine.

Typically spells like these were categorized as summoning spells, but Alus pondered if it was magic at all. He figured that its external appearance was created through mana and that the AWRs abilities allowed it to function on its own.

Interesting. This is my first time seeing something like this, he thought.

The first thing that came to Alus's mind was a transportation gate. The principle behind one was that it transferred a person's mana information body to a remote location. However, a transportation gate couldn't create copies, and it most definitely wasn't something that could be done with just a single

AWR.

Being able to split up like this meant that Rayleigh was not just an expert in mana control. He was also skilled at layering different mana information on top of his own. His high-speed maneuvering and unique evasion techniques were a product of elaborate mana manifestation.

This phenomenon was a result of not being able to visually or magically perceive Rayleigh's position. It was a technique that included a disruption of recognition, and when it was used to full effect, it was impossible to land physical hits or with spells that required accurate spatial coordinates.

Suddenly the light in the room dimmed as if a cloud had covered the moon.

Rayleigh muttered to himself as he looked out the large hole. "The night is nearing its end."

These few words had no emotion behind them. From what Alus could tell, Rayleigh was either really cold or just as elusive as his movements.

Although Cicelnia had completely deceived him, Rayleigh's expression betrayed no anger. He had probably been just as cold and emotionless when punishing Lilisha.

Alus suddenly noticed a change in Rayleigh's "clone." The darkness seemed to make its outline more apparent and ready to fight, as if it had a will of its own.

"Let's use magic too," Alus said after a pause, making it clear he wasn't going to hold back.

Letting his gaze meet Rayleigh's, Alus picked up even more speed. However, normal magic couldn't directly interfere with Rayleigh.

He specialized in masking his exact location, making spells requiring exact spatial coordinates unlikely to hit, and the longer someone took to construct a spell, the more open they were to attack.

Alus ran, pulling his arm behind him as he refined his mana. In an instant, he swung his arm and Night Mist as one at Rayleigh, who easily parried. The electricity Alus had clad Night Mist in ran through the blade to Rayleigh. But as if he'd seen it coming, Rayleigh used his momentum to brush aside the

electricity.

Not effective, huh? thought Alus. *Layering two mana information bodies over himself must increase his resistance to mana and magic as well as camouflage him.*

Since Rayleigh had a clone out at the moment, he practically had four arms, making it easy for him to counterattack even while blocking. The clone, which was moving on its own, swung its blade to stab Alus's chest.

But Rayleigh furrowed his brows as he realized what happened. Alus's body wrapped in mana right as a mana blade was about to pierce it, then the mana dispersed and Alus seemed to run through the particles right up next to Rayleigh.

He used a clone of his own to fight the clone, forming a dummy with his same mana information behind himself. He wasn't as skilled as Rayleigh, but since he was able to use Shuffle, it wasn't impossible for him to send his mana information elsewhere.

Just before his chest was stabbed, he had traded places with a clump of mana and immediately moved to attack. As he expected, even Rayleigh was surprised by this move.

Shuffle worked by completely trading the places of two spatial coordinates, but it required a suitable amount of mana information. Fortunately, Alus had had time to prepare for it this time.

But duplicating yourself with mana wasn't something that could be used so many times, and it was unlikely that a move Rayleigh had already seen would work on him again. Either way, Alus had no intention of letting this chance slip from his fingers. He kicked up and this time he was sure that he'd struck the core of Rayleigh's body.

The impact threw Rayleigh's body up and slammed him into the ceiling. Following up on that, Alus grabbed a ring of his AWR.

“<<Maris From>>”

Alus said the spell name, and branches of ice formed at his feet and ascended into the sky. Resembling a decayed ice tree, the branches froze all mana and

rose through the air, chasing Rayleigh.

The frightening ice closed in on Rayleigh. However, Rayleigh spun around midair and landed on the ceiling like a cat. He saw the approaching branches of ice...and cut them all down.

The next moment, the shattered ice fell to the ground like shards of glass. But when the branches hit the ground, they regenerated into new branches. Rayleigh swung his AWR to fight them back again, and his clone did the same to crush the ice.

Alus looked up and swung his arm as well. He himself shattered Maris From and created a new spell.

He thrust out his palm and a translucent wall launched up at Rayleigh, who was blown even further up and slammed into the ceiling again. Alus put even more strength into his arm and thrust it at Rayleigh again. His body was blown through the ceiling.

Debris fell down at Alus as the ceiling collapsed. However, Alus was no longer standing on the floor.

The tip of the chain protecting Cicelnia reached out towards the large hole in the ceiling that Alus had already jumped through to chase after Rayleigh.

Meanwhile, Rayleigh flew upwards from the impact, ascending to a height where he could see the entire palace grounds. He flipped his coat, opened his eyes, and straightened his posture midair only to find Alus right behind him, covered in a dark shadow and about to kick.

Even though Rayleigh crossed his arms to block the incoming impact, Alus twisted his body and unleashed a second and third kick, propelling him back towards the ground. Alus also threw Night Mist, aiming for when Rayleigh would land.

He threw his weapon to maintain the initiative, but there was another reason as well.

The body double had counterattacked while Alus unleashed his kicks, and Alus's legs had been cut repeatedly. Fortunately, the body double couldn't exceed the movements of the main body, preventing him from taking further

damage.

Alus clicked his tongue and followed the rapidly falling Rayleigh. Just before landing, Rayleigh and his clone twisted their body to either side as if they had split from one, dodging Night Mist before Alus's eyes. It soared through nothing but air and pierced the ground.

I guess that was too much to ask for, thought Alus.

Alus's attempt to finish the fight missed, and when he landed Rayleigh and his body double attacked from both sides. Alus pulled back his chain, which was covered in a vast amount of mana.

Sparks flew as a sword slid across the chain, making its way towards Alus's neck. Alus saw it from the corner of his eye and twisted his body to avoid it and felt it graze him. But the clone had anticipated his dodge and also stabbed towards him.

"Tsk!" Alus clicked his tongue and jumped back just in time.

Knowing he had the advantage, Rayleigh gave chase. Their swords clashed dozens of times in an instant, and the air ruptured. Both of them flipped around and landed at the same time.

With some distance between them, they stared at each other.

Blood flowed down from Rayleigh's forehead and dyed his face red like war paint. Aside from the stab from the initial attacks, Alus only had cuts on him that were far from fatal.

In the midst of the standoff, Rayleigh suddenly spoke. "I'm impressed you can keep it up with that arm. I didn't know the likes of Magicmasters had a rank 1 this good."

Rayleigh referenced Alus's gravest injury, the stab to his left arm from the first attack. Alus had seemed unaffected by it and fought using both arms the entire battle.

"Did you graduate from being a silent assassin? You have some interesting moves yourself," Alus taunted.

Rayleigh responded by silently raising his weapon again.

Like before, the outline of his arm blurred, but this time the cloned arm that appeared was clear.

“It’s the AWR’s performance. I couldn’t do this much with just my own power,” said Rayleigh.

That might have been true, but the technique was certainly on the level of a special ability. It was a truly masterful technique that could not be achieved without extremely precise copying of the mana information body.

If someone with Rayleigh’s skill existed who would listen to orders from above, there would be no need for Alus to do any of the work he did in the shadows. But Alus was not Aferka, who had turned their claws on the ruler.

But I suppose people rebel because they have power, thought Alus.

Rayleigh’s power might be useful, but since he wouldn’t do as the higher-ups wanted, he was an unnecessary blade. Alus, on the other hand, still got his fair share of behind-the-scenes work, but the nation wasn’t as turbulent as it had been during the previous ruler’s era.

At least as far as Alus could tell, Alpha was running smoothly under Cicelnia.

“I won’t say that it’s a waste that you turned on the ruler, but wasn’t there a better way?” Alus asked.

Rayleigh answered, “There’s no use in thinking about it. It would have turned out this way eventually.”

“So this is not just a result of her smoking you out?” asked Alus.

Rayleigh shook his head with a cold smile. “Rank 1, Aferka won’t change as easily as you think. We have all but lost our cause, and we won’t stay as ghosts that live in the dark. Even though we understand that, we have lived too long under strict control. Because darkness is all we know, we can’t help but feel something akin to a profound fear at the loss of our *raison d’être*. It’s what you would call a dilemma. And as a result, we realized that we must bring our name into the light or perish.”

Rayleigh spoke in a tone that was neither hollow nor pitiful. He slowly covered his face with his hand, as if to say that he had no choice but to forge

ahead despite knowing that only hell awaited him.

“What we want is for Aferka to become an autonomous organization that won’t receive anyone’s patronage or orders. Without that, we have no way to live in the world as it is now. Besides, you appear to be in the same line of work, but from the moment an outsider like you started doing work in the shadows, our reason for existing started to waver. Those with dirtied hands are not needed in the clean world of politics. How are we not to notice that our time is limited? But as someone who lives in the shadows, it would at least have given us some peace of mind to be executed as a necessary cost for peace.”



While now they were just a filthy squad of assassins with unclear origins and position, Aferka had once served the ruler until, including Cicelnia’s predecessor. But it had never been official, their existence—and especially that they took their orders from the crown—had never been never publicly acknowledged.

Because of that, opinions among noble circles were split between calling Aferka an executive unit beneath the ruler or an underhanded assassination squad.

But once Cicelnia became ruler, Aferka lost their unofficial position as an executive unit. As such, it was clear what would happen to them: They would eventually be executed for the sake of justice.

The existence of Alus, whom the ruler would love to have as a pawn, made all of that possible. And, thus, the fight between these men had become an inescapable destiny.

But reasons aside, what Alus needed to do hadn’t changed.

“I see,” he said to the Aferka leader. “But I don’t care one bit about your circumstances. You may have come to kill Cicelnia, but I will just crush you and get you to remove Lilisha’s curse mark. You’re the ones who put it on, so there’s no doubt a way to remove it.”

“Hmm, is that so? It was what that half-wit deserved. But there’s no reason to hide it, so very well,” Rayleigh continued with a slight smile. “The brand of the

curse mark consists of three constructional foundations. If my blood is dripped on each of those, the mark will disappear. The curse mark seems to have been applied stronger than I expected, but it's not all bad. It means that despite being weak and useless, she no longer needs to force herself and cling to the Frusevan name or their pride."

"Don't give me that crap," said Alus. "Don't put restrictions on her based on your own narrow view. Besides, she didn't choose this path on her own. You didn't give her a choice. Regardless, the spell binding her mind is broken by now, and she wished for the curse mark to be removed herself. Deep down she doesn't want to be tied down by her lineage."

Alus understood that Lilisha had been raised in Aferka, and therefore, it had become the basis for her values. She'd wanted to belong. As an assassin, she had honed her mana control skills and killed people to try to show that her existence had meaning.

Aside from her psychological dependency, she was somewhat similar to Alus, who had once only had a place in the military.

But as Alus quickly discovered that Lilisha didn't have a sense for killing, or rather, she didn't have an aptitude for it. She would always be tortured by guilt for her actions because she hadn't chosen that path for herself.

However, since waking up in that infirmary bed, Lilisha had taken a step towards becoming more human, walking forward by her own will. No matter how small of a choice it might be, every choice she made on her own was a big step.

"She wished for it herself? I see... So she's made her choice," Rayleigh muttered after a moment. He broke into a smile as if something delightful had happened.

Giving him a sidelong glance, Alus spoke in an indifferent tone. "You could say that. But now that I know how to remove the curse mark, there's no reason to keep you alive."

But those seemed to be the words Rayleigh wanted to hear.

"That's more like it. It is a duel to the death after all. That is our way of doing

things. I will have you know that my skills have been compared to Singles. And the curtains won't fall until one of us is dead," Rayleigh said and adjusted his grip on his AWR.

"Single Digit Magicmasters mainly fight Fiends. They can barely scrape by against people. I can't tell why anyone would want such a crippling disadvantage. So why don't you teach me," said Alus.

"Unfortunately, we are in agreement on that, so I can't teach you anything. We are birds of a feather, you and I, so there is nothing that can be learned from one another," responded Rayleigh.

"Hmph, what a boring answer."

"But I can show you the power of a Single. That shouldn't bore you, so consider it a parting gift."

"Then show me what you've got."

Rayleigh nodded at Alus's invitation and unleashed his mana. Out gushed a level of mana that could only come from someone who had devoted themselves to training. It was an unthinkable act for an assassin... More importantly it was a statement of intent.

At some point, Rayleigh's expression had become easier for Alus to read. He smiled now in elation that he was finally able to use the skills he had developed in darkness.

Rayleigh crouched low and started weaving magic. His dagger turned red-hot and started steaming as if it was overheating. Alus could sense it was a spell purely for killing—completely different from the kind of spell a Magicmaster would use.

"*«Helter Skelter»*"

Rayleigh's outline began to blur. As if his soul was being ripped out of him, his clone appeared. Since it was made from mana, physical attacks didn't work on it. Even more troublesome was that its weapon was a mana blade in the same shape as Rayleigh's AWR and just as sharp.

Just using the same trick is uninspiring, Alus thought, focusing.

That's when he noticed that the clone was different from before. This copy was much more precise than the previous one. But Rayleigh's own body had become more vague because he was using the camouflage technique from before. Eventually the two of them became practically indistinguishable.

That helped Alus finally realize what was going on.

This goes beyond mana control. This is more like interfering with space. Almost like...

It was space-controlling magic. It wasn't to the point it could overwhelm Alus, but it was the first he'd seen someone other than him use it.

So that AWR can handle space-controlling magic? As Alus pondered the spell, it completed, and the two Rayleigh's flew like arrows at Alus.

Alus stepped forward to face them even as he repressed his curiosity about them. This time, their cooperation was perfect. They even had the same amount of mana. Alus felt like he was fighting twins.

Interesting...!

It had practically become a two-on-one fight, but that didn't bother Alus. If anything, he fully agreed with Rayleigh about battling to the death. Their blades crossed, cutting into each other, causing blood to spurt into the air.

While fighting their battle, Alus was also steadily working on Niflheim. No matter the situation, the environment-altering spell would be able to change things up.

This easy-to-control spell was among his more powerful cards to play. And it wouldn't affect Cicelnia either. But just as he was about to cast it...

For just a moment, Alus paused and his mind blanked out. For some reason, his spell wasn't manifesting. He quickly tracked down the reason.

The magic formula on Rayleigh's AWR was intermittently lighting up. However, not all of it was being used—only a portion was used for support and there wasn't enough time to cast any spells.

It's not a spell! He's controlling and duplicating information in just a certain amount of space! Is that even possible?! thought Alus.

Spatial magic was not part of the normal magic system because its characteristics allowed it to interfere with space more easily than other attributes.

But in reality, that ability itself was such a prominent trait that it could be considered another attribute all its own. Interference with space increased the power of a spell used after the interference.

But instead of using that process, Rayleigh was taking it in the opposite direction: He was duplicating and twisting the necessary coordinate axis, creating a sort of special force field. By using a vast amount of mana, it was possible to artificially create a similar effect, but completely blocking spells should have been impossible...

Alus jumped away from Rayleigh and sensed something was off. When he touched a layer similar to the Tower of Babel's protective barrier, all of his questions were answered.

As I thought, there's a limit. It must be about five meters at most... So it's an anti-magic field.

A Magicmaster being unable to use magic would typically stand no chance. Unable to use their abilities as their primary weapons, they would be like a fish on land.

Although, that only applied to typical Magicmasters.

Alus had immediately analyzed the bizarre situation, and he was already trying to figure out the weaknesses in the technique—because of its powerful effect, there was a limit to its effective range, and on top of that...

It only lasts for about three seconds, Alus realized. It's weak due to being incomplete, and because of that it creates that force field.

Mana information had been duplicated several times over, and it functioned similarly to Rayleigh's clone. It spread out with the caster at the center. Rayleigh's AWR made the anti-magic field possible, and not even Alus could replicate it.

Realizing that, Alus immediately shifted his attention to recovering from the misfire of his spell. First he swung Night Mist to intercept Rayleigh's dagger,

then he used the chain to block the clone's mana blade.

Like he'd done to cover Cicelnia, he froze the chains in place to create a simple barrier. A metallic sound rang out as sparks flew, and Alus's mind kicked into top gear choosing a move to counterattack.

Duplicating mana information.

It was a move that Alus liked to use. As Alus left the effects of his anti-magic field, he saw a wall of black blades, his trump. Countless Night Mists seemingly grew out of space.

In total, Alus had created over a hundred copies of Night Mist.

“*«Oboro Hien»»*”

As he was flying backward, black blades shot out one after another and rained down on Rayleigh.

Rayleigh smoothly dodged the first few blades, but it would be impossible to dodge a swarm of blades so big that it covered his view.

Having no other choice, he lowered his center of gravity a little and readied his dagger.

And he repelled.

Swatted away.

Mowed down.

The deafening metallic sound felt like it would continue forever as he fought back against the rapidly flying blades. Sparks and white smoke billowed up from the countless pieces of metal scraping against each other and covering Rayleigh.



Once all the blades had been flung, it looked like Rayleigh had withstood Oboro Hien. But at that moment, Rayleigh saw another glint of light from a blade, and a silhouette of a person, concealed by smoke, appeared in front of him.

The figure leaped at him with the original Night Mist in hand.

Alus had timed the strike for when Rayleigh's guard dropped after getting through Oboro Hien. It flew in a perfect trajectory to decapitate Rayleigh, approaching quickly to settle their match.

However, Rayleigh's dagger and his clone's mana blade both intercepted it as if he had anticipated as much. He then went on to slice through Alus's chest.

Rayleigh's eyebrows moved ever so slightly as a sign of surprise. Not a drop of blood spilled from Alus's chest, and Night Mist suddenly fell to the ground as if it lost its support.

"Urgh." Rayleigh gasped. He looked behind himself to find Alus's mana slashed into him from the shoulder.

"It's over. Clone or not, I have some understanding of copies myself," said Alus.

Blood spilled from Rayleigh's mouth as he dropped to his knees. His clone disappeared into nothingness as he dropped his AWR.

Alus had created an accurate copy of himself in the white smoke, but knowing Rayleigh could probably see through that alone, he'd had it carry the real Night Mist, the very Night Mist, in fact, that had protected Cicelnia and clashed with his own weapon so many times... As a result, Rayleigh focused on the weapon and assumed that whoever was carrying it was real.

Alus stepped forward, but Rayleigh, who'd been beaten at his own game, lost the will to fight. Rayleigh hung his head, his eyes fixed on the ground; the deep gash in his shoulder made him struggle to breathe. He looked like he didn't even have the strength to pick up his AWR, let alone stand.

"Finish me off already. If not, you'll get the rug pulled out from under you," Rayleigh fearlessly said between ragged breaths.

“Don’t worry, I won’t even have to stain my own hands. Attempted murder of the ruler. You were never going to escape death.”

Rayleigh said nothing, but suddenly he pressed his hands to his chest. Blood poured ceaselessly out from the gaps between his hands. However, his expression was impossible to read.

Perhaps he wasn’t even thinking about anything, feeling neither regret, nor anger, nor any other kind of emotion.

His attempt against Cicelnia hadn’t been due to hate or grudges but rather due to him going along with the flow of everything. Perhaps he never really had any strong will from the start, and things were always going to turn out like this, as he’d said.

Besides, just as Rayleigh had recognized, any world that acknowledged Aferka’s continued existence was one that rejected them. So him sacrificing himself for the organization might have been part of the end of the story.

“Hey, Cicelnia.” Alus said with anger in his voice, glaring at Cicelnia.

She answered back without flinching. “What might be the issue?”

“Were they going to die no matter how things panned out?”

Cicelnia had given a secret order to capture Aferka’s members. Rayleigh’s actions to oppose it seemed to be a reckless move that would only dig Aferka’s own grave.

Their main principle had been to loyally follow the previous ruler’s orders, so perhaps they had wished to be buried by the ruler’s hand.

“Yes, no matter what they did, Aferka had no way of surviving in their current state,” admitted Cicelnia. “It’s, of course, possible that they unconsciously wanted as much. But how could a stranger estimate that?”

“It would have been possible for you,” said Alus.

Cicelnia didn’t object to that. Her expression was peculiar and vague. There wasn’t confusion, anger, or dissatisfaction, only her horribly empty eyes told how complicated her state of mind was.

“Well, I won’t deny it. Even if Rayleigh hadn’t done this, the policies already in

existence would have brought about this result. But I did have another ending in mind too, Alus.”

As Cicelnia finished speaking, she looked towards the door, causing Alus to look in the same direction.

“Brother!” exclaimed Lilisha.

Lilisha and Miltria were standing in the doorway. Rayleigh, reacting to the voice, looked over ever so slightly. But he didn’t pay any heed to Lilisha, looking only at the old woman standing next to her with a cane.

“Ugh, M-Miltria... I see, so it was you... You stepped down to cover for Selva Greenus, and I thought you had decided to live a secluded life as nothing more than an adviser... So you were the worm in the organization,” said Rayleigh.

Miltria sorrowfully shook her head and turned her back to Rayleigh as she walked towards Cicelnia.

“Rayleigh, you are half right,” said Miltria. “But I was more worried about this child than you. Lilisha has no talent for killing. Yet she desperately clung to our ways and the Frusevan family... Besides, didn’t I object to your idea of forcibly keeping Aferka alive on multiple occasions.”

“You came all the way to the palace for this...nonsense. Plus, I was well aware that she never had any talent.”

When Gill was banished, Lilisha desperately worked to keep the same fate from befalling her. But once Rayleigh became the top of Aferka, Lilisha had already reached the limits of her talents.

As a member of the five families, Lilisha received training like all others, but her progress was not as good as expected. Since Frusevan was the main family branch, they had to resolutely show their stance to the other four families, not allowing any question of their position.

This was why Lilisha had been branded a failure and exiled. In proportion to that severity, Aferka began searching more strongly for their meaning to exist. But they lacked fundamental mental support and became more radicalized as a result.

However, from Cicelnia's point of view, just running around purging whoever they decided was evil under the name of loyalty towards the ruler made them nothing more than rabid dogs.

It was ironic and tragic. This sight was surely always at the end of their twisted path...Rayleigh's defeat. So it really had been inevitable.

Rayleigh had accepted everything. He even held out a hand to stop Lilisha from running up to him.

"Brother?!" Lilisha asked.

"Don't come. What could you possibly do? Or are you saying that you will take down the rank 1 in my place for the sake of Aferka's dignity?" Rayleigh asked.

"Th-That's..." Lilisha started.

"Hmm, you really are a failure of an assassin. So go down a path fitting of your position. A cowardly rabbit cannot live like a wolf. They have their own way of life. Not that I could ever understand," her brother told her.

Lilisha's head had been hanging low, but at those words she looked, startled. The last part had slipped out unconsciously.

It was too faint to be an emotional outpouring, but perhaps it was a first sign of a brotherly side. Perhaps the meaning behind the curse mark was...

With this realization, Lilisha looked down at Rayleigh's feet. Her face turned pale as she saw a pool of blood forming on the floor.

"Brother! Th-There's so much blood!"

"It's fine. This is the end of the path that I've chosen," he said.

Miltria, who was watching the two siblings, glanced at Cicelnia before quietly rebuking Lilisha. "Stop it. Rayleigh has already made an attempt at Alpha's ruler. He won't escape the death penalty. That won't change no matter what you say, Lilisha."

Lilisha bit down on her lip and shook her head. She stepped over the pool of blood to walk up to Rayleigh.

“Rayleigh! Fuck!!!” Screamed a blond man who had suddenly appeared in the throne room.

However, his intrusion was stopped by the maid behind him, who violently knocked him down and restrained him.

“Elvi.” Rayleigh looked over to his second-in-command from over his shoulder.

No one else needed to be involved with his fate. Even Elvi could have a chance to survive if he played it off as an order.

The maid who had restrained Elvi had brilliant technique. When Alus looked at her, he felt that she looked familiar. She was one of the battle maids at the Fable estate.

Alus’s other vision had shown him Selva and his subordinates’ arrival earlier. That was why he’d let Loki and Felinella fight the other members. He hadn’t underestimated Aferka that much.

Regardless, even with his arm pinned behind his back and held in place by the maid’s knee, Elvi screamed out, “Wh-What’s going on Rayleigh... Lilisha?! And the Adviser! You!”

His face turned red as he should, but his outburst only made the maid pinning him down push down harder. A groan of anguish escaped his mouth.

Rayleigh quietly spoke to him. “Leave it, Elvi. We lost.”

That was enough to get Elvi to finally give up. He shouted again before slamming his own face into the floor.

There were still more of them. This guy’s pretty good...but this maid is bad news, Alus thought.

If Alus recalled correctly, she was Eight, a maid who was paired with Hest. As she pinned Elvi, she kept her hand by his neck as if challenging him to make a move. That hand was no joke either. The killing intent she gave off made it seem like it was just as deadly as a sharp blade.

She would clearly kill him if he let out another outburst. Alus tried to silently tell her not to kill him with his eyes.

Besides, the maid bursting in with Elvi probably wasn't something that Selva would be happy about. He would probably help Loki and Felinella if need be, but he seemed reluctant to join the battle in the palace.

Otherwise, they would have joined from the start.

Instead, he'd left it at probing for what Aferka was after on the outside because he'd wanted to keep it as a battle between himself and Aferka. Selva knew that showing himself in front of the ruler would end up getting the Fable family involved.

If he wanted to avoid that, he couldn't let one of their combat maids kill a member from Aferka in front of Cicelnia. All of Selva's careful consideration would go to waste. Even him appearing here himself and killing Elvi would be better.

Alus wasn't sure if he'd managed to stop her as Eight expressionlessly kept Elvi pinned down. So, though it was impossible to tell from her face, Alus wanted to believe that his intentions had reached her.

Now then...rotten or not, she is the ruler. Cicelnia is the only one that can keep things from getting out of hand, he thought.

The outcome was decided. But how would Cicelnia, who'd witnessed the whole thing, react?

As everyone's eyes focused on Alus, Cicelnia calmly spoke in her most dignified tone.

"It seems that issue is settled. It is only fitting that the top of Aferka pay for their attempted murder of the ruler with their life. I believe that the law is clear on that point, even without my personal discretion... Wouldn't you say so, Rinne?"

"Yes, under domestic law, attempts of assassination are punishable by death. Even cutting off his head right here would be justifiable given the circumstances," Rinne declared for everyone to hear.

With Rayleigh's death, Aferka's role would come to an end. However, as Cicelnia had said she had considered several outcomes, Alus sensed that something was off.

If she had plans in place to deal with them, she would no doubt aim for the result that was best for her. Otherwise, she wouldn't have risked involving Alus.

But was getting rid of Aferka entirely really the best move? As if to confirm his concerns, there was a lengthy pause after Rinne's statement.

Alus noticed that Cicelnia wasn't looking at him or Rayleigh.

He had a feeling that what followed would be the biggest turning point, but it would also determine the success or failure of Cicelnia's plan.

If only what happens next works out in my favor... Alus thought. It seems that the fighting outside has ended too. So it can't be helped.

The tumult outside came to a stop, as the remnants of Aferka were suppressed. Alus looked at Lilisha. She seemed to be held captive by her conflicting emotions.

Rayleigh had rejected her, and that probably made her unable to take a step forward. So Alus decided to give her a push.

Loki's words had lifted her spirits some, so he decided that he would curtly admonish her, telling her that now was the time to listen to her heart.

"Hey, Lilisha. You came all this way on your own, so don't shy away now. Just say what's on your mind. In the end, it's that arrogant ruler over there who will decide what happens."

Lilisha looked surprised, then she steeled herself, nodded, and walked over to Cicelnia. She knelt, and Cicelnia looked down at her.

However, Alus didn't miss the brief flash of relief in her expression. He had a hunch of what that might mean. There might be a thread of hope at the end of this gloomy and tragic story.

A dumbfounded Rinne and a sighing Miltria stood near Lilisha, but she kept her gaze directed at the ruler as she spoke what was on her mind.

"Alpha ruler, Lady Cicelnia. Please grant my foolish brother and Aferka your magnanimous generosity. Regardless of fashion, they have served this nation. They have merely made a misstep. Please grant them a chance to right their wrongs...!"

Cicelnia gave a somewhat mean-spirited reply. “Why would I show that much mercy? While it is true that I did not properly succeed the reign from the previous ruler, it doesn’t change the fact that this man turned his blade on me. It was not a child’s prank.”

It was a fair reasoning. Rinne realized Cicelnia’s bad habit was showing again.

“Even so...I beg of you. Please! Please...!” begged Lilisha.

“This incident will no doubt reach the ears of the nobles. And then what? Will they be told that an attempt on my life will go unpunished? I wouldn’t want a rebellion to start because I am underestimated. Examples need to be made... You understand that, don’t you?”

Cicelnia’s admonishment pushed Lilisha towards surrender, but she refused to give up. By that time, Loki and Felinella had safely returned uninjured, albeit tired, and were watching from the end of the hall.

Good timing, you two. You’re about to see something interesting. Alus thought to himself.

On the other side of the room, Lilisha knelt and threw her body to the floor. “I-I will do anything I can... So please, I beg you!”

“I am struggling to understand. Did you forget about the curse mark on your back? Is there really a reason for you to go so far? Is it just because he is your brother?” Cicelnia asked.

The ruler knew that Lilisha and Rayleigh had different mothers, but she couldn’t fathom a reason for Lilisha to cover for her brother after everything he had done to her. Was their blood tie really something to be so devoted to for one who had ordered her to die?

Cicelnia seriously could not understand her.

Alus furrowed his brows. The course of events wasn’t going very well because Cicelnia had taken an interest in Lilisha, who’d previously been outside her plans. Depending on Lilisha’s answer, the scenario set in place might have some unforeseen changes.

Lilisha gave a clear answer.

“Of course...it is because he is my brother. Rayleigh has always been a member of Aferka with a conviction stronger than anyone else. He has faithfully followed the old orders given to him by the ruler, guiding Aferka down the path that they desired.”

Cicelnia didn't say a word.

Hugging her own shoulders, Lilisha continued. “The mark on my back...is the brand of a failure. Or so I thought. But I realized something after speaking to my brother just now. Aferka is not that same organization it was in the past... Instead of killing those it deems unworthy as it did in the past, they brand them—as a form of mercy. I realized that the curse mark on me might be just that. That it is a chain to contain any betrayal or leaking of confidential information.”

“I can't believe it,” Cicelnia muttered after a moment and looked at Rayleigh again.

However, he kept silent, not intending to make any further excuses. Seeing that, her lips curled up into a smile and she looked back at Lilisha's face.

“You said that you would do anything, didn't you?” asked Cicelnia.

“Ah... Yes!” responded Lilisha.

Cicelnia folded her hands in her lap and gave an angelic but devilish smile.

“Good.”

Cicelnia stood up from her throne and in a clear voice declared, “Then from this day forth, Aferka will officially be under my, Cicelnia il Arlzeit's, rule.”

Lilisha gasped at her words.

“At the top of the organization, there will be a new leader,” Cicelnia continued. “And Lilisha Ron de Rimfuge Frusevan, I hereby appoint you as the knight commander. Under the discretion I give you, reorganize the organization into a new Aferka. Pledge your loyalty to the ruler and devote your mind and body to Alpha until the end of your bloodline. If you can swear on that, I will take care of everything that happened.”

This was too much for Lilisha to take in, and she blankly stared at Cicelnia. The ruler hadn't acquitted Rayleigh of his crimes, but taking care of it herself was a

step forward.

At this point, Alus understood Berwick's intentions when he'd sent Lilisha to the Institute. It hadn't been to observe Alus or to resolve her problems with her family. It had been to team up with Cicelnia and strengthen her. Through Lilisha, the reins to Aferka could return to Cicelnia and be reorganized as a blade under the ruler's control.

After a pause, Cicelnia muttered, "The truth is I wanted you, Alus. But you seem like you have something else you would rather do." But her words were so quiet they only reached Rinne and Miltria.

She looked back to Lilisha and grinned. "So what will you do, Lilisha Ron de Rimfuge Frusevan?"

Alus walked up behind the still stunned Lilisha and poked the back of her foot with the tip of his shoe.

Lilisha jumped, then bowed and shouted, "Ah, y-yes! You have given more than I could ever ask for... I-I cannot thank you enough. I accept this honor and swear on my life that I will accomplish your will!"

They were words Alus couldn't have imagined coming from Lilisha in the past, but he hadn't misheard her.

With a bright smile, Cicelnia nodded. "That's good. And Miltria, I want you to continue serving as her advisor. And one more thing... Lilisha, you lack the experience to lead a strong group like Aferka. Make Rayleigh your adjutant...that is, if he doesn't die from his wounds before you can persuade him. Do you have any objections?"

"N-None, of course! But..." Lilisha hesitatingly said, turning towards Rayleigh, who was on the verge of death.

She wanted to get him treatment as soon as possible, but based on Cicelnia's words, she needed to persuade him first. It was the least she could do in exchange for Cicelnia sparing him.

Accepting, she ran up to Rayleigh and stood before him. "Brother..."

The words that followed were heavy and deliberately chosen.

“Brother, it’s as you heard. The ruler has entrusted me with controlling and reorganizing Aferka...b-but it’s too heavy a burden for me alone—no it’s not something I could do myself... So I need your strength...”

Lilisha still couldn’t shake the instinctual fear she had of her brother. Before him, she struggled to say what she wanted, and she bit her lip. Even in this situation, it wasn’t easy to overcome such deeply ingrained fear. However, if this task proved too daunting, Cicelnia’s kindness would be for nothing.

And then nothing would ever change.

Lilisha knew this was the moment to stand and walk on her own feet. She looked straight at Rayleigh, her will stronger than ever to save her brother.

It was shocking that he’d attempted to murder the ruler, but she believed he must have believed it was in Aferka’s best interests. Times had changed and made it difficult for people in the shadows to live.

In the past, when the times had been more chaotic, the ruler had needed someone that could stain their hands with blood to support his authority. But the political situation right now was much more stable now.

The seven nations were much more cooperative, and people’s attention was focused on defeating the Fiends. There were still magical criminals and rebels plotting treason, but the domestic security force had risen to take Aferka’s place. The nation no longer needed assassinations to keep it safe.

A once-necessary evil had become nothing more than dirty jobs. As a result, Aferka’s reason to exist became increasingly relegated to the marginals of the arena of politics, so it was only natural for Rayleigh to feel frustration and see emptiness in Aferka’s future.

Suppressing the trembling in her voice, Lilisha thoroughly reflected on each and every word she said to persuade her brother.

“Aferka will be reborn. I believe it. This time, let us not stray from our path but fulfill our cause. You may have acted too smart for your own good, brother. So from now on you won’t have to be lonely at the top. I will be with you...”

However, Rayleigh brushed away her outstretched hand. He staggered to his feet, standing purely through willpower.

“It seems Aferka has somehow survived, so my role is over,” he said. “So just do whatever you want. Even if I am allowed to live through the ruler’s favor, it is pointless. Don’t say anything more.”

“E-Even so, I need your power!” Lilisha said.

“I said that it’s pointless. What reason is there to rely on me?” asked Rayleigh. “I branded and exiled you. Even if you were to suffer and die, I would not have felt anything. Even though it is our code, it would be considered outrageous outside of our organization. So let me tell you... It is Gill that you should rely on.”

“What? But, Gill was...” Lilisha’s words trailed off.

“He was exiled and is now working for the military,” said Rayleigh. “But his curse mark isn’t that severe. And just like yours, his curse mark can be removed with my blood. I am no longer the top of Aferka, just defeated and worthless. I can at least spare you my blood.”

Lilisha shook her head vigorously. “Even if Gill cooperates, it won’t be enough. Your strength is needed to gather and lead those who remain and to convince the five branches of the Rimfuge family!”

With Rayleigh’s plans now halted, the five families of Rimfuge would probably respect the ruler’s order to reorganize Aferka. However, Rayleigh’s existence carried a lot of weight due to the family tradition of meritocracy.

Elvi’s attitude showed as much. In fact, it was because it was Rayleigh in charge that order members had come on this mission, prepared for death.

For Lilisha to suddenly lead Aferka was a strange twist of fate, but she faced many problems. Primarily that she lacked leadership skills and experience.

But Rayleigh would be no help. He ignored her plea and remained silent. He coughed slightly and a trickle of blood ran down his lips.

Swallowing that, he turned, not to Lilisha but to Cicelnia on her throne. “Tell me. Why Lilisha?” he asked

Cicelnia looked a little surprised by his actions but then smiled at him.

“What if I were to say...because we’re both women? Forces that report

directly to me need to not only be fierce and violent, but we must be able to understand each other. On top of that, she was considered a failure by Aferka's twisted values. In other words, she is fundamentally different from you. She hasn't been fully stained by dirty blood." Cicelnia answered without taking her eyes off Rayleigh.

"What I want is a sword that will not stray from its path. Whether it is considered good or evil by some narrow definition doesn't matter. What I need for my ideal nation is reliable power and someone moderately broken enough to use it. Someone detached from the old traditions is more convenient. And from what Miltria has told me of your sister's personality and sensibilities, she meets the criteria I was looking for."

"Is that all?" Rayleigh asked after a moment.

"Yes, that's all. If she hadn't existed, I wouldn't have hesitated to take Aferka apart. An uncontrollable organization is unnecessary. The only thing that gave me pause for thought was Lilisha's existence. Moreover, I can't have you joining hands with Womruina," said Cicelnia.

Alus narrowed his eyes at her final remark. She had just confirmed what he'd suspected while battling Rayleigh: Aferka had tried to replace Cicelnia with the Womruina family.

Aferka would have only bared its fangs against the ruler to put someone else in place as the pillar of the nation. Aferka, and Rayleigh for that matter, didn't have the ambition to become king. They simply wanted to remain worthy to be the ruler's bloodstained blade.

Still, hearing that name again... It went without saying to Alus who the instigators were of the Tenbram involving Tesfia and the Fable family. They could practically be considered the root of all evil.

"Indeed, that family... They must have gotten even more carried away by you lending them your aid," Cicelnia said.

Her tone changed to one of condemnation as she coldly looked at Rayleigh. The fact that Womruina and Aferka were colluding was why Cicelnia was in such a hurry to get things done. Using her own life as a betting chip, she had started with Aferka.

“I won’t demand that you take responsibility. That is my job,” said Cicelnia. “But if you’re a brother, shouldn’t you try to help your little sister? It might have only been a one-sided bond, but you’ll just have to change that. You’ll also have to put up with walking between the path of light and shadows. At least make sure to heal your wounds before it’s too late so that Lilisha’s plea won’t go to waste...and for the sake of the other members you dragged into this.”

Rayleigh and the other members of Aferka had practically been taken hostage. And while he could easily throw his own life away, with the others’ lives on the line... He closed his eyes in resignation, giving up.

“Very well,” Rayleigh said. “Lilisha, I won’t ask you to forgive me, but I can at least give you advice. It is the last thing I can do for those who remain in the new Aferka.”

Lilisha’s eyes lit up, but the next moment her face turned pale as Rayleigh collapsed to the floor.



Cicelnia gave the signal, and a group of healing Magicmasters and guards who Rinne had brought over ran inside the room. They put Rayleigh on a stretcher and carried him out. The apprehended members of Aferka were handed over to them as well.

With one last caring glance at Rayleigh, Elvi obeyed their instructions and was taken away. By that time, Eight, who had been restraining Elvi, was already gone.

Lilisha attempted to go after Rayleigh but was stopped by Cicelnia.

“Lilisha, when his wounds heal, there will be quite a lot of trouble. You will need to make sure you talk to that brother of yours. And this is just my personal advice, but...be sure to get along with Alus,” Cicelnia advised the girl.

“Yes...! Then if you’ll excuse me.” Lilisha made only a slight bow as she hurried out.

Once he’d seen everything play out, Alus turned to Loki and Felinella. “It looks like this is the end of this play. Why don’t you two go get patched up too. Just leave the rest to me.”

They had been holding their breaths and watching things over. And while they didn't have any major injuries, they finally noticed the damage they had taken once Alus pointed it out.

"I understand. We will see you later, Sir Alus," said Loki.

"Yes. I would like to get changed too," said Felinella, "so I will take you up on your words."

Exercising some discretion, they obediently accepted Alus's suggestion. Miltria also read the situation and slowly left the throne room, rubbing her back.

At last only Alus, Cicelnia, and Rinne remained.

"So how was it? It didn't turn out that bad, did it, my knight?" Cicelnia asked with a grin, putting both of her palms on her chin, as if to enjoy Alus's reaction. It was a triumphant look.

"It just wasn't the worst outcome," Alus said after a pause. "Like you are in any position to say that."

"I didn't have any other choice. If you had taken my hand, it would have settled much quicker."

She wasn't a replacement, but Rinne was firmly holding one of Cicelnia's soft hands that Alus hadn't taken. She was a brave and loyal Spotter who had chosen to become the ruler's right hand.

Alus, however, casually brushed off the ruler's complaints. "I gave you a hand, so just settle for that."

"You really are twisted. But, oh well, I already knew that. And you were a big help, even if you only moved because you wanted to remove Lilisha's curse mark," said Cicelnia.

"You selfishly got me involved and now you're thanking me of your own accord, huh? Ruler sure is a very self-indulgent position," said Alus.

"Even so, I really am grateful to you for saving me..." said Cicelnia.

"Well, I'm not doing it again. In fact, if I hadn't been here for Lilisha, why would I come see a black-bellied snake like you?" Alus spat out.

In a playful gesture, Cicelnia hooked her fingers into the gap of her clothing and spread it open, revealing a milky white line of skin from her chest down to her abdomen. The moonlight shone on her flawless white skin, faint shadows cast by her ribs.

“Is it really that black?” she asked with a mischievous grin. Rinne scowled at her and immediately walked over to fix her clothes, muttering about how immodest it was.

“Compared to Lettie, who always has her stomach exposed, it is,” said Alus.

She must have been trying to shake up Alus by exposing herself. However, he was used to seeing such things when treating the injured or when female Magicmasters teased him, so he didn’t think much of it.

He gave her a sharp glare to remind her of what she’d done.

“Even if you didn’t anticipate the branding, you put Lilisha’s life at stake in your game. You treated her as a sacrificial pawn. So make sure you heal Lilisha’s wounds no matter what it takes. And do something about Rayleigh too. Of course, the palace should take responsibility for all of the costs,” Alus said, telling her to show some sincerity.

“Of course, the palace will take responsibility for all the costs. And I plan to personally apologize too. But I’m glad to hear that coming from you. Sorry for the troubles caused,” Cicelnia said, making it sound like she was accepting Alus’s demands.

She would comply with his requests. That way there would be no loose threads between them. Their relationship continued to have a subtle distance, not too close or too far, with no progress or regress.

Suddenly Cicelnia stared at Alus with damp eyes. “But you are getting caught up in a lot of things yourself, Alus. I heard that you went to the Outer World with Lettie... No, perhaps we should leave that at that. I’m tired.”

Even if it hadn’t been her intention, Cicelnia realized she was acting as if her man had gone out to dinner with another woman, and while she hadn’t said it aloud, it seemed that she was not happy about it.

She pouted like a small girl and furrowed her brows. It was another side of

her that she'd only show to Rinne and Alus.

"Yes, I'm tired. So tired..." She said and waved Alus over. The fact that she didn't choose Rinne showed a lot about her character.

Cursing himself for understanding her intention, Alus walked up to her, turned around, and crouched.

"Well, fine. I'll let you borrow my back as a bonus. Although if the outcome had been any different I wouldn't have allowed it," he said.

"Yes, I know that too," she answered. "Still, this game is always a lot of trouble. I don't think much of it while it's in progress, but once it's all over, the exhaustion washes over me. A ruler is not something you want to be."

Alus wanted to retort, but before he could...Cicelnia slumped onto him, putting all of her weight on his back. Her chin rested on his shoulder, and he could feel her beautiful black hair softly touching the back of his ear.

For some reason, Rinne was looking on with a smile.

"I really wasn't sure what would happen for a moment. So please let me thank you too, Sir Alus," said Rinne. "Well, this room was badly broken in the process. I only wish you could solve things more peacefully."

"You're going to focus on that, Ms. Rinne?" Alus asked.

"If I don't, who will? Just how much do you think it will cost to clean and repair all of this...? Well, I hope you can forgive some idle complaints as venting."

Rinne acted calm, but she must have been on pins and needles. She'd just been made aware of how she lacked the power to protect Cicelnia. So she looked unusually deeply troubled. And much to her dismay, her next job was to ask Alus to carry Cicelnia to her bedroom.

Cicelnia comfortably listened to the request and whispered into Alus's ear, "Alus, I know you might be worried, but I won't treat Ms. Lilisha poorly."

"Of course. You just appointed that weak-minded girl as knight commander out of nowhere. If you don't plan to give her any decent support, you should just quit being a ruler," said Alus.

“I don’t have the willpower to laugh off that spite,” said Cicelnia. “But yes, after this I will hurry to make the reorganization plans for Aferka official and hold a public appointment ceremony. I will put preparations in order, but it will take some time, so Ms. Lilisha will remain a student at the Institute for the time being.”

“Well, if that’s what she wants. But what will you do about the nobles? Didn’t you give an order to capture Aferka? Shouldn’t you prioritize dealing with that?” asked Alus.

As if just remembering that she’d done that, she put her cheek on Alus’s shoulder and casually answered.

“You don’t have to worry about that. I’ve only given the secret order to those who I can trust and can read my intentions, such as the Fable family. So cleaning up after that will be easy. It was all just an excuse to smoke out Aferka. It never had an imperial seal on it. I’m sure Frose sent out that many troops because she realized that. Even if they had run around stirring up chaos to capture Aferka’s members for real, it wouldn’t be a problem. I’ve set it all up so that I can feign ignorance.”

When Eight had appeared in the palace in pursuit of Elvi, Alus had worried that Selva’s efforts to keep the Fable family out of it had gone to waste, but it seemed his fears had been unfounded. Cicelnia had already predicted the Fable family’s reaction.

And while Alus had no way of knowing it, just as Selva had realized that Rayleigh wasn’t at Aferka’s headquarters, he also received a letter that stated as much.

Alus realized Cicelnia’s deductive powers were frightening. It was like reports of everything that had happened were already at her desk, she had perfect memories of them.

But as she’d herself said, she was no god. She must have racked her brain and worn down her nerves to get this far, considering every minor detail and considering every possibility to choose the best outcome. With that in mind, even Alus wanted to put her in bed so she could rest her exhausted mind.

As if having sensed that too, Cicelnia whispered to him again with the perfect

timing.

“Don’t leave me alone in this small garden and go flying away on your own, Alus...” she said as if it was pillow talk, and then Alus could see her slowly close her eyes from the corner of his eyes.

Even though her words rang with sadness, he didn’t respond. He interpreted her words as something too heavy to answer without preparation.

The pressure on her was something a single person couldn’t possibly carry, and Alus had been made painfully aware of that.

She created delicate plans that no ordinary person could ever hope to reach and reeled the desired outcome in with a thin thread that might snap at any moment using only her will of steel.

So what would she achieve at the ends of such toils? A peaceful nation? Praise and admiration from the people? Or perhaps renown as a ruler?

None of those really suits her, thought Alus.

In the end, she just didn’t want to be alone.

Alus didn’t realize that the root of the problem was the same loneliness he felt. While not fully, though, he could feel something that had always been unfulfilled being filled.

But people rarely notice what they have truly gained. As is customary, it isn’t until it is gone that they realize how irreplaceable it was. As such, Alus alone didn’t realize what he had.

In exchange, he had learned something. And that was what it meant to be a ruler, what fate awaited those who stood at the top of the nation and could order anyone around.

“In other words, being hated is your job,” Alus said.

Cicelnia was silent.

Rinne answered in her place. Casting her eyes slightly down, she spoke sincerely, putting consideration and nuance into every word. “I believe she truly relies on you. Lady Cicelnia can only pray that she doesn’t make too many enemies, but a nation can’t run solely on such lip service. This world is really

well made, isn't it?"

Rinne couldn't help but let some resentful sarcasm slip in at the end as she voiced her complicated feelings. Meanwhile, Cicelnia maintained a profound silence. It seemed all tension had left her body and she'd fallen asleep.

But Alus, showing no consideration, didn't bother to adjust the volume of his voice as he spoke to Rinne.

"So even you can get sentimental, Ms. Rinne."

"How rude. I'm an adult, and I can look back on the past and get lost in my thoughts, reliving the emotions of various happenings in my life. But right now, I feel like complaining to the god of fate, considering the burdens Lady Cicelnia is forced to carry."

"I see," said Alus.

"I apologize for the inconveniences we have caused you, Sir Alus. Please look after Lady Cicelnia from now on too..." said Rinne.

Even as she said that, she knew Cicelnia still hadn't told Alus everything, like that just recently she'd met with the magical criminal Elise, also known as Minalis Folce Quartz.

She also hadn't told him all of the information she'd learned. And while, depending on the circumstances, there might not be any need to tell him, Rinne felt that if Cicelnia really needed Alus, she should tell him everything.

Cicelnia's contradictory actions were evidence of her sensitive side. She wanted him to take her hand, but she was scared. She wanted Alus to trust her, but she was afraid he might hate her if she revealed everything.

As she thought about how Cicelnia had to keep her heart's desires and her actions as a ruler completely separate, Rinne felt miserable on behalf of her ruler. Not being able to open up to the person she wanted to trust just made Cicelnia lonelier.

While she had given all kinds of plausible reasons for naming Lilisha as the next leader of Aferka, it might really have been because Lilisha was close to Alus. After all, he'd gone out of his way to remove the curse mark.

Lilisha was Cicelnia's newest pawn because it put her closer to Alus. In fact, Cicelnia herself might not even have been aware of it, but Rinne felt that was close to her true intentions.

If growing up meant not easily opening up to others, then there was nobody more terrifying and cunning than Cicelnia. When it came to being up-front, the military top brass and old nobles were far more manageable.

My, look at how you are when you're fast asleep, Rinne thought with a smile.

This shrewd master of hers was completely accustomed to wearing an iron mask, but if anyone was going to strip it off, perhaps Alus could.

If only Sir Alus could always stay at Lady Cicelnia's side... No, I'm sure that would be impossible. I'm sure that he would refuse even if I asked in a roundabout fashion.

It was a matter that had already been settled between them. While they didn't say it aloud, Cicelnia couldn't tolerate Alus's stance, and Alus couldn't accept Cicelnia's demands.

But in their peculiar relationship, even without political considerations for the power and influence he had, Cicelnia was the one who wished for more from the other.

The ruler could sense the delicate balance of power she had and was not afraid of anyone, but she was strangely clumsy and inconsistent around Alus. Instead of taking the reins and controlling the situation, she acted timid one moment and strangely strong and abusive the next.

Even if it was intentional, Cicelnia of all people was unable to reach her desired results with Alus. He was the only person who caused her to forget her well-honed political skills and threw off her sense of balance, which allowed her to control anyone she spoke to except him.

Their paths were not joined, but she could only hope that they eventually would somewhere further up ahead.

With all that in mind, Rinne calmly looked at Cicelnia peacefully sleeping on Alus's back, opened the door to Cicelnia's bedchamber, and invited Alus in.

Seventy-Fifth Chapter

The Absolute of Clevideet

Only a few dozen kilometers from the border of Alpha's neighbor, the nation of Clevideet, a squad was engaged in an intense battle. Their goal was to clear the area of Fiends.

Veteran Magicmasters ran around like worker ants, slaughtering the nesting Fiends one after another. The level of coordination and quickness with which they followed one another and judged the situation was well beyond that of usual Magicmasters.

Yet they were lined up and just barely surviving the horde of Fiends that assaulted them from all directions. The team's mission right now was to prevent any Fiends from coming within ten meters of a specific area.

If someone were to ask where that area was, any of the Magicmasters would have glanced back with a desperate look on their face, their eyes leading to the exact spot. Sitting on a huge, arching root was a petite girl, slowly rotating an elegant-looking umbrella.

Despite the fierce battle going on all around her, the air just around her was almost peaceful, like she was on a vacation. She alone was allowed to slack off like that in their battle.

She was the sturdy nation of Clevideet's "hardest" Magicmaster, Fanon Trooper.

Her wisteria-colored hair was tied up on either side of her head, and her cherubic features gave her an entirely different impression than any other Magicmaster present. She wore clothes that looked completely out of place in the Outer World paired with expensive-looking high heels. And, of course, there was the elegantly designed umbrella that stuck out like a sore thumb.

Everything about her felt off, but nobody in the squad would ever point that

out. In fact, they were numb to it.

However, while it wasn't the standard military uniform, it was without a doubt her own combat uniform. It may have been hard to accept, but it was just how she was.

Fanon Trooper's stance didn't change no matter where she was—even on the battlefield.

If anything else about her girly appearance were to stand out, it was the large bulges on her chest. They looked very unnatural.

However, there was a terrifying rumor going around...

A male soldier had once made a blunder by mentioning the rumor and earned himself a powerful kick to the testicles.

But rather than a rumor, pretty much everyone knew it as the truth that she all but certainly padded her chest, and nobody in this squad, or the entire military, touched on that taboo.

At that moment, the woman who was an absolute force and reigned over this area stopped twirling her umbrella and spoke to her squad.

"Are you done yet? Can you hurry up and wrap things up already?" asked Fanon Trooper.

The suddenness made the squad jump. Even though they couldn't afford to let their guards down in their battle, they feared the long girl behind them even more than the Fiends they were fighting.

And standing next to her was a blond woman, looking cool. Based on her position, she was most likely the second-in-command. While the male squad was desperately fighting off Fiends, she didn't have so much as a splatter of blood or speck of mud on her.

But it wasn't just her.

The other women in the squad were treated differently from the men. While the men fought a bloody battle, they stood behind them, taking up position by Fanon and watching the skirmish.

But this was considered less special treatment for the women and more like

difficult trials for the men. Forced to survive harsh battles, the more veteran members became stronger. In fact, the proficiency of the entire squad rose to a level that far surpassed normal Magicmasters.

On the other hand, the female members were exclusively responsible for looking after Fanon.

Fanon's abilities far exceeded anyone else's. Even if this elite squad all ganged up on her, they wouldn't be able to so much as scratch her. So the men didn't get upset if Fanon complained that she was tired just from marching and demanded a shower in the middle of the front lines or sent them out to set up a huge tent. Most importantly, they felt it was their duty to fulfill her every wish.

Strange encouragement came from the male squad leader.

"Protect our princess! If even a single one troubles her, we might have to carry twice the usual load in the future!"

Before long, the area practically shook from the spirited response. Everyone present knew that just twice the load was too mild of a punishment.

A horde of Fiends was attacking them from all around, and the cause of that was Fanon. Going after small groups one at a time was too annoying, so she'd brought them all here instead.

Of course, Fanon herself was sitting on top of an arch of roots and kicking her legs. She did not intend to help out, as usual. Likewise, the second-in-command, the blond woman called Exceles Lilyusem, stood by coldly watching the action.

The next moment, things changed.

A dark bruise on Exceles's neck stirred and spread to below her chin as though it was alive.

"It seems that they are attacking in waves. Not only in bigger numbers but a higher class overall," said Exceles.

"Hmm. Well, I'm sure they will be fine," Fanon said nonchalantly and raised her eyebrows.

"Ah! What are you pulling back for? Who said that you were allowed to bring in the defense lines? Burn the behinds of anyone who takes even a step back

from that line!” yelled Exceles.

The female squad members who were given that order looked regretful but readied flames in their hands. At the other end were the male squad members making a circular formation in a ten-meter radius around Fanon.

But the pure numbers of Fiends began to push them back. Eventually, one after another, they began to have their behinds burned.

“Hold your ground! Squeeze out the last of your mana!” the male squad leader shouted.

Fanon’s squad had been in the Outer World for a while, and it was her men who had borne the brunt of the fighting, which had been nothing but fierce.

Yet despite that being the case for years, the squad had fewer deaths than others, and the reason was simple.

“Oh fine. This is such a pain,” said Fanon. “Have Rowan be bait as usual.”

At these words, Exceles spoke, representing the confusion of the male squad members. “Lady Fanon, Rowan is no longer with us. Did you forget that he left this squad to make his own?”

“Oh? Did he?”

“He did. Rowan only happened to be with us by chance before,” said Exceles. “His squad had joined up with ours, although it seemed to still be lacking people.”

“Now that you mention it...” said Fanon. “But it smarts a little to lose such good bait.”

“I hope you can overlook it. It has always been his dream to have a squad of his own. He’s currently groaning in a hospital room right now. How unfortunate seeing as he just formed it.” Exceles deliberately lamented their former colleague’s poor luck as if to take a dig at Fanon.

“I don’t care.” Fanon turned away as if trying to avoid a scolding.

Seeing that, Exceles let out another sigh, wearing the look of an older sister looking after a problematic younger sister.

You laid the groundwork for the joint operation, Lady Fanon, she thought. Letting the newly established Rowan squad earn accomplishments by working together with yours was fine. But dumping that tight spot on them was too harsh... Her only real fault is that she has a habit of overdoing it.

As Exceles sighed again, she heard Fanon pondering whom to send as bait instead, giving her even more to worry about.

As proof, she saw the backs of the men in the squad stiffen as though they had heard the devil's voice. In the next moment, both Exceles's and Fanon's gazes were drawn to a break in the men's formation where a B-class Fiend rushed in. Spotting it in an instant, Fanon snapped her fingers nimbly and allocated two of the women to it.

Perfectly understanding their leader's intentions, the two fired magic to patch up the hole. Magic immediately created a sea of fire before the Fiends, and at the same time, an earth wall emitted a powerful heat wave.

The two of them had worked together to create magma so intense that even the Magicmasters on the front had to cover their faces.

Following that, Exceles gave Fanon a report in an unconcerned tone. "We finally lured it in. However..."

The words seemed out of context to anyone aside from the two of them. But before Exceles could continue, a huge shadow circled back around Fanon.

A Fiend had gotten behind Fanon quicker than anyone could perceive. It had a shiny black upper body that looked like a gigantic bat with flying membranes beneath its arms. Its lower body had sturdy legs for kicking off the ground.

The Fiend's eyes glared sharply at its prey, Fanon. It rapidly approached Fanon from her blind spot.

In the blink of an eye, the Fiend used an explosive amount of mana to freeze the squad members who ran towards it. Then it unleashed an attack with all its power towards Fanon's back.

However, as everyone looked on, a translucent barrier warded off the attack. An absolute defense seemed to render everything useless.

The Fiend's five tough claws bounced off, and its arm was crushed by the recoil. As Fiend blood rained down, Fanon turned around and flashed an evil smile from under her umbrella. She spoke a single word.

“Stuuupid.”

“A-class Fiend Bakura confirmed. Please be careful! It has a lot of mana inside of it!” Exceles shouted.

Bakura specialized in letting its allies and subordinates draw its enemy's attention and then launching an ambush. Its incredible agility and ability to search for enemies made it one of the most difficult Fiends to deal with around Clevideet.

The Bakura was cunning and cautious, and Fanon had taken quite a roundabout way to lure it out so that it could be eliminated. And now that the prey had jumped into the trap, Fanon wasn't going to let it escape.



Meanwhile, the Bakura had two choices: attempt escape or be foolhardy like most Fiends.

In the span of less than a second, with blood splatter still in the air, it jumped away, unveiling its trump card. The surface of its skin was covered with countless fine lines, which all now lit up with an eerie light.

Fanon looked on with a fearless smile as even its flying membrane stretched out.

“Lady Fanon, it’s transforming!”

The Bakura disappeared from Fanon’s view. It had distanced itself from her to evolve to the next stage. Or rather, its body had already begun to transform when it began its attack. It planned to change appearance and gain new powers midair before its next attack.

However, its fate was sealed the moment it decided to back off. As it took flight, its body suddenly crashed into an invisible something—a magical barrier, huge walls that spread out in all directions.

The Bakura flew all over, hitting walls in every direction. When it thought it had just found an escape, it realized the only way to go was up. It was the only direction that wasn’t covered by the walls.

As soon as it realized that, the Bakura kicked off the walls and used the momentum to fly. It rapidly repeated the process to go higher and higher.

Seeing that, Fanon bent her fingers beneath her umbrella. In response, the barriers rapidly stretched up into the sky. The Fiend flew higher and higher, so the walls also rose ever higher. Even when straining one’s eyes, the giant Fiend looked as small as an ant.

Fanon abruptly lowered her umbrella. In an instant, the game of cat and mouse ended.

The speed at which the barriers extended exceeded the Fiend’s speed by far, and the Bakura crashed into the ceiling that suddenly appeared. At the same time, all the momentum that had built up from its continued kicks bounced back all at once.

The impact made the Fiend's head pop, and its huge body fell down with a torrent of blood. As if waiting for that moment, the female squad members fired a barrage of spells up, ignoring any and all interference.

Not even a piece of flesh was left after the massive firepower exploded the remains into fireworks. The impacts and mana particles created a natural form of space that temporarily hindered any detection.

But by then, Fanon was already sitting back on her branch, holding her umbrella high, and happily kicking her legs back and forth.

"The core has been completely destroyed." Exceles reported after some time, and the squad members stopped.

At the same time, the barrier changed shape into a box that surrounded Fanon and the others.

The Fiend's blood rained down, sounding a little like rain. Fanon closed her eyes. Once it stopped, she opened her eyes and jumped off the root.

She put her hands together and raised her arms to stretch her stiff back. "Great. Let's go home."

The mission had been expected to take a week but only took two days. It had been a forceful approach, but once Fanon decided on something, everything obeyed her will. Of course, that just meant her squad got pushed to the verge of death...

But she was fed up with the air of the Outer World and had decided she didn't want to spend a week there.

However...

"Lady Fanon, we can't! Th-The mission is still... There are more and more Fiends still coming..." one of the male squad members said in a distressed voice and pointed.

"What? You can just deal with that small fry yourself. Anyways, we're going back!" Fanon coldly declared and left, giving a wave of her hand. Her steps maintained a consistent pace, showing no signs of slowing down.

The man who had desperately called out to her stared after her. Another man

shouted at him, “You idiot! Don’t trouble the princess over enemies of this caliber!”

After reprimanding the man for his weakness, the male squad leader waved to Fanon with a smile that did not suit his rugged face. “Please feel free to go ahead, our princess! We will hold these Fiends back!”

“Oh really. But there looks to be more annoying ones coming from the way home too...” she said.

“Ah, please leave those to us too! We will carve open a path home!”

While this was a natural sense of duty for soldiers, their mana was running so low that the squad members couldn’t help but worry about if they could accomplish that. They could only see the worst future awaiting them.

But even with a clear picture of such a hellscape in her mind, Fanon left the battlefield without a care.

“Then just do your best. More importantly, Exceles, let’s go shopping to vent once we get back!”

“Huh? Yes, of course. Trying on clothes for adults is fine, but please don’t get angry just because they don’t suit you,” Exceles warned her, praying that Fanon wouldn’t get jealous of her good looks and model-worthy height.

“Oh, but of course. I’m not a child, so I wouldn’t do that.”

“I sure hope so.”

Fanon and her second-in-command casually chatted while the male squad members desperately fought back the Fiends and prayed that the battle would eventually end. As she gracefully walked down the escape path they had secured for her, she twirled her umbrella-type AWR in her hand.

Her expression showed the good mood she was in.

Seventy-Sixth Chapter

Promise

Two weeks after the events at the palace, a promise made some time ago was about to be fulfilled on the Institute's training grounds.

Tesfia's red hair swayed cheerfully as she stood with an air of importance in the middle of the battlefield set up for them in a corner of the training grounds.

"I will praise you for not running away, Lilisha. I will dye the mat red with your blood," she said.

There weren't actually any mats on the training grounds, but she was acting like a villain riling up the audience with trash talk before the match, even though her only audience consisted of Alus, Loki, and Alice.

A few chairs had been set up, and everyone aside from Tesfia was sitting.

They hadn't reserved all of the training grounds, but they had set it up so that their division couldn't be seen from the outside, which was probably why Tesfia was getting strangely worked up.

Her opponent for the day, Lilisha, gave her a cold look, then turned to Alus sitting next to her. "She's a noble's daughter, isn't she?"

"Yeah...of the three great noble families at that."

Tesfia seemed to have abandoned all dignity and manners. Lilisha gave her supposedly highbred opponent a dumbfounded look.

Having realized how pointless their conflict was, Lilisha looked to Alus with a disgusted look. "I don't care if I lose, as long as I can maintain my own dignity as a noble."

"Why are you telling me?" asked Alus. "Besides, look at her, she's so fired up that she's never going to back down."

Tesfia's cheeks were flushed with excitement. Just maintaining that level of

excitement must have been quite exhausting.

Alus recalled that it was the small fight between them that had started everything. It had been very emotional and childish, as if it was physically impossible for them to get along.

But perhaps Lilisha had already forgotten all about it. She'd been given the job of reorganizing Aferka and had only just returned to the Institute yesterday. When Tesfia had brought up the duel, she'd spaced out for a moment, desperately searching her memories.

She'd accomplished the most important task of her life and finally felt the weight come off her shoulders. Since this had come right after such a big event, her previous stubbornness no longer mattered to her, so she no longer saw any point in their duel.

Not that there had been one in the first place.

"All right, everyone's getting fired up!"

As Lilisha sighed, she found Alice standing between her and Tesfia, speaking aloud like a ring announcer.

"Fia is on fire and is determined to finish this! It is a battle of the century with the pride of nobility on the line! Standing up to the challenge is Lilisha!"

Alice suddenly pointed at Lilisha, who looked at her with surprise. "What?"

Alus gave the girl a cold look, as if to ask what she was doing, which made Alice turn red and shrink back. It looked like it was just something that Tesfia made her do. But it was her poor acting that had caused her to self-destruct.

"H-How about it? Will Lilisha face the challenggge...aaaahh I can't do this anymore, Fia."

"J-Just do it already," Tesfia whispered, trying to calm down her friend.

Being given no choice, Alice looked down at the memo in her hand.

"O-Oh, there's no response! Will the cowardly Lilisha tuck tail and run at the last minute? I-It seems that Fia has a proposal."

With Alice's prodding, Tesfia boldly puffed her chest out in a daunting pose.

“If you want to run away, you better grovel on the ground and apologize. Then I might find it in me to forgive you,” she said with a smug look.

Seeing that, Loki added with a blank expression, “What a terrible taunt. This cheap act wouldn’t even be worth paying money for.”

“Don’t say that. It makes just staying here a pain,” said Alus, knowing he could only watch things play out.

Tesfia probably wanted to settle things no matter how. She probably wanted to fight it out with Lilisha and then find some common ground, even if that was what everyone had expected.

Lilisha looked at Alus and Loki, then let out a heavy sigh, resigning herself, and glared directly at Tesfia. “How cheeky! You don’t even know the slightest thing about what it means to be a noble!”

She promptly stood up and pulled her AWR on her hands like a boxer putting on their gloves.

“In the end, she’s petty like her,” said Alus.

“Isn’t that fine? Ms. Lilisha is pretty enthusiastic about it too,” noted Loki.

“Don’t say that either,” said Alus.

But it was understandable. The weight on her shoulders caused by her family, brother, and the rest had finally lifted. What was wrong with cutting loose like a student now that the Institute had finally become the place she felt she belonged?

“Still, is that what your AWR looked like, Lilisha?” Alus asked in a whisper, and she held up a hand to show him.

Her middle finger didn’t have the glove from before but a claw instead. It was as sharp as a bird of prey, and there was a magic formula on its surface.

“Oh, this? Well, a lot happened,” Lilisha said.

“The truth is I owe that to the Fable family,” she whispered after a pause. “It wasn’t like it was for an official apology, but I brought a box of sweets with me. I did attack the place, and we’d always had a feud.”

She whispered in a volume so low that Tesfia couldn't hear, but Alus couldn't help but retort. "How casual can you be...? You did try to assassinate their butler."

"What else was I supposed to do back then?!" asked Lilisha. "What was I supposed to do other than apologize? Well, considering my position, I apologized and explained the vision for my family's future. Mr. Selva was generous enough to forgive me, and it wasn't like everything was solved, but with the reformation of Aferka, talks about a code of blood or purging Mr. Selva have completely disappeared."

Selva had left Aferka due to personal emotions in the past and been on a list of targets to be killed for the longest time. But it seemed that he'd been removed from it. Moreover, the Frusevan family had come to serve the ruler directly, so they couldn't casually fight with one of the three great noble families.

"Does Fia know?" Alus asked.

"Who knows? Well, even with the problems around Mr. Selva resolved, she probably doesn't know the details. Like your passionate approach and standing against the ruler to save me," said Lilisha.

"Now that's some misconception. But seeing how you survived and are free to be stupid like this, maybe there was meaning in that supposed passionate approach."

"You can fall for me if you like, but I'm a problematic woman," said Lilisha.

"I've been made well aware of that," Alus shot sarcastically, to which Lilisha could only give him a bitter look to acknowledge his words.

Looking back, she realized it must have been a big mess for Alus, who'd been dragged into it. While she was grateful, he'd ended up learning everything about her, whether they were things she wanted to hide or not. It was like she had been fully exposed, and for some reason she felt a little frustrated.

Frowning a little, she said, "Well, I digress. Still, it would be better if that simple-minded girl continues to stay a little stupid in the future."

Alus had secretly felt that the two were starting to get along, but it seemed

that had been a hallucination. He thought she'd matured, but that side of Lilisha wouldn't change so fast. Lilisha had instead gotten the claw-type AWR she was wearing.

“Well, all of that happened and then I got this.”

The Fable family had returned the favor; or rather it was a gift from Selva Greenus. However, exchanges of gifts weren't standard in the noble society. It was more of an investment in Lilisha, seeing as she had gotten close to the ruler.

A bribe if you would.

Lilisha had checked in with Cicelnia about it, just in case, but had gotten a carefree “Sure, why not just accept it?” in response. So Lilisha had had no choice but to accept the symbol of noble cunning with a wry smile.

The only saving grace was that the Fable family was unlikely to raise any objections against Cicelnia's current regime. Frose was rather close with Governor-General Berwick, and her daughter was attending the Witch Sisty's institute.

Lilisha figured that the gift was also a show of their intentions. Frankly, she wasn't sure what to think.

It wasn't like yesterday's enemy had become a friend today, so she was a little apprehensive of the Fable family's cleverness and the calculating nature of nobles. As a noble family of assassins, the Frusevans had lived in the shadows. As a result, they still had much to learn in terms of political maneuverings.



When she thought about how little nobles openly showed, she found it hard to believe that the redhead in front of her was likely to become the next head of the Fable family.

In any case, Lilisha gave up on trying to convey all of her circumstances and summed it up in a brief sentence. “Well, the point is that I was given it.”

She was neither boasting nor acting embarrassed, thus ended up imitating Cicelnia’s way of saying things with a complicated, bitter smile. It was like a right of passage: her first bittersweet adult smile.

Alus and Loki looked on with disinterest as the primitive method for reconciliation that went by the name of a duel was about to begin. As the two girls faced each other with AWRs ready, Loki turned to Alus with a topic completely unrelated to the duel.

“I wasn’t sure what to think at first, but this must have been what Lady Cicelnia was after.”

Loki was half-right. Cicelnia’s attempts to put the rampaging blade that was Aferka back in its sheath through a reorganization looked like it had indeed been successful. But Alus couldn’t agree right away. He had misgivings that wouldn’t go away.

Was that really all that she was after? What would the scenario have looked like if I hadn’t saved Lilisha...? No, just thinking about it feels like entering a maze full of dead ends. I’m sure it would have always ended up favoring her in one way or another in the end.

Just thinking about it was a pain, and Alus flashed his own small, cynical smile.

“That would be nice. But there’s no telling what that woman is thinking. There’s even a chance that she’s playing by ear and has no real intentions,” he said.

“If you say so, that might be that case. But it’s still a good time to settle down a little, isn’t it?” asked Loki.

“Yeah, we’ll be able to move ahead with a bunch of things now,” Alus said after a pause. “It’s a little annoying, but even Lilisha is back safe and sound, so

now everyone's gathered at the Institute. I can only hope this is not all according to somebody's plan."

"Sir Alus, it's not good to overthink things. Nobody can tell what will happen in the future, no matter how much they think about it. You have to settle eventually. So look," Loki said with a small smile and pointed to the center of the training grounds, where the two girls were about to finally begin their duel. "I was losing interest, but looking at those faces, it looks like it will be worth watching. The two of them have definitely grown."

"Yeah." Alus nodded at Loki's point, throwing his concerns in the trash and looking over to the pointless duel.

Even so, the image of the mystical smile of the beautiful ruler remained in his head. In one moment she had spoken about her plans with godlike wisdom, and in the other, she'd worn an innocent face as she slept on Alus's back. She was a goddess and a devil at the same time.

Did her plans all come to an end? he wondered. No, that's enough thinking for me. I will just have to believe that for now.

He could only pray that the goal they had reached was not just a checkpoint...

The buzzer signaling the start of the duel finally began, and Alus quietly watched the two hotheaded Magicmasters take shots at each other. And he saw them taking their first steps on the path to further growth.

Afterword

Long time no see. Izushiro here.

The latest volume is finally here.

This work is based on a web novel, but lately most of it is original, which led to further delays. I am sorry about that.

I'm sure the series will cross paths with the web novel again, but for now, I hope you enjoy watching Alus and friends in dire distress.

Moving on to the usual greetings: Thank you to my editor-in-charge for their work and advice, as well everyone affiliated with the printing, publishing, and distribution. It is thanks to all of your hard work that these books are created and available in stores.

Thank you very much.

Additionally, I would like to thank Miyuki Ruria, who is in charge of the illustrations.

Thank you very much for going along with my unreasonable requests.

I was shaken by the appearance of Fanon on the cover! I plan for her to play a bigger role in the next volume, so I beg for your continued help.

And finally, I would like to thank all of the readers for your continued support. I take all of your words of encouragement to heart and endeavor to do my best in the future too.

Moreover, Yoneshirokaru's second volume of the *Greatest Magicmaster's Retirement Plan: The Alternative* is currently being sold! We look forward to your continued support for both versions.

THE GREATEST
MAGICMASTER'S

RETIREMENT
PLAN

13



Cicelnia

The young and beautiful ruler. She has frightening levels of insight and wisdom, but she also has a tendency of treating things as a game.

Fanon Trooper

A Single Magicmaster of Clevidet. Using an umbrella-type AWR, she specializes in barrier magic, but she has a rather peculiar personality.

Lilisha

A transfer student sent to keep an eye on Alus. She comes from a family of assassins, but she fears for her place in the family and is mentally fragile.

Alus Reigin

Currently ranked No. 1 and the world's greatest Magicmaster. He wields his powers after getting caught up in Cicelnia's schemes and Lilisha's troubles.



**“If you want
to run away,
you better
grovel on the
ground and
apologize.”**

**“How
cheeky!”**

Bonus Story

Strange Thank-You Gift

Due to spoilers contained, it is recommended that you read the main volume first.

“How is the new Aferka going?” asked Cicelnia, swiftly getting to the subject as Lilisha stood before her in the palace’s office.

The young girl shrank back, still feeling out of place in front of the ruler. “Y-Yes... It is going well thanks to my brother. We have successfully obtained approval from the five families,” answered Lilisha.

“That was pretty fast,” said Cicelnia. “This might not be the best way to put it, but it seems that letting him live was the right choice. An excellent decision by me.”

“I am deeply grateful for your exceptional consideration,” said Lilisha.

“Your tone is still a bit stiff. We will fix that eventually.”

The official announcement of the formation of a new Aferka, albeit as a new unit that directly served the ruler, had been made just the other day, so Lilisha was now in a position to boldly enter the palace.

It was actually the first time the ruler had officially acknowledged Aferka.

Things had gone so smoothly that Lilisha’s new position still didn’t feel real to her. It was also her first time serving someone, so she didn’t know what to do.

“Objecting against the ruler’s decision is disrespectful, after all. Besides, wouldn’t it have been better if you announced it sooner, Lady Cicelnia?” asked Rinne, who was sitting in, in a dumbfounded tone.

“I have a lot of stuff going on too. You know that.” Cicelnia frowned as she let the strength leave her body and rested against the armrest of her throne.

It was the same as usual, but it didn’t hurt the ruler’s beauty in the slightest. If

anything, that vulnerable state made her stand out more, complementing her immense beauty.

“I-I would like to thank you again for granting me this meeting. Th-Then, getting right to the point...” Seeing the ruler’s mood, Lilisha timidly moved on to the main topic, hoping to finish things quickly.

She began by showing the item in question.

Lilisha didn’t feel at home in her current position as someone in command of a unit directly reporting to the ruler. She felt awkward. But there was no way around that, since there was a problem that needed to be resolved as soon as possible.

Lilisha had gone to the Fable family not long ago to apologize. She had received Frose’s forgiveness, but the wooden box she had gotten when she was leaving was the problem she was now presenting to Cicelnia.

Lilisha held it up with both hands like it was an offering to Cicelnia, who looked at it questioningly.

“Please look at this. It was given directly to me by the Fable family as a thank-you gift and also in celebration of the formation of the new Aferka. So I have brought it here for you to confirm. I still have not looked inside, but I don’t believe it is anything dangerous.” Lilisha cast her eyes down and waited for the ruler’s response.

Cicelnia nodded, to which Rinne walked forward and took the box out of Lilisha’s hands. Removing the clasp and opening the lid, she held it out to Cicelnia, who peered inside with interest.

“She beat me to it! This is far too expensive for a mere thank-you gift. Well, it is pretty crude to show loyalty to the ruler through you. But a gift like this would be difficult to get rid off.”

With a glance, Cicelnia prompted Lilisha, who timidly looked into the box that Rinne now held. What she saw inside caused her to stiffen—a brand-new AWR.

It was a special one and had clearly seen a lot of effort put into it...but it was also a claw, which Lilisha was unused to.

Seeing Lilisha's confusion, Cicelnia spoke up to explain. "This AWR is a prized item. That said, I am pretty sure it was formerly owned by Selva Greenus. More specifically, it is one of the fingers of Magdala...the deceased finger, Celestial Thread. What a generous gift."

"The deceased finger?"

"Yes, humans have five fingers. Magdala is different, and it is said that this one is worn on the user's sixth finger," explained Cicelnia. "I'm an amateur myself, so I don't know much about it or its properties. I only know this much because the Fable family reported the AWRs they have to me. If you want, I could give you a list of AWRs that mentions Magdala later."

That was a system inherited from the days of the former monarchy. If a noble family were to have too much power, the balance among nobles would collapse. AWRs, in particular, were powerful, so information about them was reported to the ruler, who recorded it in a special register. Of course, there were many loopholes in the current system.

"So the Fable family has given this AWR to me...?" asked Lilisha.

"Whom else could it be for?" Cicelnia retorted in a dumbfounded tone.

But being nobility, Lilisha understood the hidden meaning behind the gift whether she liked it or not. Her intuition had been correct. Behind this precious gift were political dealings befitting a great noble. It was a blatant bribe for Lilisha, who had become a cornerstone in the unit that directly served the ruler.

As if having seen right through her thoughts, Cicelnia continued. "There's nothing for you to worry about. Fortunately the Fable family is prestigious, loyal to the palace, and have a good reputation within the military."

Yet despite Cicelnia's words, Lilisha felt some hidden darkness at play. After all, if she accepted this and something were to happen in the future...if she were to take the initiative in providing favors to the Fable family, it would be the same as having made a secret agreement with them.

"Shouldn't this be returned to the other party? It might end up biting me otherwise."

The beautiful ruler brushed aside her concerns. "Oh, that's nothing to be

worried about. More importantly, won't the Celestial Thread be a necessary AWR for you? Selling favors for nothing might not be necessary, but those who stand at the top need to be prepared to do anything at times. Besides, I'm not a dictator, so I can let the Fable family do as they please."

"Are you sure that it's okay?" Lilisha asked.

"Why not? Just take it."

Lilisha sighed. In the end, it seemed she would have to do as Cicelnia said and accept the gift. But at the same time, she wondered if it would put any strange fetters on the new Aferka.

As she looked at the claw-type AWR in the box, Lilisha was forced to change her troubled and bitter expression to one of happiness in front of the ruler.

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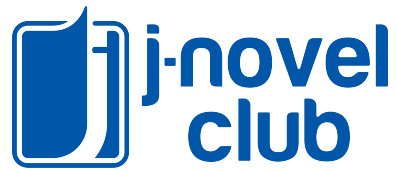
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The Greatest Magicmaster's Retirement Plan: Volume 13

by Izushiro

Translated by Warnis Edited by Heidi Ward

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