

IZUSHIRO

ILLUST

RURIA MIYUKI

RETIREMENT
PLAN

17

THE GREATEST
MAGICMASTER'S



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The Greatest Magicmaster's Retirement Plan

C O N T E N T S

17

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Ninety-Fourth Chapter: Mental Scars

A year passed, and it had really been a densely packed year for a certain first-year in Alpha's Second Magical Institute. Students were gradually moving from vacation mode to standard school life.

But a single corner of the campus was drenched in raw tension. In it stood a mysterious, altar-like structure, and students seemed to quickly walk past it while looking away, as if determined to ignore it.

It was a memorial.

Dante's terror attack on the Institute had shocked not just Alpha but all seven nations. The unprecedentedly cruel magical crime had cast a dark shadow over the hearts of the people, so a white marble table had been placed at the gruesome scene for people to leave flowers. The monument was now buried in flowers offered by all seven nations.

It was like a symbol of the pain that was built up in their soul.

However, now that the danger was past and forgotten—perhaps thanks to Alpha's top brass's information control or perhaps because society was simply quick to forget—the incident, which had been the hottest topic around, was quickly falling out of people's minds.

But there was still evidence that things would never disappear nor heal completely.

While it couldn't be accurately measured, the number of students dropping out of the Institute before classes officially restarted was proof of that. Incidentally, most of those who decided to leave the prestigious Institute on their own were commoners rather than nobles.

Their naive ideals and dreams about Magicmasters and becoming heroes for their nation after graduating and garnering people's adoration despite being commoners had been mercilessly crushed by the bloody reality they had been forced to face.

However, the Institute gathered and nurtured the elites, so it didn't particularly pursue those who left. To the Second Magical Institute, everything was simply taking its natural course, and returning to normal.

Or perhaps that was how the entire world worked: excluding those who had fallen due to the cruel hands of natural selection, those who remained were pushed forward to be incorporated into the huge wheel of fate. It was an unavoidable sorting of destiny.

This was the kind of thing that would be solved with time.

And at the Institute, there were others who'd been caught in the wheels of fate...people who had no connection to the baseless delusion of peace but who had been dragged in without even a chance to catch their breath. Even after they had been shown the cold and cruel reality of the world, it was impossible for them to give up on everything and do nothing.

In the girls' dorm, Alice looked at Tesfia with a reluctant, uneasy expression. "Are you sure you don't want me to come with you? I can be absent from a lecture."

Tesfia had received a message that the arbitration of nobility, the Tenbram, would be officially held. So she needed to hurry back to the Fable household.

The Tenbram was a mock war to settle disputes between nobles. It was in the form of a game to avoid endless, bloody battles to determine each other's legitimacy.

This Tenbram was an agreement between the Womruina and Fable families to determine two things with the outcome: the first was the engagement between Tesfia Fable and Aile von Womruina. The second was Alus's transfer to another organization, or more accurately, whether Alus would fall under Womruina's command "by his own will."

However, Alus was still Alpha's strongest military force and the current rank 1. Would it really be possible for him to leave the military and become a private soldier for one of the three great noble families?

Alus's position was too unique to be able to laugh it off as completely out of the question. After all, extrajudicial measures were currently applied to him all

too often.

The military was indebted to Alus, who'd been sent to fight on the front lines since childhood. And he was using his own achievements and the time he'd spent in the military as a shield to let him retire from the military. It was why he was currently at the Institute.

With the Governor-General himself acknowledging that, Alus was a position similar to someone with dual citizenship. He was incredibly close to being a soldier while also being a student. This made it hard to conclude which laws applied to him, and Womruina had the social and political standing to possibly get their way by emphasizing his free will as a student.

An exception among exceptions, Alus was the embodiment of a walking extraterritoriality. In fact, neither the Governor-General nor even the ruler, Sisty, had been able to tame his selfish nature. And now he had put himself in the middle of the uproar.

Thinking about it, Tesfia, who'd gotten Alus involved in the first place, couldn't possibly run away from this fated encounter against Womruina. So she took Alice's hands in her own and squeezed them as she smiled, addressing her worried best friend in an easygoing manner.

"It's okay. You're worrying too much, Alice. Listen, Al accepting Womruina's suggestion means that he is absolutely confident that he can win. While I may be unreliable as a general, Al isn't the kind of person who would let himself get caught up in a game where he's at a disadvantage. He probably thinks it's just a good way to kill time."

She'd be lying if she said that she wasn't feeling uneasy, but when she thought of Alus's calm face, she was able to retain her composure. She was convinced that there was no need to worry and that she wouldn't have a panic attack like that time Aile had stimulated her trauma with a strange spell.

Minasha, Tesfia's personal maid, stood behind her next to a cart loaded with suitcases. She nodded firmly. Tesfia's other personal maid, Hest, was as expressionless as usual, looking into the distance as if bored. Unlike Minasha, who had her hands full with the luggage, she wasn't carrying anything. Perhaps that was because she was also Tesfia's bodyguard.

Alice looked at the two servants and worriedly spoke up once more. “Well, if you say so, maybe that’s true. But Al himself left in the morning and still hasn’t come back.”

“Well, yeah...” Tesfia could only vaguely reply. She’d thought he would be coming with her to the Fable household, but he’d just taken Loki with him and said that they’d group up before leaving.

He probably had an idea of some sorts, but she was still a little anxious. Knowing Alus, she had a bad feeling that he might be late for even the Tenbram.

“Surely Al wouldn’t get caught up in some strange incident on the day of the Tenbram...right?” Tesfia quietly whispered.

And having perhaps sensed that, Alice responded with a wry smile. “Normally you’d think there’s no way of that. But that’s what I’m worried about too, considering everything that’s happened so far.”

Alus had a tendency to get caught up in incidents, or he had an ability to attract them. Either way, the two girls’ hunches had a habit of being right, so thinking about it again made them restless. Especially since this time, Alus’s presence at the Tenbram would be gigantic.

“Maybe he’s cursed. He must have gone to get exorcized.”

Despite trying to laugh it off, Tesfia ended up sighing. She didn’t want to think about the possibility, but if Fable were to lose the Tenbram, it would likely have something to do with Alus not attending for some reason.

In the next moment, Alice looked at Tesfia with a serious expression and declared, “Fia! The next time Al returns, you have to capture him!”

Her ability to capture him was questionable, but that level of precaution was almost necessary, so Tesfia nodded at Alice’s words. She wasn’t sure that she’d be able to control someone as willful as Alus, but she at least resolved not to take her eyes off of him.

After adding “keep an eye on Alus” to her list of tasks, she relaxed her shoulders and smiled.

“Keep up with your training, Alice. I’m a step ahead of you at the moment.”

Her face was so smug when she said it, Alice awkwardly scratched her cheek.

Tesfia then put her finger on Alice’s chest. “Al taught you a new spell right? Show me when I come back.”

That air of triumph loosened Alice’s expression and transformed it back to her usual smile. “Yeah, okay. I’ll master it in no time. So hurry on back, together with everyone, okay?”

Tenbram was held by nobles, so unless they were an elite among the military, a mere commoner student like Alice wasn’t able to participate. If not for that restriction, Alice would have participated right away no matter what anyone said.

As Alice tended to let her negative feelings show, Tesfia purposefully frowned as she said, “I want Al to teach me a new spell too. I know... Maybe I’ll just ask him to make one for me too.”

Tesfia dressed it up like a brilliant idea, but she knew that it was an unreasonable demand. Alice had an affinity for the light element, which was still lacking in research and had few spells, which was why there was room for Alus to come up with new spells one after another. She felt perhaps being exposed to Alus’s genius and magical knowledge on a daily basis had numbed her common sense.

Alice answered with a dry laugh, and they ran out of things to speak about. Silence fell between them.

“Uhm... Go on, send me off already, Alice.”

“Right, yes. It’s not good to worry too much.” Alice grabbed hold of Tesfia’s shoulders, spun her around, and pushed against her back. “Hurry up and finish it and come back home, Fia. Or it will affect your upcoming exam.”

Tesfia seemed to have forgotten all about that and let out a groan. Prompted by Alice once more and with Minasha pulling her away, Tesfia forcibly composed herself despite staggering.

Tenbram was the first step she’d have to take to come back. Having been able

to speak with Alice, her steps felt lighter. So as though going on vacation, the redhead turned around and told Alice, “See you later,” waved and smiled as if to say there was nothing to worry about, and left the Institute.



The military hospital was one of the greatest hospitals in Alpha.

Healing magic was an innovative technology and was constantly being studied, including its application for civilian medicine, but precious healing Magicmasters mostly prioritized healing members of the military.

As healing Magicmasters stood on the front lines, they were far more likely to be hurt, and because of that, they had far more data and experience compared with civilian doctors. So if someone wanted the greatest treatment in a nation, it was impossible to ignore the military’s healing Magicmasters.

And in terms of personnel, military hospitals had the majority of healing specialists. Alus and Loki were currently visiting one such military-run treatment facility. It was a large hospital with specialist wards on its vast site, employing a number of renowned healing Magicmasters.

A luxurious treatment room, better than anything you could get in all seven nations, was on the top floor of the hospital. After all, the room incorporated a magic circle to ensure the full effectiveness of healing magic on the patient as well as a smooth healing process. On top of that, there were vital sensors, expensive treatment equipment on the walls and ceilings, and even devices for sterilization. The room offered a complete package allowing for large-scale healing magic, precise surgery, and postoperative care.

It was so perfect that the room alone was equivalent to a large hospital, but if there was a flaw, it was that it was rather dreary. It was also expansive, and it would be lonely to spend a long time hospitalized here.

That said, the room was still furnished with the highest conceivable amenities, and with a few more furnishings, it could practically be transformed into a luxury hotel suite. Alus stepped inside with Loki.

“Hmm. You don’t really see this level of equipment often, even in the military,” Alus muttered as he glanced around the room.

He bent down to examine the flooring before immediately standing back up to stare at the ceiling and the complex equipment installed on the walls. His actions would no doubt look eccentric to an outsider. As a visitor to this room, he was behaving far too freely.

“Sir Alus, I don’t believe evaluating the facility is our purpose here.”

Loki typically affirmed everything Alus said, but even this was too much for her. She sounded exasperated. It didn’t matter, though. Alus was very curious, and her words went in one ear and out the other. Loki shrugged and decided to leave him to it while she greeted the patient lying in the bed.

“How are you feeling, Ms. Felinella? Here is a get-well gift. Sorry for it not being more thoughtful,” Loki said as she put a large basket on the bedside table. It weighed quite a bit, and Loki reeled as she lifted it. Inside was a mountain of colorful fruit.

She caught an orange-like fruit that had started to fall off the mountain as she was carefully positioning the basket. She couldn’t very well let a get-well gift fall to the floor.

“Th-Thank you, Ms. Loki.” Felinella maneuvered into a sitting position and gave Loki a beautiful smile as she thanked her. “And you too, Mr. Alus,” she added with a smile, but she seemed to be wanting to say something else, and Loki could easily guess what.

“Well, I knew that you wouldn’t be able to eat all of this on your own,” said Loki.

Alus and Loki weren’t the only ones who had brought a present. The room contained piles of gifts from visitors. As large as it was, the room still had plenty of space, but it no longer felt as dreary.

Felinella probably would have put them away, so they might have arrived just today. Not only was there a frightening number of fruits placed on various tables, there was a large fridge in the corner of the room, likely already packed full of get-well gifts. It was to be expected for the Socalent family, one of the three great noble families.

“Yes, I just had some of it moved to a different room where my luggage is

being kept too. I do feel sorry for the nurses... Ah, but I will enjoy the fruit that you two have brought. Uhm, would you mind if I had some now?"

As a lady, she didn't want to appear immodest by greedily devouring the fruit, but her embarrassed words were enough to shake off the heavy air hanging over the room.

"Of course. I will peel it for you... Which would you like?" Loki picked up a nearby fruit knife and picked out a few fruits from the basket.

"Thank you for your help, Ms. Loki. And thank you for coming to visit too, Mr. Alus." Felinella spoke with her glossy lips and a soft smile, and it was enough to stop Alus from curiously looking around the room and make him come towards the bed.

Alus dragged a nearby chair over and sat down as he spoke. "I heard you were seriously injured, but you seem to be doing okay. Fia and Alice were pretty banged up in that incident too, but the military sent a special healing Magicmaster, so they are well on their way to feeling better. It's unfortunate you were caught up in it too, Feli."

Vizaist had been pursuing Dante and the other escaped convicts, so it made sense to assume that Felinella had been part of the surveillance net, especially since she had directly given him information. But he didn't think that Felinella's injuries were a result of having been cornered. With her skills and judgment, it would be easy for her to avoid any reckless battles.

In reality, she'd come into conflict with one of the stronger of the escaped convicts, Mir Ostayka, and had been seriously injured, likely as a result of her sense of duty urging her to take action. In other words, she'd been unable to restrain herself.

It was the kind of screwup Alus only perceived because he'd worked with Vizaist behind the scenes. Moreover, because Vizaist doted on Felinella, he would only let her work as an intelligence operative rather than a combatant. So her top priority should have been finding information rather than fighting the enemy. However, if she got too enthusiastic about the mission and made the wrong decision, she could find herself on the front lines and exposed to danger.

“It’s important to know when to pull back. You were unusually reckless, Feli,” Alus said, as if having understood everything. “Sure, such experiences are the gateway to becoming a first-class Magicmaster, but it’s not worth it.”

Soldiers, especially Magicmasters, were often compared to the idea of a person walking around with their heart exposed. That was just how big the risk was.

Felinella might have been an intelligence operative, but when it was time to go on a mission, there was practically no difference between an intelligence agent and a combatant to Fiends and vicious criminals.

Suddenly, Alus sensed a stare and turned around to look. There he saw Loki looking as if to say, “Like you’re one to talk.” He’d realized as much...but it seemed like he could use some proper introspection.

“Sorry, that was a little too preachy. And I’m not one to talk,” he said.

“That’s right, please don’t tell me you have already forgotten about the Devourer. You of all people should refrain from being reckless, Sir Alus,” Loki said as her silver hair shook, and all Alus could do was agree with a wry smile and pat her head.

“Besides, if you use logic, Ms. Felinella returned alive, so it’s all right, isn’t it? Not to mention that it was an injury related to an important mission, so I don’t think you can place too much blame on her,” Loki continued.

Indeed, in the world of Magicmasters, many tended to sell their lives cheap. So paradoxically, surviving made you right.

Even the talented could lose their lives through a twist of fate, and the Outer World was a place where such things happened regularly. Compared to the normal military, which only faced people, Magicmasters had an overwhelmingly lower survival rate, and those who survived repeated brushes with death underwent explosive growth.

The principle of the survival of the fittest cast a further aberrant bias that the person on the top was the absolute strongest. That was the truth in the world of Magicmasters and the conclusion everyone reached after repeated missions in the Outer World.

“It’s okay. Mr. Alus isn’t wrong. It’s true that I was being impatient.” Felinella smiled, but her expression looked frail.

She’d already reflected on her actions, and she’d been aware of her lack of strength. She could only call her decision to pursue Dante and Mir Ostayka to the Institute’s underground portion a mistake in judgment.

Felinella had been made keenly aware that she’d overestimated her own strength.

She later found out that while Alus was gone, the Institute’s greatest fighting power, former Single Sisty, had been unable to do anything due to all of the students being taken hostage. In that situation, no matter how hard she struggled, she couldn’t overcome the situation on her own.

Stopping Dante was one thing, but stopping Mir hadn’t been worth the risk. In the end, Alus had been able to stop Dante’s plot by defeating him, but based on how Dante moved, the weakened Sisty and Felinella could have both lost their lives.

Seeing Felinella fall silent, Loki urged Alus with her gaze to encourage the girl in the bed.

“Well, I guess I misjudged your abilities too. Mir was rather skilled as well. If she had joined Dante, I wouldn’t have lost, but it would have been a much bigger pain. While you went beyond an intelligence mission, you really helped,” Alus said, averting his gaze, aware that he had done something that didn’t suit him.

Felinella’s eyes opened wide, and a graceful smile appeared on her lips. Alus wasn’t sure if he’d been able to reset the heavy atmosphere, but she at least looked more at ease.

Alus let out a sigh of relief and changed the topic as Loki skillfully peeled an apple. “That said, you did good to take down Mir Ostayka. She’d killed dozens of high-profile soldiers and Magicmasters, and her criminal record suggests that her skills were in the Double Digit class. And being connected to the underworld, she must have had considerable skills at killing people as well.”

Changing the topic was fine and all, but he ended up taking it in the direction

of his own interests and concerns.

While Felinella was skilled, she shouldn't have had the power to contend with a magical criminal of that level. Moreover, the Institute trained Magicmasters who would fight Fiends in the Outer World. The curriculum didn't put much weight on techniques used against people.

While Vizaist could have instructed her on that part, some things didn't add up. Luck played a big part in a battle to the death, so if she were to say that she'd been lucky, Alus wouldn't pursue the matter any further.

However, Felinella nodded as if she'd known she'd be asked about it. She had no intention of hiding anything from Alus. "Yes, it certainly wasn't someone I would be able to beat as I am now. So I used the Socalent family's secret technique. And my current state is the price for that."

Loki wordlessly put the peeled and sliced apple on a plate and left it on the table.

"Thank you, Ms. Loki." Felinella straightened her back and took a bite of one of the slices.

As she was a noble lady, even the sight of Felinella eating a slice of apple was picturesque.

Alus put his hand on his chin and fell silent for a bit. Even he was a little hesitant—going any further would touch on the Socalent family's secrets. It was one thing when it came to normal nobles, but he pondered if it was really okay for him to cross that line when it concerned Felinella.

After a momentary pause, Alus smiled a little. It was too late asking for that now. He was close with Vizaist. They'd both attended the Institute, as senior and junior, and they'd been on the battlefield together as well. Most of all, her soft smile told him that she would not only accept his curiosity, but even seemed to invite it.

"Then let me ask: Is that secret technique of yours something like an inherited spell? Is it how Vizaist reached his current position in a single generation?"

Inherited spells were something like trump cards for the Fable family and other long-standing noble families. They helped to protect their prestige and

power base. Because of that, they weren't recorded in the Magic Compendium either. Like their private forces and super high-class AWRs, they greatly contributed to the continuance of the families. It was generally accepted that the more renowned the noble family, the more magic they had researched on their own and hidden away.

However, Felinella nodded her head at the important question all too readily. Frankly it was a bit anticlimactic even for Alus.

"It is just as you say. As one of the three great noble families, the Socalent family also has something that could be called inherited spells. But as an upstart family, we haven't had the time or funds to research compared to the other families. Besides, my father hasn't told me how he got the magic formula, but he is bold and lively, as you know. While it's secret for now, it doesn't seem like he is planning to keep it only within the family forever."

Well, it was certainly true that it was rare to be able to monopolize a spell just by keeping quiet in the modern world of magic. Research into spells was more advanced than in the past, and with more diverse research, many of the advanced spells of the past were on the level of intermediate spells of today.

Even the Fable family's inherited spell, Icicle Sword, could be copied by someone well-versed in ice magic without too much difficulty. If necessary, Alus could cast the main component of Icicle Sword—a large sword of ice—albeit at a slight cost to its appearance.

That said...

"Even so, Mir was unable to hold her own against it. Not to mention that considering Lord Vizaist's personality, there's no way the inherited spell would be a half-hearted, boring spell," said Alus.

"Really?"

Alus nodded at Loki's sudden question. Having spent years together in the military, he had a good grasp on the man, and an inherited spell that someone as shrewd as him had developed in a single generation was enough to grab Alus's interest.

The only military organizations Vizaist had led were the former special squad

that Alus had been part of and the current intelligence agency. Aside from that, he'd almost never had direct command over a squad, and he'd only really participated in operations as a temporary commander.

Still, Lord Vizaist's spell... I wonder what it's like—what the magic formula is like and what its power is like...

As Alus entertained those ideas, Loki asked another question. “Ms. Felinella, are you sure about this? Isn't this a secret that is like a lifeline to a noble's house?”

Felinella once more smiled at that question. “It's okay if it's you two, Ms. Loki. I am sure my father will allow it as well,” Felinella continued with a mischievous giggle. “Besides, don't you already know a little about our family's secret technique?”

That surprised not just Loki but Alus himself. “Hmm? What do you mean?”

Felinella tilted her head in confusion at Alus's reaction. “Oh, my father said that he received a hint about this spell from Mr. Alus in the past.”

“Sorry, but I have no memories of it whatsoever,” said Alus.

Felinella smiled wryly at his curt answer. “Uhm, well, I'm not entirely sure it could be categorized as a spell. Mr. Alus, do you happen to know about magic dresses?”

A distant look suddenly appeared on Alus's face. “Ah yes, there was a period when Lord Vizaist asked about that. But I didn't give him any completed theories, just an idea. Hmm? So that's the spell that took down Mir? He managed to implement it?! What's its rank? And its special characteristics?”

Felinella gave a slight exasperated laugh when she saw Alus lean in, his eyes alight.

“That's right. My father took the idea further and made it a reality. And since it's not in the Magic Compendium, it doesn't have any categorization or rank.”

“I see. Then it would be boorish of me to ask any more.”

He was claiming to have given up, but it was clear that Alus's interest was now entirely on magic dresses, and his eyes were lit up with a childlike curiosity.

“Not at all; if it’s Sir Alus and Ms. Loki, I will secretly let you in on it,” said Felinella.

She put her index finger over her lips, but the gesture seemed to embarrass her, as she blushed and let out a cough. Loki self-consciously readjusted herself in her chair. From here on out, they would be talking about top secret things not to be told to anyone.

“It’s okay, there’s nobody listening in,” Alus whispered to Felinella after confirming through magical means.

Felinella nodded and lightly raised her right arm. As Alus and Loki stared, the light of mana began to gather around her wrist. Eventually the mana took on color and a presence, turning into “something.”

It only lasted for ten seconds or so, but to Loki, who gulped and observed with wide eyes, it felt like minutes. Next to her, Alus narrowed his eyes, fascinated by the sight created by the Socalent family’s secret technique.

The noble lady had been wearing a simple patient’s gown, but now it was like she was wearing a miracle itself.



The magic theory dyed the world, weaving a dreamlike raiment. A glowing sleeve materialized from the back of her hand to her elbow.

“So this is the magical dress...or more accurately clothes made of mana given special characteristics. The term refers to the technique itself. Seeing how it’s materialized given mana, it might be similar to a kind of summoning magic,” explained Felinella. However, it was more rooted in reality than summoning magic, and the phenomenon was far more durable.

Loki’s eyes were open wide, as she had practically frozen into a statue. She eventually pulled herself together and looked back. Her eyes locked with Alus’s, hoping for an explanation from the person she most respected.

Alus slowly obliged. “I finally remembered the details. If I recall, I was once asked my opinion on an interpretation of a Relic, an ancient description. There I recalled two or three descriptions from an ancient tome and told him about them. Even I thought it was just an armchair theory, but it looks like he made that theory into reality.”

“I believe so,” said Felinella.

Vizaist had probably just told her that Alus’s idea was just the starting point without going into the details, so she gave a vague answer as she undid the magical dress’s partial manifestation.

Alus had been busy at the time Vizaist asked about it, so he hadn’t done any in-depth research on the subject, but Vizaist, who wanted a powerful inherited spell, must have been different.

“Well, no matter. What surprised me more was the structure of that magical dress,” Alus said.

“But, Sir Alus, wasn’t there somebody in the Seven Nations Friendship Magical Tournament who used magic similar to a magical dress?” Loki asked.

But it had been Felinella who’d worked as the Second Magical Institute’s mediator at the tournament. “That would be Fillic Argan. I was surprised by that too, but strictly speaking it was different from a magical dress.”

Alus hadn’t watched the match, but she was referring to the first-year

competitor from Rusalca who was Jean Rumbulls's disciple. Wearing an armor of dark magic, he had been able to fight more than equally against Loki.

Loki furrowed her brow at Felinella's explanation. "If it's different, was he using summoning magic, then?"

This time Alus answered. "Yeah, most likely. There are methods of clothing your body with summoning magic. It's impossible without an aptitude for it, but there was supposedly a Single in the past who fought by covering their body in summoning magic. But it's pretty much suicidal."

Doing it for an instant was one thing, but moving around with summoning magic covering your body for a longer period of time was insanity. Since the structure of the spell would exist within the body, a slight mistake risked tearing your very body apart.

That's probably why you need an aptitude for it, but what kind of disposition do you need for it...? There's a limit to rare characteristics, thought Alus.

In terms of people with an aptitude for it, there might even be fewer than those with magic eyes.

"Sir Alus, what is the difference, then?" Loki asked, pulling the topic back on track.

"I only know of the concept of wearing summoning magic but not any details. But to summarize it, the body's movement should be dependent on the structure of the spell. There's also the problem of controlling the spell's coordinate axis while it is manifested."

Loki found it unusual that Alus would be so vague and tilted her head. But Alus could only shrug.

"Normally that's what it's like...although there might be people like Fia who rely on instinct," he said. He thought of Zepel, which was an ice attribute spell that required a complete grasp of the coordinate axis and precise mana control, but Loki didn't seem to understand.

"Ha ha, that's true, but that's her cute and strong side. I suppose you could call it natural talent..." Felinella said, gently covering her mouth while smiling.

It was true that Tesfia was unconsciously performing aberrant feats. She might have had excellent grades, but that natural airhead with red hair was a good example of there being a fine line between stupidity and genius.

“That’s overestimating her. But if that sort of thing could be done with the ice attribute, it would explosively increase her physical abilities. It could become a powerful weapon in her next battle. Although it’s a bad match for the ice attribute,” Alus said, referring to the summoning magic. “However, Feli’s magical dress is different. It’s been proved valid and I’ve seen it with my own eyes. While I just had a quick look, the principle probably works by...”

Alus paused and glanced over at Felinella. She wordlessly nodded, granting him permission to explain.

“From what I’ve seen, the magical dress is close to some type of spell, although its role and special characteristics are different from existing spells. I’d say it’s closer to a virtual AWR than a spell. No, since it materializes, I guess it would be strange to call it virtual... Anyways, it’s another step or two beyond the support functions that conventional AWRs have. When it comes to processing mana information, it’s like having an AWR become one with your body. But there are still some things I can’t figure out.”

Alus wrapped up with a sharp stare, and Felinella’s expression grew tense for a moment.

And after taking a moment to calm down from her astonishment, she slowly answered. “To think you would figure out so much right away. Are you sure that you only gave my father an idea, Mr. Alus? Maybe you already knew about magical dresses?”

“No, I really don’t know much. If I were to say I’ve seen a similar magic technique described in an old book. Naturally, it wasn’t called a magical dress either.”

Having read all kinds of books, Alus remembered a description in an old book, but even he had thought the idea was too far-fetched.

“Then allow me to add something else. This magical dress is the Socalent family’s secret inherited spell, but there’s a possibility that it exists for other attributes as well. I remember my father mentioning that when examining a

Relic about magical dresses,” said Felinella.

“For other attributes too...? No, I see. Each attribute has its strengths and weaknesses, but there’s theoretically no attribute that can’t use summoning magic or some other type of magic that could be worn. So it wouldn’t be strange for magical dresses to exist for all attributes...” Alus muttered to himself and then fell silent.

He turned to Felinella. “Feli, you said Lord Vizaist wasn’t planning on monopolizing that technique forever, right?”

“Yes, it seems he has no intention of treating it the same way as other noble families treat inherited spells,” said Felinella.

“But doesn’t that mean that you will give up on the privilege of nobility?” Loki asked in surprise.

Felinella only smiled. “It is just as you say, Ms. Loki. But my father is an unusual person, as you might have noticed. Incidentally, he discovered a Relic on magical dresses for water and fire attributes, so with enough research those could be made a reality.”

“I see...” said Loki.

“The Socalent family has a magical dress for wind, as I just showed you, but as Mr. Alus immediately noticed, even with an affinity for wind it’s not something anyone can use. Even with my father providing the funding, it’s not believed to be something that could be generalized to that level...unfortunately.”

“But why not?!” Loki asked.

This time Alus answered her. “Probably because of the characteristics, the magic formula is abnormally unique. From what I’ve seen, Feli’s magical dress is practically an original technique.”

Relics’ magic formulas were typically written with characters from ancient times. These were known as Lost Spells.

For example, in the spell Phoenix, there were differences between the Relic version and the version using the modern system. They were ancient magic.

Nobody could answer why such things could be found. However, since Relics

were typically incomplete, the Lost Spells were deciphered, and the missing portions used modern magic formulas to replicate the spell.

“The magical dress must have been a spell from an incomplete Relic. To put it simply, it has practically no basic formula that is used by all attributes. Meaning that there’s a completely different route that needs to be taken for every attribute, and every formula has to start from scratch. Since no formula has a common part, the number of tries needed to put together a working formula increases exponentially. Even the new spell I made for Alice used some non-attribute-based formulas to supplement it. Without that, you would need a large number of people to research for about a decade or even decades to create something,” Alus further explained.

Compared with mountain climbing, the normal magic system had the route for climbing the mountain partially complete already, so you could ride halfway up on a vehicle and only have to climb the last stretch on foot.

But the situation was completely different for the magical dress. There was no route whatsoever, and it wasn’t even clear where the peak was or if it was even the mountain you were supposed to climb.

“So how did Lord Vizaist accomplish it in such a short amount of time? The wind magical dress is already complete...” Loki said.

“It would be impossible if you think about it normally. It could be simple once you find the right way. And he probably used a different method in his approach or...” Alus said vaguely, because he wasn’t sure himself.

If his prediction was correct, he would actually touch on the Socalent family’s secret, and he’d be stepping into a troublesome situation.

In the past, Felinella had declared that she would seduce him. And if Vizaist got serious about it, it would put Alus in a bad situation. Even if it didn’t lead to marriage, it would most certainly bring the possibility closer because once someone learned the family’s secrets, the best move was to bring them into the family.

Felinella smiled brightly as if to dispel his concerns. “To put it simply, you store your own mana information in the formula.”

Felinella cut deep to the heart of the secret, then spoke no further about it. From how she shared no additional information, it was clear she'd drawn the line. It wasn't so much refusal to share as it was consideration.

Although, with all of the specialist lingo Loki couldn't understand much of it, she sensed as much. So she lowered her head and thanked Felinella for her consideration. "Thank you very much, Ms. Felinella."

Alus remembered supplying a few ideas that could make it a reality. Several of them were hints that came not from Relics but different old books. "I see. So when Lord Vizaist approached me that one time, it was to probe for the practicality for that. If I recall...he called it attribute refinement."

Incidentally, attribute refinement indicated a unique way of raising Magicmasters. It was also a kind of secret language that only Alus and Felinella could understand.

"Yes. The year I started learning magic, the attribute had already been completely refined. The mana used was limited to the wind attribute. And in order to learn to use the magical dress, I used a special method to store my mana information from a young age, gradually gaining control..." Felinella softly reflected on her harsh past. It was clearly a painful memory. "To be more accurate, it's a method to change the makeup of my mana."

It wasn't just an accumulation of detailed reasoning that was a useful approach for creating new magic. It was the exact opposite: theoretical leaps using aberrant creativity.

In order for Felinella to use the magical dress, her mana pathways had to be destroyed and reconstructed, a truly aberrant method.

When someone lost an eye, sometimes the vision in the remaining eye developed in an unusual way. Felinella had accomplished something similar with her mana by damaging her own pathways and forcing them to regenerate and be more active.

In other words, she had forcibly changed the characteristics of her own mana. It was said that the younger one carried out that practice, the better, but at the time Felinella was already ten years and some months old.

Because of that, she must have experienced excruciating pain.

Felinella spoke about it with a smile, but Alus's expression was more complicated. By understanding the secret technique, Alus could easily imagine her dark past and pain.

"As I showed you before, the magical dress is a garment. A collection of magical parts connected to your internal mana," said Felinella.

"In other words, the magical dress is directly connected to your body's mana pathways," Alus said as if to make doubly sure.

Felinella nodded and continued speaking. "Yes. You use a mana needle to sew it to the body. It's a lot of work to say the least."

Loki gulped. Felinella called it a lot of work, but it sounded more like torture. Loki couldn't just ignore that, so she timidly asked, "Uhm, isn't a magical needle a completely different situation than simply using a surgical needle and thread to stitch the skin...?"

"Yes, but it is difficult to explain," Felinella said, and covering her mouth with her hand she leaned closer to Loki's ear.

While she was whispering, Alus could hear her say, "It is like sewing something foreign directly to your nerves."

Pain associated with mana was on a different level from the sensation of pain one normally felt. It was like the soul was being ripped apart, and it was said to be the most painful thing a human could experience. It could make someone with a weaker mind go insane.

"So there you have it. A magical dress isn't something that can be attained so easily."

"I see," Loki said and idly tossed an apple slice into her mouth.

Alus fell silent.

He understood that Vizaist had imposed such a thing on his beloved daughter because of unavoidable circumstances. He had elevated the Socalent family within a single generation, and noble society would often call them upstarts behind their backs.

Having climbed up to their current position as one of the three great noble families, having an unshakable power was a necessity, even if it meant pushing such a harsh method on a young girl.

“As you might have sensed, using the magical dress comes at a price, Mr. Alus. A strain on the body and damage to your mana information... All my body needs is rest, and as for the latter, it can heal over time as long as it’s not overused,” said Felinella.

The magical dress temporarily linked the body and mana information, practically turning a portion of the body into an AWR, but the price of this secret technique was that it shaved away at the body to perform miracles.

Elise, a Kurama executive who’d attacked the Institute once before, had carved a magic formula into her skin to crudely turn her body into an AWR. It’d be next to impossible for an ordinary person to charge a magic formula into their skin. Even if they managed, it’d only function for a few days at best, but her body’s characteristics had made it possible.

“Yeah, it won’t cause permanent damage to your mana information as long as you only keep it active for a short period of time,” said Alus.

Felinella nodded, but Alus gave her a stern look. He narrowed his eyes and spoke bluntly to the girl in the bed, who looked like she was bracing herself. “Feli, I’m not sure if you understand this or not, but I feel like I should say it, so let me make this clear. The magical dress shaves away at a Magicmaster’s life to create a technique to temporarily transcend your limits.”

Felinella seemed to take him seriously and nodded with resolve. “So you think so too, Sir Alus. My father also researched the risks but was never able to verify it. So he made sure that I don’t use it unless absolutely necessary. Even that time it was like I’d lost myself, like my emotions flowed out and took shape.”

“I see. Feli, I acknowledge your abilities, but you are still a student and not an official member of the military. That made me curious about how you’d managed to overpower someone as powerful as Mir Ostayka.”

There, Loki seemed to catch up and timidly asked a question based on her own interpretation of the subject. “While it might have a cost, if it enhances your body, isn’t the magical dress just like my Force?”

“No, it’s in a different dimension. Force enhances your body, but a magical dress enhances your magic. It turns your body into an AWR, creating a situation of hyper specialization,” explained Alus.

Magicmasters had affinities for attributes due to a bias in their mana information, but it wasn’t like they couldn’t use any other attributes. For example, Tesfia was good at the ice attribute, but she could still use the others to a degree.

The biases caused them to be better at certain attributes. If specializing in a single attribute and being able to make full use of all the spells that belonged to that attribute was considered a one hundred percent affinity, Tesfia’s affinity for ice magic was around seventy percent.

However, Felinella with her magical dress was probably...

“This isn’t something as simple as bringing out latent potential. When using the magical dress, Feli can probably use expert-level wind spells with ease. Her affinity might even be over a hundred percent.”

Alus plainly spoke of that greatness, but Felinella shook her head, looking slightly uncomfortable.

“There’s still the matter of understanding magic formulas, and the wind attribute is really diverse. So it’s not like I can easily use everything...not to mention the problem of my amount of mana,” she said.

That said, the spell that had defeated Mir, First Material, was closer to ultimate-level magic than expert-level. But Felinella couldn’t say with any confidence that she had mastered that extraordinary magic.

With her serious nature, she considered her magical dress to be a concept similar to doping. Moreover, the shape it had taken in the battle against Mir had been a manifestation of her maidenly desire, appearing in the form of a wedding dress.

As a maiden in her teens as well as a noble lady, having her feelings so blatantly exposed was embarrassing.

However, the price was too great. She’d only used it for a short while during her fight against Mir, and now she was stuck in bed for a month and it was

uncertain when she would even be able to use normal magic again. She wasn't in this hospital simply because she'd been injured in the battle.

"Hmm...I see. I finally understand. A magical dress really is an unbelievable technique," Loki muttered. Her eyes shot over towards Alus, then back at her future rival lying in the bed. She coughed. "Ahem, you see, I also learned to use an ultimate-level spell the other day..."

Loki was being competitive, but perhaps Felinella didn't pick up on that intent.

"My, now that is amazing! Wouldn't that rank you around the higher level of Double Digits then, Ms. Loki?" Felinella asked, bringing her hands together and praising Loki, who blushed awkwardly.

Unfortunately, reality wasn't so simple.

Even if Singles were extraordinary, for Triples and Quad Magicmasters, rankings were only a rough estimation of a Magicmaster's strength. While there was an exact measurement for students, Alus and Loki knew that it didn't hold up against a truly strong opponent.

For example, the strength of Elise and the other executives of Kurama, as well as the vicious magical criminals Dante and Mir, couldn't be measured by rankings.

The biggest influence on rank was the number of Fiends one defeated and the class of those Fiends. Without practically living in the Outer World, one's ranking wasn't going to suddenly rise.

However, it would be rude to bring that up here. Instead, Alus quietly watched as his silver-haired partner's pride swelled from Felinella's honest praise.

"You really are amazing, Ms. Loki."

"Not at all, Ms. Felinella, you're the amazing one...!"

A pointless game of elevating each other began, the two girls chatting and laughing cheerfully. Perhaps because she didn't have many visitors close to her age, Felinella looked more lively than usual.

But there was no end in sight if they were left alone, so Alus carefully timed his interruption.

“That aside...Feli, did you hear anything from Lord Vizaist? I heard he took over the investigation into Morwald from Aferka.”

Felinella apologetically shook her head. “I’m sorry. I’ve been hospitalized since the attack. I haven’t seen my father for a while, and it’s hard for me to make contact from here.”

Having worked under Vizaist, Alus knew that well. When he was in the middle of a mission, it was exceedingly difficult even for family to make contact with Vizaist. That didn’t seem to change even when his beloved daughter was hospitalized.

“So he’s the same as usual, huh? Well, no matter... I was just wondering if he might have shared something.”

“I see. Could that have something to do with the Tenbram perhaps?”

“So you’ve heard about that, then.”

Finding Alus’s unexpected expression funny, Felinella smiled brightly. “Heh heh, it is the first Tenbram in a while, so it’s a hot topic, you know. It might not be publicly disclosed, but any noble with sharp ears is probably paying attention to it. Especially when two of the three great noble families are involved.”

While they might not be patrons of or have hostility towards Womruina or Fable, a lot of nobles had some kind of stake in the outcome.

Some were hoping for an opportunity, others were proactively trying to support one or the other, Felinella explained. Mostly, the situation threatened to shake the very foundation of the nobility in Alpha.

“Even more so with Mr. Alus involved... Why not go at it without reservation?” Felinella asked, all emotion disappearing from her face for a moment. It was the poker face she rarely showed. That was proof she had qualities that went beyond just those of an honors student and a noble lady.

Alus could only let out a slight chuckle in response. “That was my intention from the start, but I didn’t expect to hear you say that. I figured that the

Socalent family would stay neutral.”

There was a reason there were three great noble families as opposed to two. They worked exquisitely with each other to balance the nation, not just in politics but in many other manners as well.

As if trying to escape Alus’s piercing stare, Felinella turned towards the window. “There is no longer any doubt that the Womruina family was involved in the Aferka incident. They have crossed the line a family supporting the future of Alpha should have never crossed. I believe you should settle things promptly.”

If the Womruina family were only behind Aferka’s rampage, it could be settled behind the scenes. But if they’d led escaped criminals into Alpha as well, their crimes were too large to atone for.

That had created a tragedy that included deaths in the Institute and had dragged in not just Felinella but her beloved juniors Tesfia and Alice too. Womruina’s folly had inflicted deep wounds on them that would not heal anytime soon. To her, this went beyond noble society. They were a poison that ravaged Alpha as a nation.

“That’s true, the Tenbram is not just about my course of action anymore,” he agreed.

Alus wasn’t a noble, but even he understood what Felinella was talking about. They wore the mask of former royalty, but on the inside, Womruina was now no more than a cornered beast.

And an injured beast with no escape would fight back no matter what it took, which meant that someone needed to swing the blade to stop them before they did any serious damage.

But Alus looked beyond that good and evil or their public appearance. Simply put, Alus had taken an interest in the strange proxy-warlike game that was the Tenbram.

Behind it was Womruina’s second son, Aile. And even with Alus’s powers of perception, there was a part of the boy that he was unable to see.

He had a feeling that he wasn’t as full of worldly desires as Morwald, but if

possible, Alus would like to step into the same arena as him and see where his eccentric thoughts pointed. Alus saw the Tenbram as a dusty old relic of the past, but he was curious to see what kind of plots and calculations Aile had in store.

But Alus wasn't like a hunter that enjoyed purposefully cornering an injured beast. What he wanted was to further his understanding of the unknown, and he had an interest in the strange and twisted personality and the dangerous balance of complex, conflicting qualities that the boy was hiding.

That said, he also understood that someone needed to bring the hammer of justice down on their folly. And he understood that he shouldn't be the one to take that responsibility.

Alus had pretty much no interest in justice. Nor was he planning on being its executor. He didn't have the passion or qualifications for that either.

Alus was interested in Aile, but he saw him as a saboteur, a plunderer who threatened to steal Tesfia away after Alus had taken the time to raise her. Frankly, that didn't sit right with him, and he wanted to prevent it.

His motives were simple and irresponsible, like a child swatting away the hand trying to steal its favorite toy. As long as he could do that, it didn't matter what else happened.

And so, Alus's attitude towards the Tenbram was a complex combination of personal factors and not wanting to get caught up in the quarrels between nobility.

Alus grimaced. He found explaining himself a pain. "Don't expect too much. It's not in my nature, and I guess that I shouldn't go that far."

Felinella gracefully smiled at him. "Of course. I will cheer for you from here."

"Yeah, you just recuperate here, but I'm sure you'll get good news before long."

Felinella giggled as if to say that she'd be waiting for it. And with that, Alus said that it was time to leave and took Loki with him. Their next destination was the Fable family. Preparations were necessary for the coming Tenbram.

Ninety-Fifth Chapter: The Family's Long-Cherished Desire

Before the artificial sun that lit up the Inner World reached its zenith, Alus and Loki stepped through the Circle Port.

Since they'd left their luggage with Tesfia, they were traveling light. All they had was the bag Loki was carrying.

When they arrived at the Fable mansion, they would need to greet the head of the household. With Alus so deeply involved, he felt he would need to explain the circumstances that brought him.

He'd ended up skipping class, but considering Alus's attendance, that wasn't anything new. He owed the principal, Sisty, a lot, so part of him hoped it wouldn't cause any fatal damage to him moving up a grade.

After going through several Circle Ports, Loki moved a little closer to Alus at the very last one. While it was true that being closer made it quicker to read and extract the necessary information, Loki looked like she wanted to say something.

She stood close enough to just not touch his shoulder, and it was a sign of her worrying about Alus getting caught up in another disturbance related to nobles. But she was being considerate by not saying anything out loud, so Alus let her do as she pleased.

As Alus glanced over at her, their surroundings completely changed. Stepping out from the facility, they were greeted by a spacious and quiet suburban landscape, something you wouldn't see in the central part of Alpha.

In front of them was a large roundabout dedicated to magic cars, and that alone showed that this place was reserved for the upper class.

Alus mentally clicked his tongue. Making life more convenient was nice, but he didn't like how it was monopolized by the upper class without being accessible to commoners.

But that's how the nation was structured. The relatively safe district far from the borders, where the threat of Fiends was low, had been turned into the area where the wealthy lived and was thus called the wealthy district. However, despite Alpha's powerful military, those who didn't have the money were pushed to the districts closer to the Outer World.

Just walking here was enough to teach one about the cruel realities of the current society.

The road from here to the Tower of Babel in the center of the Inner World was like a completely different world from the area in the opposite direction, near the barrier.

Around the terminal, well-dressed people were coming and going, elegantly walking down the vast promenade next to the road on which luxurious magical cars were driving.

"Sir Alus, where do we go from here...?" asked Loki.

"I was careless. I should have told them roughly when we'd arrive, then they might have sent a car to get us. But I've been at the Fable mansion several times, so I know more or less where it is. Why don't we run?"

That was certainly a valid method, as these two could run faster than most magical cars.

"Ah...sorry, but I didn't put on running shoes today..." Loki said apologetically, shrinking back.

Looking down, Alus saw Loki was wearing heels. They looked nice, but they were certainly not suitable for a forced march.

"No, I'm sorry too. We'll end up having to wait a bit, so let's call Fia."

He rummaged through his pockets trying to find his license, but since he always treated that kind of thing so carelessly, he couldn't find it anywhere. It was probably mixed in with the rest of his luggage left with Tesfia.

Alus scanned his memories, looking bitter, while Loki watched him looking exasperated. At that moment, a voice called out to them.

"Sir Alus, Lady Loki! I have been waiting for you!" the somewhat panicked,

somewhat relieved voice of a woman who'd been waiting for them called out from behind.

When they turned around, they saw a maid jogging up to them. Unlike the calm and composed demeanor of the butler Selva, she wore a friendly smile and had an innocent, childlike face reminiscent of her master. Alus recalled that she was Tesfia's personal maid.

But Alus struggled to remember names, so it was Loki who called out.

"Ms. Minasha, why are you here?"

"What are you talking about? I was obviously waiting for you two." Minasha politely bowed and greeted them, before turning around and leading the way.

"Thank you very much. I don't think we told Fia when we would arrive, though," Alus suspiciously noted.

Minasha turned around with a smile. "That is why the head of the family told me to wait here."

Alus tilted his head, but Minasha continued to smile. "Please don't mind... I only waited around two hours or so."

Alus was speechless. Order or not, she'd spent two hours in a place like this without any entertainment or shops to visit. But Minasha's expression as she guided them to a parking lot made it seem like she didn't mind.

They were taken to a familiar luxury magical car, and as she opened the door, Minasha spoke. "Please, get in."

Loki, followed by Alus, got in and sat in the backseat of the car. Following that, the rustling sound of clothes came from the driver's seat. One couldn't very well drive in a long maid skirt, but Alus chose not to think too much about it.

"Being the Fable family's maid...especially looking after her...sounds like a lot of trouble," Alus said, trying to make small talk.

Minasha replied from the driver's seat with a delighted voice. "Maybe that's what it looks like from an outsider's perspective, but it's worth doing. There's always work to be done."

“I can imagine,” Alus said, an image of Tesfia floating through his head.

Alus heard the quiet sound of the engine starting and felt the flow of mana through the base of the car. The scenery slowly moved outside the window. However, that only lasted a moment, as once they got on a large road, there was a sudden acceleration.

Alus and Loki reflexively exchanged a look. The magical car’s key system, which used mana as its driving force, was operating on full throttle, and they could feel it roar through the seat.

It made even Alus uncomfortable to move at such speeds that failing to brake or steering poorly even once would no doubt lead to a major accident.

“M-Ms. Minasha, you do have a driver’s license, don’t you...?” Loki asked, but it seemed like Minasha couldn’t hear over the sound of the engine as she turned towards the backseat, holding a hand to her ear.

She’d taken a hand off the steering wheel and was looking away.

“Forward! Look forward, please!” Loki shouted, her face pale.

As if finally realizing what she’d done, Minasha looked forward again and stuck her tongue out. “Oh right. I’m just so used to this road; sorry about that.”

Alus wanted to point out how much more dangerous that had made it, but he held it in. If the worst case happened, he could just kick out the door and escape. Although, if that happened, he wouldn’t look after Minasha.

After that, what felt like an eternity passed. But finally, having been freed from what felt like hell, Alus and Loki stood glaring before the large Fable mansion, their faces pale. Minasha walked over to the bell next to the gatepost.

What kind of new harassment is this? Talk about a welcome, thought Alus.

Alus had broken out into a cold sweat and was pinching the area between his eyebrows. Then he saw a suit without any wrinkles appear.

A white haired man lowered his head and apologized with a sigh. “From your appearance, I take it Minasha has done it again. I am sorry for this, Sir Alus. I did tell her to drive carefully before sending her out,” said Selva, the butler.

Minasha jumped in surprise at his words. “Ah! I completely forgot about what

you told me while I was waiting for them, Mr. Selva... I-I am so sorry!”

“Oho ho ho, I will be sure to admonish her after I have guided you, so please forgive her,” said Selva.

Since they’d reached their destination in the end, it was too late for complaints.

“Don’t worry about it,” said Alus.

Selva instructed the ashamed Minasha to park the car in the garage and took over leading Alus and Loki. He opened the large door at the entrance.

“Hmm. We have sent them to the Institute to assist the young lady, but I am still worried. How are those two doing?” the perfect butler asked with a worried look that didn’t suit him.

Alus hesitated to answer. By “those two,” Selva was referring to Minasha and Hest. After all, Hest was pretty much just an assassin in maid uniform. Not only was she despairingly unsociable, she was quick to make use of force and excelled at controlling an area.

Not to mention that Mr. Selva’s worries are spot on, so how should I answer him? Alus thought.

Moreover, Hest had almost killed an investigator from another nation who’d burst in on Tesfia and Alice’s training. Things had been resolved with Alus taking them down instead, but it could have become an international incident and left a black mark on the Fable family’s prestige.

“Yes, well, she seems to be poor at adjusting her strength,” said Alus.

“I am sorry for that occasion,” said Selva.

“Ah, so you knew about it.”

Selva gave Alus a good-natured smile and nodded. “I never would have thought that Hest was that clumsy. By the way, the Fable family has already taken measures so that there won’t be any problems for you, Sir Alus.”

That said, Berwick had also said that he would take care of the problems, so with it being attended to from two sides, Alus wasn’t worried.

I was lucky nobody died. Although, since that incident I have something else to worry about, Alus thought, remembering cleaning up after Professor Kwinska's sudden appearance.

He had only just supplied the professor with a sample of his blood and the funds for a hideout. Since he would be hiding her, as well as managing the research expenses, he wondered how he would pull the wool over Berwick's and Cicelnia's eyes, but Professor Kwinska was unexpectedly skilled at that.

She had proposed they set up a few fictitious accounts and dummy companies, with Alus putting money into them under the excuse of purchasing research material. Some old books and magic minerals could have sky-high costs, so it wouldn't be strange for large amounts of money to move from Alpha's greatest Magicmaster's account. In fact, he'd poured astronomical amounts of money in the past into research AWRs.

Her research is into the Akashic Records. There is much that we don't know. Even just one piece of unconfirmed information could carry the risk of things becoming too big if made public.

The Akashic Records was the modern version of Pandora's box. If carelessly handled, it could shake the balance of the world, so it was better to leave it under Alus's personal management.

Alus was deep in thought when Selva suddenly called out to him. "Excuse me for being forward, but there is something I would like to confirm before meeting with Master Frose. It is about what happened to the young lady..."

Alus narrowed his eyes. He was no doubt talking about the mana vessel expansion. While he'd told Hest to keep quiet, considering her position, this was more or less expected. Even Hest herself had said that she wouldn't be able to refuse the head of the family if asked directly.

Of course, Hest shouldn't have known any of the details. It would probably even be impossible for Tesfia, who'd experienced it firsthand to explain it to someone else.

"Yes, there was some success. Well, it requires precious materials and comes with a risk, but I was rather convinced those two would be able to handle it. Regardless, it's not something you can do for anyone so easily. If it was, there

would be a flood of rapidly growing Magicmasters in all seven nations, and all the Fiends in the Outer World would have been exterminated by now.”

“Oh...”

This time it was Selva who narrowed his eyes.

“I am glad to hear it. While she has settled down, the young lady can still be rather careless. With there being a risk involved, if something had happened, as a Fable family butler I would have had to take action. Even if it was against you, Sir Alus...”

Selva’s stare grew sharper, and it felt like the temperature around them was dropping. Alus couldn’t help but duck his head a little.

At that moment, Loki slid between them and interjected, “This may be presumptuous of me, but it was all because Sir Alus acknowledged their talents. Not to mention that they both want to improve themselves... It’s not like Sir Alus forced them into it.”

While she spoke politely, her tone made it clear that if something were to happen, she was determined to protect Alus even at the cost of her life. She threw it like a blade, but the elderly butler easily caught it with a smile.

“Yes, I am aware. I was simply explaining my own position. Even without the Tenbram, as long as the young lady continues down the path as a Magicmaster, she needs to be strong in mind and body... In fact, the Fable family once again considers Sir Alus as having done us a favor that cannot be repaid. I would like to thank you from the bottom of my heart.”

“Don’t worry about it. I did it of my own accord. This time too,” Alus said bluntly. If possible, he didn’t want to have any strange connections to the Fable family after the Tenbram.

Selva straightened his back and then spoke as if recalling something. “No...thinking about it, perhaps it would have been better if something had happened with the young lady. There is also the chance that we could have had the person who initiated it all take responsibility.”

Seeing how Selva chuckled, it was hard to tell if he was serious or not, so a bitter expression appeared on Alus’s face. In the meantime, they passed several

servants and went through multiple doors, and Alus and Loki were finally let into a certain room.

It was a grand room, as large as three dorm rooms at the Institute. Based on the door, there was another rather large room connected to this one. Well-polished chairs with armrests sat on top of an expensive-looking rug.

Selva urged them to take a seat.

“Sir Alus, Lady Loki, these will be your rooms during your stay here. This will be Sir Alus’s room, and the neighboring one will be Lady Loki’s. The luggage you sent ahead of time has already been carried into the closets of your respective rooms.”

The two nodded and Selva continued, “Please wait here for a while. When the head of the family has finished her preparations, you will be called for. And finally, I have a request of my own: the mansion might become very noisy while you wait, but please pay it no regard.”

Selva left, and Loki gave Alus a quick bow before disappearing into her room. With that, Alus gave the room a second look. It was, in fact, a very large room. It wasn’t as large as Alus’s laboratory, but it was more than enough space to house a single person.

Then he checked his luggage in the closet and then the furnishing.

Phew, always checking for bugs is a bad habit of mine.

There was nothing unnatural to be found. Actually, the bathroom had perfume and soap, and the private fridge was stocked with a large variety of drinks. This meticulous consideration was on par with a first-class hotel.

“I feel like there’s no reason to go this far,” Alus said.

Even the shoe closet had everything from leather shoes to sneakers. There were several shirts and jackets he could change into, and even brand-new underwear. If he decided to live here for a while, he wouldn’t struggle whatsoever.

They’d even remembered that Alus preferred black and monochrome clothes. But how had they found out his size? It was like they had a full understanding of

everything, so it was kind of...

“Creepy,” Alus muttered coldly and then chose not to think about the matter any further.

Resigned, Alus sat in a chair by a window. As he looked at the scenery, he realized something.

This is on the opposite side of the entrance.

A view of the backyard of the mansion spread out before him. There was a facility for training or exercising, a refreshing fountain in a spring, and he could see the well-maintained garden and the waterways that stretched across it.

After a while, there was a knock on the door connecting the two rooms. Loki peeked inside.

“How long do they plan to keep us waiting? What rude people,” said Loki.

Based on her tone, Alus could tell Loki’s room was the same. It was so well arranged that, like Alus, she must have felt uncomfortable.

“Don’t say that. Nobles have their own problems,”

“There are certainly a lot of people coming and going nonstop. Does that have to do with the Tenbram, I wonder?” Loki mused.

“Probably... There seem to be quite a few more people here now than when I last visited,” said Alus.

“Did you use Detection?”

That was usually Loki’s primary job, but it seemed like she’d held back on looking into the details.

Loki frowned as if to say it was unfair, but Alus made sure to warn her. “You shouldn’t do it. Mr. Selva would find out immediately,” said Alus.

“I wouldn’t do something so impolite. Nobody would be happy about having a mana sonar blasted at them in private,” said Loki.

“I bet. That’s fine, then.”

Although it was less accurate, Alus’s supernatural sense functioned fundamentally differently from Loki’s mana sonar, and there was no need to

worry about the other party noticing.

“Looks like the time has come,” said Alus.

“So it seems,” said Loki.

Without even needing to strain their ears, they could hear the voices of several people outside. Looking out the window, Alus could see about twenty people or so coming out of the mansion. The retinue of followers would be twice that number. Six even looked like they were from middle school, and one of them looked to be around twelve or thirteen.

There was an unusual atmosphere, and they were talking about something in a hushed manner.

This must be the noise that Mr. Selva was talking about. They look like children of collateral families...but some are young even compared to Fia, thought Alus.

Seeing how they moved, Alus could tell that all of them, children included, had mastered magic. Loki seemed to have noticed the same as she stared at them from the window.

“Could they be relatives...? They might not be outstanding, but they are all pretty good,” said Loki.

“Yeah, I don’t like their pretentious looks, but compared with the students at the Institute, they must have started learning magic at a young age,” said Alus.

He could tell from their amount of mana. The difference between nobility and commoners was particularly evident at this age.

They wore expensive-looking clothes and were attended to by servants. The pretentious way they walked got on his nerves, but that was probably standard for nobles.

He might have poked fun at Tesfia for being a noble daughter, but now it was clear how unique she was.

She was pretty awful at first. With her mana leaking out... Hmm? Still, that’s strange.

When he thought about the redheaded girl, Alus noticed something. And it

seemed that Loki thought the same thing.

“I don’t know how old they are...but this is strange,” she said. “They appear to be better than Ms. Tesfia was when she first enrolled at the Institute. Is this what a gifted noble is capable of?”

Alus suddenly realized: the reason Frose had rushed Tesfia’s arranged marriage was because she had prematurely dismissed Tesfia’s future.

Frose had been in the military at the same time as Sisty and had come into contact with her exceptional talent. She had ended up with complicated feelings about it... If these people were from collateral families, it made sense for Frose to be so negative about Tesfia’s future.

When Tesfia had first entered the Institute, she’d been rather excellent, but surprisingly she hadn’t had the potential of the children from the collateral families.

Regardless, if they weren’t students from foreign magical institutes, they were likely hidden powerhouses whose true powers weren’t represented by their ranks. Incidentally, the only way to get your hands on a license outside of the military was through a nation’s magical institute, and each nation only had one.

Still, I thought that Fia was locked in to become the next head of the family, but I guess her place wasn’t so secure after all. Being a great noble family, if one of the collateral families makes a fuss it could cause trouble, huh? thought Alus.

Modern nobles had an inseparable relationship with Magicmasters. Contributions to the military led to contributions to the nation, and status in the military was directly connected to a family’s social standing.

While there were some exceptions, power as a Magicmaster was usually proof of their noble standing. And while full-fledged feudalism had become a relic of the past, there was still a strong tendency in noble circles to value lineage and pedigree, which was a guarantee of power in a sense.

Even Alus had been offered peerage by Cicelnia in lieu of a reward for his contributions.

This gathering held a hidden spark, albeit they were only marginally better

than the students of the Second Magical Institute.

Alus sighed, having learned yet another thing about the Fable family that he didn't have to.

"That said, they don't look like much compared with Singles or Doubles, but they have real potential. I suppose that is nobility for you," said Loki.

She was always harsh when it came to nobility, but this time she had a positive impression, which Alus agreed with.

"Hmm?" While they talked, Alus suddenly narrowed his eyes.

The group of Fable family relatives were making their move. The ones who looked like adults got inside magical cars and drove towards the mansion's gateway. A few of them remained behind and saw them off.

Alus's eyes stopped on one of the girls who had remained. She had red hair that looked somewhat diluted compared to that of Tesfia's, but from her profile and features...

"That girl... She looks like her," said Loki.

"You think so too?"

Like Loki said, the girl had an appearance that certainly made her and Tesfia look like relatives. She was a beauty like Tesfia, although she might have been a little taller.

"However..." Alus muttered and furrowed his brows. Upon closer observation, the look in her eyes and her aura was different from Tesfia's.

She had a different kind of pride in her eyes from Tesfia's. She wore a confident smile, and her body language was haughty and captivating... That alone made it clear that she was different from Tesfia.

"Isn't that what you would expect from a noble?" Loki asked sarcastically, and Alus could only agree.

Indeed, that was the face of a real noble, which Alus detested. Alus had started seeing them in a positive light thanks to his interactions with the Fable and Socalent families, so he'd almost forgotten.

Eventually the nobles left without ever realizing that Alus and Loki were watching them. They seemed to be headed for a building that was detached from the main one meant for their stay, which meant they were probably not temporary guests.



“I have a feeling this is going to be a pain,” said Alus with a sigh.

“It’ll become a reality if you say it out loud,” Loki warned, and shortly after, there was a knock on the door.

Loki moved first to open it, and on the other side, she found a familiar redheaded girl. Tesfia Fable, the next head of the family and seemingly a noble lady, was looking pale and dejected.

It was a drastic change from when they’d left their luggage with her this morning. Despite being in her own mansion, Tesfia was wearing a formal dress. And taking the relatives from before into account, the answer to why became clear.

The entire family was gathered for a meeting. If the topic turned to the Tenbram, she would be seen as the cause for it as well as an unreliable commander for it. Assuming that happened, Tesfia would find herself on a bed of nails.

The girl sighed heavily before she spoke. “Could you come with me...? Mother is calling for you.”

“You look pitiful, Ms. Tesfia. In just half a day, you seem to have aged,” said Loki.

“Who are you talking about?!” Tesfia objected, but the usual energy in her voice was gone. “There was a little problem before. But, uhm, my mother will tell you more about it,” the redheaded girl said with a lifeless expression.

Tesfia led Alus and Loki through the mansion, walking as if she was a ghost. Following behind her, Alus couldn’t help but feel bitterness well up.

Nobles had their own world, and it had their own rules. Alus tried to convince himself that it was inevitable because of how the world ran, but he wondered if that was really the best move. If Alus poked his nose too deeply into their business, he would get caught up in it all whether he liked it or not.

Alus was aware that aside from having brought Tesfia under his care, he had also selfishly taken an interest in Aile’s twisted humanity.

In addition, when his own position was brought to the table, Alus feigned

getting worked up like a normal person, while calmly understanding the risks. And his decision was certainly irresponsible in a way.

Still...in the world there are things that can't be helped. I see. Those are convenient words at times like these, he thought.

While thinking of hollow reasoning that only appeared mature, Alus quietly walked down the long hallway with Loki.

The first thing the head of the Fable family, Frose Fable, said once they were face-to-face was an apology. "I'm sorry about this. You came all this way yet we kept you waiting."

How many times had he entered the head of the family's study now?

In addition to Frose, Selva and Minasha were also there, waiting. And Hest was wordlessly standing by the door outside. She was as unsociable and unmoving as always, making Alus wonder if she'd been punished, but he knew she was probably just guarding the door.

Alus and Loki sat down in the chairs they were offered, and Selva fluidly served drinks for them, but Alus didn't drink immediately.

"It looks like the Tenbram isn't your only problem," he stated, starting the conversation.

Frose furrowed her brows, indicating he was right on the mark. She lightly shook her head as if to get rid of a headache and then ordered Tesfia to take a seat as well before speaking.

"Indeed, a problem has certainly arisen. But before I explain..." With a bittersweet smile, she called out to her tense daughter. "Fia, I should praise you for not yielding to Womruina's tyranny. Even though they are another of the three great noble families—perhaps even above us depending on how you look at it—you never gave in and rejected them out of your own will. This is a sign that you have grown, mentally."

Alus had figured she might reprimand Tesfia for being rash, so that was an unexpected reaction.

"Yes, you are worthy of commendation. Fia, you did well this time," said

Frose.

Tesfia replied with “yes” and bowed, but perhaps because of her formal dress, the interaction between mother and child looked ceremonial. The theatrical act felt out of place to Alus, like a farce they were purposefully showing to him.

As he puzzled over it, Frose turned to her with a soft smile. “Perhaps this is a little roundabout to you, but we have appearances to keep up. As you are not a noble, we can’t let you get in the middle of this.”

That said, there was the clear joy of a mother welcoming her daughter’s growth in her tone, and Alus could more or less understand her intentions.

I see, so she’s being considerate.

While Tesfia’s betrothal might have been the starting point, Alus had fallen for Aile’s provocation. If anything, he’d poked his nose into their affairs of his own accord, so there was a need to establish the basic premise that Tesfia had shown her own will.

They had to demonstrate that it was a problem between two noble families and that it was the Fable family that stood on the front and would take responsibility, not Alus.

While it might not reach the public eye, the upcoming Tenbram was already the center of attention among nobles. And in order to display their prestige to the nobles under the Fable family’s influence, that kind of ploy was necessary.

It’s definitely roundabout, but it’s certainly convenient for me, thought Alus.

Rather than coming up with various explanations, he could just feign being caught up in all of it. If the Fable family would become a good cover for him, he had no reason to refuse. Frose seemed to understand from his nod.

With that out of the way, Selva moved from behind Frose. He handed out bundles of paper to everyone in the room and created a virtual screen in the air.

“Two weeks until it starts, huh?” Alus muttered as he looked through the papers. The first thing that stood out to him was how short they were on

preparation time.

It was also questionable whether Tesfia would be able to heal from the injuries she'd sustained when the Institute was attacked.

"Fia, how are your injuries holding up?" he asked.

"What, you're suddenly worried now? Even after that grueling mana vessel expansion training?" Tesfia asked, pointing to herself, eyes wide.

"That was more of a mental thing where you battle yourself, and it doesn't have much of an effect on your body. Not to mention that the Tenbram may be a mock war, but you'll be fighting against real people, and unlike the training, it's not like I can always be at your side. So how are you doing?" Alus asked again, prompting Tesfia to look a little doubtful.

"Uhm...I think I'm okay?"

"I'm not asking for your opinion. What did the doctor say?" he pressed.

You might typically say that nobody knows you better than yourself, but when it came to this redhead, she was completely unreliable.

Selva interrupted the fruitless back-and-forth. "According to our personal doctor, two weeks will be more than enough. The military's healing Magicmasters tended to her quickly, which was fortunate. From what I hear, she is even allowed to exercise now."

"Won't hard training be necessary in preparation for the Tenbram?" Alus asked.

Tesfia jumped. But while Alus had addressed Selva, it was Frose who answered after a sip of tea.

"It's true that aside from preparations, plans will need to be made. But I believe that special personal training won't be necessary."

"I see. But it is a form of group battle, isn't it?" Alus asked.

That was unexpected and anticlimactic even to Alus. He was sure there'd be very detailed plans depending on how their opponent moved as well as advanced cooperation in order to perform them.

Based on what Alus had learned about the Tenbram from his own research, most of them were mock wars, albeit with differing rules. That was why he'd been sure that victory wouldn't be settled through a simple clash.

"Look at the description on that paper please," said Frose.

Doing as he was told, he looked at a page. Everything had been summarized to make for an easy read.

"The form of the Tenbram that Womruina has suggested is...Orb Struggle?!"

Outline aside, even the name was something Alus hadn't found in his research. Naturally, Loki looked just as puzzled.

Frose glanced at the two. "Based on your reaction, I take it your research only found information about the traditional rules. So, Selva, can I ask you to explain?"

"As you wish." Selva bowed. He changed the image on the virtual screen and started his explanation while displaying an easy-to-understand illustration. "The Tenbram is a traditional method to settle disputes between nobles. It could be a simple gladiatorial battle between groups or on horseback or even a game settled by points. However, in recent years, the study of magic has advanced and noble families have produced many Magicmasters, so the circumstances have changed. More specifically, rules trending towards magical combat have been included."

"I see, so this is a modern Tenbram," said Alus.

Selva nodded and continued. "There are other rules for the more magic version of the Tenbram, but the contest proposed this time would be categorized as group combat. Moreover, this one has a high degree of difficulty."

Alus groaned.

"For starters, each side may choose up to twenty participants...however, there are strict conditions for these participants. Specifically, participants are almost exclusively related to the noble family and its branch families. Simply put, to qualify for participation, you have to be a noble or acknowledged as related to that bloodline."

Alus furrowed his brow, and Loki's chair rattled as she stood up. "Th-Then Sir Alus won't be able to participate?!"

But Frose smiled as if to shake away her doubts and answered. "You don't have to worry about that. There is an 'exception role' allowed by the condition. A so-called helper slot. Mr. Alus will be allowed to join in that role. But unfortunately, you will not be able to do the same..."

"N-No..." Loki murmured, her face turning as pale as if the world were coming to an end. She'd come all this way, certain that she would be able to participate and help Alus, so it was a huge shock to her.

It wasn't entirely unexpected to Alus.

"It can't be helped this time. When I accepted Aile's provocation, I had him prepare a slot for me so I could participate. This is a concession on their end. If anyone could participate, everyone would just gather the highest-ranking Magicmasters to get an advantage."

He figured that it'd be pointless to think about it while details were unknown, so he hadn't told Loki about the possibility.

"Loki, I'm sorry!" Tesfia said, bringing her hands together in front of her face. "Al is right. Movement might be limited during the Tenbram, but having Al on our side is a big deal. It would naturally be advantageous for Womruina not to allow any helpers at all, so since they've compromised on that part, it would be difficult to ask them to make room for one before... Please forgive me, Loki!"

Tesfia lowered her head, but Loki wouldn't back down.

"It's clear what they're after. By letting Sir Alus join the Fable family's side, they can make him admit his loss and ensure that the condition for Sir Alus to transfer affiliation is adhered to. Since it would be impossible to defeat Sir Alus in a normal magic battle, they must have bet it on the small chance of a turnaround in a Tenbram."

She probably wasn't far off. Selva hadn't finished his explanation, so with the rules for Orb Struggle, it was possible that the other side still had a chance to win no matter how impactful Alus's presence was.

If using chess pieces as examples, Alus might have been a queen, but in this

game he would never be the king. And even if the other pieces were strong, an ambush could take down the king and decide the match.

“You heard what Fia said. Go on the support, Loki,” Alus said.

“B-But...”

“Now that I’m a part of it, I have no intention of losing the Tenbram, but knowing Womruina, they’ll no doubt use some underhanded tricks. And who knows what they might do if they lose. So if you’re here that would be...you know...reassuring,” Alus said, awkwardly scratching his head as he gave unusual levels of praise.

“Having me watch over you is reassuring, is it? Hmm, if you’re willing to say that much...” Hearing that wasn’t all that bad, and after sighing, Loki finally eased off.

Seeing the familiar exchange as if they were an old couple, Frose nodded with a smile. “Yes indeed. I am actually worried about the same. Womruina’s aim has become quite unclear now.”

While the Womruina family was former royalty, the suspicion was that they had committed crimes too large to be ignored. It seemed like all sorts of dirt—aside from just them bringing in escaped prisoners—could be brought forward if they lost.

With enough evidence, an investigation would be launched, which would spell their ruin. It was questionable if Alus’s affiliation or an engagement to Tesfia would be of any help by then.

So how exactly was Aile hoping to turn the tables?

Even Alus couldn’t make sense of it, and if Aile did have some bizarre plan, Alus kind of wanted to see it.

“Well, perhaps they are looking to go out with a bang worthy of their status as former royals. Regardless, it’s important not to give them any openings,” said Alus.

“You make it sound so easy, Sir Alus, but please do be careful,” said Loki.

“Yeah, I know. Since we don’t know how they’ll move, there’s nothing better

than playing it safe. That's my conclusion for now anyways."

Alus agreed with Loki, and everyone in the room nodded.

When Tesfia spoke next, they finally returned to the main topic. "As for the rules...I don't really know them myself. I studied the Tenbram ahead of time too, but like Al, I also expected more traditional games."

Frose could only drop her shoulders in exasperation at Tesfia's dry laugh. "Oh this girl... No matter, there is still time."

Getting back to business, Frose instructed Selva to change the display. Frose then abruptly put a leather attaché case on the table in the middle of the room.

"Selva will summarize the more detailed rules and various strategies later, so look through the documents until the next strategy meeting. Now, let's show you a 'real treasure,'" Frose said and pulled from the case an orb with geometrical patterns engraved in it. It was just barely small enough to fit in one hand.

"As the name 'Orb Struggle' suggests, it is a game during which you must steal the other side's orb. And this is said orb."

It's similar. This shape...no, the size is too different, I guess? thought Alus.

What surprised Alus was that the orb looked a lot like Minerva, the AWR said to be the prototype of all AWRs. Dante had attacked the Institute to steal the item considered humanity's treasure. It wasn't just an AWR either; it was said to be an artifact from ancient times.

After his momentary misunderstanding, Alus realized that this orb was far smaller than Minerva. Moreover, the orb had a lustrous surface with an almost ephemeral beauty to it, and it emitted an alluring brilliance as it sat on the table. Most of all, upon closer observation, it was fitted with modern AWR features, something an ancient artifact wouldn't have.

Noticing Alus's stare, Frose spoke to him. "Oh, does it seem familiar to you, Mr. Alus? It certainly has similarities to what Sisty is managing. That is because it was modeled after it. While it is a far cry from the real thing, it still has rather special characteristics and effects."

Alus quietly waited for Frose to continue her explanation.

“Incidentally the magic formula engraved inside of it, if I were to put it simply, is a summoning spell. Even someone without an affinity for it can activate it by pouring mana through it. And in modern Tenbrams, activating the magic formula and summoning forth the Guardian is key.”

“The Guardian, huh? I see. So the crux of this game will be how...?” Alus trailed off.

“How you get past the Guardian will be the key to this game. You really are quick. Incidentally, there are a total of five times the Guardian can be summoned. While it may depend on affinities and amount of mana of the user, other members could perform the summoning too.”

“Anyone? Then it sounds more like an inferior copy of summoning magic,” said Loki. She didn’t seem to understand.

That said, considering the complexity and difficulty of summoning magic, it wasn’t something that could be readily used.

“Ms. Loki, you can’t think of this as the same as normal summoning magic. While it might use the same fundamentals as summoning magic, it is only a superficial formula. That’s why it’s not a summoning spell, but the Guardian,” explained Frose.

“So it can only defend?”

“That’s correct. The Guardian is an avatar without form that can only exist within the field of the Tenbram, and it has practically no means of magic attacks. During the match, its main functions are to move the orb when it is targeted by the enemy or use its own body to protect it. That said, as long as there are enough stocks of the summoning magic, attributes and special characteristics do exist.”

“I see,” said Alus. “So it’s set up so that anyone can summon it. It’s a device that’s easily activated but a few steps below proper summoning magic.”

“Incidentally, if the Guardian takes enough damage it will disappear,” explained Frose. “The same will happen if the summoner moves over ten meters from the orb. The team that manages to take the other side’s exposed

orb and performs a seal on it will win.”

“But wouldn’t it be relatively simple to break through the Guardian since it is just a simple matter of hitting it with an equally or more powerful spell? Not to mention that it’s an inferior copy.”

Frose clearly answered Loki’s question. “In normal battle, yes. However, this has been prepared for a competitive format. The Guardian’s endurance has been digitally altered, and the methods for shaving down its endurance are limited.”

It was like a game. But it was questionable if that was possible in magical combat.

Frose pulled a ring bracelet from her attaché case and presented it to Alus. He examined the surface with a frown. It had several magic formulas engraved into it and was heavier than it looked. Most of all, its shape and atmosphere brought memories to Alus’s mind.

“So that’s why Aile let me participate,” he said.

“Yes indeed,” said Frose.

“Huh? What do you mean?” asked Loki.

Alus held the bracelet in front of his face with a surly look. “This bracelet is a control device. You might not know about it, Loki, but it’s the same mechanism used for magical criminals. And this is the type used to neutralize the most vicious criminals.”

“Impressive, to think you even know so much about the underworld.” While surprised by Alus’s depth of knowledge, Frose began explaining, “This limits the spells the wearer can use. And it can arbitrarily control them to some degree.”

“The mechanism has been around for a while. Whoever made this does some pretty interesting things. So what’s the range limit for this thing?” Alus asked.

There was no way that Aile would allow Alus to roam freely in the Tenbram. With this control device, it wouldn’t be an exaggeration to say that the wearer’s power would be made extremely average, although at worst, he figured Alus would be weighed down by an unreliable ally.

“Up to advanced magic. This will be a shackle even for you, Mr. Alus,” said Frose.

“So a new format with a restriction on magic, huh? It might be a pain, but there’s no reason to get upset at these ridiculous restrictions.”

Alus clicked his tongue and Frose shrugged. “During the match, if you remove or destroy the bracelet, you will be immediately disqualified. Your mana output and range will naturally be restricted too.”

Alus didn’t know how wide the field was, but he could easily use long-range magic. It would normally be possible for him to snipe the enemy Guardian safely from allied ground, but even that was being made more difficult.

“In that case, we’ll have to work together and steadily move forward. This doesn’t suit me at all... He’s really thought about this. So I take it that the field will be rather large,” Alus confirmed, checking the documents.

“Yes, it seems that it will take place in territory owned by Womruina. It’s forested wilderness that was once a hunting ground for nobility.”

“So we’ll have to scout it too. Interesting. The bracelet also has functions for communicating, doesn’t it?”

“That’s correct,” said Frose. “And one more thing, this bracelet has another function too. It has a damage transfer system incorporated into it, so attacks received are drastically reduced, but in exchange, it will be transformed into a digital numerical value. It’s a system made possible by the equipment set up on the field. It’s not just the Guardian, but even the participants will have endurance, called HP.”

“So attacking the enemy team is allowed too.” Alus nodded, but Loki seemed surprised.

“Combat aspect aside, there’s a system similar to the Institute’s damage transfer system? Is that even possible?”

Her surprise was only natural. The system required a huge facility. And while that was possible for an Institute funded by the nation and military, it was hard to imagine that a mere noble would be able to set it up within their territory.

“That’s former royalty for you. We’ll need to thoroughly check the field ahead of time so they don’t try to do anything dirty. Anyways, under these rules I suppose this puts me down from a monster to a more fair level,” Alus muttered sarcastically.

Frose and Selva gave him apologetic looks. Then Frose got back to giving instructions while Selva showed illustrations on the virtual screen.

“It’s not exactly a physical wall, but for the sake of convenience, let’s call it a Barrier Field. It’s visualized as a spherical light emitted by this bracelet,” Frose explained.

“According to the diagram, it’s not so much endurance as it is an energy gauge. You start at one hundred percent, with your energy being reduced when you take damage, and the light from the bracelet changes colors from green, to yellow, to red. And once you’re out of energy, you are forcibly ejected. It’s looking more and more like a game,” said Alus.

Loki looked closer like Alus, and let out words of admiration in spite of herself. “It really is a well-thought-out system.”

“Yes, while it doesn’t look like it covers your body, the barrier is actually covering it like a film. You also need to be careful of what is considered a hit. Even an attack that grazes your clothes will count as damage,” explained Frose.

“Not that a scratch would count as damage in real battle. But considering how it works, I guess there was no way around it. Still, to think something on this scale existed. Perhaps I should take this opportunity to reflect on my ignorance of noble society,” Alus said with a shrug.

Frose smiled at him.

“It’s certainly intricate. Well, among the modern Tenbrams that have incorporated magic, this one especially relies on technology. In accordance with ethical regulations, the risk to individuals has been kept to a minimum,” said Frose.

“Ahh, there’s so much to remember that my head is spinning. And all of the knowledge I studied up on is useless now.” Tesfia’s head drooped, and it looked like she’d slump over too until Alus stopped her with the palm of his hand.

“If you’re going to blame anyone, blame the shrewd Womruina boy,” said Alus. “Besides it’s not like it will all be useless. Study the past if you want to learn the future. In fact, it’s helpful even in cutting-edge magic research. That said, while there are a lot of strategies, it’s clear what we must do as we only have so much time.”

Alus was muttering while confirming the data on the virtual screen and the papers in his hand. In essence, it explained that they needed to defeat the enemy team’s guardian and take possession of their orb for a moment.

“When a person seizes the orb, their registration code has to be read and fully authenticated. It takes around one minute, meaning that they will need to keep their mana flowing for a minute after stealing the enemy’s orb. It looks like you will be defenseless while authenticating the code, but... Hmm?”

Alus flipped through the pages a bit, then his hand stopped.

“It says that another condition for the team is if the enemy commander declares defeat. What is this?”

The commanders were the leaders of each team. Unless something unexpected were to happen, it would be Tesfia and Aile.

“Like it says, if the commander acknowledges defeat, they can use their bracelet to declare their surrender. The commander has HP several times that of the other members plus higher defense, so it’s unlikely they will get knocked out, but once the rest of the members start dropping out, the front line will collapse and defeat will be inevitable,” Frose said, explaining a possible situation.

“They can attack the Guardian from every direction, making it impossible to protect the orb. So it would be more effective to attack the Guardian rather than the commander,” said Alus.

“That’s more or less correct. A battle could become so one-sided that only the commander remains,” agreed Frose.

“I see. So it’s in the interest of time. It would take a lot of mana to support the system, after all.”

At Alus’s words, Selva, who’d been quiet until then, spoke up. “There is one

more reason. It is not very admirable, but there have been cases when the Tenbram is rigged.”

“Huh?”

Even Alus looked stunned at that.

“Noble families have always valued appearances,” Selva explained. “That is why a Tenbram will be held for disputes between nobles, even when there is a clear imbalance in the relationship between both parties, regardless of the validity of their claims. It can be used as a demonstration to save face.”

“Not every head of a family that holds a Tenbram desires a duel where they go all out,” he continued. “Some don’t want to show weakness in front of their retainers and would choose not to clash in front of them in order to save face. In such situations, they will accept a Tenbram but come up with a way to acknowledge their defeat.”

Such was the world of adults, and an exasperated Alus exchanged looks with Loki. Not only was Alus ignorant of such underhanded dealings, he wanted nothing to do with a world where something so half-hearted could be tolerated.

With that in mind, the cool-looking head of the Fable family and the smiling elderly butler seemed to him like they came from another world.

“In such situations, the opposing team will acknowledge the circumstances and praise their enemy to keep up appearances. However, in order to prevent tyranny of the strong, higher-ranked nobility is not allowed to take on lower-ranked nobility through the Tenbram,” said Selva.

“I see. So even though Fia’s engagement is involved, since it’s two of the three great noble families, it’s okay. Meaning Aile has taken that into account too. Since it’s not clear if Fable or Womruina is above, there’s no imbalance to be found, and nobody is likely to complain. And if the Fable family had refused the proposed Tenbram they would be acknowledged as the inferior family.” Alus summed up his understanding of the whole affair.

As Selva nodded, Alus finally realized that this Tenbram had been elaborately planned.

With Aile laying down the groundwork, the remaining great family, the

Socalents, were unlikely to be able to raise any objections. But before the subject could start turning towards the situation in the noble world, Frose put a stop to it.

“Why don’t we leave it there? That’s enough boring noble talk. Mr. Alus, let’s stop at sharing information about the Tenbram for today. From tomorrow onward, we will discuss strategies.”

“That’s fine. But what about the all-important participants? The allowed number, including the commander, appears to be twenty-one,” he said.

“We have picked out the personnel from potential candidates and gotten their approval. We would like to bring everyone together for practical group training in two days, so they are set to gather tomorrow evening.”

Frose was in charge of choosing personnel, so Alus knew he needn’t worry. At first, he had figured that they’d be fine with just gathering anyone to make up the necessary number, but after looking over the rules, he realized they’d need some skill.

Frose had Selva show a list of the chosen members on the virtual screen, but to Alus, it was just a list of names. Considering how long the list seemed to be scrolling through it, they seemed to have prepared substitutes as well.

“Huh?!” Tesfia, who was looking at the same list, let out an unexpected yelp, then she shot back at her personal maid, “Minasha, why is Lord Bronche on this list?!”

Minasha smiled wryly and nodded. “Since it is such an important event for you, my father volunteered to participate. If he had hesitated for even a moment I would have kicked his butt.” Minasha adopted a fighting stance, but her expression soon became anxious. “Well, I just hope my father will be of use.”

“I-It will be fine. Lord Cicero Bronche is a loyal retainer who has always supported the Fable family! I hear he even personally requested that you live here as my apprentice maid.”

Considering Tesfia’s words, Alus assumed Lord Bronche’s skills were questionable. Regardless, looking at the list made him feel like he’d gotten an

understanding of how highly esteemed the Fable family was.

The scene reminded him of the past and the few times that had felt fulfilling in the military...like when he'd been in "that" squad with allies he could trust. No, in fact, even now he could share that camaraderie with Lettie.

"Well, it should be fine. Add in Mr. Selva and his antipersonnel skills, and there should be no problems."

Even if there were restrictions on which spells they could use and the strong were hindered, it was still a group battle. Selva would no doubt be invaluable with his wealth of combat experience and ability to make quick decisions. Thinking on that, Alus suddenly realized something.

Hmm? Now that I think about it, Mr. Selva's name is not on this list...

Alus glanced over and found the elderly butler apologetically lowering his head. "It pains me to tell you this, Sir Alus, but I cannot participate."

"What?" Loki inadvertently blurted out, and even Alus was unable to hide his surprise.

He'd already heard that only those who were related to the family would be able to participate, so why wasn't Selva part of it?

Alus narrowed his eyes, but before he could ask why, Selva spoke. "Sir Alus, as you might already be aware of, I have next to no skills that could be categorized as spells. The mana steel thread that you've seen before is the base for all of my techniques and its cornerstone. And that mana steel thread is..."

"Made from mana. So it would get caught on the magic-level restriction," said Alus.

"That is correct," said Selva.

"So that bracelet doesn't just restrict spells but all magical phenomena... Does that mean it determines what to restrict based on the necessary amount of mana for spells and the density of its structural elements?"

Selva nodded, impressed by Alus's powers of perception. "As expected of Sir Alus. It is just as you say. Unfortunately, even my normal mana steel threads are affected by the restriction."

“Hmm...that’s a large miscalculation.”

Aile must have considered even that when proposing the Orb Struggle.

Alus leaned back into his backrest and took a deep breath. Things were starting to get problematic. Considering his opponent’s strength, the two strong people who had been at Aile’s side when they met at the Institute would definitely be participating.

With the restrictions in this game, it was questionable if he’d be able to push through both of them on his own. Considering Aile’s helper slot, Alus wanted at least another two skilled people.

There, Frose spoke to reassure him. “It’s okay, Mr. Alus. I have already taken steps for Selva’s replacement. Sisty has put me in touch with a certain someone.”

“The principal?”

That reminded Alus that Frose and Sisty used to fight on the battlefield together. Sisty owed Alus a big debt, so perhaps she was paying it back now. Knowing how politically adept Frose was, she had probably taken this into account when she’d contacted Sisty.

“That’s a surprise. By the way, who might that be?” asked Alus.

“It’s still not entirely certain, but it’s almost certainly going to happen. They’re certainly fit for the job. So while it isn’t time to tell you who it is, please rest easy. You can count on them,” said Frose.

“Well, I did entrust you to pick out the people, so I have nothing to complain about,” said Alus.

He knew if Frose was saying something like this, they were probably strong enough. At the very least, that was one less thing to worry about.

They continued to exchange information, but the most noteworthy tidbit was the identity of the referee for the Tenbram. It was supposed to have been the Rimfudge Frusevan family, and more specifically Lilisha, but...there had been an unexpected interference.

“The Frusevan family’s political standing aside, there was an objection from

Womruina's side that Ms. Lilisha is too close to Mr. Alus and the young lady," explained Selva.

Alus couldn't help but feel bitter about Selva's report.

So that's where they hit. It's a stereotype of being stuck to her, but regardless, I guess we've been together with Lilisha too much lately. So Aile looked into that, then.

"It's not like I asked her," Tesfia said with a pout.

"As such, the Womruina family will be arranging for a referee as well. So it is unavoidable. There will be two referees this time," said Selva.

"Well, I guess that can't be helped."

Alus could only accept it as a valid proposal. Aside from noble society, Lilisha was well-connected in the underworld and could be rather sensible. He felt that just having her keep an eye out for any cheating from Aile's side would be more than enough.

The next topic regarded Alus increasing Tesfia's mana.

Selva had probably already guessed as much, but as it touched on taboo, Alus wanted to avoid explaining it in front of the Fable family head; however, Frose's concern was too great.

While Tesfia had been the one to actually expand her mana vessel, it had been practically unconscious, and she couldn't really explain it, so naturally that fell to Alus. So he ended up having to partially explain about mana vessels, but Frose's wild fervor was unstoppable and she pursued it further.

All nobles wanted their children to become first-rate Magicmasters and gave them special education from early childhood. It was on the same level as learning table manners, and it was customary in the noble world regardless of whether their efforts paid off.

Because of that, Alus's vessel expansion was on the level of inherited spells and was something any noble would drool over.

Alus kept quiet, and Loki intervened to serve as a breakwater to Frose's offensive.

“Lady Frose, this training method is possible because of Sir Alus. So there’s no point in telling anyone else.”

“My, Ms. Loki, why so reserved,” Frose said with a fierce grin, and Loki instinctively realized her disadvantage and shrank back. “You are always looking after my pitiful daughter. And you’re exceptional, are you not? And considering our family traditions there is no reason for a wonderful young lady such as you, Ms. Loki, to be so reserved. I wouldn’t mind taking you into our family if only we had a boy. If anything, I could introduce you to some good men from a branch family... But even then I don’t think it would balance out.”

Once Loki realized why the tenacious head of the family had changed targets, she could calmly respond. “No thank you. I exist to be Sir Alus’s aide, so I have no particular interest in that,” she responded.

“You really are faithful.” Frose smiled, satisfied with Loki’s answer.

When they’d met at the Seven Nations Friendship Magical Tournament, Loki had been a more hesitant young maiden, but now the indecisiveness that Frose knew to be typical in youth was gone.

“Well, good luck. You too, Fia,” said Frose.

Tesfia suddenly caught a stray bullet, but she nodded without really understanding. While she’d seen exceptional growth as a Magicmaster, she wasn’t quite growing as a woman in her mother’s view.

Frose ignored the vague worry for the future and shook her head. “Then please rest until dinner,” she said, bringing an end to the meeting.

However, Alus didn’t think they’d actually get any rest because they’d be busy from tomorrow onward.

Instead, he would be looking through the papers when he returned to his room. Since this Tenbram would be difficult to influence with individual power, creating a group strategy was more important. The first step in that was getting a grasp of the significant rules.

He could get a grasp of the complete picture of the Orb Struggle during the group training in two days, so for now he would focus on gathering information to form what he discovered into something tangible during their training.

As he walked down the hallway following the meeting, Loki approached him.

“There wasn’t any explanation of those people who appeared to be relatives, was there?” Loki asked, referring to the people they’d seen before the meeting. The adults had left, but the children who had remained were probably still staying in the mansion.

“Yeah. When Selva said it might get noisy I was sure that he was talking about them, but it’s been quiet so far.” Alus turned around and asked Tesfia, “You know about it, don’t you?”

She became visibly flustered and looked away. “Ah, uhm, I guess you could say that I know, but it’s a family problem. And I think my mother isn’t sure if she should tell you. You hate getting caught up in that kind of stuff, right? Maybe you think it’s too late for that, but we don’t want to push it any further.”

“I’d say it sounds selfish,” said Loki.

“A-At least be cautious, Loki,” Alus reprimanded.

Tesfia frowned, but for better or worse, she was terrible at keeping secrets. “Ugh, well, she might be self-righteous for deciding on her own. And it’s not like you’re completely unrelated, I guess...”

“Hey, how am I supposed to do anything but ask for more details when you put it like that?” responded Alus.

“Huh?! I-It’s not like I was trying to make you do that. It’s just the truth.”

It was hard to tell if Tesfia was clever or an airhead, but as expected there were troubles ahead.

Frankly, it feels like I’ve been entrapped, but I guess it can’t be helped considering the situation, thought Alus.

At the very least, he would need to make it so that Tesfia could study and train in peace until the Tenbram began. Knowing her personality, if she had any worries she wouldn’t be able to focus on anything.

Having a one-track mind sounded good for studying in theory, but in reality, Tesfia was just an awkward person.

Alus sighed. “I guess I have to. It’ll be a serious problem if there are issues in

the Tenbram.”

“Yes, I’d like to ask if they’re messing around.” Loki stared at Tesfia, hiding pressure behind her smile. The meeting had gone on for quite some time, but it was still not even evening. There was still plenty of time to grill Tesfia.

Alus grabbed Tesfia’s collar and pulled her into his room.

The girl protested, “H-Hang on. I need permission from my mother to—!”

“Shut up. We’re already caught up in this. Don’t make any more messes before the big event,” said Alus.

Loki quietly closed the door behind them, silence falling on the long hallway in the Fable family.



While silence normally hung over the Fable mansion, in the early morning, a few hours before Alus and Loki arrived, there was a slightly different atmosphere.

Fable was an internationally renowned noble family. Their bloodline continued even after having been forced into the narrow Inner World due to the appearance of Fiends.

And as a renowned family, their bloodline had a lot of branch families even before the Fiends appeared. But feudalism was a thing of the past, so many branch families had been swallowed by the waves of time, collapsing, having their peerage removed, or being merged into the main family.

The Fable family’s branch families were no exception, but the fact that they still had relatively many branch families was evidence of how long their history was.

But this morning, the great noble family was shaken by something out of the ordinary happening. Several magical cars had stopped in front of the massive mansion, and heads of branch families exited.

Frose Fable was the head of the family, but she wasn’t a dictator, and all of the heads had influence and a right to speak. In this age, the main family wouldn’t be able to stand on its own without the support of its branch families.

Because of their long history, it wasn't unusual to see families support each other as they were swallowed up. In that sense, the up-and-coming Socalent family was a sign of the times.

With the nemesis of humanity appearing, Magicmasters were tasked with protecting the future. Because of their expanding presence and military achievements having such value, Vizaist had been able to climb high in a single generation.

Looking out because she heard all the commotion outside, Frose coldly looked out on the scene at the gate from her study.

"Good grief, they even brought their children," Frose said in exasperation.

Selva answered from beside her. "That is not all, Master Frose. They have also brought with them their children's retainers. I believe bringing uninvited guests with them is going a bit too far to ignore."

"No, they still haven't quite crossed the line. They can be pretty strong-willed. That head count is not to pressure but to prove their zeal. I imagine it's an expression of their resolution to gather and say a few choice words to the head of the family."

"So they are all acting out of loyalty and for the sake of the main family and have nothing to be ashamed of." Selva let out an almost scornful laugh.

After all, among them were families just barely hanging on to their noble status through their yearly donations to the main family. Yet despite their status, they didn't prostrate themselves before the main family even if they also weren't openly revolting against them either. They were opportunists who did what they must to preserve themselves. But when push came to shove, they would get together like this to stubbornly assert their vested interests.

If they had any loyalty, it was towards the Fable family, not Frose.

"The family meeting will begin right away. The young lady has yet to arrive, however, so what will you do?" Selva asked.

"It doesn't matter. Fia is still a student, so they wouldn't let her participate anyways," Frose said with a faint smile.

In her hand, Frose held a letter that had been jointly signed by prominent branch families requesting a family meeting. It had reached her yesterday. Since it had been signed by more than a certain number of branch families, she couldn't refuse the request.

"I imagine it concerns the coming Tenbram and pursuing responsibilities for the small problems around it," Selva assumed.

Frose had, in fact, predicted the same. "I believe so. They shouldn't know that much, though."

"Indeed. For starters, I don't think they have found out about Sir Alus."

"Well, we'll find out when the meeting begins. Selva, there might be a need to discipline them during the meeting. If something happens, you may mercilessly intimidate them."

"As you wish."

After acknowledging her, Selva opened the door to the study.

Once he'd seen the head of the Fable family off to the meeting room, he followed behind her with his head lowered.

The large meeting room was luxuriously furnished.

As the large doors opened, he heard many chairs scoot as the gathered branch families stood up and politely met with the coolheaded woman who briskly entered.

"We branch families humbly greet the Fable family's great head," an older figure greeted Frose first.

Before anyone else could follow suit, she stopped them by holding up her hand and casually took her seat at the head of the table. Her bold figure gave off an inviolable majesty, and it was also clear that she was in a bad mood.

It felt like the temperature in the room dropped by several degrees with her few cold glances.

"Thank you for coming so far." At those words, the branch family heads sat down, but she continued speaking, her words barbed. "I am a very busy person, so let's get this started."

“Then allow me.” A man from the Verdale family, who was sitting closest to Frose, stood up.

This family had Fable blood. It was led by one of Frose’s siblings who had been granted the rank of count by the ruler. Worn swept back from his forehead, his vivid red hair was a sign of his lineage. He was a few years older than Frose and was a Magicmaster ranked in the upper half of the Triples. He was more than worthy of representing the branch families.

“First, there is something I would like to confirm with the head of the family. Is it true that we are headed for a Tenbram against the Womruina family?” he asked.

“Yes, that is correct,” said Frose.

A blatant commotion started up, but the Verdale family head, Gilman Verdale, continued, “Then is the rumor that Lady Tesfia will join the Womruina family if we are defeated true as well?”

He was probably trying to create a narrative of a tyrannical Fable family making an important decision entirely on their own.

With an exaggerated sigh, Frose put her elbow on the table and cut straight to the point. “That is my decision as the head of the family.”

“And you have no duty to announce this?” Verdale asked. “We are distinguished families linked to Fable. Surely, you won’t say that you don’t understand the importance of the main family’s daughter marrying into another family. Not to mention that family being Womruina... If something goes wrong, it would be tantamount to admitting that we are in a subordinate position.”

“Fia is my daughter. Branch families have no say in this,” Frose insisted.

The Tenbram had practically been a surprise attack on them, but Frose had known that letting the branch families find out about it would put her at a disadvantage. Instead, Frose had chosen to make everything, engagement included, a decision she’d made as the head of the family.

However, now that she was speaking to them, her curt answer filled the room with tension.

Gilman Verdale and the other heads of branch families folded their arms in a blatant manner with complicated but clearly displeased expressions on their faces.

“I would like to remind you that the Fable family can only stand thanks to the branch families,” Gilman said, giving Frose an unreservedly sharp stare.

In that instant, Frose noticed a vague change in Selva, who was standing behind her. His eyebrows raised ever so slightly, revealing his inner anger. It was a rare show of emotion for the constantly calm and composed elderly butler, making Frose likely the only one in the room to notice.

There was no doubt that the branch families had been getting a louder voice in family meetings such as these recently. That was perhaps because it had been some time since Frose had left the military, so her influence had weakened. But perhaps it was because the branch families now had more outstanding children.

It was tradition in the Fable family for the branch families to support the main family, no more, no less. It was perfectly justifiable to invest more in developing personnel for the sake of being of use to the main family...but that old and beautiful bond had long since fallen apart in the chaos that had started to assault humanity.

“It’s true that the Fable family is supported by the branch families, but conversely, we are supporting some families with generous assistance,” Frose noted. She expected to see two or three of the people seated in the meeting room to look pale, but their reactions were unexpectedly calm.

Hmm. So they expected me to try to shake them up like this... It’s not exactly treason, but they are certainly colluding, Frose thought. *The Verdale family must have promised support instead. As I recall, their artificial agricultural enterprise has been seeing big profits these past few years. It will probably not last forever, but they have enough to gather the branch families for now.*

This wasn’t the first time that the branch families had gotten carried away, but never before had they been so thoroughly prepared and acted collectively like this.

Gilman cleared his throat and put on an air of importance. He gestured as he

began to speak, as if to say this was the will of everyone. “We have supported the main family for many years, swearing our loyalty and serving. We carry the same pride in the Fable blood. And as the head of Verdale, I believe it is our duty to push the main family back to the proper path should they make a mistake. Please, reconsider this Tenbram.”

Several at the meeting nodded along with his fervent speech.

Now that they’d asserted their claim, Frose crossed her legs and glanced at everyone seated there. She’d been ingenious since childhood and had cultivated her insight through experience. Now she could see all kinds of thoughts in their eyes.

Some had enough self-preservation not to do anything too reckless, and some were truly concerned for the future of the family.

“Gilman speaks the truth. As someone related to Fable, I can’t overlook the present situation,” a large woman to Frose’s left added with a fearless smile.

She was the head of the Hanbroden family, Falipa Hanbroden. In terms of lineage, she was second only to Verdale. She was head of a military family. Verdale had the pedigree, but Hanbroden had the power.

“Regardless, measures need to be taken. In fact, instead of fighting with Womruina about withdrawing from the Tenbram, why not actively push for Lady Tesfia to marry into the Womruina family?”

It was a different idea, but there were those who raised their voice in agreement.

“If we are considering the future of Fable, we should put aside our personal feelings and consider methods of currying favor with Womruina. Oh, but not by putting ourselves in a subordinate position. I meant the other way around, naturally,” she stated, a smile on her face as though it was an excellent idea.

In other words, the idea was to take over the Womruina family. She wanted to get close with Womruina so that she could turn the tables on them and sink her teeth into them.

However, as a military family, she wasn’t very well-informed, and it seemed she didn’t understand the current state of the Fable family. In any case, they

had been targeted by the military for investigation under certain suspicions, and they were also being watched by the ruler.

Former royalty or not, Womruina was now no more than a ship with holes in the bottom, whereas Frose had a channel to the military and was clever when it came to politics.

Even if he is unrelated to the string of events, Aile's ambition will end up causing him to destroy himself. No matter how carefully he maneuvers, he can't hide the threat he poses. The ambition he possesses will lead him to a sheer cliff, the very edge of ruin, thought Frose.

She even started to pity Falipa for her lack of information gathering skills. "That is impossible."

Frose's words came as a complete shock to everyone.

"Lady Frose, you mean to say that you are stubbornly insisting on the Tenbram?!" one asked.

"It's too dangerous! Not only could we lose our honor, we would give the Womruina an opening that would threaten to bring our family down!" said another.

"Are you trying to ruin the Fable family's long-standing glory in your generation?!" said yet another.

Unable to believe what they were hearing, they were getting wound up. Then a sharp voice cut through the chaos filling the meeting room.

It was Selva's loud rebuke. "Quiet down! You stand before the head of the family!"

He glowered at everyone around the room with a threatening stare. It was a glare of cold hard steel. It felt like it could cut down the very souls of those it pinned down. His usual demeanor was gone and replaced with a stifling pressure.

"Ugh..."

"Gah..."



Their heads cooled, and they stopped as if their spines had frozen. The men and women sat down one after another, and Frose stared coldly at them.

“We will face Womruina with a firm determination. For the sake of our family’s history and glory, Fable will not stand beneath them. There is no room for discussion in this. If you were only upset about not being informed, there would have been some room to listen,” Frose said, her tone dignified as she looked over the fools.

They were probably following their own reasoning, and perhaps it was the right way of being a noble. Even if they also had some selfish motives, they were doing this for the greater good. It was clear that they were putting the survival of the Fable family first; even those who asked her to be more moderate were only trying to prepare for any eventuality. At the very least they wouldn’t bring harm to the family.

“Hmm. If you have that much resolve, I have no intention of objecting to your decision, Lady Frose.” Gilman slightly shrugged and displayed his loyalty with a courteous bow.

It was a rather drastic change, so perhaps Selva’s intimidation and Frose’s unwavering determination had struck home. The other branch heads stood up and also bowed, one after another.

“Lady Frose, please use my family’s elites for this Tenbram,” somebody suggested. And with that the dam burst open.

Offers came flooding in, such as their elites being Quadruple Digit Magicmasters or making use of their son who’d studied under an excellent master.

Frose signaled Selva with a look, and he stepped forward to calm the chaos. “The main personnel selection has already been completed, but your offers are greatly appreciated. Naturally Master Frose knows that without the support of the branch families victory is but a fleeting dream.”

It wasn’t exactly the carrot after the whip, but it was a form of compromise. Participants had already been chosen, but the branch families’ objections had been taken into account.

So some slots had been left open among the substitutes.

However, that alone wasn't enough to alleviate the branch families' concerns. After all, it wasn't Frose who would be leading but her daughter, who was still just a student.

Not even being allowed to have Alus as the only commoner was enough of a trump card to appease the branch families because among those who didn't know his real status, Alus Reigin was just a suspicious individual of dubious origin, which only served to increase their unease.

Right now Frose and Selva wanted to avoid the branch families causing an uproar and disturbing the environment around Tesfia and Alus before the Tenbram.

That wouldn't be enough to shake Alus, but Tesfia was different. Compared with Loki, Frose felt her daughter had gotten off to a late start. And the last thing she wanted right now was her daughter incurring Alus's displeasure.

Naturally that went beyond the Tenbram.

Maybe I should have taught Fia how to make a homemade meal...not that I am one to say.

Frose slowly exhaled and cleared her mind of unnecessary thoughts. With Alus's affiliation on the scales, it was unlikely that he would hold back, and for this Tenbram, he would no doubt be the key player.

Aile was more likely after Alus's power more than a marriage to Tesfia. Alus found himself as not much more than a political tool. But if not for him, Frose likely wouldn't have made such a large gamble.

"It is just as Selva has said. For this Tenbram's personnel, we will be prioritizing those who we decide will be helpful regardless of the branch family's status. We will keep you posted," said Frose. And with that out of the way, she tried to somewhat forcibly bring an end to the meeting and stand up, but...

"Just a moment," the head of the Hanbroden family, Falipa said, grabbing the hem of Frose's skirt to stop her. Looking humble, she spoke seriously.

“I have heard that the origin of this fire was at the Second Magical Institute that Lady Tesfia attends. Isn’t that a problematic environment for her to grow in as the future head of the family?”

“What a roundabout way to say this. In essence, you are doubting Fia’s current talents, are you not? And if the Institute’s environment is poor, are you perhaps proposing that she transfers to the family’s private school?” asked Frose, narrowing her eyes a little.

But as expected of a military family, Falipa brushed off the pressure with a bright smile. “No, well, I heard that Lady Frose objected to Lady Tesfia’s enrollment to the Institute at first too.”

That was, of course, an unavoidable truth. Frose had underestimated the Hanbroden family’s information gathering, so she was hit with the truth where it hurt.

“There are plenty of rumors of Lady Tesfia’s excellence, and you have shown your own resolve to us just now, Lady Frose. But even so there is a need to prepare for the unlikely event that the Tenbram could end poorly,” Falipa said, looking serious. “That is why I would like to suggest that we establish a candidate for the next head of the family. Someone with exceptional talent who could become the secret heir, the Ertlade.”

Frose was struck silent. This was an attack from an unforeseen angle. What was surprising was Frose’s lack of anger.

I see, she thought.

So that was how they were doing this.

Typically, a direct descendant of the Fable family became the next head of the family, but that was just common practice and not mandated. While there had been times in the Fable’s history when a branch family had temporarily been the head of the family, they had never officially succeeded as the next head.

However, circumstances were starting to change. The Socalent family was an example of an increasing emphasis on ability in the noble society. And while it was an indirect way of putting it, Falipa made a good point that Frose couldn’t flat out reject.

I see, so we are here now for this topic, thought Frose.

It wasn't just a matter of having a candidate to become the next head of the family. Someone with the ability to excessively control the multiple inherited spells, as the secret heir, would need such overwhelming skill that anyone would have to acknowledge it. This was also Fable's long cherished desire, and Tesfia still hadn't reached that level.

And now that problem was being brought back up. While the branch families couldn't make any reckless or blatant moves, they were still a troublesome group.

In reality, Frose didn't have the qualifications to become the secret heir herself and was only able to become the head of the family by shutting down any objections with the position she'd built for herself in the military and political influence.

She'd pushed for Tesfia to get married because she'd more or less expected this situation. She'd hoped her daughter would be able to get a husband who would be recognized by the branch families and offer high expectations for her children.

Frose fell silent for a moment, and seeing that as an opening, Gilman Verdale also added his piece. "She certainly has a point. Lady Tesfia is still far from being called a secret heir, and that is a problem. If she is going to command the branch families, she will need to be strong enough to convince us that she is the true heir of Fable, or there will be doubts around the next head of the family."

In the past, when Tesfia learned Icicle Sword, Frose had intentionally not praised her. She knew that the branch families' children around the same age had already acquired advanced spells around the same level of power.

Those children received special education under personal teachers. While Tesfia had displayed exceptional talents, they weren't outstanding compared to the branch families' children.

But Fia is different now.

Recalling that Tesfia had been receiving secret training under Alus's guidance, the edges of Frose's lips ever so slightly rose. Selva seemed to think the same

thing and nodded in agreement.

That's right. If I don't believe in her, who will... But...

But even so, Frose couldn't afford to set aside her cautious nature. After all, she didn't know how the branch families' children were growing now.

Gilman Verdale was a Triple in ranking, but his abilities put him close to that of a Double.

Falipa Hanbroden also didn't measure up to him, but her abilities rivaled that of a Triple, and she commanded an elite roster of relatives and servants.

When Frose displayed a momentary hesitation, Falipa took on a modest appearance and started speaking of the branch children. She smiled at the Verdale family, whom she deemed to be a powerful opponent. But that smile didn't reach her eyes. She feigned praise for their daughter while using that as a lead-up to brag about her son.

"If I recall, the Verdale family's daughter is a year below Tesfia, isn't she? As for my son, aside from the family's affinity for ice, he also has an affinity for another two attributes, although he is still a little short of mastering them... In fact, his personal tutor praises him for having the most potential among the branch families."

"Hmm, my daughter just has the bare minimum of talent, and I didn't suspect that she would be more excellent than any direct descendants. Although there are plenty of voices calling her the best ice user of the latest generation," said Gilman, putting his daughter's talents on display in a manner that could hardly be called indirect. He clearly wanted to position her above Tesfia. "That said, your Roderich is supposedly the most talented of the generation."

"Yes, he is two years older than your Theresia, but I do feel that he has the qualities to be able to support the Fable family. He might not be attending the Second Magical Institute, but it is all but guaranteed that his talents will blossom further should a Magicmaster of the level of the renowned Sisty Nexophia give him guidance," said Falipa.

Frose quietly watched the two clashing beneath the surface with a chilling stare. This was probably why they'd brought their children with them.

Their children hadn't been enrolled in the Second Magical Institute to avoid any senseless infighting between the branch families. It followed the tradition of branch families debasing themselves and aiding the main family at all times. But Frose had pushed ahead with enrollment in order to distance Tesfia from the branch families' influence.

While they'd followed that policy on the surface, the branch families had eventually begun diligently looking into Tesfia's talents. And in doing so, they concluded that she had no accomplishments and gave up on her talents. So they had begun to discreetly but thoroughly raise their children under the pretense of it being a precaution in case something were to happen to Tesfia.

Frose had also once given up on Tesfia's talents as a Magicmaster. However, what the branch family heads didn't know was that her daughter had been blessed with a chance meeting with Alus at the Institute.

Which was why she could now remain so confident.

"How about it, Lady Frose. It's the first time such a decision has ever been made in the Fable family," said Gilman.

"Our family agrees as well. Please consider it," said Falipa.

Since the Verdale and Hanbroden families made the proposal first, the other branch heads began raising their voices in support.

Selva took one step forward and spoke bluntly. "Everyone, I do believe you are getting ahead of yourselves. Your children may be excellent, but Lady Tesfia is the only direct descendant of the Fable family. You could say that the young lady is the Fable family itself. To the Fables anything else is nothing but an offshoot."

The branch family heads seemed to shrink back...but the two branch families who'd started this reacted differently. Gilman in particular flashed a troubled smile and looked like he was about to protest.

Apparently cowering from Selva's pressure had been him recognizing it was best to temporarily pull back.

"It appears you are misunderstanding something, Mr. Selva. We are not doubting Lady Tesfia's qualifications. What we want is proof of her talents. We

don't even need to bring up the matter of the secret heir to have questions about the current situation. Lady Tesfia is already seventeen. Does she have the talents and resolve to take over this great house? That is what I want to make clear."

Gilman had intentionally raised his voice, and Falipa followed suit. "I completely agree. In fact, the situation is unstable even around the ruler. She even formed a new special guard."

She was talking about the new Aferka.

The fat woman continued. "If we look at the Socalent family's prosperity, power is valued more than lineage now. Is it not a self-evident truth that the survival of the family should be prioritized over focusing on the bloodline? Besides, we also carry Fable blood. We should have the right to freely make proposals for the sake of the family's future."

"Just so. And I believe I have some valuable advice in that regard," Gilman said and respectfully brought his main suggestion to the table. "Lady Frose...please take my daughter, Theresia, into the family as your adopted daughter."

The schemer was showing his real ability. Denouncing Frose's decision to hold a Tenbram and retreating at Selva's pressure had been a spur-of-the-moment move. By relenting once, he could create a situation where he rallied the branch families behind him, making it much more difficult for Frose to reject him twice.

Moreover, since Frose herself had decided that the Tenbram would continue, he had realized that it would be easier to get his will through by pushing for his daughter to join as further reinforcements.

A wave of unrest washed over the meeting room. Falipa's jaw had dropped too, but she soon returned to her senses and tried to catch up with her rival.

"Lady Frose, in that case you should adopt my Roderich as well..."

Exasperated by these completely unprincipled words, it was Frose's turn to rebuke them. "Leave it at that. There is no need to decide everything here. I will take your proposals to heart, but let me say this. Rest easy, as regardless of how the Tenbram turns out, I will not let Womruina do anything."

She was convinced of that. If Frose's assumption was correct, Womruina would soon disappear from the public stage of politics. This would be even more assured if she could use Alus to win the Tenbram.

Besides, it's a great opportunity to build up Fia and bring out her talents and true worth, thought Frose.

Gilman had thoroughly thought through offering his daughter up for adoption, and Falipa had only used her son's ability to appeal to Frose. While the depths of their plans differed, their children, Theresia and Roderich, would become unexpected rivals for Tesfia. Adopting them could lead to problems in the future and needed further consideration, but Frose couldn't deny their potential use in the Tenbram and would have to test them.

It would be a challenge for Tesfia, but if she was unable to clear even that... Frose's status as head of the family covered her heart in a rose of ice as she thought about it.

"It doesn't have to be your children, but I will make preparations to adopt one who is worthy. Selva, prepare the papers before the Tenbram. Make sure that the ruler can accept it right away," said Frose.

"Yes, Master Frose."

There was no hesitation in Selva's response. It was like everything had proceeded as expected. Seeing that, a smile appeared on Gilman's face, but he was a little suspicious as well.

"Oh, what a welcome reception," he said. "But Lady Frose, how will you determine who is worthy?"

"There will be training in preparation for the Tenbram soon, so how about the candidates join that? You didn't bring your children just to put more spirit behind your protests of the Tenbram, did you?" Frose replied as snidely as she could.

As expected, Gilman Verdale was a shrewd man. His main priority might have been to put a stop to the Tenbram, but when he saw that wasn't going to happen, he switched tactics to his daughter. He wouldn't go down without a fight.

And naturally, Tesfia would be joining the training. Once put on the same stage as the two children, they would be able to rank them. They thought it would depend on if Tesfia could show her true value, but Frose had set the stage for her.

“That answers my questions. I thank you for your consideration. However”—Gilman politely bowed—“I am aware it is rude, but I must ask one more thing of you.”

Gilman looked up, and his strong determination showed in his eyes. Frose showed her magnanimity and stopped Selva from taking a step forward.

“Very well, say it.”

“When you judge that my daughter is worthy of being adopted into the main family, please allow her to learn the inherited spells or at least challenge the path to it,” Gilman said.

Falipa’s eyes opened wide at that, and she shouted in panic. “S-Show some self-control! Only direct descendants are allowed that! The inherited spells leaving the Fable family is unacceptable!”

The two things were fundamentally different. One didn’t need to be the secret heir in order to take over the family, like Frose.

When Falipa raised her voice, Gilman abandoned his polite wording and spoke coldly. “I know that. But this is all for the sake of the family. My father was the previous head’s little brother, and even on his deathbed, he strictly ordered me to loyally serve the family.”

“What?! The Hanbroden family is just as loyal!” yelled Falipa.

“Are they now? The Hanbroden family neglected their loyalty for the previous head of the Fable family, didn’t they?” asked Gilman. “And despite being a branch family, they were arrogant in their power and showed disrespect. Your qualities will naturally be called into question when we are building our noble bloodline into the future.”

With a bang, Falipa slammed her palm onto the meeting table and shouted, “You plan to exclude the Hanbroden family?!”

And she glared, Gilman calmly faced her and proclaimed, “That’s not what I’m saying. If the Hanbroden family shows its power, I don’t mind at all. I simply wish for a head of the family that has Fable blood and the inherited spells. This is about creating a powerful and prosperous bloodline.”

“I-In that case...!” started Falipa. In that sense, her son, Roderich, had more than enough potential.

When Falipa showed signs of pursuing the matter once more, the branch family heads stood up one after another to show that they agreed.

Frose came to a silent understanding. The branch families were indeed loyal—not to Frose but to the Fable family.

But that was that and this was this. While this was partially Frose’s responsibility, she had to draw a clear line. And their actions were a blow to her dignity. As one of the three great noble families, she couldn’t overlook the branch families’ conceit.

Frose rested her chin in her hand and glared coldly at the line of branch family heads. “You are all throwing your weight around without knowing your limitations.”

Their loyalty to the Fable family was only half of the reason behind their behavior. The other half was an eruption of smoldering rebellious spirit towards the main family.

But in a sense, it was something that happened as it should have. With the skills of a Magicmaster being valued above all in recent years, a head of the family unable to master the inherited spells let alone become the secret heir was no longer acceptable.

Frose had managed to become the head under the banner of preserving the family, but she’d failed to show her strength. The Fable family, which had made its name off their mastery of the ice attribute, was now a shadow of its former self.

It had been two generations since the Fable family had had a secret heir, as Frose’s father had also failed to fully master the inherited spells. And Frose herself was further from it than he had been... That fact was always lurking in

the back of her mind.

Despite Tesfia being an excellent student, Frose had despaired at her talents, wishing for her to reach even further heights. It was only now she realized that it was all because she herself had been lacking.

I suppose I was still inexperienced. However...

She believed that Tesfia would surpass her. Even knowing that it was her own selfishness, she felt that her daughter could take the stage and prove herself.

That's why I don't feel that this is a matter that I should try to shut down. I am sure that Fia herself has the means to quiet them down, she thought. While she didn't let it show, Frose was smiling beneath her mask of a calm head of the family.

Gilman, standing in front of her, seemed to have said his piece and now deeply bowed. "I apologize for making a long speech inappropriate for the occasion."

Contrary to his actions, his behavior had a pressure to it that seemed to say that the branch families would get their will. And Frose wasn't foolish enough not to pick up on that.

"I don't mind. You are right that Fia hasn't fully mastered the inherited spells. If Theresia Verdale or Roderich Hanbroden can show their strength during the practice, I will allow them to attempt to learn one of them. But only if they fully prove their talents," said Frose.

"I am moved by your generous answer in spite of my many discourtesies. In that case, I would like for my daughter to learn the magic formula for Garb Sheep if the chance presents itself," said Gilman.

Frose narrowed her eyes at Gilman, who pushed even harder. But rather than exasperation, she felt some surprise at the spell he mentioned.

Garb Sheep was one of the inherited spells that the head of the family two generations ago had mastered. That they'd mentioned that spell so quickly showed that the Verdale family must have looked into it ahead of time.

The Fable family certainly had several magic formulas for powerful inherited

spells. Supposedly, several trump cards had been prepared in the case that the head of the family was not a master of the ice attribute.

Still, it was an unexpected proposal. Garb Sheep was one of the inherited spells that had been provided to the military despite objections from the branch families, so Verdale would hardly be the only ones with the spell.

When the Fiends had first appeared, the Fable family had created three inherited spells.

Typically, the head of the family had to master at least one of them. Among them only two had been secret heirs: the head from two generations ago and the one before that.

It was well-known to everyone in the room that it was those two generations that had brought about the golden age for the Fable family.

Moreover, Frose hadn't inherited everything from her father upon becoming the head of the family. If anything, it was the opposite.

Her father had passed away before she'd been taught much of anything. So while her wet nurse and grandmother had taught her how she should act and what she needed to know about the family, Frose hadn't learned much about the inherited spells. Since she only had a sliver of knowledge, she couldn't reproduce any of the inherited spells aside from a portion of Icicle Sword.

"Very well. If Theresia is taken in as my adopted daughter, I will allow her to attempt to learn Garb Sheep and give her what I can about the underlying magic formula. Although whether she can master it will depend on her."

Garb Sheep was an obstructing spell that allowed for one to practically control the weather across a huge area. Even with the magic formula, it was a difficult spell to learn as it required an affinity for ice magic, as well as a deep understanding of the formula and the spell's nature and vast amounts of mana. It wasn't the kind of spell that one could master on talent alone. One would likely also need a high performance AWR capable of processing a frightening amount of mana information.

Learning expert-level spells almost required fate in a sense. Destiny and talent were required in order to stand on the starting line to learn the spell. That was

the main reason Frose hadn't taught Garb Sheep to Tesfia. The other was that Garb Sheep was starting to lose its treatment as an inherited spell and was no longer prioritized in order to become a secret heir.

Frose couldn't help but sigh in her mind as Gilman bowed. His attitude was provocative, but he was probably speaking the truth when he said that he had no intention of hurting the main family. He'd likely taken everything into account when asking for Garb Sheep or he would have asked for the complete form of Icicle Sword, the historically strongest ice spell that the fourth generation head of the family had mastered.

He was simply trying to protect Fable, motivated by passion and a dangerous amount of loyalty. Gilman was probably also being considerate by only suggesting that Frose adopt Theresia instead of immediately making her the heir.

It's probably fine for now, but I honestly don't know what's going to happen in the future, thought Frose.

Even if Gilman himself wasn't driven by ambition, there was no guarantee that his child or grandchild wouldn't be. Not only was Frose an acquaintance of Vizaist, as someone who'd been in the military, she'd felt the focus on ability that was spreading through the noble society.

That means that this coming Tenbram will be of utmost importance to Fia, she thought and sighed.

Now not only was there the matter of the engagement with Aile, trouble with the next head of the family had been added. So how would her inexperienced daughter fare?

That said, Frose was the head of a great noble family. So knowing that it was the path that Tesfia had chosen, she hadn't made a scene when she learned that her daughter had been injured during an attack on the Institute.

Frose had stood on the front lines and knew of the harshness of the battlefield, which was why she knew that fearing for her daughter's safety and pulling her out of the Institute would lead to the family's ruin.

The branch family heads left after Gilman's request, leaving the meeting room

vacant, aside from Frose and Selva who would discuss countermeasures.



“...and that is what happened,” Tesfia said, explaining the quarrel with the branch families.

They’d found it suspicious and pulled her into their guest room to question her, but the presence of further trouble left Alus and Loki dumbfounded.

I see. So the relatives we saw were from that family meeting. The parents returned home, and the children in question stayed behind to participate in the group training, Alus thought.

Selva hadn’t been wrong that things would get noisy. While exasperated, Alus also felt a degree of curiosity towards the system that allowed nobility to keep going on.

Unlike Alus, Loki simply gave Tesfia a sympathetic look. “You have it rough too, Ms. Tesfia. Even though you look so happy-go-lucky...”

“You didn’t need to add that last part,” said Tesfia. “Still, when I think about it, I just left all of the details to my mother. My only thoughts regarding the head of the family was that I’d need to do my best, but I wasn’t really considering the surrounding circumstances.”

Tesfia’s method of doing things had been to settle on a target and head straight towards it, but she had never thought there would be so many problems appearing before she could do so.

Thanks to Alus’s training, Tesfia had been able to show Frose her potential, but it seemed that was still insufficient. As nobility, just becoming stronger was not enough.

“What a pain. Having so many relatives isn’t all good, huh?” said Alus.

“Maybe that’s true about relatives, but they’re all earnestly thinking about the future.” Tesfia scratched her cheek.

Her heart had jumped when she heard about adopting someone from the branch families. That meant they didn’t acknowledge Tesfia as the next head of the family.

Selva had tried to smooth things over by saying there was a world of difference between this and the Socalent family deciding so quickly on Felinella as the next head of the family. In terms of talent and potential that everyone acknowledged...

Even if I can't beat Feli, I thought I'd tried my best. Be it in readiness or effort, thought Tesfia.

The gloomy feelings she'd been holding back so far appeared on her face and cast a shadow over her expression. Alus calmly looked at her.

Not that it's any of our business, but Womruina is really under pressure right now. That's why I'm curious to see what Aile is going to try and do, even if it's creepy, he thought.

Still, at this rate, Tesfia would become useless before the Tenbram due to the pressure.

Tesfia was a bit of an airhead; while she was intelligent, she was simple. Her head would be a mess with all the troubles, and she wouldn't be able to think about any plans.

This general is a handful. It would be one thing if it was a princess, but this is Fia we're talking about, thought Loki.

"Sir Alus..." Loki sent him a glance as if to say, "See? She got caught up in something again." The entangling vines refused to let go of their prey and spread towards Alus as well.

After thinking for a moment, Alus spoke, his face surly. "I do have a solution. Go on Support, it's your time to shine."

Loki sighed. "If you say so, Sir Alus...but I don't think I could solve anything at all. I can't participate in the Tenbram, after all."

"Well, there's something I need you to do too. Although that was clear from the start," said Alus.

"Huh? What do you...?" Tesfia leaned forward to ask.

Alus declared, "In short, you need to become that Ertlade or whatever. In other words, you need to learn the inherited spells. It might not be possible

right away, but from what I can tell, you're getting pretty close. Not to mention you've gained so much strength compared with when you enrolled into the Institute. Not that I know about your education."

Sensing that the discussion was moving on to the next stage, Loki quickly stood up from her seat. She searched through the room's closet in order to prepare something.

Ignoring her, Alus stared directly at Tesfia. "Just to make it clear, the fastest way through this situation is for you to grow, both to get closer to the inherited spells and to show your strength to the branch families. Besides, there's no point if you can't put your everything into the Tenbram. To roughly sum it up, there's only one thing to aim for. Get stronger."

"I-I got it!"

Once Alus made the path so clear and simple, Tesfia's expression brightened up.

That was more like it.

Since they didn't know how strong the branch family children were they couldn't do a simple comparison, but Alus believed in Tesfia's great potential, in particular, her ability to learn spells of the attribute she was best at was amazing. She was bad at theory, but she had the brilliant sense to skip several steps and grasp at the essence of the spell.

"Although there are some problems with your personality," Alus added. Tesfia looked perplexed, like she was about to ask if he was talking about himself.

"Don't worry, I was talking about you," Alus firmly declared, to which Tesfia nodded understandingly for a moment.

Then she did a double take. "Wait, you're just bad-mouthing me! Just so you know, you're not much better, Al!" Tesfia shot back with puffed up cheeks, and she then looked up at the ceiling and muttered, "So that's how you look at me..."

Hmm?

Alus felt like something was off; the way she frowned had something different

mixed in than usual. Unlike the usual tit for tat, her attitude was meek, and there was a hint of maidenly sadness to her voice.

However, Alus didn't think too deeply about the reason and flatly stated, "At any rate, there's no time to idle away thinking. Plug the rules for the Orb Struggle into your head. A general's role is more than just giving orders to subordinates."

"Of course, I'll study them," said Tesfia.

"You have until tomorrow," said Alus.

"Ugh...I-I get it." Tesfia's shoulders dropped and she turned around to drag her feet back to her own room. However, as she closed the door behind her, she peeked through the slight gap. "Al, if you need something, you can tell anyone and they'll get it for you."

"I got it. I just gotta hurry back and study. There's never enough time for that," said Alus.

"I was trying to be considerate! Hmph!" said Tesfia.

The door closed, and Alus and Loki were left in the room. But it wasn't like they had nothing to do. Loki was still confirming the luggage, and she was moving her hands and eyes as if she was moving her room into Alus's room, but she had been listening to the conversation.

"Nobles really are impossible to understand, aren't they, Sir Alus?"

Alus was looking through the papers for the Tenbram again, but he gave a quick answer. "I guess, yeah. But we're outsiders; we have nothing to say about the problems with the successor of a great noble family. That's above the authority of even a Single. And I don't have any interest in it either."

"So that would be stepping over the line. But wouldn't helping Ms. Tesfia with Fable's inherited spell be crossing it already?" asked Loki.

"...That's unavoidable."

Loki had seen through Alus's intentions.

She means Zepel... She really is sharp, thought Alus.

Zepel was a form of expansion on Icicle Sword. Alus had taught Tesfia the spell independently, and it seemed like it suited her better than expected. Or rather, it seemed that it unexpectedly helped her realize the meaning of mastering Icicle Sword.

The inherited spell that Frose had referred to was done in steps. Icicle Sword was a spell only the Fable family had, but it seemed that it wasn't enough to be called an inherited spell. In other words, it was the first step in learning the complete inherited spell.

In that regard, Zepel had helped her to easily grasp the concept of understanding coordinates in mutual locations. But from Alus's point of view, he had only just expanded on Icicle Sword so he didn't feel like she should be blamed for that. It had only been possible thanks to her talents, but there was still a worry that Alus wanted to conceal.

Alus had only been trying to apply the spell, but Tesfia's unexpected talents had ended up on the rails of the inherited spell and were closing in on the principle. The spell he had taught her had by chance served as a hint for the Fable inherited spell.

It was already too late to turn back now.

This doesn't look good... he thought.

He felt like the number of things he needed to think about had exponentially increased. It far exceeded what Alus could handle on his own.

Looks like I don't have the time to think about my retirement or research anymore. But since they're becoming more usable than I'd expected, my original goal of being able to take it easy should be realized. But that's for later. Right now I need to handle the task before me.

Problems were piling up. Looking away from any fundamental solutions, Alus flipped through the pages detailing the Tenbram.

Ninety-Sixth Chapter: A Cold Spark

The first day at the Fable mansion had been unexpectedly busy, but Alus made sure to get a good rest. Naturally, he'd looked into the Tenbram, but he knew from his experience on the battlefield that it was best not to push it too far.

As he didn't like being in places that mentally drained him, and since he liked to do things at his own pace, he had declined dinner. But he did eat breakfast the next day, at which he sat next to Loki, and they were brought quite a luxurious menu.

"Even the breakfast is delicious! The bread is fluffy and the juice and eggs were all made today, and the salad makes the most of the flavors of the ingredients," said Loki.

"Hmm? Well, I'm fine with whatever," said Alus.

Loki glanced at Alus, who had no real comparison to speak of for the food, and grabbed another slice of baguette.

"It doesn't taste bad, right?" she asked.

"I guess not..."

Unlike Alus, who acted like he was indifferent to everything, Loki happily spread colorful jam on the bread and took a bite.

"Mm, everything is perfect, starting with the ingredients. I should ask the Fable family's chef about the recipe," Loki muttered to herself after finishing her bread. With a satisfied smile, she appeased her thirst with tea. "Phew, even the tea is first-class. What an amazing reception. The Fable family is not to be underestimated."

"Hmm, yeah, it certainly makes you forget that it's a weekday," said Alus.

"Sir Alus, I will just pretend that you didn't make it sound like you live with a regular daily routine."

“You can’t pretend you didn’t hear it if you’re saying so?”

After their breakfast and casual conversation, they had returned to their room to train when Tesfia came over in place of a maid.

She was wearing an easy-to-move-in outfit similar to what the Institute had. However, as expected from the Fable family, it was clearly luxurious. The material was high quality, and while simple, the design was elegant and stylish. It was a highly functional training outfit made for Magicmasters.

Yet despite the luxurious outfit, Tesfia looked worn out. She had spent the night memorizing the rules. “Good morning Al, Loki,” she said. “Were you able to sleep yesterday? The training starts right away today... Not everyone’s here, but those who are have gathered already.”

She anxiously glanced at Alus out of concern for his misanthropic side.

It’s a bit late for that, he thought.

Alus wasn’t in high spirits, but he had no intention of turning back nor to particularly complain. Loki was quietly watching with a meek expression, and she probably also had some thoughts on the matter.

She also seemed to be paying attention to the strength of the Fable branch families’ children yesterday, thought Alus.

While not to Alus’s degree, Loki was rather passionate about strong magic.

This might even be something to look forward to. But most of all, this will be the first training for the Tenbram with the latest magic technology. I’m pretty sure I’ve got a good grasp of the rules, and I’ve got an image of how it will play out.

How would his simulation differ from reality? And even excluding that, Alus did find it rather interesting. Just how would this contest, which used the latest in magic technology regardless of expense, turn out?

Tesfia led Alus and Loki to the Fable mansion’s backyard, which was beyond imagination.

“How big are the Fable family grounds? I can’t even see the borders,” said Alus.

Tesfia nodded in a direction. “I don’t know, but if you go to the edge, there should be small boundary towers. But it’ll be a pain to come back if you go that far. Honestly, I’m not sure what we can do with all this space.”

I couldn’t tell from the front, but this is probably as large as the Institute. A part of the area is basically just a forest... thought Alus.

Not only did it have a sports ground and a full-fledged training grounds, it also had a storage facility for training equipment. It even had an athletics course with obstacles based on the Outer World. It had everything a noble might need to train.

“If they filled all of it with wheat fields they could feed a whole city. Ah, that must be our destination,” said Loki as she pointed to a certain location.

There was a group of people gathered at the far end of the sports ground. Maids were serving drinks to nobles, some in formal wear and some in the same training outfit as Tesfia.

It appeared that they were all waiting for Alus and the others. Frose had arrived ahead of them, and the nobles were taking turns chatting with her.

I guess she’s greeting them in place of their parents. Good work out there, thought Alus.

As Tesfia arrived with Alus and Loki in tow, the looks from the branch families were blatant. They were clearly appraising the two people that the next head of the family had brought with her.

Half of them look like they’re wondering why people outside of the family are here. I’d expected as much but they really don’t look welcoming.

Alus sighed and shrugged.

Frose clapped her hands and as attention gathered on her, she indicated Alus with a smile. “Now that we’re all gathered it is time for introductions. This is Mr. Alus, who will be cooperating with us for the Tenbram. He is the Fable family’s guest of honor and my daughter’s classmate. In other words, he is still a student, but I can guarantee his ability. And this is Ms. Loki...”

A recommendation from the head of the family herself was rather effective.

The way they looked at Alus and Loki clearly changed after Frose's introduction. Instead of suspicion they now offered favorable, welcoming looks.

Tesfia whispered into Alus's ear, "See, my mother introduced you right away, Al. And she even shared that she invited you herself. In places like this, the order of introduction shows the head of the family's goodwill."

That helped Alus understand, but he did manage to hold back any sarcastic remarks. He didn't have any particular complaints, but it was a blatant flip-flop, very much in the manner of politically astute nobles.

After a brief "nice to meet you" everyone reached out to shake hands. Among them were some who were quite well-informed, referring to Alus setting the record for the fastest victory in the Friendship Magical Tournament.

Top secret information on ranking seems to be getting sold cheaply as of late, considering even escaped criminals tried to assassinate me, but it seems they don't know that much, thought Alus.

Fortunately, the branch family men seemed more aware of Loki's records than his. But that was only natural since Loki had taken over for Alus, who'd retired partway through and displayed amazing prowess for a first-year student in the Friendship Magical Tournament.

Regardless, the atmosphere changed considerably thanks to Frose's introduction.

Alus and Loki were able to feel quite a bit more comfortable.

Frose then went on to explain today's training for the Orb Struggle in a dignified manner.

I figured that it would just be to get a good grasp of the flow, but it seems that we're going to get much deeper into it. That must explain these numbers.

The headcount was the same as what there would be in the real match. However, the gathered members appeared somewhat unreliable.

Among them was one as old as Berwick. Living the comfortable life of nobility, he had thin hair and a protruding belly that made it seem like he wouldn't be able to move with any high degree of agility.

Fortunately, most were in their twenties or thirties.

As if reading Alus's thoughts, Frose smiled. "Naturally, not everyone here will be participating. We will judge your aptitude now and choose the members for the Tenbram."

Ah, so this old man is just a candidate. But then...

Alus was relieved, but at the same time a different doubt entered his mind.

Are they picking participants based on more than just stamina and magic ability...? So the game has a different strategy.

Alus's prediction was wise. Among those gathered were those who had retired from the military and even some that hadn't been in the Outer World.

But Tenbram wasn't a fight against Fiends. Since it was against people, as well as tactics between groups, not even Frose would be able to immediately discern who would be best suited for the Tenbram. Alus was naturally a sure pick, but there was more leeway for choosing the other members.

So her first instructions were simple. "First you will be fighting in groups. You will split into two teams and clash. From Fable's side, Tesfia and Mr. Alus will be one group. And from the branch families, Theresia Verdale and Roderich Hanbroden..."

Those who were called lined up and were introduced. Theresia Verdale was the girl that Alus and Loki had seen yesterday who looked a lot like Tesfia. She was slightly taller than Tesfia, her eyes slightly more slanted with bangs split down the middle. And hanging down from her ears sticking out of her hair were earrings with tassels that drew one's attention.

Next was the Hanbroden family's eldest, Roderich. He had reddish-brown hair that reached down to his shoulders, and he was slim and tall. He was eighteen years old, but he wasn't naive like a student nor was he as stern as a soldier. But considering that he could use two attributes, he had extraordinary talent.

More participants were introduced, but the last one would simply observe instead of participating. Alus and Loki recognized him as well; it was the child from the group they'd seen yesterday. He was a twelve-year-old boy, but because of his androgynous features, Alus wasn't able to tell if he was a boy or

a girl until Tesfia told him.

But as expected of a noble, he had elegant posture and politely bowed at his introduction.

“That boy is Lucille Cleraban. He is a pretty distant relative. Looking at their lineage, it’s rough for them to continue to be considered a branch family,” Tesfia said sympathetically and cast a downward glance.

For a branch family to maintain its noble status, there were some restrictions. Either they had to produce strong Magicmasters or somebody in the family needed an important post in the military. There was a limit to how much the Fable family could use their connections and support.

Seemingly unfazed by Tesfia’s attitude, the innocent boy ran up to her. “Hello Big Sister. It’s been a while.”

“Have you been doing well, Lucille?” asked Tesfia.

“Big Sister?!” Alus and Loki said in surprise, and Tesfia glared at them.

Considering how Alice and the maids were taking care of her on a daily basis, it was hard to imagine, but she was technically the daughter of a noble family, so it wasn’t strange for relatives to call her that.

As the two were astonished, having momentarily forgotten that, Lucille just looked up at Tesfia with an innocent smile. That was when new figures approached.

“Pardon my late greeting, Lady Tesfia.” The tall Roderich held his hand against his chest and bowed.

Theresa next to him was just as courteous. “Unworthy as I might be, I have come to assist the main family in its moment of need,” she said.

At first glance, she seemed to be polite and loyal, but the moment her face was lowered, she bit down on her lip.

“Yes, thank you. It’s a pleasure.” Whether she noticed that or not, Tesfia gave them both a bright smile. Theresa smiled in return and then looked to Alus and Loki.

“The head of the family introduced us earlier, but since we’re here, why not

do it again..." said Theresia.

"Indeed. Why not have Lady Tesfia introduce these two?" asked Roderich.

"Right, this is Alus and Loki from the same year in the Institute," said Tesfia.

Since it was the second time, Tesfia kept the introduction brief. Theresia gave a somewhat scornful look, but Roderich kept an elegant smile on his face and held his hand out.

"Alus, is it? I heard rumors that you and Loki over there had a spectacular showing at the Friendship Magical Tournament. I may be older than you, but feel free to talk to me without reservation."

It was hard to imagine that he had underlying motives. Contrary to expectations, he was quite friendly, but it seemed like he didn't know about Alus's rank. Alus was just glad that his secret was still safe. If not, he wouldn't have the time to casually participate in a Tenbram.

That aside, while he didn't particularly want to get close to him, he noticed that Roderich was nicer than he'd expected. Since it'd be strange for him to be rude on their first meeting, Alus shook his hand.

Next, Lucille tried to walk up to Alus with a charming smile. "Learn your place, Lucille! You are from the lowest branch family," she said, harshly shutting him down.

It seemed she wanted to talk to Alus after Roderich. Lucille's shoulders trembled and he looked between Alus and Theresia and was unable to move.

Alus furrowed his brow and was just about to open his mouth, but Tesfia pulled at his sleeve as she gently reproached Lucille. "Lucille, you shouldn't disrespect your superiors. If you act thoughtlessly, you would hurt not just the Fable name but also the Cleraban family."

Tesfia acted so much like a noble lady that she even impressed Alus and Loki. They wanted to say "look who's talking," but this wasn't the place for that.

"Excuse me, Big Sister. I'm sorry, Sister Theresia," Lucille apologized to Tesfia and Theresia.

After telling him "As long as you understand." Theresia stood before Alus. "I

am Theresia Verdale. It is a pleasure to meet you. Now then, the two of you appear to be Lady Tesfia's friends and rather skilled. But this advice is for your own benefit. You should pull out of this before you embarrass yourselves in front of Womruina. This is the Fable family's problem."

There was clear hostility and disdain in her voice that she had no more intention of hiding.

For a moment, the atmosphere froze. Tesfia was aghast, but before she could mediate, Alus fearlessly faced the new girl.

"Sorry, but I have my own circumstances. That's not going to happen. I may be stuck with Fia, but I do look after her. Besides, I can't refuse a request from the head of the family."

Theresia looked a little surprised. At best, she'd figured that they were just a group of friends at the Institute. And she'd certainly not expected that Frose would have asked him to come.

Revealing that he was rank 1 would have removed all of her (or anyone else's) doubts, but then he'd have even more to explain. And he certainly couldn't reveal that his affiliation depended on the outcome. That was confidential.

"I see. So Lady Frose requested you herself? Then I could understand that you are useful. But if you're going to participate in Tenbram, some average abilities would just get in the way. So like I said, this is for your own good, but you really should just leave this to us," Theresia rudely said.

Even Alus couldn't conceal his displeasure and he made a bit of a face. She might have been ignorant, but to think a Single like him would be treated as a hindrance.

Tesfia started panicking, and Loki stepped forward in her place. She stared Theresia down with a sharp glare and firmly declared, "That's none of your business. That display at the Friendship Magical Tournament was just a fragment of Sir Alus's...I mean Al's and my strength. Ms. Theresia, was it? From what I can tell, you are merely dabbling in the ice attribute. So let me say this for your own benefit." Loki gave her a wicked grin. "You should hold off on participating, before you hold Al back."

This time, Theresia's face twisted.

"Wh-What are you...?! You're a mere guest! But if you're going to talk big, you better back it up with ability. I will talk with the head of the family, so you should join the training too. I'll wait on your formal apology until then."

"You won't be hearing it regardless," said Loki.

"Hmph. You're trampling on my kindness; you'd better be prepared to apologize later."

With that, Theresia gave Loki one final spiteful glare and left.

At that point, Roderich came over to Alus and Loki with a wry smile. "I'm sorry. Theresia was rude to you. But branch families have their own pride and impatience...although it's all because of the adults pressuring us for their own convenience. Then if you excuse me, Lady Tesfia. It seems that Lady Frose will be giving command soon."

After a polite bow, Roderich left to follow Theresia. But for some reason Lucille remained and stared at their backs.

"Are you sure you shouldn't go too Lucille?" Tesfia gently asked the boy, relieved that things hadn't gone worse.

"I won't be participating so it doesn't matter where I am, right?"

It seemed Lucille wanted to be at Tesfia's side.

"Yes, but you can't get in the way," said Tesfia.

"Okay. I will be watching from afar, so do your best!" the boy said.

"Of course."

His innocent words helped release the tension in Tesfia's shoulders and she smiled back at him.

After that, the bracelets were handed out to the participants, and they were split into groups. The first group battle wasn't simply just splitting them up between main family and branch families, but rather they were mixed to try out combinations.

Tesfia and Theresia ended up on the same team. On the other side was

Roderich, as well as Loki, who Theresia had managed to get permission for.

Meanwhile, Alus was on Tesfia and Theresia's side, but he was intending to just watch. While Tesfia's participation was set in stone as the general, Alus was set to participate according to Frose's wishes.

Moreover, he couldn't use his full powers due to his position, and since Orb Struggle was a new type of competition, he still didn't have a full grasp of the flow and essence of the game.

It was necessary to gather information on both sides, and if necessary give his opinion on the selection of participants.

And so the training began in the more wooded section of the Fable mansion backyard. Frose watched from a hastily made hill, but Selva was facilitating things.

He had both teams enter their own areas, and once the two orbs were set in their respective places, he began the match.

It was a blind start without any plan in place. Even the damage transfer system had been hurriedly powered up by Alus and forcibly linked to the bracelets. It wasn't as large-scale as what the Institute had, but with the mana batteries the Fable family had, it should be able to operate for a day.

Ascertaining the situation and taking charge was Tesfia, but...

"So, what do we do?" she asked.

Alus called out to calm down the flustered girl, "Start by using the orb's summoning magic. Who should do it first?"

The summoning used in Orb Struggle wasn't the typical combat summons but an artificial one. By having a member pour mana into the orb, they could use the system within to bring forth a special avatar, a Guardian.

The key to the match was deciding who would be the first to pour mana into the orb and choose an available Guardian. As participants couldn't directly touch the orb, it would be the orb's protector and carrier.

They could summon a mobile Guardian to avoid attackers or a sturdy one meant to take their attacks and slow down the enemy. Their strategy would

greatly change depending on the Guardian's characteristics.

Incidentally, stocking up a Guardian required the process of someone loading the magic formula. As they were restricted to advanced-level spells, anyone could do it in practice. However, in the Tenbram, the caster needed a minimum level of affinity. With that in mind, the orb was stocked with a Guardian that specialized in mobility and a Guardian that specialized in defense beforehand for the sake of convenience.

Since Alus could use a varied amount of summoning spells, there was nobody more suited to setting the five Guardians. Naturally, that was Alus's role this time too. In fact, reading the magic formula for the Guardians was no trouble at all.

However, even Alus rarely had a chance to use summoning spells outside of single magic formulas.

"How about you, Al?" Tesfia asked.

"I could do it too, but it would be better to have other members do it now. There's a maximum time for how long the Guardian can be summoned, but if they run out of mana before that, that's a bigger problem," said Alus.

Tesfia nodded, found someone she was close to among the gathered members, and called out to them. "Lord Bronche, please summon a Guardian. And once the summon expires, please have the defenders summon it in order once the cooldown is over."

It wasn't like attackers weren't able to summon a Guardian, but once the caster was a set distance away from the orb, the summon was automatically undone. Because of that, it was more convenient to have defenders or the general be responsible for summoning.

Minasha's father, Bronche, nodded with a tense expression and held his trembling hand on top of the orb, pouring mana into it. It faltered early on, but it seemed their opponent wasn't much different.

"Young lady, I have confirmed the opposing side has summoned their Guardian," Theresia, who was on the same team, reported.

Far in the distance, they could see a bird-type avatar... If it was an inferior

copy of proper summoning magic, it was probably made up of the wind attribute. It looked to have been created through a rough process, as its outline was unstable and would likely only last a few minutes.

Meanwhile, over here, Bronche was exhausted after having summoned a Guardian in the form of a lizard wrapped in fire. It had a resistance to attacks from the fire attribute, but its awkward movements were awful. It was far slower than the enemy's bird, and if swift attackers focused on it, they would make quick work of it.

In the meantime, the bird took the orb inside of it and flew to the back of the field.

They're shaping up better than we are. Using a wind attribute-based Guardian to take to the skies is the most efficient means of transport. They've chosen to accept the risk of being spotted in order to move their orb away, Alus pondered.

"They're so enthusiastic about the first battle," he muttered while quickly moving to the sides.

That was when he caught sight of fluttering silver hair. Loki was part of the enemy team, and she was using Force to launch a quick attack.

So they're going straight for the biggest threat... It's an orthodox strategy, but if you're going after me, bring it on.

Because of the damage-transfer system and the rules, strikes needed to be covered in mana to count as damage. Alus easily dodged Loki's kick covered in mana and drew Nightmist to deflect the follow-up lightning shot.

The repelled lightning grazed her silver hair, and then Loki disappeared.

"—Protect the orb!"

A stunned Tesfia gave her order, and the defenders gathered to protect the fire lizard that had merged with the orb.

No, Loki uses lightning. Clumping up like that is...!

Alus narrowed his eyes and saw Loki appear in the air, wielding her knife AWR with a smile.

"<<Lightning Ray>>"

A massive lightning bolt struck down where the members had gathered, and unable to evade, several of them were sent flying. The barrier around them, generated by their bracelets, starting blinking in a vivid red.

Oh, so that removes their HP, and the damage transfer system is functioning without a problem. Alus realized.

The ones sent flying shook their heads or rubbed their temples. They soon returned to their senses and fought back, but Loki used her high speed to disappear like she had before.

Loki is going all out just to win a training battle. But at least I've figured something out... Alus thought to himself.

Lightning Ray was a powerful spell, but it was clearly weaker than normal. The damage it had done might have been converted into a number, but it was far weaker than it would have been in reality.

That wasn't a problem with the damage-transfer system but the bracelet adjusting the power.

The ones who were hit have had their HP reduced, and while they look like it hurt, it wouldn't have been strange for that one attack to knock them out. Yet, not only do they still have HP left, they were even able to counterattack, which is strange. But if the bracelet adjusted the damage so that this was all it did... Hmm, I'm starting to get it.

Alus nodded to himself and turned towards Tesfia. "That aside, do you know who it was that summoned that bird Guardian? At the very least, it probably wasn't Loki since she uses the lightning attribute."

While they had lost the initiative, Tesfia was relieved that it hadn't been fatal. Having calmed down, she answered thoughtfully. "Yes, I wonder who. But I do think that Roderich is their general..."

So Loki's preemptive strike is made in order to create chaos that they can use to move their orb away. It's impossible to determine where it is now. So it's more advantageous if the participants with affinities are spread out and can use several? Roderich can already use two, not to mention that their general has shown versatility in strategy already. Compared to that, we're...

Alus aside, their next best, Tesfia and Theresia, could only use the ice attribute. Incidentally, Theresia, who'd been next to the orb, had swiftly read Loki's intentions while she was in the air and gotten out of range. She was now keeping things under control.

It looks like she has great intuition, thought Alus. At the very least she won't be holding us back. She might be more suited to be an attacker instead of a defender. Meanwhile, Loki is suited to use her speed to scout out the enemy.

In the next moment Alus shouted, "Fia, it's about time to call out the next Guardian. Change the summoner!"

And when she looked over in surprise, Alus laid into her. "Don't you get it? Loki's moves were meant for scouting. They already know where our orb is."

The bracelets that everyone wore had a communications function on them. So if the enemy found the orb's location, they could share it with all of their allies.

"R-Right! We need to always be moving the orb! Lord Bronche—ah."

When she looked, she found that the summoning spell had already ended and the orb was completely exposed, rolling on the ground.

"I'm sorry, young lady..." said Bronche. "I used magic on reflex to defend against the attack, so the Guardian disappeared."

Lord Bronche looked apologetic as beads of sweat ran down his forehead. If the enemy attacked now, they could easily get their hands on the Orb.

"I-I see...then hurry and pick up the orb—oh, you can't, then, uhm..."

Remembering the rule that they couldn't directly move the Orb, Tesfia was in a panic. Theresia stepped in and ordered a nearby member to hold their hand over the orb. Before long, an earth-attribute hare Guardian appeared, and it rushed into the woods at a high speed.

Seeing that, Tesfia got flustered and was about to give everyone the order to follow the orb, but Theresia intervened once more.

"Young lady, we will be at a disadvantage if we lose the initiative! We should decide on attackers and send them out. They can stop the enemy's aggression!"

She was clearly exceeding her authority, but at least she was bringing up a suggestion.

“For starters, moving forward should be the top priority,” Alus said. “Let’s have those who are fast go out and prioritize scouting over combat. The enemy’s orb has disappeared deep into the back of the enemy’s side, but they’ll need to change Guardian soon too. If not, one of their members will be running out of mana already, and it would be best to leave the rest to heavily defend the orb.”

Tesfia looked at Alus with a hesitant expression for a moment, but she nodded at his words. However, Theresia furrowed her brow, unhappy that Tesfia had listened to Alus’s advice instead of hers.

“Young lady, you should deploy attackers to either side! The team’s morale will collapse if we stay on the back foot! We should prioritize results...!” she said.

“H-Hmm, uhm...” Tesfia’s confusion reached its peak.

So Alus calmly intervened and firmly declared, “Sorry, Theresia, but I don’t believe you’re seeing the whole picture. Attacking the enemy participants is not seen as a key element of the strategy in this Orb Struggle.”

Alus talked about his view of things after the fight with Loki.

“As proof of that, the damage done to the enemy has been deliberately reduced. While you can eliminate the obstructions, the proper way is to attack the Guardian and steal the orb once it has been neutralized. If you get it, then shut up. Reckless ideas can be useful at times, but it’s pointless to disturb the general’s thoughts.”

“Wha...?!”

Alus ignored the dumbfounded Theresia and raised his voice a little so that the surrounding members could hear.

“Listen up, the point of this practice is to gather information, and winning comes after that. The real battle will be in a league of its own, with special rules. So let’s grasp the general flow of this competition and figure out what’s possible and impossible. You can think about more detailed strategies after

that. Got that?!”

“Y-Yeah. Th-That’s right. Then, you, you, and you! Rush into the enemy and gather information! Ah, I almost forgot to call the Guardian back here! We’ll need to change it again soon!”

Alus couldn’t help but want to cradle his head over Tesfia’s impulsive and haphazard command.

Phew, at this rate, she’ll be asking me to do something unreasonable too. But for now, I want to learn the details on this bracelet.

Alus secretly gathered mana in his right hand and used the advanced-level spell Blaze to create a giant fireball. That was within allowed limits and before long a burning ball of fire appeared. However, Alus poured more mana into it and complicated the magical structure.

He tried to push its power to that of an expert-level spell, but...

With a snap, the fireball disappeared.

“I see.”

As Alus nodded to himself, Tesfia looked questioningly at him.

“This bracelet doesn’t put restrictions on the rank of spell but rather on the formula,” he said. “It’s checking the size of the foundation for magic formulas. Going past that will make the bracelet erase that foundation.”

“Okay, okay...and?”

“Don’t you get it? It means this bracelet’s checks are more inflexible than the pigheaded teachers at the Institute. Trying to customize a spell a little will push even an allowed spell past the approved restrictions.”

“R-Right. But won’t some people’s habits when casting spells get in the way? Won’t that make the structure’s complexity go past the limit...?”

“That’s where mana control comes in. You’ll have to push the spell into what’s allowed. However, it’s lucky for those who can’t yet adjust or customize a magic formula in detail. They can just follow the textbook examples. It’s a much more difficult challenge for those who are more talented. Just putting in more mana than necessary can make the spell fail to manifest.”

Next, Alus snapped his fingers.

The hare Guardian returned and disappeared, and Alus put his hand over the orb and skillfully summoned a new Guardian.

Alus had brought forth a water-attribute Daraime Deer. More accurately, it was an inferior copy, an avatar. Water swirled around the Orb before taking on the shape of a giant blue deer with the orb at the base of its neck.

Alus looked in with interest as bubbles rose up from the base of the neck like glasswork channels all the way up to the tip of its three horns and burst open as they touched the air.

“With this much mana, its appearance is very accurately represented. But it seems like even then it’s lost all of its attack capabilities because of the Tenbram. There’s one more thing I want to try...”

While maintaining the Daraime Deer, Alus attempted to construct the Blaze from before.

But this time, problems occurred early on in the process.

Despite paying utmost attention, he couldn’t endure the multitasking. The Blaze disappeared, and at the same time, the Daraime Deer burst into a puddle of water.

The same phenomenon that had happened with Lord Bronche had happened again.

Once a Guardian was summoned, its caster couldn’t use other spells.

“The receiving end of the formula must have rejected it.”

It felt like an uncooperative AWR. Alus stared at the palm of his hand in surprise.

“How long was the cooldown until another Guardian can be summoned after it runs out of mana or disappears due to attacks again?” Alus asked and Tesfia answered.

“Uhm, if it’s simply the link being cut or it runs out of mana, I think it’s around ten seconds. Apparently, it’s instant if the summoner agrees to change it. Although, it can’t be recalled right away if it’s damaged, in order to prevent the

Tenbram from going on forever.”

“Good, you remember. But it looks like the summoner will need to stay within ten meters of the orb. Despite that, they can’t attack or even use defensive spells. The summoner will have to constantly attend to it.”

“It sounds like it; hopefully it’s a cute Guardian,” said Tesfia.

“Now’s not the time to say carefree stuff. It’s about time for the attackers you sent out to bring us some results. How does it look?” asked Alus.

“Ah, uhm...aahhh?!” Tesfia was left speechless when she checked her bracelet. “They’re being completely stalled by the enemy with no chance of searching for their orb. They’re surrounded and getting worn down.”

“So you can’t even call them back, huh? Combat might not be a priority, but it’s bad news if they can’t even run away. That’s enough. Let’s just stay on defense and get experience before surrendering and going at it again since it’s practice anyways. We can save scenarios like having the orb stolen or stealing their orb for later, after getting more experience.”

And so the first match ended with Tesfia’s team losing.

After that, Alus stayed as an observer, not really participating as either a scout or in combat.

That said, Loki on the other side had been remarkable. While she wasn’t quite a one-woman army, she was constantly attacking or ambushing, and even when she was scouting she was like a phantom.

She was practically always the first to discover the enemy’s orb. She even rushed back to base in order to defend at times. It truly was a shame that she wouldn’t be able to take part in the main competition. Their abilities might be limited, but Loki was definitely doing the work of multiple people.

Perhaps that was why after the third match of the day, Loki was removed from the practice in the afternoon.

“What a letdown.” Loki pouted in front of Alus.



“Well, you did go too far,” Alus replied in exasperation. “What are the others going to do with the experience gained from abnormal strategies that only you can do? Why do you think I’m not doing much in the matches? I imagine it was a bitter decision for Ms. Frose too. Anyways, with someone like you around it won’t be possible to raise everyone’s abilities.”

“That was shortsighted of me.”

Alus would have loved to console Loki when he saw her shoulders drop, but he had a heap of problems on his plate already. It would have been best if Loki could officially participate, but since that wasn’t an option, he had a lot to think about.

Everyone participating in the Orb Struggle would need to move in a coordinated fashion like soldiers as well as be able to assess the situation on their own. Naturally, in order for that to be useful, they needed to be able to share information and Tesfia had to be able to give quick orders. After every match, there were meetings that got quite heated.

Theresia was typically the spark for these arguments, and since Alus harshly reprimanded her once, she had objected to Tesfia’s poor command multiple times.

“I told you several times, did I not?! Don’t tell me you are trying to lose on purpose. You should have called back the summoner at that moment and brought out a Guardian that can fly!” she was now arguing.

She’s rather skilled, but she’ll be a difficult pawn to use, Alus thought and smiled wryly.

“There’s the chemistry between the members to consider and the composition will be a headache. Was there anyone that would be usable on your end, Loki?”

Alus casually threw a question to Loki, but she shook her head.

“Unfortunately...most of them are no good. They are hopeless,” Loki ruthlessly declared, knowing the Outer World.

“They lack mana, they construct spells too slowly, and they have no variation

in spells. Their overall decision-making can't possibly be trained up to be useful before the Tenbram in two weeks. Even though this was the third match, most people couldn't control the summoning magic, let alone move properly."

Loki gave her team a scathing review.

"What about Roderich from the branch family?" asked Alus.

According to Loki, he was leading his team rather well as their general, unlike the flustered Tesfia. That said, he didn't measure up to Loki's expectations.

"Ah, him. Unfortunately, he is only all right. Though I only saw him use attack or defensive spells twice," said Loki.

"I see. But from what I've seen, he's still useful," said Alus.

There were some things Alus was able to analyze better because he was on the other team. From what he could tell, Roderich wasn't pushing himself. Alus felt that since Loki had been rushing around on her own, Roderich was letting the other members get experience by trying out various strategies.

"You're looking at it too much from a military point of view. Fighting Fiends is typically until they die, but that's not the point with this contest. The key is how to steal the other team's orb. The Fiends in the Outer World don't have the concept of protecting a treasure," said Alus.

"Th-That's true." Loki appeared surprised.

Meanwhile, Alus was deep in thought. Roderich would make a good adjutant. I wanted someone who could lead a detached force to make up for Tesfia's unreliability. Compared with him, Theresia was harder to handle.

Tesfia was emotional, whereas Theresia was rational, so they tended to clash. And while Tesfia could sometimes give out incomprehensible orders, from what Alus had seen, there were times when she'd been correct. She seemed to excel in using her intuition or some form of sixth sense, and that was something Theresia didn't have.

Simply put, they were a terrible match. Eliminating Theresia was the fix that came to mind. It was a matter of morale because the worst outcome would be if the team split into two, with supporters for both Tesfia and Theresia.

When it came to the Tenbram, there was also the possibility of leaving the broad strokes of the strategy to Frose and Selva.

Tesfia could rely on that while commanding on the field, while Alus could use Loki to observe the teams as a sort of coordinator on the ground. In fact, Alus pretty much had the authority to make the final picks for the team.

“Are you thinking about Ms. Theresia? She could be a problem,” Loki said, as if she had read Alus’s mind.

“Yeah. I do think the best thing would be to ask Mr. Selva and Mrs. Frose.”

As Alus was saying that, the sound of arguing rose up in the distance. They were at it again, and based on the voices, there was a serious emotional outburst.

Alus stood up to go over there, and Loki followed him.

“Are you sure you are even fit to be a general if you don’t even know this?” Theresia’s harsh voice echoed as the other members surrounded them. “Excuse me, but if you are going to be the next head of the family, you need more than just superficial knowledge. You should just leave the rest to me, young lady.”

Tesfia also seemed to be at her limit. With cheeks red with anger, she boldly declared, “I will listen to your opinion as part of the branch family, but I will make the final decision.”

Theresia’s lips rose sarcastically. “Yes, I’m sure you’re right. But are you saying that you still have that right? Although it seems that Lady Frose is standing up to the challenge, there are many branch families that believe that we should be reverent towards the Womruinas. Under these circumstances, please consider that the branch families have to question your ability as the next head of the family. Young lady.”

Tesfia fought back with fierce words.

“What’s with that snide tone! Why not stop calling me young lady? You don’t want to acknowledge me no matter what anyways, right? I might not have the qualities to become the secret heir yet, but I’m working hard every day! I also got some good results at the Friendship Magical Tournament! And what were you doing during all that time? Practicing magic at a dojo while pretending that

you're king of the hill?"

With that, Theresia's thinly veiled smile finally disappeared.

"This is stupid... We branch family children aren't attending the Institute because of the Fable family code! If not for that, I would already be attending and producing results far above yours. Just because we aren't direct descendants, we get a continued cold reception. But I'm not going to complain about that now. However, if a direct descendant and the next head of the family is going to be this mediocre, what will happen to our position?! Wouldn't you say that it's a breach of faith against the branch families that have supported and sworn their loyalty to the main family all this time?!"

Theresia's voice, devoid of any politeness, was accompanied by grief that was like a cry of her soul. Her eyes trembled with anger.

She had no intention of forgiving Tesfia's sloppiness and laxness, but it came across like she was questioning Tesfia's resolve and awareness, like she was telling Tesfia to go get married to Aile and be a good little wife, and like that would be for the best for the sake of the family.

The scathing remark left Tesfia unable to do anything but open and close her mouth for a moment.

"You might have achieved something in your play area as a student, but I have deemed that the young lady's abilities are among the lowest in the history of the Fable family," said Theresia. "Naturally, that's even compared with me or Roderich...! And this time Lady Frose has promised that we may learn inherited spells depending on our work."

"I-I know that! So what?!" exclaimed Tesfia, getting heated.

At that moment, a hand pulled back on her shoulder.

"That's enough, you two. If you're going to be this noisy it'll reach the Womruina family's ears eventually," Alus said.

Tesfia looked over in surprise, but when she saw Alus's cold stare, which seemed to ask her if she got it, she held her tongue. Theresia also stopped arguing and gave Alus a suspicious glance.

Alus gave the two a meaningful grin.

“If you’re going to question Fia’s abilities that much, then you should just see them for yourself.”

“How exactly?” Theresia asked.

Alus gave her an immediate answer. “A fight, one-on-one. Right now, right here.”

“Are you insane? A member of the branch family would never be allowed to harm a member of the main family!” said Theresia.

“Ha, as if. You’ve already done that with that sharp tongue of yours. What are you going to do next, get adopted into the main family and take it over?”

Alus narrowed his eyes and provoked Theresia, who lightly shook her head.

“Ha, you have no basis for that...” she said. “Anyways, I am not doing it. You are not a noble, so I doubt you would understand, but the only thing allowed to me is to follow tradition and give advice.”

“At least your lip service is fully fledged. But what you’re doing has the opposite effect of any meaningful advice. You are tearing the team apart before the Tenbram, which the Fable family’s future rests on.”

Alus then looked pointedly at Theresia.

“...Are you going to run away? Sure, Fia can be a little unreliable, but she’s much better than you. As someone I’ve trained, she has talent.”

“Wha—?! I have the greatest talent in the history of the branch families!”

Theresia put her hand against her chest and spoke fervently.

Alus gave her a cold stare.

“Don’t you sound confident? Others are supposed to call you a genius. Calling yourself that is so cliché. Like I said before, you are not seeing anything, Theresia. So let me repeat myself: Fia is better than you. She wouldn’t do something stupid like causing morale to plummet before an important fight.”

“Urgh...!” Theresia let out.

“Not to mention you’ve already said so much. Don’t you think this is the

perfect chance to use your power to straighten out the idiotic next head of the family? Don't worry. After all my training, she can take a hit or two. Her injuries from the escaped criminals have pretty much healed too, so just disciplining her a little won't be a problem."

Tesfia started to ask what he was thinking, but Alus blocked her mouth and continued.

"What a weak attitude to take after boasting so much. It's just a bout, isn't it? Just think of it as letting a weaker person train with you. Besides, if you're a genius there's no way you'd lose."

"V-Very well! If you are going to say that much...let us have a bout, young lady." Theresa's voice trembled with anger as she spoke.

Alus whispered to Tesfia while gloating, "This is necessary to solidify your foundation as well as to ensure that the future training goes smoothly."

"I-I get that...but Theresa is..."

"Yeah, I heard from Mrs. Frose. She apparently learned Icicle Sword two years before you did."

"I-If you know that, then—" began Tesfia.

"So what? As long as you know how to sculpt, you can complete it at a glance. You were able to use it a long time ago too, right?"

"But this is still absurd! Not everyone can be like you, Al."

"Shut her up...and go at it like you're trying to kill her. In the worst case, I'll step in and make sure nobody gets seriously hurt. Regardless, this is the perfect chance to get rid of some future problems. Besides, Theresa might be excellent, but you have an ace up your sleeve too."

Tesfia stared at him.

"Hurry up. Mrs. Frose and Mr. Selva are analyzing data at the moment. So wrap it up before someone reports it."

"F-Fine!" Tesfia finally made up her mind and nodded while sighing.

A circle formed around the training grounds meant for one-on-one battles.

Tesfia and Theresia stood within the circle facing each other. Aside from details like hairstyle and the look in their eyes, they were so similar they could be mistaken for sisters. They even both used katana-style AWRs.

A chilling atmosphere surrounded them. Between them stood Alus, who had ended up as the judge.

“We’re not on the training field for the Tenbram, so there’s no need for the bracelet or barrier. It’ll be a mock battle without protection, but as long as I’m here, I’ll prevent the worst from happening... You got that?”

Tesfia and Loki were the only ones present that knew Alus’s rank, but his tone was strangely convincing. Even if he concealed it, the aura of a Single leaked through. The older branch members, Roderich among them, silently observed the situation.

Tesfia still looked down, and contrary to her, Theresia was smiling, full of confidence. The katana she was wielding was on the same level as the Fable family heirloom Kikuri. Its silvery white blade was engraved with a magic formula, and it was about fifteen centimeters longer than Kikuri.

“Sorry, but I will be winning this for Fable’s sake. Try not to get too hurt, or I’ll be blamed,” said Theresia.

“Yes, yes, why don’t you show me how incredible the branch family’s genius is,” Tesfia responded with a strained smile.

This would be their first time fighting directly, but Tesfia had heard about Theresia’s talents. She didn’t like her attitude, but it was possible that she really would be the weak one training with someone stronger.

That was when she noticed Theresia looking at Kikuri.

“Young lady, since we are fighting with real swords, why not make a bet?”

Tesfia let out a bewildered sound by reflex. “Kikuri is a Fable family heirloom. You can’t have it.”

“Of course. I know. Just wanting it would be an affront. That’s why... Why not let me borrow it for a while?”

“What do you want to borrow it for?!”

“Oh nothing at all, I just wanted to try using it a little,” Theresia said calmly, but it was clear she had an underlying motive.

Kikuri was an AWR passed down to the next in line in order to learn the inherited spell, so unlike normal AWRs, built with the idea that only a single person would be using it, a person’s mana didn’t accumulate inside it.

In other words, it didn’t customize itself with the user’s mana to become easier to use. Instead, it accumulated the mana information of those of the Fable lineage.

The only thing on Theresia’s mind was to borrow Kikuri from Tesfia and use it at will. And depending on the response, she wanted to try her own disposition. With a good enough response, she would feel for herself that she was worthy of attempting to learn the inherited spells.

Theresia’s abilities were simply too excellent for her to accept that the branch families would always be below the main family. And things would change even more if the main family’s heir was slacking off and unable to fulfill her duty.

She wanted to show her own qualifications and receive a fair judgment. If she managed to save the venerable Fable family, she wouldn’t hesitate to turn on the main family.

“So...what will you put at stake?” asked Tesfia.

“If I lose, I will give up on being a Magicmaster. The Verdale’s private education is blessed with amazing teachers, but I am prepared to give it up,” said Theresia.

“What an exaggeration. But that doesn’t benefit me. But if that’s what it takes to satisfy you, then let’s go with that,” Tesfia said with a sigh. “Let’s get this started.”

Pouring mana into Kikuri, Tesfia took a deep breath.

I’m not as nervous as I thought I’d be, she thought.

Perhaps the mock battles against Alus, who stood at the top of all Magicmasters, was the reason for that.

Meanwhile, Theresia was also ready to fight. The mana rolling off of her body

had a cold tinge to it. They had just gone through training, but both of them had plenty of mana to spare.

“Yes, let us begin, young lady!”

As Theresia finished speaking, she constructed the mana around her into a spell. A single ice needle appeared above her, and in an instant, it transformed into a giant block of ice. Next, the block of ice was sculpted into a sharp sword of ice, and it even featured an elaborate design on the surface.

“◀◀Icicle Sword!≫≫”

Her first move was the traditional Fable family spell, and the speed of its construction caused Tesfia’s reaction to be delayed.

However, Tesfia had gone through training, so she swiftly controlled her mana and created an Icicle Sword to oppose Theresia. Cold air filled her surroundings, and a refined ice sword was created above Tesfia.

Their Icicle Swords shot out at the same time and, with an ear piercing sound, clashed right in the middle of the two. The air cooled, creating white smoke and scattering shards of ice on the ground before they returned to mana particles.

The spectators took a few steps back in awe, but Alus didn’t pay it any mind and remained an indifferent judge.

As abnormally cold air crawled across the ground, the first to cut through the white smoke in the air was Theresia, her katana at the ready. She used the mist created by the clash of Icicle Swords as a smoke screen and closed in on Tesfia.

With the tip of the blade almost touching the ground, she swung it upward at Tesfia, but instead of opposing the power behind it, Kikuri easily changed its trajectory instead.

Having the attack she was so confident in brushed aside made Theresia open her eyes wide. Seeing that, Tesfia was convinced that Alus had been right. Theresia might have been the branch families’ genius, but she wasn’t out of her depth.

On the contrary, Theresia’s response let Tesfia know she could go a little further and pushed her into her combat mode.

Sparks flew as the blades scraped against each other. Tesfia snapped her wrist and twisted her hips to cleave her katana sideways.

The counterattack made Theresia leap backward. Her face showed clear unrest. Theresia might have dodged at the last second, but during their exchange, her understanding of Tesfia had changed.

When she glanced at her AWR, she saw shards of ice stuck to its blade.

It was a common strategy to use the spell Ice Blade to cover the weapon in very cold air and strengthen its characteristics. Theresia had been the first to use it, yet her own blade had been frozen and dulled... So despite activating it later, Tesfia's ice had surpassed hers. There was nothing that could show the difference in ability of ice attribute users more clearly than this.

While Theresia stared in astonishment, she could see the ground freeze from the corner of her eyes. Her body moved before she could process what was coming.

Cold air covered the ground, and in the next moment, it froze. With Tesfia at the center, the ground froze instantly. Before that ice could reach her toes, Theresia jumped back and slashed at the ground as if to draw a line. She shook off the shards of ice.

A cold light burst out from the straight line in the ground and flowers of blue ice bloomed in it.

“◁Ice Garden▷”

Ice flowers bloomed around Theresia and stopped Tesfia's Freeze from advancing.

Indeed, Tesfia was only using the novice-level spell Freeze. However, Theresia had no knowledge of one that could cover such a wide area. It had the power of an intermediate-level spell.

First I need to recover!

Suddenly, as if there had been a gap in time, Theresia was shocked as a blade, with neither hostility nor killing intent behind it, sneaked through a gap in her consciousness and came flying towards her.

Ugh...

Bending her body, Theresia barely managed to dodge it. In the next moment, she saw red hair flowing sideways, Tesfia on her side in the air. Then she felt the heavy impact from the swung sword that shook her.

A second and third strike followed. She managed to block with her blade, but her opponent's cold air wrapped around it, making her katana heavier.

"Ugh...don't get full of yourself!" Theresia said, stomping. High-pressure water sprayed out from under her foot like a geyser.

This was an intermediate-level water spell. Unlike Roderich, she had hidden that she had secretly learned to use a second attribute.

It was rare for someone young to be able to use two attributes, especially on the level of being usable in battle... This was completely unexpected.

With the water spraying upward, Tesfia would be unable to avoid it. Finally getting some leeway, Theresia showed a smile of relief... However...

"Wha...?! What is that...?"

Theresia's eyes were wide open. Reflected in them was Tesfia bent over with her hands thrust up above the water. The large amount of water had frozen instantly, as if the geyser had hardened into a strange ice sculpture.

It had happened so fast Theresia hadn't even realized it.

Was it because water magic was a bad match for ice magic? No.

Rather than being frozen, it was more accurate to say that the water had been replaced with ice.

"D-Don't tell me that's...Niflheim?!" The spell name left Theresia's trembling lips in a shrill exclamation. The phenomenon chilled her to her heart.

Indeed, Tesfia had cast the expert-level spell Niflheim. It was a rather limited manifestation, but having witnessed it for herself, Theresia was unable to keep her cool. Only renowned Magicmasters would be able to use such high-level magic.

Not only was it beyond the realm of a student's mock battle, it was impossible

to do without overwhelming talent. The surprise was as shocking as when she had faced her father and easily been forced to take a knee.

Theresia was unmoving, and Tesfia jumped down from her ice sculpture and swung her katana down.

“S-So what?” Theresia shouted, with a cold sweat on her forehead while she glared at Tesfia.

She had to admit that she’d underestimated Tesfia.

But it wasn’t just Theresia, all of the branch families would have to rethink their understanding of her. That much was clear.

However, she also knew that didn’t mean Tesfia had won. In reality, Tesfia’s Niflheim had been activated over a very restricted area. In fact, the sculpture was already falling apart.

The katanas clashed once more. Their mana clashed in a contest of physical strength.

Theresia looked desperate, but Tesfia’s eyes were perfectly composed.

Noticing that, Theresia furrowed her brows and in a fluster she thought to herself, *She’s neither acting triumphant nor looking down on me. Why is she so calm? This is more than just being composed. It’s like her heart is sharp and cold.*

As she thought that, Theresia gasped.

Mana was influenced by the user’s mental state and emotions, and spells showed a similar tendency, and it was said that each attribute had a specific mental state that masters would enter.

In the past, Theresia had heard from her father that mastering the ice attribute meant having a heart of ice and steel. It was said that the fourth head of the family, Canaria Fable, had frozen her heart to reach that state.

She and her brother were symbolic figures for the Fable family and the greatest ice attribute Magicmasters. Even in modern times, when the branch families spoke of the glory of the past they typically referred to them.

For some reason, the appearance of Canaria, whom Theresia had only seen

paintings of, overlapped with the redheaded girl before her.

She'd only been the head of the family for a brief period, but Theresia's father told her that she had been a unique and heroic Magicmaster. And right now, Theresia felt like she could see the semblance of her within Tesfia.

Theresia bit down to reject the illusion, convincing herself it was surely no more than a trick of the mind. She poured more mana into her katana.

The breathtaking duel continued, and the compressed cold air exploded, causing the white smoke to rush past as a gust of wind.

"Hah, hah, hah..." Theresia gulped. Her arm felt dull, but she felt relieved.

She'd managed to blow away Tesfia, and though the recoil had hit her, she managed to land with nimble movements. At the very least, she hadn't disgraced herself in front of everyone.

Holding her katana, she used her upper arm to rub her chin. But she herself couldn't even tell if that had actually wiped away the dripping sweat.

Waiting for her heart to slow down, she let out a deep exhale.

"You've become quite—no, very strong. I am honestly surprised," said Theresia.

Tesfia's fighting style wasn't something one would learn during conventional student life. Her movements were impossible for those not used to fighting people. Such harsh training was found only in the branch families' special education. It was the kind of thing cultivated in their private education, under the strict teachings of invited teachers.

Theresia herself had received training from her father, and when not from him, she was instructed by high-ranking Magicmasters. As the children of the branch families couldn't easily enroll in the Institute, their education naturally turned more towards actual combat. The official stance and purpose of branch families was that they would support the main family if the nation fell into chaos and to continue the bloodline if something were to happen to the main family.

Theresia, answering her father's expectations, had trained from her childhood

to this very day, all in order to become the sword of the head of the main family—or a spare.

However, at some point that duty had turned into a heavy responsibility, and she put herself through even more harsh training in preparation in case the day came when she would learn inherited spells. Theresia had taken a rough path, beating the foundations into her body and disciplining herself to get to where she was.

Since the Verdale family's blood was the purest of the branch families, it was her obligation. Yet there was someone whose very existence rejected her efforts. Right now that person, who would tear down her reason for existing, stood before her.

“Haaaaah!”

As if to spit out the feelings swirling inside of her, Theresia howled. She took a big breath to help bend the truth she didn't want to accept to her will.

As her breath gathered, so did her mana and she incanted the spell name in her mind.

“<<Frill Throat>>”

The cold air she exhaled explosively increased, and a thick mist veiled the area in the blink of an eye.

This will work even against the same attribute!

Theresia's determined gaze alerted Tesfia that something was wrong, and she readied her katana.

Frill Throat was a disruptive type of spell. Small particles stuck to mana and rapidly froze them to weaken it. Snow-like particles were already starting to pile up on Tesfia's body. It also began to dull the flow of mana within her body.

Its ability to alter was weak, but Tesfia recognized that it was similar to Alus's original spell Mislotein. But unlike Mislotein, it didn't freeze everything in an instant, not because of a lack of mana but because the details of the construct were too different. If she had been up against Alus, using the real Mislotein, it would have been all over now.

Tesfia held her breath, unfazed by the change in her body, and closed her eyes. Frost settled on her long eyelashes, but she smiled as if there was nothing to fear.

In the next moment, she ran through the mist. If the purpose of the spell was to disrupt her, then all she had to do was make a beeline for Theresa before falling snow slowed her down. Perhaps because they both used the ice attribute or perhaps it was because of the Fable blood, Tesfia felt strangely comfortable.

But she still needed to settle things. She would show Theresa her strength. She needed to crush that hubris that would prevent her from truly growing. And that included the branch family members looking on.

Perhaps this kind of thinking was a sign of her becoming fully conscious that she was to be the next head of the family. With those deep emotions in her chest, Tesfia faced the challenge before her.

As she ran into the thick mist, she found precisely what she'd expected. Theresa stood there as if she'd been waiting for this, dignified like a knight before the final decisive battle.

Surrounded by cold air, Theresa spoke. "This! Is my worth! Agents of my loyalty, answer my plea with action, «*Eisen Legans*»."

Tesfia's eyes burned with a passion far from what others might expect from her, and the cold air surrounded Theresa. In the next moment, a massive figure manifested behind her.

It was a heroic knight's upper body, a phantom made of blue ice.

The knight was over three meters tall and in its hand was an equally gigantic sword of ice.

It wasn't the Fable family's Icicle Sword but a unique sword Theresa had used all of her mana to create.

As Tesfia charged in, the knight swung the sword down. However, as she ran, Tesfia created a huge sword of ice to block it.

Aside from its overwhelming form, the vivid azure color harmonized with the white of the ice, pointing to the perfection of the spell.

As ice users, it was a display of the difference in talents between the two. Theresia gazed at the sword as if entranced. Just looking at it was enough to purify her heart of idle thoughts... And its beautiful form wouldn't allow her to even blink.

Those of the Fable family, especially with an affinity for ice, had an inseparable connection to their magical sculpting sense being proof of their abilities and dignity. That was why Theresia had polished her sculpting techniques and she'd been allowed to devote herself to it but only to the level that her father and teacher had set for her so that she would fit into the accepted mold.

There was no freedom in changing, nor had she ever questioned it. Moreover, focusing on the sculpting too much would directly lead to increasing the difficulty of the spell.

However, the sword of ice that Tesfia had created had naturally fused the sculpting and strength of the spell. By implementing a delicate sculpting, it had enhanced the degree of perfection of the spell. And that was why any ice-attribute Magicmaster could instinctively understand that this form was the reason for its presence.

Tesfia's determined voice snapped Theresia back to reality.

"In that case, I will acknowledge my own worth."

Tesfia was using an applied version of Icicle Sword called Zepel, which moved the ice sword in conjunction with her body. This was Tesfia's answer to Theresia's greatest work, Eisen Legans.

A sudden chill dominated the air, and Tesfia's ice sword was raised overhead. Zepel moved as Tesfia's arms did and took the knight's ice sword head-on.

The sound of the clash was too baffling and strange to be air vibrations. The impact created a quiet but overwhelming wave of cold air, which froze the trees around them. Only the bark facing them froze, with the other side still fresh, a sign of their accurate mana control.

Lastly, an ear-hurting, high-pitched breaking sound could be heard. Afterwards, Tesfia remained, holding her katana while the ice knight faced her.

The sword in its hand had snapped off in the middle.

“...I lost.”

Theresia didn't even glance at the collapsing phantom knight as she slumped to the ground. Her loss was determined, and in front of such a large crowd. The branch families that had surrounded them fell silent. Roderich was stiff and twitching.

Worried, Loki had tried to leap in at the decisive moment but had been stopped by Alus. Now she looked on in surprise.

Meanwhile, Alus wore a slight smile. He walked to the center of the circle and declared, “That settles it, then. The winner is Fia. Are there any objections?”

As Frose and Selva weren't present, someone would probably hurry to report this. And Alus shouldn't need to get any more involved in this matter, but at the very least, their training in the future should proceed smoothly.

Tesfia reached a hand out towards the exhausted Theresia.

“So what do you think? I'm pretty good too, right?”

Perhaps disarmed by Tesfia's bright smile, Theresia returned with a dry smile of her own, but she rejected her opponent's hand.

“No... As the loser, I do not deserve such favor. Please forgive my rudeness, Lady Tesfia.”

Theresia fell to her knees and hung her head low.

Alus smiled wryly at her overly meek appearance. “What are you going to do? These kinds of things need to be disciplined military-style even after things are settled, or there'll be more problems later.”

“Hmm? That's way too savage. Don't lump me in with you, Al. Besides, the problem with the branch families is something that will need to be dealt with eventually,” said Tesfia.

“How gentle,” said Alus.

“This is the caliber expected of the next head of the family!” She puffed up her cheeks but still had the leeway to wink as well.

As Theresia stood dumbfounded, Tesfia turned back to her.

“Forget about the promise before the match, okay? You have wonderful talents. It would be such a waste to give up on being a Magicmaster. If anything, I want you to support me with that amazing spell.”

“B-But...”

Having lost her position, Theresia let her head hang low, but Tesfia casually held out Kikuri to her.

“Here, you wanted to try it, right? That’s nothing special, so here.”

As if to say that it was a boring promise, Tesfia took Theresia’s hand and forcibly made her hold the katana as if to say that she wasn’t going to let her refuse.

Alus looked like he wanted to make an unnecessary remark, so Loki pulled on his sleeve to stop him.

“A-Are you sure?” asked Theresia. Kikuri was a Fable family heirloom. Theresia reverently held it in both hands.

Seeing Tesfia nod, she nervously put her hand on the handle. If she drew this, poured mana into it and could construct Fable’s magic...

All of the sweat and blood she’d shed would finally be answered. Her talents, which she’d prided herself on as being no less than that of the main family and her efforts in order to learn inherited magic, would be proved.

Theresia hesitated a little more, but when she saw Tesfia’s cheerful smile that hesitation was easily wiped away.

She already knew that she had never had the qualifications to wield it. Others—her father, her mother, her relatives, and those of Verdale—had wanted that, not her. She simply wanted to give back to the family.

I...I just...wanted to decide for myself.

She wanted to do something of her own will. That was all.

With a refreshing smile, free of hesitation, Theresia let go of the handle and returned Kikuri.

“That’s all I need. Thank you very much.”

“What? Are you sure?!” asked Tesfia. “You just touched it. You didn’t even draw it.”

“No, I don’t need any more. This is the katana of the next head of the family,” Theresia replied.

“Ah, uhm, okay. As long as you understand,” said Tesfia, unsure how to react because of Theresia’s unexpected behavior.

She had called Tesfia the next head of the family. This hadn’t just been a measure of strength; she’d clearly admitted it.

Something had clearly changed within Theresia, which mystified Tesfia.

It was also eerie. This was generally how people grew, but Tesfia was still inexperienced in the subtleties of human emotion and struggled with how to gauge it.

She timidly took back Kikuri and decided to press the point, looking unconvinced. “Are you sure you’re fine? You’re not plotting something, are you?”

“No, I no longer harbor any ill feelings. But if I were to say, there is one thing...”

“Wh-What?! Just so you know, I won’t fight you again!”

“As a daughter of the Verdale family, I won’t go back on a promise I have made. So I will graciously...” Theresia started.

“Whaaat?! I said that you can’t! I won’t let you give up on being a Magicmaster,” exclaimed Tesfia.

“But I won’t be able to be satisfied with that. At the very least, I will no longer receive any education from Verdale private school. And if any teachers were to come, I would turn them down.”

“Wait, why do you have to do that? Then I will talk to my mother. I don’t know what the traditions are about, but it’s not like there’s a law. You can attend wherever you want, even the Institute. I will allow it,” Tesfia spat out in a hurry.

That made Theresia stop to think.

“I see. That is a brilliant idea. A path where I can continue my education while being able to help the young lady if something happens...” said Theresia. “And it won’t contradict my family’s intentions. Then if the main family will permit it, I will officially accompany the young lady as her attendant at the Second Magical Institute.”

“Huh?!”

Tesfia looked shocked from the remark, and even Alus looked bitter. He wasn’t very welcoming of more trouble. Looking over, Loki looked sullen as well.

However, with her one-track mind, Theresia didn’t notice any of this and continued to speak with a look of satisfaction.

“That is the way it has been passed down since times immemorial. By having me, the daughter of the Verdale family, by your side as a functional hostage, it will prove the Verdale family’s loyalty. I believe you will need our family’s support to solidify your position.”

“Y-You don’t have to go that far. You know, I understand your circumstances, so as long as you’re neutral that’s enough,” said Tesfia.

“However, like I said before, it is a matter of a family’s honor. Then I will bring this home to my family, and then convey my intentions to the head of the family,” explained Theresia.

“Ah, yes, yes. That’s fine. I’m tired, so let’s take a break. Let’s get a fresh start.”

“Understood, young lady.”

The way she bowed out of loyalty made her look like a beast with its fangs pulled out, transformed into an obedient pet.

While making their way to the rest area, she remained serious and polite but bombarded Tesfia with questions. She did keep the volume low out of consideration for her surroundings, but she was exceedingly thorough.

She bore a close resemblance to Tesfia pestering Alus about Mislotein.

Of course, Tesfia couldn't logically answer everything. She'd tried to cover things up at first, but in the end it fell into Alus's lap. The topic was mostly around inherited spells.

"That last spell you used was an inherited spell wasn't it?" Theresia asked. "Our Verdale family has had a great interest and respect for the Fable family's inherited spell and created an original spell based off of Icicle Sword. That is Eisen Legans."

Alus had been bothered at first, but he couldn't keep quiet when others spoke about new spells. So he intently listened in about Verdale's spell.

Hmm, so that spell really was based on Icicle Sword. However, the approach is naturally different from my own, seeing as I confirmed the magic formula engraved on Kikuri myself and have seen Fia's Icicle Sword several times.

Creating a new spell wasn't something just anyone could do. On top of that, the obstruction spell that Theresia had used, Frill Throat, was similar to Alus's original spell Mistlotein.

No, thinking about it, I feel like that's closer to Garb Sheep. That is yet another of the Fable family's inherited spells. Still Theresia's Eisen Legans was pretty impressive.

While he didn't say it out loud, he could understand why the branch families had praised Theresia as a genius. Having been trained by high-ranking Magicmasters, her use of mana and her accuracy in constructing spells were superb. Most of all, it was clear that she had a deep understanding of magic.

Eisen Legans was two sculptures, a knight and a sword, and it was truly worthy of being called a double cast. Advancing two processes at the same time to create a single result wasn't something one could achieve only with regular training.

Like Tesfia had said, letting her talents slip by would be a waste. Alus even felt like she was the culmination of what a noble's special education was supposed to be.

"I see. Eisen Legans is a name not even I have heard," said Alus. "So that's why."

“Yeah, it was pretty amazing! Maybe I should learn something like that too!” said Tesfia.

Having Tesfia praise her put a smug and proud expression on Theresa’s face. “Not at all. I am still no match for the young lady. But if you were to learn Eisen Legans and Frill Throat, you would have a much wider array of options...”

“You think so? This girl is a simple idiot, so I would suggest a more straightforward tactic,” Alus said, unable to help himself from interjecting.

Theresa gave him a cold stare before saying, “Young lady, I believe you should reconsider your personal relationships. You shouldn’t keep someone this rude by your side.”

That sent Tesfia into a fluster, and the atmosphere turned tense.

“...Huh?”

“That is a good joke for a noble. Allow me to praise you,” said Loki while Alus raised an eyebrow.

Tesfia became very anxious. “Uhm, Ms. Theresa? Al is a classmate, but he has very deep ties with the military and... Right, my mother also trusts Al a lot. And he is a biiig help!”

Tesfia desperately tried to cover for Alus, but Theresa’s reaction was truly unexpected.

“Oh, is that so? I thought you would follow the straight path of a Magicmaster, unlike Lady Frose. But if you are going to have a family, choosing a spouse from classmates is important. However, he doesn’t look very sociable nor does he look like he would be very reliable if you had children...”

This time, the group stopped in their tracks and silence fell over them.

“Wh-Wh-What did you just say?” Tesfia fearfully asked, having just barely managed to maintain a calm facade.

But Theresa gave her a confused look. “Well, having children is an important duty of nobles. And the more children the head of the family has the better. But as for whether this person is suitable as your spouse...”

“Wh-Why would you bring that up?!”

Tesfia's face was beet red, but Theresia continued making her rash assumptions.

"I see, so that's what it is. Polygamy and polyandry are allowed for nobility. But if you were to ask me, I couldn't recommend the latter. Men tend to want to be the head of the pack, and if someone suspicious is brought in, there's a danger of treachery or a takeover before any children are born."

Theresia turned back to Alus.

"That is why some person of doubtful origin like yourself would be suitable as the second husband. And a high-ranking noble would be more desirable as the first husband. You understand that, right, young lady?"

At the very least Theresia was more well-versed in noble society than Tesfia, or perhaps one could say that she'd already been poisoned. Here she stood, boldly declaring the supremacy of a pure lineage before Alus.

"Stop lining up rubbish. Do you think I'd join the likes of Fable? Don't look down on me," he said.

"H-How rude!" exclaimed Theresia.

"Hmm, still...I might lend an ear to your nonsense if you can do something about this," said Alus.

Fortunately, they were taking a break and the bracelets were removed. Alus raised a finger and created a small fireball over it. It swelled until it was like a small sun draped in flames. It was one of Alus's specialties, the fire spell Astral Sun.

It was more massive than normal, and it radiated heat from above, rapidly raising the temperature.

And when Alus flicked his finger, the small sun moved. It looked less like a spell and more like a natural disaster. The Astral Sun dyed the ground red as it approached... And Theresia looked up at it with astonishment.

"Ahhh, no way?!"

Unable to stand the blistering heat, Theresia covered her head with her arms.

And that was when Alus snapped his fingers. Just like that, the heat from

Astral Sun disappeared like it had never been there in the first place. But the remains of the flame remained in the sky a little longer like a red illusion.

“Hmph, is that your reaction to an expert-level spell? Perhaps you’d like to try an ultimate-level spell on for size...” said Alus.

Theresia shook her head with tears in her eyes.

Alus shrugged in satisfaction. “That was a nice change of pace. Once the break is over we’ll get right back to training. So make sure you rest up.”

Tesfia was likewise dumbfounded, and while she called him childish in her mind, she agreed and nodded. But at the same time, she gave Alus a profound look.

“Regardless... While we can put the marriage talks aside...” Tesfia gestured like she was moving an invisible box and continued, “Don’t you think there was a better way to turn it down? Even if you don’t have any intention of joining the Fable family, I think that it was rude to reject it so firmly...”

While the last part was said in a muffled whisper, Alus gave her a dubious look.

“Huh? What are you talking about? You have more pressing concerns than your future right now. Plus if you lose the Tenbram you’ll be engaged to Aile.”

“Ah, well, that’s true, but...” Tesfia struggled for words, and unexpectedly, Loki gave her a helping hand.

She interjected with a blatant cough.

“Ahem. Sir Alus, the problem right before us was just resolved, so we should be happy about that... Things like these need a delicate touch. Any girl would be hurt if you are that harsh.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about. Anyways, I’ll pass on any more unnecessary mental exhaustion,” Alus firmly declared.

But this wasn’t just someone else’s problem, so Loki refused to back down. This was a good chance to teach Alus about how to handle a delicate maiden’s heart. With women being half of the population, it was a proper bit of worldly wisdom, but with no male friends and him turning down girls, Alus was

increasingly isolated in the world.

A wicked thought flashed through her mind for a moment.

Hmm? But in that case...won't I be the last at his side...?

But Loki's conscience put a stop to that line of thought and got back to the main point.

"No, that won't do! Ms. Tesfia doesn't matter, but you should be more considerate to the girls around you. It's important for harmonious relationships."

"I'm repeating myself here, but I don't need friendly relationships," Alus answered.

"But surely that will not work this time," said Loki.

"Hmm... Well, I suppose. You mean to avoid unnecessary clashes."

A united team was necessary in the Orb Struggle. As good as Alus was, a terrible atmosphere around the team would make victory questionable. That was partially why he had set the stage for Tesfia and Theresia's battle.

"You are aware that a foreign element entering a squad could lead to a drastic drop in coordination, aren't you? And if there were many women, what do you think would happen if the captain wasn't considerate?" Loki asked, using common sense of the military to corner him.

"...I-I'll be more careful," he said.

"Yes, I believe that would be for the best," Loki said with a satisfied nod.

But Tesfia looked somewhat displeased. A girl's heart truly was complicated and mysterious.

After the break, everyone checked a recording of movement as a whole in the Tenbram, then tried all kinds of divisions of roles and positioning through trial and error. Training continued until the artificial sun had fully set.

But even if they trained until the Tenbram began, there was a limit. They were still just an impromptu team; they lacked detailed cooperation or the experience to convey their intentions to each other through only eye contact.

Meanwhile, Frose and Selva, who'd learned of the incident between Theresia and Tesfia, were very grateful to Alus. They'd needed to resolve the friction with the branch families anyways, so it was like a godsend to them.

I started it, so I can't say that I was used, but...

A foreign element by the name of Alus had been thrown into a smoldering ember to serve as a spark. But surely the head of the family couldn't have predicted the results of an unexpected chemical reaction...

As the head of the family, clearly in a great mood, shared the finest of wine and the elderly butler served extraordinary food in a brisk manner, Alus couldn't help but feel misgivings. But nothing would come from being suspicious. So for now, he quietly savored the food together with Loki.

And on the night of the fourth day, after the usual dinner, Alus, Loki, and Selva gathered in Frose's study and examined the results of that day's training.

"Hmm, with our current skill, this would be the limit of our strategies." Selva groaned, his expression complicated as he looked over a strategic map on the table.

The map was over a gigantic site that the Womruina family owned where the Tenbram would be held. It had rough geographic features drawn into it as well, but it was difficult to get a perfect grasp of the elevation.

"Since we can't get a good grasp of the terrain, adaptability will be very important. We will have to compensate with individual ability," Alus answered, but the difference in ability was just a presumption.

With a rule restricting the strongest in the Tenbram, they would need to raise the overall potential of their team. But anything with people involved would inevitably show a difference in individuals.

With the blunders Tesfia had performed, it was all but certain that Aile's command was above hers. By his side were Cicila and Orneus, both no doubt very strong. And the rest would no doubt be elites raised since childhood.

Meanwhile, on Fable's side neither Loki nor Selva would participate. Theresia and Roderich would make up the core, but both were young and unreliable. So ultimately, Alus would have to fully make up for the difference in skill.

Tesfia looked nervous from start to end, but Alus was perfectly calm.

I'll just have to do something about that, Alus thought to himself with the confidence of the current rank 1.

Even with the bracelet restricting magic and the damage transfer system, there still had to be limits and loopholes in the rules. So the Tenbram's difference in fighting power wasn't absolute. There would be fluctuations.

For example, in the Outer World, it was common for an advantage or disadvantage to be overturned by changes on the battlefield.

Although that's true for them too, Alus thought.

It was possible for even Alus to get held back by something unexpected. And that was why he was pretending to be a staff officer and coming up with strategies—in order to prepare for the unexpected.

While Alus and the others were meeting every night to discuss strategy, the branch families were eagerly training.

Moreover, Lucille was unable to join the training due to his age and ability, but he wanted to be of help in some way, and after his desperate pleas, he was given the position of training manager. He briskly handed out drinks and towels in high spirits, running back and forth between the field and was secretly gathering popularity.

Lucille idolized Tesfia in particular and would wear a bright, innocent smile whenever he was in front of her.

Well, Fia really doesn't look like a noble lady. That was why she got along so well with Alice and why there's no need to be so careful around her. I can see why she'd be popular with children, thought Alus.

That was no doubt one of Tesfia's virtues. If not, Alus wouldn't have been training her nor staying at the Fable mansion. When he became aware of that, Alus felt awkward, but he changed gears, pushing that thought to a corner of his mind.

Preparations were proceeding smoothly, and Tesfia had overcome the difficulties with the branch families and become a little stronger.

All that's left is deciding who to leave the decisive blow to.

Alus plotted who would be best to use in order to display his malice for the coming Tenbram and quietly smiled.

A little more than a week remained until the Tenbram.

Ninety-Seventh Chapter: Scion of Darkness

In the past, the two matchless families—Fable and Womruina—had regularly interacted. Tesfia was only nine years old back then.

At the time, Frose had retired from the military and prioritized building connections within noble society. While she was respected, Frose’s achievements in the military hadn’t given her much influence in social circles. As a result, her connection to other families had been diluted, so it was necessary to build a solid connection to the Womruina family in order to solidify Fable’s foundation.

And so, as she was her daughter, Frose would bring Tesfia with her on visits.

At the time, meetings between the three great noble families happened on a regular basis, but with Vizaist being absent so often, a representative would attend in his place.

The Socalent family aside, it was an important place for the other two heads of their families to meet. That was also why Tesfia, as the next head of the family, along with the Womruina family’s eldest son, Lloyd, and second son, Aile came along.

As the second son, Aile was only a spare in case something happened to Lloyd. But even from a young age, Aile was always preparing in hopes of that opportunity. He was practically convinced that he would one day stand at the top of the Womruina family—and all of the noble world.

While he was no exceptional genius, he had different kinds of talents: transcendent powers of observation and a grasp of the inner workings of a mind. Aile excelled at eloquently manipulating people and securing an advantage for himself. He put veteran politicians to shame.

It was a simple feat for him to see through his opponent’s true feelings and aspirations. But Aile’s interest wasn’t magic but what made people tick.

He started his “study” by talking with several of the maids as an experiment.

He called new hires into his room and made casual conversation with them. The maids had been nervous at first and prostrated themselves before him, but once he got the hang of it, he could easily get them to open their hearts.

He pulled out their secret desires and accepted their discontent and complaints with a bright smile. With his young looks, the maids would just forget to show proper respect, and he would let it go with a smile.

First he looked to see what they wanted to hear. He skillfully closed the distance between himself and them. And the maids would become quite talkative. He would satisfy their desires and aspirations, console their sense of inferiority, and blur the lines between them. That made them forget their position and he could skillfully get close to them.

So he disposed of those who were carelessly blinded by money. A simple mind and allegiance that was only skin deep were fool's businesses that only made Aile lose interest. He quickly divided the people at the mansion into those to swiftly throw away and those that could be used as a throwaway piece.

After a few months, the maids fully enjoyed their conversations with Aile, with how busy work was at the mansion, and with the time spent with him was when they could relax even more than break time.

And the servants' room was full with talks about Aile. How he was adorable, clever, and very considerate of them. And after talking about him, they always ended up comparing him to his older brother.

Ever since he was young, there had been no love between Aile and his foolish brother. In fact, despite living in the same mansion, they had few chances to meet. Care was put in so that the brothers weren't left alone together before they had grown up.

It was already informally decided that Lloyd would be the next head of the family, and because of that, he was always arrogant and tyrannical. Being the eldest, he misused his authority and was accompanied by the strong glow of influence, which really intrigued Aile.

His brother's future seat surely had a great view.

It was at a height where inferior humans could be used as pawns. But at the

same time, Aile was able to closely observe how terrifying it was when an incompetent fool wielded authority.

Some power could be used freely and mercilessly because the person saw nothing. Aile first realized that when his brother complained to his father about a rude noble.

As a result, his father had swiftly condemned the noble.

His father made up some random crime and used his private force and connections in the military to crush his entire family. It was as easy as breathing and settled with a single flick of his finger.

And everything worked out just like Lloyd wanted.

While it was called the three great noble families, none had as much power as Womruina. They had the authority, money, and power that not even the military could ignore. Trampling over another family left a strong impression on Aile.

At the same time, so did the dangerous balance the world was in as the helpless fools wielded overwhelming power.

He carved all of that into his heart.

After that, some time passed.

Aile and his brother took seats in a ballroom facing each other. Their father sat in the middle in a particularly luxurious chair. On the other side were the maids who served the mansion, perfectly lined up.

It was time to screen the maids. Or rather, several of the many maids would be promoted to personal attendants for Lloyd and Aile.

Those gathered here didn't do odd jobs in the mansion. These maids took care of everyday necessities. In other words, they were all well trained.

According to Aile's preliminary investigation, his brother only wanted a single woman as his attendant. And Aile was simply waiting for the result. The young head maid in the center of the hall spoke up at his father's signal.

"Let us begin choosing the personal attendants for the young masters. In addition, Master Lloyd, Master Aile, your qualifications as the head of the family

may be questioned, so keep that in mind.”

Aile smiled in a way that nobody would notice. How kind of them to call for him when he was second in line.

This ceremony was like a test to confirm the caliber of the head of the family. Normally, Aile would be nothing more than another element to put pressure on Lloyd, as the next head of the family was practically decided by a single advantage: being born first.

His brother was no doubt confident that his position was rock solid. And so was his father. Birth order had decided it all. Thus, all Aile had to do was overturn their shallow thinking.

After clearing her throat, the head maid spoke in a dignified manner. “Very well. Everyone, please go towards the one you would like to serve.”

At the head maid’s words, the maids bowed and began moving towards the Womruina sons.

“Wha—!!!”

The astonished utterance came from the older brother. Nobody had come to stand before him. Even the maid he really wanted had gone to Aile’s side.

Indeed, all fifty or so maids were lined up before Aile. Even his father couldn’t hide his surprise.

Having the servants choose rather than the master was something that the young head maid had proposed to Aile’s father.

Knowing that his father highly valued the head maid for her smarts and loyalty, Aile had flattered her, won her over, and opened up to her about worries he’d made up to get a firm hold of her mind.

Ignoring the astonished Lloyd, the head maid spoke to Aile with a reverent tone.

“Very well, Master Aile...please choose your attendant from among them.”

“I know,” Aile calmly replied and looked over the maids with a smile. “Then I request that everyone here becomes my personal attendant.”

His brother was shocked speechless.

“B-But, Master Aile, then there will be some without anything to do...”

That had been unexpected, but Aile brushed off the shocked head maid’s words. “If anything, these aren’t enough.”

Aile turned to his father and spoke in a merry tone.

“Oh, my great and wise father, Moroteon von Womruina—now that it has become clear who has the talent to become the next head of the family, I ask for your permission. Do you not agree that making full use of these numbers is the caliber necessary for the true head of the family? Even should I have double the number present, as long as they wish to serve me, not a single one will have time on their hands.”

In fact, they would surely work themselves to the bone for Aile’s sake. He had already become an irreplaceable presence in their lives and the hope of this family that they could cling to.

In the next stage, he hoped to implant them with such a strong sense of loyalty that it would surpass their moral compass. After that, he would have them overcome physical pain and ultimately be prepared to risk their lives. If he could accomplish that, he would be satisfied with the results of his experiment.

“How about it, father?”

“Hmm...”

His father was evasive and gave him a sour look, prompting Aile to glance at his quiet brother.

“I understand that this is irregular,” Aile said. “But when it has become this clear, it would be disrespectful to give the position to my brother. Reconsidering is fine, but I do not believe anything will change at this point.”

With his pale older brother in the corner of his eye, Aile purposefully put on an air of importance and looked over the lined up maids.

His weapon of choice was numbers. They might have been mere maids, but their group decision would serve as visible pressure. It would make his father, who was at the height of his power, but clearly aging, lose his ability to judge

certain factors such as tradition, prestige, and appropriateness. It would shake up his existing entrenched way of thinking.

His father groaned, but Aile attacked again.

“Father, I can bring Womruina to even further greatness.”

While his words could be taken as insolence, Moroteon’s expression was sober.

He asked, “In what way?”

“First, I will reduce the power of Fable and Socalent. The great noble families won’t be equals; instead, Womruina will always be at the top. We will start with the Fable family. If I recall, they have a daughter around my age.”

“You plan to take her in,” his father exclaimed.

“Yes, our family’s influence will further expand, and we will only have to contain Socalent. Of course, I do not intend to end their family. With two children, they should be able to survive. And if two of the three great noble families have such a strong connection, even the ruler won’t be able to make a move so easily.”

Moroteon closed his mouth. He wasn’t pondering; he was astonished. While Aile was his son, he was still young. Yet the young man shared the ideas his father had secretly been plotting. While that was reassuring, he also felt a tinge of fear well up in his heart.

However, that didn’t matter to Aile. He intended to continue playing house with his family, but his father would inevitably get old. His time left on the board was limited.

“Very well, do as you please,” Moroteon said and got up, leaving the hall behind.

Aile’s older brother, Lloyd, chased after their father, pleading pathetically. Aile remained and took a thick file from the head maid, who had sworn her loyalty to him.

He flipped through it in satisfaction. It contained information on the daughter of Fable, Tesfia, and the family. It would be his first time “conquering” a girl his

age, but he already had an image of what steps to take.

After that, Aile found an opportunity to make some time for just him and Tesfia. Once their relationship had been established, he made sure to put his hand on her forehead whenever they met and parted ways so that she would only be able to see him from the neck down.

That was a form of magical suggestion he'd learned from a questionable old book, but its effect was immediate. After that, all he needed to do was take time to work over her psyche.

He sowed the seeds to dominate her mind. With that, Tesfia was unable to resist Aile. Everything went according to plan, but with little in the way of tension and sense of accomplishment, Aile was bored.

Within half a year of meeting, Tesfia was practically at his beck and call, and with some sounding out from Womruina, she signed and stamped the engagement papers. And so they became betrothed without any room for doubt.

However, three months after that light had left Tesfia's eyes, they took on a new shine.

Aile had no doubt she'd met someone who'd influenced her. He had no idea that the person she'd met was her best friend, Alice.

He didn't think anyone had noticed anything unusual about her, but even Frose, who'd been supportive of the engagement, now actively supported her daughter. With life back in her eyes, Tesfia asked Aile to annul the engagement.

That surprised even Aile. He thought he'd turned her into a puppet, but he understood that her mental growth could threaten to cut the strings dominating her.

Hmm, I suppose I should back off for now. But the needles of domination deep in her psyche won't disappear. They will simply be resting inside of you, Fia... he thought.

Aile pretended to give up and released Tesfia from the engagement.

But that pleased Aile too. There was nothing fun in everything going too well.

If her will broke as easily as his brother's had a few months ago, the reward wouldn't be worth the effort.

Besides, Aile had already carved several conditions into Tesfia's subconscious. There would likely be some change as she grew up, but the psychological grip had taken root in her and could be recalled at any time to become a trigger for domination.

That was enough for now. The game would begin several years later...when she would no doubt become useful once Aile was close to becoming the head of the family.

Aile didn't understand human feelings, but he did have something he valued in others: power.

It was hard for him to gain the favor of those with power. Just speaking to them wouldn't be enough to get them on his side. Sympathy was often most efficient.

First, Aile chose to keep the combat maid Cicila at his side. She was already something of a bodyguard, and appearance-wise she looked like a butler, which was her way of showing that gender had nothing to do with anything.

She came from the Cikolen family, which had served the Womruina family for generations as a military family. Since Cicila was pure, Aile was easily able to win her over by acting like a virtuous person. Before long, she acknowledged Aile as a lord worth protecting with her own life.

As expected, Cicila was the most devoted in her guard over anyone else. She was normally taciturn, but when she was around Aile, it was like she transformed into a different person, becoming very talkative. That was another reason why she was Aile's favorite.

Four years later, Aile had even more attendants.

One was someone hired from outside of the family, who had a completely different role from Cicila.

Aile needed someone who truly understood him, someone who walked the same path as he walked the inhuman and immoral path of madness. And that turned out to be the magical criminal who hunted Magicmasters and made

waves across the world at the time—The Hunter.

Aile used his family's private forces to cast a net around him in order to make contact with him. He ignored Cicila's desperate pleas to stop, and when they faced each other, all alone, he exposed himself for the first time.

"If you are bored, I will give you stimulation," he said, then explained his plan to take over the nation.

The Womruina family was former royalty, and Aile had already given up on his father, who seemed content to be the ruler's dog.

Even so, it was insane for the son of a great noble to face a murderer without any protection. It was unclear if he surrendered to Aile because he saw the same insanity in his eyes as in his own or if it was just on a whim.

Either way, his answer was instant.

He was pursued by the military, and now that he was surrounded by Aile's private army, he probably felt it was time to move on. He didn't hunt Magicmasters to prove his strength. Nor was it for money. He simply wanted to live on the edge of death, and he told Aile as much.

And he mentioned he still hadn't experienced the ultimate battle.

Aile had all information on The Hunter erased and employed him as his new servant, giving him the name of Orneus.

Aile was sure that Orneus alone could sympathize with his ideology.

With that, Aile finally made plans to take back what had been taken from him. Alpha had to be ruled by Womruina. They should hold the highest seat in the nation.

Right now, the ruler was a member of the Arlzeit family. They were both of the same blood, but now there was such a difference between them... One was the absolute ruler of an entire nation while the other was a dog in a luxurious collar.

And the Arlzeit family had a daughter by the name Cicelnia, who was a peerless beauty. There was always the option of marrying her. However, Aile hated her more than he hated anyone. She'd completely seen through him

when they met for the first time.

During their first pleasantries, she'd coldly laughed while looking like a beautiful goddess and told him that the ruler's seat wouldn't fill the void in his heart.

And no matter how he tried to smooth things over, she saw through everything.

It was all because of the difference in power. Because of the difference in position. He wanted to believe it was because Cicelnia was part of the family that ruled the nation. However...

Cicelnia was the only woman whose thoughts he couldn't get a read on. That astonished him, but it also made him feel an intense displeasure.

So when Cicelnia had become the ruler, Aile rejoiced. Now he could finally drag down the woman who always looked down on him. She was an opponent worth making his life's objective.

Like she said, being a ruler might not have a permanent value, but he still wanted to beat her.

If Aile had any talent as a Magicmaster, he could have joined the military. It would have been fine if he found joy in pushing towards world peace too. But Aile had no desire for any of that. So in the end, Aile belonged in noble society, where conspiracies swirled.

The reason didn't matter. As long as he had one thing to do, he could bid farewell to his days of boredom. And punishing the woman who had wrongly believed that there was an absolute difference in intelligence was one such thing. There was a mountain of problems to overcome before he could reach her, but that was just the perfect reward for him.

Winning over the Fable family would also require winning over Frose Fable.

Cicelnia was too strong to be taken down by deceptive plans. He had instigated the real leader of Aferka, Rayleigh, to attack the ruler, but it had failed. However, it had been a declaration of war. Eventually he would be forcing her off the public stage at any cost.

Until that time, he needed to make Womruina bigger and stronger. His planned engagement to Tesfia and domination of Fable was just a stepping stone. If could get his hands of Alus Reigin, or at least eliminate him, he would be able to climb to further heights—like taking control of the military.

If I could have him at my side that would be best. But all I really have to do is to get the military's collar off him and that will be enough. After all, Cicelnia is practically holding his reins right now.

As long as the person he wanted to dominate had a human mind, Aile had absolute confidence. On top of all sorts of techniques, he also had gotten his hands on psychic drugs from the black market that were far more powerful than anything commercially available.

Aile finished his preparations, and despite knowing it wouldn't lead to heaven, he walked along the edge of madness.

A wild party only had meaning if one danced until the end.



Inside a mansion steeped in history, tradition, and luxury, Aile von Womruina stood at the window of his room.

“What is the matter, Master Aile?”

When a clear voice called out to him from behind, he turned around.

“Cicila, huh. I was just reminiscing about the past.”

“Is that so? You appeared to look a little displeased, though.”

“I'm bored, waiting for the Tenbram to begin... Or maybe I should say that it's not fun.”

All of that was his older brother's fault.

“I thought that it was all but certain that his heart had broken and that he would give up on becoming the next head of the family...but this is unexpected. His incompetence is almost admirable.”

Despite being Aile's closest attendant, Cicila hadn't seen Aile so irritated in years.

While Aile somewhat violently sat down, Cicila put cooled tea down on the table next to him. Her emotions didn't show; she simply answered as his usual conversational partner.

"I am sorry. I was convinced that Master Lloyd would be unable to do anything after we deprived him of his power. I never expected that he would turn to such savagery. My Cikolen family has decided to decline the position of being Master Lloyd's bodyguard."

"Yes. He must have been bored of his retirement and drunk, but what a stupid thing to do," said Aile.

The Cikolen family had sent a female bodyguard, and Lloyd had put her under house arrest and done things to her that couldn't even be put into words. Fortunately, the worst had been avoided since the bodyguard hadn't gotten pregnant.

As Cicila took a sip of the newly poured tea, she felt her nerves calm from its sweetness.

"I should have just killed him," said Aile. "Write a letter of apology to the Cikolen family from me."

However, Aile's father, who still clung to his position, would have to punish him, and if he gave Lloyd too light of a punishment, nobody would blame Aile if he were to secretly dispose of him.

Those were Aile's thoughts as he looked at the splendid view out the window.

"There are some things even you cannot anticipate, Master Aile," said Cicila.

"You can say that again. He might have been brainless scum, but it seemed he still had pent-up frustration. It seems like leading senator Fouriva Surah has his eyes on not just my father trying to put out the fire but even my grandfather," said Aile with a sigh. "That is to be expected of Cicelnia. She is quick to act. And when dealing with the ruler you can't even use money from selling drugs on the black market to shut her up."

That was one of Womruina's secrets to securing funds. The illegal mana stimulant Chemical Boost had been selling very well recently.

“That aside, that Ambrosia there’ve been rumors about... Is that using our ingredients? It has a couple of components that Chemical Boost uses.”

“It appears so,” answered Cicila. “We launched an urgent investigation and shut down several farms but it was too late.”

“Cicelnia’s people have sharp noses when it comes to these kind of things. She ordered Senator Fouriva to keep my grandfather in check. He is a career politician with decades of experience. He won’t be dismissed anytime soon, so the surveillance on my grandfather won’t be removed for the time being.”

At the same time the illegal drug Ambrosia began to spread, the escaped prisoners had appeared within the nation. It was clear that someone had guided them, and all signs pointed to a secondary residence that Lloyd owned.

Traces of the escaped prisoners staying there had been discovered. A has-been noble who’d likely served as a mediator had disappeared, most likely disposed of by the vicious escaped prisoners, and since Lloyd’s butler was involved in that, suspicion was cast on all of Womruina.

Moreover, it seemed like the transformation the escaped prisoners had gone through at the Institute had been related to Ambrosia. And with that, Ambrosia, the escaped prisoners, and Womruina had become connected.



“To think he would lend a Womruina mansion to criminals. Even a child could understand that was a stupid idea. Just how much of a fool can he be?” asked Aile.

“Yes, it would seem that Master Lloyd is habitually using drugs,” said Cicila. Aile no longer even felt like sighing.

“At least the Tenbram will still be held as arranged,” Aile muttered.

But how exactly would he turn things around in the current situation?

Cicila was sure that the scion was hatching a secret plan behind his calm exterior. But never once since becoming his bodyguard had she been able to understand what the boy was truly thinking.

“Yes...but I wasn’t really sure if I should have shared this with you, Master Aile,” Cicila said, revealing her hesitation with downcast eyes. “I was thinking that perhaps it was Master Aile who was moving the escaped prisoners, not Master Lloyd.”

“That’s my bodyguard! You have a discerning eye.”

Aile narrowed his eyes. Indeed, at first he had made contact with the escaped prisoners, using a mediator.

“Then you could have just shared it with me,” Cicila said.

Aile smiled slightly in response.

“I didn’t move them directly. I used a certain organization to talk with them a little. I was hoping to make use of one of them, but they were really shady.”

A member of Kurama had told Aile about the escaped prisoners, but they never showed their face or identity. Aile likely hadn’t given them a good impression, and surely, they had brought the matter to Lloyd instead through his butler.

Having lost his position as the next head of the family, which included with it his authority, might, and connections, he had jumped at the offer without hesitation. And the result was the current mess...

“Here I discarded them because I thought they would bite the hand of their

owner, but looking at the results it was like they took a parting shot at me,” said Aile.

“It was probably a convenient way to get their hands on the drugs. But they were dangerous beasts that had broken free from their cages. I repeatedly told you not to carelessly contact them, so when did you come in contact...” Cicila said.

A little while back, Cicila had been told to take care of some tasks and had been out of the mansion for an entire day.

“Don’t worry, I had Orneus protecting me.”

Cicila furrowed her brows as if to object.

“Orneus again... Why do you make so much of him?”

“Well, with him around, the talks proceed smoothly. Still, you really are fussy about cleanliness. Use him like a dust cloth; once he’s dirty, throw him away.”

“No, not only is he shady, he is also a ruffian with no manners at all,” said Cicila.

“It would be the same even if he was courteous. It’s true that he might try to pull me down with him when I throw him away. Still, the world is big. It’s amazing someone like him was in Alpha.”

“I am sure that you won’t be fooled, but please be careful around those kinds of people, Master Aile. I simply couldn’t stand Mekfis when we first met him.”

Cicila screwed up her face as she spoke.

It wasn’t like Aile couldn’t understand what she meant. While it had been a different person this time, Mekfis, who’d appeared as a mediator in the past, had been a bizarre character. He’d had a unique vibe, which had sent a chill down even Aile’s spine.

Evil probably never disappeared because of people like him. With Aile’s power of observation, he could tell that Mekfis was a monster. His actions surpassed that of humanity, and of good and evil. It was like he’d been raised outside of this world.

He hadn’t ignored Cicila’s words. Because he was cautious, the people from

Kurama hadn't gotten deeply involved.

"We'll put Kurama off for later, but right now we can't ignore my idiotic elder brother any further. Especially if my father intends to give that scum more leniency."

The strong will behind his cold tone sent a shiver down her neck.

Lloyd hadn't been completely disinherited because of the head of the family's naiveté. Their father had been trying to keep him away from Aile's evil influence, but that discretion had worked against him.

"Master Moroteon is very kind towards Master Lloyd. But your grandfather, Master Josef, dotes on you more."

"Well, it would be boring if Womruina split in two before everything began. I suppose I will be a good, filial son a little while longer. Society probably thinks that Womruina has been cornered, but I will calmly see this Tenbram through. Oh, how I look forward to it."

Aile smiled innocently, but Cicila felt a tinge of anxiety. There was no way Aile wouldn't make any schemes, but she hadn't been told anything. Moreover, their opponent was the Fable family, and past them was Alus Reigin.

Aile ignored Cicila's worried look.

"Now then, it's about time we move. I want to get a grasp of the situation. There's someone I have on my mind."

"Huh? Master Lloyd is already being kept under surveillance..."

Aile wagged his finger to correct her.

"I'm talking about Morwald," he spat out.

"His Excellency? What do you mean?" Cicila asked in confusion.

Morwald was an influential figure in the military, and he was close to the Womruina family. He'd also signed the engagement papers with Tesfia Fable.

"I got an interesting report just now. It appears he is intervening in my Tenbram."

Aile took a letter on his desk and handed it over to Cicila.

“This is...a recommendation for a second referee. It is true that the referee from the Frusevan family has been getting closer to the Fable family.”

Cicila continued reading the letter, and when surprise washed over her, blurted out, “This is the person His Excellency is recommending?! To think it’s the Einhemmil Sect...”

“Morwald sure has fallen if he’s pleading to god. It’s true that he is the head of the old noble faction with quite a lot of military power, and he would be useful to pit against Berwick... Still, this is His Excellency’s proposal. I won’t bluntly refuse it.”

Morwald’s abilities were low, but he had a lot of pride, and he saw Berwick and Vizaist as political enemies that he would constantly compete against. Now that very person was doing something unexpected.

“It looks like the time to let go of His Excellency’s reins has come. If he wants to run rampant then that is his own problem, he might be close to my father, but it would be vexing if someone takes me as his owner.”

Moroteon and Morwald were in a give-and-take relationship, but Aile was different.

He is an incompetent fool with nothing but pride. My father might have use for him, but he will be useless during my period. But the two-referee idea is fair. Since it won’t hurt, I can let His Excellency have the credits one last time.

Aile pondered while Cicila quietly stared at him.

Then Aile began thinking happily. There was still time until the Tenbram began, so until then he could indulge in coming up with plans. Such was the decision of Womruina’s star.

Ninety-Eighth Chapter: Secret Talks and Honeymoon

In a prime spot in the noble district, a stately mansion stood on a vast plot of land. The veil of darkness had fallen long ago, and the artificial moon cast silver light between the gaps of the thicket.

Morwald was changing his clothes in a private room in the back of the mansion and spitting out his pent-up anger. He'd just finished inflicting pain on Noir in the basement, but it hadn't been enough.

Tsk... To think my greatest forces, the Kruelsaith, would fail to take down a single rat. Especially since Vizaist went through the effort of coming all this way.

Morwald frowned as he wiped the blood from his hands onto a handkerchief with golden embroidery. After that, his expression returned to normal, like he'd just wiped away some sweat after a light workout.

His inner thoughts aside, he did need to change gears on the surface. An important guest was waiting for him in the parlor.

Morwald personally opened a thick wooden door and called out to the person inside with a bright smile.

"Dear me, I apologize for keeping you waiting."

A man nearing old age, wearing white clothes with gold thread, politely bowed to him. His hair and beard were white like his clothes, and he had dignified features. In the neighborhood, he was famous.

"To think you would come yourself, Archbishop Silvette... Excuse me, but are you alone?"

The archbishop smiled at Morwald's polite display.

"Yes, with what time it is, I was reluctant to bring any followers with me. More importantly, I hope I am not intruding by appearing so late," answered the archbishop.

"Not in the slightest. It is nothing but an honor to have the archbishop

personally visit. I am ashamed that we cannot give you the hospitality that you deserve... Ha ha ha.”

Seeing Morwald’s high spirits, Silvette’s smile deepened.

However, what followed would be a secret discussion. Morwald whispered to the accompanying servant and had them leave.

As the archbishop looked on, Morwald folded up his stole and deliberately put it on the bar over the window, as if to shut out the moonlight. It was an act as if to keep his beloved god from witnessing the dark talks they would be having. He then sat down at a seat for visitors, his golden medal hanging from his neck swaying as he did.

“Now then...I am a rather busy person. So I would like to wrap this up quickly,” Silvette said.

And Morwald nodded as he sat down on the chair on the opposite side of a table between them.

The Einhemmil Sect was a religious power that was starting to gather both domestic and foreign believers. Normally the archbishop should receive a lavish welcome, but considering the contents of the request, Morwald couldn’t do anything too major.

“Regarding the request I made about refereeing the Tenbram between the Fable family and the Womruina family...”

Morwald put a briefcase he’d prepared earlier on the table.

After confirming that it was full of money, the archbishop smiled brightly. “Yes, of course. You have taken such great care of me... I came here to respond in kind.”

Morwald had played a part when the Einhemmil Sect first formed in Alpha. He wasn’t a believer himself, but the donations that the sect had brought were very appealing. Moreover, when trouble had appeared that he couldn’t combat with the military, the believers could be used to put out the fires.

Therefore, Morwald colluded with the sect to gather more believers and donations, leading to the eventual construction of a cathedral.

Their doctrine was not to despair at this small world surrounded by Fiends, a path they could walk without getting lost.

Ever since the calamity half a century ago with the appearance of Cronus, focus had been put entirely into the study and spread of magic. And in response to the people's fear and the suffering of their souls, the number of new religions grew.

The Einhemmil Sect, in particular, didn't perceive Fiends as a direct threat but rather as messengers that delivered the fate of death to those whose time had come. It primarily preached how to live and die in a gloomy world that held a constant threat of Fiends.

The doctrine matched well with the current state of the world, and with Morwald's assistance, there were now many veterans among the followers. The faith was even spreading to the nobility.

"With Your Excellency's consideration, we have been able to construct several orphanages in Alpha. We are able to grant salvation to the destitute children who have lost their parents to Fiends. You are truly the light who guides our teachings throughout this nation."

While the Archbishop's flattery shook Morwald a little, he didn't outright refuse it.

"That is more than I deserve. I have experience in taking in children with nowhere to go...and I was only hoping to aid your salvation of misfortunate children," Morwald said, referring to Noir.

He didn't mention that the Kruelsaith was an organization that had gathered and trained such people.

Suddenly, Archbishop Silvette's face turned gloomy.

"However, I don't believe the Einhemmil Sect has been fully accepted in Alpha. Tenbram is a tradition of old... If we were to referee it, would there not be many who would object to our involvement?"

"There is no need to worry about that. After all, it is my recommendation! And as you know, the Tenbram has the implication of a sacred duel as well. Naturally, priests have been witnesses since the old times."

As Morwald enthusiastically spoke, the archbishop nodded.

“Our Einhemmil Sect originates from teachings from ancient times as well. However, that tradition has become obsolete in modern times... That is what I was worried about.”

As if to say that he was right on the mark, Morwald started speaking with barely a breath between words.

“That is why presiding over this grand stage will lead to the Einhemmil Sect spreading further. It is an opportunity to further increase your influence. Not to mention that you can get closer to the Womruina family through me. It’s not a bad deal is it?”

“I see, indeed,” said Silvette. “I am greatly obliged by your consideration. We cannot intervene in problems between nobles, but this must be the guidance of the heavens. However, I hear that it is the second son, Aile, who has the most influence in the Womruina family. I am of the understanding that he is not very interested in religion in general or of the path to save the world. I can only hope that I would be of aid to you, Your Excellency.”

“Indeed, Aile still has a precarious side to him because of his youth. That is especially why I asked for your aid in this regard. That said, he is wide-awake to his interests, so there will be no mistakes as long as you have my support. There is nothing more reassuring than being able to borrow power, ha ha ha!”

After laughing in a theatrical manner, Morwald formed a serious expression.

“...By the way, I have another request of the archbishop. Can I ask for the Einhemmil Sect’s aid in the punishment of a heretic?”

Morwald’s request prompted Silvette to raise an eyebrow. “Let me hear the details,” he calmly responded, opening his wrinkled hands.

Morwald had pushed aside multiple obstacles to set up the archbishop as a referee, but he was a cunning and cautious man. If Aile lost in the Tenbram, he himself would be in danger, so he had wanted to take a preventive measure.

Considering the worst case, he wanted to cut down on the enemy’s power. And when he thought of that, there was a clear top priority: a boy by the name of Alus Reigin, Berwick’s ace up the sleeve.

His previous mistake was very regrettable, but he'd likely not get another chance to take down Vizaist anytime soon, so he wanted to at least get rid of Alus. Looking at the long term, if he could eliminate Alus, it was only a matter of time before he took full control of the military.

After meeting for nearly one hour, Morwald leaned into his chair and, looking satisfied, said, "Archbishop, if everything ends well, I will be sure to support your sect in the future too. And if my authority were to increase even further, I promise to give the Einhemmil Sect the right to search the Outer World. And I believe this will be of interest to you."

Morwald pulled out a small box and placed it on the table.

"Hmm...?" murmured Silvette.

"This is something that one of the escaped prisoners that made a stir in Alpha yesterday possessed," said Morwald. "The intruders used these in the Institute and displayed tremendous power."

He had been fortunate to retrieve it when he went to the Second Magical Institute. The archbishop nodded meaningfully and took the box to confirm it.

"Allow me to check. Oh, it certainly feels impure. Something like this would stain the soul. It cannot be allowed to touch the eyes of the innocent masses. And to think they took it into their bodies... How pitiful," the archbishop said and took out the Ambrosia inside of the box.

But when he returned it to the box, Silvette's expression was back to normal.

"Would the Einhemmil Sect be able to take care of this? I don't know if it is the divine artifact that you are looking for, but at the very least it would be a clue of sorts," Morwald said, calmly.

The Einhemmil Sect worshipped a singular god and their familiars, but there was also an article in particular that they considered sacred as a sign of their miracles and glory—the divine artifact granted by their god—and the sect was obliged to find it for safekeeping.

"Hmm, very well. However, Minerva is not something that should be in the hands of people either. There are rumors that it coming to the surface is the reason tragedy befell Alpha. And regarding this, the sect will do everything in its

power.”

After that, Archbishop Silvette refused Morwald’s offer to have a servant bring him home, and he walked home through the night on his own, his stole hanging over his shoulder.

His figure eventually disappeared into the night... Not even the light of the artificial moon illuminated his back in the end.



Two weeks after the events at Morwald’s mansion, the silvery veil of the artificial moon shone down on the Fable mansion, just like it had during those secret talks.

As the light filtered in from the window, Alus flipped through the pages of an old book in his room.

They had already finished choosing what Guardian to stock into the orb. With the final steps done, there wasn’t anything in particular to do tonight. The Tenbram was tomorrow, but the atmosphere in the mansion was unexpectedly relaxed.

The participants in the Tenbram had been spending all day training, so the night was quiet. There was a sense of fullness from doing everything they could every day. Dinner was excellent as well, and the warm hospitality was enough for everyone to relax.

The adults and branch family children’s attitude had changed, and the somber atmosphere had disappeared. The incident between Tesfia and Theresia had solved a lot of things, for better or worse.

However, Lucille alone seemed restless. Theresia would often give him stern warnings about the mindset of a noble. On each occasion, Theresia looked like an older sister, and perhaps that was what she was usually like.

There, in the silent night, Alus stopped flipping through the pages of his book and yawned.

It was about time to go to sleep, but he couldn’t help but feel restless in the unfamiliar room. Loki would normally help serve as a conversation partner,

but...

No, I'll leave it at that, he thought.

Loki had been helping with the training as well as gathering information, so Alus would feel guilty about putting any further strain on her.

Still, why did he feel an urge to drink some tea when it was time to sleep?

It was just before midnight. Deciding to ask a maid for a cup of tea or coffee, Alus opened the door to the hallway.

It might have been late, but the maids were fully intent on offering a warm reception to the guests, and if he poked his face out, one of them would probably show up.

The moonlight leaking through the window created a mysterious shadow, as if a corner of the room was cut out of a painting.

Suddenly he noticed a figure standing still by the door.

It was a girl in nightclothes, with a thin negligee peeking out from a silken gown. She had the beautiful profile of a noble lady, but there was a shadow of grief over her face. Alus suspiciously narrowed his eyes.

"U-Uhm, good evening?"

In the next moment, she faced him with a forced smile, ruining everything.

Alus let out an exasperated sigh. "Fia, huh. What are you doing?" he asked the redhead.

In return he got an embarrassed laugh.

"Uhm, I just couldn't sleep. I just happened to pass by your door. It was just a coincidence."

So she said, but the timing made it seem like she'd been waiting.

As Alus gave her a doubtful stare, she awkwardly corrected her posture.

"I was just thinking about enjoying the cool air by the balcony," she said.

"Is that so? Then wrap it up quickly and get to sleep. We can't have the general suffering from a lack of sleep on the big day."

“I know that. Actually, why are you acting like you own the place? This is my house, you know,” Tesfia said with a pout, but even her usual attitude seemed a little meek today. “I’m just cooling off a little. It’s not a big deal. In fact, why don’t you come with me, Al? You know, uhm...”

She struggled to finish, looking away. It was a very roundabout way of asking, so perhaps there was something on her mind...but Alus reluctantly complied.

“Fine, I was just thinking about asking for something to drink anyways. But I have no intention of going along with any nonsensical talks.”

“That’s about the reaction I expected. But that’s fine. Come with me.”

Leaving his dim room, Alus was taken to a small balcony sticking out from the wall of the mansion. Perhaps because the trees were so close, it seemed it wasn’t used often; chairs and desks were left like it was something like a storeroom.

“This is so nostalgic,” Tesfia muttered as she touched the stone rails beneath the moonlight.

“Don’t tell me this is your special place you come to when you want to be alone or something,” Alus said, immediately destroying the mood, prompting Tesfia to narrow her eyes and let out a sigh.

“That’s not it,” said. “It’s just that this was the farthest place from my mother’s study. This is where I’d hide when I was a child.”

That’s what you call special, Alus retorted in his mind.

“Who— Wh-What does it matter?!”

“I didn’t say anything.”

Tesfia frowned and wordlessly leaned over the rail. Her eyes downcast, she seemed to be lost in thought.

“I’ve had so much to think about these past few days, no, these past few months.”

“And worries,” Alus said as if to get closer to her emotions.

Tesfia nodded with the first natural smile in a while.

“Most of that is related to you, though.”

“And that is regrettable.”

“The incident at the Institute in particular got me thinking. Ah.”

As she turned back, her gown opened up a little. While concealing the bosom of her negligee, she gave Alus a suspicious glance with her cheeks red.

Her reaction was correct for a noble lady, concerned about the eyes of the opposite sex.

However—

“Talk about rude. If you’re going to act like that, you shouldn’t be walking around in such a relaxed outfit,” said Alus. “Don’t worry, I’m used to seeing it.”

In fact, there had been several occasions where Alus had seen Tesfia’s body. It wasn’t like she was readily doing it, but inseparable relationships were scary.

“Hmph. What, you mean you have no ulterior motives?”

Her tone was surprisingly provocative, and the strange emotions in her voice made Alus fall silent for a while.

Tesfia fidgeted while looking at Alus with somewhat teary eyes, and he felt strangely restless. This might have been the first time he was at a loss for words when talking to her. As if to erase the mood that had suddenly sprung up, Alus cynically spoke.

“If you’re going to use those kinds of tactics, you should wait until you have the nerves to pull it off.”

Compared to Felinella and her resolve, Tesfia lacked that kind of knowledge as well as allure and courage.

“Hmph! That’s exactly what you’d expect from someone used to sexy events.”

“Well, you’ll have to get used to it whether you like it or not in the military,” said Alus.

“What kind of life were you leading?! It must have been a lot of fun being surrounded by older military ladies!” Tesfia spat out with a frown.

“There wasn’t anything fun about it. If you want to know, I can tell you about

it sometime.”

Alus had answered with no expression. Perhaps because that was so unexpected, Tesfia looked flustered and answered in a quiet voice.

“Huh? Uhm, well...if you’re going to tell me, I suppose I can hear you out?”

Alus fell silent and closed his eyes for a while. If he wanted to be accurate, he couldn’t say that he had any memories of his time in the military worth mentioning. Only very objective and comprehensive scenes remained in his mind. There was nothing to emotionally accompany them.

Nothing at all.

“Well, I know I said it, but it’s probably better to ask someone else if you want to know,” he said.

“I see.”

Tesfia nodded, but after faltering, she timidly looked up and asked him, “But if I said that I wanted to hear it from you directly, would you be angry? Sometime I mean.”

With a clinging atmosphere and with Tesfia’s words trembling at the end, Alus relented.

“Sometime,” Alus muttered heavily.

As if that was exactly what she wanted to hear, Tesfia smiled brightly in relief.

“Yes! Sometime. Oh and let me tell you this while we’re at it,” Tesfia said and paused.

Alus sarcastically spoke. “What now? A confession?”

With a tit for tat, an energetic retort came flying back swiftly.

“Whaaat?! You’re very self-conscious aren’t you? Do you think you’re popular with the ladies? It’s about time you realize that you have a problem with your personality!”

“I don’t want to hear that from you, but I guess I’ll ask. What else is it that you want to say?”

With a red face, Tesfia pressed her head into her arms on the rail. As if to

follow her example, Alus leaned his back against the balcony. He also put up his forearm against the smooth stonework railing.

“You’re so self-important, sheesh,” said Tesfia.

“Frankly, I’ve mostly given up on being on the same wavelength as people my age,” said Alus.

As if to say that he was being brazen, Tesfia stared at Alus from the corner of her eyes. She could see his fingers on top of the railing. She somewhat nervously gulped and, removing her cheek from her arms, timidly moving her fingers towards Alus’s.

However, she didn’t have the courage to grip them, so instead she poked the back of his hand.

“But maybe you’re better that way. Always so aloof and full of composure. So it’s not like you’re unreliable.”

Tesfia turned red up to her ears, mumbling, “Besides, if you weren’t like this, I wouldn’t be like I am now. And thanks to that mana expansion training, I have more mana than before.”

“Ah, so you’ve come to get a feel for it these past few days.”

“I guess so. That’s thanks to you, isn’t it?”

Tesfia scratched her cheek, which was as red as her ears, and looked directly into Alus’s eyes and spoke clearly. “So I wanted to say thank you.”

Her scarlet hair fluttered as she spoke.

“In the end, it’s thanks to you that the problem with the branch families was settled too. Mother and Selva were really grateful, and I was too.”

Suddenly a bright smile, very much like her, bloomed on her face. So instead of making fun of her for being so meek, Alus faced her straight on.

“Yeah. I thought it might have been some unnecessary meddling at first, but I guess everything worked out. Besides, I didn’t do anything. You were the winner.”

Tesfia repeatedly nodded at Alus’s unusually kind words.

“At that time, I wanted power from the bottom of my heart. No, I’ve thought I’ve wanted the same thing so many times before, but this was the first time I’ve wanted it so badly,” she revealed.

It wasn’t just the battle against Theresia.

The biggest factor had been the deadly battle against the escaped criminals that they encountered at the Institute.

The enemies weren’t Fiends but humans with clear ill will. Her friends had been exposed to extreme danger, and she herself had been seriously injured as well. Since then, Tesfia had started to grow without even realizing.

Defeat forced a change in Magicmasters, especially for innocent people like her, who were moved by emotions.

That growth had shown itself during these past two weeks of training for the Tenbram. From what Alus could tell, she’d been unsteady at first, but after facing Theresia, she had undergone considerable growth.

Like she was getting stronger with each passing day.

“I realized that I was much weaker than I thought. That even though I thought I’d worked so hard, I was just depending on my efforts. And I could feel just how scary it is for everything I took for granted to suddenly disappear. So I thought that there is meaning in putting my gratitude into words while I can.”

Her glistening gaze accidentally met with Alus’s eyes.

“I see,” he said. “And you’ll need to be aware that you’re going to become the next head of the family.”

“Yeah, but, you know, I don’t have to do that on my own. Uhm, sure I’ll have to show my abilities as the head of the family and educate myself more in the ways of nobility, but there’s also the method of doing like my mother and marrying someone special and, uhm, protecting the family...”

Tesfia was faltering a lot, but she managed to keep herself from completely failing.

The feverish words wrapped in sweet dreams escaped her lips without her control. Whether consciously or not, when she thought about him as a

candidate, she realized there was no one else but him.

But these were just one-way feelings.

Besides, she knew next to nothing about Alus. Everything she knew about him was since he came to the Institute, and that was only a fragment of him. So if he would accept her self-indulgence, she wanted to know more little by little. She wanted to hear it from his mouth.

His thoughts.

And his past.

Half aware that she was losing her self-restraint, Tesfia still wanted to touch on all of it. It might have been too hard for her to be as devoted as Loki or to gently embrace him like Felinella.

But she felt lonely not knowing anything.

However, while she felt a want, she also felt a sort of resignation. This moment under the moonlight was just a coincidence that had occurred through a miraculous timing. Once time passed, it would end.

And they would return to their usual days of exchanging wisecracks.

But whether he was aware of her feelings or not, once Alus had taken a short break, his hand reached out towards Tesfia. But rather than touching her trembling body, he held her red hair.

"I don't know what you're thinking, but that's the method you wanted to avoid the most. Marriage this and arrangements that. I'm no Aile, but even I think that is out of fashion. Don't worry. As long as you can win the Tenbram, your abilities will be shown. At the same time, you'll be able to protect your family without following any old customs, and I'll help with that."

"...Right."

It wasn't like she'd forgotten. Her engagement to Aile was on the line with this Tenbram. But if she were to one day take a groom...

Tesfia could only picture a single person.

He wasn't just the man she was the closest to and that she'd been with the

longest since enrolling into the Institute. He was also acknowledged by her strict mother. He was also her magic teacher and the current rank 1, standing at the top of all Magicmasters.

Once she became conscious of Alus in that way, his place in her heart felt like it continued to grow bigger and bigger.

Even if she tried to deny it, it felt almost predetermined. In fact, when she imagined anybody else, she felt a pain in her chest.

Perhaps it was unavoidable now that she'd become aware of her position as the next head of the family. Once she imagined a future of walking a path hand in hand with the important man that she truly trusted and cared for...

With him, she felt like she could become a great Magicmaster and protect her family at the same time without the two paths contradicting.

And the most important of all was that Tesfia herself wanted it.

But maybe just learning will do for now, she thought to herself.

Like Alus had said before, he wasn't here for her naive dreams but for his own rational reasons, so perhaps she should just be thankful for the fortune that he was here.

And she shouldn't wish for any more right now.

Actually, Al is just as thickheaded as usual. I mean, that is just like him.

Tesfia sighed. Her face was downcast, her expression hidden by her red hair, making it impossible to see her face...but a smile eventually appeared on her lips.

She then raised her head and brushed away Alus's hand on her head with all the energy she could muster.

"Yeah you're right. It's like I'm cheating using this incident as an excuse."

Alus looked puzzled, failing to grasp the context of a maiden's heart. However, Tesfia ignored it and continued.

"I might have said something strange just now, but don't worry about it! But I have no intention on going back on what I've said. So we'll save that for some

time too,” Tesfia said and grabbed hold of the railing and leaned over it.

Alus reached out by reflex, and this time Tesfia took his hand in her own. With a gleeful expression she sat on the railing.

“I’m not going to fall. I’ve been sitting here since I was a child.”

His hand still reached out, Alus glumly replied, “Do whatever you want. But what are you going to do tomorrow if the worst happens?”

“Hmm, the breeze feels good here... So make sure you don’t let go of me.”

Tesfia dangled her legs like she was on a swing as the night breeze brushed her red hair.

They were holding hands, but Alus didn’t notice that it had more meaning than physical support. Tesfia no longer felt even the slightest bit of anxiety for tomorrow.

While Alus looked at her with suspicion, Tesfia was in high spirits. Her sorrow from before was like a lie, as she felt happiness in this moment.

The two held hands on the moonlit balcony under the stars. As she realized what the warm sensation and the joy it brought meant, the girl transformed into an adult.



When she understood that, the warmth from his hand felt all the more reassuring, and letting go became all the more difficult.

“Al! We’re going to win tomorrow!”

“You only realized that now? More importantly, get down from there already.”

“Then why don’t you bring me down? Huh?”

As Alus audibly clicked his tongue, Tesfia leaned backward and let gravity pull her.

A pair of powerful arms wrapped around her waist in support, and Tesfia accepted them with a slight tremble of joy.

“...Are you drunk?”

“Maybe I am! But don’t say I’m heavy or some other cliché. If you drop tomorrow’s general on the ground, you’ll regret it,” Tesfia said with an unyielding spirit. Then she deliberately closed her eyes and crossed her arms, holding her palms against her chest like Sleeping Beauty. “Good. Maybe you can carry me to my room while you’re at it.”

“There’s a limit to how impudent you can be,” he said. “Fine, it’ll be a special service for just today.”

“Okaaay.”

With that, the secret meeting on the balcony beneath the moonlight came to an end, and carrying the princess for the day, Alus left the balcony behind. He bumped her head on the doorframe on the way out, prompting a yelp of pain, but it was silent beyond that.

The excitement of the next day’s coming decisive battle was wrapped up in the unbroken glory and history that had continued since old. And with that the manor fell into a silent slumber.

Afterword

Long time no see.

Izushiro here.

This time I would like to get right into the story.

Those of you who have read the volume already might have felt unsatisfied with Alus not getting much screen time this time around.

In order to make the Tenbram—which will decide the fate of Aile, Alus, and Tesfia—easier to read, there was much that was changed from the web version. Alus will be taking more of the spotlight in the next volume.

I will be making preparations for your continued enjoyment, so I hope for your support in the long term.

Moving on to the customary words of thanks.

Thank you to everyone involved in the creation of volume 17 of *The Greatest Magicmaster's Retirement Plan*.

Naturally, I would like to thank my editor in charge as well. It feels like nothing ever goes to plan. But that's mostly my fault... I look forward to working with you in the future.

And thank you very much to Miyuki Ruria for the beautiful illustrations despite your busy schedule. I look forward to your work in the next volume too.

Last but not least, I would like to extend my thanks to the many readers who have picked up this book. Let us meet again in volume 18.



THE GREATEST
MAGICMASTER'S
RETIREMENT
PLAN

17



ICICLE SWORD!

Her first move
was the traditional
Fable family spell,
and the speed of
its construction
caused Tesfia's
reaction to be
delayed.

CHARACTER



Loki Leevehl

A beautiful silver-haired girl and Alus's partner. Like Alus, she attends the Magical Institute, but she has a military background and is a very skilled Spotter.



Alus Reigin

The genius rank 1 Magicmaster with an immeasurable special ability. He is affiliated with Alpha and has a tie of obligation to Governor-General Berwick. He is currently a student attending the Second Magical Institute.



Theresia Verdale

A genius Magicmaster and the favored child of the Fable branch family Verdale. She has talents that are said to surpass Tesfia, and her attitude is defiant.



Tesfia Fable

A strong-willed, beautiful girl with characteristic red hair. She is the lone daughter of the great Fable family and a candidate to become the next head of the family. She is an honor student at the Magical Institute, but after a shocking meeting with Alus, she became his student.



Aile von Womruina

The second son of the great Womruina family. He has terrifying potential. He intends to engage with Tesfia through the Tenbram, while also bringing Alus under his thumb.



Frose Fable

The current head of the Fable family and Tesfia's mother. A brave woman who was once feared as a fierce military instructor in the Alpha army. Her attitude has changed a lot due to her growth under Alus's guidance.

Bonus Short Story

Consideration of the Future

After training for the Tenbram, Theresia Verdale returned to her private room and started a call to report what had happened to her father.

“Yes, Father. Yes...the next head of the family couldn’t be made any clearer.”

Theresia bluntly reported to her father via the virtual screen before her. She reported about the mock battle against Tesfia down to the smallest detail, hiding only one thing. Taking her father’s position into consideration, she hid how refreshed she felt despite being defeated.

On the other end of the virtual screen, Gilman looked perplexed. “I see. Then the branch families’ dearest wish will be fulfilled in the best way possible. But there is something I don’t understand.”

His confusion was only natural. Nobody in the branch families had known Tesfia possessed the qualities of the Ertlade, the secret heir. In fact, when she had first started learning magic, Tesfia’s talents had clearly been lower than Theresia’s. While they had never directly competed, from what Gilman had seen and heard, Tesfia didn’t have exceptional talents.

Additionally, he’d heard rumors that the main family had given up on Tesfia’s potential as a Magicmaster. The more gossipy branch families had spoken in disappointment that she would follow the same path as Frose Fable, and there would be no secret heir this generation either. And Theresia’s father had thought the same, and therefore, had the same concerns.

“Yes. I was honestly surprised too, but it is an established fact. It also appears that the head of the family is making preparations to guide Lady Tesfia down the path of the Ertlade. I saw the next stage of Icicle Sword with my very own eyes,” said Theresia.

“Wh-What...?!” Gilman’s eyes shot wide open and he stumbled over his

words.

As the previous head of the family had passed away early, some of the branch families suspected that a portion of the inherited spell had been lost. The fact that neither them nor Frose after them had been able to fully master the inherited spell only further spurred on the rumors.

Very few members of the branch families—only a handful of the oldest—had ever been able to see the completed inherited spell.

Gilman suppressed his surprise and spoke in a calm manner. “Well, it is good to hear that the Fable’s inherited spell hasn’t been lost. If it had, it would have been truly regrettable to see Garb Sheep be given to the military. After all, that was another of our inherited spells.”

In fact, even if it had been for the sake of the military, there were still many critical that secret information had been disclosed. It was seen as a failure of the head of the family and was also a factor in disrupting the family’s leadership.

“But thinking back to it now, the head of the family had seen this when she’d made her decision,” Gilman said.

But Theresia thought differently. Not even Frose would be able to see that far. She also believed that it was true that Frose had given up on Tesfia’s future as a Magicmaster.

But Theresia remained silent, not interrupting her father who was deep in thought. “Theresia, it appears my proposal of offering you up for adoption wasn’t a mistake,” the head of the Verdale family speculated.

And as his child, there were some things that Theresia could guess. Now that he’d upwardly adjusted his appraisal of Frose and Tesfia, Gilman figured that his proof of loyalty and offering up his daughter for adoption had been a good decision.

However, after her mock battle against Tesfia, the children of the branch families gathered to talk, and Theresia had gained further understanding of the others’ thoughts and the atmosphere around them.

At the very least it was clear that they weren’t passionate for the kind of

revival of the Fable family that their parents were planning.

She'd been particularly surprised by Roderich of the Hanbroden family's actions. He'd been surprised by Tesfia's hidden potential, but he'd made it sound like he hoped this moment would make the parents settle down.

On top of that, Lucille was swearing absolute loyalty to Tesfia. Although Theresia was a little disappointed that she was the only one under Gilman's influence to be pointlessly worked up.

Regardless, now that Tesfia had displayed the power and talents as the next head of the family, a sense of relief spread through the families. Theresia herself felt a weight off her shoulders and felt even more strongly about winning the Tenbram than ever.

If Tesfia became the secret heir, the perfect head of the family that everyone had been waiting for would finally have appeared. That would also lead to Fable's influence spreading throughout the Inner World. So that was why the branch families would have to properly support the head of the family.

Theresia had found her new position.

"To be honest, I wasn't sure how to feel when I heard that you had lost after using your full power. I wasn't sure if I should lament my daughter's lack of power or rejoice at the young lady's talents," her father said.

"Heh heh, you did ask over and over after all," Theresia said and smiled, not to the dignified head of the branch family but to her father. "I was made fully aware of how far I still have to go. The young lady has truly become overwhelmingly powerful. The Fable blood really is amazing, Father. In the mock battle against Tesfia, I felt like I could see Lady Canaria inside of the young lady. The strongest ice attribute Magicmaster of the Fable family, whom you spoke of when I was young."

Gilman wore the soft smile of a father as he listened to his daughter's excitement.

"I see, so you'll go that far... Very well, since you have sworn your loyalty, you may do as you please. If a true secret heir has appeared, then our Verdale family has already finished our duties and preparations," Gilman said gravely.

He was tied down by the duties of the branch family and the techniques passed down to him by his brother, so in a sense it was good news. Theresia wasn't the only one who felt a weight off their shoulders.

"Theresia, things are going to get busy in a different way from now on. First is to display the power of the proud Fable family to the Womruinas," he said.

"Yes. Overcoming trials and tribulations will only make the future of the Fable family shine brighter. Nothing about the branch families' role should change in that regard," she said.

"Indeed. You understand your position well. Once the Tenbram has been overcome, I will consult with the head of the family once more to let you learn Garb Sheep. Now that you have sworn loyalty to the young lady, the head of the family won't brush off the Verdale family. Or perhaps she has already seen through as much. In which case, perhaps this request might be seen as unsophisticated...?"

As if to push her father forward, Theresia smiled. "No, I believe it's just as you say, Father. It is a rational method for increasing Fable's political influence."

For further unity and loyalty among the branch families, it made perfect sense to teach them the inherited spells. If they were taught inherited spells outside of the one that served as proof of the secret heir, to prominent branch families it would no doubt serve as a motivating factor for the branch families that had felt ostracized in a way.

"I see, so you think so too."

Gilman was satisfied as if he could see the future.

However, after this incident, Theresia felt something different. That perhaps there was somebody behind Tesfia's sudden growth.

Theresia spoke to her father with a serious expression, and she noticed that his expression was back to that of the head of the family.

"Do you know of the young lady's classmate, Alus Reigin? Apparently he has connections to the military...and it seems that he has played a part in the young lady's growth," she said.

“Hmm, I haven’t heard the name before. As you know, military information rarely reaches Verdale. But he is only a classmate, no? Although I do know that Lady Frose wants the boy to participate in the Tenbram,” he answered.

“About that, I believe that his true powers are far beyond that of my private teachers.”

Theresia had been taught since young by renowned Magicmasters from all over the world.

And she had made her judgment based on her experience.

“Hmm, it doesn’t look like you are joking. Even so, it is hard to believe. If he is the same age as the young lady, there is a limit to how excellent he could be. But if it is the truth, Lady Frose should know more. Thinking about it, bringing in an outsider into such an important Tenbram is suspicious.”

“Father?” Theresia couldn’t help but wonder upon seeing her father carefully thinking things over.

“Theresia, don’t look into him any further for the moment. It might stir up a bigger hornet’s nest than Garb Sheep. I will look into that Alus on my end. You just focus on the Tenbram ahead of you. And take care of the young lady,” he said.

“Yes.” She answered immediately, prompting Gilman to end the call with satisfaction.

Still, just who is he?

The question swirled in an excited Theresia’s mind inside of the quiet room. She recalled the scenery that he had shown her when she had taken such a disrespectful attitude with him.

Even now she couldn’t forget the sight of what was probably an expert-level spell.

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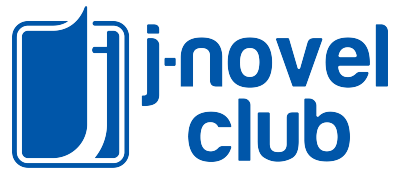
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The Greatest Magicmaster's Retirement Plan: Volume 17

by Izushiro

Translated by Warnis Edited by Heidi Ward

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