

W. Secret 361

Chapter 361: Challenging the Tower I

The arrival of Merlin and Wizard Leo had caused quite a commotion. Wizard Leo smiled at Merlin. “Merlin, look at all the Spell Casters around you. They’re all looking forward to your attempt at the Runic Tower.”

Merlin was naturally clear about the discussions of the Spell Casters around him. However, he also knew that they were not exactly looking forward to him challenging the Runic Tower. Instead, they looked forward to judging the indirect “showdown” between him and Kleis.

Merlin lifted his head and looked at the tall Runic Tower. The competitive spirit started filling his heart too. He did not mind if other people compared him and Kleis. In fact, even he himself wanted to have a real contest with Kleis.

However, ever since Kleis betrayed the Dark Magic Region and defected to Ozmu, he never showed up again. Hence, Merlin also did not have the chance to compete with Kleis, but now with the Runic Tower, he could also indirectly compare himself to Kleis.

“Teacher Leo, I’m going in!”

Merlin muttered to Wizard Leo. Then, he turned around and Wind-type elemental fluctuations started appearing on his body. In the blink of an eye, he flew into the mysterious Runic Tower.

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Upon entering the Runic Tower, Merlin saw three Spell Casters – two males and one female, all seemingly Third-level Spell Casters.

“Swoosh.”

Before he had the time to look at the three Spell Casters closely, Merlin saw them shrouded in white light and disappear from the first floor of the Runic Tower instantaneously.

“They’ve passed the first floor?”

Merlin was surprised. It only took him a moment to realize that the three Wizards had probably passed the first floor of the Runic Tower and had advanced to the second floor.

There were Spell Casters attempting the Runic Tower almost every single day. Even if they failed, they would not die either. They would only be sent out of the Runic Tower, and a certain amount of their contribution points would be deducted.

After all, Great Wizard Fidel’s purpose of building the Runic Tower was not to kill the lower-leveled Spell Casters of the Dark Magic Region but to select the best among them. The aim was to select these individuals to be prioritized for nurturing, especially those who were knowledgeable in runology by granting them some unique and powerful treasures. Hence, even if they fail, they would not die.

Merlin did not waste his time on guessing the three Spell Casters’ intentions. Instead, he went straight to the center of the first floor. There were several vermilion pillars carved with dense mysterious runes.

The life force of these runes was somewhat similar to the life force of the runes on the stone tablets outside the Dark Magic Region. Thus, they should have been engraved by Great Wizard Fidel himself. Even after thousands of years, they still possessed incredible power.

This was the magical power of runes. So far, Merlin had seen many Runic Magic Circles. Besides, he himself possessed a powerful Runic Magic Disc.

However, when it came to the study of runes, no one could ever match Great Wizard Fidel. Any Runic Magic Circles that he simply engraved could actually produce life force, just like black cat Didimoss, the spirit of the Runic Magic Circle in the stone tablet. This was a feat that even a Great Wizard could not achieve.

This was enough to prove how deep Great Wizard Fidel’s research on runology was!

“Hum hum hum.”

Merlin stood in between the vermillion pillars. The mysterious runes on the stone pillars began to flash with glints of white light. These white lights swiftly gathered in mid-air. Slowly, a big black dog appeared.

This big black dog shook its ears. Its gaze looked blank, and it appeared languid. The life force on its body was not strong either. It could even be considered quite weak.

However, what surprised Merlin was that this big black dog had a “lively” life force, which was very similar to the black cat Didimoss in the stone tablet outside the Dark Magic Region.

Merlin retreated a few steps to create a distance between the big black dog. After all, this was the Runic Tower, a tower personally built by Great Wizard Fidel. Even these runes were engraved by Great Wizard Fidel himself. Hence, no one knew how strong this big black dog was, so he needed to be more careful.

The big black dog slowly looked up and glanced at Merlin. It could actually speak, and it said coldly, “I’m the guardian spirit of the first floor of the Runic Tower. Beating me can grant you advancement to the second floor. Those who fail will be sent out of the Runic Tower! Are you clear?”

Merlin nodded and responded, “Clear!”

“Swoosh.”

The big black dog had already started attacking the moment Merlin spoke. It was exceptionally fast. Initially, it looked very lazy, but now, its movements became very agile. Its entire body was covered with mysterious runes, which made its apparent body size seem larger.

The big black dog’s attacking style was very simple. It was rampant but its strength raised some doubts. It was too weak.

“Frozen Space!”

Merlin did not utilize a Pandora Demon Ability. Instead, he directly released a Third-level spell, Frozen Space!

Frozen Space was developed from the basis of the spell, Ice Seal Zone. It could almost form a “space”. Of course, it was not a real space, but a mere tiny, completely frozen place, which was completely encased by ice elements from the top to the bottom of the space.

“Ka-chak.”

The Third-level spell, Frozen Space had both binding power and a certain degree of attacking power. After all, that sub-zero temperature was quite powerful. Once frozen, many low-level spells would not be able to protect against it. With the weak body of a Spell Caster, one simply could not survive the incredibly low temperature.

Of course, the big black dog in front of him was not a Spell Caster. Yet it seemed even more incapable of bearing the coldness. It was frozen by Merlin’s Frozen Space right away. As the ice crystals cracked shortly after, its figure disappeared as well.

“I’ve won? That’s it?”

Merlin was a little stunned. Though it was only the first floor, this seemed way too easy...

“Whoosh.”

After a moment, once again, a big black dog appeared from the mysterious runes on the stone pillars but this time, the big black dog did not attack. Instead, it directly spoke to Merlin, “You’ve passed the first floor of the Runic Tower. However, you shouldn’t be complacent. The first floor of the Runic Tower was only equivalent to a First-level Spell Caster. You’re a Third-level Spell Caster, so beating me doesn’t really mean anything. Your real test is above the fourth floor!”

Only then did it dawn on Merlin that the guardian spirit of the first floor of the Runic Tower was only equivalent to a First-level Spell Caster while the second layer was equivalent to a Second-level Spell Caster. The higher the floor in the Runic Tower, the more powerful the strength of the guardian spirits.

When he reached the fourth level or above, Merlin would face a real test because the guardian spirit of the fourth floor was comparable to a Fourth-level Spell Caster, the fifth floor was comparable to a Fifth-level Spell Caster, and the sixth level to a Sixth-level Spell Caster. As for the final floor, the guardian spirit of the seventh floor would reach the level of a Seventh-level Spell Caster!

Great Wizard Fidel's purpose of building the Runic Tower was to shortlist the true geniuses of the Dark Magic Region, especially geniuses who were adept with runes. Thus, he even allowed up to three Spell Casters to team up and use Runic Magic Discs to attempt the floors.

Even so, it was too difficult for Spell Casters below the Fourth-level to defeat a Seventh-level Spell Caster. It was not surprising that no one in the Dark Magic Region had been able to pass the seventh floor. They could not even get past the sixth floor.

The strongest ones achieved the same thing as Kleis, who had only passed the fifth floor but did not defeat the guardian spirit of the sixth floor.

"Alright, to the second floor then."

After the big black dog had finished talking, its figure dissipated instantly. Then, a white light immediately emerged from the vermilion pillar and enveloped Merlin.

"Swoosh."

When Merlin's figure appeared again, he had reached the second floor of the Runic Tower!

There were also a few vermilion pillars on the second floor. Merlin had already familiarized himself with the environment in the Runic Tower, so he immediately stood in between the vermilion pillars. Very soon, the mysterious runes condensed the guardian spirit of the second floor in the form of a fat squirrel.

This fat squirrel had a horrific tail which swept over with lightning speed. It was very difficult to dodge it.

However, this hit could not hurt Merlin at all.

Shortly after, Merlin casually cast a Third-level spell which easily defeated the guardian spirit of the second floor. He continued to the third floor of the Runic Tower.

The guardian spirit of the third floor was a scary white spider. This white spider could spit out tough white silk. There was also an odd smell on the spider silk. Catching a whiff of this would immediately paralyze the opponent.

However, it was easy to deal with this spider. Merlin directly used Fiery Collapse, incinerating the spider into ashes effortlessly, thus defeating the guardian spirit of the third floor.

Next, Merlin smoothly advanced to the fourth floor of the Runic Tower. This time, Merlin met the three Spell Casters he saw on the first floor again.

The three Spell Casters were all fighting the guardian spirit of the fourth floor – a strong giant black wolf.

This giant black wolf was extremely fast, and its body was tough. It could even withstand the usual Fourth-level spells multiple times. Only by continuously attacking a certain area on the body could the giant wolf be harmed.

Merlin watched the three Spell Casters battle from the side. The three Spell Casters were actually Four-Elemental Spell Casters. Besides, the spells they built were quite impressive. Hence, even if they faced the giant black wolf alone, they could still triumph in the battle.

These three Spell Casters might not be as brilliant as the genius Kleis, but they could absolutely be deemed exquisite. In a small spell casters' organization such as the Dark Magic Region especially, they were definitely target individuals focused for training.

Nevertheless, such three bright Spell Casters had teamed up together. Hence, they obviously desired to beat the fifth floor of the Runic Tower or even the sixth floor!

“Boom.”

Finally, the three Spell Casters cast spells altogether. One restrained the giant black wolf while the other two Spell Casters seized the opportunity to cast offensive spells madly, instantly defeating the giant black wolf.

“We’ve finally passed the fourth floor... However, this was just the beginning of our test. Let’s go to the fifth floor!”

The three Spell Casters seemed to be headed by Wizard Envia. They looked at Merlin, desperation revealed in their expressions. Then, a white light shrouded them and their figures disappeared.

Merlin frowned and glanced above him. He was able to come to the conclusion that if they did not have any special moves, the fifth floor would surely be the limit of these three Spell Casters. It would be virtually impossible for them to pass the fifth floor!

“My turn!”

Merlin looked at the few vermilion columns, but a relaxed smile etched on his face. Perhaps, for an average Third-level Spell Caster, facing the guardian spirit of the fourth floor was already the start of a real challenge since it was comparable to a Fourth-level Spell Caster.

However, for Merlin, the fourth or even the fifth floor was no different from the first three floors that Merlin had passed!

“Whoosh.”

Merlin quickly stood in the between the stone pillars. Slowly, the white light emitted by the mysterious runes quickly gathered in mid-air.

Gradually, the figure of a giant black wolf appeared!

Chapter 362: Challenging the Tower II

The giant black wolf was the guardian spirit of the fourth floor. It was comparable to a Fourth-level Spell Caster. Though the three Spell Casters earlier could have defeated the giant black wolf alone, it still looked rather difficult. It took them quite some time to defeat it.

Moments ago, Merlin also watched their attempt at the side. Hence, he had now grasped the giant black wolf’s characteristics. It was fast and had a strong defense. Even if it was attacked by a Fourth-level spell, it could still take it. It was quite a tricky opponent for a typical Third-level or even Fourth-level Spell Caster.

“Quick speed? Strong defense?”

Merlin grinned. These characteristics of the giant black wolf could almost entirely be restrained by him. On speed, Merlin had Flash Wind, which was incredibly fast. On defensive power, Merlin had Pandora Demon Ability, Fuse Earth, which was incorporated into spells. It was capable of withstanding the attack of a Sixth-level spell.

“Swoosh.”

The giant black wolf turned into a black ray of light and charged toward Merlin. Merlin gently extended his finger, and in between his fair-skinned fingers were traces of white fire.

“Chi-”

Merlin flicked his finger. A white flame spurred out and swiftly spread out, turning into a fist-sized fireball.

“Boom!”

The fireball smashed into the giant black wolf. The giant black wolf did not even have time to react as it was engulfed by the flame right away. Its figure collapsed instantaneously in the scorching high temperature.

“Too weak!”

Merlin shook his head lightly. Perhaps for an average Spell Caster, the real test truly began on the fourth floor of the Runic Tower because only at the fourth level would the guardian spirit be comparable to a Fourth-level Spell Caster. Besides, the Third-level was the highest level for a Spell Caster who could enter the Runic Tower.

Starting from the fourth floor, it would basically be a cross-level challenge for Spell Casters. Thus, it could be deemed as a real test!

Nevertheless, Merlin was not any average Spell Caster, so the fourth floor was not really a challenge for him.

“Next should be the fifth floor!”

Merlin's entire body was covered in white light and he disappeared instantly.

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On the fifth floor, the three Spell Casters – Wizard Sarah, Wizard Envia, and Wizard Ilman were staring at the few stone pillars in front of them with serious expressions.

Wizard Envia even looked back and glanced downward. He said with a deep voice, "We have to hurry up. I didn't expect Merlin to be so quick. He has almost caught up with us. We must defeat the guardian spirit of the fifth floor as fast as possible!"

None of them were able to pass the fifth floor of the Runic Tower. They still felt that it would be a tricky task even though they were united now.

Their only hope was the Kleinman Runic Magic Disc that Wizard Envia had acquired by paying a huge price. The three of them were considered among the most talented in runology in the entire Dark Magic Region. They were Spell Casters who studied runes profoundly.

It was precisely because of this that these three had activated such a complex Runic Magic Circle like Kleinman Runic Magic Circle as this was their only hope. It was an asset which they relied on for their challenge on the Runic Tower this time.

In the most glorious era of Spell Casters, Runic Magic Circles were not weaker than Pandora Demon Abilities. The only downside was that studying runology required the sacrifice of time and energy. Therefore, many Spell Casters simply chose to cultivate Pandora Demon Abilities rather than studying runology.

Now was an era where Spell Casters were declining, so runology became even more reclusive. Spell Casters who were proficient in runes were even rarer. The Dark Magic Region had always specialized in runology, so that was why there could be some Spell Casters who were outstanding in runology.

These three were undoubtedly among the few in the Dark Magic Region who had excellent talent in runology. Otherwise, if it were other people, even if they had gotten the Kleinman Runic Magic Disc, they would not be able to activate it either.

Seeing the nervous look on Wizard Envia's face, Wizard Ilman seemed to be very calm and relaxed instead. "Wizard Envia, be rest assured that the giant black wolf on the fourth floor isn't easy to defeat. Even if Merlin is really a genius like Kleis, it'd still take him a lot of effort to deal with the giant black wolf. We have plenty of time to challenge the fifth floor!"

Wizard Envia also nodded slightly. He too knew that the giant black wolf on the fourth floor was not so easy to defeat as it took the three of them a long time to pass that floor.

Nonetheless, he said cautiously, "Anyway, we still have to hurry up and don't take things lightly! We should begin. Let's first incorporate our respective Mind Power into the Kleinman Runic Magic Circle and make all the necessary preparations. When the guardian spirit of the fifth floor appears, we'll immediately activate the Runic Magic Disc. We shall combine all three of our Mind Power and activate the Kleinman Runic Magic Circle to kill the guardian spirit of the fifth floor!"

As their voices landed, a round disc which emitted white light appeared in the hands of Wizard Envia. There were mysterious runes engraved on the round disc.

This was the Kleinman Runic Magic Circle. It was extremely precious and was obtained by Wizard Envia at a great cost. It required at least three Spell Casters skilled in runology to successfully activate it.

Once the Runic Magic Disc was mobilized, the Kleinman Runic Magic Circle, which had already been set up in the Runic Magic Disc, could be activated to unleash unparalleled power.

Seeing the Kleinman Runic Magic Disc, envious looks appeared in the eyes of Wizard Sarah and Wizard Ilman. A Runic Magic Disc like this was very precious. As a spell casters' organization that specialized in runology, the Dark Magic Region would naturally have such a Runic Magic Disc in the Resource Tower. They even had Runic Magic Discs which were more powerful than the Kleinman Runic Magic Disc.

However, the price of those Runic Magic Discs was expensive beyond imagination. Any Runic Magic Disc like that would cost thousands of contribution points. It was way too expensive, even for those Fourth-level or higher-leveled Spell Casters.

Even the Kleinman Runic Magic Disc obtained by Wizard Envia was not exchanged from the Resource Tower, but gotten from the outside through some special methods.

The only reason why Wizard Envia had such a huge fortune to purchase this Runic Magic Circle was because he was born in a powerful Spell Caster clan. As for Wizard Sarah and Wizard Ilman, they could only secretly envy him.

“Hurry up and put your Mind Power into the Runic Magic Disc...”

Wizard Envia hushed them in a deep tone.

Wizard Sarah and Wizard Ilman had gotten a little impatient too. Though they had simulated this before, it was merely a simulation. Wizard Envia would never simply take out such a precious Runic Magic Disc for them to try. Only when it was really needed would they be allowed to engrave their Mind Power into the Runic Magic Disc.

“Swoosh.”

Suddenly, a white light flashed through the fifth floor. Wizard Envia and the others immediately noticed the change. They stared at this white light which suddenly appeared.

Soon, a black-robed figure slowly emerged from the white light.

Seeing this figure, the expressions of Wizard Envia and the others changed instantly.

“How can he be so fast? How can the guardian spirit on the fourth floor be defeated so quickly?”

“He actually made it to the fifth floor. I initially thought that the fourth floor would delay Merlin but I didn’t expect that Merlin will reach the fifth floor in the blink of an eye. It seems that the giant black wolf on the fourth floor didn’t cause Merlin any trouble at all.”

Wizard Ilman, who had just vowed that Merlin would spend some time on the fourth floor, looked extremely embarrassed. Yet, at this moment, there was none who noticed his embarrassment. There was only a strong urgency in Wizard Envia’s mind.

“Quick, engrave your Mind Power into the Runic Magic Disc. Merlin was stronger than we thought. We can’t let him break into the sixth floor before us!”

Wizard Envia urged immediately. Hence, Wizard Sarah and Wizard Ilman also recovered their senses and immediately mobilized their Mind Power and engraved a trace of it into the Runic Magic Disc.

“Hum hum hum.”

Suddenly, the Runic Magic Disc in the hands of Wizard Envia erupted with a dazzling ray of light. Mysterious runes appeared in mid-air in succession, which then flew to the outer bodies of the Spell Casters. It was like a layer of armor, shielding the three in the mysterious runes.

After finishing this, Wizard Envia and the other two did not hold back. They immediately leaped in between the few vermilion pillars and began to face the guardian spirit of the fifth floor.

Merlin, who had just arrived on the fifth floor, frowned slightly. He had an inexplicable feeling. He sensed a faint hostility from the looks of Wizard Envia’s trio.

Merlin remembered very clearly that he did not know the three at all, so how could they be hostile to him? It was indeed puzzling!

However, when he saw Wizard Envia and the others rushing into the vermilion column and begin challenging the guardian spirit of the fifth floor, Merlin faintly understood why.

It turned out that these three people were afraid that he would pass the fifth floor first, and even pass the sixth floor before them. After all, after a millennium since the establishment of the Dark Magic Region, no one had been able to pass the sixth floor. Therefore, there were still treasures personally left by the Great Wizard Fidel on the sixth floor.

At the thought of this, Merlin also shook his head rather helplessly. This kind of “hostility” was really inexplicable. In his opinion, the trio was not really strong in terms of strength. The fifth floor was already their limit. It was already very difficult to get through the fifth floor, let alone the sixth floor.

Thus, Merlin was not worried at all. Instead, he squinted slightly and stood aside, closely watching the battle between the three and the guardian spirit of the fifth floor.

Merlin might be strong but after reaching the fifth floor of the Runic Tower, he also had to be more cautious. The guardian spirits assigned by Great Wizard Fidel would be stronger on each floor, so he could afford to be complacent.

“Splash!”

Just like the sound of water, when Wizard Envia and the rest stood in between the vermilion pillars, all the stone pillars began exuding dense white lights. These white lights gathered together like a small stream, eventually merging to become an ocean!

In the dense white light, there was vaguely a “fierce” life force, which had never appeared in the first to fourth floors of the Runic Tower.

“Roar!”

Suddenly, in the glaring white light, accompanied by dense Runic Magic Circles, a frightening roar resounded in the fifth floor of the Runic Tower.

Chapter 363: The Fifth Floor

“This... Is this...?”

Wizard Envia felt a huge pressure. He felt breathless from head to toe. There was obviously a vast difference from the first four floors.

The white light gradually dissipated. A three-headed gray grizzly bear appeared in mid-air. It was not how big the gray grizzly bear was and how terrifying its ferocity was, but the layer of encircling dense runes on the gray grizzly bear.

The runes flew out from the vermilion pillars. They served the function of enhancing the strength of the guardian spirit. Just from its ferocity alone, this gray grizzly bear was significantly more powerful than the guardian spirit of the fourth floor.

Besides, it had the protection of the layer of runes, which made it even trickier to deal with.

“Sure enough, starting from the fifth floor, the guardian spirit’s strength had changed overwhelmingly!”

Merlin’s eyes widened in disbelief. The guardian spirit of the fifth floor had actually made him feel a little threatened. This showed that it was highly likely that the gray grizzly bear could hurt Merlin.

Merlin’s current strength was comparable to a Spell Caster at the peak of the Sixth-level, but now, he actually felt threatened by the guardian spirit of the fifth floor. It was sufficient to prove that the guardian spirit of the fifth floor was extraordinary.

The fifth floor was truly a real test of the Runic Tower! It was not surprising that in the millennium-long history, there were very few who could get past the fifth floor.

Wizard Envia and the other two Wizards looked at each other and then whispered, “Don’t be afraid, everyone. If the Kleinman Runic Magic Circle is operated correctly, its powers could even rival that of a Sixth-level Spell Caster. The three of us have studied extensively on runology, so we can surely exert most power of the Kleinman Runic Magic Circle. We could at least attain the power of a peak Fifth-level spell. We’ll surely pass the fifth floor!”

As the voice fell, Wizard Envia took the lead and rushed toward the gray grizzly bear. The Kleinman Runic Magic Disc in his hand gave off a dazzling flash, and a large number of runes began to augment unto his body. His life force swiftly became stronger.

At the same time, Wizard Sarah and Wizard Ilman also looked at each other and acted together.

The Kleinman Runic Magic Circle originally needed at least three people to unleash its power. Since the three of them also had a profound study in runology, they could unleash most of the power of the Kleinman Runic Magic Circle and reach the stage where they could rival a Fifth-level Spell Caster.

“Boom!”

A series of lightning suddenly appeared. Just like a heavy downpour, they slammed onto the gray grizzly bear in the air. The Kleinman Runic Magic Circle was a purely offensive Runic Magic Circle. If its greatest power could be exerted, it could even kill a Sixth-level Spell Caster.

However, with the powers of Wizard Envia and the other two Wizards, they could only unleash a part of the power of the Kleinman Runic Magic Circle. Even so, they could still match the peak of a Fifth-level Spell Caster.

“Zap!”

Bolts of thunder and lightning struck the gray grizzly bear successively. However, the mysterious runes on the gray grizzly bear’s body acted like real armor robes, blocking the thunderbolts. The continuous lightning attack could not bring any harm to the gray grizzly bear.

“Again!”

Wizard Envia gritted his teeth. Initially, he was full of confidence as he had paid a huge price in exchange for the Kleinman Runic Magic Disc in order to pass the sixth floor and obtain the treasures left by Great Wizard Fidel.

Yet, he was actually stopped on the fifth floor now. How could Wizard Envia accept this?

“Hum hum hum.”

Both Wizard Ilman and Wizard Sarah whom Wizard Envia had sought were among the most proficient in runes who were below the Fourth-level in the entire Dark Magic Region. Only by joining forces with them could he barely manage to activate the Kleinman Runic Magic Circle and exert part of the power of the Runic Magic Circle.

As the three desperately tried to activate the Runic Magic Circle, several huge runes which glinted with white illumination finally emerged vaguely from the Kleinman Runic Magic Disc.

As soon as these runes appeared, the finger-thick lightning which filled the sky disappeared. Replaced with lightning bolts as thick as an arm which constantly spewed electric currents. It looked extremely daunting.

Seeing these huge lightning bolts, joy flashed across Wizard Envia’s face. He said deeply, “The strongest attack of the Kleinman Runic Magic Circle – Kleinman Thunder, kill!”

The Kleinman Runic Magic Circle was named after Kleinman, a great Spell Caster. Rumor had it that Kleinman Thunder could be activated by at most eighteen Thunder-type Great Wizards. Of course, these Great Wizards must be proficient in runes.

With eighteen Great Wizards operating the Kleinman Runic Magic Circle together, it could unleash the strongest power of the Kleinman Runic Magic Circle. That power would faintly be capable of competing against a Legendary Wizard.

Anyhow, this was only a myth. Legendary Wizards were great Spell Casters who condensed Maxims and mastered the Essence of Elements. Even the most powerful spells must also comply with Maxims and be suppressed by the power of Maxims.

Therefore, Spell Casters below the Legendary status would never trump Legendary Spell Casters no matter how powerful they were. Even in the most glorious era of Spell Casters, there were never stories of people who could kill Legendary Wizards without achieving the Legendary status!

Although there had been word about how it was only necessary to gather eighteen Thunder-type Wizards proficient in runes to counter a Legendary Wizard by relying on the power of the Runic Magic Circle, it was still only a myth.

The only thing that it proved was that the Kleinman Runic Magic Circle was indeed extraordinary.

The Kleinman Runic Magic Disc in the hands of Wizard Envia had shrunk significantly after continuous use. So of course, its power had also been reduced by countless times. Even so, when that huge Kleinman Thunder appeared, it still sent cold shivers down everyone's spines.

"Boom!"

Kleinman Thunder, which was as thick as an arm, flashed ferociously like dazzling lightning. In an instant, it bombarded the gray grizzly bear in the air.

The deafening rumble, coupled with dazzling electric flashes had made it extremely difficult to see the situation inside.

Merlin also was somewhat astonished by the combined power of the three, which was unleashed along with the Runic Magic Circle.

These three were clearly only Third-level Spell Casters. Though they were high-achievers in the Dark Magic Region, it was highly likely that they would become Fourth-level Spell Casters and build towers by themselves.

However, these three did not have Pandora Demon Abilities, and they had no powerful casting tools either. By relying on a Runic Magic Disc alone, they were able to instantly exert power at the peak of a Fifth-level Spell Caster. It also made Merlin have a deeper fear toward runology.

In the most glorious era of Spell Casters, even a weak Spell Caster could annihilate high-leveled Spell Casters just by mastering powerful runes.

Runology and spell construction, as well as Pandora Demon Abilities, were at the same level. The only thing was that to this day, there were too few Spell Casters who understood runology.

After all, runology was not like Pandora Demon Ability, which only required some treasures for successful cultivation, thus unleashing unparalleled power. Runology required the sacrifice of a lot of time and energy to study profoundly so that one could grasp the surface of it. As for proficiency, there must be an excellent inheritance, coupled with an extraordinary talent toward runology. Then only could one become a great Rune Wizard.

It was just like Merlin. He had a Runic Magic Disc in his possession but he was not proficient in runes, so he was not able to activate the Runic Magic Disc. Even the Seventh-level Spell Caster, Wizard Bammou, who was already a high-leveled Spell Caster, could not operate the Runic Magic Disc due to his lack of proficiency in runology.

For someone not proficient in runes, even the possession of a powerful Runic Magic Disc would not do anything to help improve the person's strength. Perhaps this was one of the reasons why runology kept on declining.

Of course, Runic Magic Circle was just one of the many types among the endlessly vast rune methodologies. It was merely one of the more widely used types as there were many other applications of runes.

Like the guardian spirits in the Runic Tower, they were clearly born from complex Runic Magic Circles, but they each had a life force. It was also similar to the spirit of Runic Magic Circle, the black cat Didimoss in the stone tablet. It had a life force and was very magical.

These were just a few aspects which runes were applied. Life could be created out of nothingness. It was something which even Legendary Wizards could not achieve. However, by being proficient in runology, and by attaining the same level as Great Wizard Fidel back then, life could be created from nothingness.

Great Wizard Fidel left this Runic Tower with the purpose of finding gifted Spell Casters, especially those who were skilled in runology. It was as such that he allowed at most three Spell Casters to combine forces and set up powerful Runic Magic Circles.

At present, Wizard Envia's trio had used the Runic Magic Disc to trigger the power of the Kleinman Runic Magic Circle in the Runic Magic Disc. It was so that they could fight the gray grizzly bear, the guardian spirit of the fifth floor.

The thick Kleinman Thunder gave out flashes of silky yellow light, enveloping the huge body of the gray grizzly bear. Only the continuous sounds of "zap" could be heard. No one could see clearly what had happened inside.

"Roar!"

Suddenly, a loud roar rang out. The violent shockwave surprised Wizard Envia and the others and drained the color from their faces.

Along with the buzzing sound, the electric light which shrouded the gray grizzly bear also collapsed gradually, finally revealing the gray grizzly bear's body.

At this time, the gray grizzly bear was still very energetic. Moreover, the mysterious rune armor on its body seemed to have diminished. Its illumination seemed to have dulled down a little, so obviously, it was the result of Kleinman Thunder which Wizard Envia had pulled off.

Nevertheless, it only smashed a part of the runes that protected the gray grizzly bear as it did not suffer any damage at all.

"How can it be unscathed? How could it have failed?"

"Failed, completely failed. Even Kleinman Thunder couldn't kill the guardian spirit. We're completely defeated..."

“We’ve really underestimated the Runic Tower...”

Wizard Envia and the others’ expressions turned pale. They had disappointment written all over their faces. They thought that with the help of the Kleinman Runic Magic Disc, and by activating the Runic Magic Circle with their joint forces, they would easily pass the fifth floor, and even stand a chance at passing the sixth floor.

However, the current situation had given them a deep understanding of why there were very few Spell Casters who had been able to pass the fifth floor throughout the thousand-year-long history of the Dark Magic Region.

If the guardian spirit of the fifth floor was comparable to an ordinary Fifth-level Spell Caster then the trio would have defeated it. However, it was far from being as simple as that!

Chapter 364: Indirect Showdown

“Swoosh.”

The guardian spirit of the fifth floor of the Runic Tower quickly turned into a ray of gray light. Its speed was even faster than the giant black wolf on the fourth floor. In no time, it reached Wizard Envia and the other two Wizards in the blink of an eye.

“Snap.”

The gray grizzly bear lifted its giant paw and slapped forcefully. The mysterious runes which were originally on the gray grizzly bear’s body surface instantly converged into the gray grizzly bear’s giant paw. The power of that slap suddenly turned incredibly violent.

“Ka-chak.”

The Kleinman Runic Magic Circle cracked in an instant. A few tiny cracks appeared on it, and it then shattered completely.

Without the Kleinman Runic Magic Disc, Wizard Envia's trio did not have the slightest resistance. If they were to be slapped by the gray grizzly bear, they would disappear out of the Runic Tower in an instant.

Merlin frowned. He watched the gray grizzly bear's every move from the side and finally discovered the real reason why it became so terrifying.

This gray grizzly bear indeed only had the strength of a Fifth-level Spell Caster. However, it could withstand Kleinman Thunder because it relied on the dense mysterious runes attached to its body surface.

These mysterious runes seemed to be able to both attack and defend. Once they were needed to block a powerful attack, these runes would gather to exert powerful defensive features.

If the protection of these mysterious runes could not be broken and annihilated with a smashing hit, it would then become a battle of attrition. This was because the mysterious runes could continuously resist the attacks.

Moreover, if the Spell Caster challenging the tower lost focus, the gray grizzly bear would launch an attack. At the moment of the attack, the mysterious runes would once again condense together, instantly increasing the gray grizzly bear's offensive power.

This was the real reason why the guardian spirit of the fifth floor was so powerful. The guardian spirits below the fifth floor did not have the ability to harness the power of runes. In other words, it was the Great Wizard Fidel who did not grant the guardian spirits below the fifth floor the ability to utilize the power of runes.

Wizard Envia and his team had lost, but they were not beaten without good reason. After all, how many talented Spell Casters had there been throughout the existence of the Dark Magic Region for thousands of years? How could anyone not try using a Runic Magic Disc before this?

Yet, they all failed, and they could not pass the fifth floor. There were only a few people, the real freaky geniuses who had passed the fifth floor.

Merlin also knew that Envia and the others did not die, but was sent out of the Runic Tower. After all, the real purpose of Great Wizard Fidel who left the Runic Tower was to search for genius Spell Casters, especially those who were good in runology. Hence, he would naturally not let the Spell Casters who challenged the tower to simply perish.

“My turn then!”

Merlin took a deep breath and then walked into the middle of the vermillion pillars with determination, ready to face the guardian spirit of the fifth floor!

...

Outside the Runic Tower, many Spell Casters were watching the changes in the Runic Tower.

Although the specific scene inside the Runic Tower could not be from the outside, as long as someone advanced to one of the floors, then the tower on that level would have a burst of dazzling light.

At this time, the fifth floor of the Runic Tower was still shining brightly, which symbolized that there were two groups of people who were attempting the fifth floor.

“Swoosh.”

Suddenly, one of the two lights rapidly went off, leaving only one bright light. This meant that someone had failed to pass the fifth floor.

“Who has failed? Is it Wizard Merlin?”

“The fifth floor is very difficult. That was the real test. In recent decades, only Kleis has passed the fifth floor.”

These Spell Casters knew the difficulty of the Runic Tower. The fifth floor was the real test. Even the look of Wizard Leo had become serious.

“Buzz buzz buzz.”

Three rays of light emerged outside the Runic Tower. Immediately after, three gloomy-looking Spell Casters gradually walked out of the light. They were Wizard Envia, Wizard Sarah, and Wizard Ilman!

The three Spell Casters did not pass the fifth floor and were directly sent out of the Runic Tower.

They looked back at the Runic Tower, and there were indescribable expressions on their faces, especially Wizard Envia. He had paid a huge price to obtain the Kleinman Runic Magic Disc.

Now, not only had they not been able to pass the fifth floor, even the Kleinman Runic Magic Disc had been destroyed. Such a huge price, even if he was a valued individual in the clan, it would unfortunately still be hard to come to terms with it.

“Wizard Envia, let’s go. This Runic Tower is indeed not that easy to challenge.”

Wizard Ilman was also very confident before this, but now, the harsh truth laid in front of his very eyes. He had to admit that even with the help of a Runic Magic Circle, it would still be extremely difficult for them to pass the fifth floor.

Besides, even if they had passed the fifth floor, there would still be a more difficult sixth floor. If they had only passed the fifth floor, there would be no substantial gain. Only after passing the sixth floor would they obtain the treasures left by Great Wizard Fidel.

Wizard Envia shook his head gently and said gloomily, “There’s no need to hurry. We haven’t been able to pass the fifth floor, so let’s see if this Wizard Merlin could get past it?”

“Merlin?”

Wizard Ilman was slightly shocked too. Thereafter, he glanced around at the Spell Casters surrounding them. He did not know when did such a large crowd of Spell Casters came to this originally deserted Runic Tower. They all looked up at the Runic Tower enthusiastically.

At this time, only the fifth floor of the Runic Tower was lit. That was to say, only Merlin was inside the tower challenging it. These Wizards had come after hearing news of this. They heard that the recent hotshot, Wizard Merlin, was challenging the Runic Tower.

“They all came because of Merlin, but actually, they just wanted to see the indirect showdown between Merlin and Kleis. Previously, Kleis had passed the fifth floor of the Runic Tower!”

Wizard Sarah did not leave either as her beautiful pair of eyes also focused on the fifth floor of the Runic Tower.

Just as Wizard Envia and others had decided to stick around and check out how Merlin would turn out, the many Spell Casters around also saw clearly the faces of the three Wizards. Merlin was not there, and they could not help but breathe a sigh of relief.

They all knew that Merlin was still on the fifth floor of the Runic Tower, perhaps fighting the guardian spirit of the fifth floor currently.

“I wonder if Wizard Merlin can pass the fifth floor?”

“Wizard Merlin was now in the limelight. He had caused a bigger commotion than Kleis did back then. One was a Five-Elemental Spell Caster while the other a Six-Elemental Spell Caster. Both were freaky geniuses. If the two were to battle, it would be truly exhilarating!”

“Though this isn’t a real duel, this indirect showdown is good too. Just wait and see, there should be a result very soon.”

As Wizard Sarah had suspected, the real reason so many Spell Casters came to the Runic Tower was to see the indirect showdown between the two geniuses – Merlin and Kleis.

...

Merlin stood in the middle of several vermilion pillars. Gradually, a ray of light was emitted from the vermilion pillars. These lights quickly gathered, and the gray grizzly bear reappeared again.

Right after that, dense mysterious runes flew out of the vermilion pillars again. Like a fine large net, it attached to the surface of the gray grizzly bear’s body.

Merlin’s eyes narrowed. He knew that the true greatness of the guardian spirit of the fifth floor was these mysterious runes, which were inscribed by Great Wizard Fidel himself back then.

Merlin was now more and more aware of the prowess and mysteriousness of Great Wizard Fidel. He had also met a Great Wizard in Kurdmansla Islands previously. In addition, from Merlin’s point of view, the power of Great Wizards seemed to not be all that powerful.

Nevertheless, only until now had Merlin gradually learned that Great Wizards were also differentiated into many kinds – there were strong ones and weak ones. Just like that Great Wizard on Kurdmansla Islands, he was at best a beginner Great Wizard, the weakest among Great Wizards.

Great Wizard Sterling of the Sterling House should also belong to the category of beginner Great Wizards.

The founder of the Dark Spirit Region, the Great Wizard Fidel, was very proficient in runology, up until a point where it was beyond imagination. Any Runic Magic Circles that he simply engraved could also give life. This kind of Great Wizard should be at the peak level among Great Wizards.

Perhaps he was not as good as a Legend, but in certain areas, such a Great Wizard deserved the respect of even great Legends!

This was the case with Great Wizard Fidel. His proficiency in runology could even make Legendary Wizards feel inferior. He could be considered a powerful Wizard with profound knowledge in runology.

Hence, the Runic Magic Circle left by Great Wizard Fidel was able to protect the entire Dark Magic Region even until now. Moreover, the Runic Tower that he had built was even more magical. These guardian spirits were truly immortal beings. As long as the Runic Magic Circle was not destroyed, even if these guardian spirits die many deaths, they could still be swiftly reborn.

A thousand years' time was not able to incur any change on these guardian spirits. It was evident how masterful Great Wizard Fidel was in runology.

Merlin knew that these vermilion columns should be the foundation of these guardian spirits. If these vermilion pillars were destroyed, the guardian spirit in the Runic Tower would naturally vanish.

However, there were clear rules in the Runic Tower. No matter what the reason, it was not allowed to attack the vermilion pillars. Otherwise, there would be serious consequences.

“Roar!”

Finally, the gray grizzly bear which was in mid-air let out a loud roar and fiercely charged toward Merlin.

Merlin's Mind Power was shaken slightly. This gray grizzly bear's roar was able to shake his Mind Power. Fortunately, he had already braced himself, so he was not really affected.

If he wanted to defeat the gray grizzly bear, he must deal a smashing blow and directly destroy the mysterious runes on the surface of its body along with it. Only then would the gray grizzly bear be harmed.

Merlin took a deep breath. From top to bottom, white flames abruptly exuded from his entire body. This was Merlin's strongest attack currently. The illusion of Darkness-type spells had absolutely no effect at all on these guardian spirits.

Thus, he could only use his strongest offensive spell to defeat it completely!

"Condensed Fire!"

Merlin gently reached out the palm of his hand. From his palm, bursts of fireballs suddenly emerged, floating in the air calmly.

Only a Spell Caster who was proficient in Fire-type spells would know that these few small fireballs had been compressed for who knew how long. The flames contained would make even those Sixth-level Spell Casters shudder!

"Strike!"

A hint of madness also flashed across Merlin's eyes. Then, he reached out a finger and pointed. A few tiny white fireballs quivered slightly and flew straight ahead...

Chapter 365: Entering the Sixth Floor

"Hiss hiss hiss."

A series of fireballs slammed rapidly one after another into the gray grizzly bear. It formed a tall white flame that surpassed the height of a man, completely engulfing the gray grizzly bear.

It was Merlin's Third-level spell, Condensed Fire. At a glance, the fireballs might seem small in size but in actual fact, the flames contained within were tightly compressed and hence immensely powerful. Once a fireball is released, it would explode with unparalleled power.

Fiery Collapse which was infused into his spell would also be amplified following the increase in spell power. Therefore, Merlin's Condensed Fire had already achieved the peak of a Sixth-level spell.

Despite the magical runic protection possessed by the gray grizzly bear, this was a level gap that could not be compensated for. Once Merlin's Fiery Collapse completely engulfed the gray grizzly bear, the frightening high temperatures could destroy the armor as easily as snapping a twig. In just a few moments, the runic armor on the gray grizzly bear had been burned to ashes.

In order to defeat the gray grizzly bear, a Spell Caster must first and foremost be able to break through the runic protection on the bear's body. Merlin's Fiery Collapse had far exceeded the limits of the runes. Therefore, at the exact moment that the runes collapsed, the gray grizzly bear's figure also disappeared and reverted into the white twinkling stars on the vermilion pillars.

"Phew..."

Merlin breathed a sigh of relief. Finally, he had conquered the fifth floor. Although he had been relatively confident that he would be able to break through the fifth floor, he was very relieved to have actually succeeded.

Soon, another gray grizzly bear coalesced again between the vermilion pillars. This bear, however, could converse in the human language. The gray grizzly bear gave Merlin an assessing look. "Good job! It has been so many years since someone managed to break through the fifth floor! You can rest here for a moment, then you can choose whether to continue or to leave."

"Leave? I can still leave?"

Merlin was startled. He had never heard that it was possible to leave the Runic Tower so easily.

The gray grizzly bear smiled. “Of course, you can leave. It’s just that as long as you’re inside the Runic Tower, there’s no mortal danger to your life. Even if you’re defeated by the guardian spirits, you’ll just be removed from the Runic Tower. Therefore, naturally, very few people would choose to leave the Runic Tower.”

Merlin nodded in understanding. The Runic Tower was used by the Great Wizard Fidel to select excellent Spell Casters within the Dark Magic Region, especially Spell Casters who excelled in runology. It was one of the main areas of interest to the Great Wizard Fidel.

He had even allowed three Spell Casters to attempt the challenges within Runic Tower together, which implied that it was acceptable to combine strengths to conjure a Runic Circle in order to conquer the tower.

Moreover, a failure in conquering the tower would not result in death. Instead, the challenger would merely be ejected out of the Runic Tower without any injury, like Wizard Envira and his team. Once they were hit by the gray grizzly bear, their bodies were instantaneously wrapped in a white ray of light. Merlin guessed that they must have been ejected from the Runic Tower in that manner.

Thinking along those lines, Merlin said, “Since there’s no harm even if I’m defeated, of course, I’ll continue the quest.”

The gray grizzly bear nodded its head. It was normal for all Spell Casters to choose to continue even if they did not know what enemy was lying ahead. After all, they would not suffer any bodily harm as long as they were inside the tower and would also be able to witness for themselves the powers of the guardian spirits on the sixth floor.

“You can also choose to rest for a moment before continuing.”

The gray grizzly bear appeared to be slightly “human-like” as it reminded Merlin to rest longer on the fifth floor.

However, Merlin’s Fiery Collapse did not consume much Magic Power. With the amount of Magic Power accumulated in the Spell Model within his Awareness, he could easily battle another few more hours at least.

Thus, Merlin shook his head. “I’m fine, just send me to the sixth floor please.”

The gray grizzly bear did not insist any further. With a slight wave of its enormous paw, a white light appeared and wrapped around Merlin. In the blink of an eye, he disappeared.

...

Outside the Runic Tower, numerous Spell Caster was staring unblinkingly at the fifth floor. For the longest time, however, there was no change in the ray of light on the fifth floor. It did not ascend to the sixth floor, but neither did it snuff out.

“Did he meet a tricky situation?”

The formidable Wizard Leo muttered quietly under his breath. He had never challenged the Runic Tower even though he had relatively high confidence regarding his accomplishments in runology. However, when he first joined the Dark Magic Region, his goal was dead set on becoming a Fourth-level or higher Spell Caster. As a result, he did not spare a single thought for other matters.

When he finally became a Fourth-level Spell Caster and constructed the Wizard Tower, he was no longer eligible to challenge the Runic Tower. This was one of Wizard Leo’s biggest regret.

Right now, Merlin finally made it to the Runic Tower; and even better, he had advanced all the way to the fifth floor at lightning speed. His accomplishment attracted much speculation on the upcoming indirect showdown between him and Wizard Kleis, making Wizard Leo feel quite pleased.

Even though Wizard Leo did not know Merlin’s current situation, he was not overly concerned since there was no danger inside the Runic Tower.

“Hum hum.”

Suddenly, the light ray on the Runic Tower began to flash brightly as though it would disappear at any time. If the ray of light on the fifth floor vanished, then it would mean that Merlin had failed to conquer the tower.

However, the ray of light on the fifth floor flashed for a moment then immediately ascended to the sixth floor, illuminating the sixth floor of the Runic Tower!

This caused a large stir among all the Spell Casters!

“The sixth floor, finally someone made it to the sixth floor!”

“Wizard Merlin truly is a Six-Elemental Spell Caster, he’s just as powerful as Kleis back then. Even though this is Merlin’s first time conquering the Runic Tower, he has already managed to get to the sixth floor.”

“Throughout the past thousands of years’ within the Dark Magic Region, very few had managed to even reach the sixth floor. To date, no one has managed to defeat the sixth floor. Even back then, Kleis was only able to break through the fifth floor! Now I’m looking forward to the indirect showdown between Wizard Merlin and Wizard Kleis!”

Seeing that the sixth floor of the Runic Tower lit up, everyone knew what it meant. It meant that Merlin had successfully defeated the fifth floor and progressed to the sixth floor of the Runic Tower.

Merlin’s ability as a Six-Elemental Spell Caster was more brilliant than Kleis, who was a Five-Elemental Spell Caster. Nevertheless, ever since Merlin captured the attention of the Dark Magic Region, he had not been able to escape being constantly compared to Kleis.

As long as Merlin was mentioned in any conversation, Kleis would also be mentioned. Many Spell Casters, including those high-level Seventh-level Spell Casters, were extremely interested in witnessing the showdown between Merlin and Kleis.

Right now, the crowd would finally be able to witness the “showdown” between Merlin and Kleis.

“Wizard Envia, Merlin actually managed to conquer the fifth floor! I cannot believe that we’re hoping to confront Kleis and kill him in order to claim the immense reward from the Dark Magic Region. It looks to me now that our powers are no match for Kleis. Is Kleis truly that formidable?”

Wizard Ilman could not help but whisper. He was initially very confident in his abilities as he was one of the more gifted Spell Casters in the Dark Magic Region.

They had never had much contact with Kleis prior to this. Both Kleis and Merlin were similar where they often went missing for long periods of time, and no one really knew what they were doing.

Now that Kleis had betrayed the Dark Magic Region to join Ozmu, the Dark Magic Region had put an extravagant price on his head. Any Fourth-level Spell Caster and below who was able to kill Kleis would be able to claim the huge reward.

Wizard Ilman had even planned in his head that if he ever bumped into Kleis, he would take the opportunity to kill him and claim the immense reward for himself.

Earlier inside the tower, Ilman had combined powers with Wizard Sarah and Wizard Envia to cast a large Runic Circle in order to defeat the guardian spirits on the fifth floor of the Runic Tower but still, they did not succeed. Therefore, it implied that their powers paled greatly in comparison to Kleis who had managed to break through to the sixth floor without a sweat!

The gap in their abilities was too blatant. If they had really bumped into Kleis, they would be facing their own doom.

Wizard Envia and Wizard Sarah were thinking along the same lines. The three of them were considered the cream of the crop in the Dark Magic Region with the potential to advance beyond Fourth-level Spell Casters. With their combined power of the Runic Circle, they had been extremely confident of their abilities, to the point that they believed they could kill Kleis.

Nevertheless, they had failed to even break through the fifth level. Now, they realized that Kleis was far more formidable than they had anticipated.

“Let’s wait and see whether Merlin can break through the sixth floor.”

Unconsciously, Wizard Envia’s tone toward the mention of Merlin warmed up considerably than before.

...

“Swoosh.”

Merlin slowly opened his eyes and found that he was in a completely unfamiliar place. This must be the sixth floor of the Runic Tower.

However, the sixth floor no longer had the red stone pillars. Instead, the entire place was filled with dense runes in every nook and corner. Entering the sixth level, Merlin could vaguely sense that the spells within his Awareness were almost eager to move.

It was a wonderful feeling like there was an external force guiding these spells. More accurately, it was guiding the Spell Model in Merlin's Awareness.

"What on earth is happening?"

Merlin immediately heightened his guard. The sixth floor of the Runic Tower was simply too weird, vastly different from the first five floors. He did not dare lose focus. After all, for the past thousands of years, no one in the Dark Magic Region had been able to break through the sixth floor.

Among the challengers included Kleis, the most prominent genius the Dark Magic Region had seen for the last hundreds of years! Back when it was Kleis' first time challenging the Runic Tower, it was also a walk in the park for him until he reached the sixth floor.

However, his conquest ended prematurely on the sixth floor, and he did not manage to proceed further.

Therefore, Merlin was extremely vigilant toward the sixth floor of the Runic Tower, not allowing his focus to waver even for a moment.

"Hum."

Suddenly, the entire room shook lightly. At the same time, the mysterious runes started to gather together and take form. Under the watchful eye of Merlin, a familiar figure slowly emerged...

Chapter 366: Overlapping Runic Magic Circles

The figure was draped in a golden robe. His build was tall and slender with long golden hair casually scattered behind his head. Handsome features adorned his face, but the most prominent feature of all was the pair of deep, thoughtful eyes that looked as if they contained bottomless wisdom.

Under the continuous gathering and melding of runes, a solid figure began to take shape. This figure would not be unfamiliar to any Spell Caster in the Dark Magic Region. It was the creator of the Dark Magic Region, the Great Wizard Fidel!

As the creator of the Dark Magic Region, statues of the Great Wizard Fidel could be found everywhere in the Dark Magic Region. Therefore, Merlin was extremely familiar with his appearance. When the mysterious runes on the sixth floor began to take shape as the Great Wizard Fidel, Merlin could recognize him immediately.

“Ah, lucky Spell Caster! Very well then, I’m the guardian spirit of the sixth floor of the Runic Tower. You can call me Wizard Effidel!”

In the ancient Moltan language, the “ef-” prefix used in Effidel denoted something that was imaginary or fake. The guardian spirit on the sixth floor must have been a playful character. Not only did he assume the effigy of the Great Wizard Fidel but also gave himself a funny name.

Seeing the confusion on Merlin’s face, Wizard Effidel grinned. “Oh, it wasn’t the Great Wizard Fidel who made me like this. Actually, the guardian spirits can choose whatever forms we want to manifest ourselves into. Since I’m very grateful to the Great Wizard Fidel for creating me and allowing me to experience this wonderful world, I assumed his appearance and faithfully guard the sixth floor of the Runic Tower.”

Wizard Effidel was very peculiar indeed. It seemed that the guardian spirit had developed a complete conscience, just like Didimoss, the black cat inside the stone plaque of the Dark Magic Region.

However, Merlin was not interested in the peculiarities of this guardian spirit. He asked, “Wizard Effidel, if I want to pass the sixth floor, do I have to defeat you?”

“Defeat me? No, no, you’re mistaken. In order to conquer the sixth floor, you don’t have to defeat the guardian spirit. In fact, I don’t even have any fighting skills in me. The challenge on the sixth floor of the Runic Tower is very simple. All you have to do is break open that big door.”

Wizard Effidel pointed toward a big square door in front of them.

“Really? All I have to do is break open that door?”

Merlin was doubtful. How could the sixth floor challenge be so simple? If it was so simple, then how was it that no one, including Kleis, would be unable to get through the sixth floor?

Wizard Effidel's figure vanished and reappeared in a flash in front of the square door. He pointed his finger at the dense runes covering the doorway. "Of course, it's not easy to break open this door. The door is protected by five layers of Runic Magic Circles that was personally engraved by the Great Wizard Fidel, layer after layer. These overlapping Runic Magic Circles are the most difficult among all the Runic Magic Circles. You must've attained a requisite command of runes to be able to crack these five-layer overlapping Runic Magic Circles!"

Sure enough, breaking open the door was not as easy as it appeared. Judging from the complicated Runic Magic Circles personally engraved by the Great Wizard Fidel on the door, only a Spell Caster who was highly proficient in runes would be able to break through it.

At this point, Merlin had completely understood the Great Wizard Fidel's intentions. His real purpose for leaving behind the Runic Tower was to find a genius Spell Caster who excelled in runes.

Moreover, Merlin could also guess that the treasures contained on the sixth and seventh floor would surely be closely-tied to runes. Thus, Spell Casters who were proficient in runes would derive immeasurable benefits from those treasures.

Wizard Effidel continued. "Not long ago, a young Spell Caster by the name of Kleis was very good. He, too, managed to enter the sixth floor, and his knowledge of runes was quite remarkable. Unfortunately, he was just one step short. He was only able to crack the first four layers of runes, but not the final layer. Otherwise, he would have succeeded in conquering the sixth floor and progressed to the seventh floor! Oh, by the way, no one has been able to claim any of the treasures on the sixth floor yet. Behind this door is where the treasures are kept, so if you can crack the five-layered Runic Magic Circles on the door, then you can open it and receive a treasure left behind by the Great Wizard Fidel."

"Kleis? He has already betrayed the Dark Magic Region and joined Ozmu!"

Merlin's eye twitched slightly. He did not expect that Kleis was only one step short of solving the five-layered Runic Magic Circles and conquering the sixth floor. Kleis was not only talented in constructing Spell Models but also had considerable talents in runology, alchemy, potions, and other areas.

Compared to Kleis, Merlin felt inadequate. Besides possessing the Matrix and the ability to construct Spell Models, Merlin's other abilities were still subpar compared to Kleis.

It was not without good reason that Kleis was hailed to be one of the most talented Spell Casters that the Dark Magic Region had seen in hundreds of years.

“What? Kleis betrayed the Dark Magic Region and joined Ozmu?! That's such a pity... He was a good lad, and I even nurtured him like a seedling. I was hoping that after a few years, he would gain a deeper understanding of runology and come back to challenge the Runic Tower again. Who knew that he would actually end up joining Ozmu...”

The look on Wizard Effidel's face was extremely expressive, just like a normal human being. If not for the fact that Merlin had seen him being shaped out of runes, he might have even thought that Wizard Effidel was a real human Spell Caster.

Merlin ignored Effidel and headed toward the big square door. He laid both hands on the door and pushed gently. True enough, the door did not budge. Bearing in mind that Merlin had practiced the four mysterious relief sculptures, so even a heavy stone door would be easily pushed open.

However, this square door did not budge even the slightest, proving that it would be difficult to rely on physical strength to open it.

Unfortunately, since Merlin only had a very rudimentary understanding of runology, it would be next to impossible for him to crack the overlapping Runic Magic Circles that were personally engraved by the Great Wizard Fidel.

“No matter what, I still have to try!”

Merlin placed his hands on the door again. Immediately, rows of mysterious-looking runes began to appear on the door. He could see that the runes were extremely special and complex, also known as the legendary overlapping Runic Magic Circles.

The arrangement of the overlapping Runic Magic Circles was extremely complicated and required extreme caution, otherwise, the Runic Magic Circles would collapse and cannot be rebuilt.

Overlapping Runic Magic Circles were commonly used as a test subject to gauge the knowledge of Rune Masters in runology, so it was truly amazing that the Great Wizard Fidel was able to lay down five consecutive layers of overlapping Runic Magic Circles!

Merlin did not understand runes at all. Despite spending a long time groping at the door blindly, he still had no idea how to crack the Runic Magic Circles. Therefore, he decided to go back to basics – break them using brute force!

Even if he failed to break the Runic Magic Circles by force, the worst that could happen was only for him to be ejected from the tower.

Thinking along those lines, Merlin decided to cast Perfect Armor to protect his entire body.

First of all, Merlin tentatively released a small wisp of his white Fiery Collapse. Immediately, the fire traveled toward the door and slammed into the Runic Magic Circles.

“Crack.”

Exceeding Merlin’s expectations, the first layer Runic Magic Circle broke easily upon impact. However, the spell was blocked by the second layer.

At the same time, the second layer Runic Magic Circle rebounded Merlin’s Fiery Collapse back at him. Fortunately, Merlin was protected by Perfect Armor, and the amount of fire he released was relatively small, so it did not cause any damage.

Nevertheless, this attempt gave Merlin a fresh glimmer of hope. It showed that the Runic Magic Circle was actually capable of being broken by force.

“Forcibly breaking the Runic Magic Circles?”

Wizard Effidel frowned slightly as he watched Merlin’s destructive attempts. Within his long existence, he did encounter a few unorthodox Spell Casters who had tried to break the Runic Magic Circles on the door using physical force.

Perhaps the Great Wizard Fidel had already anticipated this to happen back then, thus there was another special feature of the Runic Magic Circles. As long as the spells did not break the Runic Magic Circle, it would be bounced back to the Spell Caster with equal force.

Therefore, most Spell Casters who tried to break the Runic Magic Circles by force were usually “defeated” by their own spells in the end.

“Lucky Spell Caster, it’s completely impossible to crack the Runic Magic Circle by force. There have been Spell Casters who tried what you’re planning to do, but all of them ended in failure...”

However, nothing Wizard Effidel said was getting through to Merlin. Once he discovered the possibility of breaking the Runic Magic Circle by force, the cogs in his head were turning at full speed as new ideas began to appear.

Judging by the strength of the first layer Runic Magic Circle, the defensive powers of the five-layered Runic Magic Circles were surprisingly strong. Moreover, any spell that failed to break the Runic Magic Circle would be rebounded toward the Spell Caster and inflict harm on the Spell Caster himself.

Merlin hoped to avoid this type of damage as much as possible. Otherwise, even though the spirit guardians did not harm him, he might end up getting killed by his own spells instead. After all, his own actions were separate from the Runic Tower.

If Merlin was actually “killed” by one of these spells, he would become the laughing stock of the entire Dark Magic Region.

“Alright, I’ll just increase the power a little bit at a time. Even though it would consume more time and Magic Power, I cannot afford to act too hastily. Hopefully, my Perfect Armor would be able to withstand the rebounded spells!”

Merlin clenched his teeth and sealed his determination.

“Whoosh.”

Another burst of white flames flew toward the square, rune-covered door. This time, Merlin had increased the power of the Fiery Collapsed slightly, so the flames’ power and speed were also increased.

“Crack.”

The second layer Runic Magic Circle was broken upon impact, but the flames of Fiery Collapse were stopped by the third layer Runic Magic Circle and came hurtling back toward Merlin, setting Perfect Armor ablaze.

Fortunately, Perfect Armor was still capable of resisting this level of attack, only that it consumed his Magic Power faster than usual.

Merlin increased the power of Fiery Collapse again and subsequently managed to break the third layer Runic Magic Circle. However, he encountered difficulties with the fourth layer, forcing him to release all his Pandora Demon Abilities.

“Condensed Fire!”

Finally, pale white fireballs appeared beside Merlin. This was the strongest spell Merlin had under his belt, which was infused with Fiery Collapse, thus it was capable of breaking even some Sixth-level defensive spells.

“Hiss hiss hiss.”

With a swish of Merlin’s robes, instantly a few pale white fireballs began flying toward the big square door. Upon hitting the fourth layer Runic Magic Circle, there was a suspense-filled pause; followed by the fireballs carving their flight path further inside toward the fifth layer Runic Magic Circle.

Back during Kleis’ attempt, he had been stumped by the fifth layer Runic Magic Circle. Since he was unable to crack it, he had no choice but to leave the Runic Tower.

This time, it was Merlin’s turn to challenge the fifth layer Runic Magic Circle. It was from this moment onward that really counted as the indirect showdown between Kleis and Merlin!

Chapter 367: Ultimate Limit of the Sixth-Level!

“Hiss hiss.”

The fifth layer of the overlapping Runic Magic Circles intertwined with the flames from Merlin’s Condensed Fire. Both were comparable in power, so neither could triumph over the other. Right now, Merlin had put all his power into Condensed Fire, so it was already almost at the peak of a Sixth-level spell.

However, it was still not enough. The fifth and final layer of the overlapping Runic Magic Circles did not give any indication of yielding and even managed to rebound a few fireballs of Condensed Fire at Merlin.

“Crack.”

Merlin’s Perfect Armor finally cracked apart due to the force of his own spells. Sure enough, even Perfect Armor was unable to withstand the attack of Condensed Fire.

Fortunately, Merlin was very familiar with Condensed Fire and kept the Flame Maxim active in his Awareness, so any Flame-type spell surrounding him would be suppressed. Therefore, he only suffered minor shocks to his body. Since his body was strong and powerful, those minor shocks were negligible.

“Sure enough, it hasn’t broken!”

Merlin’s face sank slightly. He ignored the minor injuries on his body and glared fiercely at the final Runic Magic Circle on the square door. It was still unbroken.

Wizard Effidel approached him slowly with a smile on his face. “Young Spell Caster, you should feel lucky enough. I definitely didn’t expect that you were hiding such a powerful Pandora Demon Ability. The Runic Magic Circles left behind by the Great Wizard Fidel have almost been broken by you!

“I’ll tell you honestly then. Forcibly breaking these five layers of overlapping Runic Magic Circles will need powers that exceed the peak of a Sixth-level spell. Although your Pandora Demon Ability is very strong, you can only reach the peak of a Sixth-level spell at best, so it will not be sufficient to break the fifth layer Runic Magic Circle!”

As the guardian spirit of the sixth floor, Wizard Effidel was naturally well-versed with the obstacle.

“Powers that exceed the peak of a Sixth-level spell?”

Merlin mumbled under his breath. Powers that exceeded the peak of a Sixth-level spell might sound similar to a Seventh-level spell, but Merlin knew that they were not the same.

Beyond the peak, there was something known as the “ultimate limit”. However, the ultimate limit was not easily achieved by all Spell Casters. Most Spell Casters could only construct spells up to the peak of the Sixth-level. In order to achieve the ultimate limit, the constructed spell must be able to incorporate elements such as Pandora Demon Ability, Enhancement casting tools or even mysterious runes.

“No matter what, I still have to try!”

Merlin narrowed his gaze as he affixed his stare at the final layer of Runic Magic Circle on the square door. A terrifying aura started to rise around his body and surrounded him.

“Oh? Don’t tell me that he’s actually capable of powers that exceed the peak of the Sixth-level?”

Wizard Effidel was somewhat taken aback. Powers that exceeded the peak of the Sixth-level was notoriously difficult to achieve, not to mention that Merlin was merely a Third-level Spell Caster. Even a true Sixth-level Spell Caster would rarely possess the amount of power required to exceed beyond the peak and reach the ultimate limit.

Therefore, it was extremely difficult, to the point of unthinkable, for a Spell Caster to reach the ultimate limit. It would require a Spell Caster to successfully combine multiple aspects and elements in order to possess powers exceeding the peak of the Sixth-level. In other words, to exceed the peak powers of the Sixth-level was even more difficult than being promoted to a Seventh-level Spell Caster.

“If he actually ends up breaking the entire Runic Magic Circles by force, then what should I do? Should I let him progress to the seventh floor or is it counted as a defeat? Sigh, this quandary is giving me a headache. Why didn’t the Great Wizard Fidel anticipate that a situation like this might happen?”

The internal conflict within Wizard Effidel was of course not felt by Merlin. At this time, his focus was wholly concentrated on mobilizing the Fire-type Magic Power inside his body.

The Third-level spell, Condensed Fire which was infused with Collapse Fire might only possess the peak power of the Sixth-level, but after every three spells, there was a window of opportunity for him to cast a stronger, enhanced version of the spell.

Despite this opportunity, Merlin had never used it. This was because very few had been able to withstand the attack of Collapse Fire, so there was no reason for Merlin to use the stronger, enhanced spell.

However, the situation was different now. If Merlin failed to break the final Runic Magic Circle on the square door, then his tower conquest would be considered a failure. His conquest would end on the sixth floor, exactly like Kleis.

Faintly in his heart, Merlin too, had a desire to compare himself with Kleis. Therefore, he had a strong desire to surpass the sixth floor and enter the seventh floor of the Runic Tower. At least then, he would be the first Spell Caster to set foot on the seventh floor of the Runic Tower!

Nonetheless, even Merlin himself was not entirely confident whether he possessed enough power to exceed the peak and reach the ultimate limit of the Sixth-level.

“Condensed Fire!”

Around Merlin, strong raging flames began to rise and burn ferociously. The pale white flames appeared exceptionally terrifying, especially the small fireball floating between his hands. The fireball appeared to be continuously absorbing the surrounding flames into its small body.

This was the enhanced version of Merlin’s Condensed Fire. He could clearly feel that the fireball in his hands had been compressed tightly to its limit.

The composition of Condensed Fire was basically made up of a continuous compression of flames. The more flame power it compressed, the more powerful the resulting explosion would be. The ordinary Condensed Fire released by Merlin also contained compressed flames, but he could feel that their compression had not reached their limits.

Now that Merlin had used the enhanced version of Condensed Fire for the first time, he discovered that there was a limit to the amount of compression that could go into the spell. Only when the flames had been compressed to its limit, then its power could be maximized.

Therefore, it would be wise not to be easily fooled by the small fireball which was floating in front of Merlin. Even though its size was smaller than Condensed Fire, the power contained inside was even stronger than ten ordinary Condensed Fire combined.

“Go!”

Merlin locked his gaze and used his Mind Power to guide the path of Condensed Fire. With a small hum, it transformed into a sharp ray of white light and flew toward the Runic Magic Circle on the square door.

“Boom!”

The small fireball slammed violently against the big door, especially on the final remaining layer of the Runic Magic Circle. Mysterious runes began to rapidly float in front of the Runic Magic Circle in a futile effort to subdue the pale white flames.

However, the small fireball that Merlin had released with all his might packed a truly powerful punch that could not be subdued by these runes. In an instant, a fire erupted and engulfed the entire square door.

From the outside, Merlin could no longer see what was happening clearly. All he could see was a strong raging wall of flames burning ferociously before him. He used his Mind Power to check the Runic Magic Circle on the door.

“Crack.”

Suddenly, a crisp loud noise sounded on the square door. Merlin’s face instantly changed, and he heaved a long breath of relief as if releasing a huge burden.

“It’s finally broken. The power that exceeds the peak, the ultimate limit... It turns out that I have already possessed the ultimate power limit of a Sixth-level Spell Caster!”

Merlin laughed in glee. He had managed to break the Runic Magic Circles by force and defeated the challenge on the sixth floor! He would be progressing to the seventh floor, so he had won the indirect showdown with Kleis!

“You... You’ve actually broken the Runic Magic Circle? Powers that exceed the peak of Sixth-level – that’s the ultimate limit of a Sixth-level spell!”

Beside him, Wizard Effidel’s eyes and mouth were wide-open, a stunned look displayed on his face.

Wizard Effidel was conflicted. If Merlin broke the Runic Magic Circles by force, would his victory still be considered a victory? Did he conquer the challenge of the sixth floor?

According to the rules of the Runic Tower, it would be acceptable to award the conquest to Merlin. However, according to the original intentions of the Great Wizard Fidel, the Runic Tower was meant to select Spell Casters who were proficient in runes to continue his legacy. Therefore, Merlin’s actions of breaking the Runic Magic Circle by force did not comply with his rules, so it should not be regarded as conquering the sixth floor. This question posed a dilemma for Wizard Effidel.

Seeing that Wizard Effidel’s expression was torn, Merlin’s heart sank a little. In a low voice, he whispered, “Wizard Effidel, what’s the matter? I’ve conquered the sixth floor. Please open the door to the treasure chest.”

Merlin knew that the square door was fully controlled by Wizard Effidel. Only after the guardian spirit had determined that Merlin had succeeded in conquering the sixth floor, then he would open the door and allow Merlin to receive one of the treasures left by the Great Wizard Fidel.

Upon Merlin’s urging, Wizard Effidel gritted his teeth fiercely. “Fine, I don’t care anymore. I’m the guardian spirit around here. According to the rules, as long as someone manages to break through the sixth floor regardless of the method used, I must open the treasure chest door and let him claim his treasure.”

Merlin had succeeded in cracking the five-layered Runic Magic Circles, but it was done via forceful destruction rather than a deep understanding of runes. This went against the original intentions of the Great Wizard Fidel.

Regardless, he did in fact, defeat all five layers of Runic Magic Circles, so it was in line with the challenge set by the Runic Tower. Therefore, as the guardian spirit, Wizard Effidel could not help but acknowledge that Merlin had conquered the sixth floor.

With that in mind, a smile appeared on Wizard Effidel's face. "Congratulations, young Spell Caster. You're the first Wizard in the Dark Magic Region to conquer the sixth floor. Hence, you can choose a treasure on the sixth floor! Do remember, however, that you can only pick one item."

"Rumble."

Subsequently, with a wave of Wizard Effidel's hand, the big square door slowly rose up.

Merlin was staring intently behind the door. According to Wizard Effidel, there was more than one piece of treasure on the sixth floor that was left behind by the Great Wizard Fidel. Even though he knew that he could only choose one, it would be enough to attract the envy of many Spell Casters.

After all, any treasure left behind by the greatest rune master would not be ordinary. Therefore, Merlin's heart was brimming with anticipation.

Chapter 368: The Golden Relief Sculpture

The square door opened slowly, revealing a small cabin. The cabin looked exceptionally delicate and contained a few expensive-looking glass cabinets.

Inside the transparent glass cabinet, there were treasures. Among them, Merlin could see a Runic Magic Disc the size of a washbasin. After all, the Great Wizard Fidel was a master of runes, and the Runic Tower had been built to nurture genius Spell Casters who excelled in runes.

This Runic Magic Disc was extremely invaluable as it was handcrafted by the Great Wizard Fidel himself. It would not be found even in the Resource Tower.

Besides the Runic Magic Disc, there were also some precious Runic Magic Circles that, if arranged correctly, were capable of killing even a Seventh-level Spell Caster!

Of course, the foremost requirement to achieve that goal was to be able to arrange the Runic Magic Circles correctly and also possessed a proficient grasp of manipulating runic spells. Back in the golden age of Spell Casters, it was not unheard of to kill Seventh-level Spell Casters or above using Runic Magic Circles.

On the other hand, nowadays, the study of runology was close to none, and the standards of Spell Casters had dropped significantly. Consequently, all Seventh-level Spell Casters and above were heralded as the untouchable elites. If any of them died, it would shock the entire Spell Caster world.

Other than the Runic Magic Disc and Runic Magic Circle, sitting on the topmost shelf was a very old and quaint book, its spine held together by bits of string. The book was so old that even its pages had turned yellowish over the long period of time.

“This is the handwritten notes of the Great Wizard Fidel. It contains some of his discoveries on runology and can be considered quite profound. This notebook is the most precious item among all the treasures on the sixth floor!”

Seeing the hesitation in Merlin’s eyes, Wizard Effidel started explaining to him.

It turned out that this book which had yellowed with age and held together with bits of string was actually the Great Wizard Fidel’s personal notes, which was truly rare and precious. Even though the Great Wizard Fidel also left behind a few of his notes in the Dark Magic Region, they were not accessible by the average Spell Casters and were extremely few in numbers.

These notes would be priceless to Spell Casters who were involved in the study of runology because the other items such as the Runic Magic Disc and the Runic Magic Circle would only increase their powers for a short time.

With the Great Wizard Fidel’s notes, it was akin to being personally guided by the Great Wizard in runology. Obviously, to Spell Casters who were proficient in runes, such guidance would be more precious than any other treasure.

However, the precious Runic Magic Disc, the powerful Runic Magic Circle, the almost-unrefusable notes belonging to the Great Wizard Fidel... All of them were invaluable to Spell Casters who were proficient in runes but were not very useful to Merlin. He already had a Runic Magic Disc, but since he was not proficient in runes, he had not even been able to use it at all.

Seeing that these few treasures were closely linked to runes, Merlin immediately lost interest.

“Are these all the treasure there is? They’re all related to runes, so they’re not very useful to me...”

Merlin was slightly disappointed, even though he knew that it was to be expected. After all, the main purpose of the Runic Tower was to nurture Spell Casters in the Dark Magic Region who were highly involved in the study of runology. Thus, it was not surprising that the treasures inside were highly related to runes.

Perhaps even the Great Wizard Fidel did not anticipate that there would one day be a Spell Caster below the Fourth-level who could release the ultimate limit power of the Sixth-level. Even back in the most golden age of Spell Casters, it was rare to come across a one-in-a-million Demonic genius.

However, the appearance of a Spell Caster like Merlin threw a wrench into things. Exceeding all expectations, a Third-level Spell Caster had managed to break the five-layered overlapping Runic Magic Circle by force. Right now, Merlin was dissatisfied with the treasure he found on the sixth floor.

“So, have you chosen which treasure you would like to keep?”

Wizard Effidel smiled good-naturedly. If he were to guess, Merlin would either choose the Runic Magic Disc or the notes belonging to the Great Wizard Fidel. After all, these two were the most practical gifts among all the other treasures.

The former would immediately heighten the Spell Caster’s power for a short period of time whereas the latter would be equivalent to receiving personal guidance from a great rune master. Regardless of which one Merlin chose, both treasures were incredibly precious.

Merlin shook his head discreetly. He understood Wizard Effidel’s intention, so he walked further into the small cabin and began to search the transparent glass cabinet carefully.

There were quite a number of treasures within the small cabin. However, they were mostly related to runology, which Merlin glossed over as they were of no use to him.

There were also some Enhancing casting tools that were engraved with runes. These items could be activated using Mind Power and did not require any runic knowledge.

Nevertheless, these Enhancing Casting Tools were all Defence-type tools and were only marginally better than the robe that he was already wearing. If he really could not find anything he liked, Merlin would much rather choose the Runic Magic Disc compared to these Enhancing casting tools.

At least with the Runic Magic Disc, if he could find a Spell Caster who was proficient in runes, then it could potentially be put to good use.

“Oh? What is this?”

Suddenly, in one of the corners of the glass cabinet, Merlin spotted a plain-looking glass cage. Inside, there was a shiny pale golden sculpture.

The carving of the sculpture was extraordinarily unique, and it also piqued a sense of déjà vu in Merlin.

The sculpture not only gave him an inexplicable sense of familiarity but upon closer inspection, it also roused a sense of curiosity in him.

“Wait a minute, this sculpture...”

Merlin’s heart skipped a beat and he immediately extracted four relief sculptures from his ring. Judging by their color and carving styles, these four relief sculptures were completely different from the golden sculpture inside the glass cage.

The only similarity between these items was that persistent sense of curiosity that they roused. Moreover, although the posture of these sculptures might appear different to a casual observer, Merlin could see a special link between the postures of the four relief sculptures and the golden sculpture.

Maybe, just maybe, they came from the same origin!

“Hum hum hum.”

True enough, Merlin’s guess was proved the next moment when he removed the four relief sculptures. The four relief sculptures began to vibrate gently and there was a reciprocal reaction from the golden sculpture, which also began to vibrate.

It was now blatantly obvious that the golden relief sculpture and the four relief sculptures came from the same origin.

“The fifth relief sculpture!”

Merlin was overjoyed. It appeared that he had somehow managed to stumble upon an accidental prize from his Runic Tower challenge. He had not expected to find the fifth relief sculpture to add to his collection.

Merlin had approached Wizard Banmou about the origin of the mysterious relief sculptures before, but he seemed to have not heard of it before. It seemed like the strange postures could help to continuously strengthen a person’s body.

Thereafter, Merlin did not continue to investigate the matter because he thought that he would not be able to find other relief sculptures anymore. Who would have guessed that he would find one of it in the Runic Tower?

Although this golden relief sculpture was relegated to a small corner of the cabinet, Merlin was sure that any item placed on the sixth floor was considered a treasure by the Great Wizard Fidel.

Among these treasures included the golden relief sculpture, though it was uncertain if the Great Wizard Fidel actually knew its secrets.

“Wizard Effidel, I’ve chosen my treasure. I want this golden sculpture!”

Merlin pointed at the golden sculpture.

Behind him, Wizard Effidel’s expression was doubtful. “Are you sure you want this treasure? You can still change your mind. Are you sure you don’t want the Runic Magic Disc or the notes of the Great Wizard Fidel?”

“No thank you, I’m choosing this treasure!”

Merlin shook his head adamantly.

Wizard Effidel could only respond helplessly. “I don’t even know what this is, but since the Great Wizard Fidel treated it as a treasure, I’m sure it must have its value.”

Despite being the guardian spirit of the sixth floor, Wizard Effidel was not knowledgeable about everything within it. At the very least, he did not know that was the purpose and use of the golden sculpture.

However, according to the rules set by the Great Wizard Fidel, as long as someone succeeded in conquering the floor, he had the right to choose a treasure. Therefore, he gently waved his hand and grabbed the golden relief sculpture in his hand, lifting it from the Runic Magic Circle that was guarding it.

“Here you go, take the treasure that you deserve!”

Effidel handed the golden relief sculpture to Merlin. Upon receiving the golden relief sculpture, Merlin could hardly hide the joy and excitement on his face.

This was the fifth relief sculpture that he received. Moreover, this golden relief sculpture was visibly different from the four relief sculptures before. Perhaps with some additional practice, the strange postures too would see a mysterious change.

Previously, Merlin had thought that the mysterious relief sculptures might have originated from the Molta Empire. He also thought that they might have been common items back in the day, at least among the Spell Caster circles.

However, seeing that the Great Wizard Fidel treated it as a treasure, even with only one sculpture; for the first time, Merlin started to wonder if these mysterious relief sculptures had a more interesting origin.

“Okay, since the treasure is already chosen, it’s time for you to choose whether you would like to continue with the conquest?”

Wizard Effidel said slowly with a small smile.

Merlin kept the golden relief sculpture into his ring. Practicing the posture on the relief sculpture was not something that could be accomplished in an hour or two. When he practiced with the four relief sculptures in the past, it took him quite a long time. Although he still did not know how difficult the posture on the fifth relief sculpture would be, he was sure it would not be easy.

“Of course, I’ll continue! This is the seventh floor of the Runic Tower. Even if I end up failing the challenge, I still want to see how strange the final floor is!”

No one in the Dark Magic Region had broken through to the seventh floor before. Therefore naturally, no one knew what challenge it held. Right now, though, Merlin finally had the chance.

“As you wish!”

Wizard Effidel’s voice was calm. Following that, he gently pointed at Merlin and a white light surrounded his entire body. With a flash, Merlin’s figure disappeared completely from the sixth floor...

Chapter 369: The Seventh Floor!

Outside the Runic Tower, all the Spell Casters were looking on nervously, including Wizard Leo. Those with stronger Mind Powers even extended their powers into the Runic Tower.

After all, in the history of over a thousand years in the Dark Magic Region, only a few had been able to break through to the sixth floor of the Runic Tower, including Kleis, the betrayer of the Dark Magic Region.

Amazingly, now Merlin too had managed to break through to the sixth floor of the Runic Tower. It unwittingly became an indirect showdown between Merlin and Kleis, the former genius of the Dark Magic Region. It was not surprising that even the powerful Spell Casters were interested in the outcome of the indirect showdown.

However, the wait eventually extended into hours as Merlin was spending a long time on the sixth floor. The passing of time was perhaps not felt by Merlin himself, but the many Spell Casters who were waiting outside were starting to get impatient.

“As long as he hasn’t been sent out from the tower, there’s still a chance!”

Wizard Leo mumbled in a low voice. Even the blood-red vertical eye in his forehead was blinking expectantly, its gaze set on the sixth floor of the Runic Tower. Then, the ray of light started to flash, showing that a change was about to happen on the sixth floor.

If the light was snuffed out, then Merlin would be sent out of the Runic Tower, which meant that he was defeated at the sixth floor, just like Kleis.

On the other hand, if the light ascended to the seventh floor, it would be groundbreaking. It would mean that Merlin was the first Spell Caster to break through to the seventh floor ever since the Runic Tower was built!

“Did he get defeated? Is he going to be sent out from the Runic Tower?”

“The fact that even Kleis got defeated on the sixth floor shows how difficult the challenge is! Can Merlin really clear it?”

Everyone was aware of the difficulty posed by the sixth floor of the Runic Tower, so no one was confident whether Merlin would be able to create a miracle!

“Whoosh.”

Suddenly, the ray of light on the sixth floor dimmed, but it was immediately followed by a brighter ray of light bursting forth from the seventh floor! At the same time, the giant glass dome on top of the Runic Floor also began to glow brightly, its light illuminating almost the entire Dark Magic Region.

Such an extravagant effect was never before seen by the crowd. Most importantly, it would only appear when a Spell Caster successfully stepped foot onto the seventh floor, the highest and final floor of the Runic Tower.

“The seventh floor – Merlin actually managed to step onto the seventh floor! The first person from the Dark Magic Region in over a thousand years, the honor now belongs to Merlin!”

“Kleis didn’t succeed, but Merlin did! Truly, the gods have been watching over the Dark Magic Region. Even though we have been betrayed by Kleis, now we have another genius Spell Caster who is more talented and shines even brighter than him!”

“The indirect showdown between Merlin and Kleis has been decided, and Merlin wins this round!”

Many of the spectating Spell Casters were overjoyed and excited, and there were even loud cheer and joyful shrieks outside the tower. It was important to note that the strong reaction was not just because Merlin was the first Spell Caster to set foot on the seventh floor in thousands of years after it was built.

The more important reason was the symbolic meaning behind Merlin's successful conquest, which was winning the indirect showdown between Kleis and him!

Wizard Leo finally revealed a rare smile. Unfortunately, the smile was extremely terrifying, to the point that none of the Spell Casters dared to come near him. Nevertheless, it was a genuine smile, one that was filled with sincerity from the heart...

"Who would have thought that I would one day have such an excellent student!"

Wizard Leo raised his hand to caress the scary-looking blood-red vertical eye in his forehead, deep in thought...

...

"Swish."

On the seventh floor of the Runic Tower, a bright white light suddenly appeared, followed by Merlin's figure which slowly materialised into existence.

"Phew..."

Merlin exhaled lengthily. He had finally arrived on the seventh floor of the Runic Tower and won the indirect showdown with Kleis.

"I look forward to the day that I can defeat you in person!"

Merlin muttered to himself, and began to evaluate the final floor of the Runic Tower.

Despite being the final floor of the Runic Tower, the arrangement of the room was not particularly remarkable in any way. Most importantly, he had to locate the guardian spirit of the final floor of the Runic Tower.

According to the rules of the Runic Tower, the guardian spirit on every subsequent floor would have a level increase in their powers. Therefore, the guardian spirit on the final floor would definitely be exceptionally powerful, perhaps even to the point of a Seventh-level Spell Caster. Merlin, on the other hand, was still eons away from being capable of challenging a Seventh-level Spell Caster!

“Welcome, lucky Spell Caster. You’re the first person to step foot onto the seventh floor of the Runic Tower in more than a thousand years!”

At this very moment, a familiar voice called out to him. Merlin was stunned as he watched a familiar figure appear in the air.

It was an unequivocally graceful, pitch black, haughty-looking cat. The feline exuded an air of unbothered laziness like he was still half-asleep.

However, Merlin was extremely familiar with this black cat.

“Sir Didimoss? Why are you here?”

Merlin was astonished. This mysterious cat was none other than the black cat Didimoss, the spirit of the tablet outside the Dark Magic Region! How did he appear inside the Runic Tower, and even become the guardian spirit of the final floor of the tower?

“Oh... It’s you, newbie Wizard!”

The majestic black cat was originally taking a lazy stroll in the air. Due to his haughty attitude, he did not even spare a single look at the Wizard who had just entered the seventh floor. When he heard Merlin’s gasp of astonishment, however, he glanced down and spotted Merlin’s familiar face. In an instant, the majestic aura dissipated, and the cat reverted to his usual lazy self.

Merlin breathed deeply and bowed his head. “Honorable Sir Didimoss, my name is Wilson Merlin!”

The black cat Didimoss used two claws to scratch the back of his head. In a half-hearted voice, he said, “Very well, Wizard Merlin, since you already found out about me, then I’ll let you know that this was all pre-arranged by the Great Wizard Fidel. Within the entire Dark Magic Region, I can control any place that is engraved with runes, so I can also travel freely between them. As to the seventh floor of the Runic Tower, I occasionally visit and play guardian spirit to this place. After all, in all the years, no one except for you has been able to break through to the seventh floor...”

It turned out that the mysterious guardian spirit of the seventh floor of the Runic Tower was only Didimoss occasionally “visiting to play guardian spirit”. This discovery made Merlin unsure whether to laugh or cry, but most of all, he felt confused.

“Sir Didimoss, what’s the challenge on the seventh floor of the Runic Tower?”

After a brief moment of hesitation, Merlin asked softly.

The black cat Didimoss took a long, measured look at Merlin. He brandished a claw and spoke in the human language, “Wizard Merlin, although you know me and have often gifted me with delicious elemental crystal stones, don’t expect that I’ll go easy on you and let you clear the challenge on the seventh floor of the Runic Tower. In order to find a suitable Spell Caster, the Great Wizard Fidel had spent a great deal of precious effort to build this tower. As a guardian spirit, I cannot deviate from the rules set by the Great Wizard Fidel!”

Merlin was already mentally prepared for this scenario. No matter how mysterious the black cat Didimoss was, it was still a spirit of the Runic Magic Circle. He was forever bounded to the Runic Magic Circle, obliged to obey the rules set by the Great Wizard Fidel.

“Please don’t worry, Sir Didimoss. In order to conquer the seventh floor, I’ll rely on my own abilities!”

The black cat Didimoss nodded. “Good. Actually, there’s only one challenge. Apply your understanding and findings in runology to quickly construct a runic tool from runes. Once you fulfill the requirements set by the Great Wizard Fidel, you can clear the seventh floor and receive the greatest treasure left behind by the Great Wizard Fidel!”

“There’s only one type of challenge?”

Merlin frowned visibly. True enough, this Runic Tower was built by the Great Wizard Fidel to nurture Spell Casters who were proficient in runes. However, no one had managed to reach the

seventh level after so many years, not to mention fulfilling the requirements set by the Great Wizard Fidel!

Moreover, Merlin was not at all proficient in runes and only had a rudimentary knowledge of them at best. He was not even capable of setting up a Runic Magic Circle, what more to construct a runic tool.

“Sir Didimoss, is there really only one type of challenge? Is there any other way for me to clear this floor?”

Merlin asked with a bitter expression on his face.

“Any other way? Actually, there is, although at that time the Great Wizard Fidel had decided it somewhat off-handedly. Back in the golden age of Spell Casters, the top was often dominated by Demonic geniuses. Thus, he decided that if a Spell Caster like that appeared one day, even without any runic ability, he was willing to gift his treasure to the challenger.”

After a long, deep contemplation by the black cat Didimoss, he finally remembered the second type of challenge set by the Great Wizard Fidel. Whether or not it constituted an actual challenge was debatable as even the Great Wizard Fidel did not think that such a situation would materialize.

“What is it? Sir Didimoss, I don’t have much knowledge of runes. The first challenge you mentioned is completely out of my depth. I would like to attempt the second challenge.”

The black cat Didimoss reacted with surprise upon hearing Merlin’s confession that he did not know runes. Upon second thought, however, Didimoss realized that within a short period of joining the Dark Magic Region, Merlin had already progressed to become a Six-Elemental Third-level Spell Caster. In order to achieve this feat, the construction of spells alone would already consume a huge amount of effort. If Merlin also managed to grasp a proficiency in runes, it would be even more abnormal.

Hence, the black cat Didimoss continued speaking. “The second challenge is very simple, which is to defeat me! Wizard Merlin, even though I’m only a spirit of the Runic Magic Circle, with the support of the enforced Runic Magic Circle laid down by the Great Wizard Fidel, I can release powers equal to a Seventh-level Spell Caster. Hehe. If you chose the second challenge, then be prepared to duel a Seventh-level Spell Caster!”

“A Seventh-level Spell Caster!”

Merlin was not at all surprised, he had vaguely predicted this potential scenario to happen.

Since the Runic Tower only allowed Fourth-level Spell Casters and below to enter, it was practically unthinkable to defeat a Seventh-level Spell Caster. Perhaps in the Spell Casters' glorious era, there also existed a Demonic genius; but they were so rare that their numbers could be counted on one hand.

Merlin had only heard of one occasion where a Fourth-level Spell Caster managed to defeat a Seventh-level Spell Caster. It was the tale of Great Legend Nikola which was told by the spirit of the Flame Maxim aboard the ship of Nikola.

Even then, the Great Legend Nikola only managed to defeat a Seventh-level Spell Caster when he reached Fourth-level. Prior to Fourth-level, Nikola, too, did not qualify as an opponent to a Seventh-level Spell Caster.

Therefore, the second challenge set by the Great Wizard Fidel was one that even he did not believe would be attempted by anyone.

However, if a Demonic genius actually did appear, the Great Wizard Fidel was willing to gift his treasure even if the Spell Caster was not proficient in runes. The reason was that a Demonic genius Spell Caster was so extremely rare and that they would eventually mature into one of the most powerful Spell Casters in the future!

"So, have you decided?"

The black cat Didimoss pressed for an answer, looking slightly impatient.

Merlin took a deep breath and nodded reluctantly. He steadied his tone and said, "I have decided. Sir Didimoss, give me your best shot!"

"Oh? I see that you chose to attempt the second challenge..."

The black cat Didimoss raised his head to stare at Merlin with an indecipherable half-smile.

Chapter 370: The Golden Relief Sculpture

“Come on, Sir Didimoss. Show me the power of a Seventh-level Spell Caster!”

Merlin growled softly. He was covered entirely by a layer of Perfect Armor. Admittedly, he had Wizard Bammou, a Seventh-level Spell Caster and Wizard Leo, who possessed abilities that were not inferior to an Eighth-level Spell Caster in previous battles.

However, Merlin had never truly battled with a Seventh-level Spell Caster. In order to experience how strong a Seventh-level Spell Caster was, he would need to seek it out in battle.

“As you wish. Still, I’m a Runic Magic Circle spirit, and can only rely on the strength of the Runic Magic Circle. Here I go – Runic Thunder!”

Following Didimoss’ great roar, the entire seventh floor of the Runic Tower was covered in many thunderbolts. These thunderbolts did not charge at Merlin but instead, quickly gathered and transformed into nine thunderbolts that were each as thick as an arm.

“Whiz whiz whiz.”

One thunderbolt after another flew toward Merlin at an incredible speed. He could not keep up with them even after casting Flash Wind, so he could only block them by force.

“Pandora Demon Ability, Fiery Collapse!”

A fireball began to form before Merlin, emitting a terrifying force. With a push from both his arms, it quickly forged ahead.

“Bang!”

With only a loud explosion, the fireball erupted into white flames that filled up space. Nevertheless, very soon, the thunderbolts began to fly out from the midst of these flames.

Condensed Fire was completely unable to withstand such Seventh-level powers. Each thunderbolt contained a terrifying strength that was comparable to a Seventh-level spell.

“Boom!”

At last, the thunderbolts landed on Merlin’s Perfect Armor. Just then, Merlin felt as if he was about to be submerged in these wide-ranging thunderbolts, a feeling that he was close to death!

“The Seventh-level – I still fall short by quite a bit...”

Merlin mumbled in a low voice. Perfect Armor, which was covering his body shattered in an instant. However, just as the thunderbolts crashed into his body, a beam of white light that flickered with mysterious runes quickly flashed over his body, intercepting the power of the thunderbolts which caused no harm to Merlin.

“Whoosh.”

Following that, the white light enveloped Merlin and he disappeared from the seventh floor!

“His capabilities are still lacking by a bit. How boring – I don’t know who will be able to clear the seventh floor. It’s easier to go back to sleep!”

The black cat Didimoss glanced carelessly at where Merlin had disappeared, and gradually faded away as if he had never appeared in the first place...

...

The Spell Casters who had gathered outside the Runic Tower seemed to have increased slightly. There were even a few Fourth-level Spell Casters who were able to build their own individual towers that came before the Runic Tower. Their eyes fixed firmly onto the seventh floor of the Runic Tower.

Merlin had brought about a miracle by getting past the sixth floor, becoming the first Spell Caster over the past thousand years of the Dark Magic Region to step onto the seventh floor!

Nonetheless, there were many Spell Casters who anticipated more from Merlin, hoping that Merlin had a final spurt of energy in him to clear the seventh floor of the Runic Tower.

Suddenly, a light began to flicker on the seventh floor of the Runic Tower, causing everyone's emotions to fluctuate with uncertainty along with the flickering light.

Finally, after flashing three times, the light vanished completely. This meant that Merlin had failed to clear the tower!

"He still failed... The Seventh floor, the final floor of the Runic Tower, holds the greatest treasure left behind by the Great Wizard Fidel. It's a shame that even Wizard Merlin had failed."

"It seems like it's fated that no one will be able to clear the seventh floor of the Runic Tower."

As soon as the light faded on the seventh floor of the Runic Tower, a beam of light appeared before the tower. Following that, the light gradually dissolved, revealing a figure within.

At that moment, countless gazes were directed at this figure. They all knew that this figure was Merlin who had just failed to clear the tower. Although he had ultimately failed in getting past the seventh floor, it was hard to deny Merlin's glory.

"Wizard Merlin, can you divulge what sort of challenge lies on the sixth floor of the Runic Tower?"

A few Spell Casters who were more ambitious questioned Merlin softly. After all, the number of Spell Casters who had cleared the sixth floor could be counted on one hand, and Merlin was one of them. If they knew what the challenge was on the sixth floor, it might be of immense benefit to Spell Casters' future attempts in getting past the sixth floor.

Nevertheless, Merlin paid them no mind. In the Dark Magic Region, there were a few Spell Casters who had reached the sixth floor before, only they were not able to clear it. They should know what the challenge of the sixth floor was, yet they did not reveal it.

There was even a Spell Caster who had recorded the challenge of the sixth floor in writing and put it up for sale in the Resource Tower. Its price was in the hundreds of contribution points, and there were only a few Spell Casters who would be willing to spend so many contribution points to exchange for it.

Therefore, Merlin was even less likely to easily divulge what the challenge of the sixth floor was. At the moment, he was still caught up in the puzzlement of experiencing thunderbolts crashing into him yet surviving it without a scratch.

Merlin could clearly recall that power which was comparable to a Seventh-level spell. Once it landed on him, he would be heavily injured even if he survived. That feeling of perishing and suffocation was imprinted in his memory even now.

However, the moment the thunderbolts crashed into him, mysterious runes had entered his body, forcibly obstructing the harmful impact of the thunderbolts. Merlin guessed that those runes must have been set up by the Great Wizard Fidel inside the Runic Tower.

Once a Spell Caster was in imminent danger, the runes of the Runic Tower would protect them and bring them away from the tower. After all, the purpose of constructing the Runic Tower was to search for prodigious Spell Casters who had excelled in and mastered runes, not to kill Spell Casters.

Merlin looked around. Other than Wizard Leo, he spotted Wizard Envia and the rest, all three of them, in the crowd. As expected, they had been safely sent out from the Runic Tower. As they had failed on the fifth floor, they were transported from the Runic Tower.

“Merlin, how did it feel being in the Runic Tower?”

Wizard Leo cracked a rare “smile”. Although his appearance was sinister and frightening, and his smile was more horrifying than his tears, Merlin could perceive his sincerity.

Merlin smiled and answered, “It wasn’t too bad. The Runic Tower was built by the Great Wizard Fidel himself, and he was at his peak with his accomplishments in runology. Tsk tsk, runology is amazing indeed. It’s only a shame that I have no talent in runology, otherwise, I would be studying runes with great care.”

Merlin was not bothered that he understood nothing of runology. Furthermore, his lack of talent in runology extended to alchemy and even potions.

In terms of brewing potions, if Merlin did not have the precise control of the Matrix, he would be unable to make potions successfully. It could be said that Merlin merely possessed average skills in many areas, but because he had the Matrix, he was able to rise above the crowd of ordinary Spell Casters, becoming a Spell Caster who was even more genius than Kleis!

Wizard Leo nodded as well. “In fact, one may only have great accomplishments by focusing on one field. Even though I study runology in depth, my main focus is still on creating spells. This is why I’m able to become a Sixth-level Spell Caster. Focus your attention on constructing spells and forget about the rest.”

Perhaps there were some Spell Casters who could grow holistically and be proficient in many fields such as a genius Spell Caster like Kleis. Nevertheless, they were the minority, and most Spell Casters would only focus on one aspect.

Of course, there were some Spell Casters who felt that they had not much talent in constructing spells and were unable to progress further. Thus, they turned to the study of runology or alchemy – perhaps they could still achieve wonderful things.

“All right, let’s go back to the tower. There’s no point in hanging around here.”

Wizard Leo glanced at the teeming masses of Spell Casters and furrowed his brow slightly.

Merlin nodded as well. He wanted to find a quiet place to examine in detail the golden relief sculpture he had acquired on the sixth floor of the Runic Tower.

With that, both of them quickly soared into the air and flew toward Wizard Leo’s tower.

...

Merlin’s success in clearing the sixth floor and obtaining its treasure had caused a stir within the Dark Magic Region. The popularity of the topic was only second to Kleis’ betrayal of the Dark Magic Region back then.

No one had been able to get past the sixth floor of the Runic Tower. Even Kleis had only made it as far as the sixth floor and was unable to clear it.

In this round of the unspoken rivalry between Merlin and Kleis, Merlin was of course ahead by one!

Thanks to Merlin, the Runic Tower was bustling with people once more. Initially, it was quiet and deserted without many people. Now, there were great crowds every day as countless Spell Casters waited for their turn to enter the Runic Tower.

However, no miracles occurred once more, and most Spell Casters failed on the fourth floor.

Still, Merlin knew nothing of the hubbub in the Dark Magic Region, and it did not have the slightest effect on Merlin.

Merlin was currently sitting in a room in the tower. He closed his eye slightly and tried his best to calm his emotions. Only when his thoughts were at peace would a new posture appear in his mind.

He had learned this posture from the fifth relief sculpture which shone with a golden glow.

Merlin was curious about this golden relief sculpture. He tried burning it but even when he used Fiery Collapse, he was unable to induce any changes in the golden relief sculpture, much less damage it.

He did not know what material the relief sculpture was made of that caused it to be so durable. More than this, besides the difference in color, its posture was also largely distinctive.

By itself, the posture on the golden relief sculpture would not be of much use in terms of improving one's physical attributes. Merlin had tested this on the other Spell Casters in the tower.

This aspect differed greatly from the previous four relief sculptures. Upon practicing the postures on each of the previous four relief sculptures, one would definitely have a boost on one's physique.

The oddities of the golden relief sculpture did not stop there. Although practicing the posture on the golden relief sculpture by itself was not of much help toward improving one's physical attributes, if one practiced the postures of the previous four relief sculptures before practicing the one on the golden relief sculpture, it was rather effortless. Merlin could even easily perceive that the posture on the golden relief sculpture was closely linked to the postures on the previous four relief sculptures.

Nevertheless, the effects of the posture could not be seen in one or two days. It required a long period of practice before the body would gradually change.

Merlin did not know what benefits there were in practicing the posture on the golden relief sculpture. However, he could vaguely sense that continuous practice of the posture would not improve his physical attributes, but serve some other purpose instead.

As for the exact change that would occur, Merlin could only confirm this in the future after he had practiced the posture on the golden relief sculpture.