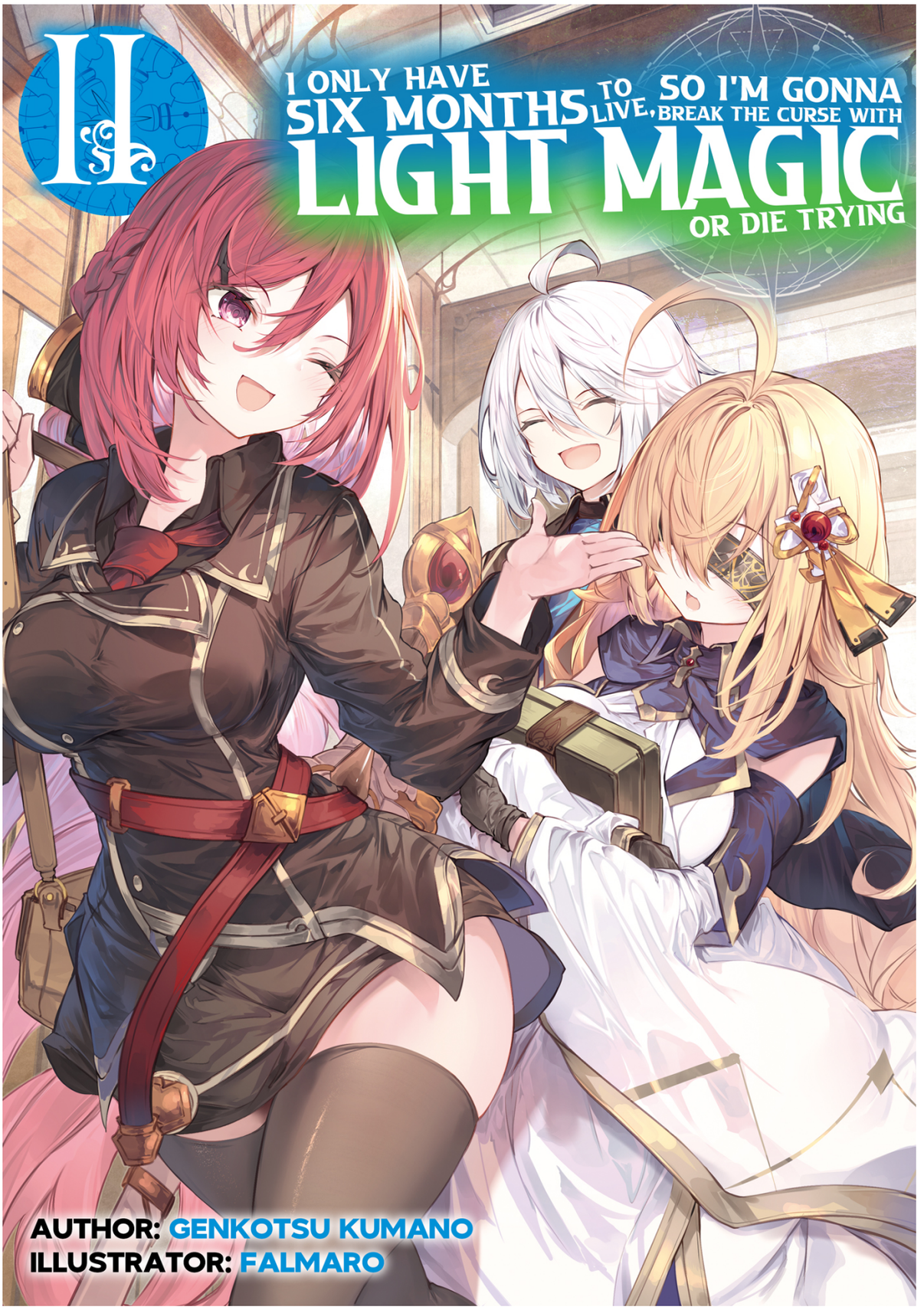

II
I ONLY HAVE SIX MONTHS TO LIVE, SO I'M GONNA BREAK THE CURSE WITH LIGHT MAGIC OR DIE TRYING
AUTHOR: GENKOTSU KUMANO
ILLUSTRATOR: FALMARO


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**I Only Have Six Months to Live, So I'm Gonna Break the Curse with Light Magic or Die Trying II**

**Author:** Genkotsu Kumano
**Illustrator:** Falmaro


"How many years has it been since I last had a visitor?"
Luna
A mysterious woman confined far below the academy.
"Now, please show me your light."
Cecilia la Lilynia
A saint and princess from the Holy Kingdom Lilyniana. Adept at light magic.
"Welcome to my lab. I am the master of the clock tower."
Saria Lulumitt
A young girl known as the Clock Tower Hermit.


"But he's still planning to fight. We can't get in his way."
"But..."
Crys Lamiared
A first-year student of the academy's Class A. The daughter of a master swordsman.
"O, noble wolf of lightning. Tear through the heavens and lay waste to the countless souls who swore to seek vengeance on you."
Volga Lugh Jaguarpatch
A first-year student of the academy's Upper Class. One of the beastfolk.
Selena
Princess of the spirits and Callus's partner.
"Course through my body, torrent of light. Defeat the evil and bring light to overflow upon this world."
"Torna Rai Ryba!"
Callus Leditzweissen
A light magician born with a curse on his chest.

CHAPTER ONE: LAXUS, THE ROYAL CAPITAL
CHAPTER TWO: THE GOLDEN SAINT AND A PRISONER OF THE STARS
CHAPTER THREE: A SURGE OF LIGHTNING
EPILOGUE: THOSE WHO CONTROL THE CURSE
EXTRA CHAPTER: THE HERMIT OF THE CLOCK TOWER

# Table of Contents


1. Cover
2. Color Illustrations
3. Chapter One: Laxus, the Royal Capital
4. Chapter Two: The Golden Saint and a Prisoner of the Stars
5. Chapter Three: A Surge of Lightning
6. Epilogue: Those Who Control the Curse
7. Extra Chapter: The Hermit of the Clock Tower
8. Afterword
9. About J-Novel Club
10. Copyright

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*Happiness is being able to live a normal life,* I thought, as I gazed upon the vast world in front of me.

# Chapter One: Laxus, the Royal Capital

I heard the carriage clatter, and let it sway me with its rhythmic thumping. Feeling relaxed, I gazed at the view outside of my window. At long last, I was able to bid the Forest of Hoba farewell. I never thought I'd ever make it out, but I felt a little lonely as I put the forest behind me.

"Would you like some tea, Prince Callus?" Shizuku asked.

"Yes, I would. Thank you," I replied.

My maid handed me a metallic thermos, and I put it to my lips. The tea was refreshingly cold and delicious. It'd been a few hours since we left the manor, but the drink was still ice-cold. *Did Shizuku use her magic to keep this cool?*

"Whew. Thank you. By the way, I just noticed that no other carriages pass through this area," I said.

"This entire forest is considered the royal family's private property, so only certain parties are allowed inside," she explained.

"Oh yeah, we *do* own this forest."

There was nothing abnormal within the Forest of Hoba, and it didn't have any precious resources either. Along with that, being designated as private property of the royal family meant that nobody dared to trespass. *It's a perfect place to hide someone like me.*

"Looks like this is the forest's exit. Wow, what a magnificent view!" I gasped.

A vast plain spread out in front of me—the Great Plains of Ruago, located in the center of the Ledyvia Kingdom. *I've seen it in books, but the intensity is totally different in person!*

The carriage pressed onward, crossing the bridge across the South Iris River, the second largest river on the continent.

We were headed to Laxus, the royal capital, where the Lemitizia Academy of Magic was. It was one of the largest institutions on the continent dedicated to raising magicians, and numerous people from outside of the kingdom gathered at the academy in hopes of becoming full-fledged witches or wizards.

Those who left the academy with excellent grades could immediately enter the Magical Committee, bypassing the strict

screening procedure that applicants would normally undergo. My master had told me that many who wished to join the Committee would seek the Academy of Magic as the easiest entry point.

"I'm looking forward to it," I said.

I had many things to be anxious about, but above all, I was excited for my new lifestyle. *What kind of campus life awaits?*

***

We finally arrived at Laxus half a day after departing from the manor. The city was filled with crowds larger than I'd ever seen before. I almost threw myself out the window to get a better look.

"Wow! I knew there would be a lot of people, but didn't think there'd be *this* many! Hey, what kind of store is that?!" I gushed.

Unusual stores with exotic items and foods lined the streets, overflowing with exciting possibilities. I was supposed to search for a house to live in first, but I couldn't help myself and made a slight detour.

"What's this store about?" I wondered.

I first approached a street stall with numerous mysterious items. It had lamps, lanterns, and oddly shaped vases. *These are all so curious.*

"Excuse me, what is this?" I asked the shopkeeper, pointing to a lamp.

The man looked at me like he was determining my worth. When he decided that I wasn't here to just window-shop, he proceeded to give a reluctant explanation.

"This is a Magic Lamp. There's a spirit sealed inside, and if you undo the seal, the spirit will grant whatever you wish...apparently," he said.

"Huh! I didn't think such a thing existed!" I replied.

Laxus was filled with interesting items, and I was enamored by this lamp.

"May I touch it?" I asked.

"Sure. But if you undo the seal, you'll have to buy it," he said, handing the lamp to me.

Aside from being covered in a layer of soot, it looked like nothing out of the ordinary.

"I can sell it to you for half right now. How does two copper

coins sound? A small price to pay if you can buy your dreams, don't you think?" the man said, encouraging me to make a purchase.

Two copper coins was around the price of two meals. I could pay up, but...

"No, thank you. I don't think I need it," I replied. I declined the offer and returned the item.

"You sure?" he asked, looking a little bewildered.

*He probably thinks it's odd that I suddenly lost interest. I really don't need that lamp, but I would feel bad for wasting his time if I don't make a purchase. Let's see... Ah, that one looks good.*

"Um, may I have that book?" I asked.

"Sure, it's one copper coin."

I took the money out of my wallet and handed it to the shopkeeper. It was the newest volume of a popular novel series about an adventurer. I was grateful for this find since I didn't have it at home.

"Thank you," I said before leaving the stall.

Shizuku, who had been nearby, watching this entire series of events unfold, gave me a puzzled look. "Are you sure you don't want to buy that lamp?"

"Yeah. That was just a normal lamp, after all," I replied.

Her eyes widened in awe. "How did you know?"

"Master told me how to differentiate between real and fake magical tools. If you pour your magical energy into a real one, it will get 'stuck' or 'hooked' onto the item."

And when looking at it up close, I noticed that the item was crudely made. I received a similar impression from the other sketchy items nearby, so I came to the conclusion that there weren't any good finds to be had from the store. I didn't want to stay too long at one stall either; I had plenty of others to visit.

"I see. I'm shocked that you can appraise these items. You're amazing, Prince Callus," Shizuku said.

"Oh, it's not that big of a deal," I replied. I tried to act collected, but I was a little embarrassed by the praise. I looked away, but I noticed Shizuku glaring over at the stall.

"His insolence knows no bounds for trying to sell you such a defective item. Shall I get rid of him?" she asked.

"N-No, you don't need to go that far! I'll be fine!" I hastily stopped her dangerous train of thought.

While the item he had offered was indeed defective, the

shopkeeper himself didn't seem well-versed in magical tools either. He hadn't asked for a high price, and I felt it was fine to leave him alone.

"Anyways, can I visit other stores? They might have proper magical tools!" I said.

"Of course. If you would pardon my impertinence, I shall go along with you."

***

Shizuku and I visited various stores, including those that sold proper magical tools. I fancied some of them, but they were expensive. The allowance I'd received wasn't enough for me to make a purchase. Though I couldn't buy any tools, the capital was also filled with a myriad of unique foods, and I had more than enough fun simply walking around and savoring these delightful dishes. Time flew while I was enjoying myself.

"Prince Callus, perhaps we should call it a day," Shizuku said.

"Huh? Oh, right. It's getting pretty late," I replied. The sun was already starting to set, and the number of people walking outside had gradually decreased. "Sirius already chose some prospective houses for us, right?"

"Correct. We'll spend the night in one of them. If it's not to your liking, Prince Sirius had suggested we look at the other candidates tomorrow."

"All right. Then let's head over."

We had been able to navigate around Laxus thanks to a map. According to the map, our house for tonight was in the southeast residential district. It was close to the academy, so I expected the commute to be a breeze.

"Um... So this must be the house on the map, right?"

It was a neat house that was a bit too large for two people. *But we might welcome other people in the future, so I guess this is perfect.* I used the key that I'd received and entered the property.

"Pardon my intrusion."

I was greeted by a large living room. *There's four private rooms. That's more than enough to welcome any guests.*

"It's a good place," I said. "It might be a bit too luxurious for a student, though."

"The kitchen space is large as well. I'm eager to test it out," Shizuku added.

I inspected each part of the house, and couldn't come up with any complaints. I was just fine with settling down here.

"But Sirius did say he had selected a few more candidates," I said. "I think I'll go take a look at those too."

"Certainly. Then I shall have that scheduled. I've been notified that we can stay here for tonight, so you may rest now if you'd like, Prince Callus."

"All right."

I left the details to Shizuku while I decided on my room. My bed was fluffy and comfortable, similar to the one back at the manor. I didn't feel any discomfort, and I was sure that I could fall asleep in an instant.

"It seems Sirius spared no expense," I muttered.

I had come to Laxus to be more independent, but at the end of the day, I was still relying on other people. I slowly dozed off, thinking of how I needed to repay these kind favors one day.

"I'm sleepy," I said with a yawn.

The trip had apparently exhausted my body. I needed to make preparations for tomorrow, but I set off for the land of dreams instead.

***

I toured three other houses that Sirius had found for me, but I still ended up deciding to live in the first one. We had some time to spare, so I went off on my own to buy some items while Shizuku gathered spices and seasonings. I was sure the capital had a wide selection, and I was looking forward to meals, but this time I was looking for books. The manor had plenty, but many were old. Laxus, on the other hand, had new books lining the shelves, tempting me to buy everything I could.

*I bought a novel about adventure yesterday, so I think I'll buy an educational book today,* I thought as I stepped into a bookstore. I was eager to read more about magic or history.

"Whoa, expensive," I muttered.

The thick books I had my eyes on were all quite pricey, easily above one or two copper coins each. While I knew that I'd be able to have anything I wanted if I begged my father or brothers, I thought that such actions would do me no good. The allowance I received was within the realm of an average person's, and if I was to become more independent, I shouldn't act too spoiled.

This would also be good practice for budgeting. I didn't want to be hopeless when it came to handling money, and I hadn't even bought anything myself until now.

"Hm… I'll buy this one and this one, so I guess I'll give up the book about alchemy. Oh, but I want that one too…"

I wandered around the city as I pondered my choices. *Oh yeah, I remember seeing a used bookstore nearby. Maybe I can get what I want for cheap.*

"All right, I'll go there!"

While I was headed for my destination, an unpleasant sight caught my eye.

"Hey, are you free?"

"If you're alone, why not play with us? I know a good place."

Two large men had cornered a girl. I could only see her from behind, but she looked reluctant to go along with them. People walked by, pretending to not see a thing, but I couldn't leave this alone.

"Men who leave women in trouble alone are scum," Sirius had taught me. So I refused to turn a blind eye.

"Hey, she seems uncomfortable," I said, stepping in.

"Huh? Who're you?!" one of the men shouted, glaring at me.

I wasn't scared one bit. These men couldn't even compare to Damien, who trained me with everything he had. I shifted my gaze towards the girl, who also turned around. She had a look of surprise before she cried out in a loud voice.

"Callus! You've grown so much, I didn't recognize you!"

The girl had flaming red hair and determined eyes. I finally recognized her as she stood there confidently.

"Uh… Cryssie?" I asked.

"Bingo! ♪ Long time no see!"

Crys Lamiared was the daughter of a master swordsman. I'd gotten friendly with her when she'd arrived at the manor five years ago. I hadn't met her since, but she'd grown into a beautiful lady. For one, she was taller and her chest was bigger. She still resembled her childlike self, but now had an air of maturity. *I didn't think she'd change this much in just five years!*

"Hey, what're you guys standing around for?!" one of the men said. He was apparently irritated that they were being ignored. He reached out towards me.

I reflexively grabbed his arm and threw him down.

"Gah?!"

My brother had personally taught me this move. The man lost consciousness as he hit the ground. *I held back, so he should regain consciousness in a few minutes, I think. I hope.*

"What the hell did you just do?!" the other man roared as he saw his partner out cold.

I prepared to fight back, but Cryssie stood in front of me.

"That's *my* line! Don't put a damper on our reunion!" Quick as a flash, she delivered a kick to the man's stomach.

A sharp sound reverberated in the air as the man flew back, before colliding with a nearby wall and sliding to the ground.

*Ouch... That's gotta hurt.*

"Whew, I didn't think we'd get interrupted like that," she said.

"Good work, Cryssie. I'm happy to see you."

We shook hands as she gave a giggle. While she looked more mature, she still acted like her younger self. Her appearance had changed, but she was still the Cryssie that I knew.

"Why are you in Laxus, Cryssie? Did you decide to stop by during your journey?"

"Why, you ask? Because you wrote that you'd enroll at the Academy of Magic, of course."

"Yeah, I guess I did write that. Did you come all the way here to meet me, then?"

"Actually, I'm here to enroll too."

"Huh?! You're going to enter the Academy of Magic?!" I was surprised by her words. I expected her to be traveling with her father, and I didn't think that she was interested in the academy. "How'd you come to that decision?"

"Fine, I can tell you," she said. "But first, why don't we go somewhere else?"

"Right."

Two large men lay unconscious around us, and we clearly stood out. We hastily left the area and headed to a nearby park. During our retreat, I stared intently at the grown Cryssie. *Time sure does surprise me. I never would've imagined that she was the same person as that tomboy.*

"You really became beautiful, Cryssie. I'm surprised."

"H-Huh?! Why would you say that so suddenly?! F-Flattery will get you nowhere, you know!"

"I'm not flattering you. You really are beautiful and adorable now. And you look so mature, so of course you'd get lots of invitations."

“H-Hey! All right, I get it! I get it already! Your face is too close!”

She stepped away, her face beet red. *Huh? Did I say something weird? I’m just speaking the way my brother taught me.*

“Look at you. You seem pretty well-trained yourself. The throw you did earlier was good. You used your strength quite well,” she said.

“Thanks. I feel more confident when you compliment me.”

Cryssie had already been a powerful fighter five years ago; she must’ve only become stronger since. I was happy to be praised by someone like her.

“And you’ve grown taller,” she said. “And, um…y-you’ve gotten cooler…I think.”

“Hm? What was that?”

I couldn’t hear the last bit because she was mumbling, but she told me to zip it, so I refrained from prying further. *Why’s she so angry?*

“Speaking of, weren’t you traveling around with Sieg? Why did you decide to enroll?” I asked. If she was genuinely looking to train her swordsmanship skills, I felt it was more beneficial for her to be traveling. While the Academy of Magic allowed students to learn magic for combat reasons, her father was the best teacher she could have.

Cryssie looked back at me blankly and answered. “Because *you’re* going to enroll, of course.”

She made it sound like that was common sense, but I was utterly confused by her line of reasoning.

“Huh? Because I’m enrolling?”

“That’s right. I’m your knight, aren’t I, Callus? It’s only natural for me to enroll in the same academy so that I can protect you.”

Cryssie had declared herself my knight in the past. I remembered it well, but I didn’t think she would have. But I especially hadn’t thought she’d quit her journey just for that.

“I thought you wanted to be an amazing swordsman like Sieg,” I said.

“I do. That dream hasn’t changed. But I can still grow stronger, even if I’m not out on a journey. I’ll become even more powerful here, at the academy, and I’ll become like daddy. And to top it all off, I’m going to protect you too. That’s *my* path of chivalry.” She said her words with pride.

*It seems she didn’t decide to come here on just a whim. She’s*

*thought about it long and hard in her own way. It'd be rude for me to butt in.*

"You saved me in the past, but things will be different now. I've grown much stronger since then. I'll defeat anyone in your path, so there's no need to worry," Cryssie said with a confident smile.

I was nervous about enrolling in an academy where I had no friends, but felt reassured with her by my side.

"Thanks, Cryssie. That makes me really happy. I'll be relying on you, then," I said.

She gave me an innocent grin, just like she would have five years ago.

We continued our conversation in the park. Cryssie had parted ways with Sieg and was living alone, intending to stay in the on-campus dormitories once the academy year began. I admired the dorm life. I knew it'd be so much fun to spend time with friends under the same roof.

We were so engrossed in our trivial dialogue that we only noticed the time when the sun had started to set. The day had gone by so quickly.

"Look at the time. Hey, Cryssie, if you're free, do you want to stop by my house for dinner?" I offered.

"Huh? A-Are you sure?" she asked.

"Of course!"

"W-Will I stay the night?" she mumbled in a soft voice. She followed me, her cheeks flushed.

*She seems nervous. Will she be all right?*

"I'm home!" I said.

"P-Pardon my intrusion," Cryssie said.

I was met by a delicious aroma the moment I opened the door. Shizuku had been giving it her all and had made me dinner.

"Welcome home...Sir Callus," Shizuku said. She greeted me by the entrance, but froze when she saw Cryssie's face.

Cryssie had also gone stiff. *Don't these two know each other? What's going on?*

"Callus, isn't she your maid?" Cryssie asked. "Are you two living together?"

"Huh? Did I not tell you?" I said. I'd apparently forgotten to notify her.

"Huh... I see."

She mumbled to herself as she glared at Shizuku, who returned with her own intense gaze. I could practically see sparks fly. *What's going on?!*





“I didn’t think your maid would be here with you,” my friend said.

“I didn’t think the young lady from before would tag along with you either,” my maid said.

The two continued to glower at each other during our meal. *Hm… I don’t get it. These two don’t have a reason to be so hostile to each other.*

“I’ve decided,” Cryssie suddenly said.

We’d finished eating and were relaxing when my friend made a declaration. *What’s she deciding on?*

“Callus, I’ll live here too! You have extra rooms, don’t you?” she said.

“Huh? Why would you—”

“You cannot!” Shizuku immediately said, cutting me off. She banged the table in protest.

*I-I can’t keep up with all this!*

“You’re planning on staying at the dorms, are you not? A sudden change of plans would surely trouble the academy as well!” Shizuku stated.

“Oh? And why do you look so flustered? Are you perhaps *afraid* of me being so close by?” Cryssie replied.

“Goodness. You have quite the nerve. Very well. I shall acknowledge you as my rival.”

*Huh?! What are these two on about?! I’m scared. I have no idea what they’re talking about, but the room feels so cold.*

In the end, the issue of Cryssie living with me was set aside for the moment, but she certainly hadn’t given up. It would be fun to live with a friend, but seeing those two exchange angry glares was bad for my heart. *I wish they would get along…*

***

It had been four days since I’d arrived at Laxus. Together with Cryssie, I visited the Academy of Magic located on the east side of the city.

“Wow, look at all these people. Are they all applicants?” I asked.

People swarmed about the campus, all looking to be the same age as me. Both Cryssie and I had gotten referrals, so we only needed to undergo a simple interview, but the other applicants had to pass a number of entrance exams to join the

academy.

“But I’ve heard that most of the applicants will be able to pass. Only a select few are unable to enter, and the exams are more about dividing the new students into classes,” Cryssie explained.

“Huh, really?”

The Academy of Magic divided students into classes from A to E. Class A contained the best students. Most students with referrals would make it into that class, at worst being placed in Class B instead.

“There’s also a different division called the Upper Class, but I suppose that has nothing to do with us,” Cryssie said.

“Upper Class?” I’d never heard of the term before.

“It’s a class for aristocrats and other wealthy families. They pay immense amounts of money to enter, and are allowed to skip the entrance exams in return. I’ve even heard that they don’t have to attend classes to advance.”

“Then why even bother enrolling?” It seemed to me like that was just throwing money down the drain, and it didn’t make sense for them to use such roundabout methods.

“According to my daddy, those kids just want the credentials or educational background. I’ve heard that upper-class society these days will scorn and scoff at those who haven’t graduated from the Academy of Magic, assuming that they didn’t even receive the bare minimum of education. It sounds so stupid, being able to graduate without studying at all.”

Cryssie seemed fed up by the system, but I was told that aristocrats cared about their appearances above all. *They don’t want their kids to enroll the normal way on the off chance that they’d be placed into the lower classes based on their grades.* Hence, they paid vast amounts of money to get into the Upper Class, where graduation was guaranteed.

That didn’t exactly give me a good impression of them, but I was sure that the academy and administration expenses were partially covered by these students’ money, so it was difficult to speak ill of them. *We just need to work diligently and pave our own path. We probably won’t get involved with them, anyways.*

“Look, I think we’re supposed to be over there. Let’s go,” Cryssie said.

“Okay.”

She tugged on my hand as we made our way through the crowd. Cryssie’s appearance had indeed changed, but she wasn’t

much different on the inside. She had the strength to push forward no matter what. It was reassuring to have her by my side.

"It must be here," she said.

We lined up in front of a tag that read "Referrals." Compared to the other applicants, our line was clearly shorter. I supposed it was difficult to get a referral.

"Did you get a referral from Sieg?" I asked.

"Yeah. Da—I mean, my father is pretty well-connected. Did you get yours from Gourley?"

"Something like that."

I couldn't tell her that I'd actually received one from the king. I hadn't even told her that I was part of the royal family, after all. *Speaking of which, Emilia isn't here. Since he's connected to the academy, I expected him to meddle with me.* I was honestly relieved that I hadn't seen him, and I wished for him to never appear in front of me again.

"What's wrong? Are you looking for something?" a student behind me asked as I was glancing around at my surroundings.

The short-haired boy looked friendly. *Since he's here, did he also get a referral?*

"I actually came to the royal capital for the first time a few days ago, so I'm just surprised by everything I see," I said.

"I see. Then you must be from the boonies like me," he replied.

"Uh, I guess so."

The manor that I'd spent my entire life in was in a remote place on an isolated plot of land. I didn't think I was lying about being from a rural area, though it was probably different from what he'd imagine.

"Ah, forgot to introduce myself. I'm Jack Rosso, a referral. Nice to meet you."

"I'm Callus Leyd. Nice to meet you."

Jack extended his arm and I shook his hand. Leyd was, of course, a fake name. I couldn't let people know my real identity.

"So you got a referral," I said.

"Yep. I didn't get it from my master, but from a magician who happened to stop by my village. When I showed off some of my magic, I was told that I had a knack for it and ended up getting a referral. I was mighty lucky," Jack replied.

"I see."

*If he was referred by a magician whom he just happened to meet and impress, he must be really talented. I'm excited to see his magic.*

"It'd be great if I can make it into Class A. It's good for employment opportunities, and the tuition will be free. Since I come from a poor family, this bonus will be a huge help," he said.

*Right, tuition. It's only natural that some people struggle to pay their school fees.* I had no need to worry since my father was the king, but if I were to start becoming independent, I wanted to be as little of a burden as possible. To that end, I was determined to join Class A. While I was steeling my resolve, the line started moving.

"Seems like it's started. Let's go," Jack said.

Jack, Cryssie, and I headed inside a building. Three applicants would be interviewed at a time, so we entered together. Five interviewers were there, and I happened to recognize one of them. As I tried to greet the familiar face, Macbell Runoirt, he gave a silent gesture indicating I should refrain from doing so.

"Do you know him, Callus?" Cryssie asked.

"Yeah, he's my master's apprentice. He's like a senior apprentice to me," I replied.

Five years ago, Macbell had arrived at the manor to relay a message from the chairman of the Magical Committee. Because of me, my master was forced to leave the Committee, so Macbell hadn't thought well of me for a time. But we had made our amends.

I knew that he had become an instructor at this academy three years ago, but I never expected him to also be in charge of interviews for the entrance exams.

"Since you have all been referred, your skills have been approved, and you won't undergo a normal entrance exam. However, I'd like to know what you plan on accomplishing or researching at this academy. I'd also like to conduct a simple exam for magical skills, just to confirm that none of you are falsifying your identities. Your acceptance won't be decided by this test. I hope that puts your mind at ease," said the oldest interviewer out of the five.

Jack was first in line, and I was last.

"Now, Jack. If you will, please."

"Y-Yes!" Jack nervously said, his voice rising an octave. He seemed the type to be normally competent, but weak when it

came to showing his performance. “I-I mean, it is my dream to be a first-rate magician and enter the Ministry of Magic within this kingdom!”

The Ministry of Magic was an organization tasked with overseeing anything related to magic. Their work was tough, but the pay was good. It was also hard to get into, but if a student graduated from the academy with excellent marks, they had a good chance of entering that line of work.

“The Ministry of Magic. I see. That’s a wonderful goal to have. Now, will you exhibit your magical capabilities? I’d love to see the abilities written on your referral.”

“R-Right! Of course!” Jack put both hands in front of him and slowly kneaded his magic outwards. He didn’t have ample magic, but he was careful when using it; it was clear that he’d practiced the spell numerous times. “Here I go! *Zieux Lo*!”

Once he’d chanted the spell, a chunk of dirt appeared from his hands and floated in the air. *Huh, earth magic.* This element was often used in areas where agriculture prospered. It was used to till the land and enrich the soil with nutrients.

Jack proceeded to surprise me. “And…*Mol Lo*!”

A tree started to sprout from the floating chunk of dirt. *Jack can use two types of elements? Now that’s rare!* Normally, only one spirit would attach themselves to a person. It was rare for multiple spirits to possess the same individual, since they’d fight over claims of magical energy until one left. As I was looking on in interest, Jack continued to be full of surprises.

“And now…*Ol Lo*!” he said.

Water poured from his hand, showering over the tree. *I didn’t think he could use three elements. I get why he received a referral.*

“Hm…” the interviewer murmured with shock.

I took my chance to whisper to my partner. “Hey, Selena. Could I borrow your eyes for a quick second?”

“Sure, but you have to offer me some delicious sweets from the royal capital. Okay?”

“All right. You sure love your sugary foods.”

My partner, the light spirit Selena, was always by my side. When my curse had been subdued, I was worried that I wouldn’t be able to see her anymore, but that never happened. This was probably proof that my curse hadn’t completely disappeared just yet, but I knew that I’d be lonely if I lost sight of my partner.

“All right. Yah!” Selena said cutely. She made a circle with her

thumb and index finger before placing it over my right eye like a monocle.



Other spirits entered my field of vision. This was a spell that I'd created over the past five years. It was called *Sylph Ring*, and it allowed me to see spirits other than Selena while the ability was activated.

Three spirits surrounded Jack, who'd just used three different elements. Since earth and tree elemental magic were similar, there would sometimes be spirits that could use both, but the boy was borrowing power from three different spirits. *Amazing.* A small mole lay on his shoulder, a fish spirit floated near him, and a green bird perched on his head. None of the spirits seemed to be fighting. On the contrary, they looked to occasionally be talking in a friendly manner. *I never knew they could coexist like this.*

"Very good. Thank you for showing us your splendid magic, Jack. I pray that you will be able to excel within this academy," the interviewer said.

"R-Right! Thank you very much!" Jack breathed a sigh of relief as his turn was over.

*Next up should be Cryssie. I wonder what kind of interview she'll do?*

"Hello, Crys. Why do you want to attend this academy?" the interviewer asked.

"I came here to hone my magical abilities and become an even stronger knight," she replied.

Unlike the timid and nervous Jack, she was calm and collected. *Way to go, Cryssie.*

"And..." Cryssie added before continuing. "I came to the Academy of Magic to fulfill an important promise."

She glanced at me, making me feel a bit sheepish. The interviewers all tilted their heads questioningly.

"All right, then. Would you please show off your magical abilities to us?"

"Of course." She unsheathed her blade by her waist. Her gestures were refined, and she looked cooler than ever. "Here I go."

She placed her left fingers onto her weapon and concentrated her magic into her fingertips. "*Fé Arms.*"

In the next moment, the room was surrounded by an incredible gust of hot air, reminding me of the midsummer heat. As I started to sweat from the temperature, Cryssie's sword, imbued with her fire magic, glowed red. *I wouldn't want to be cut*

*down by that. Five years ago, she could barely use any magic, but she's clearly improved. I need to follow her example and work hard.*

"Oho… Your magic is quite impressive indeed. Will you show me more of your powers?" an interviewer asked.

"Of course," Cryssie answered confidently.

A large rock was brought into the room. It was about as large as Cryssie, and its rugged exterior gave a tough impression.

"This is a boulder used for the normal entrance exams. It's a special rock containing high amounts of iron, and it's very hard. Would you please strike this boulder?"

"If that's all you wish from me," she replied.

She stood in front of the large rock and raised her blade. Her stance was nostalgic. I was reminded of the time when she trained me with her swordsmanship skills.

"If you can scratch this boulder, it's said that you have enough power to join Class A. I have high hopes for you," the interviewer explained.

"Scratch… I see," she said with a grin.

Quick as a flash, she swung her sword down. Hot wind swirled around the room, causing me to close my eyes. Once the wind died down, I opened my eyes to see the boulder split cleanly down the middle. With a clack, Cryssie sheathed her sword and turned to the interviewer.

"Is this satisfactory?" she asked.

"I-Indeed. There's no problem at all. That was splendid."

The interviewers all sat with their mouths agape. I noticed that even Jack had the same expression. Cryssie looked at me with a triumphant smile and discreetly gave me the peace sign. I nodded in reply, astonished by her power.

"And lastly…Callus. Why have you decided to attend our academy?"

"I'd like to learn different types of magic," I replied.

"I see. That's a marvelous goal to have. Would you please show us some of your magical capabilities?"

"I shall." *Hmmm, what should I do? Should I just show my light magic to them?*

"*Rai Lo*," I chanted.

I created a medium-sized sphere of light and illuminated my surroundings. The interviewers gasped in awe.

"Wow!"

"Marvelous…"

“What a divine glow!”

I was relieved by their positive responses, and wondered if they’d never seen light magic before. *It’s an unusual element, after all.* However, one interviewer looked at me sternly and gave words of critique, shattering my sense of relief.

“I-It’s true that light magic is rare, but we’ve only been shown one ball of light.”

*Weren’t you amazed by the magic you saw earlier?*

“I’m aware that a sage was expelled from the Committee a while ago. I believe he used light magic as well. It’s indeed unusual, but I don’t think he should unconditionally be allowed to enter Class A just because of his element,” the interviewer said.

This comment rubbed me the wrong way. The interviewer had snubbed not only light magic, but my master as well. I didn’t much mind what anyone said about me, but I couldn’t forgive them for insulting my master.

I silently looked over to Macbell, who shared the same master as me. He seemed displeased by this comment as well. He locked eyes with me as though to signal, “Show ’em what you’ve got!”

*All right. Since I’ve gotten his approval too, I’ll show them what I can do.*

“It seems some people aren’t satisfied by this, so please allow me to show off one more spell,” I said.

“Hm, are you sure? I’m sorry about the inconvenience,” the interviewer who sat in the middle said. They apologized on behalf of their colleague who’d given a rude remark.

“Here I go.”

I exhaled and concentrated to tap into my magical energy. I usually had a tight plug on it, but I slowly allowed some of the energy deep inside of me to seep into my body and flow outwards. *Not yet. Store a bit more of your energy. A bit more.*

“All right, this should do it,” I said.

I took all my stored energy and released it in one go. *Take this, you overly critical interviewer!*

“Hah!”

In an instant, the room was saturated with magical energy. The walls and floors started to crack as the interviewers fell from their seats. Vast amounts of magical energy didn’t need to be converted into a spell to have an effect on people and objects.

For magicians, who were sensitive to magic, this feeling was equivalent to pouring a bucket of water over their heads. The other interviewers also widened their eyes in shock.

"Such dense magical energy! I-I've never seen a student like this before!"

"But this isn't a spell, is it?"

"What should we do about these walls?"

As they were fumbling around in panic, I showed off my spell.

"*Ra Heal!*"

Particles of light discharged from my hands and melted into the cracked walls and floors, which then began to return to their original state. The interviewers could only gasp with awe.

"I'd only heard about it, but I never thought it could repair objects as well! Light magic is indeed amazing."

While water and tree magic had healing spells, only light magic could restore lifeless objects and items. It was a special, unique kind of power that had no replacement. While repairing wouldn't have much effect if I didn't fully understand the constitution of my target, it was far easier to heal walls than humans. The interviewer who'd mocked light magic moments before was at a loss for words, and was unable to rebuke my abilities. *Heh, serves you right!*

"That was wonderful, Callus. Your power is the real deal. I didn't think we'd have *two* students who could use light magic in our academy. I think it's simply unprecedented. Please, do your best to hone your abilities," an interviewer said.

"Huh? R-Right, of course!" I replied. *There's two light magic users?*

I left the room, confused by these words. *Who's the other one? I need to find out later.*

***

The moment I left the building after the interview, the senior apprentice caught up to me.

"Callus, you overdid it!" Macbell scolded me.

The interviews for the referrals were put on hold for a short while as we took a break. *I did make someone faint, after all.*

"But didn't you want me to show them my powers?" I asked.

"I never told you to go that far," he replied, then sighed. "I do feel a bit better, though. That jerk mocked Sir Gourley without

knowing a thing. He got what he deserved."

Though Master had been chased out of the Committee, Macbell still respected him, and he would even come by for a visit on occasion. I knew that he was extremely loyal to our master.

"Pffft! Did you see the look on his face?! He was foaming at the mouth! That was great!" Cryssie found the whole thing humorous, and had been laughing since we left the interview.

*People are looking, though. It's so embarrassing.*

"Will I be okay? What if I made them angry and they cancel my admittance?" I asked.

"Don't worry, I won't let that happen. Besides, the other interviewers had a positive impression of you. Must be thanks to *Ra Heal*," Macbell replied.

Reassured, I decided to ask him another question. "Didn't they say that there was another light magic user in this academy? What was that all about?"

"Oh, you mean the saint. She entered our academy last year from a different nation. She's a virtuous person, and her skills put even an instructor to shame. But whenever she comes up in discussion, that interviewer always expresses his disdain."

"No wonder he had a bad opinion of light magic. But isn't his hatred completely unjustified?"

It seemed unreasonable to resent someone who had done absolutely nothing wrong. A student with that kind of behavior was bad enough, but it was simply unacceptable for a teacher to have this mindset.

"I know this is shameful for me to admit, but there are some good-for-nothing teachers out there. Well, the vast majority are fine, so there's nothing for you to worry about. If you ever get picked on like that again, tell me immediately, and I'll take care of it."

"All right, I understand." I nodded at my senior's comforting words.

*A saint who can use light magic, huh? I'd like to meet her one day.* I had another thing to look forward to.

"Er, we're done for now, right? What should we do?" I asked.

The results of the interview would be out tomorrow, so we had the rest of the day to ourselves.

"Why don't we leave the academy for now? We can think

about what to do then," Cryssie suggested.

"Good idea."

We walked together as I thought of places to visit on our way home. Suddenly, someone stepped in front of us.

"You're..."

It was Jack, the boy we had met during the interview. He glared at me with a solemn expression. *Did I make him angry somehow?*

"Um, what—"

"Hey, you!" he barked, cutting me off. He grabbed my shoulders and stared me down. "You're awesome!"

"Huh?" Words of praise were the last thing I'd expected to hear.

"When I first met you, I knew that you weren't just a normal person," he rattled on. "You even silenced that nasty interviewer! Your courage was amazing!"

"Th-Thank you." Apparently he had taken an unexpected liking to me.

"From what I can see, you, me, and that red-haired chick have all made it to Class A! That'll make us classmates. Look forward to learning with ya, Callus!"

"I think it's a bit too early for us to be making assumptions, but all right. The pleasure is mine."

I shook hands with the person who was likely my first classmate. He was a bit rowdy, but he seemed like a nice guy. *I hope we can be good friends.*

"So why don't we go out and splurge on a meal to celebrate our friendship? I've looked into some cheap, delicious restaurants within the royal capital!" Jack said.

"I'm in. I haven't eaten out in Laxus yet," I replied.

I'd bought some snacks from stalls, but I had yet to enter a restaurant for a full meal. I was excited to finally experience it.

"All right then. If it's your first time, I think the Golden Apple House is a good place. Their meat dishes are delicious."

Jack was apparently rather well-informed, and he introduced me to a few places. I was impressed; he wasn't even from Laxus, yet he had access to all sorts of knowledge.

"Hey! Stop chatting away with just the two of you! Take me there too!" Cryssie insisted, butting in and slinging her arm around my shoulders.

Cryssie wasn't shy, and she often made physical contact with

me. A nice, faint aroma from her made it tough for me to remain calm. I was going through puberty, after all.

“Nice! Then let’s all go together! This’ll be fun!” Jack said, leading the way.

We had a nice meal at the Golden Apple House and engaged in pleasant conversation. For the first time in my life, I was able to eat outside with friends. I had so much fun that I lost track of the time. After we ate, we went around to a few spots that Jack recommended, and before I knew it, it was getting dark out. *Time flies when you’re having fun.*

“I had fun today. I’ll see you all at the academy,” I said, parting ways with my two friends. As I started heading home, I realized something important. “I think I told Shizuku that I’d be home early today.”

My blood ran cold. Shizuku rarely got angry, but when she did, she was terrifying. She wouldn’t yell at me, but her fury would boil in silence, causing my stomach to ache.

“I need to get back, and fast!”

I strengthened my body with magic and raced home as night fell over the city.

***

“Hmph.”

When I got home, Shizuku was waiting for me with a pout. She was clearly sulking, and I knew from experience that it was hard to change her mood when she got into this state.

“I’m sorry. I lost track of time because I was so happy to make a new friend. I’ll apologize as many times as it takes, so please don’t be so angry,” I said.

“I’m not angry,” she said. “But perhaps my love for you has waned.”

“You’re *definitely* angry.”

Even *Ra Heal* couldn’t improve another’s mood. I was at a loss. Unable to find a solution, I used my trump card.

“Shizuku, I actually have something good for you.”

“You can’t buy me with things. I’m not that cheap,” she said, but her tone suddenly changed. “Huh?!”

I showed her a bottle of high-quality wine that I had snuck out from the manor. Shizuku was a sucker for alcohol. She’d drink in perpetuity if she didn’t exercise self-control. She usually

restrained herself, but she'd down quite a few glasses with a cool face during parties. Out of all the types of alcohol, red wine was her favorite. She'd been so busy recently that she hadn't been able to drink, so this was surely an enticing gift.

"H-Heh heh, please don't take me lightly, Prince Callus. I won't lose to alcohol," she said, her eyebrows twitching.

She was trying extremely hard to hold herself back, but for now, she was winning against temptation. Her resolve was the real deal.

"Wh-Why are you being so obstinate?" I asked.

"If I remain in a bad mood, you'll continue to worry about me for at least the next three days. I won't miss this golden opportunity."

Her face was as composed as ever, but her reasoning was rather silly. *If she wants me to pay more attention to her, she should just say so. She's so clumsy and awkward. But now that I know what she wants, I can grant her wish and improve her mood.*

"Okay then, why don't we have a drink together?" I said.

"Are you sure?" She looked at me wide-eyed.

I didn't drink often. I didn't hate the taste of alcohol, but I got drunk quite easily and often turned it down. Shizuku knew of this, and had made sure to not drink by my side. *She should be happy about this invitation...I think.*

"Let's do it right away," she said.

Before I knew it, she held two glasses and some snacks in her hand. She was quick to prepare, but I was glad that she looked much happier.

"Why don't we drink outside? The wind might feel nice," I suggested.

"That's a wonderful idea."

The house's front yard wasn't large enough to run around in, but there was ample space to easily fit a table and a few chairs for a meal.

"All right then. Cheers," I said.

We clinked our glasses and enjoyed the wine outside. It was delicious and easy to drink, attesting to its quality. I had to be careful to not drink too much, though.

While I was slowly enjoying my alcohol, Shizuku's glass was already empty. But instead of pouring herself another, she stared at her empty glass. *What's wrong?*

"Come on, Shizuku. I'll pour you some more. Could you hand

me your glass?" I said.

"Ah, right. My deepest apologies."

However, she didn't put her lips to her filled glass. She just continued to stare with a nostalgic expression.

"What's wrong? Does it not suit your taste?" I asked.

"Not at all! It's very delicious, of course."

"Then what is it?"

"Um, I'm not sure how to phrase this well, but I was once again thinking how it feels like a dream to experience a day like this." She put her glass on the table and continued. "Five years ago, I wouldn't have even dreamed of enjoying a drink with you outside of the manor."

"Yeah. If my master hadn't come, it would've never happened. I would've died inside the manor."

On the day I had been sentenced with six months left to live, my fate changed completely when I met my master. I was now able to walk outside, attend school, and even make new friends. I knew that I was truly blessed. Had I told my past self about this day, he would've spurned me and said that it was impossible. It was truly a miracle that I was here today.

"Thus, I'm genuinely happy right now. Please allow me to support you by your side," she said.

As I saw her kind smile, I felt my heart jump. *Huh? What is this? It doesn't feel like a curse or anything.*

"You dolt! You're so dense!" Selena suddenly insulted me.

*Me? Dense? There's no way. My partner's so rude. But what was that all about? I can't even look directly at her face. This feels weird.*

"Is something the matter, Prince Callus?"

"N-Nothing at all! L-Let's look at the stars! They're so pretty!" I hastily looked up.

The night sky of Laxus wasn't as pretty as the view from the manor, but it was still a lovely sight to behold. These stars looked so small, but recent discoveries had revealed that each star was actually very large. *Researching stars seems pretty cool. I hope I can learn about them at school.*

"The starry sky is indeed beautiful, but the view from the royal capital shows where it's lacking," Shizuku said.

"Yeah, it's such a shame," I replied.

A piece of the night sky seemed to be missing, a circular shape with no stars at all. It was as though that area had been gouged out, or something dark was floating in front of the stars

to block the view.

"This area, the Star Absence, is not fully understood to this day. I hope they unravel this mystery while I'm still alive," I said.

We enjoyed the stars of the night sky, and found that they paired perfectly with the wine.

***

The next day, I rubbed my slightly throbbing head as I woke up. I had tried to be careful, but it seemed I'd had a bit too much to drink. Today was the day I'd get my results.

"*Ra Heal*," I chanted, putting my hand over my head.

The pain vanished instantly, and my head felt clear. *Phew, good.*

"Like heck it is! Don't use light magic to cure your hangover, you scamp!"

"Morning, Selena," I said, skillfully ignoring her biting remark.

As I left my room, I was greeted by a lovely aroma from the kitchen.

"Good morning, Prince Callus. Breakfast will be ready soon. Please have a cup of coffee while you're waiting," Shizuku said.

"Thank you."

I went outside and brought in a newspaper called the *Royal Capital Times* before I settled down in my chair. I sipped my coffee while reading the paper, something that had become my morning routine ever since moving here. There were details about matters pertaining to Laxus, monsters in the surrounding area, and the state of affairs of other nations. It was chock full of information that stimulated my brain.

"Oh, there's a huge article about the results of the entrance exams of the academy," I murmured. *Seems like the Academy of Magic is at the center of attention for residents in the royal capital. The academy does cover almost the entire eastern region of the city, after all.*

"I'm a little nervous. I hope I can make it to Class A."

Even if I ended up in Class B, I could still be promoted if I maintained good grades. But I didn't want to be separated from Cryssie and Jack, and I hoped that we all made it to Class A. While I was finishing breakfast with these thoughts in mind, I heard a loud voice.

"Callus! I'm here!"

The front door opened with a bang. I'd forgotten to lock it after I took the newspaper in.

"Oh, you're awake. Very good. I'm proud of you!" Cryssie said upon entering the house. It was still morning, but she was bursting with energy.

"Good morning, Cryssie. Is anything the matter?" I asked.

"I came to pick you up so that we can go to the academy together, of course."

I was fine meeting with her at school, but it seemed she wasn't satisfied with that arrangement. I hastily got prepared while Shizuku and Cryssie glared at each other. *Are they going to...?*

"Oh my, I didn't think you were here, Lady Crys. You sure are energetic so early in the morning," Shizuku said.

"Thank you. I shall take it upon myself to safely take Callus to the academy. Please be at ease. ♪"

The two continued to glare at each other menacingly. *They're so scary.*

"Sir Callus, why don't I give you my usual send-off routine?" Shizuku said.

"Huh?" I asked, tilting my head at her words. I didn't remember us having anything like that.

Ignoring my confusion, she came up and hugged me tightly. "Goodbye, Sir Callus."

I felt something soft and warm throughout my body. I'd heard that hugs could soothe people, and I oddly felt much better.

"We don't usually do *this*, do we?!" I asked.

"Is that so?" Shizuku replied with a straight face.

While she was playing dumb, I tried to release myself from her embrace. But I couldn't wriggle away from her powerful grip, and she only squeezed harder.

"Sh-Shizuku, you're too strong!"

Cryssie's anger boiled over, and she pulled me away from my maid with incredible force.

"Wh-What are you two doing?! You're ready, aren't you, Callus?! Let's go!" she said.

"I-I-I know! I'll see you later, Shizuku!" I called.

"Do be careful," Shizuku replied.

I rushed out the door while Cryssie pulled my hand. *It's been a tough morning.* There were already many people outside, all headed for the academy. While a majority of them were

students, I saw some adults mixed in the crowd as well.

"What are those people up to?" I wondered.

"Many of them try to recruit students who pass the exam. From researchers to religious groups, a lot of organizations are understaffed. Be careful not to get roped into some weirdo's schemes," Cryssie said.

"Right. I'll be on guard."

I was curious about what someone might recruit me for, but I chose to focus on my academy life first. It wouldn't be too late for me to enter those groups after I graduated.

"Whoa, look at all those people," I said.

Huge crowds were swarming the front of the academy gates. As we pushed through, we finally made it in front of a large canvas the results were written on. Fighting my thumping heart, I searched for my name. *Please say I passed. Please say I passed.*

"Ah, found it!" I said.

My name was under Class A, along with Cryssie and Jack. We'd all safely made it to the same class.

"We did it, Cryss—"

"Eek! Yay! We did it! We're all in Class A!" she squealed as she threw her arms around me.

My face was pushed against her soft bosom, but Cryssie was too elated to notice. *People are staring at us. This is so embarrassing...*

"C-Cryssie, you're pushing me against—"

"Hm? Against what?! Ack!"

Finally coming to her senses, she released me from her grasp. *Phew, this is bad for my heart.*

"You pervert," she said, glaring up at me with a red face.

*A horrible false accusation. But Sirius told me that it's important to swallow my tears and accept the insult, or I'll be no good. It's so hard to be a gentleman.*

"There you two are!" Jack said, making his appearance. Apparently he had already seen the results, and was in high spirits. "Glad to see we all passed. Hope we can remain friends!"

"Same here. I'm already excited," I replied.

We again exchanged a handshake. I was eager to lead a fun campus life.

"The people who passed can get their uniforms and textbooks over there. Hurry up and get it over with so we can grab some grub," Jack said.

“All right. But I’ll need to take my leave a bit early today,” I replied. I didn’t want to make Shizuku mad again, and I didn’t have much wine in stock for if I did.

“Huh? How boring. Oh, I know! Why don’t you stay at my place, Callus?” Cryssie said teasingly with a smile.

“Ha ha, don’t say something so scary,” I replied. *I can only imagine how Shizuku would react if I decided to stay over.*

We tried to walk over to get our uniforms, but we’d been so caught up in our banter that we hadn’t noticed the people surrounding us, all pushing papers in our hands with something written on them.

“Hey, are you interested in astrology? I’m from the Astrology Committee.”

“How about politics? I can teach you the charms of democracy!”

“Do you have any troubles? Why not join the Blaues Licht Faith?”

We were being recruited at an alarming rate. *I’d been warned about this, but I didn’t think they’d be this aggressive!* As the wave of recruiters closed in, someone rushed towards us.

“Hey! I’ve told you people already! No recruiting on campus!” Macbell roared.

The moment they saw his face, the recruiters fled in an instant. *So they didn’t even receive permission?*

“Good grief. They’re all so troublesome, trespassing on school property like that,” Macbell said wearily.

They’d apparently paid no heed to the numerous warnings and decided to cause trouble anyways.

“Oh, if it isn’t Callus. Congratulations on getting to Class A. I welcome you,” he said.

“Thank you. I’m relieved that I was accepted,” I replied.

He remembered Cryssie and Jack as well, and congratulated them on their acceptance too. *He’s pretty suited to being a teacher. I guess he’s found his calling here.* Though Macbell was Master’s apprentice, he couldn’t use light magic. Rather, it was a water spirit that possessed him.

“Callus, could I have a word?” Macbell asked.

“Sure,” I replied.

After he finished talking with the others, he led me a short distance away to speak with me in private.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

“It probably won’t be an issue, but please don’t mention your relationship with Sir Gourley within this academy, okay?”

“I didn’t plan to, but is there a problem with that?”

“Sir Gourley’s position is a little complicated. People usually don’t get their names scrubbed from the Committee for no reason. Like you saw yesterday, some people will assume the worst and speak ill of him without knowing the full story,” he replied solemnly.

“Oh, like that interviewer.” Just remembering him made me irritated.

“Right. Of course, there are many who still support Sir Gourley, and he’s respected by a lot of people. But differences in opinion about him have split people into two factions, and it’s even caused altercations to break out every now and then. I’m his apprentice, so I often get wrapped into these quarrels.”

Macbell was practically the only one aware of the entire situation. He knew that I was cursed and that I was a prince, and that Master had fought back against the chairman of the Committee as well. None of this had been publicized, and it was kept top secret.

“Be careful. I understand your circumstances, but try not to stand out too much. You already attract enough attention as it is for being a light magician,” he said.

“Thank you for your concern. I’ll do my best.”

“I-I’m not concerned! I just don’t want you to drag me into your mess!” Macbell hastily replied, turning away. “But if you have any issues, let me know immediately. Sir Gourley left you in my care, so I’ll do whatever I can to support you.”

He turned on his heels and left. His words were a bit rough, but he was a kind person, and was certainly worried about me.

“I’m really blessed by the people around me,” I said to myself, and walked back towards my friends.

***

“How do I look? Is it weird?” I asked.

I wore my uniform and anxiously stepped in front of Shizuku, who then snapped numerous photos of me.

This camera was a magical tool created with the latest technology. It could capture images via its lens and print them onto paper while looking exactly like the real thing. It was a

revolutionary invention, and although it had only been created recently, it was already playing a huge role in various fields.

Newspapers were now filled with pictures, and the camera had given birth to a new profession known as modeling, where people posted glamorous pictures of themselves to gain popularity. Adventurers who traveled the world claimed that cameras were a necessity, and I was certain that the tool would continue to be convenient in the future as well. *Is it okay for her to take so many pictures? The paper processed with magical energy to develop them is probably quite expensive.* I was worried about Shizuku's wallet.

"You look lovely. Ah, could you strike a pose, if you would? Very good. Could you look up a little more? Perfect," Shizuku said while snapping my pictures.

We ended up getting carried away with it, until Cryssie popped in.

"...Why are you guys having a photo shoot so early in the morning?" she asked, also wearing her uniform. I thought she looked good in hers too.

"Sorry. I'll get ready," I said.

Cryssie was staying in the dorms on campus, but she had come all the way out here to pick me up. I couldn't allow her to be late for the entrance ceremony because of me. But as I hurried to get ready, Shizuku was once again provoking the girl.

"My goodness, Lady Crys. If you have any complaints, I suppose you won't need any of these pictures," she said.

"Huh?! What are you talking about?" Cryssie replied.

*Ugh... They're at it again. I need to stop them.*

"And? How much do I need to pay you? I have money to spare," Cryssie finished.

*Or not, I guess. Wait, why is there a demand for my photos?*

"Hm, it's good to see some obedience out of you. As a special reward, maybe I can show you a few," Shizuku replied.

"My, aren't you kind."

"Even if I give some away, I've still got my *Sir Callus's Photo Album ~His Glittering Growth Diary~* so it's no big deal."

Shizuku produced a book with a cover that read *Vol. 348.*

"Whoa, how many pictures *do* you have? That's an incredible amount."

*Th-That number can't be right...can it?!*

"Cryssie, why are you getting carried away too? Let's go!" I

said, tugging her hand.

“I-I know! I want this one and this one, so leave these for me!” Cryssie said as she reluctantly left.

My house was lively today too.

***

At the entrance ceremony, we received a long speech from the headmaster. I learned some interesting stories, like how this academy had been established, but Cryssie and Jack fell asleep almost immediately. I supposed it was boring for them.

After the ceremony was over, we set foot into our classroom, labeled *1-A* by a sign outside. I had been told that only the most talented students could enter this class. I was excited to be exposed to new kinds of magic, but I had one more surprise waiting for me.

“All right! To your seats, everyone!” Macbell said as he entered our room.

To my shock, he was my homeroom teacher. I felt lucky to have someone I knew be in charge of me, but I needed to be careful when calling out his name. I’d need to refer to him as “sir” from now on.

“I’m your homeroom teacher, Macbell. Looking forward to being with you all for a year.” He quickly bowed his head and proceeded to provide some information. “As you all may be aware, everyone in this class can already perform basic magic spells. Thus, we won’t be spending time on any elementary lessons like the other classes. We’ll be starting with pretty difficult material instead, but you don’t have to attend.”

The class started to chatter in confusion. What could he have meant by that?

“Oh, don’t misunderstand. It doesn’t mean that you guys can skip classes as much as you want. It’s quite the opposite. You won’t be able to advance to the next year if all you do is show up. The other classes require students to also get decent grades on tests. Students from Class A will be required to show results three times a year,” Macbell said.

Students talked amongst themselves again, thoroughly perplexed. This was starting to get strangely complicated. *What does he mean by ‘results’?*

“For example, you might create new spells or potions, or find

unknown plants or historical structures. You could even construct a new magic theory. Anything goes, as long as you can create something new. I want you all to surprise us instructors, and only those that can do so three times within a year will advance to the next grade. If you cannot, you must either repeat the year or fall to Class B and follow their progression."

*I see. This sounds tough.* It was clear that being adept at magic wasn't the only requirement for advancing a grade in Class A.

"In general, only around half the class will maintain their status and advance to the next year. By the third year, only a quarter of you will remain, and only half of that will make it to graduation. But should you all deliver excellent results, you will all be able to graduate together. It might be tough, but I wish you all luck, and will provide support to the best of my abilities. If you don't want to go through all this, you may transfer to Class B. Feel free to let me know at any time," Macbell said.

All the students looked dead serious. It seemed incredibly difficult to graduate while maintaining Class A status.

"Students who deliver excellent results in Class B will be promoted to Class A. Just because you fell to B once, it doesn't mean that it's the end. You can still make your way back up. There are other ways to make it to Class A, but since those aren't pertinent to any of you, I suppose I'll cut this short."

I had a tough road ahead of me, but I was excited as well. I firmly believed that I could grow and mature at this academy.

***

A week had already passed since starting school. Because my master had taught me so much about magic, I had little trouble keeping up with my lessons. However, the same couldn't be said for Jack.

"Ugh, today's lesson was as confusing as ever," he said with a frown. He bit into a sandwich that he had purchased from the student store.

We were eating lunch at a table in the campus courtyard. Jack sat across from me, and Cryssie was to my left.

"But that was a difficult lesson. There was even some information about alchemy that I found confusing," I replied.

"Right?! Right?! I *knew* you'd get me, Callus! Hey, can I have a bite?"

“Nope.”

These were completely separate matters, and I wasn’t about to let my guard down. I couldn’t hand Shizuku’s homemade lunch over so easily. A few days ago, Jack had been unable to purchase food from the store, so I’d given him some of mine. He’d taken a liking to the taste, and he’d been aiming for my lunch like a hyena ever since. My lunch *was* delicious, so I understood his eagerness, but it was also something I looked forward to each day. Shizuku woke up early to specially make it for me, so I couldn’t just give it to my friend for free.

“Dang it. Guess it won’t be that easy. Oh, I know! How about an exchange: some food for some information?” Jack suggested.

“Information?” I repeated.

Jack was friendly and could get along with anybody, so he had access to all sorts of information throughout the academy. He knew it all: the balance of power between classes, the friend circles of famous students, the best places to ditch class, and the seven mysteries of the academy. I felt that he should channel that passion into his studies, but I had to accept that everyone had their own strengths and weaknesses. Jack was no exception.

“I see. Well, I *am* curious, but wouldn’t you rather make a deal for help with your studies instead of food?” I said.

“Ugh… You’re right. All right, Callus! I’ll tell you something fun, so help me study!” Jack replied. He beautifully prostrated himself on top of his seat.

I would have helped him even if he hadn’t offered me anything, but curiosity had gotten the best of me.

“And? What do you have?” I asked.

“You know that big old clock tower in this academy? There’s apparently someone living in there.”

On campus stood a magnificent clock tower whose bells rang every four hours to notify us of the time. I’d seen it up close before, as it piqued my interest.

“But isn’t it locked? And with a heavy one, at that. I don’t think you’re allowed to go inside,” I said.

“Well, that’s the thing. That lock apparently wasn’t made by the academy. A certain student closed off that area so that they could remain as a shut-in inside.”

“Wait, so a single student decided to completely occupy the clock tower? Wouldn’t the school see that as a big problem?”

“I hear the student’s a bit special, and the teachers can’t

reprimand them too harshly. And since there isn't much of anything else inside the clock tower, the occupant is just being left alone."

"Huh. That's interesting."

"Right? The other students call this person the 'Clock Tower Hermit.' Why don't you drop by if you're curious?"

I'd already decided to do so. I wanted to know about a student that even the teachers couldn't do anything about. *I'd love to meet them!*

"All right. A deal's a deal. Let me have some of your lunch," Jack said.

"Hey! Don't take my food without permission, or I won't help you study!" I said.

"C-Come on! Give me a break! Here, I'll give you some of my bread!"

While Jack and I were chattering away, Cryssie gave us a side glance.

"Boys are so stupid," she said wearily.

***

After school, I decided to head to the clock tower alone.

"Wow, it's massive."

There were plenty of large buildings on the Academy of Magic campus, but the clock tower was one of the biggest and most eye-catching. I never would've imagined a student using this building all for themselves.

"All right. I guess I'll enter."

I approached the tower and looked at the door, which was covered by a large lock. I glanced around, hoping for another way in, but I couldn't find any. The window was too high, so the door was the only way to enter. I could've used my magic to climb up, but I didn't think there was any need to attempt something so dangerous.

"Okay, here I go!"

I held the lock in my hand and examined its structure. This wasn't a normal one; it was a special type of lock called a magic lock. Normal locks needed a key, but magical ones could only be unlocked by pouring magic into them in a specific way. One needed to understand the structure of the item and delicately control their magical energy to open it. Even master lockpicks

didn’t stand a chance against these. Some magic locks would even spring traps if mistakes were made, so I needed to be careful.

“Selena, can I ask for some help?”

My partner suddenly appeared. “Huh, so *this* is a magic lock. I’ve never seen one before.” She stared at the lock with great interest.

I’d already asked Macbell and the other teachers for permission to be here. If I hadn’t, Selena wouldn’t have agreed to help.

“You think you can do it?” I asked.

“Give me a second… Yah!” She fired some light from her fingertips which enveloped the lock. “Hm, I see.”

“You think you can open it?”

“Maybe it’s too complex for a human, but for a spirit like me, I could undo this with my eyes closed. Here, I’ll give you instructions, so try it out.”

“Thanks.”

I stuck my finger into the keyhole and directed my magic as instructed.

“A little to the right here. Stop when you hear a click. Then swirl it around inside, and…done,” she said.

A large clack echoed through the air, and the lock opened. *Whew, that was a little tough.* I was glad that Selena was by my side.

“Thanks, Selena. You’re a big help.”

“You’re welcome. Let’s go inside.”

I opened the crudely fitted door and stepped inside.

“Pardon my intrusion,” I gingerly called out.

The building was dark inside, so I activated *Rai Lo* to get a better view.

“Wow, it’s filled with stuff.”

Quite frankly, the clock tower was a mess. Every time I took a step, dust rose into the air. Books and suspicious-looking tools cluttered the floor, likely the belongings of the Clock Tower Hermit. Since there was a magic lock on the front door, it was safe to assume that this person had extensive knowledge about magic.

“Hm… There’s no one here.”

I took a quick sweep around the room, but I couldn’t feel anyone’s presence. As I was feeling disappointed for wasting my

time on a rumor, I suddenly heard a large clatter from above.

"I haven't checked the room above me yet. Since I've gone this far, I might as well."

Though a little scared, I chose to go to the floor above. I found some stairs in the corner of the room and slowly made my way up. The wooden floorboards creaked with every step I took.

"Ugh, these boards will crack at any moment now."

It was clear that nobody had repaired the clock tower for a while. *But why does the academy allow a person to stay here? Even if no one generally uses this building, it's unnatural to allow a single student to do as they please.*

When I got to the second floor, I was shocked by the view.

"Whoa!" I yelped.

I was greeted by walls covered in equations and formulas. Mysterious magical tools and shady potions scattered the floor. It looked like a small research facility. I would've never guessed the clock tower hid such a secret.

"I wondered who undid the magic lock, but I didn't think it was a student," a young girl's voice suddenly filled the room.

I looked up in shock and hastily glanced around the room, but no one was to be seen. *Wh-Where did that voice come from?*

"Over here. I'm right next to you," she said.

The voice indeed sounded close by, but I couldn't see anyone. Thinking she might've turned invisible or blended in with her surroundings, I heightened my vigilance and looked around carefully, but I still couldn't see anyone.

"Where are you looking?! Down here!" she said irritably.

"Huh? Down?" I said, slowly lowering my gaze.

There was a girl that looked younger than ten with striking, fluffy, chestnut-colored hair.

"Welcome to my lab. I am Saria Lulumitt, the master of the clock tower."

The small girl was dressed in a white lab coat that was clearly too large for her. *How odd.* She was clearly younger than me, but she sounded calm, intelligent, and mature.

"Um, are you the Clock Tower Hemit?" I asked.

"Hm, I don't ever remember calling myself that, but it's true that a lot of students have given me that nickname. How rude to be called a hermit."

It seemed she was the person I was looking for. Upon closer inspection, I noticed that she was wearing the academy's

uniform under the loose-fitting lab coat. I was able to confirm that she was a student here, but I still had a question remaining.

"Um, I thought you needed to be fifteen to enroll in this academy. I hope this isn't rude of me to say, but you seem much younger than that, Saria."

"Hm, what an honest and fitting question. You ask why a young, genius lady is holed up in the clock tower."

"Sure..." *I didn't really think the "genius" bit, but I'll let it slide.*

"You're the first student who's undone the magic lock. Personally, I'm rather interested in you as well. I don't mind telling you, but...I'm in the middle of an important experiment right now. Could I ask you to leave for today?"

With that, she turned on her heels and retreated to a room deeper inside. I tried to chase after her, but bumped my forehead on something hard.

"Ow," I murmured while rubbing my head.

I looked in front of me, but there was nothing there.

"Huh? I thought I just bumped into something."

I slowly reached out and touched an invisible, hard surface. This was a barrier made from magic. I gave it a few small knocks to confirm its sturdiness. *This looks pretty tough.*

"That barrier's made from a magical tool. You won't be able to break it so easily. I recommend you leave before you hurt yourself," Saria said.

On the other side of the wall, I noticed an item making a peculiar sound. That was what must have created the wall.

"Um, is there any way for me to talk with you?" I asked.

"Oh? You want to talk with this genius girl that badly, do you? I'd be happy to hear your thoughts, but I'm busy. Come again another day. Although, if you can break that barrier, I suppose I could reconsider."

Saria proceeded to fiddle with some magical tools at the end of the room. I'd come this far, and I wasn't about to turn back without getting any answers.

"All right. Give me a moment," I said.

"Huh?" She looked at me with her mouth agape as I put my hand on the barrier.

"*Ra Daziel*." A wave of light emanated from my hand and melted into the barrier. The light crawled throughout the barrier, notifying me of the type of magic used in its construction.

"This structure is similar to a magic lock. If that's the case..." I

muttered. I could disarm this tool in a similar fashion; there was no need for me to brute-force my way through. “Selena, could I ask for your support?”

“Of course. Leave that to me,” she replied.

Together, we poured our magic into the barrier. Though it was a bit more complicated than the magic lock, I still managed to deactivate it.

“I’m honestly surprised,” Saria said as she saw the barrier fade.

*Will she talk to me now?*

“Humans are creatures bound by fixed ideas or stereotypes. A lock should be unlocked, and a barrier should be broken. Most of them go with this line of thought, but you found the structure of the barrier and managed to deactivate it. Wonderful. I’m even more interested in you now,” she said.

With her large coat dragging behind her, she approached me and jumped onto a tall chair.

“Good. This makes it easier for us to talk, no?”

Saria and I were finally at the same height as she pointed her haggard eyes towards me.

“Now, allow me to introduce myself once more. I’m Saria Lulumitt. I’m the master of this Clock Tower Laboratory.”

“I’m Callus Leyd from Class 1-A.”

“Ah, a freshman, I see. Then you’re a grade below me. I’m from Class 2-A.”

“Um, I’m a bit curious, but aren’t you younger than me, Saria? Or are you from a species that ages slowly?”

This world was filled with nonhuman species including elves, dwarves, lizardmen, and beastfolk. Saria looked to be a human like me at first glance, but there was a good chance that she was from a different species, which would have explained the disparity between her age and appearance. Elves, in particular, lived a lot longer than humans.

“Nope. I’m an honest-to-goodness ordinary human,” she replied.

“Wait, really? Then why are you in your second year while you—pardon my rudeness—look so small?” I asked.

“It’s a long story, but I suppose I’ve got the time. It’ll be my way of thanking you for going out of your way to come here.”

She poured herself some coffee out of a shady-looking device. The alcohol lamp boiled some water in a round glass container,

and the hot water rose up a glass tube into a different glass vessel on top. It mixed with the powdered coffee and slowly changed color. *I didn't think you could make coffee like that.*

"Here, have a drink. There aren't any odd chemicals in here. You've got nothing to fear," she said.

She poured the coffee into a flask and put it in front of me. Had she put it in a mug, it would've looked more normal, but now it felt like I was just drinking some kind of experimental drug.

"R-Right. Thank you," I said. I was a bit reluctant at first, but I gulped it down. "Oh, this is delicious."

"It is, isn't it? I can't cook, but I'm picky when it comes to coffee," Saria replied.

The drink looked awful, but the taste was superb. It had a deep richness combined with gentle, mellow notes. *Still looks so weird, though.*

"Now, where shall I start? Perhaps from four years ago, when I first entered this academy," she said.

"F-Four years ago?!" I sputtered. Coffee went everywhere.

"That's right. It's not three or five years, but four."

"But aren't you in your second year? The numbers don't add up!"

"That's simple," Saria replied, looking proud. "I've been in the same grade thrice already."

"I don't get it anymore."

This small girl, who was supposedly an upperclassman, had repeated a year not once, but twice. I couldn't keep up with this. Since she'd entered four years ago, she should be nineteen, but she looked about ten years younger than that.

"Wait, you can repeat the year while maintaining your Class A status? I heard that you'd be dropped to Class B if you can't pass the periodic screenings," I said.

"Ah, well, that's because I've passed those screenings. But each time, I refuse to move up a grade. When I first made this request, the instructor's face was a work of art. I was told that no one had ever willingly asked to repeat a year." Saria gave a hearty laugh.

"But won't it negatively affect future job opportunities if you continue to repeat the year? Why did you willingly choose that route?"

"There's a very simple answer to that, my dear junior: I can

research freely while I'm at this academy. There's nothing more wonderful than that. I can use whatever tools I like whenever I want, and there are plenty of books here. If I file a request, my research fees will be covered. To abandon this environment would be the height of folly."

She talked in a fast-paced manner, and I could tell that she was truly dedicated to her research. *This academy probably lets her do as she pleases because she's so capable. Any normal person would just be reprimanded.*

"But if you're good enough to maintain your Class A status, couldn't you just work at a good research facility after you graduate? This academy does have items and tools at your disposal, but a proper research facility probably has more tools and staff members," I said.

"But if I do that, I'd have to...you know?" Saria mumbled.

I couldn't hear her at all. "Pardon? Sorry, what did you say?"

"If I do that, I'd have to work with other people, won't I?!"

I suddenly felt pity for her. *She's not just a shut-in, she's probably shy around strangers too.*

"That's right! As you can tell, I was born with crippling anxiety around strangers, to the point where I can't communicate with them! But so what?! I can do my research all on my own! Who needs other people?!" She gave a defiant belly laugh that was almost refreshing to hear.

"But even if the academy allows you to stay, you can't be here forever. It'll be difficult for you to stay when you become an adult," I said.

"Very perceptive! You get a gold star. I did think about that issue. I don't wish to be looked at by students with pitiful gazes that convey, 'How long does that person plan on staying here?' Hence, I created a medicine that allows me to retain my young form."

"Wait, you mean..."

"That's right. The person in front of you merely looks younger because of that medicine. It was my first attempt, so I suppose I've gotten a bit *too* young, but the experiment was a success."

I was shocked. Saria had created a medicine that returned her to a youthful form just to remain at this academy. Her motives may have been a bit odd, but it was amazing to see a student concoct such an item by herself.

"Is your research about potions and medicines?" I asked.

“Oh no, that medicine was just secondary. *This* is what I’m passionate about,” she said, placing a white rock on the table. It looked like an ordinary white stone, but I instantly recognized what it was. “You might not be familiar with it, but it’s called a Dwelling Stone. Some areas that still follow traditional customs will place offerings in front of the stone to express their gratitude towards spirits.”

I was more than familiar with this practice, and I’d done it on multiple occasions myself. *But I usually offer cakes and parfaits, so they’re nothing like normal offerings.*

“I’m using science and technology to do my research on magic. But the more I researched, the more I came to realize that there are creatures other than humans out there. Within the process we know as ‘magic,’ I kept receiving signs that there’s a third party who exerts their will to activate it. I hypothesized that this was the power of spirits. I’m unable to prove this just yet, but if we really *are* receiving aid from spirits, I’d like to see them one day. And before I knew it, my research had shifted to seeing spirits.”

Saria looked quite serious while explaining her goal. It was clear that she was truly passionate about spirits.

“Why do you want to see spirits so badly?” I asked.

“Doesn’t it seem lonely? They’re always by your side, lending you their powers, but you’re unable to see or hear them.”

Her words struck a chord in my heart. I’d had the same thoughts before. I could see and talk with my spirit and offer my gratitude to her, but others couldn’t do so; that was a rather lonely existence. If others were able to see spirits like me, I thought that it would be absolutely wonderful. I acted quickly.

“Saria, can I help out with your research?”

“Hm? I’m happy to hear you’re interested, but unfortunately, I’ve no need for extra hands. A light magic user is indeed rare, but I don’t think it’s imperative to my research.”

Her response was within my expectations. She was shy around strangers. Though she was willing to talk with me, she must’ve preferred to do her research alone. *But I’ve got an ace up my sleeve.*

“I can see spirits. Would I still be useless to your research?” I said.

She was so astonished that she dropped some test tubes onto her desk. They fell with a clatter and rolled across the table. She

didn't even attempt to pick them up as she stared at me with suspicion and curiosity. *Her feelings look to be evenly split.*

"You can see spirits? Hm, that's very, *very* intriguing...if you're telling the truth," she said. She gulped down the rest of her coffee and placed the empty beaker on her table. "I've read certain texts which say that in ancient times, humans were able to see spirits. However, even if you claim to be able to see them, I can't just simply believe you without any proof. Will you be able to show that skill to me?"

"I don't mind doing that, but how?"

It was difficult for me to prove that I could see spirits. It might have been simple if I could cast *Sylph Ring* on others, but the technique only seemed to work on me. I had even tried to test it on my master, but it hadn't activated.

"Could you use your powers to look at my spirit? Tell me what's possessing me. If I'm satisfied with your response, I'll believe you," she said.

"All right. If that's what it takes."

I glanced over at Selena and had her activate *Sylph Ring* for me. When I looked at Saria, I saw a large, blue, translucent, and mysterious creature flickering behind her. *I've seen this in a reference book before. It's from the ocean. I think its name was a...*

"Jellyfish?" I said questioningly.

*Right, that's what it is. An organism that floats around in the ocean.* A large jellyfish was floating around Saria.

"A jellyfish. I see," Saria said. She closed her eyes as though she was trying to remember something.

*Is she all right?* "Um, what's wrong?" I asked.

"A long time ago, when I was still a young child, my parents took me to the ocean."

*There's a large ocean in the western region of the Ledyvia Kingdom. Is she talking about that?* Of course, I had never gone there before.

"It's a bit embarrassing to admit, but I was sort of a tomboy back then. Whenever my parents weren't looking, I'd run off by myself. Oh, no need to point out how I'm still small today. I wouldn't do anything that thoughtless *now*," she said.

These words felt unfitting for someone who had repeated their grade thrice, but I refrained from making any comments, and decided to listen to her story.

"When I jumped into the ocean by myself, predictably, I

started to drown. Just when I thought it was all over and I couldn't be saved, a cold, squishy *something* reached out and grabbed my hand. Right before I lost consciousness, I remember seeing a blue tentacle. When I came to, I was lying on the beach. I had been saved by whatever it was," she said.

"I see."

There were numerous stories about spirits saving humans. I wasn't sure how, since spirits couldn't touch us, but I guessed that they might still possess powers we were completely unaware about.

"I wanted to know its identity for the longest time. I thought that I'd learn about it if I gathered knowledge, so I studied furiously. When I found out about the existence of spirits during my research, I thought, 'This is it.' The creature that saved me back then must've been a spirit." Saria turned slightly behind her.

The jellyfish spirit was right there. As though she could see it herself, she stretched her hands out towards it.

"You're right here, aren't you?" she said. "I can't see you, but I can feel your presence. Thank you for saving me when I was young. Thanks to you, I've been able to live and grow so healthily. I've gotten a tad shorter, however."

The jellyfish entangled its tendrils around her hands. It wasn't as though I could read its facial expressions, but it seemed happy nonetheless.

I whispered to my own partner, "That relationship is kind of nice, isn't it?"

"Yeah," Selena answered. "I wish for a world where spirits and humans can become friendlier with each other. And the human world has plenty of delectable dishes that spirits know nothing about. ♪"

"Heh, that's right."

*I also wish for a lovely future like that,* I thought as I stared at Saria and her partner.

***

"It seems we've talked a bit too much. Today was fun," Saria said, as the sun began to set.

I had come here to satiate my curiosity, but I'd never expected to be treated to such a wonderful story. "I had fun too. And will you allow me to help you with your research?"

I hadn't received an answer just yet. I was eager to help her research how to let humans see spirits.

"Heh," Saria said with a snicker. "'Allow,' you say? You sure like to feign ignorance, don't you?"

"Huh?"

"You're already an honorary member of this lab, you see. You'd best be prepared; I won't let you quit even if you beg. Unless, of course, you could abandon a lady who wails and cries about it. Are you that callous, hm?!"

Saria gave a hearty laugh. *I guess that means she's accepted me, right?*

"As proof of membership, I'll have the magic lock memorize your magical energy. That way, you won't have to solve it every time," she said.

That would certainly be convenient, and I appreciated being allowed to enter with ease.

"You can drop by the lab whenever you please. You must be busy, so I won't force you to come every day, but join me once a week or so. I have loads of topics to research, notably the mystery behind your condition."

I hadn't told her about my curse, but I had revealed that I had a unique trait. I wasn't quite sure why I could see spirits in the first place. Was the curse really the source, or was it something else? There was a chance Saria could help me solve this mystery.

"I understand. I'll be sure to come here once a week. Oh, can I bring my friends next time?" I asked.

Saria clearly looked displeased. After much pondering, she said, "Hmmm... Honestly, I really don't want you to, but I suppose I'll make an exception. I'm sure you're not friends with *unpleasant* kids, anyways."

"Really?! Thank you so much!"

*I honestly thought she'd decline, so this is great!* I knew that Cryssie would insist on coming along, so I breathed a sigh of relief.

"Nah, don't mention it. Consider it my way of saying thanks for telling me about Sherry. To tell you the truth, I'd hit a wall with my research, so you were a godsend, like an oasis in a desert. I'll be a bit more tolerant," Saria said.

Sherry was the name of the spirit that possessed Saria. Since jellyfish couldn't talk, Saria had chosen the name. It had trembled with elation, happy with its new name.

“Then I’ll visit again soon. Thank you for today,” I said.

“The pleasure is all mine. Come by anytime you’d like.”

“I will.”

After making my promise, I left the clock tower. When I looked up, the sky was already orange; I’d be a bit late getting home, but I’d make it in time for dinner. *Thank goodness.*

“Hm?” I noticed someone standing by the academy gates: a man dressed in black, a hat covering his face.

I was very intrigued by this person, but I stayed alert as I approached the gates.

“Who could that be…?” I said, before I was struck with a sudden sense of familiarity. “Ah!”

A few meters away, the man took off his hat and revealed his face. I recognized him in an instant.

“It’s been a while, Callus. It seems you’re doing well,” my master and the light magic user, Gourley, said with a joyful smile.

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“Thank you for treating me to dinner. Miss Shizuku’s cooking is as delicious as ever. I can see why Callus has grown so well,” my master said.

Shizuku giggled. “Flattery shall get you nowhere. Ah, but would you like some dessert?”

I glanced at Shizuku, who was unexpectedly easy to manipulate, and finished my food. After I had met with my master at the academy, we’d walked home together and were currently enjoying a meal. He apparently had some business at the Royal Capital, and had decided to pay me a visit on his way back.

“Now then, Callus. It’s been about a month since you left the manor. Have you gotten used to your lifestyle here?” he asked.

“I have. The academy is fun and very fulfilling. There’s a lot of books at the library here too! I’m not sure if I can read them all within three years.”

“Oho, you seem to be enjoying yourself. That’s good news.”

With a satisfied nod, he stood up and approached me, encouraging me to do the same.

“Callus, let me see your chest,” Master said.

“Okay,” I replied with a bit of reluctance.

I took off my clothes to reveal the upper half of my body. My

master stared at the curse on my left side.

“Hmmm,” he observed. “It’s gotten a hair larger. I suppose we can’t completely halt its invasion.”

The curse engraved on my body had gradually become more destructive as I grew older. I’d been able to suppress it, but there were no guarantees that I’d be able to keep it in check until adulthood.

“B-But I feel no pain at all! And I can move my body just fine!” I hastily said.

“You dolt! If you *did* feel any pain, I wouldn’t let you attend the academy at all. Come now, stand still. I’ll draw a new magic circle on you.”

My master took out a special writing instrument called a magic circle pen, and proceeded to scribble over my curse. This magic circle allowed me to store light magic within my chest. If I cast *Ra Lucis* over this circle, my chest would constantly be exposed to the effects of the spell.

“It looks like you tried to draw it yourself, but your lines are still no good. A shoddy magic circle like this won’t last even a week,” Master said.

“Right. I’ll keep at it.”

I thought I’d done it pretty well, but it seemed I still had a long way to go. *I’ve gotta work harder.*

“But I understand that it might be tough to do it on your own body. I have a friend in the royal capital who’s a magic circle master. You should go visit sometime. If you mention my name, I’m sure you can request some help,” he said.

“I-I will! Thank you, Master!”

While we were talking, my master had finished writing a splendid magic circle on the left side of my chest. It looked neater and a lot more accurate than what I’d written. As long as I didn’t get injured here, I’d be fine for a while.

“Well, I had a delicious meal, and I was able to talk with my apprentice. I suppose I’ll be taking my leave,” my master said.

“Huh? Are you not going to stay the night?” I asked. It was already dark outside, and I’d assumed he’d be staying with us.

“I have some tasks to do in the morning. We wouldn’t have to act so formal with each other if I had my own lodging.”

“In the morning? Does this have anything to do with my curse?”

He gave a troubled smile. *I see. So Master’s been working hard*

*all by himself.*

“Just to let you know, there’s nothing for you to be worried about. I’m doing this for my dream,” he quickly added.

“All right. But at least let me express my gratitude. Thank you, Master. Please take care of yourself.”

As I bowed, he gently patted me on the head and left the house.



I watched him leave and mumbled, “I’m always indebted to him.”

I thought I’d matured a bit from when I left my manor, but I realized that I was still a child. When I truly did become an adult, I wished from the bottom of my heart that I would become someone who could repay my debts to everyone.

***

That night, I lay in bed as usual. I thought about today’s lessons, my talk with Saria, and my time with my master.

“An underground labyrinth in the academy,” I said to myself.

This was a detail my master had let slip during dinner.

“There was something called the seven mysteries of the academy. I’m sure it’s still around to this day. When I was a student, there were other students who gathered and did research solely about those mysteries,” he said.

“Huh, I didn’t know about that. What were the mysteries about?”

“Well, the underground labyrinth of the academy was especially famous. Laxus used to be home to castles for the lords of the demon’s army. You’re aware of this, aren’t you?”

I knew this story all too well. My ancestor was the one who destroyed the demon’s army with a trusty dragon by his side. That person became the first king of the Ledyvia Kingdom.

“There were rumors that these castles still remained under the academy. I was interested and went looking for an entrance myself, but I wasn’t able to find anything of the sort. You should search for it if you’re interested,” my master said.

Any normal boy would be curious about a mysterious underground labyrinth. *If it’s a building that old, I might discover something about my ancestor too.* The first king of Ledyvia, King Arth, was a man shrouded in mystery, and I was eager to learn more about him. I dozed off with these thoughts in mind.

When I woke up, I wasn’t in my room, but in a completely dark space.

“I didn’t think I’d be *here* again,” I murmured.

I’d been here before; I met an entity that could’ve been the root of my curse, in this very space. I hadn’t seen it since, so I’d completely let my guard down. *What does it want this time?*

“Come if you dare,” I said.

I was surprised, but not frightened. I was no longer the timid kid who'd curl up into a ball. I wouldn't give in to the curse.

"I know you're here."

The space in front of me distorted, and a human-shaped entity appeared. I could tell that it was trying to emulate a human form, but I couldn't make out its minute details. *What even* is *this thing?*

**"Been…a…while."**

Its voice was grating and unpleasant, as though it was scratching my eardrums. It was the same voice as before. Within its dark face, I could barely make out its narrowed, bright eyes. *Is it smiling?*

"What do you want from me? Is there something you want to tell me?"

**"Callus, you…look well. I'm…happy."**

It chuckled, sounding joyful from the bottom of its heart. *Is it really happy for me, or is it taunting me? I can't tell this thing's true intention.*

**"Hey…Callus…"**

It suddenly stopped laughing and took on a serious tone. I couldn't believe the words it said next.

**"Do you…want to undo…your curse?"**

I gasped in surprise. *Did it just ask me what I think it did? I don't understand. What is it trying to say? Isn't it part of my curse?* My mind was racing. Had I overlooked something fundamental somewhere? I still couldn't deny the possibility that it was merely mocking me. *I don't understand. What* is *this entity?!*

"Of course I want to break free from my curse. Are you saying you can do that for me?"

The entity shook its head sadly. Did it really want to help me?

**"Go…under…"**

"Under?"

I mulled over its words as the entity made a handlike appendage and pointed down. *Down? Under? Underground?!*

"What about the underground?"

**"Tower…under…there."**

*Under a tower?* I thought back to the last tower that I'd visited—the clock tower. Was it referring to that? I hadn't noticed a path to go underground there; was it hidden away somewhere? I was curious about the location, but I was most eager to know what was there. *Could it be the underground labyrinth that Master talked*

*about? Does it have something to do with my curse?*

"Who's underground?"

**"Blue…useful…"**

"Blue? What are you talking about?"

**"Heh…"** It gave a creepy laugh and nothing more.

I was suspicious. I couldn't trust this entity one bit. But…there was a chance that I could learn something about my curse. It might be worth it to take a few risks.

"Fine. It's not like I trust you, but I can head there."

It narrowed its eyes with glee and clenched my hand. **"Happy…"**

In the next moment, a sharp pain ran through my entire body.

"Gah…?!"

I'd never forget this pain—I'd felt it when my curse had tormented me at its worst. It was as though needles were stabbing into every pore of my body, and it made me want to die. I fell to the ground in agony.

"No…"

Through the pain, I tried to free my hand from its grasp, but I couldn't find the strength to do so. As I writhed on the floor, the entity continued to squeeze my hand tightly.

**"Hurts…right… Happy…"**

"What are you—"

I gritted my teeth and managed to choke out a few words, but I felt so weak. Unable to stand or talk, my consciousness slowly faded away. *Ugh, it hurts… Why do I have to go through this suffering?*

**"See you…later…"**

As the unknown entity grabbed my arm, my consciousness slipped away.

# Terminology Dictionary IV

## Star absence

A blank space in a sky otherwise filled with stars.

One theory states that this piece of the sky chipped off during the battle with ancient gods, but the cause remains unknown.

## Magical Potion of Youth

A type of medicine created by Saria, which allows one to decrease their age by ten years. Since the potion is created specifically for her body, no one else can use it. Though it makes the user younger physically, it can't stop the aging of the soul, and thus can't extend one's lifespan. Even so, there would certainly be many people who would want the potion. Saria has refrained from making it public.

"I've already told the academy that my experiment failed, turning me into this form. Even I'm aware of the possible ramifications that could come with making this kind of medicine known."

She was happy to be able to research to her heart's content with her small body and seemingly limitless stamina, but she's been troubled by how she gets sleepy so early in the night.

## Chapter Two: The Golden Saint and a Prisoner of the Stars

“Huh?!”

I jumped awake. I practically fell out of bed but managed to keep myself from hitting the floor.

“Huff… Huff… Was that a dream?”

My breathing was haggard and my palms were sweaty. There was no doubt that my dream was the cause. *Was all of that real, or was it actually a dream?*

“My curse…”

I swiftly pulled my clothes up and saw the black stain, unchanged from yesterday. *Phew. I don’t know what I would’ve done if it had gotten larger.*

“I’m not sure if what I saw was reality, but I should probably check out the basement of the clock tower.”

Some magicians were able to have precognitive dreams or prophecies. What I saw had chilled me to the bone, but it still could have been a prediction of the future.

“It’s getting lighter outside, so might as well wake up… Hm?”

As I was mumbling to myself, my right hand felt odd. Curious, I looked down and gasped in surprise. There was a bright bruise on my right wrist, where that black entity had squeezed me.

***

“‘Sup, Callus! You look…not that good today,” Jack said as he stared at me with concern.

“Hm? What?” I asked.

“Don’t ‘what’ me. You look pale. Shouldn’t you head to the infirmary or something?”

“Cryssie said the same thing, but I’m okay. Look, I’m bursting with energy. I think I just stayed up too late. I’m fine.”

“You sure? Well, if you say so. Don’t push yourself too hard, though.”

I apparently looked so pale that everyone was worried about me. *I know it’s because of what I saw last night, but I don’t want Cryssie and Jack to be so concerned. I’ve gotta stay strong.*

“Thank you. I’ll head to the infirmary if it becomes a bit too much,” I said. I stuck my hand into my desk and took out my textbook when I noticed an unfamiliar letter on top. “Hm?”

The green, expensive-looking envelope was adorned with a gold design. I tilted my head in befuddlement; I didn’t remember purchasing this stationery.

“Ohhh! Is that a love letter?” Jack asked.

“Come on, don’t tease me. That’s impossible,” I said. I’d never received anything of the sort before, and I was convinced that I never would. Sirius had apparently received so many that his desk overflowed, but that would obviously never happen to me.

“Hey, it *could* be. You’re good looking and you’ve got the brains. If that demon wife wasn’t always around you, you’d be a lot more popular.”

“‘Demon wife’?”

“I’m talking about Cryssie, of course. Who else could it be?” Jack looked at me wearily.

“Huh? What are you talking about?”

“That’s my line. You and Cryssie are clearly closer than friends. You guys aren’t just lovers—you’re more like a married couple. I can only assume you guys are dating. And with such a terror by your side, of course other girls are hesitant.”

“Huh? I’m just hanging out with her like a normal friend would.”

It was true that I spent a lot of time with her; we were almost always together within the academy. But I only saw her as a friend, and I wasn’t planning on becoming anything more. I would’ve been happy if a cute girl like Cryssie would date me, but I doubted that she’d ever see me that way, and I didn’t expect anything like that would blossom from our relationship.

“Well, if you’re all right with that, then it’s not my place to say anything. So come on, open that envelope,” Jack urged.

I opened it and scanned its contents.

“Uh, let’s see… An invitation to a tea party?” I read. *But why would I get something like this? It doesn’t ring a bell at all.*

“Hey, can’t you tell who the sender is?”

“It says, uh, right here…Cecilia. From Class 2-A, apparently.”

When the words left my lips, Jack fell to the ground with a loud crash. He stared at me, goggle-eyed, while opening and closing his mouth like a fish. His astonishment came as a mystery to me.

“Jack? You okay?” I asked.

“Y-Y-Y-You don’t know who that is?!”

Thinking back, it certainly sounded familiar, but I couldn’t put my finger on it. *I can’t remember at all.*

“If you don’t know, I can tell you. That sender, Cecilia la Lilynia, is a princess from the neighboring kingdom, the Holy Kingdom of Lilyniana. She’s a legitimate saint, and above all, a light magic user just like you,” Jack said.

“So this is the saint.”

The Holy Kingdom of Lilyniana was located southeast of the Ledyvia Kingdom, and was a large, religious nation. They believed in the God of Light, Raila, and their churches dotted the kingdom.

Nuns who finished their training at convents under the religion of the God of Light were permitted to call themselves “saints.” And Cecilia wasn’t just a saint, but a princess as well. I would’ve never guessed that a saint with royal blood would be at this academy. I was looking forward to meeting her.

***

“Uh, I think this is the place,” I mumbled.

At lunchtime, I went alone to the location on the invitation. There was a courtyard lush with nature, and colorful flowers bloomed all around. *I didn’t know such a beautiful place existed in this school. I’ve still got a lot to explore.* I hadn’t eaten lunch yet—I’d forgotten mine at home. I had been a bit absentminded due to the pain I felt from my dream, and I felt guilty for leaving Shizuku’s food.

“You over there. Do you have any business with us?” a woman said, barring my way while I was gazing at the flowers. She wore a garment embroidered with an emblem that symbolized the element of light. That was the crest of the Holy Kingdom, implying that she was related to the nation.

“I’m terribly sorry, but this area is restricted to regular students,” she said. “If you’re lost, I can guide you back to the school buildings.”

“Um, I received this,” I hastily said, taking out the envelope.

When she glanced at the note, her expression changed in an instant. “Pl-Please forgive me! I wasn’t aware that you were Princess Cecilia’s guest! Right this way, please!”

Her firm demeanor immediately turned more forgiving, proving her devotion towards the saint.

“Over here, if you will. Princess Cecilia is waiting for you,” she said.

“Okay,” I replied. I followed behind her and stepped inside the garden.

“If you have been called today, you must be Sir Callus, correct?” the woman said while walking.

“That’s right.”

“Very good. My name is Miria, and I’m from Class 2-A. I’m pleased to make your acquaintance.”

Miria seemed to be in the same class as Cecilia. *Is she the princess’s attendant? I should probe a bit more.*

“May I ask about this place?” I said.

“Of course. This garden has been provided by the academy as an act of goodwill. Many wish to meet Princess Cecilia. Hence, we were lent this area so that she could have a bit of privacy where no one could bother her. It’s very unusual for outsiders other than those who serve her to enter.”

“Is that so? I’m very honored.”

This garden was a quiet sanctuary inside the noisy academy. It must’ve been a great area for Cecilia to relax.

“I’ve heard that you’re able to use light magic, Sir Callus,” Miria said.

“I can.”

Her face lit up. “Is that so?! Splendid! May you be blessed with Raila’s divine protection.”

She put her hands together and prayed to the heavens. Almost everyone from the Holy Kingdom was a follower of the Path of Light, the religion of light, and Miria was no exception to this. The God of Light was said to have descended from the skies and brought light upon this world. I had been doubtful of its existence in the past but, since spirits existed, I had recently come to accept the idea of gods existing as well.

“I also tried to undergo training to become a saint in the past. However, the power of light did not possess me,” Miria said. “I was overcome with deep sorrow, but now I’ve received the privilege of undertaking the honorable role of being Princess Cecilia’s attendant. My days are filled with satisfaction and joy.”

“I see.”

My master had stated that light magic users were rare. Even

in the Holy Kingdom, where they worshiped the God of Light, this statement had rang true. *I guess I really did luck out.*

"Light spirits aren't nearly as abundant as those of other elements. I suppose it can't be helped. No matter how hard one believes, if their quality of magic isn't good enough, spirits just won't possess them," Selena said.

I was interested in Cecilia. She was a light magic user and from the royal family—I felt like we had a lot of similarities, and I was eager to become friends.

"Here we are. She's over there, waiting for you," Miria said.

I found myself surrounded by beautiful orange flowers. In the middle was a white table and chair, and a lady waiting there for me.

"Welcome. I apologize for calling you out so suddenly. Do have a seat and make yourself at home." She spoke in a clear and beautiful voice, with a relaxed tone.

Her blonde hair fluttered in the wind and shimmered under the sun's rays. Saint Cecilia encouraged me to take a seat.

***

Her hair was like strands of gold. Elegance emanated from her. Anyone could tell at a glance that she wasn't a normal person. Her eyes were covered with a dark cloth embroidered with gold, making it difficult to see her entire face, but her nose and mouth were more than enough to convey that she was a breathtaking beauty.

"Pardon me," Callus said, taking a seat across from Saint Cecilia.

She gave a gentle smile. Callus couldn't help staring at the blindfold.

"I'm sorry," she said. "This is distracting, isn't it?"

"Er, uh, my apologies!" he replied.

He was taken by surprise—he hadn't expected her to be able to see through the cloth over her eyes. But Cecilia didn't seem to mind, and she giggled.

"In the Holy Kingdom, it's customary for saints to never show their faces in front of others. I'm terribly sorry, but I just can't show my face to you," she said.

"Huh, so that's why."

"I know it's a bit unsettling, but I hope you'll understand."

“Please don’t say that. I can tell that you’re a beautiful lady, even with your eyes covered.”

Suddenly, an odd voice resonated through the air. Callus quickly looked around, thinking that it must’ve been a cat, but saw nothing.

“Did you just hear something?” he asked.

“Nothing at all,” Cecilia replied, shaking her head.

“I see.”

Looking a bit disturbed, Callus sat down. Cecilia took a teapot and started to pour tea into his cup.

“I-I can do that myself!” the boy said.

“I mustn’t allow a guest to pour themselves tea. Though I’m a princess from the Holy Kingdom, at this academy, I’m just another student. Do treat me as your equal, if you kindly would.”

“If you say so.”

Respecting her decision, Callus put his lips to the cup of tea. A refreshing aroma tickled his nose and he exhaled. The tea was of good quality—even a single sip allowed him to relax. As he was calming down, he widened his eyes in surprise.

“How is it? Is it suitable for your tastes?” Cecilia asked.

“Ah, yes! It’s delicious!”

“I see. That’s splendid to hear.” She broke out into a smile and put her hands together.

Callus stared at her wordlessly. Several moments passed as the two spent time together in silence and serenity. They simply gazed at each other. Under normal circumstances, this would’ve been awkward for him, but oddly enough, he wasn’t bothered by the silence. He was able to trust the peacefulness, and knew that there was no need to force a conversation. It was comfortable and tranquil. However, he wasn’t willing to remain quiet forever; after he finished half a cup of tea, he decided to pose a question.

“Cecilia, why’d you call me here?”

“I heard that a light magician had entered this school, so I wanted to meet them. Light magicians are rather rare, even in our kingdom, and especially male ones.”

In the Holy Kingdom, only women were able to receive support from the church and become saints. Men could also attain a high rank or status if they knew light magic, but as they weren’t able to receive as much support as women from the church, their numbers were few and far between.

This following tidbit was unknown to Callus, but light spirits

preferred attractive people. Hence, these spirits wouldn't be attracted to humans unless they were good looking.

"*Rai*," Cecilia chanted. Light enveloped her right hand.

It was pale, bright, and kind. Callus was taken by how different this light was from his own. She brought her hand close to him.

"Now, please show me your light," she said.

"O-Okay."

He repeated the same chant and light inhabited his right hand. His light glowed more brightly and powerfully in comparison. Cecilia's pale and kind glow made it apparent to Callus that each light was unique.

"Could you put your hand over mine?" she asked.

She faced the palm of her hand upwards and encouraged Callus to place his hand on top. He obediently did so. The two types of light clashed, then slowly melted into each other. Their boundaries became vague as their colors started to mix. Callus felt odd, as though their hearts had now become one.

"This is a ritual in the Holy Kingdom known as light merging. It's said that two people are very compatible if their lights can mix without repelling each other," Cecilia said. She gently squeezed Callus's hand before pulling away.

"I see." Callus was in awe.

The two then continued to chat. The academy, the Holy Kingdom, and light magic—there was no end to the topics at hand. They enjoyed their time together. As Callus finished his second cup of tea, someone entered the garden.

"So this is where you've been, Sir Callus," Shizuku said.

"Huh?" Callus said, surprised by her sudden appearance. "Why are you here, Shizuku?"

"I came to deliver what you forgot. When I asked your friend, I was told that you'd be here. I explained my situation to Lady Miria, and she kindly guided me." In her hands was the lunch that he'd forgotten. She'd come all the way here to simply deliver his food.

"I'm sorry that I forced you to come all the way to the academy. Ah, and here's Cecilia. She's my upperclassman at school and is a saint from the Holy Kingdom," Callus replied, receiving the lunch. "I'd love to eat this now, but I think lunch will be over soon. I'll eat it between classes."

Callus turned back to Cecilia and bowed his head. "Thank you

very much for your invitation today. I had a lot of fun."

"The pleasure is all mine," Cecilia replied. "I quite enjoyed our time together. Please come by any time."

"Okay!" he replied energetically. He swiftly returned to his class.

Cecilia and Shizuku were left behind in the garden. The maid had planned to leave once her business was over, but she stared at the saint.

"Would you care for some tea, Shizuku?" Cecilia offered.

"I shall take you up on that kind offer," Shizuku replied without hesitation.

The saint had expected to be turned down, but she remained composed while pouring some tea into a new cup. Shizuku continued to stare with curiosity before she opened her mouth.

"Why haven't you divulged the truth to Sir Callus, Lady Sissy?"

Cecilia's hands trembled in shock, close to spilling all her tea across the table. Her calm demeanor vanished in a flash, replaced with nervous movements as she fumbled around while breaking out into a cold sweat. She slowly put the teapot back onto the table, careful to not let anything spill, and strengthened her resolve as she removed the cloth from her face. She revealed her damp, blue eyes. Though she'd grown and become more mature, her gaze was as youthful as ever.



“H-How did you know?!” Sissy gasped.

Her tone of voice was the same as five years ago—feeble and timid. Sissy had taught Callus light magic and had even sacrificed her body in the process. Had she not done so, he surely wouldn’t have been able to master *Ra Heal* in such a short amount of time.

Ever since they had parted ways at the manor, Callus and Sissy hadn’t met again, and only exchanged letters. Although they were finally able to reunite, she had presented herself as Saint Cecilia.

“H-How did you know it was me?” Sissy asked. “I thought my appearance had changed quite a bit.”

“Yes, you’ve matured quite well, Lady Sissy…in all sorts of ways,” Shizuku replied, shifting her gaze to the girl’s chest.

Although Shizuku had quite the full chest herself, there was certainly a difference between the maid and Callus’s classmate.

“However, minute mannerisms such as speaking habits, hand movements, and the like can’t be masked so easily. I’m quite adept at these observations,” the maid said.

As a woman who had received Umbran training, her perceptive and analytical skills were extremely sharp. She far surpassed any normal human when it came to telling people apart.

Sissy couldn’t hide her astonishment. “That’s how you found me out? That’s really quite amazing, Shizuku.” Her meek smile resembled her child self from five years ago. She no longer had a hint of the sternness that she’d commanded from behind her blindfold.

“But I never would’ve expected you to be a saint, much less from the royal family, Lady Sissy,” Shizuku replied.

“I was hiding my true identity, after all. I felt bad for doing so, but it was at Sir Gourley’s request.”

A princess from another nation had visited a prince whose existence had been erased from history. Had it gone public, there would have been a huge uproar; Gourley’s caution made sense.

“Our positions might be different now, but I’d be elated if you could talk with me more naturally like you did in the past, without acting so reserved,” Sissy said. “I haven’t had many opportunities to talk so cheerfully recently.”

“I understand. Then I shall do so.”

The girl gave a bright smile in response. “I’m proud of my position as a saint. However, there are times when I do feel a little lonely. I can usually hide it behind my blindfold, though.”

The cloth served as a mask for Sissy, for her to play the role of a saint. When she had it on, she could act like a graceful lady from the Holy Kingdom. But underneath was the same frail and kind girl from many years ago.

“Then why did you hide yourself from Sir Callus?” Shizuku asked. “I’m sure he would’ve accepted you just how you are.”

The saint jolted for a moment before giving an unexpected reason. “B-Because…he’s become so handsome!”

While Shizuku’s jaw dropped in shock, Sissy continued to prattle away as fast as she could.

“I-I really did try to tell him, you know? But Sir Callus became so tall and so, *so* cool… I couldn’t take off my blindfold at all! Ugh… I know it’s pathetic.”

The cloth that covered her eyes was made of a special material that allowed her to see to a degree from underneath it. She had been able to vaguely make out his face, but her heart had started to beat so loudly, she’d been unable to remove it.

Her face was beet red from making such a pitiful excuse, but Shizuku gently squeezed her hand.

“I completely understand how you feel,” the maid said firmly.

“Huh?” Sissy let out a whimper, astonished by the words she’d heard. She’d expected to be mocked, not consoled.

“I said that I understand. I was able to slowly get used to him since I have always been by his side, but it’s been five years for you, Lady Sissy. It’s only natural that you’re unable to stare straight at him, and that’s nothing for you to be embarrassed about.”

“R-Right! Thank goodness! I-I’m normal, aren’t I?!”

She was anything but, but there was no one around to point this out. This came as a saving grace for Sissy. She didn’t have much opportunity to vocalize her true thoughts. For now, she wasn’t a saint or a princess, but a regular girl enjoying a conversation.

“You’ve still got plenty of time. Please deepen your bond with Sir Callus and become familiar with him,” Shizuku said. “He’s been eager to meet you again, Lady Sissy. It’d be wonderful if you could tell him the truth soon.”

“Yes. Thank you so much! I’ve been anxiously worrying about

never being able to tell him the truth! I'm so glad that you're with me, Shizuku!"

As the girl innocently smiled, the maid couldn't help but do the same. It was a wonderful occasion for Shizuku to learn that her master, whom she loved dearly, had earned the affection of others.

"But is it all right for me to be friends with Sir Callus? Don't you also…" Sissy trailed off, looking apologetic.

The saint had vaguely caught onto the maid's feelings. She would've been torn if she was forced to fight against Shizuku.

"I don't mind at all," the maid replied. "I'll be satisfied if I can be by his side until the end. Should he have a hundred wives, or if I were unable to become closer with him, I'd still be fine."

"Sir Callus truly is blessed to have someone who thinks so fondly of him." Seeing the maid's resolve, Sissy realized that she was still immature. She had seen the strength of selfless loyalty.

"However, I shall be strictly judging Sir Callus's partners. I will be quite stern, even towards you, Lady Sissy."

Sissy giggled, knowing that Shizuku was half-joking. "Then I must work quite hard, mustn't I?"

"Sir Callus has been born with a difficult fate on his shoulders. I'm certain that he'll face more hardships in the future. The more people who can support him, the better, but you know light magic, Lady Sissy. I'm sure you can help him more than anyone. Would you please lend me your strength?"

Shizuku took the saint's hands and bowed her head. The normally hesitant Sissy immediately gave a firm reply.

"Of course. Please leave it to me. I shall happily lend my powers to him any time."

"Thank you so much." The maid gave her heartfelt gratitude before raising her head.

Sissy felt like she had seen the corners of the woman's eyes turn red ever so slightly, but didn't point it out.

"We've rented a house near this academy. Please stop by anytime you'd like. I'm sure he'd be ecstatic to see you," Shizuku said.

"I-I shall! When I've steeled myself, I shall visit!"

Sissy seemed determined, but Shizuku was a bit anxious. The girl was extremely timid and shy—she might *never* steel her resolve. Though she thought it a bit mean, Shizuku decided to give the girl a strong push.

“Sir Callus has been walking to the academy every day with a girl in his class. And he met her before he met you, Lady Sissy. If you take too long, I’m afraid it will be too late.”

“Wh-Wh-Wh-Wh-Wha?!”

Shizuku gave a faint smile as Sissy grew adorably flustered.

“Now then, I suppose I shall be taking my leave. I look forward to meeting you again,” Shizuku said.

“Huh?! Wait, could you tell me more about that girl?!”

The maid left without being stopped. As Sissy watched her go, the saint told herself that she must become stronger.

***

After school, hours after the tea party, I once again headed to the clock tower. I was, of course, searching for the underground area I had been told about in my dream. I wasn’t sure if I could completely trust that thing inside my body, but I thought it best to confirm for myself. Since I could’ve very well been walking into a trap, I had a reliable ally by my side for safety.

“You made a good decision, relying on me. You’ve got nothing to fear,” Cryssie said proudly.

I just wanted her to call for help if anything happened, but she was determined to resolve any issues herself. Cryssie’s powers were the real deal, but I was worried she’d use them incorrectly.

“An underground labyrinth, huh? That’s so exciting,” she said.

I’d only told her that we were looking for an entrance to the labyrinth. I hadn’t told her about the curse at all. I felt bad for hiding things from her while borrowing her assistance, but this secret had to be kept. If she knew about my curse, I was certain that she’d try to offer her help—I didn’t want to embroil her in something so dangerous.

“Come on, let’s go, Callus!”

“Right behind you.”

She was raring to go, so I had to jog to catch up. I still had my reservations about having invited her, but I was glad that she seemed to be enjoying herself. I’d hoped that nothing would happen, but we immediately ran into a skirmish.

In front of us were three male students whom I’d never seen before, blocking our path. One of the students was beefy and menacing. It was as though he was looking down on us, and I

didn’t appreciate it.

“What do you guys want?” Cryssie said. She clearly sounded miffed.

“Do you have any business with us?” I asked.

The student in the center stepped forward, acting as the leader. The other two seemed to give way to him.

“Nice to meet you. Are you Callus from Class 1-A?”

“That’s me.”

I was a bit cautious, but the guy appeared rather friendly. *He seems…all right.*

“I’m a first-year from the Upper Class, Mars Laissezfaid. I came to invite you today.”

“Invite?”

“Yeah. I wanted you to join my faction.”

*A faction?* I tilted my head in confusion. I hadn’t heard of such a system within this academy. I may have simply not been informed yet, but I was dubious of his words.

“What do you mean by ‘faction’?” I asked.

“The Laissezfaids are a famous household, and you’ll be allowed to work under our name,” Mars replied. “It’s quite an honor, don’t you think?”

*I don’t get it at all.* While I was trying to wrap my head around his words, Cryssie stepped forward and raised her voice.

“I don’t know what this whole ‘faction’ business is, but could you stand aside?! You guys are totally in the way!”

“I-In the way?!” Mars grew stiff, shocked by Cryssie’s biting remark.

I felt bad for him, but it also felt kind of good to see him so troubled.

“Watch your mouth, woman. Don’t be rude to Master Mars,” a large student from behind said, glaring at Cryssie. He was so large, grim, and intimidating that I wasn’t sure if he was really a student like us.

Cryssie didn’t seem frightened at all, and gave him a provoking grin. “Oh, so you *can* talk? I just thought you were some kind of large decoration who can’t speak without his *master’s* permission,” she sneered.

“You damn commoner… Seems like you need to be educated.”

The student made his anger apparent. The situation could turn explosive at any moment. *Why did you just add fuel to the fire?*

“Stop that, Mike. We’re not here to fight today,” Mars said, defusing the tension.

“Yessir,” Mike replied reluctantly.

*Whew. Guess we don’t need to fight.*

“I’m sorry to scare you both. He’s just a bit too loyal, you see,” Mars said.

“I don’t mind. He isn’t scary at all,” Cryssie replied.

“I see.”

Mars’s eyebrows twitched. It was obvious that he was angry, but he was doing his best to hide his emotions. *So he really isn’t planning to fight us, though the fact that he said “today” bothers me.*

“Anyways, back on topic. I’m planning on making my name known within this academy. I’ll bring capable students under my wing, create a strong base for my household, and show off my power. Of course, if you do decide to work for the Laissezfaids, you’ll be rewarded handsomely. It’s best to bet on the winning horse early on, wouldn’t you say?”

“Sure…” I mumbled.

I’d just gotten caught up in something that seemed like a huge pain to deal with. Cryssie seemed completely uninterested, audibly yawning. I’d heard that aristocrats couldn’t just accept their place if they were underestimated. They prioritized appearances, and tried to make themselves look more powerful than they seemed. Even so, I’d never expected some to be so brazen.

I didn’t mind if they fought amongst themselves, but I hadn’t expected them to drag normal students into their affairs.

“Numerous students have already gathered by my side. At this rate, I’ll be able to control the academy within half a year,” Mars said proudly.

I couldn’t believe his plans would go so smoothly, and I was suspicious of his claims. There was a good chance that he was bluffing to have a better chance of recruiting others.

“You see, some aristocrats aren’t happy with my efforts. Thus, I’m looking for students who can swiftly lend me their power,” he said.

“I see,” I replied. *Now, what should I do?*

Needless to say, I had no plans of working under him. I had plenty of things to do, and no time to waste on him. But I wasn’t sure if a simple “no” would shake him off. The fact that he had

burly students by his side made it clear to me that he wouldn't hesitate to use force if necessary. *Is there a way to just leave without escalating this?*

While I was thinking, Cryssie clasped my shoulder. "Callus, you're being too nice. You're probably trying to think of a method to resolve this peacefully, aren't you? But there are times when force is the best way."

She unsheathed her trusty sword. It had a beautiful blade, its hilt fitted with a glimmering red jewel. Cryssie had told me its name: Ruby Rose. According to her, this was quite the fine sword, and when combined with its aesthetic value, it had been so expensive that the price had made her eyes pop out. It had been a gift from her father, Sieg, and one could feel the love he had for his daughter from this weapon.

"Out of our way. I'm not kind like Callus, you know?" she said.

She put her fingers onto the blade, which was illuminated by the sunlight. She brought out her magical energy and activated her spell.

"*Fé Arms!*"

Her blade, pointed towards the sky, was engulfed in a fiery blaze. The temperature around her was so sweltering that I could feel myself sweat. *It's the same spell she used at the interview, but so much more intense now!*

"Huh?!" Mars said in shock.

While Cryssie seemed strong-willed, she was still a cute girl. He hadn't expected her to suddenly unsheathe her blade. Even I couldn't hide my surprise.

"I said...*move*!" Cryssie yelled, swinging her flaming blade down.

A loud rumble echoed as dust and smoke billowed in the air. She'd completely eviscerated the stone tiles in front of us. *Her power is amazing.*

"Come on, Callus," she said.

When I looked up, no one was in front of us. Mars and his goons had jumped to the side, and were now staring at her in disbelief. Recruiting was apparently not on Mars's mind anymore.

Cryssie had been a bit violent, but this might have been for the best. No one had gotten hurt, and we were able to leave.

"What's wrong? Let's go."

"Okay. Give me a second," I said. I extended my hand towards

the ground and concentrated. “*Ra Heal*.”

The particles of light were absorbed into the shattered stone tiles. With a clatter, they slowly moved into place and stuck together. There was a bit of soot on them and they weren’t perfectly back to normal, but it wouldn’t cause trouble for other students.

“Thanks. You’re a big help,” Cryssie replied.

“But we’ll report this to a teacher, okay? We *did* break school property.”

“Ugh… F-Fine.”

We walked through the middle of the road while she looked a little down. Suddenly, Mars’s voice came from behind us.

“This isn’t over,” he said.

“I’ll be taking my leave,” I replied, without turning around or stopping.

I continued to feel his piercing gaze from behind for a while longer.

***

Once I arrived at the clock tower, I took the magic lock and poured my magic into it. It opened with a clack. *It really did remember my magical energy.*

“So our upperclassman is in here?” Cryssie asked.

“Yeah, but she’s not good with strangers, so don’t be pushy with her,” I replied.

“I know, I know.”

I’d told her about Saria on our way here. But still, I was a bit worried. I felt like they wouldn’t get along well, and I could only hope they didn’t get into an argument.

“Excuse me,” I said, entering the tower anxiously.

The tower was dim as usual, and I wondered if Saria was inside.

“It’s pretty dark,” Cryssie said, entering with caution.

We looked around the room together, but there was no sign of anyone. *Maybe she’s on the upper floor.*

“Are you here, Saria?” I called out.

A mountain of magical tools stacked high suddenly moved and fell to the ground.

“Eek!” Cryssie gave a cute shriek of surprise.

Saria made her appearance from the mountain while

coughing. I hadn't expected her to be there, and I feared she might get buried alive one day.

"Well, well. If it isn't my dear junior. How admirable of you to visit me so soon," she said.

Her gaze stopped when she saw Cryssie. She froze, eyes wide. She started to sweat and her hands began to tremble, making her anxiety painfully clear.

Unable to let her be, I immediately tried to come to the rescue.

"Saria, this is—"

"Pleased to meet you. My name is Crys Lamiared," Cryssie said, cutting me off. She didn't come off too strong and gave a friendly smile.

"I-I see. Nice to meet you," Saria mumbled back. She seemed a bit flustered, but less wary.

"I apologize for imposing on you so suddenly. May I have some of your time today?" Cryssie asked.

"S-Sure. I don't mind."

"Thank you very much. You're rather kind, Miss Saria."

*Wh-What am I seeing? Cryssie's speaking politely? I-I can't believe it.* Saria had relaxed much more, and I felt like a fool for being so worried.

"Ah, I was just about to pour some coffee. You two should have a cup too. We can talk while we drink, can't we?" Saria said, before ascending the stairs alone.

Cryssie and I were left in the room.

"What are *you* in a daze about?" Cryssie asked.

"Huh? S-Sorry!" I replied.

She gave me an exasperated look; it seemed like she'd reverted to her usual self.

"You didn't expect me to speak so politely, did you?" she said.

"Y-Yeah. I'm sorry. I'd never seen you talk to anyone like that, so I was surprised."

"I'm not a child anymore, you know. I can change my attitude based on the people I'm around."

She was nonchalant, but proud as well. She had polished more than just her swordsmanship and magic skills over the past five years.

"But weren't you your usual self around Mars and the others?" I asked.

"Because that's just fine for them. If I'm too polite, it'll get to

their heads."

She might have been right about that. I could imagine them getting carried away all too easily.

"But you're indebted to Saria, aren't you? Then it's only natural for me to be polite. It'd be rude otherwise. I won't do anything to make you lose face," she said.

She walked over to the stairs. *I didn't think she'd be so thoughtful.* While I was moved by her words and efforts, I vowed to myself to work harder so that I wouldn't disappoint her.

After climbing to the second floor, we told Saria about our plans while drinking coffee. We told her that there might be an underground labyrinth under the clock tower, and that we were looking for its entrance. After Saria had mulled over our words, she offered her two cents.

"Hmmm... An underground labyrinth in the royal capital... I'm not sure where you obtained this information, but I can see that you've keenly deduced that the entrance is within this clock tower. I'd expect no less from my future assistant candidate."

*I'm an assistant candidate now? I thought I was an honorary member. She seems to be winging these titles, but that's not the point. What does she mean by "keenly deduced"?*

"Do you know anything about this underground labyrinth?" I asked.

"A little," she replied, gulping down the rest of her coffee. "Follow me."

She headed to the first floor, and Cryssie and I followed close behind.

"Where's she going?" Cryssie asked.

"No clue," I replied. "I didn't think there was anything on the first floor."

Once we arrived, Saria approached the edge of the floor and started feeling around.

"Ah, here it is," she mumbled, grabbing onto the floorboard and prying it off. "Whoa there."

"I'll help you," I said, catching a tottering Saria.

After I helped her remove the floorboard, I was greeted by an awesome sight. A stone door solemnly stood there.

"Wh-What *is* this?!" I gasped.

The thick, stone door seemed to be blocking the path underground. *I would've never guessed that this was hidden in the*

*clock tower!*

"Fascinating, isn't it? It's engraved with a pattern that was used over a thousand years ago," Saria said. "You're curious about what lies behind this door too, aren't you?"

"A-A thousand years?" I asked.

That would mean that this door was made long before the creation of the Ledyvia Kingdom. This implied that something related to the demon that my ancestor had slain, or something long before that, was hidden inside. *This is much more than I'd anticipated.*

"This door was concealed by magic, but an explosion during one of my experiments seemed to deactivate the spell, and I coincidentally found the door," Saria explained. "A lucky break, so to speak. So only I'm aware of its existence."

"Huh? Explosions don't occur often, do they?" I asked.

I was terrified to think of an explosion that had destroyed a spell. I wanted her to reassure me that these incidents were scarce, but she didn't reply. *That's…frightening.*

"So does this door open?" I asked.

"I've tried all sorts of methods, but it hasn't budged an inch. I believe that these engravings act as some sort of key," Saria replied, tracing the pattern with her fingertips. "After some research, I learned that the shape of the patterns indicated 'light' and 'dark' engulfing a 'star.' I've no idea what that means, but it's very interesting."

I crouched down and took a good look at the door. *What lies behind it? Is it connected to a labyrinth?* While I was deep in thought, Cryssie approached the door as well.

"We just need to open this, don't we? I've got this!" She unsheathed her Ruby Rose and raised it above her head.

*I-Is she—?!* "Cryssie! No—"

"Rah!"

Just like how she'd shattered the stone tile, she swung her blade down. She didn't put in that much magical energy, perhaps keeping her surroundings in mind, but her speed was intense. I could tell that she was serious. Cryssie had been slicing rocks since she was a child. For a moment, I believed that she'd be able to destroy this door too.

"Eek?!"

There wasn't a scratch on the door, and Cryssie was instead blown back. She did a somersault in the air and expertly landed

on the ground. *Athletic as always.* In any case, I had seen some sort of barrier appear in the moment before her sword had struck. We most likely couldn't brute force our way through.

"J-Junior, what is she up to?! Why did she become violent so suddenly?! That's dangerous!" Saria yelped. Shocked by Cryssie's sudden actions, Saria was on the floor. Her knees had apparently buckled, so I helped her get back on her feet.

"Ha ha, I'm so sorry. She's a bit energetic," I said.

"Energetic?! She suddenly unsheathed her sword to cut the door down! That's way beyond energetic! And here I thought I'd met another cute junior!"

She hung her head in shock. *Whoops, looks like Cryssie's true nature was revealed a bit too quickly.*

"Owww... What's with this door? I've never seen rocks this tough before," Cryssie said.

"Seems like it's under a spell," I replied. "There might be collateral damage to our surroundings, so it's best to not use force here."

*Saria must've already tried using magic to open this door. I'd probably have no luck with that either. What do I do?* I once again crouched down and touched the door, when suddenly...

"Whoa?! What's going on?!" I yelped.

The engravings on the door had started to glow. And with a low rumble, the door slowly gave way.

"J-Junior?! What did you do?!" Saria cried.

"I don't know!" I wailed.

"You should step away for now! Over here!" Cryssie said, pulling me to safety.

We watched over the door while the entire building shook as if in the middle of an earthquake. *I can hear the walls start to creak. Are we really going to be okay?!*

"Take a look, my dear junior. The door's open. Good grief, you're filled with surprises, aren't you?" Saria said.

"I-I'm shocked too, you know," I stammered.

The passage seemed to go impossibly deep, and it was so dark that I couldn't see the other end.

"I've no idea why the door's open, but we should think about that later. The most important bit right now is what lies below. So, why don't we treat ourselves to a little exploration?" Saria said excitedly as she tried to head down.

*I thought she was the indoorsy type, but she acts quick.* I couldn't

allow her to go alone, and I was just as curious about this underground route, so I followed her.

“All right then, let’s head… Wah!”

With an odd cry, Saria was suddenly blown back. I had been right behind her, so I managed to catch her. *That was close, though.*

“A-Are you all right?” I asked.

“Ouch… That was a surprise. Nice catch, dear junior. You saved me.” She patted the dust away and stood up while staring at the door. “The moment I tried to enter, a barrier-like force repelled me. It seems I’m not invited.”

“Let me give it a try,” Cryssie said.

She took out her blade and gingerly thrust it forward, but her weapon was pushed away by an unknown force as well. *What should I do?*

Saria looked at me. “Crys and I might be no good, but you might be able to enter. You opened the door by touching it, after all. You’re the most likely candidate.”

“She’s right. Why don’t you give it a try?” Cryssie encouraged.

I hesitantly took a step forward and approached the stairs. Much to my surprise, I wasn’t pushed away. I was able to enter with ease.

Saria grinned. “Seems like there’s our answer. *You’re* invited inside.”

“I didn’t expect this. Wh-What should I do?” I asked.

I was scared to go inside this mysterious area alone. *Is it best to consult a teacher or something?*

“If the Magical Committee catches wind of these stairs, I can almost guarantee that we’ll never be allowed to set foot inside,” Saria replied. “If you’re curious about what lies ahead, I suggest you proceed and explore while you can. The choice is up to you.”

“Up to me…”

I had no idea what was below, but judging from what the entity had told me and how only I was allowed inside, there was a good chance that it was related to the curse. I glanced at Cryssie, who seemed to have caught on. She said what was on her mind.

“I can’t enter this area, so I can’t protect you. Honestly, I’m reluctant to let you go into such a dangerous-looking place alone. But I’ll respect your opinion, Callus. You should make that decision yourself.”

When Cryssie voiced her honest beliefs, I knew that I had to harden my resolve and come to a decision. She truly didn't want to put me in any danger, after all. After much thought, I gave them my answer.

"I...want to go. Even if it's dangerous."

The two girls gave me a happy smile and slapped my back.

"Well said. I expect no less from my future assistant. People stop evolving when they lose the will to gain knowledge. Go on. If you don't return after a while, we'll call for some support and help you out."

"Yeah. I'll destroy this stupid barrier if I need to," Cryssie added.

"Thank you. Then I'll be off!" I said.

Encouraged by the two, I made my way down the dark set of stairs and stepped into the underground passage.

"It's so dark... *Rai Lo*."

I created a ball of light to illuminate the path in front of me. The stairs seemed to descend endlessly. *Just how far does this go?*

"Watch your step," Selena said, in a worried tone. "If you trip, you'll roll all the way to the bottom."

She usually remained hidden around others, but she often appeared by my side when it was just the two of us.

"I'm glad you could come with me, Selena. I wouldn't be able to use magic if I was alone," I said.

"No need to worry. I'll defeat any enemy that comes our way." She gave a huff of pride.

*She's so reliable.*

"Anyways, this is an odd place," she said. "It's filled with cold magical energy."

"Cold energy, huh? It actually *is* physically cold here," I replied.

The lower I went, the colder the air became. It wasn't unbearably freezing, but it was still chilly.

"Oh, I think this is the end," I said.

Several minutes after I had begun my descent, I reached the bottom of the stairs. I exchanged glances with Selena and heightened my vigilance. There was a chance that we'd get ambushed, and it was best to stay alert.

"All right, here I go."

I came out into a round room. It was decently wide. Desks and bookshelves lined the edges, all old and covered with dust. *Seems like no one's been here for a while.* But I was most bothered

about a lone round, stone chair placed in the center of the room, with an object sitting on it.

"Is that a doll? It's not a...corpse, is it?" I wondered out loud.

A woman with blue hair and pale skin was seated on the chair. Though she appeared about the same age as me, her doll-like face accentuated her otherworldly beauty. Stone shortswords pierced the back of her hands and into the armrests, locking her in place.

"This is awful..."

Upon closer inspection, I found that swords had pierced her feet as well, pinning her to the ground. And seemingly as a final blow, a stone spear had stabbed her through her chest and the backrest of the chair.

"Even to a doll, who would do such a thing?"

I could feel the offender's intense hatred. They wanted to make it abundantly clear that she wouldn't leave this place. *But why? And for what reason?* I wasn't eager to get much closer, but there were no other paths. All I could do was search this room.

"We might be able to find something. I'll take a closer look."

The moment I tried to approach the stone chair, I jolted in surprise.

"How many years has it been since I last had a visitor?" A clear voice rang out through the room.

It had come from the woman on the chair. She slowly opened her blue eyes and looked at me before breaking out into a faint smile.

"I welcome you, child. Welcome to my prison."

I let out a gasp. "Huh?!"

She must've been imprisoned in this area for a long time, and her limbs and her chest were impaled, but she stared straight at me and spoke calmly. At first, I thought she must have been a golem—a doll that moved using magic—but her movements and expressions were far too fluid and human.

"Are you...alive?" I asked.

"Hm, what an interesting question to ask. I believe it may depend on what you count as 'alive.' I'm breathing, my blood is circulating, and I'm certainly conscious. I believe this falls within your standards of being alive, but what do you say?"

"Um, so, you're alive then...right?"

I didn't quite understand, but I decided to leave it at that for now. *I have bigger questions first.* This person had to know

something I didn't, and it might have been a huge clue to undoing my curse.

"My name is Callus. Could you tell me yours?"

"Certainly. My name is—"

"Callus! Just who *is* this person?!" Selena suddenly yelled, drowning out the woman's voice.

*What's wrong?*

"Her magical energy, it isn't normal. It's more like that of a spirit's! I've never seen anyone like this before!"

Selena looked clearly flustered for the first time since I'd met her. This woman's existence was simply that alien to us. I needed to learn more.

"I'm sorry, Selena cut us off. Would you kindly continue..." I started, but I suddenly noticed something odd.

This person had stopped talking when Selena had spoken up. She was even looking at Selena in shock.

"Can you see her? Can you see spirits?" I asked.

"I see. So humans are now unable to see them. How regrettable," the woman muttered, narrowing her eyes sorrowfully.

There was no doubt about it. This person could see Selena, and apparently it was common among the people of whatever generation she was from.

"My name is Luna. I am the guardian of the sacred moon, and a prisoner here. And as you may have already guessed, I am a magician from long ago."

I couldn't believe my ears. I'd heard that in ancient times, when gods had still existed, magicians held much greater power, as they lived together with spirits. *Is she from that era?!* But that would have been over fifteen hundred years ago. There was no way for a normal person to live for that long. Even so, she didn't seem to be lying. I needed to gather more information.

"Um, what do you mean by 'prisoner'?" I asked.

"Nothing more, nothing less. I'm trapped within this underground area and unable to move. These blades piercing my body are specially made to seal my powers. A normal magician would die from simply touching such cursed implements. You seem to possess quite a bit of magical energy, but I still recommend that you keep your distance."

"I-I understand."

*I didn't think it'd be so terrifying. Just who is Luna? Why can she*

*talk so normally while she's pierced by these tools? I only have more questions.*

"Um, can I ask why you're trapped here?"

"Certainly. Long ago, I was the one and only moon magician. I had quite a few followers, as well as the respect and admiration of many others. But at the same time, many cursed my existence." Her eyes were downcast as she seemed to scorn herself, invoking unimaginable levels of anger, sadness, and powerlessness. "Five magicians who feared my power took me by surprise and bound me to this chair. To make sure that I could never leave, they used five cursed tools that could restrain even the gods. They then confined me deep underground and sealed my prison with a door that would never open. What an elaborate plan they concocted."

Judging from her story, Luna didn't sound like the demon that had controlled this land. The demon was said to have appeared a thousand years ago, so if she had lived during the era of the gods, there would be a gap of five hundred years.

"It's said that terrifying creatures roamed the land around five hundred years ago. Do you know anything about that?" I asked.

"Hm. As you say, around that period, I remember feeling sinister magical energy from outside. But I've always been confined here, so I wasn't able to see for myself."

"I see."

If Luna was speaking the truth, she didn't seem to have much of a connection to the demon or this kingdom. *She's not related to the labyrinth either, probably.*

"And that's where my story ends," Luna said. "I simply garnered some hatred and was stabbed in the back. It's a common story. I'm afraid I've just bored you."

"No, not at all. It was very interesting. Thank you for telling me."

I desperately tried to burn her story into my mind. This was valuable information that I doubted I'd hear elsewhere.

"Ah, within your story, there was a word I couldn't quite understand. May I ask about its meaning?" I asked.

"Certainly. What are you referring to?"

I told her the word that I wasn't familiar with.

"What's a 'moon'?"

Luna widened her eyes with shock. "What...are you saying?!"

She gave me a look of absolute disbelief. I could even sense

some anger in her tone, but I had no idea why.

"I apologize if I said something rude. But I truly don't know what the word 'moon' means," I said.

"Are you mocking me? Surely you've seen it before. The pale blue glow that illuminates the night sky? Don't tell me you haven't!"

She raised her voice, but I truly had no idea what she was referring to.

"I'm sorry," I replied. "I've never seen it before."

"Impossible... How could this...?" She hung her head and started mumbling to herself. "Did the moon truly disappear? That's impossible... No, wait, I suppose *they* could've done this. Heh, so not only did you bind me down here, you even went out of your way to humiliate me to this level. Are you *that* afraid of me?"

"Um, Luna?" I asked gingerly.

She stopped mumbling to herself and looked up. The rage she'd expressed earlier was gone, and she had composed herself once more.

"I was just a bit shocked. Sorry about that," she said.

"No, I don't mind at all. Would you be able to tell me what the word means?"

"Sure, of course. But before that, let me ask you one thing. How are your calendars? Do you still have months?"

"Huh? Y-Yeah, we do. Oh, is that what the moon refers to? We're currently in our fourth month, so it's the month of Mazu. Is that what the moon is? Can you perhaps manipulate time?"

That made sense to me, but it seemed I was wrong.

"I see. So the moon remains within periods of time. I suppose they wouldn't have been able to completely erase it."

She started mumbling to herself again and seemed to come to an understanding, but I was still completely in the dark.

"I think I get what's going on. You have my gratitude, Callus. It seems the outside world is completely different from my time."

"S-Sure. So could you tell me what the moon is?"

"Right... Could you bring me that item on the shelf over there? It might be the fastest way to tell you."

I obeyed her orders and retrieved a cute necklace. It had a simple design, but carried an odd charm that drew my attention. I had no interest in accessories, but even I was a little enticed. It had a faint, blue glow and an unusual shape: a sphere with a

circular gouge cut into its side, resembling a bow. I felt like I'd seen this shape before.

"What is this?" I asked.

"That's proof of being a follower of the Moonlight Faith, a religious order I led. We would hold that necklace tight as we sent our prayers to the heavens. That charm was made in the shape of the moon, which long ago floated in the skies and cast a gentle glow over the night."

"I didn't know that there was a celestial body in this shape. Huh..."

"We call that particular shape a 'crescent moon.' The moon is an unusual body that changes its shape over time. It could look round on some nights, or sliced in half on others."

The more I learned, the more curious I was. It must have been beautiful to see.

"But this moon isn't in the sky anymore. Was it destroyed?" I asked.

"Probably not. Even gods would struggle to do such a thing to a celestial body. I suspect that magic was used to hide it away. How audacious."

"Can a celestial body be concealed so easily? They may look small because they're so far away, but aren't these bodies very large?"

"Oh, you're quite knowledgeable. It seems the standard of education is higher than it used to be." She gave a joyful smile. Perhaps the people of ancient times wouldn't have been able to understand her explanation. "As you've said, it's no easy feat. But the people who confined me here could probably do it."

"I see. But why did they do something so troublesome?"

"They feared my power. Thus, they trapped me down here and even obscured its source: the moon. I'd no longer be able to use my full strength, you see."

"So it was all out of fear towards you."

"Most likely. I'm sure they destroyed any writings about the moon and killed my followers as well. And as a result, people of this age know nothing about the moon. If everyone is ignorant of it, there'd be no need to reveal it once more. I didn't think I'd be this humiliated while sealed," she said, letting out a dry laugh.

*This is on such a grand scale.* But I was more curious about Luna, against whom such extreme measures had been taken. At a glance, she only looked like a frail woman to me. Did the moon

hold some great power?

"Ah, I've talked a bit too much. Shall we get to the heart of the issue?" Luna said after some deep thought. She stared at me, giving off an alien yet divine aura. She was clearly no normal person—probably closer to a spirit.

"Callus, why don't we join forces? If you can undo my seal, I'll completely rid you of the foreign matter inside your body."

It was like a bolt from the blue. I panicked at her offer—I'd never mentioned the curse in my body since setting foot in here, but she'd apparently seen straight through me. I stayed in stunned silence.

"You don't have to be so wary of me," Luna said. "Even if it's sealed up and lost almost all its power, I can tell at a glance that there's a foreign object within your body. I *am* an amazing magician, I'll have you know."

I'd heard her story, but there were still quite a few mysteries about this moon magician. There weren't any guarantees that she was a good person. There could very well have been a proper reason behind keeping her locked up in here. But it seemed true that she would have enough power to undo my curse. I couldn't just turn on my heels and leave without hearing her out.

"I'll at least hear what you have to say," I replied.

"Heh heh, that's more like it," she said with a bewitching grin.

Her speech and mannerisms were that of an adult's, but her appearance resembled a child's. However, something in the way she expressed herself hinted that she was much older than a normal adult. *She's really an odd person.*

"My deal is simple. I need you to help me undo my seal. In return, I'll rid your body of that thing that's eating away at you."

"Can you really do that?" I asked.

Even with the help of Serena, princess of the spirits, my curse couldn't be destroyed. While Luna may have been a powerful magician, there was no guarantee she could actually rid my body of the curse. This was certainly a gamble.

Luna seemed to sense my hesitation. "It's only natural for you to be skeptical and anxious. That thing inside of you isn't normal, is it? And I understand that it might be difficult to trust my words alone," she said. "But believe me, I can dispel that thing with my moon magic. For starters, why don't you try pouring your light magic into the necklace?"

“Uh, okay… *Rai Lo*.”

Light magic possessed the necklace, then suddenly transformed into a blue light. It was so fantastic and beautiful that I couldn’t tear my eyes away.

“That’s the light of the moon. I’m sure you’re aware of the properties of light magic, but moonlight is especially effective at warding off evil,” Luna said.

I felt the blue light emanate waves similar to *Ra Lucis.* I had no doubt that Luna was telling the truth.

“The moon’s power within that necklace is only a minuscule fraction of the abilities that I can wield once I regain my full strength. Is this convincing enough for you?” she said, while tilting her head.



*Her powers are the real deal. It'd be great if I could have her as an ally, but can I really trust her?*

I decided to ask my partner for advice. "What do you think, Selena?"

"Me? Hmmm…" After a few moments of thought, she looked at me as serious as ever. "I think…we can trust her."

"And why do you think that?"

"It's just intuition. As you say, she's very suspicious. She's not a normal human. But even so…I don't think she's a bad person."

Luna's face broke into a smile at those words. "Heh, I'm quite honored."

*I didn't expect this. I thought Selena would be against the whole thing.* As a spirit, Selena could sense things that humans couldn't. Even if it was intuition, I couldn't dismiss it as blind faith; it was worth lending an ear to.

"I'll be honest," I finally said. "I still can't completely trust you. Even if I find a way to undo your seal, I can't promise that I'll definitely free you. If you don't mind that, I'll cooperate with you. Please lend me your strength as well."

I was hesitant, but I decided to proceed. I'd decide later if she was trustworthy. For now, I found it important to deepen our relationship.

"I see. I'm quite happy to hear that, Callus," Luna smiled.

I didn't feel any malice from her. *I'm sure I'll be fine.*

"I'll give you that necklace too. It's called a moon amulet. I believe it will be useful to you. But if you don't like it, you may sell it or do with it as you wish," Luna said.

"Huh? Really? I can have this?"

"Sure. It's a small price to pay for your cooperation."

"Thank you so much! This necklace is so beautiful, I did kind of want it." Just looking at the moon amulet's pale glow soothed my soul.

"You're staring at that thing a little *too* much." Selena grumbled.

"Huh? What's wrong?" I looked at her quizzically. I didn't think I'd been doing anything strange.

"You have *my* light, don't you? I don't think you need that other one," she said.

"Huh? Wait, are you…jealous of this light?"

"Wh-What?! Of course not! Y-You're so immature!"

She looked away with a huff. *It's hard to understand women*

*sometimes. Maybe Sirius could have dealt with this situation better.* While I was pondering my choice of words, I heard Luna start to chuckle.

"Is anything the matter?" I asked.

"Apologies," she replied. "I just thought that you two get along well."

"I guess so. I've been with Selena for five years. She's my partner, my friend, and my family. Right, Selena?"

"Shut up!" Selena replied, spurning me.

I looked at her, dejected. I couldn't see her well since she'd turned her face away, but I saw her cheeks flush ever so slightly. *Was she actually thinking the same thing?*

"With humans no longer able to see spirits, I assumed that these relationships had been discontinued as well," Luna said. "But I'm relieved to see people like you two out there. I hope that you continue to be friends."

"Of course. Selena's my amazing partner," I replied without hesitation.

After talking with Luna for a short while, I decided to leave the basement. I couldn't tell the time down here, but I guessed that it was already getting dark. I didn't want to worry anyone. Before I left, I decided to ask one more question.

"I want to know about this door. It didn't react at all to other people, but it opened when I touched it. Do you know why?"

"Hm, that's a rather interesting tidbit. Do you know what was written on the door?" Luna asked.

"Um, I think it was light and dark engulfing a star."

"I see." She seemed to have found some sort of answer. "The people who sealed me down here didn't want anyone else to enter. So they put a lock in the shape of a vow."

"A vow?" I was confused by her words.

"First, we're working under the premise that perfect or absolute magic doesn't exist. Hence, it's impossible to create a magical seal that will *never* be undone. Magic will always have a loophole or an exception—in other words, a weakness or a *key* will always exist."

"I see. And that applies to this as well?"

"Precisely. However, those who created the door gave it a key that could never be found. According to that engraving, only humans who possess both the light and the dark can enter."

Even I could understand the paradox of that condition. If fire and water were to mix, one would be extinguished—they couldn't coexist in the same realm.

"They created an impossible key and thought that it would trap me in here for good. But they couldn't predict *your* existence. The foreign object inside of you is undoubtedly one of darkness, and you've suppressed it with the power of light. You're treading a superbly fine line between the two forces, and you're doing it very carefully."

"My curse comes from the dark element..."

The polar opposite of light was dark. The pieces clicked into place. While I was suppressing my curse, the two elements had melted and mixed together, creating a balance of light and dark. As a result, I had become an existence of contradiction, and the owner of two opposing elements.

"Um, do you know what *this* is?" I asked. I showed her my chest and revealed the stain from the curse.

Luna stared intently before she spoke. "Unfortunately, I don't know any details. I'm sorry I can't be of any assistance."

"Not at all. Thank you for teaching me all sorts of things. It was very helpful."

After that brief conversation, I finally took my leave. My mind needed some time to process the vast amount of information that I had been given today. I wanted to go home and take a rest.

"I'll be leaving now. But I'll be sure to come again," I replied.

"Sure. Come whenever you'd like. As you can see, I've only got time on my hands."

She gave a small wave with her hand, at least as much as she could with a blade pierced through it. I quickly bowed in response, and left the chilly basement.

***

When I returned to the clock tower, Cryssie immediately leaped to my side. Saria had apparently been sleeping, as she mumbled and rubbed her eyes while approaching me.

"Callus! You're safe!" Cryssie cried.

"Yep, never been better," I replied.

She breathed a sigh of relief. I'd apparently caused her to worry quite a bit.

“Thank goodness… I knew you’d be fine, though,” she added.

“Oho? You’re not very honest, are you? You were worried about my dear junior all this time. It was quite cute,” Saria added.

“Hey!” Cryssie wailed. “You promised not to tell him!”

“Heh heh heh. Did I, now?”

A red-faced Cryssie grabbed Saria’s collar and started shaking her. While I wasn’t sure if there was any truth to that, the two seemed to have grown close.

“In any case, I’m glad that you’re all right. And? What did you find down below?” Saria asked.

“You see…”

I explained everything I had seen, except for Luna. That information seemed dangerous to give out, and she’d requested for her existence to be kept a secret.

“The people who sealed me might still have friends prowling around. It would be bad to risk letting them know that the door has been opened,” Luna had said.

“I see. I’d expected something amazing to be lying inside, but I suppose that wasn’t the case,” Saria said.

“Um, could you keep this underground room a secret? I’d only like for this place to be revealed once I’ve investigated everything inside,” I said.

“Hm, fine by me. I don’t owe the Committee any favors, and it’d be troublesome if other people come here to investigate as well.”

I felt relieved. I had no doubt that if Emilia came, he’d try to enter, and it’d be dangerous for him to meet with Luna. I was glad that I’d been able to keep my secret, until Saria’s words stopped me.

“But I’d like for you to tell me the truth one day,” Saria said. “I won’t force you, of course.”

She’d seen through my clumsy lies.

“I understand. I’ll tell you someday,” I replied.

I made my promise as I redid the floorboards and concealed the door. I needed to remember its location since I was planning on visiting again.

“I’ll be leaving for today. Thank you so much,” I said.

“Sure. Be careful on your way home,” Saria said.

And so, Cryssie and I left the clock tower.

***

I left the academy by myself and turned around to face the clock tower on my way out. Cryssie had returned to her dorm, so only Selena and I were here.

"I know Luna's reasoning is logical, but I still don't like lying," I said to myself.

The guilt of hiding the truth from Cryssie and Saria was like a thorn in my heart. Before I knew it, I had become full of secrets. My curse, my princehood, and the basement were all topics that I couldn't reveal so casually. I knew that this was out of my control, but it felt suffocating nonetheless.

"But you've got me, Callus," Selena said. "You can tell me anything, can't you?"

"Yeah. Thanks, Selena. It's a huge help that I can talk about anything with you," I replied.

"Hm. Feel free to rely on me more," she said happily. She was my reliable and reassuring partner.

"Huh?" I looked down and noticed a blue glow coming from my pocket.

I rummaged around and found the moon amulet that Luna had given me.

"But why's it glowing?" I wondered out loud.

I thought that it wouldn't glow without me pouring in my light magic, but it was giving off a pale light all on its own. As I was gazing at the amulet, it suddenly let out a sliver of light towards the sky above.

"Huh...?"

The small beam of light was thin and frail, invisible to the naked eye from afar. But I was up close and able to see it clearly. The light was stretching towards a certain location.

"Isn't that area the Star Absence? Why's it pointing there?"

The light had indicated a patch of sky that lacked stars: the Star Absence. I couldn't understand what this light was trying to tell me. I continued to stare intently at the sky.

"I-Is that—?!" I gasped.

The area the light was pointing at wavered for a split second, and I caught a glimpse of a glowing, blue celestial body. The sky immediately returned to normal, but I was certain that there was *something* behind the Star Absence. It was much larger than the stars dotting the sky. It was round and beautiful. *That must be*

*what Luna was talking about—the moon.*

"Selena, did you see that?"

"I did. I'm surprised. I didn't think something like that was hidden in the skies," she replied, looking bemused.

The sky was always watching over us from above, but we only saw what it really looked like for a brief moment.

"No wonder there was a patch of sky with no stars. I didn't think they had just covered the entire moon like that. Who could've done this?" I wondered.

I was creeped out by it all. I turned my back and quickly rushed home.

***

Once Callus had left the basement prison, Luna mumbled to herself amid the silence.

"I've been trapped here for a thousand and five hundred years, I see. A human came by sooner than I'd expected."

She'd been prepared to wait for millennia. This isolation and solitude couldn't have been endured by a normal human. But her intense hatred swirled around in her heart, painting over any feeling of loneliness, and she'd been able to retain her sanity to this day.

"Callus and Selena... Heh, I saw some nostalgic faces within them. I suppose this is the fate of the stars."

With a faint smile, she looked up in the room of her confinement. She prayed that she'd one day leave this place, and that a sky filled with stars would illuminate her world once more.

***

"Whew. I think I made it," I said, swiftly arriving home after having left the clock tower.

I was a little late, but it wasn't dinnertime just yet. I exhaled and entered my house, but was greeted by someone in a maid outfit.

"Welcome back, Prince Callus. I'll take your belongings fur mew."

"Thank you—I mean, no, what?!" I yelped.

It wasn't Shizuku. This woman spoke with unique, catlike tics, and had cat ears sprouting from her head, as well as a graceful

tail. This was a member of a humanoid species with beast-like traits, known as beastfolk.

"Um, where's Shizuku?" I asked.

"She's still cooking. Would mew paw-lease wait a hair longer?"

"Oh. I see."

The mysterious beastfolk was wearing attire similar to Shizuku's, so I had to guess that she was an acquaintance. *Wait, Shizuku and a beastfolk?* I felt like I'd met her before. I racked my brain to find an answer.

"Are you...Kallie?" I asked.

"Nya ha ha! You finally remembered me-ow."

She happily wiggled her striped ears and smiled. Kallie was a maid who had worked at my manor in the past. She had come at around the same time as Shizuku, but left to work in the royal castle. That was why I hadn't seen her for a while.

"It's been like a decade, hasn't it? I'm happy to see you look so well," I said.

"I'm also ecstatic to see mew look so healthy. And you've grown quite handsome, just like His Highness Sirius. I can see why Shizuku's so attached to mew."

Shizuku emerged from the kitchen and directed an icy glare at Kallie.

"If you've got time to talk about silly speculations, why don't you help me out? Don't let your fur drop into the food," Shizuku said.

"Mew're so horrible. That's speciesist."

Kallie pretended to cry as she went to help Shizuku. It might've been difficult to tell, but Shizuku seemed a lot more energetic than usual. Kallie had been her friend since the Umbra days, so she must've been happy to meet an old pal.

"Prince Callus, I've finished making dinner. Please help yourself," Shizuku said.

"Thanks. I'll dig in."

Tonight's dinner was stew made with all sorts of ingredients. Since another person had joined us, dinner felt warmer and more enjoyable than usual.

"So what brings you here, Kallie?" I asked.

We'd finished dinner and were taking a short break. She was working at the royal castle, and must've had a lot of work to do.

"I came to meet Shizuku, of course. Isn't that right, my fur-

end?”

Kallie leaned on Shizuku, who sat next to her, and hugged her, rubbing their cheeks together. Shizuku quietly resisted and tried to push her away. *They get along so well.*

“Mrow... You’re as cold as always. Mew used to be a cute kitten who chased after me.”

“That was a long time ago. Please don’t talk about my past in front of Prince Callus.”

“I see. You’re still as bashful about your felines as ever. Nya ha ha!”

“Shall I see to it that that talkative mouth of yours never opens again?”

“Mrow?! D-Don’t brandish your knife!”

*They really do get along well.* I don’t think I’d ever seen Shizuku this lively before. I couldn’t suppress a chuckle.

“Your Highness! Don’t just sit there and laugh! Help me-owt!”

After the two played around for a bit more, Kallie finally stated her reason for coming here.

“Mew see...His Meowjesty requested fur me to see how mew were doing.”

“My father?” I asked.

“Correct. His Meowjesty can’t pawsonally come here, as I’m sure mew’re aware. I had some time, and I’m fur-ends with Shizuku, so I was selected in his stead.”

“I see. Thank you for coming all this way.”

I told her about my life at the academy: my friends, getting into Class A, and meeting all sorts of people. My academy life was always satisfying. I told her about everything...except for the basement.

“I see. I’m glad that mew seem to be enjoying yourself. I’m pawsitive that His Meowjesty would be elated to hear the good mews.”

“Yeah. Please tell him that I’m having fun.”

“Your wish is my command. Since I’ve finished my task, I suppaws I’ll scurry on home,” Kallie said, rising from her chair.

“You’re leaving already? Why don’t you stay?”

“Nya ha ha, I’d absolutely love to do so, but I’ve got a purr-ior engagement. I hope mew’ll excuse me,” she said apologetically.

Though she seemed a bit silly at times, she received orders directly from my father, so she had to be quite capable. It’d do her no good for me to get in her way.

“I see. Then I guess that can’t be helped. Come by anytime,” I replied.

“I shall. Pawlease excuse me.”

As Kallie left, Shizuku insisted on walking with her for a bit and left the house as well. *I guess I’ll return to my room.*

***

“This is far enough for me-ow, Shizuku,” Kallie said.

The pair had arrived at the central plaza of the royal capital. Had Kallie not said anything, Shizuku might have gone with her all the way to the royal castle.

“I see,” Shizuku replied. “I understand.”

“Nya ha ha, thank mew for today. I had so much fun.”

“I did as well. I’m glad that I got to see you again.” Shizuku gave a faint smile.

“You really do smile more often. If the people who knew mew back then saw you meow, I’m sure they’d be shocked.”

Kallie remembered Shizuku as a quiet and expressionless girl. The Shizuku from back then hadn’t expressed many emotions, but her skills were exceptional, and she was highly praised within the Umbra.

“It seems mew’ve found a great master. I’m glad to hear that.”

“Indeed. I’ve truly been blessed by the people around me,” Shizuku said, before adding, “But you haven’t changed, Kallie. You’re always hiding something underneath your smile. Isn’t it about time for you to return to your work under the sun?”

“Nya ha ha, some people feel calmer in the darkness. I’m…fine like this.”

Kallie gave a sad smile and turned her back on Shizuku.

“Bye, Shizuku. Let’s meet again, my fur-end.”

“Of course. Please don’t push yourself.”

Kallie kept her back turned while she raised her hand and melted away into the night.

# Terminology Dictionary V

## Light Merging

A traditional ritual from the Holy Kingdom often used for engagements. When two light magicians who love each other layer their light together and it mixes without repelling, it signifies a long and lasting relationship.

Since the number of light magicians have become scarce, many are unaware of this ritual.

## Moon

A large celestial body that used to float in the skies. Its blue glow is said to have powerful anti-evil properties.

## Moon Amulet

A crescent-shaped necklace filled with the power of the moon. Moonlight can be produced by pouring light magic into it. It’s made from a stone that doesn’t originate from this planet.

# Chapter Three: A Surge of Lightning

The next day, Cryssie didn't come by to pick me up. *Did she sleep in, or did she get carried away with her morning training?* After spending a calmer morning than usual, I headed to the academy by myself.

"We always go together, so this is a bit lonely," I said, before noticing someone. "Hm?"

As I passed through the front gates and headed to my classroom, three students approached me. I tried walking along the edges of the hall to not get in their way, but they were clearly staring at me. *Do they need me or something?*

"Pleased to meet you. You're Callus, aren't you?" a pretty woman with bright green hair said.

She seemed mature and fashionable. *Is she an upperclassman?* Two other students were behind her, but they remained silent. They were apparently her attendants.

"That's right. And who might you be?"

"I'm a second-year student from the Upper Class, Latena Lilianora. Pleased to meet you," she said with a smile.

The Lilianoras were a famous household; even I was aware of the name. Like an aristocrat, she commanded a ladylike air of elegance combined with the grace of a contemporary woman. *What an odd person.*

"And, uh, what business do you have with me?" I asked.

"I wanted to ask you a few questions. Would you spare me some of your time?" Latena replied.

"Sure, I can do that."

She chuckled. "Thank you."

I'd been called out by another aristocrat not long ago, but she didn't seem to be pressuring me into anything. *I guess it takes all kinds.*

"I heard that you were recruited by someone, but is that true? Errr, I think it was that revolting blue-haired boy," Latena said.

"Oh, you mean Mars."

"Ah, that's the one! Marth, or whatever his name was. Did he try to recruit you?"

"He did. Why do you ask?"

The two attendants behind Latena furrowed their brows and glared at me. *I don't like this.*

"And did you accept?" she asked.

"No, I didn't," I replied. "I'm not really interested in stuff like that."

"I see. That's a relief. I wouldn't want to go against my cute underclassman."

*"Against"?* Her words didn't sound peaceful at all. I was beginning to understand the situation.

"Um, are you against Mars?" I asked.

"It's not on a personal level, really," Latena answered, with a sigh. "Our households are fighting each other. It's a bit of a hassle, but I must keep him in check."

"So you don't really want to fight him or anything?"

"That's right. I want to become a model in the future. I'm not even the slightest bit interested in the quarrels between aristocrats. I'm only doing this because my daddy asked me to, but I don't want to be involved with political strife."

She spoke about herself candidly. *She really does seem like a modern, progressive girl.* Recently, the trend of a single master maintaining a household was said to be outdated. *The very concept of a kingdom might fade away in the near future.*

"As long as you're not in his group, I'm satisfied. That's all I have to say. I'm sorry for taking your time," Latena said.

"Uh, sure. Um, I know it's kind of weird for me to say this, but aren't you going to recruit me?" I asked.

Mars was probably trying to grow his faction as we spoke. Surely Latena must've wanted as many friends as possible.

"If you want to enter my group, I'd welcome you with open arms, but you don't wish to be involved with these petty, ridiculous squabbles, do you? Leave these troublesome matters to your elders, and enjoy your academy life." She waved her hand before leaving. "Bye."

The two students who followed her seemed to assist her of their own free will. If I were to choose a side, I was sure I'd go with Latena's.

"In terms of solidarity, I think Latena is on even ground. But Mars doesn't seem like one to fight fair, so I don't know how this will go," I said to myself. "They should just enjoy school without these fights."

I guessed that Mars had his own reasons as well. Aristocrats

had a lot going on, after all. I headed to class, hoping that there would be no further trouble.

When I entered the classroom, I realized that there was a huge fuss.

"What's going on?" I said, as I anxiously took my seat.

Jack rushed over. "Hey, Callus, were you okay?"

"Huh? About what?" I tilted my head, puzzled by his worried expression.

"Seems like you're fine," he said, sounding relieved.

*What's going on?*

"What do you mean? Did something happen?" I asked.

"Ever since yesterday, a lot of students have been forcefully recruited. They couldn't get away until they agreed to it. It was terrifying."

"What kind of recruiting was it?" I wanted to confirm my suspicions.

"There's a guy called Mars from the Upper Class. He's apparently trying to gather students to grow his faction. I swear, these aristocrats come up with the dumbest ideas."

"I...see." *I knew it. He backed off easily last time, but he does force people to join him.* This was something I couldn't ignore.

"It's mostly students from Class A and B who are being targeted. Just about everybody in Class A has already been approached by him. I thought he'd go for you too, but you seem to be safe."

"He actually *did* come to me, but he backed off almost immediately."

"I see..."

Jack seemed a bit down and his voice was gloomy. *What's up with him?*

"He didn't try to recruit me," Jack mumbled.

"O-Oh."

He didn't want to join, but he felt left out for not being recruited at all. Boys certainly had their own set of complex emotions.

"But I'm glad you're safe," Jack said, then glanced towards the hallways. "Hm?"

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"Don't you think the hallways are a bit noisy?"

"Now that you mention it, you're right. And it looks like a lot of people are gathering too. I wonder if something happened."

I had a sinking feeling as we headed to the corridor. The other students had gathered around, focusing their attention on two students who seemed to be arguing with each other. A threatening air flowed between the pair. *Are they fighting?*

"Can't you take a break from being so stupid? Why would *I* ever work under *you*?" a familiar voice rang out.

Jack and I looked at each other.

"Hey, is that…?"

"It can't be…"

We pushed the crowd aside and approached the owner of the voice. Cryssie was in front of a large man who stood confidently. The man had been present when Mars tried to recruit me before. *I think his name was Mike or something?*

"I've graciously decided to pardon your rude comments and make you one of my subordinates. You're too cheeky for a commoner!" Mike roared back. Veins were popping out on his forehead.

His intimidating aura scared all the other students, but Cryssie didn't seem bothered at all. *She's strong.*

"Why don't you go home and tell your *master* that he should come back and become a better man if he wants to recruit me," Cryssie replied. "Forcing people to work under him makes him scum."

Mike's face turned red. "You little… You open your trap one more time!"

Cryssie never minced words. *She didn't have to go that far.* But I still couldn't help but smile inside. The other students, probably feeling the same way, started to giggle.

"Seems like you need to learn some manners!" Mike shouted as his arm shot out.

*No!* My body moved first. Before I knew it, I'd grabbed Mike's arm.

"You're…" Mike said.

I'd acted without thinking, but I had no regrets. I couldn't just sit back and silently watch when someone important to me could get hurt.

"What are you doing?" I asked. "I thought I was the one Mars wanted."

"I've got some business with that wench over there. Back off," he replied.

He exerted his strength, but his arm wouldn't budge an inch.

He was strong, but he couldn't compare to Damien. I didn't even need to use my magic to increase my muscle power.

"Rah!" Mike bellowed, grabbing me with both arms.

I caught his attack, and we grappled each other.

"You commoners just need to shut up and follow my orders! Stop resisting!" Mike shouted.

His thought process was distorted. How could he say such horrible things just because he'd been born in a different household? My father had told me about having trouble dealing with aristocrats as well. *If there are a lot of people like Mike, I can see why.*

"That's so selfish!" I said through gritted teeth. "We won't bow down to you guys!"

I used my strength to push him back. I wouldn't lose to him in power, but I didn't know what to do from here. People were gathering around, and I wanted to finish this soon. Suddenly, Cryssie walked past me and approached Mike. *What's she gonna do?*

"You're so freaking annoying!" Cryssie yelled, delivering a heavy kick...to Mike's groin.

He gasped and crumpled to the ground. Who could blame him? His vital area had been hit, and with such great force. The other male students, including myself, all winced in pain. *Ouch... He won't be able to stand up for a while.*

Mike foamed at the mouth and gasped for air. He'd gotten what he deserved, but I couldn't help but pity him a little.

"Hmph. I feel a whole lot better now," Cryssie said, without an ounce of guilt.

Some other students dragged Mike away to the nurse's office. After we watched him go, we returned to our classroom. The other students of Class A had apparently seen the entire altercation, and the room was buzzing with the news. They were worried that they might become the next recruiting target.

"Cryssie, are you okay? Did that guy do anything to you?" I asked.

"I'm all right," she replied with a grin. "Thanks to a certain someone stepping in to save me, I've never been better. Thanks."

*Whew, seems like she's fine.* "But I never thought they'd be so forceful. I wouldn't have expected them to shift their focus to you either."

I'd underestimated their persistence, and I was sure that they

hadn’t given up yet. I didn’t even want to think about what they might try next.

“We should probably come up with a way to stop them,” Cryssie said. “If they keep coming at us like that, we won’t have time to study. We’re busy enough as it is just trying to advance to the next grade.”

She was right. We had to produce results three times every year to advance, and even though I wasn’t sure what would count, it was clear that with such a difficult task, we had no time to waste on these pointless faction battles. The other students seemed to be worried about the same thing.

“What should we do?” I mumbled.

The quickest way to put an end to the recruiting was to ask my father. He could implement rules at the academy and prevent them from happening, but that was only a temporary solution. After some time, people would find loopholes or start operating in secret, rendering the rules meaningless. And above all, I didn’t want to trouble my father.

“Just remembering it makes me fume,” Cryssie grumbled. “How could they single out a lady and aim for her while she’s alone? They’re such cowards. One kick wasn’t enough for him.”

I gave a dry laugh, thinking that what he’d already received was suitable punishment. *Only guys know that pain, after all.*

“Maybe we should just enter the opposing faction. I heard a girl is at the top, so I’m sure they’re a bit more well-behaved,” Cryssie said.

She was referring to Latena’s group. Either way, these choices would have gotten us involved in the battle between aristocrats. *Is there a way to not enter a faction, and also not get recruited?* After some thought, I came to a single conclusion.

“Hey. Why don’t we create a third faction? Our own new group?” I suggested.



Cryssie and Jack looked at me, wide-eyed.

"If we stand out like that, they'll only target us more!" Jack said.

"I like it. It sounds like fun," Cryssie said. "Sure beats following someone else's orders. If you're set on it, I'll help you out."

The votes were currently tied, one to one. I realized how outlandish this idea sounded, so I couldn't blame Jack for being against it. But even so, this had to be better than simply sitting on our hands.

"Jack, I don't have any intentions of getting involved with fighting. I just want to create a new choice for everyone," I said.

"A new choice?" he asked.

"Yeah. Most of the students in this class just want to study. And I'm sure a lot of students from the other classes feel the same way. I want to bring all of us together. In other words, I'm creating a faction that won't get involved with factions."

"Huh? That's a contradiction."

"Sure, but if we can safely form a faction, Mars will think twice before trying to recruit us."

"That...might be true."

These forceful recruitments were occurring because students were independent and didn't belong to any group. If we all worked together to reject these fights, our opinions wouldn't be ignored.

"Hey, could you tell us more about that?" a student asked.

Before I knew it, other people had gathered around and were interested in my idea. I repeated to them what I'd told Jack, and a lot of people agreed with me. *This is reassuring.*

"Wait, Callus. Even if we work together, I can't imagine that Mars would just walk away from us. We need support from someone influential or something," Jack said worriedly.

He was right, of course. Strength in numbers just wouldn't be enough—we needed someone with authority and power to drive Mars away.

"About that... I think I have an idea. I'll tell you more after school," I said.

"Ugh, so we're really doing this? This is bad for my heart," Jack said.

"Heh, it sounds like fun! Really gets me excited," Cryssie added.

The gears were slowly starting to turn. We were about to

enter a small battle to protect our freedom.

***

After school, I took Cryssie and Jack to the clock tower to discuss my further plans. Jack had never been here before, so he was anxious about following me.

“A-Are you sure we can enter the clock tower? I heard that shady experiments were done inside. There aren’t going to be any sudden explosions or anything, right?” Jack asked.

“Ha ha, I don’t think anything will explode. Hopefully,” I replied.

“Hey, are you *sure* this is safe?!”

I ignored his cries and removed the magic lock.

“Callus, can’t you just tell me about this idea of yours? My heart’s beating so fast that I think it’ll burst,” Jack said.

“You’ll see once we get to the second floor,” I said, coaxing him up the stairs.

“You’re here, dear junior. I’ve grown tired of waiting,” a little girl said.

“Hello, everyone. Thank you for inviting me today,” another lady said.

The two greeted us as we reached the second floor. Jack stood there goggle-eyed.

“C-C-C-C-Callus! Why’re the Clock Tower Hermit and the saint here?!” he shrieked.

He could tell at a glance who they were. I’d asked Saria and Cecilia to be here with us today, but Jack hadn’t expected to meet this amazing duo in the least. He gave an exaggerated yelp.

Saria narrowed her eyes. “Junior, who is this noisy, excitable man? Should we exchange his vocal cords for a magical tool that can adjust his volume?”



“Eep! I’m sorry!” Jack squeaked. He swiftly bowed his head at Saria’s grumpy words.

It was scary when she made jokes like that with such a deadpan expression.

“All right, I’ll just give a quick introduction,” I said. “This is Saria and Cecilia. Saria’s an amazing inventor of magical tools, and Cecilia’s a saint and princess from the Holy Kingdom. A lot of things happened and these two became my friends, so I called them here.”

“Awesome,” Jack said in awe. “This duo is notoriously difficult to approach, but you became friends with both.”

I felt blessed for knowing these two as well. Suddenly, Cryssie jabbed my side with her fingertips. *That kinda hurts. Why does she look so unhappy?*

“So you’re friends with such a beautiful girl,” Cryssie said.

“Huh? Yeah, Cecilia kindly allowed me to be friends with her,” I replied.

She was familiar with Saria, but had never met Cecilia before. Cecilia was a beautiful princess, so I guessed that Cryssie was a little nervous.

“Are you friendlier with her than with me?” Cryssie asked.

“Huh? Probably not. I’ve spent most of my time at the academy with you, I think.”

“Hm, I see.”

After she studied my face, her mood seemed to improve a little. I didn’t quite understand, but I was glad that she seemed happier.

“Then I guess I’ll forgive you for today,” she said.

“Uh, thank you?”

After she forgave me for whatever reason, I got the feeling that Cecilia was glaring from under her blindfold. I decided to ignore that for now. *I should get on with it.* Once I’d introduced the two, I got to my main point.

“I talked to these two ladies during my lunch and asked them to help me create a third faction,” I said.

“I see. These two are certainly influential within the academy. Even Mars won’t be able to touch us so easily. He definitely wouldn’t want to go against them, after all,” Jack said with a nod. “But are you two fine with this? I would’ve assumed you guys wouldn’t want to get involved with these quarrels.”

I’d been worried about this as well, but the two ladies had

given me their consent.

“Hey, it’s what my cute junior wants, so I’ll help him. But I’ll have him return the favor with interest, of course,” Saria replied.

“I cannot, in good conscience, stand back while a brute rampages across this sacred place of learning. I had already considered acting as well. I shall gladly lend my help,” Cecilia added.

It warmed my heart to see their dependable poise.

“I’m actually starting to think that Callus’s plan might work,” Jack said.

“Heh, were you still in doubt?” Cryssie asked.

“That’s not what I meant, but…you know,” came the glum reply.

He still wasn’t fully on board with my idea. I could understand his hesitation; we were against an aristocrat, and Jack was reluctant to go against the upper class he’d never even thought of fighting.

“I won’t force you, of course. I know that it’s a bit unreasonable to suddenly have you accept my idea,” I said.

If anything, Cryssie was the odd one for immediately following me. Jack’s response was much more normal and rational.

“I don’t mind if you decline,” I said. “We’ll do our best. I won’t hold it against you or cut ties with you just because you decide to not join us either. You don’t need to worry about that.”

“Callus…” Jack said. He looked as though he wanted to help, but his sensible mind was stopping him.

“But, I would love for you to help us out. It’d be a lot more reassuring. What do you think?”

He folded his arms in front of him and thought long and hard. He closed his eyes and mulled it over until he finally came to a decision.

“Argh! Fine! I’m not a man if I run away after making a friend plead with me! I won’t be of much help, but I’ll do what I can! I’ll make that aristocrat regret not inviting me!” he yelled. His tone seemed slightly hesitant, but his eyes were resolute.

“Thank you. That’s reassuring to hear,” I said.

“Callus, I’ll be honest,” Jack said. “I’m sure everyone in this room right now is enough to handle the situation. There’s no need to explain to our two upperclassmen, but I know that you and Cryssie aren’t normal people either. But I think it’s best to be

cautious and to have all our bases covered. So I'd like to ask one more person to help. Would it be all right for me to introduce them to you all?"

He looked at me seriously. I nodded and asked for their name.

"His name is Volga Lugh Jaguarpatch, a first year in the Upper Class. He's a beastfolk," Jack said.

I'd never heard of this student before, but his family name rang a bell.

"Isn't Jaguarpatch the household that produces a lot of famous soldiers for the military?" I asked.

"Yep. And Volga's no exception. I heard he's an extremely capable fighter. Most students in the Upper Class were born with a silver spoon in their mouths and have never even participated in mock battles, so they're terrified of him." Jack gave a malicious smirk. "And Mars is no exception. I heard that he tried to recruit Volga, only to be declined. And when Mars tried to use force, Volga sent all those goons to the infirmary. If we can get him on our side..."

"This match is as good as ours."

Jack nodded. *It'd be great if we can have him on our side. We won't need to get involved in any needless fighting, and Mars might give up.*

"If you wanna meet him, just say the word. I have a good idea about where he is," he said.

"I'll come along too. I won't let you two go off to such a dangerous place," Cryssie said.

"Thanks, you two. You guys are a big help," I replied.

My next step was to meet Volga.

"I'm sorry to leave after I gathered you all, but I must go to meet this person. I'd like to continue this tomorrow," I said.

I bowed my head to my two upperclassmen, and left with Jack and Cryssie to invite a new friend.

***

Jack guided me to a certain area of the academy I'd never been to before. There weren't many students around. *It's a bit creepy. What's this place for, anyways?*

"Jack..." I said.

"This place used to be the academy training grounds, but that

was moved to a new location, so the academy stopped using this area. There were originally plans to rebuild, but they got canceled for whatever reason. Now it's just a dingy, deserted place," Jack said.

"Huh, I never knew." *Jack really is knowledgeable. I wish he would channel all that enthusiasm into his studies.* "So Volga's here, right?"

"Yep. I heard he gathers here with his admirers."

After walking some more, we came out to a clearing. By our feet was a rotted sign that read *Outdoor Magic Training Grounds Site 2.* We seemed to be in the right place.

"Looks like we found them," Cryssie said, looking alert.

She stared at a gathering of ten or so students. Among them was one guy who was clearly more muscular than the rest.

"That must be him," I said.

He was much larger than me, and far more built. He had long black hair, and his fangs and claws accentuated his ferocity. And, further distinguishing him as one of the beastfolk, animal ears resembling those of a wolf's adorned his head. *Volga Lugh Jaguarpatch. I see.*

"Hello, could I talk with you for a bit?" I asked, approaching them from the front.

The students around Volga grew wary and blocked my path.

"Who the hell are you?! What'd you come here for?"

"Get lost before you get hurt."

*Well they certainly aren't giving me a warm welcome. What should I do?*

"I just wanna talk," I said.

"Our boss doesn't have time for you. If you don't get it, I'll hammer it into your head!"

One of them reached out to grab my collar.

"Wait," a gruff, low voice said, stopping the student.

Volga looked at me curiously.

*Whew, that was close. Had he really grabbed me, I doubt Cryssie would've stayed quiet.* She clicked her tongue and removed her hand from her blade. In another moment, she would've cut him down without question.

"White hair and red eyes... You're the rumored Second Light, aren't you?" Volga asked in his low tone.

"Uh, yeah, I am. My name is Callus. Nice to meet you."

I was confused by the unfamiliar nickname, but I introduced

myself anyway. *Am I called that because I'm the second light magician? It's a bit embarrassing.*

"I'm Volga. I welcome you," he said, standing in front of me.

He looked as sturdy as Damien, and it was apparent that he was a born fighter.

"So, what business do you people from Class A have here? I don't think there's anything that would interest you," he said, glancing over at Cryssie.

It seemed he knew her as well.

"I'm honored that you know me," Cryssie said.

"It's more unusual to *not* hear about the daughter of a master swordsman entering this academy. I'd wanted to fight you one day."

"Oh? I like your spirit. We can do that right now, if you'd like." She gave a provoking smile.

*We came here to talk, not to fight. This is bad for my heart.* For a moment, the situation seemed like it might turn explosive.

"That's enticing, but I have to decline for today. Sorry, but I'm more interested in this guy in front of me right now," Volga said.

"A pity. But keep in mind that I'm Callus's knight. If you so much as lay a finger on him, neither my sword nor I will stay silent." She revealed a flash of her blade by her waist.

"I'll remember that," Volga replied with a smirk.

*Phew, so no fight here.* I breathed a sigh of relief.

"Uh, what about me?" Jack asked gingerly.

"Who're you?" Volga asked.

"Right." With Jack magnificently failing to be recognized, he just stood there in silent dejection.

I proceeded to explain my plan to Volga. I told him about creating a faction that would stay out of all this fighting, and how Saria and Cecilia would lend me their help. Finally, I requested Volga's assistance.

"Honestly, they've been nothing but an eyesore," Volga replied. "Their reasons for fighting are selfish, and their tactics are juvenile and immature. It's unbearable to watch."

*This sounds promising.* He seemed fed up with Mars's antics. There really was a chance he would become an ally.

"Then would you—" I started.

"But," Volga said loudly, cutting me off. "I come from the honorable Jaguarpatch household, and I'm a soldier. Even for a temporary alliance, whoever I follow must be one I choose

myself."

"I see."

*He's telling me to prove my worth.* He gave me a challenging scowl.

Cryssie stepped forward. "If you want a match of strength, I'll be your opponent. I'm Callus's knight and his blade. There should be no issue with me fighting in his stead."

"Back off. I told you that I'm interested in Callus. And besides, your master seems on board with this idea too," Volga replied.

"Huh?" I asked.

Cryssie turned around and stared at me. She widened her eyes in shock before she gave a small sigh and stood back. "Ugh. Fine."

"Huh? What's wrong, Cryssie?" I asked.

"What are you talking about? Look at you, Callus. You're smiling."

"I am?"

I hadn't realized it myself. *I guess I am excited.* I was curious to learn about his magic, and how effective my powers would be against him. I'd never felt that way before.

"Hm... I wonder why. I don't really like fighting," I mumbled.

"There's nothing to be upset about. It's normal for a person to fight with glee when testing how far they've come. Consider it a friendly competition," Volga said with a grin.

*Seems like he feels the same way.* "Sorry, Cryssie," I said. "I'll take this one."

"Oh, all right. If you say so. But I won't forgive you if you lose," she replied.

"Yeah. Thanks." I turned to Volga. "So I'll be your opponent. When would you like to fight?"

"How about...tomorrow, right here? We'll go by the Kingdom's Duel rules. If you win, I'll listen to you. If I win, we'll pretend none of this ever happened," he said.

"You won't ask anything from me if you win?"

"I just wanna fight. Of course, if you want to follow me afterwards, that's your call."

Volga just wanted to do battle. Combat wasn't his method, it was his goal—he was a fighter to the core. If that was fine by him, I had no complaints. I just needed to do my best.

"I'll take care of the small stuff for this duel. You just need to show up," Volga said.

“I understand. Thank you. Then I’ll see you…”

Volga and I locked eyes.

“Tomorrow,” we both said.

I turned on my heels and left. It would have been boorish of me to say anything else—I’d talk with him to my heart’s content tomorrow. I hurried home, trying to suppress the pounding of my heart.

***

The next day after school, I went to the deserted magic training grounds. Along with Cryssie and Jack, I had Saria and Cecilia come along too. They were involved in this entire affair, after all.

“Thank you for coming all this way for me,” I said.

“But of course. Good luck with your duel,” Cecilia replied, cheering me on.

“Good grief, you’re such trouble. It’s so bright and dirty outside. I want to return to the clock tower,” Saria said grumpily.

Through her complaints, she still tagged along to root for me. *She’s a kind upperclassman, but I’m sure she’d get mad if I said so.*

“You’re here,” Volga said as I arrived.

He was already standing in the middle of the training grounds, ready to fight. A few of his friends had arrived as well to watch the duel. The only other people present were a referee and two teachers who’d act as witnesses. There weren’t any rowdy spectators.

“Seems like this secret was kept,” I remarked.

This duel was hidden from the other students. Had they caught wind of it, we surely would have drawn a large crowd. That would have been okay if we weren’t using magic, but spectators of magic duels could become collateral damage. We took the necessary precautions.

“Sorry to keep you waiting,” I said.

“I’ve been waiting since yesterday. Let’s start,” Volga said with a grin, baring his fangs.

I thought I’d been prepared, but I started to grow nervous. *How good am I in a fight?*

“What are you all scared about? You’ll be fine, Callus,” Cryssie said. She slapped my back to perk me up.

“Right. Thanks,” I replied.

“Give it all you’ve got. If you lose, I’ll be there for you.”

“That sounds great. Maybe I should lose on purpose.”

“Come on, don’t be silly. Go on out there.” She grinned.

“Please don’t push yourself too much,” Cecilia said, approaching me. She seemed anxious. A person as kind as her must’ve surely been worried.

“I won’t. I’ll show him the power of light magic,” I replied firmly.

She poured her magic into her hand and placed it on my forehead. “May you be blessed by the light’s protection.”

The light entered my body, and my entire body grew warm. I even felt myself relax.

“This is a ritual used in the Holy Kingdom to send off soldiers. It’s filled with a wish for you to return safely.”

“I’m honored to receive such a blessing. Thank you. I’ll return with victory.”

I set foot into the training grounds. Hearing Jack and the others cheering me on melted away my anxiety.

“Seems like you’ve made up your mind,” Volga said.

“Yeah, I’ve got some trustworthy friends by my side.”

When I had left the manor, I was eager to be independent, and furious with myself for having to rely on everyone else. But my thoughts had changed a little since then. No one can live completely alone. I wanted to become a person who could repay the kind favors that I’d received from others. I needed to win this duel to answer the cheers from the people around me.

“Are you both ready?” the referee asked. His name was Godber. A former seasoned adventurer, he was adept at combat and would oversee our duel.

“Yeah, I’m ready whenever,” I said.

“Same here,” Volga replied.

The teachers acting as witnesses gave a pair of objects to Godber, who then handed one to each of us. *A stone doll?*

“This is a magical tool called a copy doll,” Godber explained. “It’ll link itself to the person who imbues it with magical energy. If that person becomes injured, the doll will start to crack. Once the doll completely crumbles, that will signal the end of the match—you’ll be forbidden from fighting any further.”

“I see,” I replied. *I’ve never heard of this item before.* This would definitely make it easier to determine the victor.

“We used to decide matches by a combatant surrendering,

but these calls were often made far too late, resulting in permanent injuries. With this recent invention, the number of such cases have decreased. The match will be over once one of the dolls breaks, so be sure to stop fighting then."

"I understand. Will the doll heal if I cast healing magic on myself?"

"It should. Oh, that's right, you're a light magician."

*That's good to know.* If the doll didn't heal in tandem with me, there'd be no reason to heal myself.

"Duelists, at the ready! A duel between Volga and Callus with Kingdom's Duel rules shall commence. May you both use your utmost abilities and duel with respect and pride!"

Volga and I silently braced ourselves. Words were no longer needed now; we'd talk by battling. Our duel had just begun.

"Ready, begin!"

***

Volga Lugh Jaguarpatch had been bored. He'd entered the Academy of Magic at the behest of his parents, but he couldn't find anything that he was passionate about. It left him unsatisfied. He liked talking to the people he was familiar with, and he didn't dislike studying. But the soldier's blood within him boiled—he had been itching to battle. Other students had tried to pick on him when he'd first entered the academy, but after fighting only five of them, no one dared to touch him.

*I guess this is all the academy has to offer. I won't quench my thirst for blood until I graduate and head to the battlefield,* he thought.

However, his thoughts were completely flipped one day. A young, frail-looking boy had appeared in front of him, and Volga had started to feel excited. Wanting to know the reason for this, he'd challenged the boy to a duel.

"I've got some high hopes for you. Don't lose too easily," he said.

"Of course. I'll do my best," Callus replied.

Immediately, Volga started to channel his magical energy. Beastfolk were a species that weren't adept at magic. In exchange, they had physical abilities that far surpassed a regular human's. Yet, after a long history of struggle and strife, the

Jaguarpatches had it all. They had attained not only sturdy bodies, but the ability to skillfully wield magic as well.

"*Ril Lo!*"

Lightning coursed through Volga's right hand as he scraped the ground. Numerous bolts of lightning rushed through the ground at extreme speed. They headed straight for Callus, but he calmly activated his spell.

"*Ra Ordo!*"

A wall of light appeared in front of Callus, easily repelling the bolts and protecting its master. Light magic boasted one of the highest defenses amongst all the elements, and normal spells couldn't even begin to scratch it.

"Heh, so that's how it's gonna be," Volga said with a grin. He charged towards Callus at an incredible speed while activating his magic. "*Ri Sax!*"

A glittering spear of lightning appeared in Volga's hand—a destructive weapon of incredible density created by condensing lightning magic. Volga gripped his spear and rammed it at the wall of light.

"Raaah!"

"Gh!" Callus grunted as the wall shattered and disappeared.

*Ra Ordo* boasted high defense, but it was vulnerable to pinpoint attacks, allowing *Ri Sax* to pierce through. Once the shield had broken, Volga thrust his weapon at Callus.

"*Ra Sword!*"

The boy created a sword of light to parry the spear. He grabbed his blade and swung it down towards Volga. A shock wave erupted as the sword of light and the spear of lightning collided with each other.

The two duelists gritted their teeth, bracing their bodies so that they wouldn't get blown back. The first to move was Callus.

"Hah!" he yelled.

He knocked the spear aside and swiftly closed the gap to Volga. Damien had taught him how to wield weapons well, and he was able to use his techniques with magic armaments.

"There!" he shouted, delivering a swift kick to Volga's side.

Callus was a lot scrawnier than Volga, but with magical energy, he could drastically increase his strength. The boy had learned martial arts from his brother, who vouched for the effectiveness of these moves. The heavy kick was able to damage Volga's beefy physique.

“Not bad at all. You hit my abs,” Volga said.

“Doesn’t seem like it did much, though,” Callus replied.

“Well, I’ve got *some* muscle.”

In response to the kick, Volga punched Callus with everything he had. Callus had managed to put up both arms to block the attack, but he wasn’t able to absorb the full impact, and was blown back. Had his arms not been hardened with magic, he was certain that they would’ve shattered.

Cold sweat formed on Callus’s brow. “Ouch… So this is the physical prowess of the beastfolk, I take it? You’re so strong.”

“Oh, don’t worry. Even among the beastfolk, I’m exceptionally powerful. No one will mock you even if you lose.”

Volga proceeded to reveal his claws and started swiping at Callus. His wave of attacks didn’t even give time for the boy to breathe. Callus could only focus on dodging.

*He doesn’t have any openings! He’s not only powerful, but skillful too!* Callus thought, feeling flustered.

Volga had undergone strict training since he was young. His power and combat prowess had far surpassed anything an adult soldier could do. Combined with his high magical capabilities, no student in this academy could even compare. Volga had always confidently thought so himself. That all changed today.

“*Ra Ryba!*”

Callus used the tiniest opening he could find to launch a torrent of light that engulfed Volga in an instant. The beastfolk was blown back into the air for a short while until he plummeted to the ground, unable to stop his fall. He continued to tumble across the ground before finally coming to a stop.

Volga couldn’t hide his astonishment at finding himself sprawled on the ground. The attack had done more psychological damage than physical. *What* was *that power?! How much magic does this kid have?!*

He slowly got up, his body still a little numb. He looked at Callus and saw him emanating magical energy. In other words, even after having used that powerful spell, Callus was still overflowing with magic. Volga realized his opponent was far stronger than he had expected, and he smiled.

“H-Hey, you’re scaring me,” Callus said, trembling.

Volga’s eyes were fixed on him, like a beast who’d finally found his prey. “Heh, don’t be so scared. I’m happy that my boredom will finally come to an end.”

He slowly approached Callus while slightly crouching forward, sauntering like a predator sizing up its prey. Even the onlookers were frightened by this display.

“Heh…” Volga chuckled, unable to suppress the magical energy welling up inside him. Bolts of electricity sparked around his body, making his hair stand up. He looked terrifying.

“I used a pretty powerful spell, but you seem fine. I’ll have to give it my all,” Callus said.

“Of course! Give me everything you’ve got! Try to kill me, Callus!”

The two clashed once more.

Flashes of light erupted with every clash. The audience all narrowed their eyes at the blinding spectacle. But Callus and Volga, in the center of that radiance, had their eyes opened wide, keeping each other in their sights. They each knew that leaving even the slightest opening would lead to their loss.

“*Ri Sax!*”

Volga created a spear and once again thrust it towards Callus. The boy summoned *Ra Shield*, repelling the spear with a defensive spell even tougher than what he’d used before.

“Will Callus be okay?” Jack nervously asked.

It looked as though Volga had the upper hand. Callus was indeed on the defensive and unable to launch an attack. At this rate, it seemed Volga would push through and come out as the victor.

But unbeknownst to everyone, Volga was silently panicking.

*This kid’s magical energy hasn’t decreased one bit. Just how much does he have?! I’ll run out first at this rate!*

They’d used the same amount of magic, but Callus’s spells had never wavered, indicating that he wasn’t anywhere near his limit. In contrast, Volga could feel his magical energy draining away fast. He still had plenty of stamina to spare, but he wouldn’t be able to win if he became unable to cast any spells. Volga’s impatience started to grow. *The longer this lasts, the more disadvantaged I’ll be.* With that, Volga channeled his magical energy into both his hands to initiate his signature spell. He’d never shown it in front of others since he’d joined the academy. It wasn’t that he had been forbidden from using it, he simply hadn’t found an opponent who was worthy.

“In honor of your strength, I will hunt you down,” he said.

Volga thrust both arms out and put his hands together while

curling his fingers inwards to reveal his claws. His hands looked like the maw of a beast baring its fangs, making Callus grow wary.

"Here I go! *Ri Baw!*"

The moment the spell left Volga's lips, a loud crackle of lightning enveloped his hands. His right arm shaped the electricity into an upper jaw while his left arm formed the lower jaw, creating a head of a beast.

"*Ri Baw* is a spell passed down through my family. My hands resemble the jaws of a lightning wolf," Volga said.

"That's amazing. I can feel the crackling from this distance," Callus replied.

The hyper-condensed lightning affected its surroundings as well. Standing in the center of it all, Volga himself was the most affected, with the hair on his entire body rising like a beast's.

"Callus, I've taken a liking to you. So don't die, you hear me?" Volga said.

He kicked the ground and rushed towards Callus at tremendous speed. He was using his entire body like a spring, taking full advantage of his beastfolk traits. No human could possibly keep up.

Callus, realizing this, decided to receive the attack from the front. "*Ra Shield!*"

The wall that had protected him many times in the past appeared again, filled with the light energy that could return things to their normal state. It could even block a wyvern's breath.

"Not good enough!" roared Volga, shredding through the shield.

The wall shattered, and Callus was clearly taken aback.

"It's over," Volga said, as the fangs that had bitten through *Ra Shield* now snapped at Callus.

Callus instinctively dodged to the side, avoiding a direct hit, but he was unable to completely evade the attack, and the lightning grazed his body. With a loud crackle, the boy flew into the air. A few seconds later, a burning scent filled the area. The compressed lightning could easily burn a human's body.

"Callus!" his friends called out.

The boy didn't move. Astounded by the scene that had unfolded in front of them, his friends all gulped and watched over the duelists.

Volga turned to Godber. “End it here.”

“The match isn’t over,” Godber replied.

“Huh?”

Volga was bewildered by this response. No one could have taken that attack without sustaining injuries. *They should get him to the infirmary as soon as they can,* he thought. Godber showed the beastfolk Callus’s copy doll. Had Callus been injured all over, the doll would’ve been destroyed—but it was completely unscathed.

“What’s going on?” Volga asked.

Others started to murmur in confusion. Feeling a shiver down his back, Volga turned around and saw Callus standing there, looking chipper as usual. His clothes were a bit burnt in some places, but there weren’t any visible injuries, and he seemed just as energetic. It was as though he had taken no damage at all.

“Impossible! How can you stand after taking my *Ri Baw*?! What did you do?!” yelped Volga.

“I can use light magic. I’m sure you know what this means,” Callus replied.

“Healing magic?!”

The moment Callus had taken the attack, he’d activated *Ra Heal*, immediately negating the damage. The copy doll had also reflected this.

“I’d only heard rumors of the healing capabilities of light magic, but this makes me laugh. Heh, it’s like fighting an undead. But even if you healed the damage, you should still feel some pain. How much longer can you withstand my attacks?” Volga asked.

“I have my own reasons, but I’m used to enduring pain. I can take whatever you give, as many times as I need.”

“Like hell!”

Volga once again activated *Ri Baw*, electricity coursing through his hands even more powerfully than before.

“If you’re going all out, so will I!” Callus replied. He raised his right hand with an open palm. “*Ra Shell*.” A ball of light larger than his fist floated in front of his hand.

“I don’t know what you’re planning, but are you really going to try using a slow attack against me?!” Volga asked.

He was about to ask if Callus was serious about winning, when he stopped dead in his tracks. There wasn’t just one sphere in the air. Callus created two, then three—one by one,

dozens of them started to float around him.

Jack could only look on in shock. “How many are there?!”

Summoning multiple items at the same time required a high level of technique. Though Jack could summon around three at once, he hadn’t been able to surpass that limit despite his rigorous training. But fifty balls of light surrounded Callus in an instant. This number was unprecedented for a single person.

“This should be good enough,” Callus said with satisfaction before he turned to Volga. “Sorry to keep you waiting. Let’s start, shall we?”

“Bring it on!” Volga said with a grin as he dashed towards the light.

A spattering of light rained down on a spark of electricity that ran through the ground. The battle had reached a new level of intensity, and what its combatants were doing was beyond anything the other students of this academy could do by a mile.

“Just what’s going on?” Volga’s friend murmured.

Light and lightning were particularly speedy elements when compared to others, and the audience struggled to keep up.

“*Attack!*” Callus yelled, while pointing to an area.

A sphere of light bolted as commanded and hit Volga, despite his agile movement. A deafening explosion shook the air. Callus had used a similar technique in the past against a wyvern, but he had greatly increased its speed and impact in the five years since that time. Volga immediately used magic to harden his body, but he wasn’t able to block the attack completely and was dealt a heavy blow.

“Ugh, I was only hit once and it hurts this much? This power’s nuts,” Volga muttered as dozens of spheres hovered in front of him. He’d managed to destroy a few while running, but it’d take some time to dodge all of them. “Guess I have to directly aim for you,” he said.

From afar, Volga stared intently at Callus, who gazed back. Ever since Callus had activated *Ra Shell*, he hadn’t moved an inch. It took a lot of magical energy and concentration to command this many orbs of light, and Volga surmised that Callus was unable to move. If he closed the gap and turned this into short-ranged combat, he’d win. And so, he summoned his determination and charged again into the light.

“Let’s do this! *Ri Verf!*” Volga became shrouded in electricity, strengthening his entire body.

His muscles bulged, increasing his physical prowess and making him the spitting image of a werewolf from fairy tales. He looked more beastlike than a normal beastfolk, causing even his friends to cry out in shock. *Ri Verf* normally didn't have these effects, but with intense training, Volga had managed to raise the spell's capabilities to a new level.

"Sorry if this scares you. This form drastically changes my appearance, so I don't like to use it often," Volgas said.

"Really? I think it looks cool. Could you let me stroke your fur later?" Callus asked.

"Heh, I'll think about it if you win!"

Volga dashed forward with glee. Callus tried to aim his balls of light, but Volga swiftly ran through them, closing the distance between them.

"He's fast!" Callus gasped.

The beastfolk was like a bolt of lightning streaking across the ground now, and Callus could only barely keep up.

"*Move! Block!*" Callus commanded, creating a wall of light.

But Volga maintained his speed and made a sharp turn to dodge the wall, continuing to close the distance.

"No one can catch lightning. It's over," Volga said.

He raised his right hand and pointed his sharp talons towards Callus. The moment he was about to swing down to deliver the finishing blow, Callus smiled.

"I knew you'd make it here," the boy said.

"What?!" Volga gasped.

Before the beastfolk could reach Callus, he felt the ground beneath his feet explode. Volga took the full force of this unexpected attack.

"Gah! What just...?!" Volga glanced at the ground while he was blown into the air.

He noticed a number of *Ra Shell* spheres set low on the ground like land mines. Callus had predicted that Volga would close the distance between them, and had commanded the orbs to rest on the ground nearby while the beastfolk's vision was obscured by the wall he'd constructed earlier. Volga would've noticed this under normal circumstances, but he had let his guard down in his eagerness to land the final blow. Callus had used this slight opening to his advantage.

"You really *are* lots of fun!" Volga said, landing on the ground gracefully. He would make sure to remain vigilant from then on.

He faced the boy and swore to use his full power to defeat him.

“Raaah!” Callus cried.

“Huh?!”

Callus had personally closed the gap himself. Volga was caught completely off guard; he expected the boy to fight from a distance.

“*Ra Verf!*”

Callus was enveloped in a glittering light and punched Volga’s left cheek with all his might.

“Gah?!”

Volga staggered, having received an unexpectedly heavy blow. He felt dizzy for a moment, and the taste of blood filled his mouth. He braced himself to stay on his feet, and grinned without wiping the blood dripping from his mouth.

“Just how much more fun can you even be?” Volga yelled.

He launched a swift kick, but Callus skillfully dodged the attack and launched his own counters. *He’s used to fighting!* Volga thought. Callus had no talent in close combat, but his overprotective brother had made him endure a harsh training regimen, which had allowed him to learn a few techniques. Volga was skilled himself, and endured Callus’s attacks while landing his own counters. However...

“*Ra Heal!*”

Any damage he caused was swiftly negated, showing everyone how terrifying a skilled fighter with healing magic could be.

“If it was a simple battle of brute strength, I wouldn’t hold a candle to you. But I have light magic on my side. I’ll definitely win!” Callus shouted.

Callus planted a strong kick into Volga’s stomach. The pain was enough to make Volga’s organs lurch, and blood filled his mouth once more. *It’s a good attack. But I won’t just take free damage!* Volga thought as he dug his heels into the ground to regain his balance.

Callus looked surprised that Volga had been able to endure the attack. The beastfolk used that moment to grab Callus’s leg with his right arm.

“And now, you can’t run,” Volga said.

“Agh!” Callus cried.

Volga used his left hand to bare his claws and slashed at Callus. The claws were sharp like knives, and one scratch would

inevitably cause a fatal wound. Callus did everything to twist his body and evade the attack. The boy was able to dodge the brunt of the claws, but Volga's thumb scratched Callus's chest and broke into his flesh, tearing his clothes.

"Gh..." Callus winced as he felt the sharp pain from his chest, and a tinge of blood started to appear on his clothes.

He managed to break free from Volga's grip, and immediately confirmed his wound. From the pain, he knew the wound wasn't deep and could quickly be healed, but Callus's face fell when he saw it.

"Oh no..."

Volga had struck him on the left side, near his heart, where the stain of the curse was. A magical circle had been engraved in that area to suppress the curse, but Volga's attack had ripped through the circle and destroyed it. In other words, there was nothing holding the curse back now. For five years, this curse had been sealed up, waiting for its chance to strike. It gleefully welcomed the opportunity as it unleashed its agony.

"*Ra Luci*—"

Callus hastily tried to use his spell to redo the seal, but the curse wasn't forgiving. In an instant, it released itself and took over Callus's body, causing his consciousness to fade to black.

"Eeeeek!"

A shriek rang through the air. A black substance oozed out of Callus's body like black slime. It enveloped the boy and continued to spread, trying to swallow the entire arena whole.

"Wh-What's going on?!"

"Run! It's coming for us!"

People fled from the black substance as it instantly spread throughout the area and formed a dome. Only Callus and Volga were inside, completely shut away from the outside world.

"What's going on?" The other students started to chatter in awe.

Godber, who'd been the referee, froze in stunned silence. Amid the panic, some students didn't shy away from the black substance, and rushed towards it instead.

"Give! Callus! Back!" a red-haired girl said.

She engulfed her sword in flames and swung down without any hesitation. The fiery blade cut the surface of the black substance with a sizzle, but the dome immediately repaired itself, making her unable to carve all the way through.

“What *is* this?!” she cried. “It’s tough and it regenerates quickly!”

“I’ll help you,” another girl said. Saint Cecilia was also unafraid of this curse. “*Ra Lux!*”

A bright ray of light shot towards the dome. This spell was based on Callus’s *Ra Lucis*. It contained strong light energy and was extremely effective against curses. The black substance writhed in agony when it came into contact with the light, but it still didn’t break.

“I can’t believe this isn’t good enough,” murmured Cecilia.

“It’s too early to give up! I don’t know what this is, but I can tell that it’s not good. If we don’t break it, Callus will be in danger!” replied Crys, intuitively understanding how threatening this ooze was.

She continued to slash with all her might, but the dome kept regenerating at an incredible speed.

“What’s going on?” Volga muttered, as he awoke inside the dome.

A black substance wriggled around him wherever he looked. He couldn’t see anything beyond this dome. Light from the outside world was completely shut out, but the inside was eerily well-lit. He was able to see quite clearly, including the entity in front of him.

“That’s…not a friend, is it,” Volga said.

A few meters in front of him was a dark entity. It had taken on a human shape, but its rugged body made it hard to tell the front from the back. He was able to sense that Callus was inside it, and that the entity was able to control the substance all around him.

As it stood there silently, two red lights shone on its face, mimicking eyes. Its horrifying gaze stared back at Volga, and it spoke in an unpleasant voice that seemed to coat his eardrums.

**“…you?”** it said.

“Huh?” Volga asked.

**“You bullied Callus, didn’t you?”**

In the next moment, its limbs stretched out swiftly and punched Volga back.

“Gah?!”

The thin appendage didn’t seem to wield much power, but it was easily able to blow Volga’s large physique away. The tip of

the arm had hardened and swelled up like a club. A normal human would've been absolutely obliterated. Luckily, Volga's sturdy body was able to receive the attack, but the damage he took was great.

"That hurts," he mumbled. He rubbed his aching head as he stood up.

He didn't expect to be let off the hook, even if he lost consciousness. He had no choice but to battle.

"I don't get what's going on, but seems like I've gotta fight."

Volga bared his fangs and glared at the entity. An impossibly creepy aura emanated from the black being, but Volga faintly felt the magical energy of the boy he'd fought earlier.

*Is he really in there?*

He couldn't understand a thing that was happening, but that didn't matter. He was determined to fight the mysterious being to save his worthy rival.

"*Ri Sax!*"

He created a spear of lightning and hurled it at his opponent with all his might. His aim was true, and the spear pierced the strange entity. His target, however, didn't seem to be bothered at all. Its surface was burnt a little, but it'd taken no damage.

"*Ri Verf!*"

Volga strengthened his body and rushed towards the being. It swung its appendages around like tentacles and tried to hit him, but Volga managed to dodge them all. *It's fast, but its trajectory is too easy to guess!* He perfectly predicted the entity's attacks and evaded them before landing a blow to its head.

His attack was strong enough to crumble a boulder, but the black entity only staggered slightly and recovered as if it were nothing.

"Impossible! How tough *is* this thing?!"

He felt like he'd struck a large chunk of rubber. Volga felt the impact of his attacks being absorbed. He continued to kick, punch, and use his lightning, but none proved effective.

"How about this?! *Ri Baw!*"

He used his thunder fangs to bite into the neck of the being. However, his best attack only gave the entity pause.

**"Annoying."**

It swung its appendage swiftly, knocking Volga on the head. He was smashed into the ground.

"Gh?!"

He coughed up blood, and the impact knocked the wind out of his body, rendering him motionless. He'd fought numerous adults in the past, but he'd never felt such a vast difference in power. This entity was simply a much stronger organism than he was; it was higher up on the food chain. Volga had never experienced this feeling before.

**"Just die now."**

The dark being used its large hand to grab Volga and smash him into the ground. He felt his bones creak and his organs give way, but sheer willpower allowed him to retain his consciousness.

"Not...yet..."

**"Stubborn."**

It grabbed Volga by the scruff of his neck and brought him close as it gazed into the beastfolk's eyes with great interest. He glared back and spoke.

"Hey, you're listening, aren't you? Do you really wanna end it like this?"

**"Hm?"**

It tilted its head questioningly, confused by the words that had just been uttered.

"I don't. I want to battle *you*, not this *thing*."

**"Noisy."**

The dark being transformed its left hand into a large needle.

"Do you really wanna end it like this?"

**"Shut up."**

The tip of the needle was aimed at Volga's chest.

"Do you want our fight to be interrupted by *this* thing?!"

**"Shut up! Die!"**

Enraged, the entity thrust the needle towards the beastfolk. Volga gritted his teeth, prepared for the pain, but it never came.

"So you *can* hear me, after all." Volga grinned.

The needle had stopped just short of Volga's body. A few centimeters more, and Volga would've experienced excruciating pain.

**"Callus... Why...?"**

The dark entity started to shudder. The surface of its body began to crack, and a blue light peeked through the openings. The entity kept resisting.

**"I'll handle everything! I'll kill him!"**

The being placed its hands on the cracks and desperately

tried to contain the spilling light. But the light continued to shine brighter, completely eradicating and purifying the dark substance around its body.

**“Cal…lus…”**

The dark entity dissipated completely, and Callus emerged from within.

“Wah!” Callus gasped, rolling onto the ground. The dome surrounding the area had disappeared, and the black entity was nowhere to be seen. “Haah… Haah… I made it out.”

Callus caught his breath and managed to stand up. In front of him was Volga, looking equally exhausted.

“I’m sorry,” said Callus. “I think I just took a little nap.”

“Don’t worry about it. Let’s resume our battle,” Volga replied.

“Of course. Please do.”

There were so many questions in the air, but the two duelists wanted to prioritize the outcome of their duel.

“Sir Callus!” Cecilia called out, now that the curse’s veil had disintegrated.

Even from afar, she could tell that Callus had no more stamina to spare. She tried to rush to his side and heal him, when somebody grabbed her wrist.

“Wait,” Crys said.

Cecilia hadn’t expected to be stopped. She uncharacteristically raised her voice. “Why are you stopping me?! We must go to his side—”

“I want to go too,” Crys said, looking at Callus. The boy was staggering as he stood up, but he was facing Volga. “But he’s still planning to fight. We can’t get in his way.”

“But…” Cecilia started. She noticed that Crys’s hand was trembling. Crys must’ve wanted to help him more than anyone, but she was respecting his wishes and desperately burying her emotions.

After a pause, Cecilia finally said, “I understand.”

She stopped, understanding Crys’s feelings. The two silently watched the rest of the match, praying for the boy’s safety.

“I’ll begin,” Volga said, condensed lightning bolting around him. His hair stood up once more.

The quality of his magic was clearly different from what he’d displayed before. It was cold and terrifying—Callus intuitively understood that this was Volga’s murderous intent. Callus’s fear came from a primitive instinct within his body.

Callus stayed put and decided to receive every attack that would come. “Selena, I’m sorry, but can you lend me a little more of your power?”

“Good grief, you want to continue fighting after all that? You really do love to push your limits,” Selena said wearily. She didn’t want him to hurt himself any more, but over the past five years, she’d come to know that he was unexpectedly quite stubborn. “Fine, have at it! But you’ll get a good scolding after all this is done!”

“All right! Then let’s go!” Callus replied. He started to store his energy to fight against Volga.

There was a cork which plugged and suppressed his magical energy. He now released it completely, gaining full access to all the magical power within himself. Particles of light enveloped Callus, and an intense amount of magic filled the air.

“You have way too much magical energy. Heh, that’s the way I like it,” Volga said with a grin.

When touched by the thick and concentrated magical energy, everyone’s hair stood up on end. It was easy to guess that Callus had an incredible amount of energy, but what they felt exceeded their expectations. Volga recognized Callus as the greatest rival of his life, and decided to use his forbidden spell.

“Very well. I’m happy to meet someone as powerful as you. I’ll show my respect for your strength, and fight you with my strongest spell,” Volga said. He took a deep breath, compressing all the remaining magical energy he had, and started to chant an aria. “*O, noble wolf of lightning. Tear through the heavens and lay waste to the countless souls who swore to seek vengeance on you.*”

An aria was a ritual used only with high-ranking magic. By reciting certain words, a magician’s soul and the spirit which possessed it would resonate, allowing for the activation of extremely powerful spells.

“*Pierce. Volf Ril Bawga!*”

An impossibly large wolf made of lightning appeared. Its howls shook the earth. This spell was in a completely different realm from the ones he’d used so far.

The others observing the match couldn’t hide their shock. High-ranking spells were difficult to activate, and only a select few adult magicians could manage to do so. It was unheard of for students to even *see* them, much less use them at all. Shock was only a natural response.

But Callus, who stood directly in front of it, didn't even flinch.

"What amazing magic. But I won't lose to that!" He and Selena silently nodded at each other before they activated their spell together as well. "*Course through my body, torrent of light. Defeat the evil and bring light to overflow upon this world.*"

Particles of light gathered towards them. Callus could see his partner. He was able to connect and communicate with her. The two could resonate their souls more than anyone else, and the magic they used commanded immense power.

"*Torna Rai Ryba!*"

A colossal tornado of light was expelled from Callus's hand, clashing with Volga's wolf. With a deafening rumble, the tornado pushed back against the lightning wolf's jaw.

"Raaaaah!" Volga roared, exerting all the magical energy he had.

His entire body was in agony from using too much magic, but he paid it no heed. If he could win right now, the rest didn't matter to him.

"GRAAAAAH!"

The wolf gave a thunderous howl as though responding to Volga's wishes. It tried to use its immense fangs to bite through the torrent of light. But the tornado showed no signs of slowing down, and slowly pushed the wolf back.

"You're strong, there's no question about that. But in terms of the amount of magical energy we have, I won't lose!" Callus yelled.

He'd suffered from tormenting pain and had been on the verge of death numerous times. In exchange, he'd received a gift. Callus had unadulterated confidence in his gift of magical energy. It didn't matter to him if his opponent was a genius soldier, or was blessed with extreme physical prowess. Callus made his cyclone even larger.

"Gh?!"

The deluge of light was too large for the wolf's jaw to handle and ripped right through, destroying the beast. With nothing else to block its path, the light headed straight for Volga.

"Man, you really are quite the kid," Volga said, before he was engulfed by the light. His consciousness faded.

The entire arena had grown quiet from the intensity of the battle. Amidst the silence, a crackling sound rang through the air, and Volga's copy doll crumbled. The referee saw this and

immediately ended the duel.

“Th-The winner is Callus!” he cried out.

Cheers broke out among those who had been watching. Callus sank to the ground in exhaustion.

“Whew, I’m spent,” he said.

Crys and Cecilia immediately rushed to his side, each grabbing an arm.

“Whoa!” Callus yelped, surprised by the impact.

“Jeez. You made me so worried. But congratulations. You did great,” Crys said.

“You really did make me worried. I’ll heal you, so please show me your injuries!” Cecilia said.

“H-Hey! One at a time, please!” Callus said with a smile, as the two fought over him.

“You did it, Callus! I believed in you!” Jack said, approaching him.

Though Callus was ecstatic by his victory, he also felt a sense of guilt. He’d exposed his curse to everyone present. *How can I explain this away?* Callus thought. He was good friends with everyone here, but that was all the more reason to keep it a secret. He didn’t want the people closest to him to get involved with his problems.

While Callus was troubled over this development, someone suddenly descended from the sky. She wore a purple robe and a pointy hat, and carried a luxurious staff.

“Good grief. You’re quite the handful,” the woman said, looking troubled.

A bright flash of light was expelled from her staff.

“Huh?”

All at once, the entire clearing was wrapped in light, and everyone present collapsed. Callus was no exception, and he once again felt his consciousness slipping away before the blinding light.

***

“Mmm…”

I awoke, feeling pain throughout my entire body.

*Where am I?*

An unfamiliar ceiling first entered my view. This wasn’t the house I’d been living in. I got up and looked around, but I was

only able to confirm that I was in an unknown room.

Books, herbs, and magical tools were haphazardly strewn about. *Oh, hey, I've been wanting to read that book.* Now was not the time to be thinking about that, but I couldn't help feeling enticed to read it.

"If you'd like to read that, you can take it home. I've already memorized its contents," a voice said.

"But I'd feel bad about… Wait, what?!" I looked towards the direction of the voice, and was greeted by an elderly woman in a black robe. *When did she get there?*

"It seems you're already as energetic as ever. It's good to be young, isn't it?" she said with a tender smile.

I had no idea what was going on, but it seemed she'd been taking care of me.

"Um, and who might you be?" I asked.

"Oh dear, do you not know who I am?" The woman proceeded to pull a pointy black hat over her eyes.

I suddenly recognized her very well. "H-Headmistress?!"

"Oho, correct."

The elderly woman was Laura Magnolia, the headmistress of this academy. I'd seen her from afar during assemblies, but she always had her eyes covered with that strange hat.

"Ah," I said, suddenly regaining some of my memories. *The duel ended, and the headmaster suddenly came from above, and…then what? I can't remember. But first…*

"Headmistress Magnolia, why did you…" I started.

"Now, don't be so stiff with me. Call me Laura."

"Okay, er, Laura."

She gave a satisfied nod, poured a cup of tea, and handed it to me. When I looked at it more closely, I noticed the tea glimmering faintly. I was familiar with this phenomenon.

"This tea is made from leaves grown with light magic, isn't it?" I asked.

"Oh? You're quite knowledgeable," Laura replied. "Perhaps that's par for the course for *his* apprentice."

"Huh?!"

I stepped back in shock. *How does she know?!* The fact that I had a master at all had been kept a secret.

"Your injuries aren't fully healed. If you make a fuss now, it'll have nasty effects later," Laura warned.

She didn't seem at all upset by my attitude, and placed the tea

atop a table. *What's going on? Why am I here, and why does she know about Master?* She took a sip of tea before looking at me.

"Callus, you know that I'm a sage, don't you?" she asked.

"Of course. That's why you were selected to be the headmistress."

The Academy of Magic was an organization jointly run by the Ledyvia Kingdom and the Magical Committee. A sage was a fitting person to stand at the head of the academy. Laura was an elite first-rate magician who had achieved success on the front lines. Her name was widespread, and it made sense for her to have been made the headmistress.

"I've been a part of the Magical Committee for over forty years. Naturally, I've known that senile old fool for a while," she said.

"A-Are you referring to my master?" I asked.

"Of course I am. I've known your master, Gourley, for quite a long time. Yet, that dolt cast his title away without telling me. It was quite troublesome for me, you know."

She seemed to have her fair share of complaints. While the tone of her words was biting, it sounded like she was enjoying herself. It was easy for me to guess the kind of relationship they had.

"You were quite close with Master, weren't you?"

"Oh, does it look like that to you? We had a lot going on between us. We tried to seriously kill each other a number of times in the past, but I suppose it's now just a silly story to tell."

Her voice carried a tone of nostalgia. *Were they comrades in the war? I'd like to know more.*

"So you heard about me from my master?" I asked.

"Quite so. I heard that you were going to duel, so I decided to keep an eye on you. And look what's happened. I received quite a shock."

"Ugh. I'm sorry."

I hadn't expected such a thing to have happened either. I needed to be more careful than ever before.

"No matter. It's not bad for that old square to owe me one. Ah, and the chairman knows nothing about this, so don't you worry."

I breathed a sigh of relief. I was terrified that the chairman of the Magical Committee, Emilia, might turn his attention to me again. I had no idea what he'd do. It felt reassuring to have the highest-ranking official in this academy on my side. I couldn't

express enough gratitude towards my master. I then remembered the incident during the duel.

“Um, I showed my curse in front of everyone, but I had wanted to keep it a secret. What should I do?” I asked.

“Not to worry. I’ve already taken care of that as well,” Laura replied.

She grabbed her staff and a bright light illuminated its tip. The odd light gave a suspicious flicker. *I’ve never seen this before.*

“This is *Arcane Art: Oblivion.* I used light magic, the power to return things to their normal state, and selectively erased some memories,” she explained.

“So everyone forgot about that curse?!”

“That’s right. You can attend the academy as usual starting tomorrow.”

“I’m so glad. Thank you so much!”

I felt relieved. *Thank goodness. If word spread about my curse, I wouldn’t have been able to attend the academy anymore.* Laura had my utmost gratitude.

“I didn’t know you could use light magic too. I’m surprised,” I said happily.

“Oh, I can’t. Magic and arcane arts are different things.”

Arcane art was the practice of drawing out one’s own power through a formula. It didn’t borrow power from spirits, and could only create phenomenon similar to magic. *At least I think that’s the gist.* Even if one wasn’t possessed by a light spirit, if they could prepare light element magical energy, they could use light arcane arts.

“Could I ask more about the practice of arcane arts?” I asked.

“I’m sorry, but I’m not willing to conduct a lesson right now. Above all, you have someone to speak to, don’t you?”

With a snap of her fingers, the door opened. Volga, the person I’d been fighting earlier, came in.

He looked at me and grinned. “Guess we’re both pretty beat up.”

“Ha ha, yep,” I replied.

While our superficial wounds had been healed, our bodies were still sore and aching with pain. We both laughed as we saw each other’s awkward movements.

“It was a good match. Some of my final memories are hazy because of your attack, but I remember that I lost and that I had fun. You were splendid,” he said, revealing that he’d forgotten

about the curse.

When my entire body had been affected by the curse, I was only able to regain consciousness thanks to Volga's voice. I wanted to thank him for it, but it was a pity that I'd never get to do so.

"You were really strong too, Volga. I think I just got lucky," I replied.

"That's not true. I still can't envision how I could have beaten you, so I've gotta start training from square one again."

I was elated to receive such high praise from a fighter as powerful as him. My five years of effort had bore fruit.

"Right, about the faction. As promised, I'll accept your invitation. If my name will help your cause, you can use it as you wish," he said.

"Ah, right, that's why we were fighting."

"How did *you* forget that?"

It felt like we'd become normal friends, and we couldn't suppress our laughter. I'd only known him for a day, but I felt like I was talking to an old friend, which proved how much we'd conveyed to each other during our duel.

"Heh. We're done with the duel, aren't we? I've taken a shine to you. I'd like you to be my friend," Volga offered.

"Of course. I hope we can remain good friends, Volga."

I shook his large and firm hand. I would continue to be indebted to my new and reliable friend.

***

Once Volga had joined us, the faction fight ended almost too smoothly. A majority of the students had only joined these factions reluctantly anyways, and with Cecilia, Saria, and Volga protesting, other students immediately joined us. Since Mars was no longer able to throw his weight around, those who had begrudgingly joined his side instantly jumped ship and left. That was only to be expected, since his intimidation was no longer effective.

With Mars no longer a threat, Latena willingly dissolved her faction as well. Even so, there were students who surrounded and followed her, attesting to her charismatic nature. Mars was persistent and tried to gather those who left her, but it didn't seem to go too well.

A week after my battle with Volga, I was walking outside the school buildings to find a spot for lunch.

“You! How dare you!” Mars said, appearing in front of me. Beside him were two other students. It seemed some had remained on his side.

“Hi, Mars. Do you need something?” I asked.

“Of course I do! Because of *you,* my plans were completely foiled!”

He glared at me with rage. *Ugh, I didn’t think he’d be this angry.* I’d specifically chosen the most peaceful route I could’ve taken, but it had only humiliated him. The fact that he was yelling at me in front of others proved that he’d completely lost his composure. *What should I do?*

“If only *you* weren’t around!” Mars roared, taking out a wand from his chest pocket.

*Is he planning on using magic here?* There were innocent students everywhere, so I had to stop him. Suddenly, my friend came from behind and stood in front of me, blocking Mars’s path.

“What’s up? If you wanna talk, I’ll hear you out,” Volga said with a glare.

“You!” Mars replied with frustration. “Why are *you* getting in my way?!”

“It’s only natural to help out a friend who might be in danger, no? Besides, you’re not supposed to challenge the boss right off the bat. Since I lost to him, I’ll be your opponent instead.”

“Boss?” I said, unable to help myself. Volga often praised me highly, but it always made me feel a bit embarrassed and uneasy.

“So? Are you gonna fight or not? I don’t mind taking all three of you at once,” Volga replied.

“Ugh…” Mars was at a loss for words. His face turned red, either from rage or humiliation.

“Heh, you can’t, can you? You need that stick of yours to fight properly. You don’t stand a chance against me.”

Staves and wands were support tools to stabilize magical energy. They were convenient to have, but relying on them too much would make one a poor magician. My master had purposely made me use magic without one so that I could become a fully fledged magician in my own right.

“Damn it! I’ll remember this!” Mars said, before fleeing.

It was a wise decision. Judging from the amount of magical energy he had, he wouldn't have stood a chance against Volga.

"Hmph. Pathetic," Volga spat.

"I'm beginning to feel bad for him," I said.

"You're too soft, Callus. You'd be doing this world a service if you shattered his spirit," Volga said, looking a bit tired.

Mars did seem like he could be dangerous if left to his own devices, but...

"If I taunt and injure him, there are others who would be sad. So this is fine," I replied.

"I see. I think you're being a bit too kind to others, but the fewer people who dirty their hands, the better. If you can walk down a brighter path, that's for the best."

"You make it sound like *you* can dirty your hands. I think you can walk down a bright path too. Don't put yourself down like that."

Volga's eyes widened with shock, and then he laughed. "Heh, you really are an oddball. But hey, that path doesn't seem too bad to me."

He had a refreshed and energetic look on his face.

***

Night had fallen over Laxus. At a certain aristocrat's residence, one person raised his voice in rage and irritation.

"Damn it! I was so close! I was so, *so* close! But that brat!" Mars, the second son of the Laissezfaids, roared in anger as he kicked a chair away.

Callus's plan had succeeded; most of Mars's underlings had left him, and the aristocrat was now desperately venting his fury. Empty bottles of liquor riddled his room, and elegant little trinkets had been strewn on the floor, smashed into pieces.

"At this rate, I won't rise through the ranks. What do I do?"

Mars knew that other students looked at him coldly. While some had found him unpleasant before, others had temporarily sided with him. But now they all gave him the cold shoulder. It was an utterly impossible dream to create a faction in this state. With all the students finding him disagreeable, it was unclear if he could even graduate safely.

"It's all *his* fault! If only *he* never came here!"

The white-haired boy was etched into Mars's mind. Everything

had gone smoothly until that hindrance had appeared. He irately muttered to himself, spitting venom at that boy's very existence. His stress reaching its limit, he finally decided to cross a line that he ought never to cross.

"That's it. He just needs to disappear."

If Callus were gone, Mars's situation wouldn't change one bit. On the contrary, it might even make it worse. But having completely lost his mind, Mars was unable to realize something so glaringly obvious.

"Even if it was a fluke, he managed to defeat that beastfolk. Any old scoundrel on the streets won't do for him. It might be a little costly, but I should hire an assassin."

The rage within him caused him to go berserk. He'd lost his sanity, and he was quickly spiraling out of control. Mars started to seriously consider assassinating Callus, when suddenly the lights of his room went out, engulfing him in darkness.

"Wh-What's going on?!"

He hastily went over to turn his magical stone lamp on, and found someone in a dark cloak who hadn't been there just moments before.

"Wh-Who're you?!" Mars cried out. He fell to the floor in surprise.

The person wrapped in darkness had hidden their face, making it difficult to read their expressions. However, their eyes were trained on Mars. The mysterious person's tight-fitting attire revealed a feminine figure. Her sleek and precise movements were akin to a wild animal's, and she had animal ears and a tail. This woman was a beastfolk.

"You use words like 'disappear' and 'assassin' so easily. Kids these days sure are dangerous," the woman said, slowly approaching the boy. A piece of cloth covered her mouth and slightly muffled her words, but it was clear that it was a woman's voice. "You have the privilege to live your life in the light. I simply cannot understand. Are you that desperate for power and authority?"

"Sh-Shut up! This is the Laissezfaids' residence! It's no place for a cat burglar like you!" Mars yelled.

He took out his wand, intending to aim it at the intruder. She swiftly dealt a kick to his stomach before he had the chance.

"Gah!" Mars cried.

He was blown back against the wall, then slid to the ground,

unable to steady his breathing from the sudden impact.

"Who…are you?! What…do you want?" he gasped.

"My name is K. I destroy those who seek revenge on this kingdom," she replied. "I would've let you go if you had just kept to your silly little faction squabbles, fighting over useless authority. How foolish."

She crushed Mars's right hand. With a nasty *crack,* the bones shattered. Mars screamed in agonizing pain and almost fainted from the torment.

"You…You won't get away with this…" he managed to choke out.

"Your father has already been informed. When I notified him that his son was suspected of committing national treason, he happily handed you over."

"No…" Mars's face turned white with despair. He'd hoped that he could buy some time and cause a fuss until help arrived, but his faint ray of hope had been snuffed out.

"Those dark clothes… Are you an Umbra? I thought the new king disbanded you!" Mars said.

"So you know of that name. You must have some rather conniving friends. I suppose I'll make you spit out everything you know before getting rid of you."

Umbra was the organization that protected the kingdom from the shadows. In other words, it was a gathering of assassins. From collecting intelligence to carrying out assassinations, they were a group of elite warriors who did all the dirty work that couldn't be publicized. The organization had been quite active during the previous king's reign, but when Gallius had taken the throne, the Umbra had supposedly been dismantled. It seemed some of them had remained.

"We've decided to sink deeper and further into the shadows, so that we can remain hidden. And we will continue to dispose of those who wish ill upon this nation."

"W-Wait! I understand all that, but why're you trying to kill me?! The only one I want to kill is a mere commoner!" Mars hastily said.

Thinking this was all just a misunderstanding, he managed to stand up and defend himself. However, K's murderous intent didn't diminish—in fact, it only grew stronger. Finally, Mars realized his mistake.

"You mean he's—" he started.

“That is not for you to know,” K replied.

Before Mars could even blink, K’s hand struck a heavy blow against his neck. Mars didn’t even realize he’d been hit as his consciousness quickly faded. She caught him, slung him over her shoulder, and jumped out the window. Her speed was astonishing—no one would have guessed that she was carrying another person as she leaped from roof to roof, the cityscape hurtling past her.

As she blended into the night of Laxus, she murmured, “I can’t have Shizuku do this job.”

She remembered the face of her old friend who was living happily with Callus, away from the Umbra. Honestly, K was rather envious of Shizuku, but her friend’s happiness was more important than her own.

“Anyways, I guess I should return to my work for meow.”

The dark beast worked to protect Laxus—and above all, her friend’s smile—as she melted away into the darkness.

***

“It really did become peaceful,” Jack suddenly said.

We were eating lunch outside as usual.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

“It’s just…so many things happened last week. It feels weird now that everything’s so quiet.”

It was true that so much had happened. It had all started with meeting Saria at the clock tower. Then came befriending Cecilia, the faction fights, and my duel with Volga. I had been busy every day. While Jack had only joined in when the whole faction fiasco started, it’d been mentally exhausting for him. I tried to apologize for dragging him in, when my other friend spoke before me.

“You’re weak if you get tired from just that much. Are you really from Class A?” Volga asked, stirring the pot.

The three of us were having lunch together, but it seemed Jack and Volga couldn’t quite get along. I wanted them to be friends, but they just didn’t click with each other. And Cryssie was off eating lunch with her other friends today. Since I was more shy, I was envious of how Cryssie was able to break the ice and become friends with almost anybody. But whenever I tried to make new friends, Cryssie would interfere. *I wonder why?*

While I was lost in my thoughts, the other two guys were becoming more belligerent.

"What's that? You wanna pick a fight with me or something?" Jack asked.

"Hmph, my food will start to taste bad if I eat it next to a whiner," Volga replied.

The two glared at each other. *Oh no.*

"Why did you even join Class A, anyways? Weren't you in the Upper Class?" Jack demanded.

Volga had, in fact, transferred from the Upper Class to join us in Class A. Normally, students couldn't move between classes until completing their current semester. But since Class A students were the cream of the crop, they were an exception. Students considered to have enough talent to be in Class A could transfer from another class within a month of entering the academy, no questions asked. It was only written in the fine print at the very end of my student handbook, so I hadn't known this rule either.

"I only came to this academy because my father forced me to. I initially planned on idly watching my time go by in the Upper Class, but with someone as interesting as Callus around, I've decided to change my plans and start taking my studies seriously," Volga replied happily.

I didn't think I'd have had such an effect on him. I was shocked, but happy. Suddenly, another voice came from behind.

"Heya, doing good?" a girl said.

"Huh?" I replied, turning around towards the voice.

I came face-to-face with Latena, whom I hadn't met since the whole faction incident. *Should I have gone to her at some point?* I stood up and bowed my head in front of her.

"Hi, Latena. I'm sorry for not showing you my gratitude until now. Thank you for disbanding your faction right away," I said.

"That's my line, really. Thanks to you, Callus, I've been able to put this entire thing behind me. I'm so grateful to you," she replied with a smile.

*She seems to be the type who doesn't like troublesome matters, so she must've really been fed up with these factions.* I gratefully accepted her words of thanks.

"Um, and who was he again? The noisy blue-haired kid?" she asked.

"Mars? You *really* don't seem interested in him."

She hadn’t even bothered to remember his name, though maybe that was just part of her carefree nature. I was glad she remembered mine.

“Yeah, apparently that Marco guy suddenly quit school. I feel a bit bad for him, but it seems like he won’t trouble us anymore.”

“Right. I do feel a little guilty, though,” I replied.

Soon after the entire faction incident had been settled, Mars had quit the academy. He didn’t mention his reason to anyone, but he’d apparently left Laxus as well. I was a little surprised, since I expected him to try to get his revenge on me. I felt a little bad for having chased him out of school, but I was relieved that I could focus on my academy life.

“Anyways, I really am grateful to you! If you’ve got any troubles going on, feel free to give me a call!” Latena used both her hands to squeeze mine. She bent down a little, peered into my eyes, and winked at me before leaving.

*She’s…really cool. I can see why she’d be popular with both guys and girls.*

“What are you in a daze for, Callus? I’ll report this to your crazy wife,” Jack said.

“Stop it. Cryssie and I aren’t like that,” I replied, shrugging off his usual jokes as I sat back down.

Latena’s mannerisms had made my heart pound, but it wasn’t a feeling of love. Jack, perhaps desperate to become popular, often mentioned romance.

“I know you’re good looking, but I wouldn’t go for Latena if I were you. She’s super popular, and seems more cunning than anything. She’ll toy with you and your heart before tossing you aside,” Jack continued.

“I’m telling you, that’s not it.”

*Just how much does he want to talk about Latena?*

“And I even heard that she was walking around the city with a younger man recently. That guy was apparently really handsome to boot. Probably an aristocrat. She’s a luxurious flower out of reach for us commoners.”

“You sure know a lot about her. It seems like *you* want to be friendlier with her, Jack,” I replied.

Jack fell silent. Curious about his reaction, I was about to ask, when tears started streaming down his face.

“Is it bad if I *do*?! I wanna be toyed with by an upperclassman vixen too!”

He continued to sob loudly. *Ugh, his face is a mess.*

“Here, wipe your tears on this handkerchief,” I said.

“Ugh… Thank you…”

“Hey! I never said you could blow your nose with it!”

“You guys really are noisy. Well, at least it’s not boring,” Volga muttered.

Our days were filled with liveliness and cheer. I probably should’ve thought more about my curse, but I wanted to enjoy my happiness a bit more and forget about those painful days. *It’s fine if I indulge myself in this for a bit longer, isn’t it?*

***

A single student was happily humming to herself as she walked around. Her bright green hair flowed behind her, and while she still seemed a bit childish, she possessed an air of alluring maturity. Her thin, well-toned body attracted the attention of both guys and girls.

Her name was Latena Lilianora. She studied at the academy while also working as a model. As a result, she was a bit of a celebrity. She’d just finished her daily shopping, using magic to float her enormous amount of purchases behind her as she opened the door to her residence.

“I’m home!” she called out to a silent house.

She placed the floating goods in a corner of the room. These bags and boxes were stuffed with clothes. Fashion trends changed frequently, and she was passionate about studying them, so she regularly went out to buy new apparel. Of course, she only had the luxury of doing so because her family was wealthy.

“Huh? I thought no one was home, but there you are,” she said.

When she stepped into the living room, a beautiful boy with silky, green hair was already seated on the sofa. He appeared to be a little younger than Latena, and he looked exasperated when he saw the large quantity of clothes.

“You bought so much again. You *just* purchased a ton only a few days ago,” he said.

“Trends change every day. I did my best to restrain myself, you know,” Latena replied unapologetically.

The boy shook his head. She sat down beside him and leaned

on him while taking on an overly sweet, spoiled tone.

“Sir, there’s still some more stuff that I want,” she purred.

“All right, all right. Just stop using that disgusting tone with me, you greedy girl. Your personality really doesn’t resemble that person’s at all, even though you two look so similar,” he said. He stared into her pretty face with disdain.

“Who are you talking about?” Latena said, tilting her head to the side quizzically.

“It’s got nothing to do with you. In any case, how’s the academy? Is anything interesting going on?”

“Ah, speaking of,” she said, explaining her academy life to this young boy whom she knew as her uncle. She, of course, mentioned the factions as well.

“Heh, I see. He seems to be having fun,” the boy said, smirking maliciously upon hearing a familiar name.

“What’s wrong? Do you know him?”

“A little.”

“Then why don’t you go and meet him? Aren’t you part of the staff?”

“I told you before, I can’t enter the academy right now. That’s why I’m asking you.”

“Is that so?” Latena said, playing dumb.

Her guardian and the chairman of the Magical Committee, Emilia, sighed in exhaustion. “You really are… Never mind. In any case, let me know if anything happens at the academy.”

“Okey dokey.”

Latena’s reply sounded nonchalant and thoughtless. She and Emilia weren’t related by blood, but they were close enough that she regarded him as family. She had no reason to refuse his request. Once he’d heard what he needed, he stood up and tried to leave. Before he put his hand on the door to go, he remembered one last thing.

“Speaking of, an unfortunate incident will occur in Laxus soon. I’m sure you’ll be fine, but it’s still best for you to be careful,” he said.

“Huh?”

Latena once again tilted her head at the warning she’d received. This behavior was very unusual for Emilia. While he acted as her guardian, he took a laissez-faire attitude and rarely interfered with her life. In other words, this warning was evidence of just how big this incident would become.

“Okay, I’ll be careful,” Latena replied.
“Good. Now, I’ll be off.”
With a look of satisfaction, Emilia took his leave.

# Terminology Dictionary VI

## Beastfolk

The name of a humanoid species with beast-like traits. They possess greater physical prowess than normal humans, but tend to be less skilled at magic. While beastfolk with canine or feline traits are the most abundant, there are plenty of other kinds as well, such as harpies who resemble birds.

Lizardmen and merfolk are also types of beastfolk, but species that aren't covered with fur are often regarded as demi-humans.

They used to be treated as inferior species and were persecuted by humans, but that type of discrimination has decreased in recent years.

## Copy Doll

A doll made from a special stone created in the likeness of a human. If one pours their magic into it, it'll link with that person and will start to crack if the user becomes injured. Long ago, when duels were often held, many people ended up dying. The invention of this doll has drastically decreased the danger.

## Curse Techniques

A way of battling by using the power of a curse as one's own. Its history is ancient and goes back to the era of the Gods. These abilities don't use one's own magical energy or the power of the spirits. It's a completely different type of primitive phenomena that doesn't use magic or arcane arts.

# Epilogue: Those Who Control the Curse

I descended the dark, cold staircase. I had been scared of this path at first, but I no longer felt any fear after having passed through numerous times. Once I arrived at my destination, I opened the door and went inside.

“Ah, Callus. So you came. I was just thinking of how I have too much time on my hands,” the resident of the room said with a smile.

“You make it sound like you have anything to do down here. Are you ever actually busy?” I asked.

“Heh heh, you ask some difficult questions. I’ve been sealed away in here for many years, but I don’t think I’ve ever felt busy.”

Luna the moon magician was from ancient times, and had been confined in this area under the clock tower. I had no idea why she was so feared, but she was forced to sit on a stone chair with each arm and leg nailed to her armrests and the floor by special blades.

Maybe I shouldn’t have gotten involved with her, but I believed that the magical energy of the moon was the vital piece in undoing my curse. Even if it was a bit dangerous, I found it to my advantage to interact with Luna. *But above all…I don’t think she’s a bad person.* There was no question that she was enigmatic and wouldn’t easily tell me the whole truth, but she didn’t seem malicious.

“You know, I had a little match with a classmate the other day,” I said, while cleaning the room.

I’d occasionally visit Luna’s room and talk with her while cleaning. The room, neglected for many years, had accumulated piles of dust everywhere, and the books had been weathered. I had started this cleaning of my own accord, wishing for Luna to live in even a bit of comfort, if possible.

“Oh, I know. It was a good battle,” she replied.

“Huh? Why do you know?”

“You were making a huge fuss above me. I couldn’t have *not* noticed even if I tried.”

“I…see.” *I don’t think the sounds would echo to the basement, though. She’s full of mysteries.*

“You want to ask me about the curse taking over your body, don’t you? I never expected the curse to awaken at that time. It was quite unfortunate for you.”

“Huh?”

She even correctly guessed what I’d been thinking. I felt a little intimidated; it seemed like she saw straight through me. *How much does she know?*

“Um, you’re exactly right. I took an unlucky attack to the seal that was suppressing my curse, which ended up undoing it,” I replied.

I still remembered that sensation. My entire body was swallowed whole by a dark swamp, and I was slowly dragged deeper and deeper into the abyss. The mere memory of it made me shudder. I had been able to regain consciousness, but a certain item had helped me.

“When I was drowning in the curse and thought it was all over, the necklace you gave me—the moon amulet—started to give off a blue glow. I frantically reached out to the light and strongly wished to be saved. Then suddenly, the curse shattered and I was able to regain consciousness,” I explained.

“I see. You were on the cusp of losing your life when you were temporarily able to utilize the moon’s magical energy. You’re quite the child.”

“Without it, I may have been swallowed alive by the curse. I truly cannot thank you enough.”

I bowed my head with gratitude. If it had taken me just a moment longer to regain control, I may have killed Volga. That would’ve been the end of me, and I certainly wouldn’t have been able to continue attending the academy.

“There’s no need for your gratitude. The item I gave you was but a trigger. You returned to your normal self using your own power. Other people can only provide trivial support. One must save themselves of their own accord.”

Luna sounded a bit lonely. *She must’ve gone through a lot. I hope she’ll tell me her story one day.*

“From what I can tell, you placed a new seal on your curse, but it’s only a matter of time before another incident occurs and your body is taken over once more. I find your solutions unwise. Magical energy and the like cannot be sealed in the first place,” she said.

“Huh? Really?”

“Indeed. Sealed magical energy will build up over time and condense until nothing can be done. You know that very well yourself, don’t you?”

I thought back to the day my curse had been released. After being sealed for five years, the concentrated curse was powerful, knocking me unconscious instantly.

“There’s a term called ‘a fool’s lid.’ Only fools will put a lid on a problem and believe that it’s been solved. Just because you put that lid over your curse, it doesn’t mean it’s gotten weaker. If you’re determined to live, you must coexist with it.”

“Coexist?”

I’d never thought of that before. I’d always assumed that the curse was evil and was meant to be suppressed. I was sure that any other magician would have had the same thoughts as me. I was once again hit with the realization that Luna wasn’t of this era. She understood magic on a much deeper level.

“How can I coexist with it? If I try to release the curse again, all that will do is put my body through more pain,” I said.

“Instead of entrusting your body to the curse, you need to order it, regulate it, and use it as your own power. If your curse is a phenomenon made from dark magic, surely the only conclusion is that it can be manipulated by human hands.”

*I see.* If I was able to do that, the curse wouldn’t accumulate within my body. *All right then, let’s try it out.*

“I have to order the curse and manage it,” I murmured, putting my fingertips over my chest.

I concentrated deeply, trying to remove the dark magical energy writhing around in my body.

“Ugh…”

I groaned as a sharp pain stabbed at my chest. *Is it impossible for me to do this?*

“Calm down. Your pain is proof that you’re unable to control it just yet. You must dominate the bit of the curse you remove, and place it under your control for the pain to diminish. I’m sure you can do it,” Luna said.

I listened to her advice and concentrated once more. If I gave the curse I released any openings, it would jump at the opportunity to attack me. This showed that I still wasn’t able to manage this energy.

“Listen to my orders!” I yelled, concentrating my magical energy to my fingertips. I was trying to put a collar onto the

energy and grab its leash. I was trying to grab the reins of the rampaging curse, and manipulate it. “Raaah!”

I grabbed the core of the curse and pulled at it with everything I had. The curse I’d pulled out formed a jet-black blade and launched across the basement room. I heard a loud rumble as it collided with the wall.

“What amazing power,” I whispered.

I’d only removed a small sliver of the curse, but the power I’d wielded made my jaw drop.

“You did very well. Abilities that use a curse’s power are called curse techniques. I’m unsure if any others still remain, but in ancient times, there were those who could use this kind of magic. But I haven’t met anyone with a curse as powerful as yours,” Luna said.

“This is amazing. But it seems like something I need to be really careful about using.”

“So you worry about the future before you express your joy. How admirable. With great power comes great responsibility. Since you use the power of a curse, I’m sure the responsibility will be even greater.”

That much was clear to me as well. This technique allowed me to curse whoever fell victim to my abilities. If I used it incorrectly, it would only cause chaos.

“Power is not good or evil on its own. It is defined by the one who wields it. Remember that well.”

“Right,” I replied.

I’d received a great new power, but would I be able to use it without straying off the right path?



# Extra Chapter: The Hermit of the Clock Tower

I love coffee.

I love the dark, seemingly endless liquid.

I was able to continue research that no one else would understand in isolation partly thanks to this drink. I'd recently made a human my new assistant-in-training, but I was still heavily reliant on coffee. My body was a child's, after all. I got tired and sleepy very easily. I wanted to slap my past self, who'd stupidly believed that I'd be able to do my research all day if I made myself younger again.

"Ah, he's here," I said. The lamp's glow in my lab notified me of the guest. It was linked with the magic lock on the entrance of the clock tower, allowing me to immediately know if anyone entered the place.

"Then I suppose I should pour everyone a cup. Let's see, three mugs…"

I took out enough flasks for everyone and placed them on the desk. The sizes varied, but that was fine. The important part was whether they could drink coffee or not. Since my junior hadn't said anything about it, I guessed this would be fine.

"Ah, I should pour in the sugar quickly."

I dumped a good amount of sugar into my flask. *Hm, this should be enough.* I used to be able to drink black coffee when I was in my old body, but I currently had the palate of a child. Sugar was necessary, or else it'd be too bitter for me. I actually wanted to add some milk too, but that would change the color of my drink and be a dead giveaway. I couldn't make such a blunder in front of my dear junior. To maintain my dignity as an upperclassman, I couldn't bring myself to do it. While I was having these thoughts, I heard footsteps coming up the stairs. *I guess it's time for me to welcome them.*

"Welcome to my lab, you two. It's a bit messy, but make yourself at home," I said. I placed two cups of coffee for my junior and for the saint from the Holy Kingdom.

It had all started this morning. My junior had dropped by

between his lessons, wanting to introduce me to the saint. At first, I'd thought he was joking or talking nonsense, but I learned that there were some troublesome affairs going on. I generally tried to avoid meddling in these sticky situations, but I had no choice. In exchange for requesting his support with my research for an entire day on the next holiday, I decided to meet the saint and lend a hand with the faction fights.

"Pleased to meet you, Saria. My name is Cecilia la Lilynia. I hope we can be good friends," the saint said, bowing with her brilliant golden locks.

I'd heard that she was a capable person, and I saw firsthand that the rumors were true. She gave off an air of elegance without being unpleasant. Even someone with a twisted personality like me had a positive impression of her. It only seemed natural that she was rather popular.

"Pleased to meet you, saint," I said. "I'm an ill-bred person, so I'm not too familiar with polite speech. I'd appreciate it if you let my mannerisms slide."

I knew it was a nasty thing to say. My junior didn't seem to expect this response either, as he looked flustered and puzzled. I felt bad for him, but this was a test for her. However, she didn't seem bothered by this at all.

"Whatever are you saying? I'm just a student within this academy. You're an upperclassman, Saria. I believe you need not worry about such trivial matters. Please, just call me Cecilia," the saint replied.

"Ugh... Th-Then allow me to do so, um...C-Cecilia."

"Of course. I hope we can be good friends."

I thought I could uncover her true nature beneath that blindfold if I acted rude, but instead she showed me maturity and tolerance—she was vastly different from me. She wasn't like those normal aristocrats I'd seen either. I knew that I should show a degree of etiquette and courtesy when engaging with her.

"Um, since introductions seem to be over, could I talk about the heart of the issue?" my junior said.

He proceeded to talk about the factions and the battles that were going on. I'd been given a briefer in the morning, but he explained everything once more now that we'd all gathered. He was trying to confirm if we were all on the same page. If we had any questions, we could ask and share that information between

us. His method was very logical.

"And that's how it is. Do you have any questions?" he asked.

"Oh, I've got one. May I?" I asked, raising my hand. Cecilia didn't seem to have any.

"Sure. What is it?"

"Let's say your plans go well. This Mars fellow gives up, and peace returns to the academy. What do you plan to do with your faction then?"

"I'll disband it, of course. I only wish for everyone to freely enjoy their time at this academy. I will never use my faction for my own gain or advantage."

He didn't have an ounce of hesitation in his eyes. *All right, seems like I can leave this in his hands.* I glanced over at Cecilia and saw that she seemed smitten with him. *Oh? Could this be…?*

"Then I'm relieved. And what are you planning on doing from here?" I asked.

"I want you two to meet two of my friends. I think they'll become powerful allies to this cause. Um…is it okay to hold that meeting here?" he asked.

"Hm… I don't quite like that idea, but fine. I'll accept it. But if they get noisy, I'll kick them out."

"Thank you so much! I'll be sure to tell them!"

After we confirmed a few more details, my junior left the lab. He apparently had some stuff to talk about with a teacher regarding this issue. *What a busy child he is.* That left Lady Cecilia and me in the lab. I'd assumed she'd chase after him, but she was sincere and politely chose to finish her cup of coffee before leaving. I was happy that she was enjoying what I'd offered until the end, but this was awkward. Why did a socially awkward person like myself have to be left alone with a princess?

"Um…" she started.

"Y-Yes?!" I said, my voice rising an octave out of surprise. *Oh no, my dignity as an upperclassman! I'm not sure if I had any to begin with, but still…*

"Um, may I ask why you became young again, Saria?"

"Oh, are you curious? I can't give any details, but this is the result of my research."

"That's amazing," she replied, looking at me with envy.

*Not that I can tell, since she has a blindfold.* But it still felt good to be admired by an underclassman. I felt my self-esteem rise.

"Um, is it possible for me to use it as well?" she asked

sheepishly.

This was a surprise to me. She was clearly a young, beautiful woman. I didn't expect her to want to go back a few years.

"Unfortunately, this research has been tailored specifically to my needs. I don't think we could bring the results you desire even if you used it," I replied.

"I see." She looked quite disappointed.

I was making a form of that medicine for others to use, but it wouldn't be finished any time soon. I wasn't planning on selling it, of course. It was all just a part of my research.

"I don't think you need any de-aging. You have no need for this medicine," I said.

"Um, I just…want to become smaller."

"Smaller?"

I cocked my head to one side. Did she want to become shorter? But she wasn't a particularly tall person either. *I don't get it.*

While I was looking at her in befuddlement, she squirmed and shyly opened her mouth to speak.

"U-Um, I…want to make my br-breasts smaller."

I stared at her blankly for a moment before I broke out in laughter.

"Ha ha ha! I certainly didn't expect *that*! Heh, I wouldn't have imagined you'd be bothered by it!"

"I-It's a real issue for me! Ever since I was young, they were large, and they're continuing to grow. Um, I thought this was i-indecent for a saint such as myself." Her ears turned bright red.

Her blushing face was so adorable. I was overcome with the urge to stroke her hair and console her. If a woman like me felt this way, I was sure men would fall in love with her.

"Heh, I'm sorry to have laughed. I didn't mean any ill will. I don't have large breasts myself, so I never imagined your struggle, but it seems bigger isn't always better. I suppose you have your fair share of problems too," I said.

"Ugh… Please don't tell anyone."

"Of course. I'm not mean enough to toy with a maiden's innocence."

I'd taken a liking to her. If my dear junior hadn't given me this opportunity, I would've never gotten to know her like this. I would've only seen her title as a saint. *I suppose it's not good to be a shut-in for long. It's important to go outside and meet others every*

*now and then. I guess I should be thankful to my junior, who opened that heavy door and exposed me to the outside.*

"So you want to make a specific part of your body smaller. It wouldn't be impossible for a genius like me, but I don't think you really need that," I said.

"Hm? Why do you say that?"

*I guess I'll be a bit of a busybody to show my gratitude.* "My junior was glancing at your breasts every now and then. I can confidently say that he likes them. It's part of your charm, and one of your weapons. It's no good to cast that aside."

Her face turned redder than ever as she hastily opened and shut her mouth. "Ah, er, um... Wh-Why are you talking about him?"

"Why, you ask? You're a bit into him, aren't you? I can tell just by looking."

"I didn't think you'd see through me." She seemed shocked, but I hadn't expected her to admit it so easily.

"Well, I only said that as a bluff. But it seems I was correct. You two are like open books," I said.

"Y-You tricked me! You're awful!" Cecilia replied angrily.

*She really can be expressive. Between her and my junior, they're both such adorable underclassmen. I don't think I'll ever get tired of them.*

"Now, now, don't be so angry. Why don't I teach you a way to seduce him by using your breasts?" I offered.

"I-I can't do something so shameless!"

And so, we got to know each other a little better. This world was still filled with so many fun things that I knew nothing about. I'd never get bored.

# Afterword

Hello, everyone. I'm happy we can meet again. I'm Genkotsu Kumano. How was the second volume of *Yomehan*? I hope you enjoyed it.

Callus remained in his manor in the first volume, but his world has expanded in the second volume. I'd love to include more of the Ledyvia Kingdom where Callus resides, as well as other nations, in the future. I think national struggles and battles between nations are some of the highlights of a fantasy series, so I'd love to write some of that too.

While Callus was a child at the start, he's grown physically and mentally in the second volume. It was very fun to write him as he became stronger and much more reliable. The manga adaptation is steadily moving along, so please look forward to that!

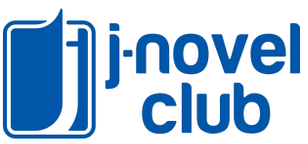
Lastly, some acknowledgments.

I'd like to thank Falmaro once again for providing wonderful illustrations for the second volume. Thank you so much. The characters were all drawn so adorably, they had me trembling with joy. The illustrations you've given me are my treasures!

Thank you to my editor, Warafuji, who patiently stayed by my side. I'm looking forward to our next meeting/party!

Thank you to the proofreaders, the sales team, everyone who was involved with this book, and to the readers who picked it up. I'd like to end this afterword by expressing my gratitude.

I look forward to meeting you all again!



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I Only Have Six Months to Live, So I'm Gonna Break the Curse with Light Magic or Die Trying: Volume 2
by Genkotsu Kumano

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Edited by Austin Conrad

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Ebook edition 1.0: June 2023