
Umikaze Minamino
Illustration by Laruha
4
KUNON the SORCERER Can See

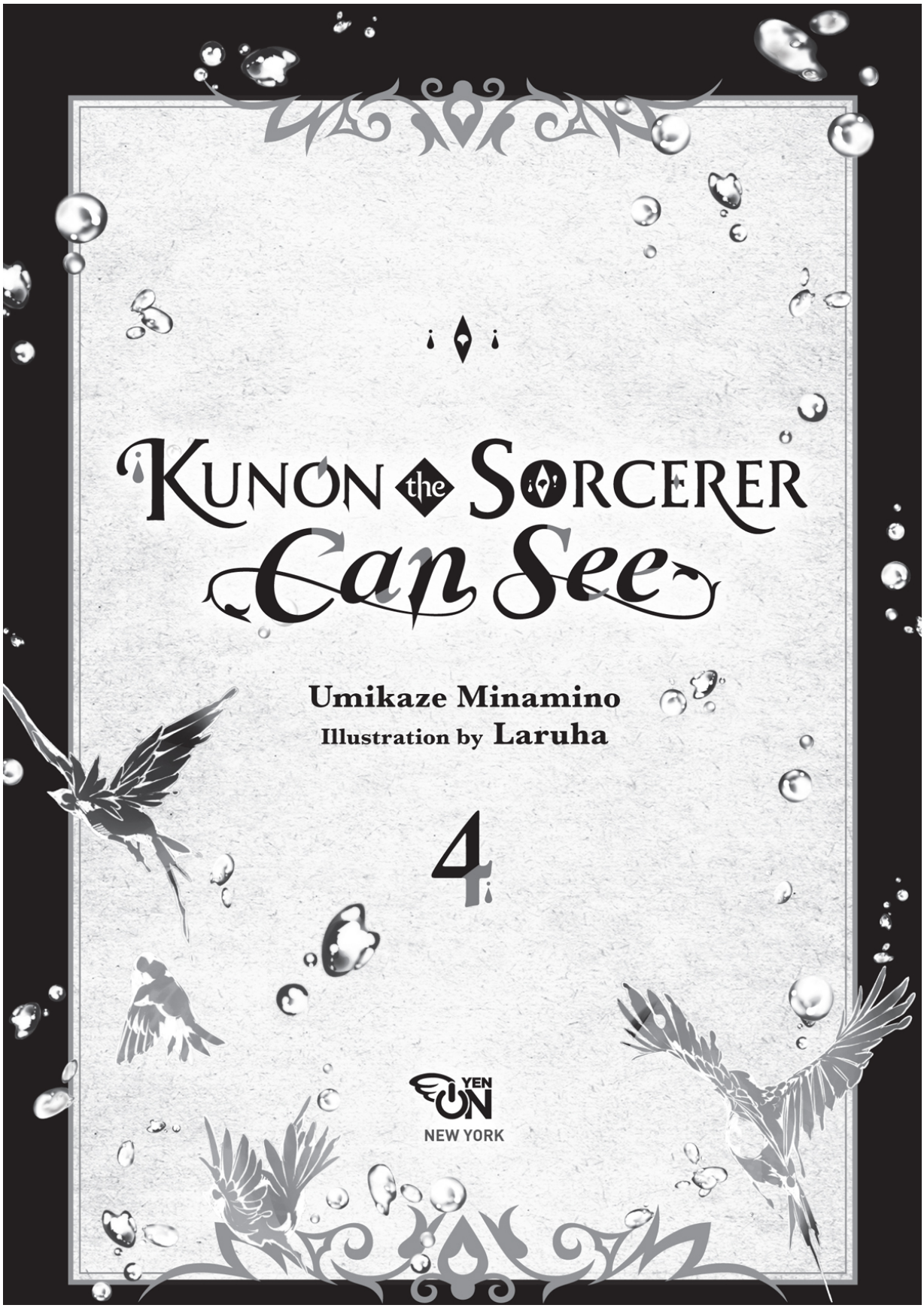

KUNON the SORCERER Can See 4
"If you deem my abilities necessary, please do not hesitate to reach out to me."
—Lulomet Gaines
Kunon the Sorcerer Can See




"Right, time to get serious."
"I'm coming for you, Kunon!"
Kunon Gurion
Gioelion F'louvain Arcion
Independent of the spectators' musings, both Kunon and Gioelion had also concluded that their duel would soon come to an end.


"When will you learn? You can't escape my lightning."
Shilto Lockson





Kunon the Sorcerer Can See

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NEW YORK



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MAJUTSUSHI KUNON WA MIETEIRU Vol.4
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First published in Japan in 2023 by KADOKAWA CORPORATION, Tokyo.
English translation rights arranged with KADOKAWA CORPORATION, Tokyo, through TUTTLE-MORI AGENCY, INC., Tokyo.

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First Yen On Edition: July 2025
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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data Names: Minamino, Umikaze, author. | Laruha, illustrator. | Smith, Katelyn, translator.
Title: Kunon the Sorcerer can see / Umikaze Minamino ; illustration by Laruha ; translation by Katelyn Smith.
Other titles: Majutsushi Kunon wa mieteiru. English Description: First Yen On edition. | New York : Yen On, 2023– Identifiers: LCCN 2023018636 | ISBN 9781975368227 (v. 1 ; trade paperback) | ISBN 9781975376581

(v. 2 ; trade paperback) Subjects: CYAC: Magic—Fiction. | Blind—Fiction. | LCGFT: Fantasy fiction. | Light novels.
Classification: LCC PZ7.1.M6314 Ku 2023 | DDC [Fic]—dc23
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2023018636

ISBNs: 978-1-9753-9036-5 (paperback) 978-1-9753-9037-2 (ebook)

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Characters

The Magic City of Dirashik

Kunon Gurion

A genius sorcerer who is blind. Possesses a peculiar sense of chivalry.

Rinko Round

Kunon's maid. Takes after her older sister, Iko.

Reyes Saint-Lance
Saint who lacks emotion. Exceptionally fond of plants.

Advanced Class: Ability Faction

Bael Kirkington

Faction representative. Caring older brother type.

Genevis

Possesses a rare magical attribute and a distinctive laugh.

Elia Hesson

A beautiful girl with a one-sided crush on Bael.

Advanced Class: Harmony Faction

Shilto Lockson

Faction representative. Powerful young woman also known as the "Lightning Bolt."

Elva Daglight

A very pretty girl, at least until she starts an experiment…

Hank Beat

Kunon's classmate. Currently studying bacon making.

Advanced Class: Rationality Faction

Lulomet Gaines

Faction representative. Rare darkness magic user. Very thoughtful.

Cassis Hawk

A girl at heart. Possesses indomitable confidence in her looks.

Riyah Houghs

Kunon’s classmate. A country boy who finds cities a bit scary.

Second Level Class

Gioelion

Second imperial prince of the Arcion Empire. Also known as the “Inferno Prince.”

Magic School Teachers

Gray Rouva

The world’s greatest witch. Ageless and immortal.

Satori Glücke

A well-known water sorcerer and Kunon’s idol.

Soff Cricket

A wind sorcerer. Roughly the same age as Zeonly.

Jenié Kors

Kunon’s first magic teacher. Currently an associate professor.

The Kingdom of Hughlia

Mirika Hughlia

The kingdom’s ninth princess and Kunon’s fiancée.

Grand Master Londimonde

The powerful head of the Royal Sorcerers.

Zeonly Finroll

Kunon’s second magic teacher. A magical engineer whose element is earth.

Prologue

Satori Glücke's office was organized, but there were a lot of raw materials, chemicals, and equipment lying around, giving it a cluttered impression. Still, compared to her peers, her space was on the tidy side.

That was uncommon for a teacher's office, since such places were primarily used for research. Some were so messy you couldn't even see the floor.

At present, there were three people in the room. They were sitting around a table, enjoying a nice, relaxing cup of tea and some snacks, discussing the particulars of a rather fascinating topic.

A splendid way to pass the time, Satori thought.

"Oh?" she said. "Quite an interesting turn things have taken."

She had heard a little about the matter from her own apprentice, but the details were even juicier. Especially since it was happening right here and involved people she knew.

"Yes," said Professor Soff Cricket with a smile, "the Second Level class is going through some intriguing changes."

Not long ago, Soff had come to Satori for advice on the situation. The Second Level class was becoming a problem, he'd said.

Today, he had come to inform her of the latest developments. How had things progressed since then?

The more she heard, the better it got. Satori, who was something of a wily old woman, kept breaking into a grin. She couldn't help it—the subject was just that entertaining.

"It's considered a challenge the moment two of them lock eyes with each other. Students who didn't stand out before are making names for themselves while those who were at the top of the pack are being kicked down to the bottom. It doesn't matter whether someone is a first-year student or an upperclassman, what family they come from, their social status, even their star ranking—it's just about their ability now. The rebellion worked, in other words."

Put like that, the current situation sounded incredibly brutal.

"But is that okay…?" asked Jenié Kors hesitantly. She was Satori's apprentice and sat with her and Soff at the table.

As an associate professor in charge of a First Level class, she knew something about the situation in Second Level. But the reality seemed a lot more violent than she had imagined.

Such a state of affairs would have been unthinkable back when she was a student. She began to imagine what it would have been like for an unremarkable student like her, but the idea was simply too dreadful to consider.

"Oh, don't start with the softhearted drivel," said Satori. "A sense of competition is essential to the growth and progression of one's magic. Good grief, I can't believe my apprentice is so weak-willed."

Around someone as strong-willed as you, Jenié thought, *I practically have to be.*

If both apprentice and master were too headstrong, all they would do was fight. As it stood, they had struck a nice balance. Not that she could ever say that to Satori's face.

"Things are too peaceful now," the old woman continued. "When I was young, there was never a shortage of people looking for a fight."

A slew of familiar faces from her youth ran through Satori's mind.

These days the school had a relaxed, calm atmosphere. When Satori was a student, however, many of her classmates were fierce and ambitious.

Some were spurred on by a desire to improve their social status. Others were eager to get back at the powerful or simply anyone they didn't like. Still others were desperate to distinguish themselves from those they considered beneath them.

Then there was Satori herself, who put any upstarts foolish enough to challenge her in their place. And of course, there were the opponents even she hadn't been able to defeat.

Decades-old memories washed over her, filling her with nostalgia.

But if she was asked about more recent students with this same ethos, the first name she'd give would be Zeonly Finroll. That boy

had been a real troublemaker, but he was strong, even in battle. Plus, he had racked up achievements no one could deny.

Well…perhaps that wasn't so recent. A decade had already passed since his time.

"Is this how magic school was back in the old days?" asked Soff.

Satori smiled wryly. "No, things are much more out of control now. In my time, only a portion of the students acted like that. And there was no level-wide ranking system."

A hierarchy had emerged among the students. Each of them was assigned a number in descending order of strength. Number one was the most powerful, number two was second most powerful, and so on.

It was a rather ludicrous system. There were many sorcerers who were brilliant regardless of whether they were strong or weak.

Truly, Satori thought, *what a fascinating turn of events.*

"Well, being a sorcerer isn't all about fighting, of course," replied Soff, "but there are some experiences that can only be gained through combat. We even incorporate it into some of our tests. I don't completely approve of what's going on, but I don't believe it's entirely inappropriate, either."

Like Satori, Soff was intrigued by what was going on in the Second Level class.

Right now, it was teetering on the edge. The prevailing ideology at present was that magic school should be a meritocracy, where one's ability was all that mattered.

The current mood might be a little too radical, as far as Soff was concerned, but the thought behind it wasn't wrong. This was a school for learning magic—an institution where students could polish their abilities without worrying about politics and social influence. Indeed, from that perspective, the students' assertions were correct.

"Kunon…"

Jenié couldn't believe what that boy had set into motion.

There were various factors at play, and no one had expected things to turn out like this, not even Kunon himself. And yet it was

undeniable that his actions were the driving force behind the present state of affairs. The small ripple he had caused had spread and grown, ultimately becoming a tidal wave.

"Now, now. There's no need to worry so much, Jenié," Soff said.

Kunon was Jenié's student. She wasn't very forthcoming about this fact due to the stark difference in their abilities, but as long as Kunon continued to insist that she was his teacher, that relationship wouldn't change.

Soff was aware of Jenié's circumstances and understood her concerns.

"These kinds of things are like a fire," he said. "They start burning strong, but eventually they die down. The fiercer the flames, the quicker they burn out. This will probably be over in two, maybe three months at most. Even if it takes longer than that, it won't be as intense as it is now."

I truly hope you're right, but… Jenié couldn't stop her doubts.

"So, Professor Soff, who sits at the top of the pecking order at present?"

Unaffected by her apprentice's anxieties, Satori continued to enjoy herself. Apparently, she didn't see this situation as her problem.

"Considering the uneven matchups between certain attributes, the rankings are constantly changing… Except for the top spot, which remains in the hands of the Inferno Prince. You've heard of him, haven't you, Professor Satori?"

"He's the imperial prince, isn't he?"

"Yes. His talent is second to none. In particular, his ability to control and manipulate magic is astounding. He might be better at it than me."

"Oh? I'd like to see that."

"Right? Rumor has it even Gray Rouva wants to watch the Inferno Prince in battle."

"Her, too? Impressive."

"If he stays in the royal family, it'll be a real waste of talent. At his current rate of progression, he could even become a Scarlet

Sorcerer."

The two teachers carried on their lively conversation, heedless of the troubled associate professor in their midst.





Chapter 1
Long-Awaited Rendezvous

"Master Gio, what's the plan starting tomorrow?"

Just as Gioelion was getting ready to leave the classroom and go home, his bodyguard Garthries Gadanthus showed up. As an earth sorcerer, he attended class in a different room.

The second semester of magic school had come to an end. As of the next day, students would have an extended break of about three weeks. Or rather, now that classes were over, their vacation had pretty much already started.

As Gioelion's friend, bodyguard, and roommate, Garth—as his friends called him—should already have been aware of the prince's plans.

Do you even need to ask? Gioelion wondered; though at the same time, he understood the aim behind Garth's question.

"There's no requirement that I return to the Empire, so I'm just going to stay in Dirashik and take it easy, perhaps do some

independent studying," he explained.

The people who actually wanted an answer to Garth's question were the other students in Gioelion's second-year class—the one for students with the fire attribute—who were currently gathered around them.

For some reason, Gioelion was considered a representative for the entire Second Level. Consequently, many of his fellow students were interested in his every movement.

His political authority played a part, too, of course. One's family name and political influence were supposed to hold no sway at magic school, but with so many students from high-ranking backgrounds, such things were impossible to ignore.

It wasn't as though Gioelion was concerned about his classmates. But if he revealed just a little about his plans, the rest of them would act accordingly. And in that case, a certain amount of disclosure was necessary to keep things running smoothly.

"I see," said Garth. "Sounds like I'll be able to relax, too, then."

"Ilhi reporting for duty! I really want to try that orange lezzi dessert I've been hearing about lately!"

The noisier of Gioelion's two bodyguards had arrived. Ilhi Bolyle's attribute was fire, so she was in the same class as he was.

"I have no idea what that is, but you can ask the cook to make it for you," Gioelion said, getting up from his seat.

The past few days had been extremely enjoyable as far as he was concerned. Between the rebellion and final exams, there hadn't been a dull moment.

He had made it through his exams without issue, but the rebellion that had recently taken root in Second Level—led by the first-year water attribute class—was still going strong, and as a result, the whole Second Level was in an uproar.

As the root cause of the rebellion, students from the Empire were particularly prone to being challenged. Sometimes they managed to turn the tables on their opponents; other times they were not so lucky.

Gioelion, an imperial prince, had received more than his fair share of challenges, but he had yet to lose a single one.

He defeated each and every opponent, content that this was how things *should* be at magic school. As long as rebellions and uprisings were fought with magic, Gioelion thought, they should be allowed to happen. He figured the school's leaders agreed, at least in part. That was why the teachers made no move to stop them. Some of them even helped arrange duels.

It was interesting, though, how evident an opponent's abilities became in a fight.

As a matter of fact, there were quite a few secretly talented students who didn't usually stand out. Two members of the first-year water class—the prince of Aselviga and the daughter of the Empire's Duke of Rhodia—were especially noteworthy. They were considerably skilled. Gioelion also liked the Aselvigan prince's determination; no matter how many times Gioelion beat him, he kept coming back for more.

And yet if he was honest…the only person on Gioelion's mind was the boy with the eye mask. They had made a promise to anxiously await their next meeting and agreed to fight each other in a duel. In truth, not much time had passed since then.

Gioelion had chosen that wording himself, and he had indeed grown quite anxious for the wait to be over. When he realized this, a wry grin rose to his face.

"Ilhi," he called to one of his guards as they walked along together. "It seems my patience has run out."

A long break was about to begin, and he would have some free time. Plus, exams were over, and he didn't have to go back to his own country. What reason was there to put things off any longer?

"Finally ready to be reunited with your special someone?" said Ilhi.

Recently, and with increasing frequency, she was able to tell just by looking at Gioelion that he was thinking about Kunon. To her, the prince had taken on the appearance of a lovesick young man,

though she kept that thought to herself, afraid it would unnecessarily upset him.

"My 'special someone'? Well, I suppose you're not entirely wrong."

Gioelion knew this behavior was unlike him. He was perfectly aware that he didn't tend to form strong attachments to people or things. Despite that, ever since meeting Kunon—no, even before they met—he had been acutely aware of the younger boy.

"Time for you and Mr. Kunon to go at it?"

"Yeah. Let Kunon decide the date. Can you handle the rest of the arrangements?"

"Yessir! Garth, I'll leave Master Gio with you!"

Breaking off from Gioelion and Garth, who were headed home, Ilhi turned and walked in the opposite direction.

She made the rounds and met with all the necessary people to get things set up. Her last stop was Kunon's lab in Building 11.

"Pardon me!" she called out, knocking.

When someone called back from inside, she opened the door.

"It's nice to see you again, Miss Ilhi."

There he was—Gioelion's special someone—in the middle of a messy room. He appeared to be sitting at a table, writing something.

"…You should probably tidy up in here a little," said Ilhi.

She'd meant to return his greeting, but before she could, the level of disorder in the room had completely distracted her.

Though she seemed rough and careless, Ilhi was actually a fairly orderly, methodical person. That was why her attention was stolen by the lab's sorry state.

What had likely once been stacks of documents had toppled over and been left to rest on the floor. Some of the papers had clearly been stepped on and bore visible footprints.

How could anyone let a room get like this? Ilhi could not fathom it.

"People tell me that a lot," said Kunon.

People tell him that a lot? she thought, dismayed. *And he* still *hasn't done anything?* That dismayed her even more.

"I see…," she said. "You seem busy, so I'll get straight to the point. Master Gio would like to know what time would be most convenient for you."

There was no safe place to step inside the lab, so Ilhi stayed in the doorway. She had already decided to simply finish her errand and go home.

"Anytime works for me," said Kunon immediately. "Oh, but the sooner the better."

He didn't need to ask, "Most convenient for what?" or "Are you talking about the agreement we made?"

Given the speed of his response, he had probably been pining just as much as Gioelion.

"In that case: tomorrow morning, here at school. We can meet near the cafeteria."

"Understood."

Leaving Kunon's lab, Ilhi retraced her steps.

Now that the boy himself had approved of the plan, preparations could proceed. She had to hammer out all the details. It would be a large undertaking, but Ilhi didn't mind.

She was a fire user herself, and she, too, was looking forward to the duel between Gioelion and Kunon.

"…Why does it feel like this has become some kind of major event?" asked Kunon the following day.

"…Good question," Gioelion replied, shifting his gaze reproachfully to a certain loudmouthed bodyguard.

"It wasn't me! I'm telling you!" Ilhi said. She was the one in charge of the day's preparations. "I only invited two teachers and the Saint!"

As she went about getting permission to use school facilities for the match, Ilhi had asked two teachers to come in case things got out of control and needed to be shut down. She also invited the Saint so they would have a healer on hand if anyone got injured.

She had gone to others to make various requests, but only those three people had been called to attend.

Ilhi had assumed the duel to be a private affair and had made arrangements accordingly. She absolutely had not gone around blabbing about it to everyone. She wasn't the sort of guard who needlessly exposed her charge to potential danger. She would never have turned this match into a big to-do.

So how had things ended up like this?

Late that morning, outside the cafeteria, Kunon met up with Gioelion and his bodyguards as agreed. After exchanging pleasantries, they relocated to the laboratory in Building 10. They'd already received clearance to use it for their duel.

Kunon had assumed this would be another white room like the last one, but instead, it looked like some kind of arena.

It was equipped with a sunken ring and spectator seating, and it seemed far too large to be contained in a single room. In fact, despite being located inside a building, the room had no ceiling. Overhead was an endless expanse of blue sky.

Had the space been twisted, connecting it to another location? Or had the room been manipulated to accommodate the arena? Was it all a fabrication, even that big blue sky?

Kunon didn't quite understand how it worked. But then there were more pressing matters at hand.

The spectator area of the laboratory-cum-arena was already full of people. That said, since only those related to the magic school were in attendance, it wasn't actually *full*. Only a few sections in the front rows were filled in.

Still, there were students from both the First and Second Levels, and even some from the Advanced class. A few of the faces in the crowd were familiar; others were not. Kunon saw some people who appeared to be teachers, though he didn't recognize them.

Both Kunon and Gioelion had considered this match a private matter. They hadn't expected so many people to show up, nor were

they very happy about it. Even Ilhi, who had arranged everything, seemed surprised by the presence of an audience.

And that wasn't the only thing on their minds.

"I can't see," said Kunon, "but are my eyes mistaken or is there a big black cube over there?"

"There is…," said Gioelion. "What *is* that?"

Floating unnaturally above the spectator seats was a large black box. What was it, indeed?

"You're here."

A familiar figure walked up to Kunon and the others, as they stood flabbergasted in front of the participants' entrance to the arena.

"Oh, Professor Satori—"

"Professor! What is the meaning of this?!"

Ilhi's voice cut across Kunon's, interrupting him.

Satori Glücke, as it happened, was one of the teachers she'd made arrangements with.

Ilhi had assumed that because she knew Kunon, she would be more likely to help. Indeed, Satori had immediately agreed to prepare a location for the match and to be present for it. It had gone smoothly, and for that, Ilhi was very grateful. Or at least, she *had* been very grateful.

She'd never dreamed Satori would let in all these spectators.

"Calm down," said the professor. "No matter who's watching or where it happens, it doesn't change what the two of you came here to do."

"Whether or not they're being observed makes a huge difference!"

Ilhi was right about that.

Skilled sorcerers tended to keep some of their abilities under wraps—secret weapons and trump cards and the like. And using those abilities in front of a large crowd meant exposing their secrets to everyone present. That would make the match all the more difficult.

"I understand how you feel, but there's nothing I can do about it." Letting out a small sigh, Satori shifted her gaze to the floating black

box. “Gray Rouva said she wanted to watch.”

“”Gray Rouva?!””

The name shocked not only Kunon but also Gioelion, Ilhi, and Garth.

Gray Rouva was the most famous witch in the world, and she had lived for countless centuries. An immensely talented magic user, she had defended this area from the three major powers surrounding it all by herself. Her name was so famous it appeared in history books.

And yet it was said there wasn’t a soul alive who really knew her and barely anyone who had seen her.

Was she truly centuries old? Did she even exist in the first place?

If she was real, what kind of magic was she using to preserve her life?

Gray Rouva was a fascinating figure, but she wasn’t someone you could meet simply because you wanted to. Even attending magic school did not guarantee you would meet her.

…That was the general consensus anyway.

That floating black box—which was probably a sort of smoke screen made of shadows… Apparently, the world’s greatest witch was inside it.

“And she said that anyone else who wants to watch might as well be allowed.”

Might as well. In other words, since she was going to be there, why not invite others, too?

“Sorry,” said Satori. “No one can go against Gray Rouva.”

That made sense. Gray Rouva was like the headmistress of the school. In fact, she was the ruler of the whole magic city of Dirashik. No one associated with the school was going to disobey her. They would be risking expulsion. Here, Gray Rouva *was* the law.

“But it should be fine, right? You’re still young, and your magic hasn’t developed yet. Ten years from now, you’ll be well beyond your current abilities. You can give it all you’ve got right now without any real drawbacks. To people my age, it all looks like baby stuff.”

Satori had a point. The school's teachers were extremely talented. From their point of view, magic used by boys like Kunon and Gioelion, still in their early teens, was mere child's play.

That didn't make the situation any easier to accept, but…if this was what Gray Rouva wanted, they didn't really have a choice. The world's greatest witch had shown up to watch their match. For sorcerers, it was like dueling in the presence of their queen.

Kunon might be in the Advanced class, but he was still only a first-year, and he felt humbled by her presence.

Satori continued, "I have a message from her, as well. She says, and I quote: 'Even if you die within seconds, I'll heal you, so fight with all the power you have.'"

In other words…

"We're allowed to fight without using a dueling magic circle?" asked Kunon.

"You prefer it that way, don't you?"

"I do, but…"

In Kunon's opinion, being hit by a spell was just another learning experience. But would Gioelion agree?

"I'm fine with it, too," said the prince.

In that case, there was no problem…right?

"Then there's no issue. Look, everyone's waiting. Go on; get started."

There was still a lot bothering both of them, but as students, there wasn't much they could do.

Their only choice was, reluctantly, to proceed.

Their match had garnered a bit more attention than they had anticipated. That had dampened their enthusiasm somewhat, but the moment they turned to face each other in the center of the arena, their surroundings became unimportant.

Perhaps it had something to do with the way the audience looked on in complete silence. Without all the noise, it felt like they were completely alone.

They only had eyes for each other now. The only one either of them could see was the opponent they had been yearning to fight.

"Kunon. Gray Rouva said it first, but allow me to reiterate," Gioelion said, his gaze boring into the other boy. "I'll try hard to keep you entertained, so please show me the same courtesy."

Behind his mask, Kunon's unseeing eyes were fixed on Gioelion.

"You want me to give it my all, right? To go for the kill?"

"If you can beat me without using your full power, fine. But that's how I intend to proceed."

"Understood."

Thank goodness, Kunon thought. His greatest anxiety regarding this match was the possibility of Gioelion pulling his punches.

In Kunon's estimation, Gioelion was a league or two above him in both total amount of magic power and in the ability to manipulate and control that power. Not to mention the number of spells he knew and all their variations.

It was only a gut feeling, but Kunon didn't think he was wrong. He probably couldn't win this duel.

That was no big deal since his desire to fight Gioelion had never had anything to do with winning. But if the playing field was leveled to make things more "even," that was a different story. In that case, even if Kunon somehow managed to win, it wouldn't mean anything. In fact, he'd probably be disappointed.

"I feel like we often agree about magic, and it seems we are alike in this aspect as well," he said.

Gioelion must have worried, too—about whether Kunon would hold back. Given his status as an imperial prince, he probably had a hard time finding people willing to fight him seriously.

But Kunon was sure they'd both come to the same conclusion: Where magic was concerned, status was irrelevant.

They had one reason to fight and one reason alone: to reach ever greater heights and ever deeper depths. Nothing else mattered.

Professor Soff Cricket gave the starting signal.

Ilhi had approached him as well, just like she had Satori.

"All right, begin."

His words weren't very enthusiastic, but both Kunon and Gioelion reacted right away.

Countless A-ori appeared around Kunon as innumerable fire butterflies fluttered to life in the air surrounding Gioelion.

It might have looked like a deadlock—but the flames moved faster.

Butterflies danced.

Fire swallows soared.

Dogs of flame ran.

Burning dragonflies flew.

All sorts of fiery creatures rushed forward at once, leaving streaks of red in their wake and heading straight for Kunon.

Kunon carefully enclosed each and every one of them inside an A-ori.

All the irregularly flitting butterflies.

The swallows swooping down from above.

The dogs racing toward his legs.

Even the dragonflies zipping at his face.

"…?"

But as he finished trapping the creatures, Kunon felt a sense of unease wash over him. The fire swallowed up by his A-ori was still burning.

"…!"

The moment he noticed, the flames began to swell.

Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang!

The water membranes popped, giving way to the growing masses of flame. In the space of an instant, all the fire animals exploded.

Kunon was surrounded.

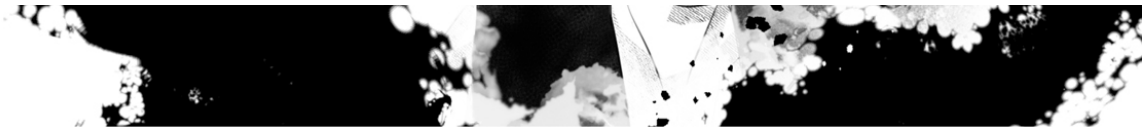
The Inferno Prince Gioelion's flames were like budding sprouts. And now those sprouts were bursting madly into bloom.

"Whoa…"

Kunon had been engulfed in flames.

It had happened so quickly.





That's the prince's opening move? thought Elia Hesson as she looked on from the audience.

She had come with the Ability Faction representative, Bael Kirkington—the person she liked. Privately, she felt like they were on a date.

But all of a sudden, her faction junior was on fire, and her joyful mood disappeared in a flash. Her excitement went up in smoke as if she was the one being burned.

Incidentally, the other Ability students in their vicinity were sitting a short distance away to give the two of them some privacy. Or well, to give Elia some privacy, at least.

"Judging from his reaction, it seems like Kunon didn't know about the Inferno's special feature." Bael remained calm—he was a serious sort and hadn't been all that excited to begin with.

This was one of the things Elia liked about Bael, but sometimes it depressed her a little. She was right here next to him, and he wasn't paying her any attention at all.

Not that it really mattered.

Bael's watchful gaze was directed at their fire-wreathed junior.

"I'm assuming Kunon thought he could trap the flames in A-ori, starve them of air, and make them go out."

Magical fire didn't require a flammable substance—it didn't need fuel. All it needed was air. Without air, the fire couldn't form.

From the start, fire had no substance. For that reason, it couldn't exist without a favorable environment. And magical fire, aside from a few exceptions, more or less followed the same principles.

"Its special feature… You mean, the way it explodes into bigger flames?"

"Yeah. I don't know who said it, but someone described it as 'sparks that bloom into an inferno.' That phrase spread, and that's how he became known as the Inferno Prince. Apparently, the effect is really difficult to recreate. But that prince is a natural."

"How does it work?"

"Oh, it's—"

Just as Bael was about to explain, the flames surrounding Kunon burst into big flowery shapes—like fireworks—and disappeared.

A huge bubble swelled up with a sloshing sound.

The fire vanished, leaving behind Kunon enclosed in a massive A-ori.

"I see," he said. "So that's the Inferno."

The bubble around Kunon popped, and he laughed, still dripping wet.

It had surprised him a bit, but he had figured it out. He knew now why Gioelion was called the Inferno Prince.

"Consider that a greeting," Gioelion said as countless fire butterflies fluttered around him. "Did you like it?"

"Of course. It was quite fun."

Most likely, he had used a double-layered Ka-shi—one smaller Ka-shi nested inside a larger one.

It was constructed so that as the *exterior* flames flagged, the *interior* Ka-shi flared up. In search of air, the *interior* fire would burst through the weakened areas of the *exterior* one. That was the truth behind the Inferno.

Perhaps it would be easier to conceptualize as one fire emerging from a second fire. If someone didn't know the principle behind the effect, it would probably seem like the flames were suddenly bursting out of control.

"It was so fun, I tried it myself."

First, Kunon had created a large A-ori to protect his body from the fire. Then inside of that, he made a second colder A-ori to balance the temperature. Then he made the *exterior* sphere burst, extinguishing the flames.

"Don't copy me right away like that," said the prince.

"Oh, I've been able to do this sort of thing for a while, so please don't let it get to you."

The technique of enclosing magic within magic was commonly applied in the making of magic tools, so it wasn't a new concept to

Kunon.

During the several months he had holed up in his room developing the Glass Eye, nesting one spell inside another was among the various ideas he had come up with.

In other words, his success was just a matter of his having tried it before.

"Shall I return your salutations now?" asked Kunon.

"Be my guest. But don't expect me to sit back and take it. Your water is terrifying."

"I accepted your sentiments, didn't I?"

"Sorry, but I'm not that brave."

"I see. That's a shame. However"—Kunon raised his cane a few inches—"please accept mine nonetheless."

Then he struck the ground with it.

"Mire."

Squelch.

Ever so slightly, Gioelion's feet began to sink. *This is bad*, he thought. Immediately predicting what was coming next, he tried to get away.

"Mire."

Again, Kunon jabbed his cane into the earth. Gioelion's field of vision dropped with a jerk. Before he knew it, he was ankle-deep in the bog that had formed beneath him.

"Mire."

Another strike of Kunon's cane, and the mud came up to Gioelion's knees. The heavy sludge was so thick it was already impossible to pull out his feet.

"Mire."

The cane hit the ground once more. Gioelion sank in as far as his thighs. The bog had spread. Everywhere he could reach with his hands was swamp.

"…This is what I meant about water…," he muttered.

Water was truly bothersome, Gioelion thought. Even more so where Kunon was involved. It wasn't the big powerful techniques that scared Gioelion; it was the little ones.

Big tricks could often be anticipated because the shift in magic power was similarly large, but that wasn't true for small maneuvers. And when you were as skilled at manipulating magic as Kunon was, you could keep anyone from noticing them.

People said that delicate moves were for the weak and that such techniques weren't enough to clinch victory. But Gioelion knew—those were the conclusions of mediocre sorcerers who had no clue how terrifying the subtlest of moves could be.

The weakest spell could kill a person. Dealing with someone didn't require a ton of firepower. Once a sorcerer understood that, they could see the danger in small tricks.

Gioelion had realized that Kunon wasn't simply standing there, letting himself burn. Even as he watched the younger boy go up in flames, he stayed on alert. He paid close attention so as not to miss the shifting of Kunon's magic. His gut told him he had to.

Gioelion imagined what he would do if he had to face himself in battle. He figured that was a good way to anticipate Kunon, who had a similar way of thinking. And if he was right, that meant Kunon might launch an attack at any time, under any circumstances.

But this—*this* was truly unexpected. Kunon had sent water seeping into the ground at his feet *while* he was surrounded by fire. And that water had reached Gioelion—whose vigilance had not extended to the dirt—before he realized what was going on.

And even if he *had* been paying attention to the ground, he wasn't sure he would have noticed it.

"Mire."

Again, Kunon's cane struck the earth, and Gioelion sank to his waist. And now a slew of A-ori were floating in the air just outside the swarm of fire butterflies surrounding him.

The bog wasn't an attack. The *attack* was whatever was coming next.

"Rain," said Kunon.

Gioelion wasn't sinking anymore. Instead, the surrounding A-ori merged with their neighboring spheres, forming one big dome. And beneath the dome, it started to rain.

This wasn't just any rain but a torrential deluge.

Inside the dome, water accumulated steadily. Buried up to his middle, Gioelion couldn't move. Rain tore through the fire butterflies' wings, putting them out.

And it showed no signs of stopping.

"I expected as much."

In the stands, Eushida from the Rationality Faction was rather impressed with Kunon's magic. When all was said and done, his ability was indisputable.

They were both water users, and having conducted an experiment alongside the boy, Eushida had some understanding of what he could do.

It wasn't his spells that were impressive but rather the way he used them. It was his creativity. That and the control and manipulation required to manifest such results.

"…Hmph. That's nothing. He's just using little tricks."

Watching at Eushida's side, Sandra had only disparaging things to say, but her serious profile told a different story. She hadn't once taken her eyes off the match.

Creating swampland or a localized rainstorm was something any water sorcerer with some amount of skill could easily accomplish. Sandra herself could produce a mudflow big enough to wash away an entire village.

The problem was how much magic power that would consume. Large-scale spells used a lot of it. Typically, if someone was going to do the same thing Kunon had just done, they would need to use a lot more power than he had.

Sorcerers did not have access to limitless amounts of magic power. You were lucky if you could fire off a few big maneuvers in a single

battle, and once a sorcerer ran out of power, they were just a regular tired person.

Kunon was using a frighteningly small amount of power. After all, he was casting the most beginner-level water spells. The bog, the localized storm—they were both likely made from simple A-ori. But for those watching, that was nearly impossible to believe. It had to be a sham.

And yet there it was, happening right in front of them.

Within the confines of the dome, heavy rain continued to fall.

Waist-deep in mud, Gioelion was no longer visible…

A short distance away from Eushida and Sandra, a boy and a girl watched the match. Technically, however, they were both male.

"…Ugh. Oh no…"

Cassis, of the Rationality Faction, was struggling with mixed feelings. Naturally, she had come to support the Imperial Prince in today's duel. So why was she starting to root for Kunon? It had begun the moment the boy was swallowed up in flames.

And yet she was still cheering for Gioelion, too. She detested the thought of that dashing prince having to accept defeat. She wanted him to keep being the prince she admired. But that didn't mean she wanted Kunon to lose…

Her maiden's heart wavered hither and yon.

"You're surprisingly compassionate, aren't you?" said Lulomet, the Rationality Faction representative seated next to Cassis.

"Huh?" she replied, surprised.

"Well, it's only natural that you would have stronger feelings about Kunon, who you've actually interacted with, than a prince you've never spoken to."

"Wh-what?! No way! I can't stand Kunon!"

"Right, of course."

"I mean it! Playboys are the worst!"

"Yes, yes… Oh. Looks like something's happening."

Gioelion's magic power had begun to swell.

“Ah. How pushy of you.”

Just as Kunon muttered those words, steam spewed up into the air. The water sizzled and turned to vapor, as if it was being poured over hot stones.

This was the work of Gioelion’s fire.

Both the rain and the dome evaporated in an instant. Overwhelming firepower had defeated the downpour.

Then there was movement from within the dense plume of steam. At a nice, even pace, Gioelion walked out, his entire body emitting a red-hot glow. It was as if he were made of fire.

“I’m surprised,” said the prince.

As the water vapor cleared, Gioelion’s form slowly returned to its usual color palette.

Most likely, he had broken free from the bog using heat so intense that it not only melted the surrounding earth but also caused all the rain and groundwater to evaporate.

Despite being brutally pelted with rain until only moments ago, Gioelion was now completely dry—if still a little dirty. The ground beneath him bore scorch marks, but it was solid, no longer mud or bog.

“I can’t believe I had to use intermediate magic so soon.”

Ka-negaki was an intermediate-level spell that cloaked its user in flames.

“I didn’t expect you to get out of there using brute force, either.”

Kunon was grinning, but he was even more on guard than before, because the amount of magic power Gioelion was emitting had yet to change.

“Hope I didn’t disappoint you,” said the prince.

“Not at all. You’re going to keep showing me more interesting techniques, right?”

“Of course.” The slightly dirt-stained Gioelion raised his right hand. “I won’t be holding back anymore.”

A bunch of itty-bitty fireballs formed in his upheld hand—and immediately shot forward.

They moved quickly but not shockingly so.

The notable thing about them was the variety of their movement and trajectory. Some flew straight; others took a curved path. While some of the fireballs slowed down, others sped up.

The only common feature they shared was that they were all headed in Kunon's direction. Every one of them was targeting him.

Catching things that flew irregularly was quite difficult. Not to mention, Gioelion continued to release more of them all the while. Already, a swarm of at least one thousand fireballs was approaching Kunon, and— "They're *bees*."

—as they got closer, Kunon realized what they were: small spheres of flame shaped like bees.

Fire bees.

That was why they didn't fly in a straight line. They were imitating the flight patterns of their insect counterparts.

"Bees, huh?" mused Kunon. "I don't think I've ever made one of those."

Pff.

The bee nearest Kunon burst open right in front of him. It didn't hit him, of course.

Pff-pff.

The next one and the one after that met the same fate. Before they could touch him, they bloomed into mini-infernos.

Pff. Pff. Pff-pff-pff-pff. Pff-pff-pff-pff-pff-pff-pff-pff-pff.

"Gosh, there are so many."

Sounding completely unbothered, Kunon safely disposed of the fire bees. To any onlookers, he appeared to do this without so much as lifting a finger.

And then…

"Wha—?!"

…the fire bees stopped appearing, because Gioelion had *dodged*.

"Oh, wow! You noticed that?" said Kunon.

He had used the A-oruvi spell. This was an elementary bit of magic that shot water in a straight line. Except this version had been compressed into such a fine jet that it could not be seen. And it carried a *lot* of force.

He had used it to eliminate the fire bees one at a time, then managed to let off a single shot toward Gioelion himself.

On top of being invisible, the beginner spell wasn't easy to sense because it didn't use much power. The exploding bees also worked as a visual distraction. The jets might not be capable of boring into metal or stone, but they were powerful enough to pierce human flesh.

It was just one such shot, but Gioelion had noticed. Kunon had been expecting to land a hit while his opponent was preoccupied with attacking. After all, his A-oruvi was invisible and *fast*.

But Gioelion dodged it. Kunon was delighted.

There was a pause in the action as the two of them locked eyes.

"I warned you, Kunon. I told you I wouldn't hold back."

"…Ah."

The fire bees were a smoke screen. It wasn't only Kunon who had made a move while his opponent was distracted.

"Burn."

The ground had begun to turn a deep red, with Gioelion at its center.

This was an intermediate spell called Ka-yuida.

The red ground shook.

Within seconds, flames erupted, turning the entire area into a field of fire.

The blaze spread wildly, a blooming crimson inferno.

"That was a pretty close call…"

After making a hasty escape, Kunon felt fear wash over him.

Because he couldn't see, he preferred forms of locomotion that didn't depend on his own legs. He had made it a firm rule never to rely on such movements while fighting.

And Gioelion had just exploited that weakness without mercy.

Not only that but he'd used the ground in his attack, as if repaying Kunon for his bog.

No holding back.

The other boy hadn't been lying.

Kunon's joy only grew.

"Oh, I'm sorry if I appeared haughty just now. I didn't have much time to react."

Lying back in an arrogant posture, Kunon flew atop an A-ori over the sea of flames.

Gioelion looked up at him and said, "Don't worry about it. I'll drag you back down soon enough."

"He's being quite ruthless," murmured Shilto Lockson, the Harmony Faction's representative.

The heat from the inferno spreading around the arena could be felt even in the stands.

Right now, Kunon soared through the air looking full of himself, while Gioelion stood calmly at the center of the fiery ring.

Now the ground was Gioelion's domain. If Kunon fell, it was game over. He had to stay airborne for the rest of the match.

"This makes things a bit tricky for Kunon."

All his spells were for beginners. He probably wouldn't be able to extinguish an intermediate spell like Ka-yuida; it was on a whole other level in terms of requisite power.

No matter how deftly one wielded them, beginner spells were still beginner spells. They wouldn't hold up in a pure contest of force.

While protecting himself, Kunon would also have to defend and maintain his means of getting around. And naturally, he couldn't just stick to defense. Under those circumstances, he would also have to launch an attack. And against Gioelion, no less.

The sphere Kunon was riding used an A-ori spell. Fire would likely affect it, which meant just keeping it intact would be a challenge.

Although really, he was finished from the moment the ground was set on fire.

Flying wasn't normal for a water sorcerer. He had escaped one danger, but how would he do against the next? Given the current conditions of the match, it looked like the end was nigh.

"My money is on the Inferno Prince," said the person next to Shilto. This was Kunon's classmate, Hank Beat.

He was a fire user, too, so he understood. Being a fire sorcerer didn't make one's body resistant to fire. They felt the heat like anyone else, and if they slipped up in their handling, their own magic could scald or burn them.

Despite this, Gioelion stood amid the sea of flames with a look of utter composure. He had to be manipulating his magic somehow to block out the heat—and that was no small achievement.

The Inferno Prince.

As his nickname suggested, he was a force to be reckoned with.

Not far from Hank and Shilto, another pair in the audience were watching the match with smiles on their faces.

"Master Gio looks like he's having fun," said Garthries Gadanthus.

"He really does," agreed Ilhi Bolyle.

The two of them were Gioelion's friends and his bodyguards.

The title "imperial prince" might conjure up images of a lavish, luxurious lifestyle, but the reality was quite different. Gioelion intentionally lived a rather austere life. Though he was provided things of the finest quality, he never demanded more. Nor did he actively seek pleasure for himself.

His thirst for knowledge ran deep, but he never had enough time to satisfy it. Day in and day out, Gioelion did nothing but devote himself to his studies, leaving hardly any time to spend as he liked.

The resentment and frustration piling up inside him was like a ticking time bomb. Garth and Ilhi, always at his side, had worried about it for some time.

But now…he seemed to be enjoying himself, firing off spells without hesitation or restraint. And his opponent was up to the challenge.

Gioelion appeared to be having fun. He looked happy—truly *happy*.

However…

"They're reaching the end," observed Ilhi.

Why was it that good times always slipped by so quickly?

By their nature, magic duels were difficult to draw out. Even a single small maneuver could decide the match, not to mention a larger strike. Opponents were constantly hitting each other with lethal blows. The fight could be over in an instant.

The duel between Kunon and Gioelion hadn't been going on for very long, and yet for sorcerers, this was already a protracted battle. The Ka-yuida spell Gioelion had cast used a considerable amount of power. It wasn't meant to be maintained for an extended period.

In other words…

"Yeah. It won't be long now," agreed Garth.

…Gioelion had set the stage for the finale.

Independent of the spectators' musings, both Kunon and Gioelion had also concluded that their duel would soon come to an end.

The time for observing and testing the waters was over. All that remained was matching each other blow for blow.

"I'm coming for you, Kunon!" Gioelion roared, naked emotion in his voice.

Two massive fireballs appeared, each about as tall as Kunon. Furthermore, both spheres were cloaked in countless fire butterflies.

It was a tremendously advanced spell. Exactly how much power was Gioelion generating and controlling in that moment? Was there anyone in the entire Advanced class who could do the same? His skill and mental fortitude were off the charts.

And this merciless attack was aimed and fired directly at Kunon.

"Right, time to get serious." Kunon's smile vanished.

These fireballs were the type that could home in on their target. Personally controlled by Gioelion, they would probably chase Kunon anywhere he went.

The flames were extremely hot, and someone like Kunon, who could only use beginner spells, would struggle to deal with them.

The difference in their power levels was simply too great and the magic in these fireballs too strong. Half-hearted attempts to put them out with water would be pointless.

Kunon no longer had time to think. Even he had no idea what he would do next.

Without the chance to strategize or come up with countermeasures, he ended up moving on pure instinct and intuition. Split-second decisions were his only option. Anything else would be too little, too late.

The fireballs were almost on top of him.

Surrounding himself with a slew of A-ori, Kunon sent the chair-shaped one below him flying at top speed.

"Ah! No…!"

Preoccupied with dodging, he noticed too late.

All of a sudden another fireball rocketed up *from beneath him*, blocking Kunon's flight path.

It had emerged from the sea of flames.

Gioelion still had time to release additional attacks? How *delightful*. Even at such a crucial moment, Kunon couldn't suppress his joy.

There was no escaping this time.

Shielding his face with both arms, Kunon accelerated right into the flames. His version of flight followed a predetermined route drawn with magic power, which meant sudden changes in direction were impossible.

And so all he could do was increase his speed and charge through the fireball without stopping. That and enclose himself in a spur-of-the-moment A-ori.

Somehow, that strategy worked. He survived with only minor burns to his skin, some holes in his clothes, and a light singe to his

hair.

It was hot. Kunon was in pain. But he still had his presence of mind.

He hadn't used up his magic yet, and he was still brimming with the will to fight. And in that case, his current condition was no problem.

As soon as he burst out of the fireball, he used water to cool himself down.

The A-ori he had been riding, however, had evaporated, and Kunon was hurtling through the air.

Hot on his trail, the butterfly-covered fireballs gave chase.

"…!"

Gioelion had taken damage, too.

While dodging earlier, Kunon had fired some invisible A-oruvi at his opponent. Just one jet—out of thirty-seven shot in a semi-radial pattern—had hit Gioelion, piercing his right shoulder.

The large number of projectiles had been fired indiscriminately in only a general direction, and Gioelion had failed to dodge one.

But Kunon couldn't blame him. He was already controlling three fireballs, maintaining the sea of fire, and keeping his own body from being burned.

He could only maintain all of that because he was a prodigy. But no matter how much of a prodigy he was…talent had its limits.

It was unfair to expect Gioelion to do all of that *and* dodge Kunon's attacks—invisible ones, no less. He'd had his hands full just evading the other thirty-six.

At the start, the duel had been a deadlock.

Now, somehow, it had become a battle of reflexes.

"…!"

Kunon screamed without making a sound. He fought to stay conscious and control his breathing so he wouldn't inhale any hot air.

His scream was meant to pump himself up as his body whirled through the air in all directions.

His usual chair-shaped A-ori wasn't capable of quick turns, so Kunon had no choice but to fly using another method. He kept creating highly elastic A-ori and placing them in his current path. Their repellent force would then send him rebounding off in another direction. It wasn't a very sophisticated solution, but it kept him aloft.

Kunon had long since lost the ability to tell which way was up. He was merely ricocheting around, his body spinning, limbs akimbo. He looked like a leaf at the mercy of a strong wind.

The fireballs had grazed him numerous times.

Though none of the hits had been direct so far, it seemed like they made contact more than half the time. He was managing to avoid the spheres themselves, but the shrouds of butterflies were a different matter.

He had cast off his scalding eye mask, his clothes were burnt, and his legs ached terribly.

Still, Kunon continued to fly. He kept moving and firing invisible water jets.

"…! …!"

Gioelion, also worn out and battered, let out a voiceless scream of his own.

He had lost track of how many of Kunon's projectiles he had been unable to dodge.

The pain was intense. He was bleeding, and it was more than a little scratch. And yet he still hadn't given up.

Rather than fading, his control seemed to be getting more and more precise.

He was nearly at his limit. No, he had probably already surpassed it.

Nevertheless…

Both Kunon and Gioelion were thinking the exact same thing: *I wish this match could last forever*.

And then it was over.

◆

"That was really dangerous, you know."

"Very dangerous indeed."

Those were the words that greeted Kunon when he regained consciousness.

He was in a place he knew well—the Saint's classroom. He opened his eyes, and just as he had once before, he found himself lying in a bed there.

Professor Sureyya, a light magic user, and Reyes, the room's current owner, were seated at a table. When they saw Kunon sit up, they immediately began scolding him.

"……"

Kunon understood: The duel was over.

Sometime in the middle of his fight with Gioelion, Kunon had fainted.

But he remembered. He had given it everything he had. He had fought seriously, freely, and with the intent to kill. He wanted to believe the same was true for his opponent.

And Kunon hoped he had lived up to the prince's expectations—that the other boy had never once found their match tedious, that he had commanded his attention throughout, leaving no room for superfluous thoughts.

He could still feel the fatigue from using too much magic power, though his body was free from pain and injury. He almost certainly had the two light sorcerers in front of him, and their healing magic, to thank for that. He was truly grateful.

And according to them, he'd been in real danger. He must have been in quite bad shape. That sent a spike of concern through him.

"How is he? Is Gioelion okay?"

"Why don't you worry about yourself first?" Reyes said, and then it hit him.

Sure enough, he was naked. This time, it was because his clothes had been completely burned away.

Slowly, with dignity, Kunon covered his chest and asked again, "What happened to Gioelion?"

"There's only one bed here, so he was treated in another room."

"That boy was in bad shape, too."

The two ladies gave Kunon a rough summary.

Apparently, he and his opponent had been in much worse shape than he'd imagined.

Toward the end, Kunon had been hit by one of Gioelion's fireballs. The second and third followed, along with the remaining butterflies, sending him plummeting into the sea of flames while already on fire.

On the other side, Gioelion suffered massive blood loss from being hit by too many A-oruvi. In addition, the very last water jet ran straight through his right eye, mortally wounding him.

But even then, it seemed, Gioelion hadn't lost control of his magic. His force of will was extraordinary.

"What?! Mortally wounded?!"

Kunon was shocked by what he learned.

He had been utterly immersed in their duel. As he tried to avoid the fireballs, Kunon had shot off jet after jet, just in case. There hadn't been time to check if any of his attacks had hit.

If his opponent was shot down, the fire spells would stop. If they didn't stop, then…

Following that logic, he had continued to shoot. And Gioelion's magic hadn't deviated at all, so Kunon had been under the impression that his attacks had missed. After all, the impact and ensuing pain should have interfered with Gioelion's control.

But as it turned out, Kunon had actually landed quite a lot of hits.

"Your injuries were also plenty fatal. You were both in a lot of danger."

His body was completely healed now, but right after the duel, almost every inch of Kunon had been covered in burns. Without help, he would have died.

And that went for Gioelion, too, of course. His and Kunon's wounds had been severe.

The outcome of the match, no matter how one looked at it, was a tie.

"Enough about me! How is he?!"

Right now, Kunon was alive and speaking. He was safe. So what about his opponent?

"He's been healed, so don't worry. Just a short while ago, his friend came by to say the prince was conscious and they would be taking him home."

Relief washed over Kunon. It was true that he had fought with the intent to kill. But he couldn't possibly afford to let Gioelion die.

Sure, his opponent was a powerful and important prince, but even on an individual level, the idea was unthinkable. He and Gioelion were like peas in a pod. Such a person was a rare find, and Kunon never wanted to lose him.

"Your change of clothes will arrive soon, so please wait a bit longer."

This was just like his match with Soff Cricket not long ago. He'd run into the same circumstances and followed the same course of events.

"Why don't you come over here instead of sitting there, hiding your chest? I'll make you some herbal tea."

"Are you sure? I'm indecent…"

"I'm accustomed to seeing children's bodies, and I've seen yours once before already. It's not an issue."

Well then, Kunon thought, *I suppose it's fine.*

"Are you all right with that, Professor Sureyya?"

"Huh? Oh yes, I prefer big brawny types, so I don't think of you that way."

Then I suppose it's fine, he thought again and headed toward the table.





Interlude 1
Letter

To my beloved fiancée,

The first signs of spring have begun to appear. How do they find you?

The cold days persist, but I'm sure they will soon fade.

I miss your warm, kind smile.

Do you have any news to share?

I, quite fortunately, have had the opportunity to participate in magic duels with two different men.

The first was a teacher.

Apparently, magic school professors don't usually duel with students.

It was truly a rare and valuable experience.

I'll save the details for now, as it would take dozens of pages to summarize the events, my thoughts, and the strategies used, even in brief.

My professor was amazing. He was so strong.

He left me in tatters, unclothed, and sent me to bed.

The second was another student, one year my senior.

I can't write about him in detail because he is a person of very high status, but I was surprised by how well we get along. It was hard to believe we had never met before.

Is it our values that align? Our ways of thinking?

He's such an incredible, fascinating person.

He was unbelievably intense.

Typically, he comes across as calm and levelheaded, but his magic was all passion.

It set my heart ablaze.

I'm sure he felt the same.

Yet again, I was run completely ragged, stripped bare, and sent to bed.

It's nice to lose, don't you think? You learn so much that way.

Once more I was reminded of the profound depths of magic.

All sorts of ideas came to me as a result of these two duels.

I have not developed many spells for the sake of combat. I have those which can be used in a fight, but none which were designed for the purpose.

Fighting techniques were a discipline I had left almost entirely unexplored. My parents forbade my learning it, so I put off studying the subject.

But knowing how to attack means understanding how to fight in a way that doesn't cause more harm than necessary. Being strong means having the ability to keep one's power in check.

When I think about it like that, I feel that combat is another essential area of knowledge.

I think I'd like to start studying it in earnest.

There are so many more things I still want to discuss with my senior.

How is your knighthood training going, Your Highness?

You haven't been hurt, have you?

I was injured in the matches I mentioned, but there are healing sorcerers here who have helped me a great deal.

Truthfully, I would prefer that you never have to suffer, but I believe injuries are part of the occupational hazard of being a knight.

The magic tool I wrote about in my last letter looks like it will come to fruition not too long from now.

As soon as it's done, I'll send it to you, with every last bit of my affection poured into it.

Please accept it as a charm for your protection.

Spring is on its way.

I'll look around for your favorite seasonal flowers.

Though I cannot see, I'll imagine they're you as I sit beside them.

Waiting for the day we meet again with eternal love,

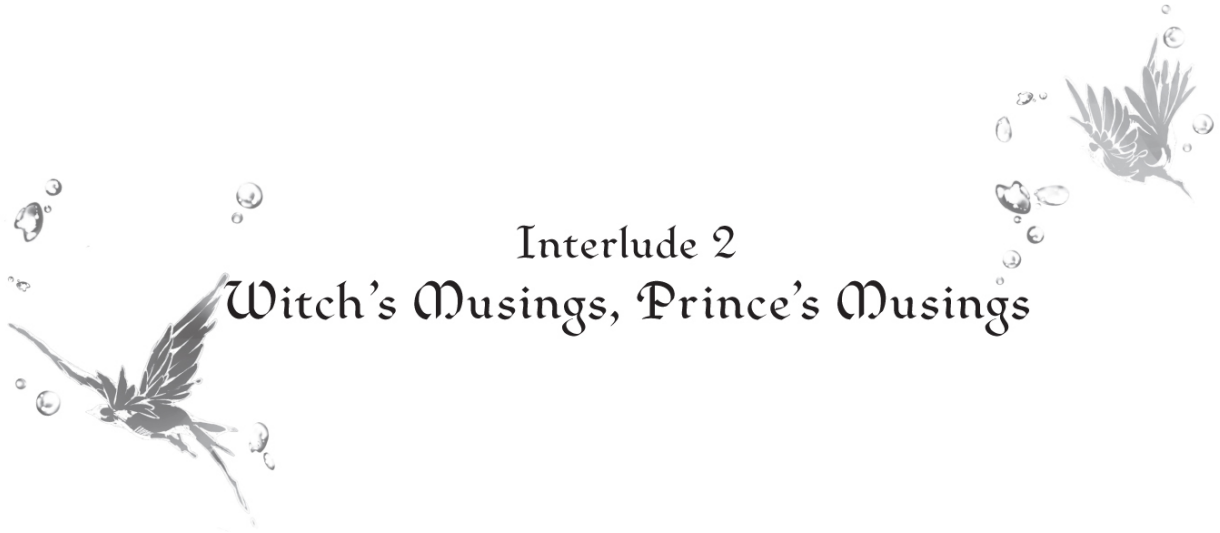
Kunon Gurion

PS

My maid recently asked me, "What do you think about two men being together?"

I don't know what she meant, and I am somewhat terrified.

Do you have any clue what she was getting at, Your Highness?



Interlude 2
Witch's Musings, Prince's Musings

It was an entertaining duel. The kind of excellent match rarely seen in recent years.

They hadn't planned it that way. With no organized strategy whatsoever, both sides had simply determined how best to respond in the moment.

That sort of thing was interesting, because sometimes, a spur-of-the-moment idea was better than carefully laid plans.

The combatants were close in ability, too, which only helped, as did their unpolished skills. That meant they both had fewer trump cards to play.

Duels between sorcerers tended to be decided by big, bold moves—the kind of powerful maneuvers that could force an opponent into submission. Matches like that made for a good show, but they weren't that noteworthy. This match had been different.

Another interesting aspect was the water sorcerer's flight. He soared freely through the air as he escaped his opponent's fireballs. And even as he fled, every so often, he would fire off a glistening jet of water. This attack was probably similar to a light sorcerer's Ra-sera.

As water flew through the sky, fire dominated the ground.

The fire sorcerer's ability to control his magic could put a teacher to shame. Despite being pelted with water jets, he had the mental fortitude to continue controlling his spells, even while injured. It was extraordinary.

The water jets weren't flashy, but they dealt a lot of damage. They fell down on him like rain. Avoiding all of them while handling his own magic was impossible. He was dodging anything aimed at his vital areas, but the volume of injuries was steadily increasing.

"About now, I think," murmured the witch from within her mysterious shadow box.

Not long afterward, one of the water sorcerer's attacks pierced the fire user's right eye.

The witch let out a low hum. That attack had almost hit him right between the eyebrows, but he moved just in time. That was excellent. It showed his unwillingness to give up the fight even under extreme circumstances.

She could feel his royal pride, the tenacity of a prince for whom defeat was not an option.

That was a fatal injury, however. He'd probably die if the duel wasn't stopped soon.

As she thought that, a fireball caught up to the airborne water sorcerer. His burning form fell from the sky.

That one was a goner, too. This would be the end.

"Both sides needed more time."

Grinning, she waved a finger.

Suddenly, the young magic users below her were ensconced in black boxes. Then the battered, beaten boys appeared right in front of the witch.

She had created a link between the shadow boxes and warped the boys to her.

"…Oh? They're already dead."

Both of their vital signs had just faded away. Apparently, she hadn't been quick enough with her intervention.

The water sorcerer's burns were severe, but he seemed to have broken his neck as well when he fell.

The fire user had been done in by that jet of water to his right eye. What's more, his entire body was riddled with holes, and he was bleeding profusely. Even if his eye hadn't been hit, he might not have made it.

"Bwa-ha-ha," the witch cackled gleefully.

Countless times, she'd said, "Even if they die, I'll heal them." But it had been a long time since she'd had to deliver on that promise.

She was having a lot of fun. In recent years, youngsters so obsessed with magic that they dared to fight this hard were few and far between.

"This should do it."

The witch cast a spell, and both boys' heartbeats returned. As if time had been reversed, the two young sorcerers started to breathe once more.

She cast a calm over both of their minds, placed them back in black boxes, and this time, sent them off to the sick ward.

The fun was over. She had come to watch on a whim and ended up enjoying herself more than anticipated. At the moment, she was satisfied. She had high hopes for these boys and their future growth.

Then the witch—Gray Rouva—vanished into thin air.

◆

"……"

As soon as Gioelion awoke, he checked his right eye.

It was healed. He could see without issue and had no discomfort.

That's a relief, he thought.

He hadn’t cared what happened to him. He had consented even to the possibility of death. But his relatives hadn’t, and there was a chance they would have made a huge fuss.

Being an imperial prince came with a lot of trouble. He didn’t want to inconvenience Kunon, who had gone along with Gioelion’s selfish wishes, any more than he already had.

That was the reason for his relief. Without visible injuries or lasting scars, it would be as though nothing had happened.

“Oh, you’re awake?”

“Are you feeling unwell?”

He was probably in the infirmary.

Looking around, he saw that Garthries and Ilhi were with him. They were sitting around a table with a middle-aged woman—most likely a teacher capable of healing magic.

“Yeah, I feel fine… Where is Kunon?”

Gioelion glanced at the bed next to his, but it was empty. It appeared Kunon was not in the room.

“He was transferred to the Saint’s lab. Apparently, he’ll be treated there.”

“I see. As long as he’s safe.”

Getting out of bed, Gioelion changed into the clothes prepared for him, likely the work of his guards. His old ones must have been full of holes and covered in blood, no longer suitable to wear.

“Master Gio.” Ilhi called his name, and Gioelion shifted his gaze to her. “Did you have fun?”

What a thing to ask.

With a snort of laughter, Gioelion replied, “Of course. Did I look bored?”

“Not at all.” Ilhi shook her head. “You seemed happier than ever before. Honestly, I was jealous.”

“Don’t be. Even if I usually look uninterested, I’m enjoying myself in my own way… Let’s head home.”

His body was a little sluggish. He had used too much magic and probably lost too much blood. But on the inside, he felt as light as a

breeze.

The duel had been a lot of fun.

For the first time in ages, he'd been able to fight with everything he had. No restraint, no discretion—just pure, raw power. And his opponent had responded in kind.

There was someone his age he couldn't defeat even with all his might. That made him feel amazing.

"Then I'll go check on Mr. Kunon and let the others know we're leaving. Master Gio is in your care, Garth."

After seeing Ilhi off and thanking the teacher, Gioelion and Garthries left the infirmary.

"Hey, Garth?" asked the prince.

"What?"

"Does Kunon have a fiancée?"

"Huh…? I mean, I dunno. He's always flirting with women, so I suppose not. I doubt a noble would publicly make passes at other women if he were engaged."

"I see… Aurora needs a husband. What do you think?"

"Are you trying to use your relatives to make him a part of your family? I don't think he has a fiancée, but I doubt Hughlia would hand over such a valuable sorcerer to another nation."

"…You're right. Sorry for talking nonsense. It must be the blood loss."

"You enjoyed yourself that much?"

"Yes. If I or Kunon were a girl…I don't think I could let him go."

Someday, he wanted a rematch. Despite the excruciating pain, Gioelion was already thinking of when he could repeat the experience.

What *was* this fixation of his? Gioelion couldn't answer that question, either. Perhaps if he and Kunon hadn't been of the same sex, he would have called this emotion "love." That was how much the other boy occupied his thoughts.

"I see. Good thing you're both boys."

"No kidding."

Fellow sorcerers from different countries and both members of the aristocracy.

If they were a boy and a girl in a relationship, there would be no end of trouble.





Chapter 2
The Matter of Credits

"Oh."

It hit Kunon as he was busy observing a large tomato. Half of his first year at magic school had already passed.

"With this, I'll have satisfied my credit requirement," said the Saint.

Had Kunon come to the realization on his own, or had her words brought it on?

He was visiting her room for lunch. Of course, he had work to check on as well. They were making small talk when it happened.

"Selective breeding is so complex," said the Saint. "That tomato, for example, is undeniably sweet. It thrills me so much to think about publicizing this that I can't sleep."

She carried on discussing the big tomato—her pride and joy—but all Kunon could think about was his own credit status. Exactly how many had he currently earned?

Advanced class students had to rack up ten credits each year. If they failed to do so, they would be demoted to Second Level.

Kunon hadn't forgotten about the "magic-containing box" he was planning to develop. That box was the reason he'd been determined to earn all ten credits in only half a year. But his sense of times and dates was lacking. Truthfully, he had worked these first six months without really pacing himself.

Plus, meeting Gioelion had thrown him off course a bit. He hadn't expected it, and spending time with him had been so much fun that he'd ended up doing it a lot more than intended. Not that he regretted it.

Apparently, the Saint had already earned all her credits by cultivating and breeding various vegetables and medicinal herbs. It seemed Kunon hadn't simply been imagining the increasing number of potted plants in her lab.

"By the way, how many credits do you have, Kunon?" asked Hank. "Riyah and I each have around half."

It so happened that their classmates Riyah Houghs and Hank Beat were also in Reyes's room that day.

Occasionally, they would all meet up there for lunch. It had become something of a standing appointment for the present first-year students in the Advanced class. They would catch one another up on recent news, chat, and exchange advice.

Though their opportunities to collaborate had markedly decreased after they each joined different factions, they continued to socialize as before.

"I'm…not sure," Kunon replied. "I definitely received some letters, though."

Proof of a student's credits was sent via letter. One could have them delivered to their labs or their home address. Kunon had arranged to have his sent to his laboratory, and he had already received a few.

He remembered getting them. And if memory served, he had crammed them into his desk drawer—exactly as they came, without

even opening them.

The letters usually arrived while he was engrossed in drawing up a report, or copying his notes, or reading a book. Consequently, he had accepted them without thinking and stowed them away somewhere.

Kunon had certainly done various things in the past six months with the aim of earning credits. Some of those had definitely been successful or, at the very least, had some value. And yet here he was, still unaware of the results.

"I'll go check right now."

Kunon mentally went over all the things he'd done that he could remember. He thought it unlikely that he had earned all ten credits already.

Starting right then, he resolved to prioritize credits so he could get to work on his magic-containing box as soon as possible.

"Oh, there's actually something I wanted to ask you about, Kunon."

"Huh?"

Kunon had finished reviewing the growing conditions of the sacred herb, the whole reason he'd come to Reyes's room. Now he was anxious about his credits and ready to return to his own lab. But Hank had spoken up, delaying his departure.

"Listen, you were developing a box that dehydrates objects, right? I was wondering how that was going."

"It's more or less done. Still in the testing stage, though."

He was developing both a box that removed moisture from objects and a box that hermetically sealed them. They were intended to store medicine made from the sacred herb shi-shilla, and he had already succeeded in making them.

At present, they were being tested to see how well they could stand up in various situations. How long could they be used, and could they work in any environment? How potent were their effects? That sort of thing.

Once improvements and reinforcements were made, the boxes would finally be complete.

They were based on magical storage boxes, but could their contents be sufficiently preserved? Time was needed to investigate. In short, they were currently observing deterioration over time. They needed to investigate both the condition of the boxes and that of their contents.

"After our bacon experiments," said Hank, "I got into making dried meat. Do you think I could use one of those boxes to store jerky?"

"Oh?! You're still making bacon just for me?!"

"I am, but it's not just for you. It's pretty popular. People keep telling me I could turn it into a business and that they'd be happy to invest."

"I'll invest, too!"

"Don't. I'm a sorcerer in the Advanced class. I can't just become a processed meat seller."

Kunon didn't agree, but he understood Hank's point.

Sorcerers were a valuable resource. Graduates of the Advanced class were considered especially brilliant. It was unheard of for a sorcerer of that level to specialize in something like processed meat. Many would undoubtedly consider it a waste.

"Couldn't you just do it on the side?" Kunon asked.

"Hmm?"

"You could just run a business on the side. I don't see a problem with that."

"Ah… Got it. So that's something people do, huh?"

Moonlighting wasn't uncommon in aristocratic circles, but Hank, who came from a humble background, apparently saw "owning a business" as synonymous with "full-time employment."

After giving Hank a little advice, Kunon eft the Saint's classroom.

"Hmm…"

Back in his lab, Kunon began opening the letters he'd received from the school and reviewing their contents.

There were cards inside, each representing one credit earned. They were inscribed with Kunon's name and a brief description of the associated achievement along with the school seal.

Kunon lined the cards up on his desk.

For the report on Riyah Houghs's flight experiment: one card.

For jointly experimenting with Reyes Saint-Lance on the cultivation of sacred herbs: two cards.

For collaborative underwater experiments conducted with Eushida Fai and several others: one card.

For a water magic–based flying method: one card.

That was it. Five in total.

"Hmm…"

He would probably earn a credit for the Medicine Boxes he'd developed with Bael, the Ability Faction representative, and Genevis and another one for the shi-shilla medicine.

Those two were still in the testing stage. They couldn't be submitted yet, so they weren't included in his current count.

If he added those…

"Seven or eight, I guess?"

In that case, he needed three more.

What should I do?

"…Maybe I'll discuss the matter with Professor Satori."

Kunon was pretty sure he'd been told that assisting a teacher could earn one credits, too.

He didn't have any ideas that would result in a quick turnaround, so it was probably a good idea to consult his idol. He could talk to Jenié, too. He wanted to see her face. Not that he could actually see it, of course.

"All right."

Having decided on a course of action, Kunon stood up.

"Credits, eh? I don't think you need to panic just yet."

Kunon wasted no time, heading directly to Satori's office.

She appeared to be in the middle of experimenting with aquatic plants. Only half listening to Kunon's request, she was observing the contents of a tank of water, busily jotting down notes.

"There's something I want to do, but it will probably take a lot of time," said Kunon. "So I made it my goal to complete my credits in the first half of the year."

"You're saying you want to dedicate the remaining six months to this thing you have in mind?"

"That's right. So I need about three more credits… By the way, what is this experiment you're working on? It fascinates me as much as you do, Professor."

It was not the subject at hand, and Kunon had been telling himself over and over not to ask about it. But in the end, he couldn't hold back. How could he? This was an experiment conducted by the world-renowned water sorcerer Satori Glücke. Of course he was interested.

"Oh, this thing? It's a water-dancing bug. I'm studying its ecology."

"A water-dancing bug?"

Kunon had never heard of such a thing. He couldn't recall seeing it in any of the many, many plant and animal reference books he had read.

"It's not surprising you haven't heard of it. It's an obscure insect I had sent here from far away."

"Insect? That's an insect?" Kunon was drawn to Satori's side like a moth to a flame. "…Really?"

Even up close, it just looked like grass floating on the surface of the tank's water. The grass was a vivid green, unusual this early in the year. Or that was how it appeared to his Glass Eye, at any rate.

"Try looking at it from the side, not from above," said Satori.

Look at its roots, in other words.

Kunon bent down a little and peered into the tank from the side.

"Oh, I see."

There were no roots. Instead, there were six thin legs similar to those of a stick insect.

As Kunon watched, Satori nudged the water-dancing bug with the tip of her pen. When she did, its long, slender legs paddled calmly through the water. Its pace was slow, but it was swimming.

It really was an insect after all.

"Wow… Is it mimetic?" he asked.

"So it would seem. I've heard the grasslike part changes color depending on its environment, which could be considered a form of mimesis. And the interesting thing about this critter, you see, is that it feeds on impurities in the water."

Impurities, huh?

Regular water contained all sorts of substances. A single mouthful could taste and smell completely different depending on where it came from.

"Do you understand what that means? Jenié said she didn't."

"Hmm. If it eats impurities…then it's an organism that purifies water?"

"Exactly. Hey, Jenié—your student is clever, eh?"

Jenié, who was quietly writing something at her desk, pretended not to hear Satori's snide comments.

"Insects are highly adaptable," she continued. "I want to test whether I can create a water-dancing bug that feeds on toxins mixed into water by slowly introducing it to such substances. Contaminated water… You know, like a well that's been laced with poison. If these insects were released into that well, perhaps the water could be made safe for people to drink. That's the idea."

It was a fascinating experiment.

Kunon had known it would be even before he asked. And he'd been right.

"Do you think it would be possible to make some sort of antidote while you're at it? If it's able to acclimate to various poisons, perhaps you could extract that quality."

"Hmph. There's such a thing as being *too* clever, you know."

Kunon had gotten totally swept up in Satori's experiment, but now he had to put that topic aside.

"Credits, eh? You could earn a few by helping me, but no more than one every two weeks. That's the rule."

Taking a break, Satori moved to sit at a table with Kunon.

"In other words," he said, "if I assist you for two weeks, you'll give me one credit."

"I'm game. I'll work you hard, of course. But one credit in two weeks isn't very efficient for an Advanced class student, right? You'd probably rather get them without expending so much effort. I was like that once, too."

Kunon recalled Eushida saying something similar. She had invited him to participate in her experiment on breathing underwater, saying she wanted some easy credits.

But well…once they started, it snowballed into a much larger experiment and nearly became an international incident. It had been fun in its own way, though.

"I am genuinely interested in helping you, Professor."

Kunon honestly didn't mind getting one credit for two weeks of work. If he helped Satori, he could ask her about all sorts of topics. That kind of valuable experience was worth a lot more than credits. He would even pay money for the opportunity.

But at the moment, it seemed impractical.

Kunon had spoken to Bael, the Ability Faction representative, regarding his plans. They hadn't hammered out the details, but Bael also meant to earn all ten of his credits in six months.

One credit in two weeks… It would take over a month to earn three—too much time.

"I suppose the ideal situation would be to conduct some kind of experiment concurrently over the two weeks I assist you," he said.

That would mean two credits in two weeks. Satori probably wouldn't expect her helper to be in her office around the clock. A simple experiment should be doable in his free time.

"As long as you aren't overextending yourself, I don't mind," she said. "The problem will be choosing what to do. I don't intend to give you tons of free time, you know. I'll be putting you to work properly. So do you have any ideas for this concurrent experiment?"

As it happened, when he heard about the water-dancing bug, an idea had begun to form in Kunon's head.

"I'm still working it out, but I was thinking of something to do with hydroponics."

In Kunon's mind, two things were overlapping beautifully: the Saint's plants he'd observed not long ago and the characteristics of the water-dancing bug he'd just learned about.

According to Reyes, it was relatively easy to earn credits for projects related to plant cultivation and breeding. If so, surely the same would hold true for hydroponics.

Putting things that way was a bit misleading, however. It wasn't that earning credits was easy but that Reyes was unusually talented at those subjects. The key was that they were things she was suited to, that she was good at.

"Growing crops or cultivating a field wouldn't require me to be there all the time. And if it goes well, it would benefit society, too."

Kunon didn't think Reyes had tried her hand at hydroponics yet.

Having her assistance would be reassuring, considering her recent agricultural achievements. And he suspected she was likely to say yes to such a proposition.

Hydroponics was a type of agriculture, after all. She was bound to be interested in it.

The day after Kunon spoke to Satori, he went to the Saint's lab to discuss conducting a joint experiment involving hydroponic cultivation.

He'd rushed through his flirtatious greetings, such as "The silver hair on your left temple is especially beautiful today," and cut right to the point.

"As expected, you see things differently, Kunon," Reyes replied.

"You think so? Well, I can't actually see, of course."

"I'm also interested in hydroponics. However, since I have already completed my credits, I was thinking of trying that after advancing to the next year. I have other experiments I want to do at the moment, and I think it might be premature to expand my efforts that far."

Oh, right.

The Saint had already met the requirements for advancement. In other words, she had come out ahead in the race to earn credits. She was the winner. She was free to do as she liked now. Kunon had never envied someone so much.

"I want credits, too," he said. "And I don't have time for an experiment that calls for constant supervision."

"So that's why you set your sights on agriculture."

All he'd have to do was prepare a growing environment and plant the seeds. Then he'd simply observe carefully and wait for the plants to grow. He wouldn't have to monitor things every second of the day. He'd only need to make note of the most important stages.

"Oh, by the way, Miss Reyes, I had the wrong image of hydroponics in my head, but you know what it is, don't you?"

The day before, Kunon had done some research on the subject. Much to his surprise, it turned out to be vastly different from how he had imagined it.

"Yes, I do. People tend to think of things like paddy fields, but that's something else entirely."

Indeed, hydroponics and paddy fields were distinct subjects. Kunon had investigated the matter in order to negotiate with the Saint, and he'd been shocked by how totally incorrect his initial assumptions were.

Simply put, hydroponics was a type of cultivation method that did not involve soil. Instead, plants were grown solely from the nutrients in water, without being rooted in the earth.

Kunon had indeed assumed that hydroponics meant things like paddy fields, where seedlings were planted in soil filled with water.

As long as he could earn some credits, however, he didn't really care which it was.

"Are you sure you don't want to participate?" he asked. "I won't pester you about it if you truly aren't interested."

"Allow me to be frank," Reyes said, puffing out her chest. "I've been highly interested and eager from the start."

Thus began their joint experiment in hydroponic cultivation.

"This is Professor Keevan. He specializes in researching agricultural subjects."

Before the experiment got underway, Reyes brought Kunon to a particular teacher's office to discuss hydroponics with someone knowledgeable in the subject.

That someone was Keevan Brid.

He was a large, solidly built man of thirty-five with a long, unkempt beard. He wore plain clothes suited for manual labor, and his disheveled dress, wild hair, and beard made him seem like a farmer at first glance.

However, his intelligent auburn eyes made it clear he was no country bumpkin.

Just like Reyes's classroom, his office was home to a great number of potted plants. The faint scent of flowers mingled in the air with the strong aroma of greenery. The room smelled like life.

"How do you do? I'm Kunon."

"Oh, I know who you are," the professor answered in a calm, deep voice. "I'm Keevan Brid. Nice to meet you."

If the man tidied up his appearance, Kunon was sure he would make quite the gentleman.

Reyes explained briefly that fellow light magic user Professor Sureyya Gaulin had introduced them and that these days Keevan was the teacher she consulted with most often. To Reyes, Keevan was probably what Jenié or Satori was to Kunon.

"Now, then. What is it today, Reyes? Do you want more vegetable seeds? Or are you in need of advice?"

"I wanted to ask you about hydroponic cultivation."

"Ah, has it struck your fancy? Actually, I haven't had much success with applying my magic in that area. There's still a lot I don't understand."

Keevan was an earth sorcerer, and since hydroponics didn't involve soil, it seemed he couldn't use earth magic to manage it or make adjustments.

"If you're planning to look into it, that'd be a big help to me," he said.

Having spread himself too thin already, Keevan apparently didn't have the time to grow any additional plants.

"Silly, silly me," he said with a hearty laugh.

He didn't appear bothered at all by this predicament, however. He was probably quite fulfilled as it was.

"Are there any plants that can be grown in approximately two weeks?" asked Kunon.

"Oh yes. Certain herbs will grow in that time. But it's not the season for them now, and I'm not sure they can be grown hydroponically."

"Understood. I'd like to request the seeds for those plants. Also, please instruct me in the basics of hydroponic cultivation."

The Saint's Sanctum spell had the effect of warding off evil. And although it wasn't yet well understood, it also provided some amount of fertility to crops. Reyes herself had only recognized this aspect recently.

Though the scriptures passed down in the Holy Kingdom mentioned past saints having such an ability, not all saints were said to possess it. And so Reyes had been operating under the misconception that it was not part of her skill set. But when she began interacting with various flora, starting with the shi-shilla herb, she came to realize that it was.

As the scope of the Sanctum spell was narrowed, the fertility effect seemed to increase. And before coming to magic school, the Sanctums Reyes had created were all roughly the size of a house.

What's more, she never kept the spell in effect for more than half a day. That was why she hadn't noticed before. Perhaps if she hadn't taken up gardening, she would have gone her whole life without realizing she had a special aptitude for cultivation.

At any rate, this meant that even if it wasn't the season for a particular plant, Reyes could make it grow.

"That reminds me, your financial troubles were resolved, right?" asked Keevan.

"Yes. I get by every month without issue," Reyes replied.

That matter had been the start of her friendship with Kunon. Ever since, Reyes had kept afloat just fine.

"That so? Herbs can make you some good money, too, you know. Well, not as much as sacred ones."

"That's good. One can never have too much money, after all."

Kunon thought the Saint was being rather sensible. Leaving Keevan to her, Kunon stood back and watched the two of them negotiate.

Reyes seemed somehow solid and dependable. He couldn't put his finger on it, but it was like the girl in front of him now was more levelheaded than the one he'd met six months ago.

She was growing up, just as Kunon was. Hank and Riyah probably were as well.

And Mirika, whom Kunon hadn't seen in half a year—surely, she was growing up, too.

Kunon and Reyes began their experiments, and the results came with a few surprises and unexpected discoveries.

Kunon couldn't speak for others, but he often wound up acquiring more than he'd bargained for from experiments. Then he'd decide to take things just a little further and continue his trials or else get derailed and start on something else.

In that way, one experiment would lead to another and another and so on, ultimately using up quite a lot of time. It was a trap Kunon fell into frequently.

"This is so interesting…"

He felt like he was catching a glimpse of a whole new realm of water magic.

Until that point, Kunon had assumed he'd attempted anything and everything there was to try involving water. That was naive of him. His element went much, much deeper. When it came down to it, maybe he wasn't even a novice sorcerer yet, but merely a little dandy with some good sense.

It happened the day after their hydroponics experiment began.

"It's fascinating, isn't it?" said Reyes. "What could it mean?"

"I don't know. But I'm fascinated, too."

Three brand-new potted plants had been set up in the Saint's room. Actually, the vessels weren't pots but clear cups. Each enclosed in its own little Sanctum, the cups floated in midair in front of Kunon and Reyes, who stood shoulder to shoulder, closely observing the sprouts that had emerged.

All three had sprouted. In other words, they had chosen a viable cultivation method.

The problem was, it looked like they were growing three entirely different herbs.

"Can the nutrients in water alone result in such variability?"

There was no soil involved in hydroponics; the plants got all their nutrients from water and light. The seeds were inserted into an appropriate amount of cotton, which was set afloat in a cup of water, and that was it. Water absorbed by the cotton provided nutrients for the seeds. That was how the system worked.

They were using aguilan seeds.

Like peppers, aguilan fruit bore many seeds, which were used as a sweet spice. Like many spices, its distinctive flavor made it quite divisive. Apparently, some people liked it, while others did not.

Kunon had never tried it before. He knew the name, but this was his first time seeing the plant in person. Supposedly, it was a species of fragrant grass, which just like a common grass would take about a week to grow. Then the fruit would start to appear, and the seeds

could be harvested. The fruit, as it happened, did not taste very good. That was how Professor Keevan Brid had described it to them anyway.

"This is a success, right?" said Kunon.

"It's sprouting," replied Reyes, "so theoretically, yes."

But it wasn't quite that simple. They'd prepared the experiment just as Keeven advised, and it had yielded the following results: The sprout on the left seemed to be doing fine and had a standard bud. The center cup's sprout was as black as tar for some reason and had a lustrous hue. And the cup on the right was growing much quicker than the others. Already a number of long, spindly roots were growing through the cotton.

In hydroponics, the source of nutrients was water.

That was where Kunon would have come into play, if not for a long-accepted theory that water produced by sorcerers wasn't suitable for growing plants. According to this theory, the problem was that magically produced water lacked the minerals and other material found in natural water. Since that information came from research conducted long ago by well-respected scholars, it had a lot of credibility.

So what should they do? If nutrients were needed, couldn't they just add some?

Kunon had proposed mixing nutrients into magically produced water and giving that to the plants. His suggestions ranged from commonly known substances to unique ones used in magic potions.

Since it was in keeping with the spirit of the experiment, Reyes hadn't objected. On the contrary, she had strongly endorsed the idea. She was quite intrigued by it.

And so they tried it out.

That was the story behind these three variant plants. They just hadn't expected such drastic differences to come from nothing more than mixing different nutrients into the water.

Kunon found this very interesting. Perhaps this, too, was a kind of selective breeding.

"…Should we…do more?" he asked.

Five or six plants at a time was probably doable. He could think of a whole bunch of substances he wanted to try as additives. To do that, Kunon wanted to increase their sample size.





"That's a foolish question coming from you. Isn't it more your style to simply attempt whatever you're interested in?"

Reyes wasn't wrong. However, this was a joint experiment, and decisions could not be one-sided.

"I, for one, believe we *must* add more plants," said Reyes. "It's only a matter of preparation, then monitoring progress, so it's not time or labor-intensive."

Kunon now had her permission.

"Don't you think you're getting a little reckless? You're still charming, of course."

The Saint used to give off the air of an uptight stickler who couldn't take a joke.

"I prefer the term *flexible*," she replied. "Plants are living things, after all. They require an adaptable approach."

That was certainly true, but Kunon sort of missed the old, slightly stuck-up Reyes.

People really do change, huh? he thought. *For better or worse, people grow and become different.*

At any rate, the two of them decided to expand their joint experiment.

Two weeks later, they returned to Keevan's office.

"I know it's rich coming from me," he said, "but I really think you should plan things out a little better."

They had indeed gotten carried away and should probably reflect on the matter.

"Even so, we learned a lot," said Reyes.

The report on their experiment was so long that it seemed impossible it could have only spanned two weeks of work.

A strained smile on his lips, Keevan looked at the ridiculously thick stack of paper and at Kunon and Reyes, who had submitted it without reserve.

In fact, this was mostly Reyes's doing. Over the course of their experiment, the number of plants had increased to thirty at her

urging. Kunon ultimately had to put a stop to it.

Every day, over and over, he was met by the same dispassionate insistence: “Let’s add more,” “Why not add more?” “Aren’t you arguing based on emotion rather than logic?”

It hadn’t been easy to curb her. Horrified, he’d wondered if this was what people called “divine madness.”

“We obtained some very interesting results. Here are the seeds that can be made into spices.”

The harvested seeds possessed distinctly different flavors depending on the supplemental nutrients the plant had received. Some tasted just like the usual potent variety, while others had nothing more than a slight sweetness to them.

Their results carried great potential. If research into the subject was continued, perhaps it would be possible to achieve similar success with whatever spices they wanted.

“Oh-ho? Ah! I see, yes!” Keevan had been smiling wryly at the Saint’s overeagerness, but after tasting the seeds, his eyes suddenly lit up. “I can’t believe they taste so different! This is fascinating!”

“I believe the differences are more extreme in the ones that were given magic potions as opposed to those that received common nutritional additives,” explained Reyes. “Their appearances varied quite a bit, too. They were all alike in shape, but the variations in color, growth rate, and stem length made them seem like entirely different species.”

“Magic potions?! Isn’t that a bit drastic?! There’s no such thing as a cheap potion!”

“We used ones Kunon made himself.”

Kunon looked on as Reyes and Keevan got increasingly excited. Not that he could see, of course.

The Saint had taken the reins partway through their experiment, and Kunon had left almost all of it up to her. He figured that even though he was after credits and she was participating merely out of interest, her passion for the research was greater.

One could also say Kunon had merely been exercising restraint to keep things from going overboard. Though he was often swept up in a subject and went from one experiment to the next, the Saint's desire to keep expanding the scale of their work had been particularly problematic.

That was the kind of behavior pattern that would quickly become unmanageable. Kunon knew this well, because he'd done it himself more than once. It tended to make one forget about the experiment's main subject and why it mattered.

Without a designated start and finish, experiments never ended, so he had guided theirs in the direction of being completed on time. And they'd managed to get some interesting results, as well, so Kunon was satisfied.

But that didn't mean he had fully moved on.

The hydroponic cultivation of aguilan was still in its infancy. Figuratively speaking, it was like they had done a little preparatory digging in a mine and come back with a small amount of iron. If they kept digging further down, what would they find?

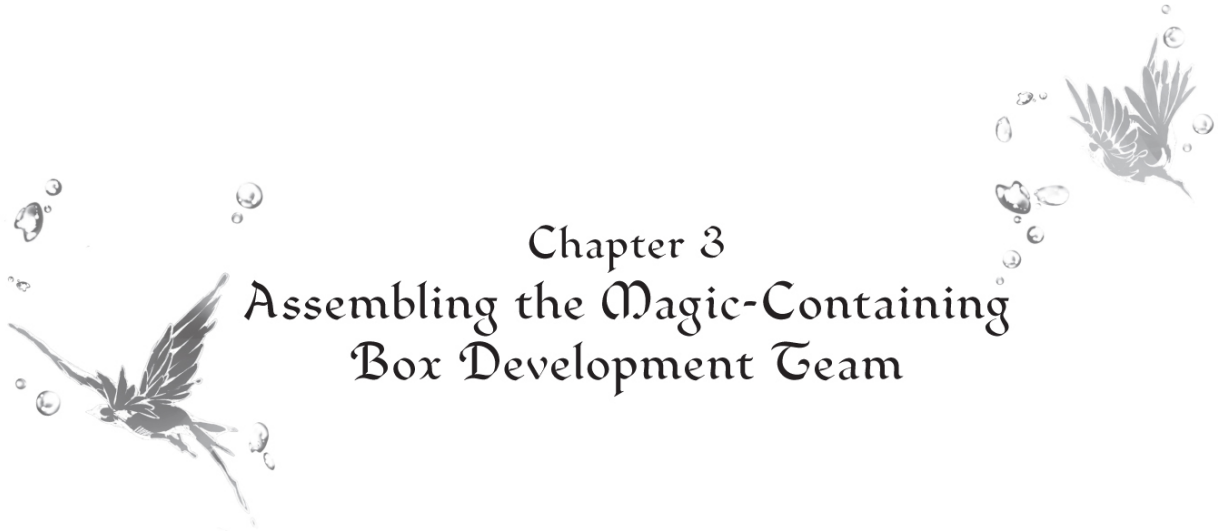
A tremendous amount of time and effort would doubtless be required. Kunon's interest had far from run out, but he couldn't devote all his time to it, either.

He was sure Reyes would go on with the project, but Kunon would not be joining her. He wanted to help, but he couldn't put his all into it the way she would. Besides, it had been quite difficult to keep her in check.

"…Although I suppose there's no harm in keeping an eye on her work…"

In the end, he *was* still interested, so Kunon decided he would continue observing the Saint's forays into hydroponic cultivation.

Looking back, that was where it began—the precise moment the seeds were laid that would lead to the Building 11 Forestation Incident.



Chapter 3
Assembling the Magic-Containing Box Development Team

"Here you go. Thank you for your hard work."

Kunon was at Satori's office. She held out a card and he accepted it. This was one of the credits he'd so dearly wished for.

While he and the Saint had carried out their joint experiment, Kunon had also worked as Satori's assistant. He'd just finished two weeks in that role.

"You really did run me ragged."

He'd worked for her from noon until evening every day. He spent his mornings doing business and researching with Reyes, so he'd arranged to start helping Satori in the afternoons.

The volume of work had been considerable and mainly involved taking notes while Satori dictated and producing clean copies of her memos and such.

The notes she dictated to him consisted of hypotheses and deductions made while observing the water-dancing bug, as well as

records of various data. She would read them off, and Kunon would take down whatever she said.

Afterward, they would talk about classes. Satori taught Second Level now and then and would ask for his thoughts.

Kunon had a lot of fun. It was like getting to take a private class with Satori herself.

He also really enjoyed seeing Satori and Jenié discuss teaching matters together.

As a sorcerer, Jenié may not have been impressive. But once again, Kunon was struck by her talent as an educator. The consideration she had for her students could be felt in the way she chose simple words to explain difficult concepts, as she had with Kunon. Just as an excellent sorcerer did not necessarily make a good teacher, the opposite could also be true.

Gazing upon his wonderful first tutor made Kunon's heart swell. Not that he could actually see her.

"Any complaints?" Satori asked him.

"None at all. If I had the freedom and energy, I would have liked to spend even more time assisting you."

After all, Satori Glücke was incredible. And despite visiting her office many times, this was Kunon's first experience helping her with an experiment.

It was no wonder she was a world-renowned water sorcerer. A novice like Kunon couldn't hold a candle to her when it came to knowledge and ingenuity, a fact that had become evident over and over during the last two weeks.

If he had the time, he would have liked to stay at Satori's side and continue to learn from her.

"But unfortunately, I have a curfew."

Nearly thirteen years old, Kunon was still only a child. After discussing things with his maid, a curfew had been set for him. He had to be home at night.

"I feel the same. You were more useful than I expected, so I would have liked to keep you around a bit longer."

Those were Satori's honest feelings. She knew she was an eccentric old woman, and she struggled to give straightforward compliments. But her temporary assistant really had exceeded her expectations. She was in a good mood, so she told him so.

Having a capable assistant made experiments and research more consistent and less time-consuming. The water-dancing bug experiment was progressing smoothly, and it seemed nearly time to move on to the next stage. The fact that the project had arrived at this point ahead of schedule was a testament to her assistant's good work.

Satori had also enjoyed his occasional discerning comments and questions. A few times, he had even startled her by noticing some careless oversight she had made. She'd been annoyed whenever it happened and hidden her surprise, pretending she'd been aware of whatever it was the whole time. After all, she *was* an eccentric old woman.

"Come back anytime you want more credits," she said. "You're more than welcome."

Kunon left Satori's office and headed home.

In the daytime, it felt just like spring, but the evenings were still a little chilly.

"Now, then."

His credits were mostly completed. He might need one more or he might not. And if that was all, he could pretty much do anything to make up the difference. He could even help Satori out again—a tempting proposal.

He had approximately half the school year remaining, just as he'd planned.

Preparations were complete. Starting tomorrow, he would begin his attempt to develop a magic-containing box.

First, he would go to see Bael, the Ability Faction representative. And from there…

Kunon mused over such things as he walked the path back to his house.

The next day, Kunon headed to the old castle serving as the Ability Faction's base.

"Oh, it's Kunon."

There, he ran into Elia Hesson, who was in the dining hall chatting with three of her friends.

"Hello, Miss Elia. What's this? Is it possible you've grown even more beautiful in only a day's time?"

"You didn't see me a day ago. In fact, it's been a while since we met."

They cracked some jokes; then Elia continued before Kunon even had a chance to state his business.

"You came to see Bael, right?"

"Of course not. As if I would come all this way to see a man. I'm here to see you, obviously. It just so happens I'm going to visit Bael while I'm here."

"'It just so happens' that you have an appointment with him, you mean?"

She was right. Kunon had merely spouted some nonsense about preferring women on instinct. His reason for coming was indeed to see Bael.

"A few days ago, he entrusted me with a letter," said Elia. "He said, 'Give this to Kunon if he comes by.'"

"He did?"

Elia nodded and held out the letter.

"I wonder what it could be. If he's asking me on a date, I'll obviously have to decline."

With this offhand comment, Kunon opened the plainly sealed letter then and there. It wasn't a formal missive, so he didn't think it would be a problem.

"But didn't you go on a date with the Inferno Prince?"

That question came from one of the girls Elia had been chatting with.

A date.

Well, they *had* gone shopping together. Kunon supposed you could call that a date.

In fact, if someone told Kunon that his recent duel with Gioelion seemed like a date as well, he wouldn't be able to deny it. The two of them had been in their own little world the whole time, as if they were the only people in existence. It had been so much fun, Kunon had almost lost himself in it.

"He's a bit of an exception," Kunon replied, and the girls squealed in delight.

What are they all excited about? Kunon wondered. But he had other things to focus on.

"…Two weeks…"

The contents of Bael's letter had him a little perplexed. It was a brief message, reading: *"I don't have enough credits yet. I need about two more weeks. Please wait a bit longer."* That was all.

Apparently, Bael was having some trouble with credits just as Kunon had. He figured it was less a matter of Bael procrastinating and more that earning ten credits in half a year was quite an ambitious goal.

Either way, Kunon didn't mind as long as Bael hadn't forgotten their agreement. If he had to wait another two weeks, he could simply spend that time continuing his preparations.

"…Oh?"

There was a second page to the letter layered so neatly underneath the first that Kunon had only just noticed it.

The second page read, *"I didn't tell them the details of the experiment, but I did inform Lulomet and Shilto that we would be conducting one. If you want to invite them to join, try going to them, too."*

"…I see."

Kunon remembered something Bael had told him: Collaborative experiments were not the Ability Faction's strong suit. That sort of thing was where the Harmony Faction excelled. Kunon had heard that the Rationality Faction was also good at such work, provided the groups were small.

Luckily, he was acquainted with both the Rationality Faction representative, Lulomet, and the Harmony Faction representative, Shilto.

He hadn't seen either of them in a while, so it was probably not a bad idea to go say hello. And technically, he was a member of all three factions…even if he had totally forgotten about that.

"I am intrigued by the subject matter," said Shilto, "but wind magic isn't useful in magic tool production, is it?"

Kunon had first stopped by the short tower the Harmony Faction called home, figuring that if he was paying people visits, he might as well start with a woman.

He was called to a dining hall that doubled as a reception room, where Shilto was waiting.

Faction leaders were always busy. He had arrived unannounced, so it was fortunate he was able to see her at all. Nevertheless, successfully getting an audience with her did not guarantee a favorable response.

"…You might be right," he replied.

Shilto's question was reasonable. In the past, Bael and Kunon had denied Elia Hesson a spot on the team for the exact same reason.

When it came to making things, the most suitable attribute was earth. Technically, water wasn't a great option, either. It was only the unique nature of Kunon's magic that allowed him to adjust his attribute to make it useful in a development context.

Earth sorcerers made good magical engineers, and other attributes didn't. That was the common perception, and it was generally accurate.

Foul magic, too, Kunon thought.

Genevis, a member of the Ability Faction who had worked on developing the Medicine Boxes with Kunon, was an exceptionally talented foul magic user. Foul magic could temporarily alter the properties of matter, which came in very handy during trials and when constructing prototypes.

Kunon wasn't sure how useful dark magic would be, however. He wasn't familiar enough with it to say one way or the other.

As for light…from what he'd learned about the attribute from Reyes, it didn't seem that useful when making tools. It was great for plants but didn't seem to have much material-processing capability.

"But a box that contains magic, huh? That really is a fascinating idea."

So this is what Bael was talking about, Shilto thought.

Around half a year ago, Bael had come to her and said, "There's an interesting research project coming up, so finish your credits by the six-month mark."

Shilto was a serious student and would have earned her credits early either way. But if the project involved developing a magic tool, it would be difficult for her to contribute. No matter how intriguing she found the subject, it was in poor form to throw her hat into the ring for something she wasn't suited to. She would only be a hindrance.

And so…

"If you'd like, I can speak with Harmony's earth users. I'm sure a few of them would gladly participate."

…Shilto offered to help in a slightly different capacity.

It *was* an interesting idea, and she was curious about it, so she wanted to support the project.

"Hmm… I should probably consult with Bael before we decide anything."

Though Kunon was planning on taking the lead role in development, he didn't intend to make all the decisions unilaterally. Instead, he wanted to align his thoughts and actions with the rest of the team to keep them all moving in the same direction.

That was what collaboration was all about and the reason group projects often progressed more quickly than solo endeavors.

Even his second magic teacher, the self-absorbed Zeonly, considered Kunon's input to some extent. Depending on others might carry a certain stigma, but in Kunon's opinion, it was a critical skill.

"I see," said Shilto. "You may be right."

"If it comes to it, please introduce me to a female earth magic user."

"Got it. Harmony Faction has a brilliant earth sorcerer. I'll reach out to him."

"…Him…"

Slightly dejected, Kunon left the Harmony Faction base.

"Ahhh, what an interesting experiment. A box that contains magic, you say?"

After parting ways with Shilto, Kunon headed straight for the underground facility where the Rationality Faction was stationed.

The faction representative, Lulomet, was conveniently in his office. Kunon paid the boy's orderly room a visit and made his proposal.

"Unfortunately, however, I've already made plans."

As Bael had suggested, Lulomet had completed his credits in the first half of the year. But regrettably, he was no longer free to collaborate with them.

"Plans?"

"Yes. There's an experiment I want to do. I've estimated that it will take at least three months."

Kunon certainly didn't want to stand in the way of Lulomet's experiment.

"May I ask what you'll be doing?"

"I'm thinking of summoning a dark spirit."

"What, really?! That's amazing!"

Spirits were mysterious entities said to exist in nature. There were records of people who could see spirits in the past. Inevitably,

though, since people who couldn't see them couldn't confirm their existence, the credibility of those claims was a matter of debate.

There were various theories about them. Some said they fed on people's magic power and released spells in return. Others said sorcerers were able to use magic because spirits resided within their bodies. There also existed the theory that spirits weren't real and never had been.

The prevailing belief within the magic community was that spirits were masses of magic power that possessed a life force.

At any rate, spirits weren't usually visible. Sometimes, a strange magic power could be felt even though nothing appeared to be present. That unidentified power was said to be a spirit.

"I found some old documents in the back of the library that describe how to summon spirits. I checked with the school and was given permission to attempt the summoning ritual if accompanied by a teacher."

Wow… What a fascinating experiment.

"How *compelling*!"

What *were* spirits? Such an experiment prodded at the very mysteries of the universe. What was magic? This work might bring them closer to the answer.

Kunon couldn't restrain his enthusiasm.

"Isn't it?" said Lulomet. "I'm interested in what you're doing, too, but I'm not sure I would be of any use in creating magic tools to begin with."

"Is dark magic not suited for it?"

"I have no experience with such things, so I can't really say."

In other words, even if dark magic *was* useful for magic tools, Lulomet was a total novice.

Nothing resembling a magic-containing box existed at present, so they would be starting from scratch. Honestly speaking, Kunon thought the project would be quite difficult.

"Understood," he said. "If I need anything, may I ask for your assistance?"

If possible, Kunon wanted people with at least some magical engineering experience on the team, so he gave up on recruiting Lulomet.

"Of course. If you deem my abilities necessary, please do not hesitate to reach out to me. I'd like to be involved, even if only a little."

While he had Lulomet's ear, Kunon also brought up the possibility of scouting a talented earth sorcerer from the Rationality Faction.

After that, he took his leave.

"Right."

Emerging from the underground facility, Kunon nodded.

Thanks to his efforts, it would now be easier to secure team members when the time came. They hadn't begun their research, so nothing more was needed on that front.

It would be about two weeks before Bael was available, and in that time, Kunon could continue preparations.

Making up his mind, he started to walk in the direction of Satori's office. He needed to apply for another laboratory so they would have a place to develop the magic-containing box.

◆

"Sorry to keep you waiting. Let's begin."

Credits fully earned, Ability Faction representative Bael arrived at the classroom Kunon had rented for their project.

Their collaborative experiment could finally start.

First, they discussed personnel selection. Development would be difficult and time-consuming with only two people, so they wanted to assemble some teammates.

"How about Geneve?"

The first person Kunon suggested was Genevis, from the Ability Faction.

Kunon really wanted a foul magic user. He had been told that people with rare attributes were usually busy. One could tell as much

by looking at the Saint. Though in her case, she was the one increasing her own workload. She'd made her own bed and was now having to lie in it.

In any case, Kunon hadn't dared extend an invitation to Genevis on his own.

"Excellent. I already looped him in. I'll bring him with me tomorrow."

That was lucky. Bael's answer was more than enough to make up for the two-week delay.

"Phew, I was wondering what to do if you said you didn't want him to join," said Bael. "I mean, you know he's an acquired taste."

He was indeed. Genevis often laughed at nothing—a major cause of strain in his interpersonal relationships.

"I don't dislike him," said Kunon.

Genevis seemed to look down on others, but his skill as a sorcerer was undeniable. Plus, Kunon was still very interested in foul magic.

And even though Genevis's laughter gave Kunon the feeling he was being made fun of, Kunon had never been offended by his actions. After all, the boy in question had said he wasn't doing it on purpose. Kunon had chosen to simply believe him.

He could also see the black-haired woman haunting Genevis from behind—another factor that made Kunon want to trust him.

"I appreciate your saying that. He irritates people, and they tend to misunderstand him… I feel a bit sorry for him."

If Genevis wasn't doing it on purpose, that really was a shame, thought Kunon.

He and Bael continued their discussion and began selecting outstanding earth sorcerers from among the three factions.

Thanks to Kunon's earlier negotiations—his laying the groundwork, as it were—they were able to secure two brilliant students very quickly.

The first was Harmony Faction member Elva Daglight.

With her jet-black hair and amethyst eyes, Elva was said to be the most beautiful girl in her faction. After receiving an invitation secondhand, she sought Kunon and Bael out at their workspace.

"Oh? You remember me?" she asked Kunon.

"Yes. I hardly ever forget a beautiful woman."

Six months prior, Elva had been the girl to ask Kunon to join the Harmony Faction. They hadn't interacted since then, so this reunion was their first meeting in half a year.

The Harmony representative Shilto had told Kunon she would introduce him to a male earth sorcerer, but it seemed her recommendation was busy with his own experiment and wouldn't be available anytime soon. He, in turn, had referred Elva to them.

Kunon had resigned himself to working with a man. Bael had even brought up the same male student when they were discussing personnel.

This outcome was, therefore, beyond what he had hoped for. Kunon rejoiced at the happy turn of fate.

"There's something I want to say right off the bat," said Elva, her gaze shifting to Bael and Genevis. "Once I start an experiment, I get really grimy. Please don't expect me to be ladylike."

Elva, the most attractive girl in Harmony, was a sorcerer and a researcher first and foremost. Consequently, once she began working, she didn't spare a thought for her appearance. Her lustrous, bewitching hair became disheveled. Her clear amethyst eyes dulled from lack of sleep. Her skin dried out, and dark circles formed under her exhausted eyes.

Fingernail maintenance and makeup also fell by the wayside, and she had no reservations about curling up in a little heap to sleep on the floor. She could pull four all-nighters in a row, though she could tell it was taking years off her life.

She only bothered to look nice when she wasn't busy. It wasn't that she didn't like dressing up, however. Elva was just a woman who put her research first.

It didn't seem relevant to Kunon, since he couldn't see, so she directed her warning to the other two boys.

"Oh yes… I've heard something about that," replied Bael. "It should be fine."

Rumors of Elva staying up all night and looking a mess had reached him before. Beautiful girls, he figured, had a lot going on. They had to worry about the way men saw them, their expectations, and so on.

But Bael didn't really care about such things. He was the head of the Ability Faction. He knew very well that progress couldn't be made if they spent their time worrying about whether their comrades were boys or girls or beautiful women. So even if Elva hadn't said anything, he wouldn't have paid it any mind.

"*Eh-heh, pfft…* I look forward to working with you, *eh-hee*, particularly because I'm like this. I really don't mean anything by it… I'm sure your grimy self, *ah-ha*, is charming, too, *ah-ha, ha-ha-ha*."

That was Genevis's answer. His idiosyncratic laughter was more intense than Elva had heard. It genuinely felt like he was making fun of her, but well…he probably didn't mean anything by it. Probably.

"Grimy, you say…? That's nice. Cultivating a lady is a gentleman's favorite pastime. I would certainly like to see that side of you as well. Not that I can see, of course."

Kunon's reply was more or less what the others had expected, so no one really gave it any thought.

Their second earth sorcerer was Ladio, from the Rationality Faction.

"…Hello. I saw your recent match," he said to Kunon.

He was so large it was hard to believe he was a teenager, and his deep voice reverberated from somewhere in his stomach. Everyone else had to look up to meet his eyes. When he entered the lab, he greeted Kunon first.

"Ah, hello. I'm Kunon."

By “your recent match,” Ladio probably meant his duel with Gioelion.

“…I’m a huge fan,” he said. “Can I shake your hand?”

“Huh…? Um, okay.”

What does he mean “fan”? Kunon wondered.

Kunon knew what the word meant, but why would someone be a fan of *him*? He didn’t really get it, but since Ladio didn’t seem to mean it in a bad way, Kunon figured it was fine.

The other boy must have been drawn in by his gentlemanlike manner, which was widely acknowledged to be superb, Kunon decided. After all, gentlemen were often admired by others.

“It’s been a while, Ladio.”

At the sound of Bael’s voice, the large boy’s head turned.

“…Yeah. Thanks for inviting me, Bael. This experiment sounds interesting.”

Ladio was a student known for his craftsmanship. Despite his tremendous size, he had the skill to create intricate designs and execute them with precision. Already making a name for himself and his wares, he did business with the aristocratic set. Even within the Advanced class, students like him were rare.

Ladio usually stuck to doing his own research and experiments and rarely appeared in public. He was a little inarticulate and didn’t seem too keen on interacting with others.

He hardly ever responded when people invited him to participate in their projects. But this time—like Bael and the others—he must have been lured in by the subject matter.

“I should be thanking you,” replied Bael. “We appreciate your taking part. I’m glad I’ll get to see your handiwork up close again.”

“…It’s not as good as yours.”

Ladio and Bael were both three-star earth sorcerers.

Their work didn’t overlap enough for them to become rivals, but they recognized each other’s abilities and maintained a certain mutual awareness.

With that, the development team for the magic-containing box was established.

Kunon was the leader, and his collaborators were Bael, Genevis, Elva, and Ladio.

They might have to add more people later on, or they might go the whole project with their current lineup. Either way, they would start with this group of five.

Incidentally, with his Glass Eye, Kunon saw a black lizard wrapped around Elva's left arm and a silvery, metallic-looking echidna perched on Ladio's shoulders. Both of them were earth sorcerers.

A short time had passed since the magic-containing box development team was established.

…It all started with an ulterior motive, as Elia Hesson would later reveal.

Elia, a member of the Ability Faction, had feelings for her faction's representative, Bael Kirkington.

She was dropping hints. In fact, she had been doing her best to make her intentions obvious, but she didn't know if Bael was getting the message.

Things hadn't really gone anywhere. She didn't think Bael hated her, but he also hadn't reacted in the slightest to her efforts.

She needed to make contact… Whether that meant accidentally bringing their faces together or doing it on purpose, Elia wasn't sure. But she felt she had to do something to make Bael take notice of her. Recently, she'd been busy thinking about how to cross that line.

Incidentally, because of how much she liked Bael, Elia couldn't stand being apart from him for over a week. And so, a few sweet provisions in hand, she decided to pay a visit to the Building 11 laboratory he was working in.

"Oh, come on in."

When she knocked on the door, she was greeted by Elva of the Harmony Faction.

Bael was currently developing a magic tool, and Elva was another member of the project. Elva was so gorgeous it made Elia's head

spin, even though they were both girls. Truthfully, she didn't like seeing women that pretty near Bael, but there was nothing she could do about it.

"Now should be fine."

Elva already knew who Elia was there to see.

To be honest, the majority of the Advanced class knew. Her feelings were obvious. There were even people who had bet on whether Elia and Bael would become a couple.

Some people were just rude, thought Elia. But she preferred that to anyone interfering.

Elva, as it happened, had no interest in Bael aside from his skill as a sorcerer. She could forgive a guy for being thickheaded but not to that degree. A man so obtuse that he didn't even notice when he hurt a girl was out of the question.

"That you, Elia?"

Here was the object of Elia's affection.

He and the others had shoved a group of desks together and were sitting around them, poring over a mountain of books and documents. They were probably in the middle of surveying the relevant information.

The development team had formed only a week ago. At present, they were still preparing to start their project.

"Hello, Bael," said Elia. "I brought you some refreshments."

"Really? Thank you. Hey—let's take a quick break."

Kunon, Genevis, and Ladio looked up from their work.

Glancing around casually, Elia thought about how amazing the team's lineup was. It was made up entirely of the cream of the Advanced class.

Ladio's participation was especially impressive. He was skilled enough to sell his wares to nobility and usually never worked with others. That alone spoke to how much this project must have interested him.

Elia understood why. Even without taking her love interest into account, the project fascinated her. As a sorcerer—or rather, *because*

she was a sorcerer, she was drawn to the subject.

"How about some tea?"

The team took a break and drank the tea Elva made for them and ate the honey toast Elia had brought.

A month after the development team was established, Elia once again made her way to Building 11, snacks in hand.

"Do you have a moment, my lady?" a voice called out to her, and Elia turned around.

"Huh?"

For a moment, she thought the voice belonged to Kunon. After all, he was the only person she knew that would call her "my lady." But she was mistaken.

"Um… Sorry, but…have we met?"

A boy about her age stood before her. His facial features were nicely arranged around his headstrong eyes. His clothes were fine, so Elia figured he was probably from some noble family or perhaps a royal.

She didn't recognize him, though. And considering his good looks, it seemed odd that he wasn't a subject of gossip among the female students. Cassis, of the Rationality Faction, for instance, would be going totally bonkers over him.

"No, we haven't," the boy replied. "I'm in Second Level and have no reason to know a member of the Advanced class."

That made sense, Elia thought as she nodded. There weren't many students in the Advanced class, and she could recognize the faces of everyone involved in the factions.

Even if you combined the members of all three—no, all four factions when Freedom was included—they were a small group.

"My name is Azel. I'm a first-year in the Second Level water class. Am I correct in thinking this is Building Eleven?"

After introducing himself, Azel looked over at the building Elia had been about to enter.

"That's right," she said. "Did you need something?"

"I came to see Kunon. Do you know him? He's an Advanced class student who enrolled this year. I'd appreciate it if you could tell him I'm here."

Elia nodded again.

Kunon was also a first-year water sorcerer. That was probably how he and Azel knew each other. But well, at the moment…

"Um… Do you need him for some urgent business? Is it vital that you meet with him right now?"

"…No, I only wanted to have a word with him. It's not very important."

"Oh, okay… Then now might not be a good time."

"Why not?"

"He's in the middle of a large-scale development project. I'm not sure, but it might take up to six months… He's planning on spending the rest of the school year working on it. If it's not a time-sensitive matter, I suggest you don't disturb him… Although I suppose that's not really for me to say."

"……"

"No matter what Kunon says, he's kind to boys, too. I'm sure if I told him you were here, he would meet with you. What do you think? If you really want me to, I'll go get him."

"No, it's fine. Don't even mention I came," Azel said, turning his back to her. "I really want to beat the imperial prince, so I was going to ask for advice, but…if he's busy, I don't want to trouble him with such a pathetic request. I was never here, and you and I never met. Let's leave it at that, please."

Azel left without waiting for a response.

"…The imperial prince?"

Had he meant the Inferno Prince? wondered Elia. Or was there another imperial prince floating around somewhere? Elia didn't know much about Second Level.

Well, whatever.

Azel seemed to want to pretend he'd never come, so she decided to respect that.

Once more making for the door to Building 11, Elia headed toward the team's lab.

"Oh, welcome."

She was ushered in once again by a tired-looking Elva. Starting a week ago, Elia had begun to notice dark circles forming under the other girl's eyes. Now they were obvious to anyone who looked.

"Are you all right?" she asked. "Aren't you tired?"

"I'm okay, really. I still have enough energy to make it home."

Was that how she defined *okay*? Elia didn't know if she agreed, but if that was what Elva said, she was probably fine.

"Oh, Elia," replied her beloved. "Thanks for always bringing us stuff to eat."

He looked sleepy. It wasn't just Elva—the whole team was showing signs of exhaustion.

"This formula, is it correct?" someone asked.

"…Uh…I don't think it's a decrease multiplier, but I could be wrong…"

"May I take a look…? *Ah-ha*, oh dear. This writing is a little blurry. Representative, look at this."

Books and reports were stacked up high on the floor. Various types of equipment had been lined up along the desks.

"Sure… Ah, let's stop for a while. I'm starting to see these numbers in triple."

One month had passed, and the group appeared to be getting quite tired.

"I'll make tea. Raise your hand if you want extra sugar in yours."

The team rested for a while and drank the tea Elva brewed and ate the honey rusk Elia had brought.

Two months after the development team was established, Elia made her way to Building 11 yet again, snacks in hand.

"Excuse me, my lady? Do you have a moment?"

"Huh?"

Feeling a bit of déjà vu, Elia turned to look.

It wasn't Kunon this time, either. Nor was it the Second Level boy who had called out to her before.

That made three different boys in the school—Kunon included—who addressed girls with "my lady."

Elia was astonished. She was also astonished by the third boy's identity. This time, it was someone she recognized.

"Inferno…Prince…?"

It was the imperial prince who had dueled with Kunon several months ago. Elia had been there to watch, so she remembered his face.

"You're Miss Elia, correct?" he asked.

"Um, yes."

She'd been so distracted by the prince that she'd missed the two others flanking him—a boy and a girl.

"I'm Ilhi Bolyle," said the girl.

Their faces looked familiar, too. Just before the duel, they had been at the prince's side. They were probably his guards.

"Could you tell us, by chance, what Mr. Kunon has been up to recently?" the girl asked.

"Kunon?"

Elia had been wondering what they needed, and it seemed they had business with Kunon.

My, Kunon, Elia thought. *You're surprisingly popular with boys.*

"You know each other, right? Are you, by chance, on your way to give him that food?"

They'd probably already done some groundwork and were asking in order to confirm. Elia had no reason to deny it, but she wanted to make one thing perfectly clear.

Making a beeline for Ilhi, who seemed like the party's main negotiator, Elia said quietly, "I am bringing food but not for Kunon's sake specifically."

She wasn't here to give Kunon a gift. She wanted to do something nice for the boy she liked, Bael. Elia was eager not to be misunderstood on that point.

"I see. Master Gio—isn't that great? It seems Miss Elia has her sights set on someone else."

"What are you talking about?" replied the prince.

Seriously. What is *she talking about?* thought Elia. She'd rather like to hear more…

"Um, Kunon is in the middle of a large-scale experiment right now," she said, "so…"

"That much we are aware of. He told us so himself. It's just that we haven't heard from Mr. Kunon for the past two weeks, so *he's* a bit worried. Master Gio, that is."

Apparently, Kunon and the Inferno Prince spent time together. Quite often, it seemed.

Elia wasn't opposed to hearing about boys in close relationships. She was a girl, after all.

"Hmm… How should I put it…?" she began.

Don't worry—he's definitely alive. He just isn't all that lively.

Recently, Kunon had been looking particularly fatigued, even to an outsider like her. Elia would have described him as "barely hanging on." But should she really say that to someone who was so concerned he'd come to check on him?

Was "barely hanging on" an acceptable reply? Would that provide any peace of mind at all?

No. No way. On the contrary, it would only cause more worry.

"Well… All I can say is that lately it seems like the work has gotten a little challenging…"

"So it would seem… Nothing wrong otherwise, then?"

"I don't think so. It's just that he's so tired and has so much to do that he hasn't been able to focus on anything else— Oh, that's right."

Elia was also concerned about the development team's well-being, but she was wary of visiting too often and becoming a nuisance. She'd been trying to show restraint. However…if she wasn't the one dropping in on them every time, she wouldn't become an eyesore. That gave her an idea.

"Why don't you three try bringing him food sometime, if you'd like? I would be really grateful since there are days when I can't make it."

"Oh? Seeing how Mr. Kunon is doing would make us happy, too, but is it okay for us to enter an Advanced class facility?"

"I don't think there are any rules against it. You should check with a teacher just to be safe, though."

"That's an excellent idea. Master Gio—I think Miss Elia's plan sounds wonderful. Let's bring Kunon some provisions next time."

"Yes."

It seemed the Inferno Prince was satisfied with her suggestion, too. Elia told them how often she brought snacks to the lab, and they parted ways.

"Thank you, my lady."

The address sounded more dignified when the prince said it, Elia thought as she watched him walk away with his friends.

Now, then.

Slightly delayed, Elia turned back toward Building 11 and headed inside.

"Hel*looo*, I brought snacks!"

There was no need to knock at this point. The room's occupants didn't want to bother answering the door and had told her to simply come and go as she pleased.

Without waiting for permission, Elia stepped into the familiar laboratory.

"…Oh, it's you, Elia. Sorry to make you come all this way so often. You really don't have to worry about us so much."

She could hear the voice of the boy she liked—but she couldn't see him. It seemed he'd dozed off on the floor again. Hidden by a plethora of books and documents, not an inch of Bael was in sight.

Genevis, Ladio, and Elva were probably lost in the sea of research materials as well.

"Oh, Miss Elia. Welcome," Kunon greeted her as he entered the room.

Since he had a curfew, Kunon always went home at a regular time and was more energetic than the others.

That, however, was a low bar to clear. Only half of his face was visible beneath his eye mask, but he was tired enough that his pale complexion was obvious.

Even after returning home, Kunon's to-do list was endless. There were materials to search for, preliminary calculations to make, rough estimates regarding the magic tool's construction to put together. He claimed he was cutting into his sleep to keep working.

That probably wasn't a lie. After all, he was managing to keep pace with his immensely talented teammates. He really was an incredible first-year student.

"The others are busy sleeping, so I'll take that off your hands. Oh, unless you'd like for me to wake them up."

"Gosh, no. It's okay—let them rest."

Elia couldn't bear the thought of waking everyone up just to give them snacks when they were in such a state. Bael hadn't spoken again, and she suspected he'd already fallen back asleep.

"Are you sure?" asked Kunon. "I still eat breakfast and dinner at home, but for the others, the food you bring has been a lifeline. They'll be happy to see you."

"Huh?"

What had he just said?

No… Somehow, she understood. Even Elia tended to forget to sleep and eat when she was absorbed in research or an experiment.

"Don't tell me they're all starving themselves."

"It's hard to say, but I've never seen them eating anything outside of what you bring," said Kunon, before adding, "Not that I can see." But Elia wasn't listening.

What…? They're forgetting to eat and sleep? All of them?

It certainly looked that way. But wasn't that a little odd?

People ate when they were hungry and slept when they were tired. That was only natural.

There were times, however, when someone became so engrossed in an activity that it simply didn't occur to them to eat or sleep. Elia had found that the more talented a sorcerer was, the less they tended to their own health. She didn't have any data to back that up beyond her own experiences, but generally, she believed it held true.

"Researchers, I swear…"

Elia had gotten caught up in work and forgotten to eat and sleep before, but there was a limit to how far you could take it. She'd certainly never gotten this bad.

"Should I bring food more often?" she asked.

Typically, Elia visited once or twice per week.

At first, she had worried that was too much. Then she started to feel concerned, because every time she showed up, the team's members looked increasingly ragged. Now the group was in such bad shape that she was afraid to take her eyes off them.

And today, she'd learned her concern was more than warranted.

She would have to meet with the Inferno Prince again and discuss how often they brought food. She felt that running into him and his friends earlier had been destiny. Not even magic could have intervened.

"I'm always happy to see more of you, Miss Elia, but…won't that be a burden on you?"

"If you have time to worry about me, you should put more effort into this project and get it done faster."

She wanted Bael to be set free soon. And above all, she wanted something done about the lab's grueling environment. Elia had no desire to see people she knew die from overwork.

"Understood," said Kunon. "I shall continue to look forward to your love-infused treats."

"No, these aren't for… Well, whatever. Just take a real break, okay? I mean it."

She had been about to correct him, to say that the love she put into these snacks wasn't for Kunon. But there really wasn't any

need. And besides…Kunon would likely be receiving love-infused treats from the prince from now on.

She really hoped he would accept them.

Three months after the development team was established, Elia thought, *Things have gone too far*.

"……"

Was this really supposed to be a laboratory?

It was more like a disorganized reference room. Anyone who saw it would think the same. A disgraceful scene was spread out before her.

Until then, Elia had been keeping her opinions on the situation entirely to herself, no matter how messy things got. Even when the room reeked with an alarmingly strong chemical smell. Even when piles of materials were being used as mattresses to sleep on the floor. Aware of her position as an outsider, she'd stayed quiet.

But this was beyond irresponsible. There was nowhere to stand in the entire room. Not one of the people inside could form a coherent response.

Shockingly not asleep for once, the team members were sitting around their desks. One glance was enough to cause alarm; they looked like they were already dead.

Bael's complexion had progressed beyond pale blue into a greenish tone.

Genevis was earnestly trying to write something down using a pen that was clearly out of ink. He was grinning as he mumbled to himself, "How strange—I can't write… Is this a dream? Ah, I see…"

Elva and Ladio were carrying on an incomprehensible conversation —"I'm waiting for the prince to come rescue me from this hell," "Take me with you, please"—while petting some water cats.

Okay, so their conversation wasn't entirely incomprehensible. Apparently, the imperial prince had been checking in on the group every so often.

Kunon, the only one who still had any of his wits about him, had nevertheless failed to notice Elia's appearance. He was moving between the piles of materials—those which had yet to collapse—toppling them one after another in search of something. "Huh?" he said to himself as he broadened the scope of the disaster. "Where did that document get to?" Perhaps he wasn't quite as together as he looked.

It was too much. This wasn't research.

"That's enough!" Elia shouted. "Get some actual rest! And clean up this room a little!"

If I don't stop them now, she thought, *someone really will work themselves into an early grave.*

◆

Elia declared a compulsory rest period, effective immediately.

She was serious. She intended to make the five of them take a break even if she had to get a teacher involved.

Yet to her surprise, no one objected.

Later, after waking up from a deep sleep that lasted the entire day, Bael told her, "That knocked me out completely."

When Elia asked, the five of them said they had been thinking about the project nonstop, whether awake or asleep.

No matter what the team was doing, their minds were running—even while they slept. As soon as an idea hit them, they woke up to jot it down. Sorcerers often entered such a state after starting an experiment and narrowing their focus. Frankly, even though they wanted to rest, they couldn't. Never knowing when a flash of insight would come, their minds remained in a constant state of tension. *Spellbound* was a good word for it. Driven by a single goal, they found the difference between consciousness and subconsciousness no longer mattered.

Elia's declaration, however, had shattered that tension.

Kunon reacted first, exclaiming, “Let’s sleep today! I’m tired, too!” and creating waterbeds for everyone.

All five of them jumped into their waterbeds without saying a word, so quickly it surprised even Elia, who had just shouted at them. They were asleep within seconds.

Their exhausted, corpse-like faces looked extraordinarily peaceful as they slept, enough to make Elia worry that they might never wake up. And once they’d fallen asleep, Elia was left behind—the sole conscious person in a room that may as well have been a war zone.





"…I can't leave it like this, right?"

Though she wavered a little, Elia thought enough was enough.

The state of the lab was truly shocking. The whereabouts of any given item were a mystery, and there were dozens upon dozens of unreturned library books all over the room.

It would probably be fine to tidy up a little bit, right?

The team's research results seemed to be concentrated around the desks, so it was probably safe to organize the documents and notes outside of that area.

After all, if she left things as they were, she was sure the others wouldn't clean it up. And in that case…

"This might be too much for one person, though."

The sea of chaos spreading throughout the classroom was too vast to overcome alone.

Honestly assessing the situation, Elia decided to call for help.

One day had passed since Elia's rest order.

A sleepy-looking Kunon had gone home to comply with his curfew, but the other four team members remained dead to the world.

"This is quite the shameful sight."

While the team slept, Elia and her helper set about cleaning and organizing the lab.

She had called on Shilto, the Harmony Faction representative. Considering the subject of the research, she hadn't thought it a good idea to ask for just anyone's help.

This idea for a magic-containing box—a container that could store a specific spell—could be the invention of the century. It would allow magic to be used even without a sorcerer present and had the potential to change not just magical society but the world at large.

Kunon's team was developing a very important magic tool, and if someone were to run off with the results, it would be a disaster.

Thus, Elia had decided to call on a person in a position of authority. Serious and honest, Shilto was the perfect choice.

"Take care of anything relevant to your research by yourselves. Understand? I won't let you get back to your project until this is cleaned up."

The team had slept for almost an entire day, and Shilto hit them with that decree the moment they opened their eyes.

Start cleaning.

No cleaning, no experimenting.

She was very reliable in times like these.

And so the five team members, technically still taking a break from their work, joined Elia and Shilto in a roughly two-day effort to clean their lab.

"Three, two, one—"

""Thank you very much.""

Bael led the count.

The team thanked Elia and Shilto, who felt a bit like adults on the receiving end of forced politeness from children.

Well, none of them looked like they were on death's doorstep anymore, so that was a relief. They even appeared to have gone home and changed their clothes for the first time in a while.

Though she had worried she was overstepping, Elia was fairly sure — No, she was *certain* this had been for the best. She was able to prevent the five of them from dying of overwork. If they *had* died, it would have been too late.

"I'd rather not meddle. However," said Shilto, looking at Elia and the others, "what do you think about adding her to the team officially? In my opinion, this group absolutely needs someone to do chores and manage its members' health." She was referring to Elia. "Even if you can't make her a part of the team, at least compensate her a little or something. She's already done more for you than anyone should expect from a free service. Frankly, you've taken her for granted."

Just before leaving, Shilto added, "And you had better get me something as a thank-you, too."

She had spent three days with them despite already being short on time. They needed to thank her with something more than just words.

"So will you join us, Miss Elia?"

Elia had been staring at the door as Shilto left, but she turned at the sound of Kunon's voice.

"……"

There were five people with awfully sincere expressions looking at her. Despite Kunon's eye mask, she could tell his gaze was directed her way, too. They looked so pleading—especially Bael. Elia couldn't believe the amount of hope and desperation on his face. She had never seen him look that way before.

If possible, she would have preferred he turn that gaze on her because of his own private feelings, not because he wanted to recruit her for a project.

…But well. Whatever.

"Um… I'm not particularly against the idea," she said. "But I haven't finished earning my credits yet, so I would only be able to come and go as much as I have been up until now."

The team's goal was rather advanced. Plus, having never been involved in magic tool-making, Elia didn't understand a lot of what they were doing, so she couldn't participate in the tool's development.

The only thing she could do was look out for them, such as by helping with chores. If that was okay with them…

"Yes, thank you very much!"

The group erupted in cheers, taking her hands in theirs to celebrate.

Well, if they were this welcoming, then Elia had no regrets.

"…Um. You know what?"

It's already…like this again…

"Let's be more careful this time," they'd said. *"Let's not let things get out of hand again."*

Were they simply not willing to put in the effort?

A few days later, their newly appointed team member Elia arrived at the lab.

Despite all the organization they'd done, there were already research materials strewn all over the floor, and the other five team members looked exhausted.

Once more absorbed in their experiment, none of them had even noticed her come in.

"Maybe I shouldn't have agreed so quickly…," Elia muttered.

She heaved a long sigh and began picking up documents.

◆

Around the same time, two teachers stood in the Saint's room.

"Professors, please take good care of these children," said the room's current occupant.

One of the teachers was Sureyya Gaulin, a light magic user. The other was earth sorcerer Keevan Brid.

"They just need to be watered, right?" said Sureyya.

"Yes. Please harvest and eat the fruits and vegetables if you'd like. They should be ripe in about a week."

Reyes Saint-Lance was leaving her plants in the two teachers' care.

"How long until you come back?" Keevan asked, looking at a pot containing an unripe raspberry plant.

"The plan is to return in two weeks, but I'm sure all sorts of business will pop up. I suspect I may be away for a month."

"I see. That's a bit long."

"I apologize. I can't entrust my plants to just anyone."

"Oh no, it's not your fault. I'm just worried about your research being delayed for a month."

"It cannot be helped."

Quite honestly, Reyes would also have preferred not to leave school.

Indeed, despite her lack of emotions, the Saint could identify the exact feeling making a home in her chest. It was *reluctance*. She didn't want to go.

"After all, I'm a saint."

The Holy Kingdom of Saint Lance required her to attend a sacred festival. In other words, this was an official duty.

She performed such duties every year, so this had been expected. It was a part of her work even before she came to magic school. It was neither a sudden request nor an unreasonable adjustment in her schedule. It was something she had always planned to do.

Except…Reyes didn't want to leave. She wanted to stay at school.

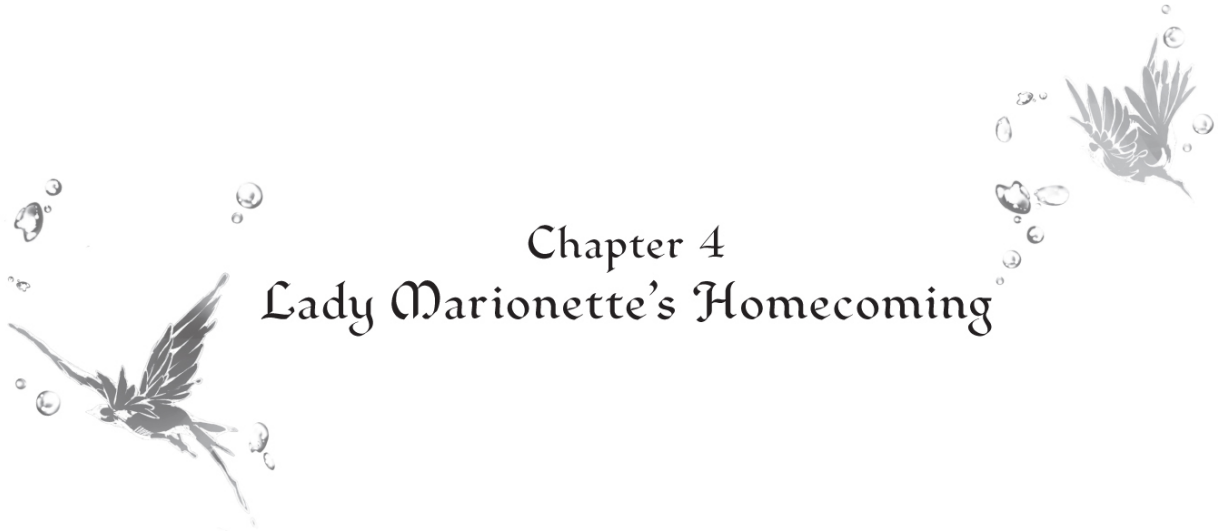
But she couldn't be so selfish. At school, she was allowed to be a sorcerer before she was a saint. But to her country, she was a saint first and foremost.

"I'll be counting on you starting tomorrow," she said.

The next morning, Reyes would travel to the Holy Kingdom, where she would stay, unable to return to school, for some time.

Her classmates had already been informed, though she hadn't been able to see Kunon. He was always busy working on his magic tool lately, and she hadn't wanted to bother him.

And so, with about three months left in her first year at school, Reyes headed home.



Chapter 4
Lady Marionette's Homecoming

"Thank you for your hard work. I hope you enjoy the short vacation."

With that, Reyes walked off toward the Great Temple with the priest who had come to greet her.

Philea and Jirni, who served as her maids and bodyguards, saw her off.

"…Whew. That's a weight off the shoulders, isn't it?"

"Yeah."

When Reyes was no longer in sight, Jirni's shoulders sagged and Philea breathed a small sigh.

For the time being, their work guarding the Saint was done.

Short on emotion, Reyes wasn't very independent, either. She did as she was told, never did anything uncalled for, and never went anywhere unplanned. As far as taking care of someone went, they could not have asked for an easier charge.

But just because Reyes didn't cause trouble didn't mean they could take it easy. As her bodyguards, they had to keep watch over Reyes's movements *and* be mindful of external threats. Vigilance was essential.

The job paid extremely well, but it required a lot of care and consideration.

The three of them had come to the Holy City of Libila, where the Great Temple was, in the Holy Kingdom of Saint Lance. Libila was what other countries would have called a capital city.

The trip back had been short. Thanks to Philea—who was also a wind sorcerer—using her flight magic, it had only taken a few days for the three of them to arrive in the city and to escort Reyes to the Great Temple, where she would be staying for the time being.

While she was there, Reyes would be watched over and cared for by the temple's priests, so Philea and Jirni would get some time off. That didn't mean they had no duties whatsoever, though. One of the higher-ups would surely call on them at some point and ask them to report on how Reyes was spending her time in Dirashik. And of course, when it came time to return to the magic city, they would be accompanying her again, which meant they weren't allowed to leave Libila in the meantime.

Nevertheless, time off was still time off. There were a few restrictions, but this was their first significant break in quite a while.

Starting that evening, Jirni planned to drink enough alcohol to fill a bathtub, and Philea wanted to take care of some errands of her own.

"Okay, I'm off. Contact me if anything comes up."

"Yep, later."

Shoulders light, an eager Jirni disappeared into the hustle and bustle of the Holy City in search of liquor.

"……"

Philea watched her go before walking off in a different direction.

The truth was, Philea was a priest of the Holy Kingdom. She kept that fact a secret from Jirni. Reyes knew, but she had been

instructed not to tell anyone else.

In a word, Philea played the role of watchdog. It simply wouldn't do to surround Reyes with outsiders, and when Jirni first became a guard, her trustworthiness had not yet been established.

She was a highly skilled adventurer hired through the Adventurers Guild, as it was deemed beneficial to have someone along who knew the ins and outs of the world. That was why they hadn't simply filled the position with someone from the Holy Kingdom.

Nevertheless, they hadn't been sure if she had ulterior motives when accepting the position. And so, it had been necessary to stay vigilant and determine whether she might cause harm to the Saint.

By now, she had gained their trust. But setting that aside…

"Is Bishop Ezué in?"

Philea had arrived at her destination: an orphanage near the Great Temple.

This orphanage operated as a training school, and brilliant orphans from all over the Holy Kingdom were assembled there. In short, it was an institution for training future high-ranking members of the church. On the surface, it seemed like a normal orphanage, and aside from the fact that it taught the children complex languages and mathematics, it wasn't that different.

"Yes. Please wait a moment."

After enlisting a passing nun to help her, Philea waited.

She wasn't required to pass on any information yet. However, there was one thing she had to report right away—Reyes's growth. That topic, at least, could not wait for later.

"Ah, Lady Marionette is home."

A voice reached Reyes's ears as she walked through the Great Temple.

Lady Marionette—that was a name the servants and priests sometimes used for Reyes, who had spent her life in the temple from a very young age.

The moniker brought to mind an emotionless doll; a puppet who only did as she was told; a figurine incapable of caring for others. With such connotations attached, it was certainly not meant as a compliment.

Nonetheless, Reyes, who was indeed lacking in emotion, had thought nothing of the name when she was made aware of it. It didn't upset her, and she had never expressly told anyone not to say it. She didn't care if they called her Lady Marionette. She didn't pay attention to things like that in the first place.

"After you."

Her presence in the temple for the first time in a while attracted some attention, but Reyes made it to her room without being stopped.

The young female priest walking ahead of her and carrying her luggage opened the door and beckoned her inside.

"……"

Her plain room looked utterly unchanged from how she had left it.

Actually, no—it felt somewhat small and cramped.

There was only a desk, a bed, and whatever decorations she had received as birthday presents each year from the High Priest and archbishop. It was a room that felt only barely lived in.

This room, Reyes thought. *It won't do.*

"What is your name?"

Pausing only one step into the room, Reyes turned to look at the young priest waiting in the doorway.

"Oh yes. My name is Leela."

Reyes had not recognized Leela. This was despite the fact that there weren't many priests attending to the Saint, and Leela had been looking after her closely for about two years.

Leela had vaguely realized that Reyes paid no attention to her, however, so it came as no surprise.

What *was* surprising was the present moment—Reyes asking for her name; actually facing her while speaking; making eye contact, addressing her.

Lady Marionette—even Leela had thought it a fitting nickname; Reyes was simply that unique.

And yet…here was Reyes, whom she hadn't seen in over half a year, behaving in a completely new way.

"Leela, could you have some potted plants brought here, please? Flowers or even weeds would be fine."

Reyes couldn't stand places like this. There was no soil, no greenery. It was lifeless. She could abide a small room. She could endure being hungry or not having many clothes. If she had to, she could even tolerate having nothing to wear at all.

Not having plants, however, was too much. She would not go back to a life without verdure. She couldn't be in an environment without vegetation. Reyes longed to cast a Sanctum around some potted plants as soon as possible.

"P-potted plants?"

"Anything is fine, even vegetables. Or vegetable seeds. Please bring me several types of vegetable seeds and some pots."

"…Uhhh, so you want…vegetables?"

"They don't even have to be in season."

Leela didn't quite understand, and it seemed like Reyes had more preferences than she was letting on, but this was a request from the Saint.

Leela had a duty to report in detail on Reyes's actions and demands, but…surely for something of this nature, there was no need for special approval, right? After all, the nearby orphanage had gardening plots, so both seeds and soil could be procured quickly.

"Well then, I'll fetch those for you, so please make yourself comfortable, Your Grace."

"You're going now? Oh, but you won't be able to carry all those pots alone, will you? I'll come, too. As I recall, the orphanage has a garden, doesn't it?"

"Huh…? Uh?"

"Let's not waste any time. You can just toss my luggage over there. Come now—quickly."

Snatching her bag from Leela's hands, Reyes threw it onto the bed. She had packed light. Only some clothes and souvenirs for the High Priest and archbishop, but who cared about those things at the moment?

"Let's go," she said.

When did Reyes get so pushy? Leela wondered. *Is this really the same Lady Marionette?*

Bewildered, Leela hurried to catch up with the Saint, who had already left the room.

"Has Reyes returned?"

The sun was already setting when he got back to his room.

Taking off the opulent garb he wore when meeting important guests and visitors, he changed back into his usual simple and comfortable clothes. He still had paperwork to do, so it was too soon to get ready for bed.

This was the High Priest of the Holy Kingdom—Archield Saint-Lance. He was a middle-aged man turning fifty that year and the head of the country.

Slender and delicate, Archield may not have had an imposing presence, but for a holy man, his meager form was, if anything, a point of pride. And in contrast to his timid appearance, he was sharp and capable.

Naturally, as the country's leader, he also had a strict side.

"Yes. She arrived shortly after noon." Archield's attendant priest, Fon, answered while delivering dinner.

With the upcoming festival practically breathing down their necks, they had been busy lately with preparations. Consequently, though he had wanted to be present to welcome Saint Reyes home, it hadn't been possible. He had been hopeful about making it back in time to see her at dinner, but that hadn't panned out, either.

Tomorrow, they would be reunited, likely at breakfast.

"Has it really been more than half a year since we last saw each other? She must have grown quite a bit."

"Indeed. Children grow quickly at that age."

Archield was unmarried.

Devotees of the Radiant Goddess, Kira Leila, were not prohibited from matrimony. But from the moment he decided to dedicate his life to his faith, Archield had been determined to remain a bachelor.

That was probably why he thought of Reyes as his own child.

He had been resigned to the fact that he would never have children. And then a young girl—the Saint—had appeared at his side. Toward her, he felt the kind of emotions typically reserved for one's family.

He intended to shower those feelings—the care, affection, and tenderness he hadn't even realized he possessed—upon Reyes.

Emotions were hard to come by for the Saint. She was so unlike other people that it made those closest to her worry. Perhaps that was why Archield had adopted the role of her guardian with such gusto. It was either that, or pure paternal instinct.

The result was an indulgent father who fussed over and doted on his daughter excessively. Though he hid it well in public, on the inside, he was always worried about her.

He hadn't wanted to let her go to magic school. Living far away from her was terrible. The fear that she would be bullied wherever she went for her unusual personality sat like a stone in his stomach.

In her letters, Reyes said she had made friends. Archield fretted nonetheless.

Were they true friends? Or were they actually wolves in sheep's clothing? Or could they be libertines after an innocent maiden?

Many times he had cautioned her, "Be wary of men. Do not trust them so easily."

And yet she had written to him about making friends with boys.

Was there something going on between her and one of those young men? Had Reyes been carrying on some passionate affair without Archield's knowledge?

No, surely not. This was Reyes, after all. She always abided by his rules. That was just how she was. Even so, he worried and worried

and *worried*…

"That reminds me," said Fon. "An urgent report has arrived regarding Saint Reyes."

"What?!" Achield's uncharacteristic rise in volume took Fon by surprise. "Why wasn't it delivered to me directly?!"

"Ah, because, um, it isn't a matter requiring your immediate attention."

All matters involving the Saint were important. But the report in question had not been deemed high priority enough to interrupt the High Priest's duties, nor had it merited any sort of rapid response.

"The details are in the letter on your desk."

Almost as soon as the words were said, Archield rushed to retrieve the envelope.

"…Hmm."

Inspecting the letter's contents, he had to acknowledge that it was, indeed, not very urgent. His anxiety had gotten the better of him, just a little.

The first thing that had popped into Archield's mind was what to do if the letter reported that Reyes had brought a man home with her. What it actually said was that some plants had been brought to Reyes's room at her request. The types of plants she had chosen were listed as well, and they all looked relatively unremarkable.

Archield recalled that in one of her letters, Reyes had written that she'd developed an interest in plants and crops. And in that case, this report made perfect sense.

If anything, it was cause for joy. Reyes, who never showed curiosity about anything and did nothing unless instructed to, had asked for something of her own volition. Surely this was a sign of growth.

I'm glad I sent her to magic school after all.

No doubt the friends she had made were sensible, respectable people, too. They must have been positive influences.

However, realizing that Reyes had grown came with a small but definite tinge of loneliness. As she grew, she was becoming more

independent, and that meant straying farther from the nest. She would have less and less need for Archield's protection and become increasingly capable of making decisions for herself.

It would probably only get lonelier for the High Priest from that point on. But every step Reyes took away from Archield would surely bring her closer to her own happiness.

And so it was okay. After all, praying for their daughters' happiness was what fathers did.

…Or at least, that was what he had thought the night before.

"Good morning, Your Holiness. It's been a while."

The next day, unable to wait any longer, Archield paid an early visit to Reyes in her room.

He was hoping they could perform their morning prayers together. The thought of waiting until breakfast had been unbearable. He was dying to see her face for the first time in over six months.

He *had* wanted to see her, but…

"Something happened, didn't it?" he asked.

…after more than half a year apart, Reyes did appear to have gotten a little bigger.

She seemed taller, her body slightly less childlike. Her expression was, as usual, blank. But it also seemed just a tad more mature.

This was a Reyes who, after overcoming the trials and tribulations of being twelve, had turned thirteen in the winter. It was only natural that she had grown, wasn't it?

But more importantly…

"Pardon?"

"Are you in some sort of trouble?"

"I'm not sure what you mean." Reyes was as emotionless as ever.

And yet—she had changed. If he had to describe what was different, Archield would have said it wasn't Reyes herself so much as…*her room*.

"……"

What was with all the pots?

An extraordinary number of potted plants were now taking up more than half of her room. There were so many he could hardly count them.

In mere moments, Archield's fatherly concern for Reyes had exploded out of control. He should never have let her go to magic school. This had to be because of those unsavory friends of hers.

It was unpardonable. Who were the scoundrels who had instilled such evil into this righteous saint? Who was putting unwanted drivel into her trusting head?

He would discover the identities of each and every one of them. Then, for the crime of harming a saint, he would have no choice but to put them to death.

"Oh, that's right," said the Saint. "I have a souvenir for you, Your Holiness. Do you have a moment to spare?"

"Of course."

He had to find out—who were the worms taking advantage of Reyes? Of his beloved daughter?

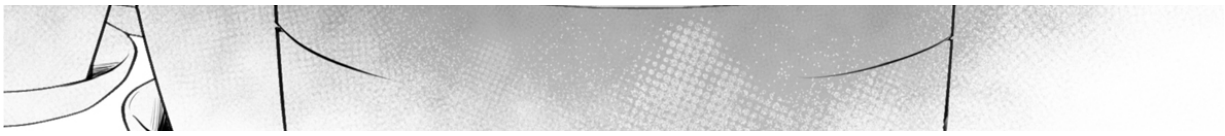
"Your Holiness, we should go," said Fon, his attendant priest, stopping him.

Right. It was nearly time for morning prayers. He couldn't stay for a leisurely chat.

"We'll talk later. Shall we go perform our morning prayers, Reyes?"

Frustrated though Archield was, he wouldn't dwell on it. Reyes was scheduled to spend at least two weeks at the Great Temple. Her stay could be extended to around a month merely by entrusting her with a few small duties.





With that much time at his disposal, the High Priest could be careful and thorough in digging up information about these ne'er-do-wells. There was no need to rush.

"Please go ahead without me," said the Saint.

"What?"

Archield could not believe his ears, but he knew he had heard correctly.

He'd been turned down. Reyes had never said no to one of his requests before. No matter what it was, she had always agreed.

"I have to water these little dears, so please leave without me."

"What?"

Little dears? Since when did the Saint use sentimental words like those? Where had she even learned them?

No. Archield steadied himself. Such words were used all the time by all sorts of people.

"By '*little dears*'…you mean these potted plants?"

"Yes. They're all precious to me. They're like my children."

"What?"

Like her children?!

Did girls of twelve or thirteen develop motherly instincts?! Wasn't it a bit early? And wasn't this a few too many children?!

Wait. Archield steadied himself again. There was a significant difference between "they are my children" and "they are *like* my children."

"…So you like flowers?"

"Yes, I like flowers, too. But I've discovered that growing fruits and vegetables is more enjoyable."

"Wha—? Oh…I see."

He had to remain calm. What Reyes had just said was completely normal, not something to be concerned about.

"…Huh?"

No—that wasn't right. It couldn't be.

It was unusual precisely because it was normal. Reyes making a normal statement was unnatural. That was the kind of child she

was… Or rather, that was the kind of child she *had been*. Until six months ago anyway.

"Your Holiness, the time…"

When Fon called out to him, Archield nearly shouted, "Who cares about that right now?! Reyes! She's changed so much! Aren't you concerned about what could have happened in the last half year?!"

With great effort, he held the sentiment in. Making full use of the faith he had cultivated over his many years, Archield exercised restraint. Such was the power of the devout.

"Very well. We'll talk more over breakfast. You can tell me all about magic school."

"Yes. I'll see you then."

Archield left Reyes's room, then he breathed a long sigh. It was already turning out to be an exhausting day.

That was when he finally noticed that his forehead was totally drenched with sweat.

"…Did you hear that? Reyes said no to me."

Her refusal was the reason for all that sweat. Being turned down by his daughter hurt more than he had expected. He had also been quite shaken up by the changes in her.

Archield recalled a time when a devotee had lamented his daughter's cold demeanor. Now he understood. He, too, felt compelled to complain about the pain in his chest.

"We really must go," said Fon. "The congregation will be waiting."

Preaching the divine precepts and guiding the faithful was the High Priest's duty. In that moment, however, Archield wished he had someone to guide him.

Was the pain of being a father truly so intense?

Already burdened with a heavy heart despite the early hour, Archield made his way to the cathedral.

He learned he was mistaken surprisingly quickly.

"I see… So that's how it is."

The force responsible for the state of Reyes's room wasn't the evil influence of someone else; Reyes simply had a genuine interest in plants.

This was the same Reyes who had never shown an interest in anything. She was like a completely different person from the girl who had left the Great Temple six months ago. That was how drastically she had changed.

Archield sat down to breakfast with Reyes after morning prayers.

They were eating in her bedroom, surrounded by countless potted plants. Being with his daughter for the first time in six months was blissful indeed. But naturally, he was anxious to hear what Reyes had to say.

She was telling him about school, and her account contained some top secret details.

Philea, the Saint's maid and bodyguard, had a duty to report about her charge, but truly confidential information had to be conveyed verbally.

Since an oral report involved no physical evidence, it prevented information from being leaked. Furthermore, Archield had decided that such reports would be given by Reyes herself. After all, the Saint didn't disobey orders, and she didn't lie.

"You started by cultivating the sacred herb and your interest developed from there, yes?"

He knew the general story. Students in the Advanced class had to earn their own expenses, so Reyes had begun cultivating shi-shilla.

But that was the extent of Archield's knowledge. The particulars had been kept secret because Philea had judged them top secret.

Her judgment had been correct, though it seemed some fragmented information was circulating around parts of the magic city of Dirashik. Something about a successful cultivation involving a saint and an herb.

Regardless, the cultivation of shi-shilla was an achievement that would go down in history. All the more so because a saint was behind it.

This feat was likely to become a page in Reyes Saint-Lance's life story. No, it definitely would be. His daughter's efforts would be preserved for future generations.

In modern times, saints were regarded primarily as symbols of the Holy Kingdom. The days of purifying cursed forests and slaying powerful demons were long over. Now, as children born of the goddess's love, saints mostly participated in festivals and formed ties with other countries.

"As a result of the experiments, we discovered my Sanctum spell contains the power of fertility."

"Really?"

That was also something Archield had read in a written report. Still, he wanted to hear it from Reyes herself. He wanted to praise her.

"Yes. It promotes growth and allows crops to grow out of season."

"That's amazing."

He did want to commend Reyes, but even if he hadn't, what other reply could Archield give? It really was incredible.

"I believe there's still more to be done with it. At present, I'm experimenting with selective breeding, and I've been thinking about whether it's possible to develop crops that will grow in infertile soil…" She spoke in a detached tone, without facial expressions.

And yet she had a lot to say. This, too, was very unlike her behavior of six months ago. Before, she almost never spoke unless she was answering a question or reporting information.

Was the hint of joy he saw in her a trick of Archield's eyes?

He listened calmly while she discussed these important matters. Watching her speak with such eagerness filled Archield with so much love for his daughter that he could barely stand it.

There was one thing that kept bothering him, however.

"Reyes."

"Yes?"

"From now on, could you perhaps refrain from saying the phrase 'get high'?"

The term had come up several times—"got the leftover herbs high" and "getting high in the pot" and "got high on nutritional supplements" and so on.

Every time it came from her mouth, Archield's anxiety spiked.

"Is it an inappropriate term?" asked the Saint.

"I don't believe it's befitting of those who serve the goddess… Did someone teach it to you?"

Whoever was responsible for this was beyond pardon. He would definitely make them pay. Masking his inner fury with a smile, Archield took great pains to ask his question casually.

"Yes, a little boy I met at my preferred general store in Dirashik. He told me that it's a common slang term used by young people these days, so I should use it, too. He said, 'getting them high on this good stuff right here will make them grow like crazy.' According to him, one can say they 'got high' or 'are high' and things like that."

"Yes, I get it, thank you." Calm and composed, the High Priest nodded just once. He had identified one bad apple.

"When you've gotten something really high, you say it's 'totally blitzed'—"

"Let's not use that term, either. Ever again."

Hearing the words *totally blitzed* from his precious daughter's mouth—now there was something shocking.

That general store brat was going to pay for this.

"There are a few things I wanted to confirm with you."

A massive festival—the celebration of the birth of the Radiant Goddess, Kira Leila—was almost upon them.

Somehow, amid the hustle and bustle of preparations, Archield managed to make time to meet with Philea in a secluded corner of the orphanage gardens.

Philea, who served as both maid and bodyguard to Reyes, was a member of the goddess's faith. On the surface, she had no

association with the High Priest or the Holy Kingdom's senior authorities. As she was also a skilled magic user, she worked as a sort of undercover agent. That was why she was assigned to Reyes.

"What is it, Your Holiness?"

Philea had a duty to report to the High Priest, but she never expected the man himself to come ask her questions.

She was a little anxious. What in the world could he want to confirm? Was he about to reprimand her for some work-related issue?

Other than Jirni drinking on the job, Philea couldn't think of any obvious mistakes. Had there been some other blunder?

"Could this be about Jirni's drinking?" she blurted out, her nerves getting the best of her.

"Oh no, that's no issue. We discussed that back when she was hired. It's in her contract that a little drinking is allowed."

"So that was true?"

Jirni liked to drink. She did so without hesitation, even during work. Philea had told her off over it countless times, but Jirni always gave the same justification: Drinking was within the bounds of her contract, so it was fine.

If the High Priest was saying as much, Jirni must have been telling the truth.

"That was her condition for accepting the job. In exchange, she agreed to be constrained to guard duties for an extended period and take on the work of maid, to which she was unaccustomed. I couldn't hire just anyone to be at our precious Saint's side, after all."

Jirni appeared a bit lax, but her abilities were solid.

"Jirni is a skilled adventurer with a reputation within the guild for her excellent conduct and serious approach to her job. The fact that she isn't religious was a plus, too. She was the perfect candidate, and—"

"She would only accept the job on the condition that she be allowed to drink."

"Correct. She said drinking was the only thing she couldn't give up. She insisted that she wouldn't work if she couldn't drink, no matter how good the compensation was."

Jirni was bold beyond belief. She'd demanded to the High Priest's face that he let her drink?

"So anyway, I don't care about her drinking. You know, she can actually hold her liquor quite well. Give her ten bottles of wine and she can still stand up straight."

Philea found some of this rather hard to accept. But if it was all settled in the eyes of her superiors, then there was nothing for her to say about it.

"Anyway, about Reyes." Archield's gaze turned serious.

It seemed the real topic of discussion was about to begin.

"Is it true that Reyes has a lot of male friends?"

Philea had been wondering what the High Priest was about to say with such a somber expression when he'd suddenly asked about Reyes's friendships.

Momentarily caught off guard, Philea had to remind herself that this was an important issue. Reyes was so lacking in emotion that she was called Lady Marionette.

For her to have made friends was… Truthfully, it was difficult to imagine her forming any relationships at all. She hadn't even been able to do so within the Great Temple, where she had lived for many years. It was no wonder the High Priest was worried.

"They seem to be no more than ordinary friends."

Kunon, Hank, and Riyah—those were the names Philea had heard Reyes mention. The Saint seemed to feel particularly obligated to Kunon.

…Indeed, from an objective point of view, Reyes did have a lot of male friends. Though that could be considered inevitable, since the three boys were her classmates.

"Philea."

"Yes?"

"I want Reyes to be able to love as she chooses. That's why I'm not searching for marriage candidates and why I turn down proposals made for her hand."

"…Is that so…?"

Perhaps *unexpected* wasn't the right word. Philea had never thought of this man as someone who would use the Saint's marriage as a political tool.

Archield Saint-Lance was a kind, virtuous man of spotless integrity who loathed injustice. Honest, fair, and impartial, Archield treated everyone the same despite his high-ranking position. He didn't seem capable of pushing a political union for Reyes.

"So I'd like for us to speak frankly. Because she's a saint, we can't let Reyes move out of the country. That means we'll have to take in her husband as our own. Ideally, he would be a devotee of the Radiant Goddess or willing to convert, even if that has to come after the marriage. So—do you see what I mean?"

"…No, I'm afraid I don't quite follow…"

Archield's face was unbelievably serious. She could feel the pressure coming off it in waves.

He was, by all appearances, a completely ordinary middle-aged man. And yet he had risen to the position of High Priest. He was made of more substantial stuff than his looks let on.

"I want to preemptively investigate any man Reyes seems likely to choose. That's all. I have no ulterior motives. Really, none at all. Not yet anyway. Understand?"

His insistence was powerful, too. His thoroughly calm voice only served to add an edge to his words.

"Yes, I see… She seems to get along well with the other students in her same year and class."

"Kunon?"

"Ah. Yes. Did Her Grace tell you about him? She also does business with Master Kunon, so I believe they're on rather good terms."

"…So it *is* Kunon, then?"

"Your Holiness…? Your Holiness?"

Archield's face had turned incredibly grim, but Philea had no idea why.

"And?" he asked.

"P-pardon?"

"What sort of child is this Kunon? I heard he's an extremely frivolous boy who asked Reyes out for tea and parfaits and such the moment they met. Is that true?"

"Yes, probably."

Kunon thought being polite meant sweet-talking women, though it became clear right away that he never meant anything by it. His pretty words were devoid of feeling, so it seemed unlikely that any girls took them at face value. For one thing, he was preposterously more enthusiastic when he was talking about magic than when he was flirting.

"I see. Thank you."

"…Your Holiness?"

A gentle smile had replaced his stern scowl.

Philea wasn't really following, but it seemed Archield had understood something and was satisfied for the moment.

"Ah, that reminds me."

After briefly discussing Reyes's friendships, a priest called for Archield and their conversation came to an end.

However, after making to leave, the High Priest turned back.

"Philea. To what extent is Reyes interested in plants, in your estimation?"

"Huh?"

To what extent?

Philea wasn't sure how to reply. She didn't know why the question was being asked, but she thought for a moment and gave an answer anyway.

"I believe she would probably try her hand at growing any plant or seed she came across."

Both the garden and the interior of the house they'd rented in Dirashik were full to bursting with plants.

Expression blank, Reyes would talk happily about finding rare seeds at the neighborhood general store, then plant and raise them as if it were the only thing to do.

Some of the plants were kinds that Philea had never seen before. She had recently been surprised to learn that Reyes was even attempting to grow carnivorous varieties.

Of course, now that her crops and herbs were coming in nicely, their meals had become more luxurious.

"I see… Her room at the Great Temple is quite a sight at the moment."

"Ahhh… I have a feeling I know what you mean."

Recalling their house in Dirashik, Philea assumed the Saint's room here must have developed a similar look.

"So, you see, I'm considering entrusting Reyes with Kira Vera seeds."

"…Kira Vera?!"

Kira Vera was the Sacred Tree said to be the true form of the Radiant Goddess, Kira Leila. When the goddess descended to their world, her body was in the shape of an enormous tree—the Sacred Tree, Kira Vera. That was what had been recorded in the scriptures.

Of course, that was a legend, and no one had ever seen the tree.

"There are Kira Vera seeds?!"

"Yes. Quite a lot of them, in fact."

What?

The Sacred Tree—which was believed to be the Radiant Goddess herself and which Philea had thought existed only in myth—not only had seeds, it had a *lot* of them.

"But apparently, they don't sprout without a saint's fertility power."

Kira Vera was a very valuable tree. The Holy Kingdom's high-ranking figures—Archield included—knew that very well, because there remained detailed records of it from years gone by. Other ancient countries probably had similar records.

It was a tree of great fertility—a true sacred tree. Where Kira Vera grew, the surrounding earth was revitalized.

Archield didn't know how it worked exactly, but it was likely similar to sacred herbs, which contained some magic elements. Considering its effects, it made sense why such a tree would be enshrined in myth.

It was said that long ago, the Sacred Tree was planted in land shrouded in a powerful, thick miasma. The tree then purified that land.

There were no records of its cultivation in the last two hundred years, so there probably weren't many people in modern times who knew of it.

"I'll give it to her before you return to Dirashik. I'll instruct Reyes not to tell anyone about the seeds, and I'd like you to quietly keep watch. Naturally, I want detailed reports, too."

"U-understood! Do you…think it will grow?"

"Absolutely. Reyes can do it. After all, she's my d—I mean, she's a saint."

His…what?

Whatever Archield had almost said gave Philea pause, but the High Priest was gone in an instant. It probably wasn't that important anyway.

"…Kira Vera seeds…"

The astounding plan that the High Priest had just casually revealed to her was much more of a shock.

Someday, she might even touch the stuff of sacred legends. As a believer in the Radiant Goddess's faith, that idea brought joy, pride, and humility.

"…I have to make sure it doesn't show on my face."

She would be entrusted with the seeds of the Sacred Tree. How could she forget?

Of course, no matter where the seeds came from, Reyes would probably go about cultivating them, simply and quietly. Given the

circumstances, it seemed like the person who would feel the greatest burden was Philea.

Reyes and her guards returned to Dirashik approximately three weeks later.

The many potted plants from Reyes's room came along as their travel companions.

With the added weight, Philea had a harder time controlling her flight magic, but her heart was dancing in her chest all the while.

Doubtless, she was even more concerned than the Saint about the future of those sacred seeds.

◆

"The shi-shilla capsules are extremely popular. We hope to continue selling them for a long time."

They were in an interior reception room at the Adventurers Guild. It was an odd setting for their group of five—three adults and two children—to meet in, though two of the adults were guards.

On one side of a table sat the accounting manager for the Dirashik branch of the guild, Asand Smithee. Across from him were Kunon and Reyes. And standing behind the two children were the Saint's maids and guards, Philea and Jirni.

"I am glad they have met your expectations. Kunon, the documents… Kunon?"

"…Hmm? Oh, sorry. Yes, the documents."

When Reyes called out to him, it took Kunon a beat longer than usual to respond.

He was several months into his development experiments, and lately, he often appeared a bit dazed. One might think he was dozing off, but he was definitely awake, as he sometimes started furiously taking notes without warning. It was simply that something had such a strong hold on his thoughts that he would forget the world around him, no matter what he was in the middle of doing.

"My apologies," he said. "Here are the documents."

"Ah yes…," said Asand. "Are you all right? You look rather tired…"

In response to the man's concern, Kunon replied, "It's just a lack of sleep. Truly, please forgive me for derailing the meeting."

Development of the magic-containing box had already stretched on for months, and that wasn't the only project Kunon was juggling. Another was just about to bear fruit.

"When properly stored, the shi-shilla capsules last for three months… You've confirmed as much on your end as well, yes?"

"Yes. I've been recommending carrying them in a bottle."

It had been a few months since their first transaction. Every thirty days or so, the Adventurers Guild purchased a fixed amount of capsules, which were already prized as a must-have for top adventurers.

At first, the capsules had merely been offered as samples, but demand had exceeded expectations to such an extent that they were now simply selling them. Furthermore, relying on data from adventurers who had actually used the capsules, the product had undergone several rounds of improvement.

Once the Medicine Boxes—currently in the durability testing stage—were complete, the capsules would be even easier to store and carry.

"As outlined in the document," Reyes explained, "further improvements to the product would only make costs skyrocket."

"Yes, I see…"

There had been a proposal to increase the medicine's healing power by using magic potions to either strengthen the herb itself or add to its ingredients. While they had achieved some level of success in that regard, taking it any further did not seem viable.

It was neither efficient nor economical. Kunon and Reyes had concluded that, given the cost of the magic potions required to augment the shi-shilla, it was simply not efficient or cost-effective.

They had already implemented all the improvements and modifications they could think of, and at present, there was no more they could do. They had prepared documents to that effect.

"In our opinion, it would be best to consider the capsules a completed product at this point. We believe any further changes would be unfeasible."

Asand scanned the documents as Reyes spoke, nodding along to her words.

"Indeed. I understand. A formal reply will follow once I consult with the guild master, but I'll be sure to convey your wishes." Incidentally, as the guild master was absent that day, Asand was serving as proxy. "Now, then. Shall we move on?"

And as far as Asand was concerned, the next item of conversation was of particular importance.

The capsules' effectiveness had already been proven by adventurers in the field. Frankly, there was no more to discuss. Now Asand had received these documents and had an even better understanding of the matter. Whatever the case, the guild was going to keep purchasing the capsules.

From the very start of their negotiations, Asand had recognized the product's utility. Now he had proof. That was all there was to it.

The next topic would take them leaps and bounds beyond the first.

"May we be present for this as well?" asked Reyes.

The Saint hadn't really played a part in this second matter. It was something Kunon had forged ahead with on his own.

In a preparatory meeting with the guild master regarding the sacred herb, she had handed over a letter on Kunon's behalf. But essentially, the two topics were separate. There was no reason for the Saint and her guards to be present. That said, she was just as interested in what was next on the docket. That was why she had asked for permission.

"Of course," said Kunon. "This still concerns you, Miss Reyes."

Swaying slightly from side to side, he placed a metal box roughly the size of a cigar case on the table.

"Its official name is the Panacea Storage Box," he said. "Easy to understand, right?"

Indeed, the name was *very* straightforward.

"This box is for storing shi-shilla medicine in both capsule and paper forms. There may still be room for improvement as we gather more data, but it is ready for practical use. Please feel free to examine it."

As instructed, Asand picked up the box, unlatched the clasp, and opened the lid.

"This—this is… This paper is…!"

It was right here, around nine months ago, when Asand first heard about it. He'd been thrilled over what was, at the time, no more than an idea—the groundbreaking concept of a paper form of medicine that could be applied to wounds. And now he finally had it in his hands.

Each pale-green sheet of paper was so thin it was transparent. Piled one on top of another in the box, the stack became a deep, rich green color.

It was exactly as Kunon had described it. If affixed to a wound, the injury would heal immediately. It was practically too good to be true.

"I want to try it right away!" he exclaimed. "Should I call for someone who's injured?! Ah, why don't we just stab me instead?!"

"Please calm down." An outrageous suggestion from Asand prompted Kunon to speak up. "Actually, what's significant here isn't the medicine; it's the box."

The paper form of the medicine was simple enough to make. Any sorcerer with some knowledge of medicines could manage it.

The issue was not having a way to store the paper once it was produced. It was made from shi-shilla, which had a short shelf life to begin with. In its paper form, its healing properties would last no longer than two or three days, even if it was kept in a dark place. Carried around in varying environments, its shelf life would likely be shortened even further.

Enter the Panacea Storage Box. This made it possible to carry the paper medicine around while preserving its potency.

It had been nine months since they first discussed the idea. Despite being busy, Kunon had never stopped working on the box. The quality and durability of the box itself had been tested, as had the longevity of medicines stored inside of it.

Barely two months after entering school, he had created the first prototype model with Bael and Genevis. Since then he'd conducted every trial he could think of, finally achieving something suitable for use.

"The paper medicine can be stored for approximately three months inside this box, the capsules for six months. It reduces the effects of temperature, humidity, and time by over ninety percent. So I believe, outside of any especially poor environment, it will preserve freshness well."

"Three months?! *Six* for capsules?!" Asand was shocked.

He felt a pang of embarrassment for having suggested storing the capsules in bottles.

"Preserve freshness…" Reyes was keenly interested in the box's effects.

The item was called the Panacea Storage Box, sure, but there were definitely other uses for a product like that. Storing vegetables, for example. Or fruits.

The Saint could easily think of dozens of produce types she would like to store long-term. The possibilities were limitless.

"I made it so anyone can use it, but it is still a magic tool. It has to be charged with magic power when you put the capsules inside. These documents provide detailed instructions. First…"

Kunon went on to explain.

Asand, the Saint, and even the Saint's maids all listened attentively, expressions serious, as Kunon talked.

The visit had run a little late, and at long last, four people walked out of the Adventurers Guild.

"I hope it was okay to make a contract with someone who isn't the guild master," said Kunon, a bit worried.

Asand was, after all, only a proxy. He probably didn't have a say in decisions like this.

"I'm sure it's fine," Reyes assured him. "He said he had the authority to act on the guild's behalf."

Judging from what she had heard, the Saint figured there was no chance that the Adventurers Guild would turn them down. And even if they did, all Kunon had to do was approach another guild about it.

Oddly, that was just what Kunon had said to her when they first came here to do business with Asand.

That box was going to sell well. And when it came time to sell the box and the shi-shilla medicine as a set, Reyes would be getting in on the action.

At present, she was the only one who could easily supply the sacred herb.

There would definitely be profit—even more than she was making now. She would never know destitution again.

An unprecedented contentedness spread through Reyes's heart. Was this how it felt to be fulfilled and enriched?

The sense of security and bliss that came over her was so intense, it was as if the Radiant Goddess herself had wrapped Reyes up in her arms. Not that she knew how it felt to be embraced by the goddess, of course.

She was a little concerned about being so consumed by the desire for money, but well—she could think about that later.

"What now?" she asked. "It's a little past noon, isn't it? Shall we go to a café?"

"I would love to, of course," replied Kunon, "But…please pardon me. Even though there are three lovely ladies here… While I believe it is the duty of a gentleman to ask beautiful women out, I'm short on time at the moment. Another day, when I'm not as bogged down, I'd like to make it up to you."

Bogged down.

In that moment, with his upper body swaying back and forth, Kunon did seem rather burdened. Plus, he was asking to postpone

rather than turning them down—a very Kunon-like move.

"I see. That sounds nice. Please go home and rest."

"I'd like to, but I have another errand… I can't rest just yet."

"Is it the project you mentioned before?"

Reyes didn't know what Kunon was working on, but he had been involved in some sort of development experiment for months.

She met with him frequently for business reasons, but their classmates Hank and Riyah seemed to miss his company, lamenting how they hadn't seen Kunon of late.

"There's that, too, but I have to commission a craftsperson to decorate the box soon…"

"Decorate the box?"

"Yeah."

Nodding, Kunon took a box out of his pocket. It was the Panacea Storage Box he had shown them at the Adventurers Guild.

"I made this magic tool to give to someone important to me, you see. It's a precious gift, so it has to look the part."

Refilling the paper medicine might be a challenge, but it would be fine to store other magic potions in the box.

His fiancée's goal was to become a knight. She was surely spending her days in rigorous training, suffering endless injuries. And so, Kunon had decided to send the box to her as a present along with his next letter.

He'd actually wanted to give her a magic-containing box, but that was still a long way from completion.

Someday, he'd give her one. But for now, this was the best that Kunon could do.





Chapter 5
The Spell Vault

The end was near.

Only one month remained in the school year. Graduating students were getting ready to say goodbye, leaving behind those advancing to the next grade or repeating the year.

The end of the term was close, and the days were becoming ever more summerlike, full of strong sunshine and warmth.

"It's done…!"

At long last, Kunon and his team had reached a critical stage in their development of the magic-containing box, newly named the Spell Vault. After months and months, they had a finished prototype.

Yes, it was still only a prototype, not yet fit for practical use. Nevertheless, its completion was a big deal. All that was left was to put it through trial after trial and gradually bring it to its final form.

"Finally!" rejoiced Bael.

"Ohhh, at last, *ah-ha*, *ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha*, at last I can sleep!" Genevis laughed, voice thick with emotion.

"It took a really long time…," said Elva, tears in her eyes. "Oh, I'm crying…"

"…I can pass out now, right?" said Ladio, already closing his eyes.

They all looked exhausted, but even so, there was cheer in their faces.

Some of them seemed more excited to be free from their suffering than satisfied by their accomplishment. But if they had been less fatigued and sleep-deprived, they would probably be appropriately pleased.

"Phew. Finally…"

Elia, who had joined the team partway through to do chores and such, was also granted some peace of mind. The thought of no longer having to babysit five huge children was a relief.

It had been difficult. The team was truly a handful. No matter how many times she scolded them, the lab ended up messy every day. None of them slept or ate without being told to. They wore the same clothes for days. They didn't bathe or even rinse themselves off. Apparently, none of this concerned them.

Keeping them in check had been much harder than she had imagined. Particularly because even though they listened when Elia talked, they tended not to follow through. It was always "Let me finish this bit." Or "Just a little more."

Once, they'd delayed and delayed until sunup, and she'd finally worked out that there was no limit to their ability to stall. Her head had swum with the realization. After that, it was clear to her that she could not leave them to their own devices.

Wrapped up in something they enjoyed, they were totally unaware of everything else, just like a bunch of kids.

But if development was over, that meant Elia's duties were, too.

What a chore this turned out to be.

After finishing the prototype, the team decided to take the night off. They met again the following day.

"So this is the Spell Vault…"

It was a metal box, though the shape was a bit unconventional. To be precise, it was a flat, round vessel, like a frying pan with a second pan overturned on top of it.

This was Elia's first time seeing it. She hadn't been involved in the development, so she had tried not to look at it as much as possible. She had told herself she was only in the lab to clean. That was her way of maintaining an appropriate distance.

"It was able to preserve a beginner-level spell for three days," Bael said.

After a day of proper rest, he was back to looking like the spirited older boy Elia liked. There was no hint of impending death on his face, either.

"Wow…"

Three days might sound unimpressive to some. But Elia was also a sorcerer and a researcher. She understood well the significance of their achievement—they had done the impossible.

"Open it. There's a four-day-old A-ori inside."

"Huh?" Elia replied. "You want me to open it?"

"You're the only person here who hasn't gotten a good look inside yet."

The rest of them had helped develop the box. They were all staring at her as if to say, "Come on, it's time to be amazed."

"Okay, here goes…"

Heart pounding, Elia reached out a hand.

Other than its creators, she was going to be the first person to experience what was probably the invention of the century. Even more nerve-racking, however, was her excitement at getting to touch such an incredible magic tool.

Fingertips trembling slightly, Elia opened the box and…

"Oh!"

…the moment she did, water came oozing out through the gap.

"Ah, the spell is dissipating," Kunon said.

Elia figured he probably meant that the water wasn't an A-ori. It was water that *used to be* magical. In other words, this was a failed storage attempt.

"Day four is still out of reach, huh?"

"Looks like three days is still the limit."

"*Eh-heh, heh-heh-heh… Ah-ha-ha. Haaah.* Practical use is still a long ways off, it seems."

While Bael, Kunon, and Genevis were talking, Elva placed another box in front of Elia.

"This one is on its third day," she said.

There was more than one prototype, apparently. That made sense. Durability testing was difficult with only one model.

"Ah, okay. Then I guess I'll give it a try."

The first time had been a letdown. Elia's nerves and excitement had been washed away by the viscous water.

She extended her hand again, popping open the lid of the second box without fanfare. And…

"Oh…"

Success.

There, right in front of her eyes, was a small, furry version of Kunon's giant hairless rats, made palm-sized to fit inside the box.

"That's amazing! This has been in here for three days?!"

Elia immediately wrapped up the extremely cute creature in her arms—or rather, her hands, since it was so small.

It was simply precious. The texture and temperature were the same as its larger counterparts. It felt nothing like water, but that was a good thing at the moment. She couldn't believe it was a spell that had been cast three days ago.

Intricate magic circles had been drawn on both the bottom and top of the box. It seemed some rather advanced techniques were involved in its creation.

"So three days is fine, huh…"

"I had some ideas for improvement, but as for time…"

Apparently, Kunon and Bael still had some motivation left. Despite that, they must have both realized that they were at the end of the road.

"Time aside, *pfft*, *ah-ha*, my physical endurance is already… Am I the only one who thought I had died several times? I would be awake but seeing one memory after the other, almost like my life was flashing before my eyes… *Ha-ha…* But I suppose if I had to go, there are worse ways." Genevis stared blankly ahead as he muttered.

Your life was *flashing before your eyes*, Elia thought.

"It was quite the journey. I've never done a project that lasted so long before. It was…what, about five months?"

"…That long…? I probably have a pile of work waiting for me…"

There were improvements to be made. That was true, but everyone had lives to get back to. All sorts of things had likely been put on the back burner while they devoted five months to this project. Taking up any more of their time would be a bad idea. It was already ill-advised to continue for as long as they had.

"Everyone, thank you for your hard work. For the time being, development of the Spell Vault is over," Kunon declared, understanding the reality of the situation as well as the rest of them.

They all felt the same way. It didn't need to be said. There was a significance in the project leader stating it out loud, however.

"Bael, thank you. Geneve, thank you. Ladio, thank you. Miss Elva and Miss Elia, too—I'm grateful to have spent so much time with such wonderful ladies. Thank you. I'm sure you all still have ideas and suggestions for improvement in your heads, just like I do. I expect several are popping up in your minds as we speak. Please, as much as you can, make note of those ideas. Someday, some other time, let's team back up and work to bring this prototype closer to completion. Next time, we'll set a fixed development period, okay? Working without a destination in sight, never knowing when it would end… Even I found that a bit dreadful. Not that I can ever see my destination or, for that matter, where I'm currently standing."

Thus ended the five-month project.

The development of the Spell Vault—formerly known as the magic-containing box—had reached its first milestone.

◆

That's strange. Am I dreaming? Or am I still working on the Spell Vault with no end in sight?

Maybe finishing the project itself had been the dream—a sad vision resulting from all that backbreaking work.

Those sorts of tired clichés were the very first thoughts that popped into Kunon's head.

Last night, for the first time in a long while, he had slept soundly, his mind quiet. It had been a blissful sleep. Now he wondered whether he had yet to wake up.

His next thought was, *Maybe I went to the wrong place? I'll ask the lady there.*

"Pardon me, dear lady. Your beautiful, adorable visage is both mystical and mysterious, and yet kindhearted and alluring. May I have a moment of your time, by chance?"

""Yes?""

More than one person replied, but that wasn't an issue for Kunon. In his opinion, that description was fitting for most women. Exceptions were rare, in fact… A single male voice had been mixed in with the replies, however, and that perplexed him slightly. But that could wait. It was nothing when compared with the situation in front of him.

"If I must be lost, I'd rather be lost in your eyes. Yet it seems I've stumbled off course. I want to go to Building Eleven. Whereabouts are we currently?"

Kunon didn't think he had made a mistake. He had gone to Building 11 almost every day for the past year. Even though he couldn't see, his body knew the way, so he *couldn't* be mistaken.

Nonetheless, it was only natural to second-guess himself. Because that morning, where Building 11 should have been, there was something he had *absolutely no recollection of* at all.

"You're already there," someone replied.

"This *is* Building Eleven."

"It *ought* to be anyway…"

"Flirting first thing in the morning, Kunon? That's a bit flippant for the situation."

Almost in unison, the voices of multiple girls—and the one male voice from before—responded to his question.

"…Huh? Bael, is that you?"

Kunon was so thrown off by the scene confronting him that he hadn't recognized his senior at first.

He did now, though. He had long since become familiar with that voice. It belonged to someone he had spent nearly the entire past six months with: Ability Faction representative Bael Kirkington.

But that wasn't important at the moment, either.

"Is what you and the ladies said true?" he asked.

As one, the four of them answered: "It is."

This was Building 11. It was, in fact, the place he spent almost all his time—his home base. The Spell Vault had been developed here too. It genuinely was the same location he had visited only one day ago.

So then…what was going on? What in the world was happening?

"Am I mistaken or…has the place where Building Eleven stood until only yesterday turned into a forest?"

Right in the center stood an incredibly large tree, and all around it was a lush expanse of greenery. The smell of vegetation filled the air along with an irritating degree of birdsong.

Had a forest massive enough to swallow a sizable school building really emerged overnight?

"It has."

"Yeah, sure has."

"My lab was in there…"

Apparently, the answer was yes.

Kunon double-checked through both his magical perception and the Glass Eye, and sure enough, there was a forest spread out right in front of him.

Bewildered students were starting to accumulate in the area. A few curious onlookers even crowed, "*Whoa*, this is wild."

Perhaps it felt less like a big deal when it was someone else's problem. For those involved, however, it was nothing but trouble. Everyone else was just as perplexed as Kunon—except for those there to rubberneck.

"Somebody must have done something," Bael said, his words tinged with resignation. "Once every few years, someone messes up big-time like this."

Perhaps Bael, owing to his position, was accustomed to dealing with other people's large-scale blunders. Being a leader was hard. Kunon had experienced that himself a number of times over the course of developing the Spell Vault. He hadn't realized how much of an undertaking it was to be in a leadership role.

But more importantly…

A mistake. Greenery. A big tree.

To Kunon, these keywords brought to mind a certain person—a particular female student whose lab seemed to contain more potted plants every time he visited.

"This is pretty bad, isn't it?" he asked.

"Yes," replied Bael. "Even given the school's long history, I would say this constitutes a 'major incident.'"

"By the way, what did you come here for, Bael?"

"Cleanup. We have to finalize our report for that thing, right?"

"That thing" was how Kunon and the team referred to the Spell Vault.

"Oh, you were going to help me with that?"

Development was over, but there were still tasks to be done.

"I mean, yeah. That much work would be hard for one person, wouldn't it? So I thought I could pitch in at least."

As project leader, Kunon had considered cleanup his own responsibility.

They had run every test and experiment they could think of—repeatedly—for five months. The messy notes from all those trials were left just as they'd been jotted down, and they needed to make clean copies. Essentially, it was file-sorting time.

That had to be done while the information was still fresh in their minds. The notes were so sloppy that if the task was left for too long, not even the team member responsible for writing a given note would be able to decipher it. And they needed to be consolidated where possible, with any superfluous sections cut to create as compact a document as possible.

It was five months of work by five different people, after all. Just reading it would be a challenge.

Of course, they also needed to write up a report for the purpose of submitting a copy to the school…but, well…

Kunon had been planning on using the remaining month of the school year to complete it, and now…

"I wonder what state our lab is in."

"The lab is probably a loss since even the building itself was destroyed. Our research results might still be around, though. It's just that extricating them will probably be difficult."

Building 11 had been engulfed by the mysterious forest, but that didn't mean it had vanished. It seemed to have completely collapsed, but it was still there. The building's contents would all be buried under the rubble.

"But this is really bad, isn't it? Should we really be standing around just chatting about it?"

The gravity of the situation had thrown Kunon's emotions a bit out of whack. He wasn't happy or sad or angry. He was simply shocked and confused.

"I think it'll probably be fine." Bael, on the other hand, remained calm. "All the teachers at this school are world-class, remember?

Plus, Gray Rouva is here, too. There's nothing we can do, but I'm sure *they'll* be able to handle it."

Of course, Kunon thought.

The other students, who could overhear their conversation, understood, too.

Bael was right. The world's greatest witch was at their school. There had to be something she could do about the situation.

"Gya-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!"

Meanwhile, Gray Rouva, having received a report about Building 11 turning into a forest, burst into gales of laughter.

"An entire school building destroyed in one night, eh?! Isn't that something?! That's great!"

Soff Cricket had delivered the report. He regarded the shadow box before him with an exasperated expression.

"This isn't a laughing matter," he said.

They were in the headmistress's office—Gray Rouva's office, in other words.

The witch was inside her shadow box. Soff had yet to enjoy the privilege of seeing her face. Through the shadow box, however, he had shared a drink and exchanged words with her a number of times. She came to teacher get-togethers and end-of-year parties every now and then.

She was undoubtedly a magnificent being. When consulted about any magic-related issue, she never failed to give an answer. At the same time, Soff knew she was a surprisingly approachable person.

"How can I not laugh?! Success and failure are both best in abundance, you know! Sorcerers these days are all about theories and logic. They think too small! It's so tedious!"

For someone responsible for dealing with the aftermath, it was an outrageous statement.

"So? Who did it?" she asked.

"Most likely, it was Reyes Saint-Lance, a first-year in the Advanced class."

"Saint-Lance? Ahhh, the current saint, eh…? *Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha!* She's an entertaining one, isn't she?! The last two saints were so meek I don't even remember them!"

"I told you, this isn't a laughing matter."

A school building was in ruins. Not even a fragment of its original form was left intact. A large number of students based their work out of that building.

"A forest made by a saint, hmm? Maybe there's even some Kira Vera growing in there."

"Kira Vera…?"

That was the name of a tree from ancient times. If Soff remembered correctly, it was the tree of the deity worshipped in the Holy Kingdom, mentioned in their scriptures. That was the extent of his knowledge, however.

"It actually exists?" he asked.

"It does. Long ago, the land was entirely barren and withered, choked by a powerful miasma. The world was resurrected by hundreds of Kira Vera. Most of the Holy Kingdom's legends are true. The seeds of the Sacred Tree, given by the Radiant Goddess, Kira Leila, brought a world polluted by the Demon Lord back to life. Not that they have any use these days. They're just trees with some unique properties."

Gray Rouva spoke as if she had witnessed all that herself. Perhaps she had.

People said she was immortal. Only the witch herself knew how long she had been alive.

"If Kira Vera sprouts somewhere with a large quantity of supernatural matter, it will soak it up and grow before you know it. If you planted one here, at the magic school, it would reach an enormous size in no time at all."

"…That is genuinely fascinating, but let's set the topic aside for a moment. I came to ask what should be done about this."

An entire school building had been leveled overnight. The students were probably baffled. Soff wanted to present them with a solution

as quickly as possible, to offer them some reassurance.

Even Reyes, at that very moment, might still be coming to terms with what she had done. For her sake, too, a quick resolution was necessary.

"For the sake of the school, it should probably be left as is. That tree is worth studying. Any seed planted near Kira Vera is guaranteed to grow. Season and climate are irrelevant. It doesn't even need water. Not to mention it also magically repels evil. I'm sure both teachers and students will find it interesting."

There was no denying that the tree was of great interest. Even Soff, whose specialty had nothing to do with plants, was deeply compelled by its properties.

"It'll wither and die when it runs out of power," said the witch. "But that's still a century or two down the road. This whole area will have been engulfed in the forest by then, though, *hee-hee*."

In that case, it really wasn't a laughing matter, was it?

"You intend to leave it?" asked Soff.

"First, I'll ask you—was this a mistake?"

"…No, I don't think so."

Indeed—it *wasn't* a mistake. The plant had simply grown beyond the intended scope. Soff doubted that Reyes had meant to destroy a school building. Her only goal, he expected, was to grow things.

Of course—that was assuming that the root cause was really the Sacred Tree.

"Wouldn't it be impolite to have it removed or relocated, then? My goal is to provide a safe environment for students to explore magic to the fullest. There's a difference between results and consequences. As long as they don't go against the will of humanity, a sorcerer should not be punished for their actions. And unless the person responsible wants them destroyed, the results of those actions should be left alone."

To provide a safe environment for students to explore magic to the fullest—that was the reason this school existed. Those words were

the first thing the headmistress instilled in the school's teachers, and they all knew them by heart.

The school had a handful of rules, too, but the truth was those didn't concern Gray Rouva. They were created by administrators and only in place to make running the school easier.

Beyond the enforcement of the fundamental principle she had just mentioned, Gray Rouva demanded nothing.

That had never changed.

"That settles our plan of action for the tree," said Soff. "But the results of the students' research and experiments are still under that collapsed building. We have to do something about that."

"We only need to retrieve any items swallowed up by the Kira Vera, right? Leave that to me. Building Eleven will have to be rebuilt anyway, so I'll do a little cleaning while I investigate. Tell the students not to get worked up. We've just had a little forest sprout up on school grounds."

Relief washed over Soff. When Gray Rouva said, "Leave it to me," he didn't need to worry anymore. The world's greatest witch always stayed true to her word.

"Something still doesn't make sense, though," said Gray Rouva, the moment Soff relaxed. Without waiting for him to reply, she continued. "A whole forest, overnight? No matter how much supernatural matter this school might have, I wouldn't expect it to grow that quickly… And besides, it wouldn't absorb so much power unless the magic was tinged with miasma. Someone must have done something."

"…You mean some kind of human involvement is at play?"

Had someone *made* the Sacred Tree grow? But for what purpose?

"You're half right," Gray Rouva said to a confused Soff. "This is the work of *something*, no doubt. But no human could have done this. Besides me, that is. That means the party responsible *isn't* human. Now—is it a spirit? A fairy? Some deity's practical joke? We won't know until we investigate."

"Hey! That's *your* tree, isn't it?!"

"What are you going to do about this?! My lab is in shambles!"

"The meat I stocked up on was in there!"

"So were my class credit cards!"

The most likely suspect had arrived at the site of the utterly transformed Building 11: Reyes Saint-Lance.

She approached at a slow pace, staring up at the massive tree. Her gaze never left it, as if she couldn't even see her accusers or anyone else.

"Hold on—wait a minute! Throwing blame around isn't going to solve anything!"

Bael tried to stick up for her, but there were simply too many voices against him.

"P-please calm down!" Kunon, too, stepped in frantically to defend Reyes. "Anger doesn't suit charming young ladies like yourselves! Let's at least hear her out first, yes?! Failure is an essential part of magic, isn't it?!"

It had started several months earlier, after Kunon's battle with the Inferno Prince. Or more specifically, after the Kunon/Inferno Prince or Inferno Prince/Kunon incident. Ever since then, Kunon's popularity with girls had mysteriously increased, giving his placating words some amount of power.

The girls' voices settled down somewhat. As if to follow suit, the male voices did, too. It would be easier to hear the Saint speak like this. Everyone was ready to hear what she had to say.

If she apologized then and there, things would probably be okay for the time being. Even Kunon, who had little experience with social graces or friendships, could see as much.

But whether or not Reyes—who had even less experience with those things than Kunon did, and who lacked emotion on top of that—would understand…that was the scary part.

Even avoiding the issue entirely would be acceptable. All that mattered was that she didn't add any fuel to the fire.

Kunon and Bael, the students who didn't think it was Reyes's fault, the rubbernecks who thought it was madness to blame such a cute girl, and even those who thought everyone should be kicking up more of a fuss—they all waited on tenterhooks for the Saint to make a statement.

She didn't spare any of them a glance. She stood utterly still in front of the forest as tears streamed quietly down her cheeks. And then she opened her mouth.

"My child has grown so big…"

There was no apology in her words. She was crying for reasons no one else could understand. Whether she deserved blame was a difficult judgment to make and what exactly her tears meant was up for debate. But one thing was certain: They were not shed in apology nor from any feelings of remorse.

They were much too pure. Tears like that had no trace of negative emotion in them. Some girls cried as if to say, "Oh, I'm but a poor maiden; perhaps if I cry some brave man will come to my rescue." But these tears were nothing like those.

Regardless, some might say it was in poor taste to shed beautiful tears in such a situation. That wasn't what the rest of the students were hoping for, after all.

"You don't even think this is a bad thing, do you?!"

After a few long moments, someone realized Reyes wasn't crying because she felt sorry or guilty. Yes, her words made that clear enough.

But they probably should have said so a little sooner.





"Where do you think you're going?! Wait one minute! Hey! Saint!"

Kunon was wondering the same thing.

After shedding her quiet tears, the Saint began walking toward the forest as if totally unaware of anyone calling out to her.

Then, all of a sudden, she looked back.

"I'm going to where I am supposed to be."

After a beat of silence, the crowd erupted.

"Didn't you hear us?! We're in the middle of discussing how *you* destroyed the place *we* should be!"

"What are you going to do about my lab reports?!"

"And my meat?!"

The air exploded with angry shouts.

The place where one belonged—one side was headed for it, the other had just had theirs destroyed.

Reyes probably hadn't meant anything cruel by her words. Still, they'd come off as pretty sarcastic.

"Hey! Apologize!"

"Don't act all high-and-mighty just because you're a saint!"

"Stop hanging out with Kunon! Think of the poor prince!"

Some of the voices were shouting things Kunon didn't quite understand, but even he thought Reyes should at least stop to make a quick apology.

But the Saint didn't turn around again. Instead, she disappeared into the forest.

The forest was small but dense.

They had no idea what was in it and needed to approach it with caution. To be specific, since the forest had sprouted primarily because of magical factors, they had to assume it wouldn't be anything like a normal forest. There was no telling what lived in there.

No one was going to follow the Saint into that mysterious jungle. Dumbstruck, the students merely watched as the source of all their troubles walked away.

"Please calm down, everyone. Let's not get excited," said Soff Cricket, appearing on the scene. "I'm sure you all have a lot to say, but please listen first. I'll answer your questions afterward."

Silencing the students before they could start airing their grievances, Soff began to explain.

"There's still a lot about the situation that we aren't sure of, so an investigation of the forest will begin shortly. That's why, for now, I'm only going to tell you the essentials. First, while it is highly likely that Reyes Saint-Lance is partially responsible, this was not solely her doing. No matter how powerful a saint may be, they don't have the ability to create a forest in a single day. Try to think logically. If Reyes was that powerful, don't you think everyone would be targeting her? The Holy Kingdom would never have let her past their borders. In other words, she could not have made this happen single-handedly."

His explanation made sense. Few people had a concrete, accurate understanding of what a saint's power entailed. However, no anecdotes of their past exploits were on the level of creating a forest in a single day. Even if someone combed through the history of all prior saints, they would never find something like that. In other words, it was beyond their powers.

If a forest had appeared overnight, the Saint could not be solely at fault. She was only part of the problem.

"Next, regarding the personal belongings and schoolwork left inside the building—you don't have to worry. The faculty promises to recover them for you."

That was what they'd all been waiting for. With a guaranteed solution to the most important issue at hand, a number of the students sighed in relief. Kunon and Bael were among them.

Building 11 had contained the Spell Vault's prototypes, piles and piles of notes, and a mountain of books borrowed from the library. All of these were valuable and needed to be collected no matter what.

Not to mention—although he had forgotten about it until just then—Kunon had to get back the money he'd stowed away in his lab. He hadn't withdrawn any funds since development began on the Spell Vault, simply shoving the money sloppily into his desk. There had probably been quite a large sum in there. If he didn't get it back, he would be in a fix when it came time to pay his maid, especially since some of her wages were already overdue.

"Also, for the time being, the forest is off-limits."

Soff had been ordered to conceal the fact that the massive tree at the forest's center was a Sacred Tree, at least for a little while. Its special characteristics, in particular, had to remain secret. Critical information like "any seed planted near the forest will grow" wasn't to be carelessly spread around. Somebody was bound to carelessly start testing it out—probably more than one of them. So many that Soff would start cursing youthful inquisitiveness.

If the greenery spread as a result, resolving the incident would only get harder. Thus, for the moment, Soff could not talk about that. He'd keep those details under wraps, at least until they knew why the Kira Vera had grown so large so fast. That was Gray Rouva's plan, anyway.

It wasn't something they could keep secret indefinitely, but for now, at least, they'd try.

"Building Eleven will be rebuilt in another location soon, and this forest will remain as is."

The school would have to make a report to the Holy Kingdom, which would probably have demands of its own. If Kira Vera had been grown, the Holy Kingdom would surely want it.

Soff had been concerned that the other country might even ask that the forest be transplanted, but Gray Rouva's response was very blunt: "It exists here, which means it's mine. There's no reason to hand over sorcerers' research materials."

To the Holy Kingdom, the tree was the genuine body and representation of the Radiant Goddess, Kira Leila. Its existence was extremely sacred.

To Gray Rouva, however, it was just a tree worthy of study. That was it.

"In addition…" Soff then noticed Kunon's raised hand and turned toward him. "Hmm? What is it?"

"You said just now that the forest is off-limits, right?"

"…Yeah? And?"

"Well, Miss Reyes, earlier, she…"

"She went in there? Got it… Well, that should be fine. Professor Keevan is already inside checking out the situation."

The earth sorcerer had been all too pleased to do so. When he heard that a mysterious forest had sprouted out of nowhere, he was tremendously excited and practically flew headlong into the trees.

Keevan poking around in the forest was probably why the birds had been so noisy. They must have been sending up warning signals to one another.

"Anyway, don't go in there, okay? Once Reyes comes out, I'll make sure to let her know, too. And now, I have a message for all of you from Gray Rouva."

All the students stood up a little bit straighter the moment they heard that name. It belonged to their school's headmistress and the world's greatest witch—someone more entrenched in the depths of magic than any of them. They couldn't help but respect her.

"She says, 'Don't make a fuss just because a little forest appeared.'"

She was the world's greatest witch, after all. A school building reduced to rubble, a whole forest growing overnight—those were mere trifles to her.

Soff Cricket also talked about the faculty's plans going forward.

First, he confirmed that papers and books, as well as metal items, could be recovered. The recovery would be finished by the next day, but since everything would be mixed together, the students would have to sort through it all themselves.

Sorting was expected to take up to one month. In that time, Building 11 would be rebuilt and any loose ends that needed seeing to would be dealt with.

It was assumed that the investigation into the mysterious forest phenomenon—which would later be dubbed the Building 11 Forestation Incident—would continue until the end of the school year.

Furthermore, if anyone was still short on credits, they would be awarded one or two once the sorting process was done. That was likely to be time-consuming, so special consideration was being given.

Then there was the matter of any private property students had kept in their labs. The students would be compensated with either money or items of value for any damage, destruction, loss, and so on of goods, chemicals, and magic materials. Those involved with the incident would shoulder the cost. Once fault was established, the offender would be held responsible.

Essentially, the culprit was liable for all damages. At present, all they knew was that some percentage of the burden might land in the Saint's lap.

"We're fortunate that it was only an academic hall that was destroyed. A dormitory would have been much more troublesome."

Whether the students found that comforting or not, Soff's point made sense. Though students occasionally stayed overnight in their labs, no one actually lived in Building 11. Therefore, no one had been injured in the incident, and everyone still had a place to stay sheltered from the elements.

If a dorm had been destroyed, the total amount of damage would have ballooned, too. Compensation would have included the living expenses of anyone who lost their residence.

The cost of constructing a new school building was, incidentally, being taken on by the school. Repairing school facilities was part of a school's burden, even if they were leaving the cost of each student's personal belongings to whoever had caused the incident.

"That was a close call."

"It really was."

The Spell Vault development team—including Kunon and Bael—had been active until just the other day. They had spent many nights sleeping in their lab.

Well, Kunon had been obligated to go home every night because of his curfew. His heart had stayed with his team, however. His body was in his own bed, but he always left his thoughts behind. That was how he felt anyway, though it wasn't particularly sensible.

At any rate, they were lucky this incident hadn't happened on one of the nights the team had slept in the lab. If the building had come down around them, they'd have suffered more than a few injuries. Thank goodness for small mercies.

"Oh, she's back."

Soff had just finished making the essential announcements when Saint Reyes, who had gone into the forest—or returned to where she belonged, depending on one's point of view—emerged from the trees along with Professor Keevan Brid.

The students had calmed down after hearing the school's plan of action. No one was interested in leveling accusations at Reyes anymore. Especially since it was possible she wasn't at fault. Now that there was a chance their blame was misplaced, the students couldn't be so insistent about it.

The Saint walked out of the forest wearing the same blank expression she'd had going in, but her appearance was now a complete mess. Her beautiful silver hair was beyond disheveled, and her face and clothes were both streaked with dirt, as if she had tumbled through the forest.

Small changes in appearance didn't register with Kunon's magical perception, but everyone else knew at a glance that something had happened.

"Whoa, hey, are you all right?" Soff cried out, dismayed at Reyes's appearance. Then he turned to Keevan. "Was there some sort of incident?"

"I mean, I suppose there *was*, but…" Keevan was smiling wryly.

"Professor Soff," said Reyes.

Being addressed by the tattered but still expressionless Saint rattled Soff a bit.

"Uh, right. Yes? What is it?"

"Please use your wind magic as a bird repellent."

"Bird…?"

"Birds are pests. I will not tolerate them."

It seemed Reyes had been assailed by birds.

A little later…

"Please convey all the important information to your respective factions. Now then, you're dismissed."

…the necessary discussions came to an end, and the crowd dispersed.

Students who had been based out of Building 11 aside, the rest of them—the rubberneckers—broke off to wherever they needed to be.

An investigation into why the forest had appeared would commence presently. Students were not to set foot inside until the results were released. Building 11 would be rebuilt over the next month. Those were the only three points the students needed to remember for the time being.

"Kunon," said Bael. "I'm going back to the base for now. I'll come again when they've finished recovering the stuff from inside."

"Got it. See you then."

As the Ability Faction's representative, Bael was charged with passing on the relevant information, so he took his leave, too.

By its nature, the Advanced class was not that big. As a result, the number of students working out of Building 11 was thankfully small. Few people were being inconvenienced, and the total sum of damages probably wouldn't amount to all that much.

"So what is it like in there? Is there anything dangerous?"

In front of the remaining students—fewer than ten people—Soff turned to Keevan to ask about the forest.

Ordinarily, such information was kept secret from the students. But those present were all victims of the incident and had a right to know the bare minimum, at least.

What's more, some of them might end up going into the forest despite Soff's warnings. They'd say, "I'm just popping in to get something important" or simply not take the risks seriously. He didn't want them strolling into a situation they knew nothing about.

"Oh, Professor Soff, it's *incredible*, let me tell you." Keevan laughed. "There are crops all over the place."

"Crops…? As in fruits and vegetables?"

"That's right. It would seem the seeds and potted plants in Reyes Saint-Lance's classroom have taken root and are growing wild."

Keevan was not yet aware that the huge tree at the forest's center was a Kira Vera. That was why his excitement over and interest in the mysterious explosion of verdure were so strong. Not that either was likely to wane once he found out.

"The perimeter…the area around the forest is covered in the weeds from outside the school building, but the inside is like a field. That's why all the birds have come—there's so much for them to eat in there. The smell of ripe fruit was *intense*."

That was when it dawned on Kunon. Reyes's animosity toward the birds wasn't because they'd attacked her but rather because they were devouring the plants she'd raised with such tender love and care.

Moreover, the birds had probably tried to drive her off, as if laying claim to the crops. From the Saint's perspective, it must have felt like having her own children stolen from her. That would indeed be difficult to forgive.

At that moment, the female students with labs in Building 11 were helping Reyes put her appearance back to rights.

Not long ago, they had blamed her for the whole incident. But now that they were calm, the girls had lost the desire to yell at the Saint.

In fact, it seemed Reyes had occasionally shared her fruits and vegetables with these girls. They were hardly strangers. On the

contrary, it appeared the Saint had been a good neighbor to them. The Saint—*Reyes.*

Kunon looked on in quiet amazement. He hadn't known.

"Nothing seemed dangerous to me," said Keevan. "There were carnivorous plants that looked big enough to eat a person, but they had no reaction to either us or the birds. I don't think they're a threat, either."

"I see. Then for now, I suppose it's fine to assume the forest is relatively safe."

"I'd say so. Though we'll need a more thorough investigation, judging from the inclinations of the plants, I don't believe there's any danger. I didn't find any poisonous plant species, either. In terms of the environment, I doubt any demons will wander in, and it doesn't seem like any dangerous animals are lurking inside."

The forest was inside the grounds of the magic school, which just happened to be located in Dirashik. Demons—aside from avian varieties—couldn't even enter the city. What's more, Kira Vera had the ability to repel demons. The average demon wouldn't be able to get anywhere near it.

"Understood. Let's just set up something to deter the birds, then."

Though his motives were different from the Saint's, Soff still wanted to keep the birds out.

Birds brought seeds. They swallowed down the seeds of the plants and nuts they ate and returned them to the earth in their feces. And any that landed near the Sacred Tree were guaranteed to sprout. The forest could start spreading before the investigation even began. That was not a welcome prospect.

With those thoughts running through his head, Soff glanced at Reyes.

"What, really?! There are huge tomatoes in there?!"

"A whole thicket of enormous raspberries?!"

"You didn't see any meat growing, did you? I don't think I'm gonna be able to get mine back…"

"I'm partial to apples, but I wonder what forbidden fruit you beautiful ladies prefer?"

Reyes was diligently answering the students' questions.

I really hope they don't ignore my warning and sneak into the forest, Soff thought.





Chapter 6
Kira Vera and Investigating the Forest

"And those are the results of the cursory investigation."

It was evening on the day of the mysterious forest's sudden appearance.

Those who had set out to survey it—Keevan Brid, who studied plants and herbology, along with several other teachers with earth attributes—were gathered in the headmistress's office.

The school's faculty was made up of sorcerers whose names were known far and wide. There was no more capable group of people to carry out such an investigation.

"Hmm. So the interior is similar to a vegetable plot?"

Gray Rouva sat hidden in her shadow box, listening to the investigation's findings.

"Evidence suggests that the seeds are not the result of repeat harvests. They aren't growing fast enough to wither overnight. We believe that most likely, they sprouted from the seeds Reyes Saint-

Lance had stored in her lab. In addition, it's possible the potted plants she was raising broke free and took root in the ground, becoming wild crops."

The vegetables, fruits, and herbs resulting from these liberated plants had spread farther than expected.

They were impressive, too. Though irregular in shape, the size and quality were excellent.

Some samples had been collected for inspection, and once it was confirmed there were no abnormalities present, a taste test was performed. The flavor was strong, the fragrance pleasant, and most importantly, they were huge. Those who liked fruit were especially happy.

They unanimously agreed that if sold, the forest's products would certainly turn a profit. No doubt they were high in nutrition, too.

It was no wonder that the wild birds had tried to defend the place. Food was plentiful in the forest and external predators nonexistent. It was an ideal place to build nests and breed, though the birds had already been driven away with wind magic. They'd put up quite a show of resistance, however. It was tough out there, and one had to fight for one's survival.

"What about the students' belongings? Their reports and books?"

"They were there. They appear to have been scattered all around, along with rubble from the school building."

A huge tree—Kira Vera—had sprouted from inside Building 11. Because the structure was destroyed from within, objects had been sent flying in all directions. Some were in the field, some hidden in the grasses. Some were even caught in the branches of the Sacred Tree.

With debris from the building spread everywhere and the greenery as dense as it was, recovering everything manually seemed nearly impossible.

"Understood. You may leave the rest to me."

But Gray Rouva had agreed to take on this task. And as soon as she said, "Leave the rest to me," the impossible became possible.

"…Hmm? What is it?"

One of the teachers had raised a hand.

"We would like to observe as you work."

Though their positions were different, the teachers were magical researchers, just like their students. They were bound to be interested in Gray Rouva's magic.

"Eh? Oh…I won't be doing anything special. I'll just make another world, integrate it with this one, and then grant limited permission for entry. Wreckage, paper, books, and such will be allowed through and everything else excluded. Then I can collect it all."

This world and *another*.

The existence of other worlds wasn't anything new. But even the teachers had never heard of magic which would allow them to create one themselves.

"The depths of magic are profound. Much more so than you can imagine. Even I haven't reached its limits. Let your ideas fly more freely. Don't let common sense tie you down. Try doing things irresponsibly now and then instead of using trial and error. You'd be surprised what you can find out."

With that advice from Gray Rouva, the conversation ended.

Even the world's most distinguished sorcerers couldn't hope to hold a candle to Gray Rouva's abilities. For the faculty, even just being made aware of this fact was its own reward.

It was night, and moonlight fell over the deserted school.

Two figures stood in front of the mysterious forest.

One was merely a humanoid shadow—that was Gray Rouva. Whether one looked at her from a distance or got up close, her form resembled only darkness more profound than the moonlit night sky. Nonetheless, one could see the outline of her undeveloped body—like that of a twelve-or thirteen-year-old boy or girl.

The other figure was a silver-haired man. His beauty could put even the twinkling of the stars to shame, and his features were so

refined that he seemed otherworldly. His name was Clavis Saint-Lance.

He was the biological son of the first saint, who long ago had played an active role in the Great War of the Seventeen Kings. He was also the most *beloved child of the Demon Lord*.

At present, though, he was just Clavis, passing the time peacefully as a teacher at the school.





"I'll accompany you, Gray."

"Do as you please."

The two exchanged brief words before walking into the forest.

The moment they did…

"Saint blood is interesting, isn't it, Clavis?"

…glowing spheres of white light floated all around them.

They varied widely in size. The big ones were as large as people; the little ones could fit on the tip of a finger. There were hundreds, maybe even thousands of them. From far off, the forest may even have shone with a faint light.

"Being too popular is a problem of its own," he replied.

The glowing spheres were, in fact, light spirits. The kind that could generate a forest. If they were doing *mischief like this*, they were probably just children, freshly born.

The fact that none of them spoke back to the two human figures was proof of that. Language and even free will were still hazy to them; they may not even have a sense of self.

Light spirits were drawn to the blood of saints. As the child of the first saint, Clavis's saintly heritage was quite pronounced. The spirits' current response was distinct to him.

"They must have come from somewhere else along with the current saint and settled down here."

"Seems so."

From the sound of things, Reyes SaintLance had been making very frequent use of her Sanctum spell recently.

The interior of a Sanctum spell was a very hospitable environment for light spirits. It wasn't odd for them to slip inside the spell, and if Sanctums were plentiful, the chances of the spirits settling in were high. They must have been hanging around in the Saint's lab.

The sheer number of them proved as much. If there were only ten or twenty of them, they wouldn't have had much of an effect.

"I was able to predict this much," said the witch.

If the spirits were merely settling in, that was fine. They would, at most, cause plants to grow faster and crops to produce better yields.

However, if they were doing more…

"Given the appearance of light spirits, it's quite likely they are related to this incident."

"The question is what spurred them to action. Clavis, do you have any guesses?"

"Well, speaking of spirits, a short time ago a student conducted an experiment to summon dark spirits, I believe. Perhaps they remained on the premises after being summoned."

"I see. They must have made some friends."

Light and dark were the basis of every world's creation. They were so well matched they forgot themselves, and so they resisted one another in a desperate attempt to retain their own identity. Such was their relationship.

If the spirits had yet to develop a sense of self, they may have acted on instinct—on their very reason for being—and come into contact with one another. The result was Creation—or a miniature version of it. In this case, the rapid growth of the Sacred Tree, along with its surrounding forest.

"But this place isn't suitable for dark spirits, is it?"

As their name suggested, dark spirits disliked bright spaces. They rarely ventured aboveground, where around half of each day was spent in light. If they were to exist somewhere at the school, it would probably be in the deepest floors of the artificial underground labyrinth that served as the Rationality Faction's base.

That was a bit far away, though. The two groups of spirits should not have been able to communicate over such a distance.

"We can't learn anything more here, Gray. Let's go farther in."

"Yeah."

And so the two of them walked deeper into the forest of frolicking lights.

They were headed for the heart of the woods.

"Oops… A fruit."

In the forest at night, it was very difficult to see where one was walking, and Clavis had stepped on something. It was round.

For an instant, he wondered if someone's freshly severed head was just rolling around in the grass, but it turned out to be something much less exciting.

It was only a fruit.

Looking closely, he could see they were all over the place.

"Watermelon. These were delicious."

The melon was yellow with dark stripes. The teachers had brought back a sample earlier, so Gray Rouva had already tasted one. It was extremely juicy, fresh, and sweet. Some of the teachers had suggested sprinkling it with salt, which made Gray Rouva think they were crazy. What kind of person put salt on something sweet?

"Your distant descendant has been growing plants and vegetables lately, I hear. And now they're growing wild thanks to the power of Kira Vera."

"So it would seem. I'm surprised at just how many. The quantity and variety are impressive."

Gray Rouva agreed. The patch of verdure did resemble a forest around the edges, but inside, tall trees were few and far between. Instead, there were various vegetables, fruits, and herbs growing as far as the eye could see.

They grew in total chaos, without any regularity or regard for season. Some might even call it a paradise. This was a place where all crops flourished. It was like a dream, but one glance was all it took to see that here, it was reality.

"You're right," said Clavis. "This is delicious."

"Hmm? What are you eating?" asked the witch.

"A raspberry. Do you want to try it?"

"I don't like them. Aren't they sour?"

"No, this one is sweet. It has just the perfect amount of sourness, but the dominant flavor is sweet."

"The perfect amount? Really? Gimme one."

The pair continued into the center of the woods, picking at edible-looking plants as they went. Their pace was quite slow.

"I just had a great idea, Clavis."

"Yes, yes, it's about alcohol, isn't it? I'll listen to that later, so can we keep investigating now?"

Gray Rouva decided to prioritize the investigation. Just as Clavis had suggested, she *had* been about to bring up alcohol. She was thinking of getting the Saint to grow grapes to use for wine.

The crops were unexpectedly good. Not just one or two of them—everything was excellent. How much wine could be made from grapes grown by Reyes's hand? It didn't have to be wine. Any alcohol would do.

Gray Rouva was eager to make that happen. The desire was bubbling up in her chest, but…at the moment, it was time to investigate.

"There are a few things I'm curious about," she said. "For now, I'll try collecting anything that has magic power."

The shadow that was Gray Rouva started to spread.

It covered the crops and swallowed up Clavis and the light spirits but left them completely unaffected. Though engulfed in blackness, Clavis's vision wasn't impaired at all, and the balls of light made no moves to avoid the shadow.

"How's this?"

The darkness reconverged in an instant, and a handful of items of varying sizes lay at the pair's feet.

There weren't many. Investigating them one at a time wouldn't take long.

"Let's eliminate magic potions for now."

Clavis removed any elixirs in glass bottles. Next came any processed shi-shilla and materials imbued with magic power.

After those were sorted out, they were left with a number of small boxes—magic tools. They appeared to be meant for storage, but just looking at them wasn't enough to reveal what was inside.

"This is… Ah, Gray, wait a moment."

"Mm?"

Gray Rouva, on the verge of opening a small metal box shaped like a cigar case, was stopped by Clavis.

"I believe that is a prototype of a magic tool used for storing shi-shilla. They appear to be in the middle of testing durability and deterioration over time. If you open it, the test will be spoiled."

"Oh-ho… Sure enough, there's a date written on here."

"The date it was filled, I'd assume. I bet there's processed shi-shilla medicine inside."

"Got it. Let's rule out all boxes of this type, as well."

Once the magic tools were sorted out, all that remained were some oddly shaped metal boxes. There were around a dozen or so. Though they differed somewhat in size, they were all of the same style—thin, flat, and round. They ranged from the size of one's palm to as big as a large frying pan.

"What are these? Do you know?" asked the witch.

"Not a clue. This one says 'Prototype Model 2.'"

"Mine says 'Model 6.'" The flat, round boxes had been labeled from Model 1 to Model 15. "Logically, they must be prototypes starting with number one and going up to fifteen, right?"

"I should think so. I suppose that means Model 15 is the most recent."

And if that was the case…

"Then the smaller numbers are failures, so it's fine to open them, right?"

If Model 15 was the newest, Models 1 through 14 were likely duds. And if the tool was still in development, Model 15 could end up being a failure, too.

"That's…probably true… Touching students' research materials without their permission makes me rather uncomfortable, though."

"Safety takes priority right now," insisted the witch.

Perhaps the boxes were dangerous. Perhaps they were the reason the forest had appeared.

They had come here to find that out.

They didn't know what was inside the boxes or what their intended purpose was. But there was a chance the forest had affected them somehow. It may not have been a dangerous object to begin with, but it might have become one.

"I'm opening it."

She didn't know what would happen, but she deemed it a greater hazard to have the students open it instead. They couldn't afford to take unnecessary risks like that.

And so Gray Rouva decided to open the box herself.

"…Oh?"

The item gave no resistance and was empty except for two magic circles—one on the top and the other on the bottom—charged with power.

If something was put inside the box, it would have been sandwiched between the two magic circles. There wasn't room to put any objects inside, though. When the box was closed, the lid and bottom fit snugly together. In other words, it couldn't have contained anything physical.

"Those circles…"

"They're based on Iguraigu—magic circles for dueling. I see, I see." Gray Rouva grinned. She'd understood the purpose of the box. "You're meant to insert something between two magic-repelling magic circles. That's the idea behind it."

"…Ah, I see. So it's meant to enclose magic."

"Seems so. Then we have our answer."

"Indeed we do."

It was dark spirits, after all.

They were fond of small, dark places that were quiet and deserted. Furthermore, they liked to settle in spots where they could sense supernatural matter. This invention just so happened to be a dark spirit's ideal environment.

"Could you tell me where your friends are?" Clavis murmured to the spheres of light.

They couldn’t communicate through words, but the floating light spirits understood his meaning and gathered around the boxes at their feet.

Just as expected, it seemed that their friends—the dark spirits—were inside one of those boxes.

◆

This was a first for Kunon.

“Being called out by a teacher doesn’t feel too great.”

Indeed, a summons from the faculty was rather unpleasant.

Kunon was nervous. This felt much worse than being called out by his father.

Satori had called for him before regarding business and experiments, but this was his first time ever being summoned by a teacher without having the slightest idea why.

It was early morning, and students were congregated in front of Building 11—or rather, the mysterious forest. They were all students who had been based out of the building. Kunon, the Saint, and so on.

None of them knew the reason they had been called there.

Most likely, the results of the investigation into the forest were out. And yet the atmosphere was distinctly uncomfortable. It was scary not knowing who was going to show up and what they were going to say.

This is not a feeling I’d like to experience again, Kunon thought. Being called there alone would have been miserable.

“You think so?”

In contrast to Kunon’s restlessness, the Saint waited with dignity. The only thought going through her mind was: *What will become of the forest?*

Reyes wasn’t thinking about the school building or her lab. Rather, she was much more concerned about the plants she saw as her children, and, in particular, how the forest would be treated.

She didn't think the faculty would propose getting rid of it. But if that did come up, she was thinking of involving her homeland in a protest or suggesting the forest be transplanted.

She couldn't tell them that the massive tree at the center was a Kira Vera, but there was also no way she could sit idly by if they suggested cutting it down.

She couldn't explain her reasons, but she couldn't capitulate, either. Rather than her personal feelings, this was her opinion as a member of the ministry.

Reyes, Kunon, and the other students waited for a teacher to arrive.

"Hello. Sorry for the wait."

Shortly thereafter, two teachers joined them.

Kunon didn't recognize the one who gave the friendly greeting. He had a hood pulled low over his eyes and wore a pair of glasses, so his face was not easy to make out. All Kunon could tell was that the teacher was young and male.

The other one was the broadly built earth sorcerer Keevan Brid.

"Let's get right into the results of the investigation."

Keevan was standing behind the other man—perhaps he was of lower rank.

"……"

There was nothing odd about Kunon finding a teacher he didn't recognize. He expected there were still plenty of faculty at the school that he had yet to meet or even see. After all, the school had many recluses who didn't care at all about the outside world, including both teachers and students.

Except…Kunon could *see* something the others couldn't. And he'd just encountered a brand-new mystery.

"The investigation concluded that this incident was caused by several coinciding factors and was therefore an accident. If even one of those factors had been absent, this wouldn't have happened, and it may have been avoided if there had been even one additional

element involved. And so Gray Rouva has decided to treat this matter as an accident and will be overlooking the entire thing."

So the great witch would overlook it. While some students were visibly relieved, others looked dissatisfied. Nevertheless, if that was the official position, all they could do was accept it.

"Are you able to tell us the details?" one student asked, hand raised.

"I'm afraid not. As I mentioned before, this happened because of overlapping coincidences, some of which involve students' experiments and research. Simply put, I would have to disclose your research results, and so I cannot discuss it. Talking about your results would necessitate discussing your experiments and research, which would rob you of your right to confidentiality, you see."

That was certainly an undesirable outcome to many.

"I'll simply say that it's not the kind of accident that happens often. I really doubt a coincidence like this will happen again."

This incident was the first of its kind at the magic school, despite its history spanning several hundred years. If it somehow did occur a second time, it would probably be many years in the future. That was the faculty's conclusion.

"Next, regarding the plan for the forest."

There it was—the only part of this discussion Reyes was interested in. She leaned forward slightly.

"The forest will be left as is. Building Eleven will be reconstructed in another location, so that should be your expectation going forward."

Yes!

The Saint rejoiced.

Outwardly, her demeanor didn't change at all, but on the inside, she was clapping and dancing with abandon.

"Reyes SaintLance," said the hooded teacher. "An inquiry has been submitted to the Holy Kingdom. A public announcement is pending their approval, so please plan accordingly."

Reyes knew at once that he was alluding to the Kira Vera.

"I understand."

She already had her orders from the High Priest: "Don't tell anyone about the Sacred Tree." Even if a teacher hadn't said as much, Reyes had no intention of telling a soul.

"That's more or less it for the investigation report. I'm sure there are many aspects you're curious about, but I hope you'll refrain from asking, as you must understand there are things I cannot discuss. The whole incident is being overlooked with that expectation. Next, regarding the personal belongings left in the forest…"

In short, every item that had been inside Building 11 had been recovered. However, since they were all jumbled together, it was up to the students to separate and sort them.

The school was claiming responsibility for all damage and loss. The incident had been deemed an accident. It was determined that human intent was not a factor, and therefore, there was no human culprit.

The students' belongings would be returned, and the school was going to reimburse them.

Though the investigation results had been left vague, the students were more or less content with the conclusion. They didn't have much choice, of course.

"And finally, about this…"

Finished with the main topic of conversation, the teacher pulled a round metal box out of his pocket.

"Oh!" Kunon exclaimed. He knew exactly what the item was.

"Is this yours?" asked the teacher, turning toward him.

"Um, yes, well, it's more of a collaborative effort…"

"I see. I'd like to speak with you a little more. Is that okay?"

"…Um?"

What was happening? Why was he being singled out?

"Don't tell me… Am I in big trouble…?"

It was terrifying to be called out by a teacher without knowing the reason why. And this time it was just Kunon, and he didn't know

anything about the teacher in question.

The man's tone was mild, but that calmness made the situation even scarier. Kunon couldn't figure out what the man wanted. But then again, Kunon was already afraid of this teacher for an entirely different reason.

"'Trouble'? No, I just want to hear what you have to say about this very interesting magic tool. And I have something to tell you."

He had something to tell Kunon. What was it?

"…Um, you're a teacher here, right? A sorcerer?"

"…Yes? Though I doubt any of you here know me, as I rarely go out in public. This is definitely our first encounter. My name is Clavis, and I'm a professor of light magic."

That makes sense, Kunon thought.

Considering the way he was addressing the students, he must be a teacher. And Kunon could indeed sense the expected magic power coming from him.

But that was exactly what unsettled Kunon. That was the problem.

Why? Kunon wondered. Why was it that he *couldn't see anything* behind Clavis?

Whatever it was that Kunon always saw accompanying sorcerers, Clavis didn't have one.

After receiving the vague results of the investigation, the students gathered in front of the forest were divided into two groups—a group of nine and a group of one.

Kunon alone was led away from the rest. Reyes and the others were left in Professor Keevan's care.

"Sit wherever you'd like," said Professor Clavis.

He'd brought Kunon—and only Kunon—to another school building. They were in what appeared to be an empty classroom, with desks and chairs arranged in rows.

"……"

Obediently, Kunon lowered himself into a suitable seat.

He was nervous.

Since coming to Dirashik, he must have seen hundreds of ordinary people and sorcerers alike, but this was his first time seeing someone with nothing at all on or around them.

The things around sorcerers were particularly striking, but even people who couldn't do magic had something easy to spot, like horns or wings sprouting out of their bodies.

But here, standing right in front of Kunon, was Clavis—an exception to both of those categories.

The man was very clearly a sorcerer. Kunon could feel his power even more distinctly now that they were facing each other one-on-one. It was vast and serene, like the placid surface of a lake. But the more Kunon probed into it, the more bottomless it felt, and the more he sensed something mysterious lurking in its depths.

It was puzzling. And, faced with this mysterious being, Kunon's curiosity started to overtake his nerves.

"Are you a three-star, Professor?" he asked, unable to stop himself.

It was probably fine. Clavis had introduced himself as a teacher, and that meant a student like Kunon was free to ask questions.

According to Kunon's experience, Clavis had to be a three-star. No one with that amount of magic power could be anything less…

"No. I'm a two-star."

"Ah."

A lie.

This enigmatic person with nothing around them had just lied to Kunon.

"I thought two-stars didn't have that much magic power," he said.

"Ha-ha-ha, people often think that's the case. But I'm telling the truth. I took a long time to develop my power through training."

When he put it like that, however, Kunon began to feel he was telling the truth.

It was just as Clavis said. Kunon couldn't prove he hadn't increased his magic power through training.

Some people insisted the increases were minuscule or that they were within the margin of error, but such increases had been

confirmed. Even if other people's gains were quite small, it was always possible that Clavis had uniquely grown his power by leaps and bounds.

"I hear you're on good terms with the Saint," Clavis said.

"Yes." Kunon nodded. "We're classmates and very good friends. I think she's a fantastic woman."

It had been nearly a year since they met. Perhaps it would have been a different story back when they first began school, but Kunon felt confident Reyes wouldn't deny their friendship now.

"I see. All saints are a bit sheltered, no matter which generation, so I'm sure it's not always easy. But please do continue to be kind to her."

"That's no matter. I also have a reputation for being ignorant of the ways of the world."

"Is that so? Well, that's a relief, then."

This information hardly seemed reassuring, but there was no one present willing to point that out.

Kunon and Clavis were idly chatting away when…

"Hey. Sorry to keep you."

"…?!"

…all of a sudden, a rectangular shadow was standing next to Clavis.

Kunon was truly surprised. He couldn't sense anything. But how was that possible?

Though it was little consolation, Kunon's lack of sight had made his other senses especially perceptive. He could feel the presence of others and was highly attuned to the flow of air against his skin.

Uneven terrain and slopes weren't his strong suit, but not being able to see didn't inconvenience him much anymore. And yet…when the shadow appeared, he hadn't noticed.

It wasn't until he heard a voice that he realized *something was there*—a shadow he couldn't see using his magical perception.

Through the Glass Eye, he could see it, but looking at it didn't help much. It was still just a rectangular shadow, after all. There wasn't anyone standing there.

"Clavis, where are you in the conversation?" The shadow was speaking in the voice of a young woman.

"It hasn't started yet. I was waiting for you."

Clavis seemed utterly unfazed, but Kunon was on edge.

Now there were two puzzling beings. There was nothing visible behind either of them. Not to mention one of them was just an oblong shadow and not humanoid at all. It was just a shadow shaped like a casket.

Looking at the two of them had Kunon's heart pounding away in his chest.

"Little boy."

That must be me, Kunon thought. The one addressing him was the shadow, so he couldn't tell that she'd turned to him or feel her gaze.

"Tell me about that box. What was your intention and purpose in developing—? …What?"

The reason for the shadow's confusion was that, at that very moment, a hesitant Kunon had stood up and cautiously stuck out his left hand—right into the rectangular shadow.

Kunon was shocked.

"What…?! This— What is this?!"

He didn't feel a thing.

There was no one inside the shadow. He felt no change in temperature around his hand—it was neither cold nor warm. He didn't sense any sort of spell comprising the shadow's structure, either.

By all appearances, it could only have been a magically operated presence, and yet he couldn't even feel any magic power.

It would be best described as a patch of black air. But then what about the voice?

Where did the voice coming from the shadow originate?

"Whoa now. Hey, Clavis. This is the first time anyone has ever touched me so presumptuously."

"Please don't say that like you're enjoying it. Kunon—you shouldn't touch the body of a woman you've just met without warning like that."

This revelation was even more shocking.

"This is a woman?! She's nothing like any woman I know…! Wait, this is her body?!"

Despite what he'd heard, Kunon couldn't make heads or tails of the information.

The shadow was *such* a mystery that if someone had told him it was the abyss of magic itself, he would have believed them.

Still just a novice, he didn't understand a thing.

Was he lacking in knowledge? Did he simply not understand enough about magic?





This, Kunon thought, *is exactly why magic is so interesting*.

"…Her body…?" His hand was still inside the shadow. He couldn't feel anything, but if this was a woman's body… "Please excuse my rudeness."

His hand hadn't brushed against anything. Nevertheless, *apparently* Kunon had just impolitely groped a woman's body, so he stepped back and apologized.

"This is my first time meeting a woman who feels like nothing more than air… Is *shadow person* an accurate term?"

"Sure, that's fine."

Apparently, it was fine.

Kunon was just as clueless as before, but at least knowing that he didn't know was a small step forward. Probably.

"Let's get back on topic. Clavis."

"Yes."

Prompted by the shadow woman, Clavis once again took out the Spell Vault that Kunon had developed with his team.

"Kunon, I called you here to ask you about this magic tool. What we say here is confidential. You have my word that your hard work will not be stolen or replicated. So please tell us about this in detail."

"As expected…"

It's all coming together, Clavis thought.

When they heard about the box—the one designed to store and transport magic, and known as the Spell Vault—from Kunon, the final piece of the puzzle fell into place. The cause and flow of events that had led to the recent forestation phenomenon were plain to see.

"What do we do?" said Clavis, turning to the shadow at his side. "Is it okay to explain it to him?"

The shadow responded, "I don't see why not."

There were two primary factors contributing to the matter at hand: the Saint's Kira Vera and Kunon's Spell Vault.

An explanation could be given without bringing in anyone else's work, and it was probably fine to mention the Sacred Tree here. The Holy Kingdom would likely get back to them within the next few days. If permission to give a public statement was granted, then it was no problem, and if by some chance permission wasn't granted, it wouldn't matter.

That tree was going to remain at the school for decades or even centuries to be studied. It would be impossible to keep it hidden from the students, so Gray Rouva had already decided to make a public statement. When that would happen was not yet determined, but they intended to do it sooner rather than later.

Kunon and the Saint were on good terms, and he was aware of Reyes's abilities to some extent. They would probably be able to explain things to him without saying too much. And they had things to discuss with him once he was aware of the situation.

"Kunon. We're going to tell you the specifics of this incident."

"What? Me?"

Earlier in front of the forest, Clavis had said he wasn't able to discuss any details, because it would mean disclosing students' research results.

"Oh."

Kunon understood at last: The students whose research would be compromised were mainly those on his own research team. It was fine to talk to Kunon about it, because he already knew the information to be disclosed.

"You said you were the leader of the Spell Vault's development team, right? There are a few things I need to caution you about, so this explanation is necessary."

With that preface, Clavis began to discuss the matter.

"*That's* what it was…?" Kunon was surprised. "So spirits really do exist?"

"They do. If you want to explore all magic has to offer, you're bound to encounter such beings someday. Please look forward to it."

That certainly was an exciting prospect. But at the moment, there was more to talk about.

Clavis had just told Kunon the particulars of the forestation incident. But quite frankly, Kunon's comprehension had yet to catch up.

"May I ask questions about what you just told me?"

He wanted to make sure he fully understood the chain of events.

Clavis responded, "Of course," and Kunon decided to proceed without hesitation.

"Would it be correct to say this began with the arrival of the dark spirits…?"

"Sure. Well, you could also say it started with the light spirits around Saint Reyes."

Spirits had been practically under Kunon's nose without his realizing it. The topic was endlessly fascinating, but he left it there for the time being.

"Do the dark spirits possibly have anything to do with Lulomet from the Rationality Faction?"

"Ah, so you knew about that. That speeds things up a bit. We're talking about something that happened several months ago, mind you. We believe the dark spirits involved in this incident were the ones Lulomet and his team summoned in their ritual. At the time, the ritual was completed and wrapped up successfully—or so it appeared."

"In reality, things weren't so neat and tidy," Kunon concluded.

When the ritual was over, the dark spirits had vanished. Everyone was under the impression that they had returned to wherever they came from. The spirits, however, had actually lingered in the area.

Why they stayed wasn't clear. But for some unknown reason, the dark spirits had remained on school grounds. And apparently, they had been hiding inside an early Spell Vault prototype created by Kunon and his team.

"There are so many aspects I don't understand, but…why the Spell Vault…?"

"Because it's a comfortable place for them to live." That answer came from the shadow woman. "Dark, quiet, extremely confined, and filled with pleasant supernatural components. That's the ideal habitat for dark spirits."

Kunon was reeling.

"That box allowed them to stay on the surface and still avoid the light. The spirits probably snuck inside intending to take a nap."

"A nap…"

The magic tool Kunon and his seniors had worked themselves to the bone over had become a spot to catch a few *z*'s? That was… Well, he supposed it was fine. He had some thoughts about it, but he let them go.

"By the way, they're still there."

"They are?! Right now?!"

Apparently, the Spell Vault that Clavis was holding had dark spirits inside it at that very moment.

"They must really like it as a home, considering they've yet to leave even with people around like this."

Kunon wasn't sure whether he was supposed to be flattered by that or not. Either way, it was a result he hadn't foreseen in the least.

"And…the mythology?" he asked.

"Light and dark coming together resulted in the genesis of everything. That's the principle behind the Creation—everybody knows it."

"That happened?"

"The Saint's light spirits and the summoned dark spirits—two groups of entities that would normally never come into contact with each other did just that, triggering Creation on an extremely small scale."

"…And that…happened?"

"I understand it's difficult to believe, but that explanation makes the most sense. A miniature Creation took place. Wind spirits spread the word, and the local earth spirits gave their blessing. Fire cradled it all in its warmth, and water helped everything grow. That forest is the outcome."

"And the genesis served as the growth agent for the Kira Vera?"

"A tree that takes more than a century to mature grew that much overnight. Don't you think that's the simplest explanation?"

This did strike Kunon as pretty convincing…

"Creation and the Sacred Tree of myth…"

The story still seemed rather fanciful to him. It was as though he'd suddenly found himself in the middle of a fairy tale. Despite being assured it was all true, he simply couldn't shake the doubt in his head.

"That's because you still have a long way to go," the shadow woman said, as if she could plainly see all Kunon's inner misgivings. "As a sorcerer, you've not yet crossed paths with anything mysterious. You haven't even come close. The magic world has mythology in spades, you just haven't noticed it yet. Sure, it's not all true. A lot of it is nonsense. But there's truth there, too—you've done business using the sacred herb shi-shilla, but you still cling to these foolish preconceptions. That, too, is a product of legend, you know."

"Huh?"

"What we call sacred lands and consecrated grounds are, to begin with—"

"Gray." Clavis cut across the shadow woman's words. "You're saying too much. Sorcerers have to make it *to the entrance* on their own merits. Don't start playing the mother hen."

"Hmph. Impertinent little boy."

That time, it wasn't Kunon she was referring to.

"I am really, really interested in what you were just talking about," he said.

"Well, this brat says I have to stop. If you want someone to blame, look at him."

"I blame you, Professor Clavis."

"Ha-ha. Teachers who are strict are better for their students in the long run."

"They're very unpopular, though."

"Ah-ha-ha. I don't like the sound of that."

Unperturbed, Clavis laughed cheerfully.

"I'd like to return to the previous topic, if I may?"

Their conversation had gotten a bit sidetracked, but at the moment, Kunon was still verifying the sequence of events.

"So the forest appeared on the same day as the light and dark creation event, correct?"

"Correct. Miraculously, it would seem that was the day after you and your group completed the Spell Vault."

"I was horrified when I found out. It would have been awful if we had been caught in the middle of it. But…"

Overnight stays in the lab had been common while the Spell Vault was under development. The rest of the team spent many a night in Building 11, though Kunon had a curfew to abide by. Still, he'd stayed with them in spirit.

Even Elia, who had joined the team partway through the project to help with miscellaneous tasks, had struggled to manage the team's schedule. She said it had been particularly impossible to make them go home, and she'd ultimately had to give up.

The day the Spell Vault was completed, they all went home, so none of them were caught up in the forestation incident.

When the forest appeared, the school building was completely destroyed. Kunon was sure that if any of them had been inside when it happened, the consequences would have been dire. The thought of what could have been—but wasn't—made him shudder with fear and sigh with relief. However…

"It wasn't just a matter of lucky timing, was it? It happened because the school building was empty, right?"

"That's right. No one was around, so the dark spirits came out of their hiding place."

Everyone on Kunon's team went home the day they finished the Spell Vault. But there were probably other students staying in Building 11 that night. Consequently, the forestation phenomenon didn't occur until the following night, on the day the team unveiled their prototypes to Elia.

If Clavis and the shadow woman had come to that conclusion, Kunon figured they'd also gathered evidence to back it up.

"And that's how the dark and light spirits happened upon each other. It's possible they met before, but… Well, it appears both parties had more than their fair share of merrymaking that night. The Creation happened at the end of all that."

Spirits. Merrymaking. Creation.

It seemed the situation was still largely beyond Kunon's comprehension.

"Now, as for what we need to tell you."

The invention Kunon's team had made ended up being linked—completely unexpectedly—to myth. Kunon had already been given a detailed explanation of that unbelievable affair. And yet, apparently, they hadn't even gotten to the main reason Clavis and the shadow woman had called him out.

"As I said before, a very small-scale Creation took place, but that isn't an everyday occurrence because of where dark spirits are found."

"Where they're found…?"

Kunon went back over what they had talked about earlier.

Dark spirits were said to prefer dark, cramped places. Evidently, they were partial to entering—or maybe getting caught inside of…?—environments like the Spell Vault, which had been sealed up very tightly to avoid any gaps or openings.

"Is that because dark spirits stay in the dark, and thus, under normal circumstances, they wouldn't come into contact with light spirits?"

"Precisely," Clavis replied. Kunon seemed to have hit the nail on the head. "We're talking about the root of Creation here. If it had taken place at its usual scale, it wouldn't have ended with some measly forest. This is how worlds are born. I expect it would have been an event large enough to destroy this universe and generate a whole new one."

That sounds a bit hyperbolic, Kunon thought.

But then again, if he took the topic at face value, wasn't that exactly what Creation entailed?

"So backtracking a bit—this Spell Vault. It's ended up with an unintended utility…or risk, perhaps, beyond what you kids designed it for."

Kunon nodded. Clavis had been right; this was what they'd really wanted to discuss with him—the part of the conversation that came after the explanation of the forest's appearance.

"As use of the Spell Vault spreads, there's a chance that dark spirits will take up residence inside them."

And wherever light and dark spirits met, another incident like this would occur.

The collateral damage had been limited to a single school building this time. But who knew where the next such event would take place? Depending on the location, the results could be disastrous.

It was a matter of scale. The scope of damage was minor in this case…or, actually, Kunon wasn't so sure about that.

He got the feeling that the Sacred Tree's involvement had limited the effects—or was it the other way around?

He didn't understand any of it. Since he was so befuddled by it all, the safest option was probably to prevent it from happening again. And that meant the Spell Vault's marketability was in jeopardy.

"Do we need to suspend development?" Kunon asked with determination, steeling himself for the worst.

Though the Spell Vault was not yet complete, it was showing some promise of success. It was still far from practical use, but the team was committed to improving it in the future.

If he had to tell them development was suspended, he would prefer to do so right away. The sooner the better, really. All the experience and expertise they had earned would come in handy someday, so stopping the project now didn't have to mean all their hard work was for nothing.

Above all, time was a precious resource. They couldn't afford to waste it continuing a project that would only be suspended.

As a child of nobility, Kunon would have to return to his home country someday. His time at magic school was limited.

But things went a little different than he'd expected.

"No," Clavis replied casually. "Unless there's a serious need, we will not infringe on your rights as students. That goes double for Advanced class experiments."

"We're suggesting the opposite, in fact," the shadow woman added. "Viewed one way, this is a box that could induce young spirits that haven't yet developed a sense of self to stay put. We see value in that. Spirit guiding and summoning methods exist, but dark spirits are particularly challenging. The summoning part isn't very difficult, but they scamper back to where they came from as soon as they're able. That's where this box would come in handy. With this, dark spirits could be temporarily confined."

Kunon supposed that was possible. He didn't know anything about spirits, however, so he couldn't really gauge what that would mean.

Then again, if something as unbelievable as Creation had happened, then whatever the shadow woman was talking about had to be a big deal.

"But carrying on as before isn't an option, either, right?"

Even if Clavis and the woman thought it was fine, Kunon had been made all too aware of the risks posed by the Spell Vault. He was already of the opinion that it shouldn't be released into the world. At least, not in its current form.

It still wasn’t yet ready for practical use, however, so other issues had to be sorted out before the question of its release was even raised.

“What do you mean? All you’d have to do is make the inside less hospitable to dark spirits. That’s simple enough, isn’t it?”

“Oh, of course.”

It was indeed simple. Based on what Kunon had learned about dark spirits, they wouldn’t enter—or get caught inside of…?—a place with even a smidgen of light.

Engineering a gap in the box would be complicated, but making the magic circles inscribed on the interior luminescent enough to repel dark spirits would likely take no time at all.

“Besides, it’s an interesting magic tool. What does it do once you put a spell inside of it?”

“Oh, it’s intended to store the spell for a non-magical person to use.”

“Ah, I see! So that’s what you’re going for! I thought you might be keeping spells of other attributes inside for use as needed.”

“It’s certainly where I’d like to end up, though the product is nowhere near complete.”

“I can tell. From the looks of it, I’d guess this thing is only capable of maintaining a weak spell for one or two days.”

“Not to mention the power required to maintain the contents is probably nothing to sneeze at. It’s a long way from being useful.”

“That’s exactly right,” agreed Kunon. “The one you’re holding now, Professor Clavis, is an early prototype. But the newest model needs a ton of work, too. And it took us half a year of development to get even that far…”

Their conversation soon turned lively. Sorcerers were all the same at heart, after all. With a shared subject at hand, they couldn’t help but get excited.

Despite their spirited discussion, the three sorcerers had already discussed all the necessary points.

In short, all they'd wanted to talk about were improvements and requirements regarding the Spell Vault's production. That was it.

"Can I ask just one more thing?"

Knowing there was no better time, Kunon had taken the opportunity to ask a variety of questions. Many things had been weighing on his mind, but there was one question he hadn't dared to touch on. Depending on the answer, it may have been nothing but a waste of time. That was why Kunon decided he would save it for last.

As the conversation came to a close and he was given permission to leave, Kunon stood up and said it: "Can I ask just one more thing?"

"What is it?"

Beneath his eye mask, Kunon's gaze shifted to the shadow at Clavis's side.

"Is that lady there… Could she possibly be…the world's greatest witch…?"

Several times during their discussion, Clavis had referred to the shadow woman as Gray. And every time, it made Kunon's heart leap in his chest.

As that was happening, he remembered that he had seen something like the shadow once before—during his match with the Inferno Prince. He'd fought until every last drop of his magic was spent, and Kunon's recollection of all aspects of the duel other than Gioelion was hazy at best. That was why he hadn't thought of it until now.

Despite this, he'd refrained from confirming the woman's identity up to this point.

If she *was* Gray Rouva, well. *Well.*

The thought alone made his pulse pound. His heart was racing at a full sprint.

The world's greatest witch—also known as the best magic user in the world. The one every other sorcerer revered.

Kunon wasn't confident he would be able to address her directly if he was cognizant of who he was speaking with. As it was, he had already committed a blunder unworthy of a gentleman: groping her body only moments after they'd met. He wouldn't be able to forgive himself.

"That's right," Clavis replied easily, unaware of the way Kunon's chest was throbbing.

And so, he was no longer able to forgive himself.

His body seemed disinclined to show him mercy, either, what with the way his ribs had started to ache. Even if his mind had been willing to pardon his behavior, his body was not.

"Introduce yourself, Gray."

Now Clavis was demanding she introduce herself? To a first-year student who was still only floundering about at the entrance to the magical world?

Kunon wondered if his heart would explode. It was beating even faster than when he had gained his magical perception or invented the Glass Eye.

"I'm Gray Rouva. I usually disguise my voice and speak like a stereotypical old woman, but this is closer to how I naturally sound. I've already lived so long, you see—I have to stay young at heart or my age will catch up with me mentally."

Voice and tone both brimming with youth, Gray Rouva, formerly known as the shadow woman, announced herself without hesitation.

"…Um, earlier, I behaved in such an ungentlemanly, despicable way…"

Kunon's chest hurt. He had asked for verification, and now he regretted it.

To think he had groped the body of the world's greatest witch because his curiosity had gotten the better of him. What in the world had he done?

Now he was breaking out in a cold sweat. He'd simply had to know before he could walk away, and this was the result of giving in to that desire.

"Earlier?" asked the witch.

"He's probably referring to touching you," said Clavis.

"Oh, that? Don't worry about it. You could tell by touching, couldn't you? *My body* isn't here."

Please tell me everything about that!

That was what Kunon wanted to say, but he bit the words back.

His heart had very noticeably skipped a beat, too, as if begging him to stop.

Even if she explained herself, he was sure he wouldn't understand. After all, in that moment, Kunon hadn't the slightest clue what that shadow was—not one. He didn't even understand how it was possible, so he was sure it would be beyond his grasp.

Someday, if he acquired enough knowledge and skill to comprehend it, then he would ask.

He needed to acclimate himself a bit more, too. If he ever got more worked up than he was right then, he didn't think his body could withstand it.

"Thank you very much."

Feeling grateful on so many levels, Kunon gave his thanks and left the classroom.

He stepped outside in a mild daze. He'd just met the world's greatest witch. He'd even spoken with her.

He didn't know if he was overcome with emotion or merely shaken to his core.

Kunon stood, unmoving, until his heart calmed down.





Chapter 7
In Short, Misery

"Ah, Kunon! Over here!"

Bael was calling to him.

Moved and rattled by his unexpected encounter, Kunon was currently heading toward a different school building.

He couldn't bask in the afterglow forever. After indulging in just a little bit of basking, Kunon caught up with the students he had parted ways with in front of the forest.

Earlier that day, he alone had been called off on separate business, but since that was over, he rejoined the group.

The rest of the students had ended up in Building 9, he was told. And just now, it was from a third-floor window in Building 9 that he heard his name.

"How is it going?" Kunon asked.

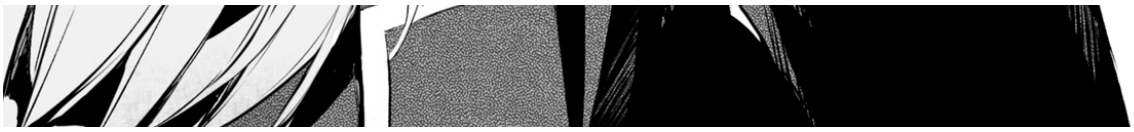
Creating a staircase made of A-ori, he climbed right up to the third floor from outside.

"It's a bit rough— Hold it; you're not going anywhere."

The moment Kunon glanced through the window, he tried to bolt.

Bael's reflexes were quick, though. No sooner had Kunon turned his back than he felt a hand grab him by the collar. It was like Bael had been anticipating this. Well, he probably had been.





"I'm no good with cleaning, organization, or rooms full of men!"

"Neither am I! But you know, we have to do this!"

Inside the classroom, the situation was already dire. It was bad enough that a single peek made one want to flee.

The room was overflowing with books and documents. It was chaos—a sea of papers in disarray.

When Kunon and his team had been developing the Spell Vault, their lab had grown pretty wild, but this—this room was on an entirely different level. It had to be at least twice as bad.

"This was inevitable, remember? All the books and documents from Building Eleven were bundled together during collection."

Indeed, every single text and scrap of paper that had been inside the building when it collapsed were currently amassed in a single room in Building 9.

Now they had to sort through it all—manually, one item at a time—and collect what belonged to each of them.

The books would be relatively easy. Even though there were a lot of them, the total amount clearly paled in comparison to the real problem: the documents.

To make matters worse, their work hadn't even been consolidated yet. Every last memo and scribbled note from Kunon's team—and there were a *lot*—was in this room, and they had to find them.

That meant separating them out from everyone else's papers, too.

In other words, the situation was a total nightmare.

Starting that day and continuing for who knew how long, every waking hour would need to be devoted to boring, unpleasant, unfulfilling menial labor.

Kunon hated cleaning at the best of times. Just imagining himself tidying up this mess made him feel physically ill.

"*Ugh*, nooo…I don't wanna…"

"Hey! Seriously? Don't cry."

It had been a long time since Kunon genuinely felt like shedding tears. In fact, he really *did* cry a little. After all, he knew there would be no escape from the trials and tribulations ahead.

"Aha… This is interesting."

"So somebody was researching that…"

"Hey, has anybody found my meat report yet?"

Bound by responsibility and physically unable to escape, Kunon had joined in on the organizing.

The students formerly based in Building 11 were diving headlong into the sea of documents. Combing through the shocking amount of paper to recover only their own work was no easy task. And yet all they could do was carry on.

While they sifted through the mess, they inevitably ended up looking at other people's documents. There was no helping it; they had to check them to figure out whose work it was.

Once they skimmed over a document, their interest was piqued. And once their interest was piqued, they couldn't help reading it through.

At the start, they had all balked at the idea of reading other students' private research results. But that sentiment faded pretty quickly.

Despite their relative lack of experience, they were all sorcerers. When it came to magic research and experiments, sorcerers were hard-pressed to curb their curiosity.

"Hmm. Fire attribute experiments are interesting, too."

Even if the type of magic involved was not their own.

"There's this much variation in soils and fertilizers…?"

Even if the subject matter was quite literally *outside of their field*, plenty of topics could grab a sorcerer's attention.

"Hey. You know you shouldn't be looking that closely."

Even though Bael kept telling them off, the students found themselves thoroughly engrossed in other people's reports the moment they let their guards down.

Kunon was no exception. He was getting very little sorting done.

Incidentally, students who had no documents in the sea of papers weren't allowed to participate in the sorting, since it involved looking at other people's hard work. The only exception was Bael, who was

given special permission to help because he was involved in some of their projects.

His hands would also pause mid-categorization every so often, but they didn't come to a full stop like Kunon's did.

"This is really interesting. It's about the principles of levitation, and look—"

"I said, knock it off. That's somebody's unpublished work. Normally that information would be off-limits to anyone uninvolved—like you."

Bael had noticed something Kunon had not: There was a girl standing in their vicinity, boring holes into Kunon with her serious stare.

The report he was holding probably belonged to her, and she seemed pretty interested in Kunon's impression of her work.

"I don't think we need to worry about it at this point. See?" Kunon gestured around the room.

"Huh? Where's the report on Model 7?"

"There's a bunch about Model 9 over here."

"I want to read from the beginning… Oh, the notes are interesting, too. Where in the world did they get the idea for this…?"

The other students had completely abandoned sorting and were simply hunting around for the documents they wanted to read. It was like they were letting themselves get swept into the sea of paper. Bael found the words they were exchanging rather familiar.

"Lots of people are reading our reports, too," said Kunon.

There was a veritable mountain of documents in the room. It was the work of approximately ten people, accumulated over the course of several years. The more serious a student was, the more work they produced.

Nonetheless, the amount of writing concerning the Spell Vault was notably vast. Enough so that the students were bound to catch sight of some of it even if they weren't trying to. And of course, they were going to end up reading it in detail—they were sorcerers.

"That's not really okay, either…" Bael's voice had grown faint.

If the others were truly that deep into their reports, then Kunon's claim was probably correct.

There was only one student taking the sorting seriously—Reyes Saint-Lance.

And yet given the current situation, she appeared startlingly uninterested by comparison. She was so immersed in the task of silently categorizing documents that it made her look positively unenthusiastic about magic.

"Everyone, listen up! There's no point in trying to keep our stuff confidential anymore, is there?!" Donning his faction representative face, Bael addressed the room. "Let's finish sorting through everything first, *then* take our time reading! We'll be here forever if we carry on like this! So let's say that everyone except me is allowed to read whichever reports they want *after* everything has been separated! Does that sound okay to everybody?!"

Bael was certainly right; at their current rate, the sea of papers would take an eternity to sift through.

It was evening. Sorting had begun early that morning, and most of the day was already gone.

Progress had been minimal, practically nonexistent.

Some particularly negligent members of the group—like Kunon—just tossed papers aside after reading them. The only things they saw were the research topics and subjects that interested them. Not that Kunon could actually see, of course.

"I also think we should call for backup. If we don't have somebody here to keep us on track, things will just drag on and on. Kunon—we haven't submitted our report yet, right? You'll be headed for Second Level next year unless we pick up the pace."

Oh. Right.

Kunon had yet to check how many credits he had earned for the Medicine Boxes or the shi-shilla medicine. There was a chance that he wouldn't have enough credits to advance if he didn't submit the Spell Vault report.

"Call for backup…? Don't tell me you mean…?"

Someone to keep the sorting process on track. Those words brought one name to mind.

"What choice do we have? When push comes to shove, I'm kind of a slob, too, so it's not like I can be in charge."

"…So you're calling on her…?" Kunon heaved a sigh. "I don't want to clean… I wish we could just blow all this away with wind magic…"

"You need the credits, remember?"

Kunon's sorrows were ignored, and the next day, *she* showed up.

"Come on—let's get to cleaning. Snap to it, everyone. Just so you know, it's not like I have a bunch of spare time on my hands. I'll be expecting appropriate compensation, so be prepared."

Shilto Lockson, the Harmony Faction representative, had joined the group. She drove them hard with relentless direction and pressure.

The students of Building 11 faced off against a sea of documents, and now they meant business.

Three days had passed since the sorting work began, and there was still no end in sight.

With Shilto at the helm, however, progress was being made. One could even say the work was going well. Particularly because Shilto kept zapping everyone.

Her nickname—"Lightning Bolt"—wasn't just for show. Lightning magic, which was difficult both to use and to control, was Shilto's specialty, and she hurled it without hesitation at anyone who slacked off.

On top of that, she was the one working the hardest despite having nothing to do with the situation. *And* she did so with joy, her love for keeping things neat and tidy on full display. This made it impossible for the other students to object.

At first, the sorting efforts were frequently held up by people dragging their feet, taking long breaks, and getting lost in reading the documents.

Seeing how little attention anyone paid to verbal warnings, supervisor Shilto quickly stopped bothering with such things. Instead, she switched to using force. Anyone whose hands slowed even a little got zapped.

Thanks to that tactic, the students were no longer inclined to be lazy. Some of them did try to run away, though.

Working in constant silence, the students fighting on the front lines of the paper sea had all grown hopeless—except for Shilto, who was enjoying herself, and Reyes, who carried on in her disinterested manner.

But one among them simply couldn't stop his mind from turning: Kunon.

Kunon was thinking. He kept doing so even after being zapped several times. Regardless of whether it was insolence or tenacity that drove him, he just kept thinking.

Was there really no way to escape this misery?

No—Kunon knew there wasn't.

In the end, he simply didn't have enough credits. He couldn't afford to run away. With his credits at stake, he had no choice but to participate in the cleanup.

That meant his best hope was finishing the sorting as soon as possible. And so he needed an efficient organization method.

The simplest solution was probably to get more people to help. But since most of the documents that needed sorting contained other people's confidential information, that wasn't an option, either.

The students of Building 11 had all agreed to share their reports with one another after realizing they could no longer keep them secret. But that was a choice made out of necessity. They would never have done so otherwise.

"Bael," Kunon called out to his senior, who was sorting papers nearby.

"Shhh. Don't talk to me… We'll get zapped again."

Bael's reply was quiet. The mere act of talking was enough to earn a punishment; it was like they were in a work camp. Their current

situation was surprisingly similar to one, in fact.

"When do you think we'll be done if we keep working at this pace?"

"Shut up. You're going to get us zapped."

It seemed that Bael's will had already been broken.

Kunon certainly understood why. The lightning was quite powerful. The pain, shock, and heat were fascinating and unlike anything Kunon had experienced before.

When the sorting work was over, he really wanted to talk to Shilto about her lightning magic. But that would have to wait.

He had wanted to pick Bael's brain, but the older boy had been broken by their strict supervisor.

With no other choice, Kunon went back to thinking by himself.

It was now day five.

Kunon, as always, was still thinking about document sorting methods and ways to differentiate between documents.

A few ideas had come to mind. However, he knew even before attempting any of them that they would be difficult to implement. Simply put, he'd written them off as obvious failures from the start.

Kunon had used A-ori and A-rubu in all sorts of ways up to that point, but he'd never used them to sort documents.

Though he hadn't experimented much with either A-oruvi or A-eura yet, he was pretty sure neither spell would prove useful. He couldn't think of a way to use them that made sense.

"Now!"

"Run! Hurry!"

"Shilto! Runners!"

"When will you learn? You can't escape my lightning."

Auuughhhhh!

Kunon kept thinking.

Escaping Shilto was impossible. He needed those credits, so giving up was impossible, too.

And yet, an efficient way to sort documents simply would not materialize in his head.

Nevertheless, he couldn't stop thinking about it.

Perhaps, in a way, getting lost in thought was Kunon's own little way of escaping.

It was now day seven.

All the while, Kunon was constantly thinking. And at last, he hit upon a single idea that was not so easily dismissed.

It came to him upon hearing the screams of his fellow prisoners.

Two of their number made regular escape attempts. Several times a day they tried to run but were zapped and brought back by Shilto. One was a boy, the other a girl. Kunon didn't know whether they were a couple.

Instead, what grabbed his attention was the difference in their shrieks. The tone, the way they yelled, the length of the screams—it was all different. In other words, the sound varied from individual to individual.

It was possible that the effects of the lightning also differed between men and women, but that wasn't what Kunon felt like investigating at the moment.

The key was individuality. When it came to documents, maybe that would correspond to paper size…?

Many of the notes scattered around the room were on the inexpensive standardized sheets the school provided. Anyone who applied would receive them. That meant probably around 90 percent of the documents in question were the same size. Sorting them that way wouldn't make things much easier.

The variously sized notes and memos could be separated out, but those were only notes. They were sad little scraps of paper whose purpose was served as soon as they were turned into clean, finished documents. Efficiency-wise, sorting out just the notes wasn't very meaningful.

And anyway, they had already been at it for seven days. Due to Shilto's hard work, progress had reached approximately 50 percent. The end was in sight.

In spite of himself, Kunon tried to find some hope in that thought but quickly retreated to the bleaker places in his mind.

They were only halfway done. With his sanity restored, he realized they would still be sorting for another week or so. It was too early to be optimistic.

He turned his thoughts back to individuality.

Kunon thought and thought. What individuality was there within this sea of documents? If he could figure that out, maybe he could come up with an efficient sorting method.

It happened on day ten.

"This is it…"

After hours of endless, desperate thinking, Kunon finally arrived at an answer.

He was holding a document. It was a single page from an experiment report about using magic to make beverages that paired well with meat dishes. Kunon was intrigued by the topic as a bacon lover, but he set his interests aside for the moment.

He did so because of the handwriting on the document.

The page was written in a rather distinct hand that Kunon couldn't decipher at first glance. Reading it properly would require focus. At the same time, he tried to look at the paper as little as possible, since he would be zapped if he was caught staring at it.

However…

This was it—the solution. The answer Kunon was searching for had been there in his hands the whole time.

"Sorting by letters… If I can do that…"

There was a way.

Separating the papers by size was inefficient, but if he used letters…

One of the compound versions of Kunon's A-ori spell—one from his arsenal of original variations, in other words—was used to trace fixed shapes.

The concept was similar to his magical perception, which allowed him to read books via touch. Typically, using that method, he couldn't get a clear reading of anything that wasn't close enough to feel with his hands. And so when he wanted to parse words and pictures within a reasonable distance, he traced over the surface with water.

The water contained some of Kunon's magic power. Using his awareness of that power, he could identify and therefore understand what the water was tracing. Essentially, it was water-assisted magical perception.

For days and days, as he toiled and suffered, Kunon had thought about how he could achieve his goal of sorting the documents. He hadn't been able to come up with anything, but he kept clinging to the possibility—probably because he knew that, somewhere in his head, there was a solution with potential.

He didn't need to separate the notes based on their paper. He needed to focus on *the writing*.

Writing was unique. Given letters as idiosyncratic as the ones in front of him, Kunon would, at the very least, be able to distinguish them from other people's handwriting right away.

He wouldn't really know if it was possible until he tried it, but… But if he *could*, then this nightmarish sorting task would be over in no time.

He wanted to test the idea immediately.

"Shil— Nng, *yeow*!"

As Kunon turned to make his case to Shilto, she zapped him.

He yelped in his own characteristic way.

"Why aren't your hands moving? We're finally nearing the end. Don't get lazy now."

Kunon knew there was sense in her words. *But*, he thought, as faint white smoke wafted up from his head and clothes, *you could at*

least hear me out first.

"Sort them via magic?"

Kunon got zapped three times, but he did eventually get Shilto to listen to his idea.

"I should be able to do it in theory," he said.

He smelled vaguely of smoke, but the odds of success looked favorable.

"But isn't it a bit late? I'm pretty sure we'll be done in just a couple more days."

"Don't you think that's a little uncalled for?! No matter how lovely a lady you are, possessing both severity and kindness in equal measure, there are some things you shouldn't say!"

"I…I see…"

The only thing on Kunon's mind was bringing his time as a conscripted laborer to an end as quickly as possible. For someone to deny him that was unconscionable!

He wasn't looking at how much work was left. He didn't want to see it. It didn't matter. He couldn't see it anyway.

By now, Kunon was eager to pounce on anything that would help them finish sooner, even if it was only by half a day.

"Come now, Shilto. Why not just— *Ouch*, what was that for?!"

Though they weren't exactly fighting, when Bael saw a disagreement sprouting between Shilto and Kunon, he attempted to intercede. Reflexively, Shilto zapped him.

"Ah, sorry," she apologized.

She had gotten so used to immediately zapping anyone who wasn't working that it had become a habit. Idle chitchat was considered "not working," so she had probably reacted purely to hearing Bael talk.

The upside, if there was one, was that while the lightning dealt considerable impact, the pain was not as intense. Shilto was making sure to moderate the power behind it. Of course, that was also the reason she kept using it so liberally.

"Anyway, you keep sorting. I'm the one talking to Kunon."

"……"

Supervisor Shilto never let up on the reins.

Bael sadly returned to his task. Looking at his desolate form from behind, Kunon felt sorry for him. But worrying over Bael would have to wait.

"…So anyway, you were saying?" asked Shilto.

"I thought of a sorting method, and I would like to try it out."

"Don't you do water magic? You're going to use that to sort *paper*? Or do you have some other means?"

"Oh, I can adjust the osmotic power of my water."

Kunon could prevent his water from permeating paper by changing its viscosity. Plus, extracting water from a material it had soaked into was easy. It just left things a little bit damp. But that wasn't likely to be an issue with ink that was already dry.

"You can do that? That's really clever." Shilto crossed her arms, contemplating her options. Then she said, "Okay, let's give it a shot."

At Shilto's command, everyone exited the classroom temporarily. It was a fleeting moment of freedom.

Law and order had arrived when Shilto joined the sorting team. To be specific, from the moment the students arrived in the morning until it was time to go home in the evening, they were not permitted to leave the classroom. They ate their meals in the room and were only allowed to use the bathroom at designated break times. Desertion was, of course, inexcusable.

Sure, they got to go home at the end of the day, but so what? The next day and the day after—every day until the sorting was finished—they were bound to continue their hellish tidying task at the magic school they loved.

It wasn't only Kunon who felt that way; most of the students involved shared the sentiment. Especially the two who kept trying to escape. There was nothing in that classroom but stagnation, surrender, and lightning.

But now they had a brief respite. How serene was the air of freedom! How refreshing the gusts of liberty!

And there was a chance that this release from their shackles could be permanent. It all depended on what Kunon was about to try. Whether he liked it or not, the hopes of those around him were piling high.

"Okay, I'm going to start… Oh, just in case, let me say this: There's nothing to worry about, so please don't try to stop me."

Kunon's warning was cryptic, but no one said a word. They simply urged him in silence to get a move on.

"Right. Here goes."

Standing in the hallway, Kunon held out his hands toward the open classroom door.

The next moment, the room was filled with water. It was approximately waist-deep.

Kunon's magical control imbued the water with enough tensile strength to prevent it from spilling out of the door. Still, the room was unmistakably underwater.

Someone whispered, "…Everything's…totally drenched…"

The meaning behind Kunon's warning was clear now. Even so, the sight was still rather difficult to take in.

Every single sheet of paper in that room was part of an important document—the frantically scrawled materialization of a student's hard work.

True, there was hardly room to stand, and thus most of the documents had been trampled over already. Still, they weren't objects that ought to be handled roughly. And now they were all submerged under several feet of water.

"I'm going to agitate it now," said Kunon.

The water began to swell and roll like the rising and receding waves of an ocean. Stirred by the movement of the water, the sunken documents started to sway with the tides.

Then several sheets of paper rose to the surface. The other students assumed they had risen by chance, forced upward by the

whims of the water. However…

"Here you go."

Like leaves in a stream, the papers drifted on the current toward the door, where Kunon collected them before handing them to a male student.

"Huh…? Oh! This is all mine?! My meat report?!"

Essentially, Kunon had touched the pages with water. He'd then traced the letters on each paper and picked out only the documents that met the present criteria. Because the water contained his magic power, he could use his perception on whatever the water touched.

In theory, it was possible to sort through the pages one by one using only his regular magical perception. However, given the scale of the mess and the sheer quantity of papers, searching around with magic power alone would have been difficult to manage.

That was why he'd needed the water. By equipping it with a "locate specific shape only" characteristic, he'd achieved the present effect. Kunon designated the desired shape, and the water did the rest on its own.

Kunon still had to maintain control over it, of course. If his hold over the magic slipped, the room would truly be flooded.

Shilto asked, "Just those few sheets?" to which the male student responded, "My report wasn't very long to begin with. I think I have all of it now."

Apparently, he had already found most of his work during the more laborious sorting.

"Let me see." Shilto reviewed the recovered documents. "The paper is…yep, just slightly damp. It doesn't seem like the spell will cause any damage. Great idea, Kunon. Do you want to use this to sort the rest out all at once?"

Kunon's fellow prisoners erupted in cheers of celebration.

Their jailer approved, which meant they could adopt this method. Though he was happy, however, Kunon did have one concern: "…If the handwriting is too neat, the spell won't be able to classify it…"

Handwriting varied. Sometimes letters looked a little misshapen or varied in size. They might appear slanted or be a bit spread out. When someone was writing sloppily or in haste, the resulting letters sometimes didn't even resemble their basic forms.

What's more, the same letter could look different even when written multiple times by the same person. That, too, was part of one's individuality.

Kunon had identified just one unique letter in the test run. In doing so, he had specified a standard range to allow for a certain amount of variation. That way, even if the letter was a little squished or on the small side, the spell would recognize it as the chosen shape.

The issue at play was, of course, the uniqueness of a person's handwriting. If there wasn't enough idiosyncrasy in the writing, the spell wouldn't be able to distinguish one person's work from another's.

"That shouldn't be a problem," Bael declared when Kunon explained his concern. "Even if the writing is neat, you can still do an approximate sorting. Plus, you should be able to separate them out by *specific words* rather than individual letters. Especially if you do it by content. If you were looking for our stuff, for example, you could use terms like *Model 1* or *Model 2*. I don't think those would show up in other people's reports."

Kunon was blown away. Not letters but *words*. That did indeed seem doable.

"Are you some kind of genius?" he asked.

"If either of us is a genius, I would say it's you."

Though there was only two days' worth of sorting left at that point, the rest of the work proceeded at a dramatically increased pace.

The sea of documents was entirely cleared up that very same day.

And…

"Ah, looks like you're done."

…just as they were finishing up, Professor Soff appeared to check in on them, as if he had been waiting for the moment they were released from their misery.

"Sorting your personal belongings is next. You're nearly finished; keep it up!"

And so, Soff cast them back into the pit of despair.

"I'll be joining you, too," said Shilto.

It seemed she would be continuing her role as supervisor.

The prisoners would have to keep up their hard labor just a little bit longer.

"Thank goodness…!"

Though some of the students' knees buckled on the spot in despair when presented with their next trial, the task was not as much of a nightmare as the sea of documents had been.

It made sense—the amount of papers they'd had to go through had been immense. It seemed never-ending no matter how much they toiled. That was why it had taken so long—long enough to grind the hearts of all the laboring students into dust.

Only the Saint had been unaffected. She hadn't been a prisoner at all. Reyes was the type of person who could silently carry on sorting just as instructed without being bothered. She hadn't been zapped even once. It was enough to make one jealous—but putting that aside…

Thinking logically, it made sense that their second task was easier. There simply weren't as many personal belongings as there were documents.

"Oh, my centrifuge. It's broken…"

Picking up a piece of equipment lying at his feet, Kunon sighed.

Indeed, the number of personal items was relatively small. It seemed like it wouldn't take very long to complete the sorting itself. It was just that many of the items were damaged.

Desks, lab equipment, pens, inkpots. Small bits of rubble from Building 11 were scattered among them, though the larger pieces

had been cleared out already.

Some of the students' belongings were fine, but many were not.

This was their next trial. Soff, who had guided them to this second classroom, gestured toward one of the room's corners.

"Things that might have become dangerous when mixed in with other items, like potions, catalysts, magic tools, and such, are divided up over here. Roughly speaking, mind you."

Even a cursory presorting was very much appreciated; compared to the misery the students had just endured, the situation they now found themselves in would be a breeze.

"Bael, would you mind retrieving any Spell Vaults?"

"Can do."

Everything in this classroom was someone's personal property. None of it belonged to Bael, who didn't work out of Building 11, so Kunon tasked him with collecting objects he would recognize.

"Now, then."

Kunon's lab, the empty classroom he had been renting, had contained quite a few of his belongings. He had kept a lot of lab equipment—like the broken centrifuge in his hands—in that room. Who knew how much of it had survived? If even half was still in working order, he'd consider himself lucky.

"If anyone finds a locked desk, please let me know! It might be mine," Kunon announced to his fellow inmates.

A few scattered replies came back to him, so he figured the others would probably do as he'd asked.

If nothing else, Kunon had to get his money back.

Several months ago, development on the Spell Vault had begun. Constantly busy throughout that period, Kunon had fallen behind on paying his maid, Rinko, her salary.

It had just totally slipped his mind. And since she could tell at a glance that Kunon had a lot going on, Rinko had found the matter difficult to bring up with him.

He would come home exhausted, do the bare minimum of his end-of-day routine, and go straight to bed. Then, the next morning, he

would return to school still weighed down with fatigue. Day after day, this continued.

On top of that, Rinko figured that it was extremely unlikely Kunon was simply trying to get out of paying her. Even if he was, all she would have to do was request her wages from the Gurion estate. That was why she had simply brushed off his tardiness.

Kunon was totally focused on magic, and Rinko had decided not to say anything that might trouble him.

Fortunately, she had set some funds aside before the project's development began, so their living expenses were covered. Other than her own salary, they had more than enough to pay for what they needed. *Other than her own salary*, of course.

The very moment Kunon had cheerfully announced that the project was over, Rinko made her demand: It was time to settle accounts.

"There are quite a few desks…"

In order to pay his maid's salary, Kunon had to recover the money he'd saved up in his lab. That was his number one priority. Without it, he was going to be served nothing but bitter vegetables for dinner from then on.

Rinko had even threatened to withhold his bacon for a while, so from Kunon's perspective, it was a matter of life and death. In fact, in recent days, the bacon she did serve him was being sliced more and more thinly. It was like paper.

Rinko was just about fed up with waiting, it seemed.

Throughout the Spell Vault's development, Kunon kept making money via his business operations. He had simply continued shoving it into his lab desk's drawer. It had to be around here somewhere.

"This is more like cleaning than sorting," Shilto said, and Kunon agreed.

The previous task had involved toiling away in a half-hunched position that was murder on one's lower back. This, however, looked like it would take way more physical labor.

Shilto turned to face Soff. “Professor, if you happen to have time, would you mind helping us?”

“Hmm? Ah…right. It shouldn’t take long with this many people, so I’ll lend a hand, too.”

Supervisor Shilto had successfully captured a new prisoner. She was a capable jailer, indeed.

“Oh! My underwear!”

“Underwear…?! Wait, those aren’t for men, you idiot! Who the hell do they belong to?!”

“They’re mine!”

“Why do you wear such obscene undergarments?!”

“Oh, shut up! I like having clean panty lines!”

What an outrageous conversation, Kunon thought.

Words exchanged between men didn’t excite him at all. They did make him laugh, though.

Compared to their previous ordeal, this one was like paradise. He felt a newfound sense of freedom. Kunon was sure the rest of the students he had labored alongside felt the same.

“…Underwear that gives you clean panty lines…?”

Even the Saint, who was never perturbed by anything, reacted to the conversation.

Perhaps in her own way, she too was remembering the pain of their sorting nightmare and savoring their newfound liberation.

…Yes, that must be it.

After all, she couldn’t simply be curious about underwear. Right?

The sorting and cleaning were done by evening.

“The school will reimburse you for anything that was broken, so be sure to submit your applications. Doesn’t matter if you’re asking for the cost of repair or replacement.”

Soff, who had assisted them until the very end, made this announcement with a tired expression before leaving the classroom.

“It’s over…,” one of the other students commented.

The documents were sorted.

There were still things that they would have to do individually, like putting their papers in sequential order. However, they had overcome the most difficult task.

Then there were their personal effects. Quite a few of them were broken, but nothing was missing, and above all, there weren't that many of them.

Dividing the items up by what was bound for the trash and what could be salvaged had taken hardly any time at all. The next step of the process would come after the reconstruction of Building 11. Once it was completed, their belongings would be moved in.

It had been a lot of hard work. Kunon had wanted to give up countless times, and some people had even attempted escape.

The nightmare had lasted for about two weeks, and it had brought together the students of Building 11, despite their having nothing else in common beyond being based out of the same building. Technically, Bael was there too. And Shilto.

Perhaps because of this shared experience, a curious sense of camaraderie was starting to emerge. The whole thing had been an awful, hideous, unbearable hell. So why did Kunon feel just a smidgen of sadness now that it was over?

Unless another freak accident like this took place, there was a chance this exact group of people would never again wind up together. Their magic attributes, research subjects, specialties, hobbies—even their taste in underwear—were all entirely different. In other circumstances, they might not have ever had anything to do with one another.

"Hey!"

Perhaps it wasn't just Kunon that thought so—maybe they were all feeling it.

As if to prove this, he heard someone say, "Why don't we celebrate now that it's finally over?! Let's get wild tonight!"

Everyone threw up their hands at the idea. It seemed they were in agreement.

Kunon headed home first and let his maid know that he would be attending an afterparty. Then he went out to enjoy Dirashik's nightlife, in complete disregard of his curfew.

It was Kunon's first evening out on the town.

In reality, they simply ate dinner, hung out for a little while, then broke up on the earlier side, so it was a bit too wholesome to be called a "night out."

Even so, Kunon felt like he had grown up just a little.

◆

Reyes was troubled.

Yes—troubled.

Because of her emotional deficiency, not much had troubled her in the past. But right now, she had a problem.

"For me," said Jirni, "it would be alcohol."

Jirni loved drinking, so alcohol was the perfect gift for her. In her case, the only question was how many bottles to get, and which brand.

"I think a bouquet of flowers would be fine," replied Philea, her other maid. "Even better if you grew them yourself."

That was probably a safe choice, Reyes thought. She had been giving flowers as presents since she was little. They took a little time and effort to acquire but didn't cost anything.

While she lived at the Great Temple, Reyes had received neither an allowance nor a salary. A flower bouquet was an easy, low-cost gift.

In the past, she had simply gone along with whatever others suggested. But…

"I feel like doing something different."

…now she didn't think that was good enough.

Was merely going with the flow an acceptable way to convey a sentiment?

That wasn’t something she had spent much time contemplating before, but it weighed heavily on her mind at the moment. It just didn’t seem right.

And so she was troubled.





The cause of her worries, as it happened, was a birthday present—for High Priest Archield.

Reyes's brain kept churning even as she went out to the garden to pull weeds.

The garden of her rented house, which had been spacious at the start of their lease, was now overflowing with life: lush, full greenery, and blooming flowers in all sorts of colors.

The number of plants might strike some as overwhelming. Even so, Reyes wanted more. She was thinking about moving to a house with an even larger garden; her maids were trying desperately to prevent that from happening, though. They said anything bigger would be too difficult to take care of and asked her to content herself with what she had already.

Trifling matters aside, she was running out of time. She had to decide soon, or it would be too late.

It was just that, with this particular issue, she couldn't settle on anything. Every prospect felt wrong somehow. Going with the flow wasn't enough.

Reyes was taken in at the Great Temple before she was old enough to remember, and ever since, the High Priest had looked after her with great care. As busy as he was, he still checked in on her in various ways and made time for them to spend together.

Before coming to Dirashik—when she had not yet developed her love for plants—she had taken her circumstances for granted without a second thought.

Then she left the Great Temple, and money became an issue. She worried about where her next meal would come from. What's more, there hadn't been anything she wanted to do. She had no clue what she ought to do while at magic school.

It was only after confronting those hardships that she realized how sheltered her life at the Great Temple had been.

She realized then that not only Archield but also the archbishop and the priests and priestess had taken very good care of her and

brought her up wanting for nothing.

That was the reason why Reyes felt so opposed to the idea of repeating the same old song and dance for the High Priest—a man who had cherished her so much.

"Is it really that troubling?"

Jirni didn't quite understand what Reyes was struggling with.

The Saint's emotions almost never showed in her expression or demeanor. But after looking very, very closely, Jirni was surprised to see that Reyes seemed preoccupied lately.

"It's a little complicated," said Philea.

Although she hid it from Jirni, Philea was a devotee of the Radiant Goddess and understood the Saint's worries.

"It's a present for the High Priest's birthday, right?" replied Jirni. "Wouldn't liquor be fine?"

The household's economic situation had improved considerably.

When Reyes started school, they had fallen into hard times, but as time passed, the red had disappeared entirely from their account books. At the moment, they had quite a comfortable cushion.

Reyes had personal contracts with local restaurants, who bought the surplus fruits and vegetables she grew. Because her produce was high-quality, it sold for a good price.

It was established public opinion that sorcerers had good earning potential. Saint Reyes was just another example that proved this. As an adventurer who had always risked life and limb to get by, Jirni was quite envious.

"Surely giving him some expensive, rare alcohol would be acceptable."

"I heard His Holiness doesn't drink much."

Not only was that true, but when he did drink, Archield preferred cheaper spirits. Philea was pretending not to be acquainted with the High Priest, however, so she couldn't make any claims that were too precise or definitive.

"Isn't that weird? Why would the head of a country avoid luxury goods?"

To Philea, it made perfect sense. Even though his title was High Priest, Archield was no better than any other believer in the eyes of their goddess. He often said so himself in his sermons. It was a promise he made to Kira Leila and his parishioners, as well as a standard he held himself to—that was why he stated it out loud.

That was another reason Reyes was worried.

Things would be easier if the High Priest had a taste for fur clothing or something similar, like his friend the archbishop.

But Archield was a true ascetic. He didn't like expensive things. He drank only a small amount of cheap alcohol. Even his meals—save for ceremonial ones and the spreads made for guests—were probably more modest than what the average commoner in his city ate. He took excellent care of his belongings, so everything he owned was a favorite item he had been using for years.

What kind of gift would make such a person happy?

That was where Reyes's troubles lay. In previous years, she had gotten him flowers. But since enrolling in magic school, her emotions and sentiments had clearly matured. For better or worse, Reyes was changing.

She always gave Archield a bouquet for his birthday. That had been the case every single year. But this time was different.

As it came time to grow the flowers, and she wondered what kind to give him, Reyes had started to wonder. Was a bouquet of flowers really an okay present?

"This is the influence of that boy, isn't it?"

"Yes, undoubtedly."

The Saint's frivolous little friend had said something to her: "I made this magic tool to give to someone important to me." Those words had struck a chord in Reyes's heart.

She had sensed how much care the gift giver felt toward the recipient. And so she was troubled.

She didn't know if flowers were acceptable. Would thoughtlessly continuing to give someone a bouquet year after year actually get her feelings across?

"Well, I think it's nice that she's giving it so much consideration."

Reyes had never felt much concern for anything, not even for other people. But now she was anxious for someone else's sake. Philea didn't think there was anything wrong with that at all.

She expected that High Priest Archield would be pleased with any gift Reyes chose. All the Saint had to do was decide.

And at last, that problem, too, was a thing of the past.

"I made up my mind. I'm going to give the High Priest some underwear that will give him clean panty lines."

"Please wait a moment."

Reyes had made that declaration the second she got home from school, prompting Philea to slam on the brakes.

What brought this on? What led to this choice?

Archield was sure to love it. As long as it was a gift from Reyes, even just some stones or twigs she'd found lying around would probably satisfy him.

But why underwear? Of all things she could have picked, *underwear*?

And why, on top of that, had she decided specifically on underwear that affected how the wearer's butt looked?

"Ah, underwear is a good idea."

"Jirni, shut up."

"They're consumables that come into contact with a person's delicate bits, for one thing; plus, when they're nice, they're really pleasant to wear."

"Jirni."

"Also, weirdly enough, once you start paying attention to panty lines, you'll notice them all the time. Yours and other people's, too."

"Jirni!"

"Huh, what's wrong? I really don't think it's a bad idea."

Underwear was certainly important. People wore it all the time, so it was good from a practical perspective. But it was still *underwear*, no matter how useful it was.

Underwear as a birthday present for the High Priest—a man old enough to be a father or even a grandfather—from Reyes, a young lady who was practically his daughter.

Was that really okay? Was underwear an acceptable gift in this situation?

Would it make Archield happier than the usual bouquet of flowers he got every year?

Well, perhaps.

With all the fretting and pondering she had done, there was no way Reyes had landed on an answer without taking it very seriously. She had probably arrived at this conclusion after a lot of careful consideration. Philea didn't doubt that, and she did understand the importance of underwear.

And yet…this was *underwear* they were talking about.

Was a saint allowed to give underwear to the High Priest?

Moreover, was she allowed to give him the kind that provided clean panty lines? That had to mean something with a string.

Was Reyes really going to give the High Priest something clearly designed to thrill and arouse? Could Philea just sit back and let something so unprecedented go forward?

If she was going to put a stop to it, she needed to do so now.

But this was something Reyes had put a lot of time and thought into. Was Philea allowed to shoot her down? Would the High Priest ever truly forgive her if she showed disdain for the Saint's feelings?

She didn't know.

As a devotee of the Radiant Goddess, Philea genuinely had no clue what the right choice was in this situation.

◆

"…!"

Kunon sat at the breakfast table, feeling wonder and relief in equal measure.

Today's bacon was cut thick! Plus, there were two slices!

His maid was in good spirits again. Receiving her wages had apparently taken the edge off her quiet rage.

The day before, Kunon had paid Rinko her overdue salary. Then he had gone to the cleanup afterparty and had dinner out with his fellow students. Consequently, this morning's breakfast was the first one Rinko had made for him since being paid.

I'm glad things didn't get too awkward, Kunon thought. He was the one at fault, so all he could do was apologize.

"Here you go, Master Kunon! Today's health drink!"

As Kunon relaxed, a shockingly green beverage was set down in front of him with a *thunk*.

"……"

Recently, Rinko had been serving him this green juice at breakfast every day. The drink was bitter, smelled strongly of grass, and coated his throat so that the taste lingered for ages; Kunon hated it.

…Apparently, he had let his guard down too soon.

While he was caught up in his project, he had drunk the juice almost unconsciously. Even so, it tasted so bad that it had left a lasting impression on him even when he was more or less on autopilot.

"Don't worry. It's not bitter today."

"Huh?"

Kunon's emotions showed on his face pretty often, and it seemed his maid could tell what he was thinking.

"I admit I was bullying you a bit before, but the truth is, I made this drink with your health in mind. It's highly nutritious."

Kunon had thought the juice seemed good for him, but…

"You were bullying me…"

Hearing her admit that out loud was rather shocking.

"That's because there were things I wanted to say to you, in addition to the unpaid salary issue of course. Please put yourself in my shoes. All I could do was watch while you, a child, spent every day so exhausted that you could hardly walk upright! I was sick with

worry. You genuinely looked like you were going to collapse. I could barely stand to watch."

She was talking about the Spell Vault development period.

Day in and day out, Kunon had devoted himself to the project until he was wobbly in the knees. At the time, his maid had kept almost entirely quiet. But naturally, while she'd held her tongue, Rinko had her fair share of concerns.

"…I'm sorry. From now on, I'll take more breaks."

Kunon's previous maid, Iko, would have gotten him to rest even if she had to do it by force. Rinko, however, had decided to consider Kunon's feelings.

Neither approach was better or worse. The issue was that he had caused both women to worry.

"Promise?"

"Yeah."

"And as you know, a promise to a woman is…?"

"Something a gentleman must always keep."

"And a promise to a man?"

"Depends on the time, the place, and the one you've made the promise to."

Good, Rinko thought, nodding.

During the project development and document sorting, Kunon had been so exhausted that he hadn't even been able to carry on conversations with his maid like this. Kunon seemed livelier in both appearance and spirit, so Rinko was content for the time being.

"It's been almost one year," she said.

"Hmm…? Oh yeah."

Just under one year ago, they had arrived in the magic city of Dirashik. Before Kunon knew it, twelve months had passed since he'd left Hughlia.

There weren't even two weeks left in the school year. In about ten days and one short break, Kunon would be a second-year student.

"It went by so fast."

He had come into contact with magic every day since entering school. He had learned so much in that time—some of it fun, some of it deeply interesting, some of it brand-new to him.

He'd gotten to meet someone he idolized. He was reunited with his old teacher. He even met the world's greatest witch. His first year had been, to put it mildly, a total dream.

"It really did," agreed Rinko. "I, too, had a more enriching year than I'd imagined."

Apparently, Rinko had spent all her free time in a very maid-like way: studying cooking. She wanted to run a legitimate eatery someday and was currently working hard toward that goal.

"Wow, it really isn't bitter! If anything, it's sweet!"

The green juice—the health drink in its nonbullying form—didn't stink or taste bitter despite obviously being made of vegetables.

After his cheerful maid saw him off, Kunon went to school in a good mood for the first time in ages.

The nightmarish sorting task had been successfully completed. Today, the work of putting their recovered documents in sequential order and compiling them into a finished report would begin.

For Kunon, who had a lot of experience making clean copies, it would be a cakewalk.

"Huh?"

Building 11 was not completely rebuilt yet, so the sorted documents had been moved to a classroom he was renting temporarily in a different building.

When he got to the room, Kunon was surprised to find people other than Bael inside. What's more—perhaps because the ordeal he'd just been through had seemed much longer than it actually was—he felt like he hadn't seen these people in quite a while.

"Oh, hello, *ah-ha-ha*."

"Nice to see you, Kunon."

"……"

Inside the classroom were Genevis, Elva, and Ladio, the other three members of the Spell Vault development team.

“It’s been too long, everyone,” said Kunon. “You’re all looking well.”

Maybe it was the resilience in their voices. Or their improved complexions. Or was it the way he could sense their will to live? The fact that none of them looked like they had one foot in the grave?

Only a short time ago, Kunon had seen them nearly every day for six months.

Genevis’s laughter, Elva’s attentive care, even the untalkative Ladio’s gentle gaze—Kunon had missed them all.

“Sorry we couldn’t help you organize the documents,” said Elva, who was once again a stunning beauty.

With her glossy black hair and clear amethyst eyes, she looked completely unlike the slovenly girl they had worked alongside. Kunon had grown so used to seeing the dull, unkempt, exhausted Elva that her current appearance made him feel a bit like he had lost his bearings. It was undoubtedly the same Elva, though.

“It couldn’t be helped. Other than the students from Building Eleven, only Bael and Miss Shilto were allowed to participate.”

The other team members had heard about the hellish experience, of course. After all, it was also their report—and by extension, their credits—on the line. They couldn’t remain indifferent.

Nevertheless, students who weren’t based in the collapsed building were, in general, not permitted to join in the sorting work. That was why the three of them hadn’t helped.

Now that things had moved past that stage, however, it was a nonissue. They could offer their assistance freely.

“Speaking of Bael, where is he?”

“He said he was taking the morning to rest because he’s hungover.”

The night before, the younger students at the afterparty—Kunon included—had been sent home rather early in the evening.

It seemed, however, that the grown-ups had enjoyed a wild night out on the town.





Epilogue
Letter

To my beloved fiancée,

The sun's rays have grown stronger.

How are you faring during these early summer days of fresh, vibrant greenery?

It's been one year since we parted ways.

Even though we haven't seen each other for many moons, my feelings for you remain utterly unchanged.

I hope yours are the same, Your Highness.

I apologize for the gap between letters.

For the past six months or so, I was working with my seniors on the development of a magic tool. Day after day, I forgot to even sleep or eat, so I had no time to write to you.

As I wrote previously, I was making a gift for you. The process has been far more difficult than I expected, and your gift is nowhere

near complete. It will probably be another year or two before I can give it to you.

And so I have a different present for you in the meantime.

I truly hope you like it.

Oh, that reminds me.

I can't go into the details, but there was an incident and one of the school's buildings collapsed. The room I was renting as my lab was destroyed, too. Everyone's documents were in a jumbled mess, and it took more than two weeks to sort through them. It was absolutely awful.

Please be careful to avoid trouble yourself, Princess. Though I suppose there are some accidents that can't be avoided no matter how careful one is.

Still, please take care.

Speaking of, I attended an afterparty for the first time the other day. Around a dozen of us went out into the city at night together.

Do you remember, Your Highness? That night you and I went out together for dinner?

Afterward, I felt like I had become just a little more grown up.

I got that same feeling that I had matured slightly at the afterparty, too. Perhaps nighttime is when people become adults.

In any case, to think that drinking alcohol makes everyone, men and women alike, so boisterous.

The legal drinking age in Hughlia is fifteen, as I recall.

It's not as though I'm uninterested, but… Imagining myself in such a state of disorder is kind of frightening.

What of your affairs, Princess?

You're already a second-year student in the knighthood class, right?

I'm sure both the training and assignments are tougher than the previous year's.

Please get plenty of rest and don't overexert yourself.

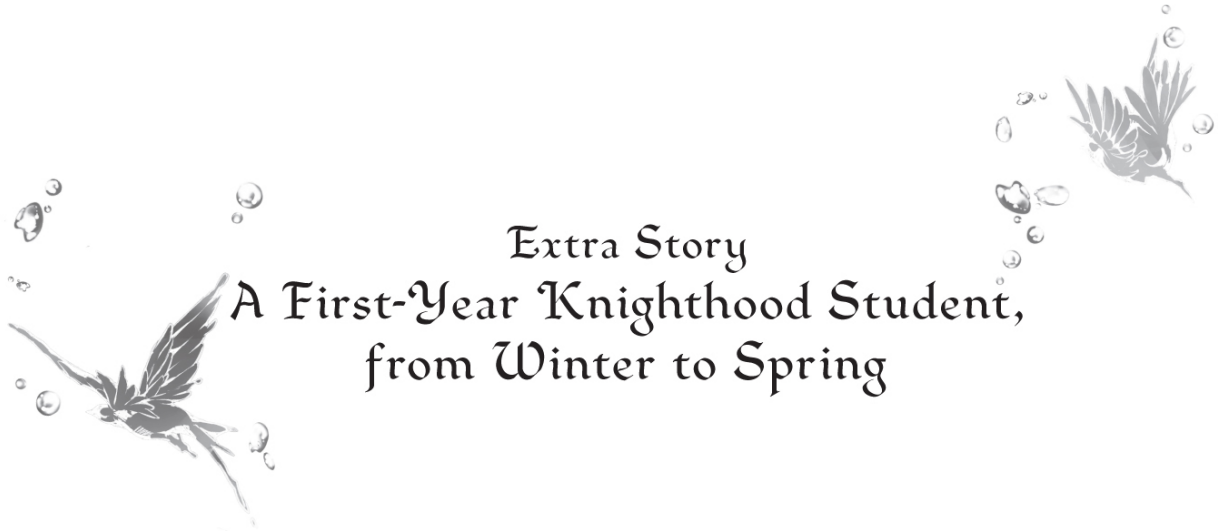
Even from afar, I worry about your well-being.

With eternal love,
Your Kunon Gurion

PS

I upset my maid a little and ended up suffering rather a lot.

If I could give you a word of friendly advice… Please be sure to take good care of your servants, too.



Extra Story
A First-Year Knighthood Student, from Winter to Spring

Whenever she read this particular letter, Mirika Hughlia's face inevitably twisted up with complex emotion.

"Unclothed…"

It was probably no big deal. There was likely nothing more to it than what was written on the page.

"…Unclothed…"

Whether she meant to or not, however, she always ended up wondering what in the world Kunon was up to.

This letter from her fiancé had arrived at the height of winter.

Sometimes at night, when Mirika missed Kunon or was feeling down, she would reread this letter in the privacy of her room. Kunon had sent it from Dirashik, where he had gone abroad to study magic.

She wasn't reading the letter tonight because she felt lonely or sad, though.

Today, she needed courage. That was why she was reading it.

Most of Kunon's letters irritated her somewhat when she reread them because they were full of anecdotes about women. Nevertheless, they let her feel closer to Kunon, so she endured the irritation to read them again.

Then this letter arrived.

Kunon wrote that a teacher leaving him unclothed was "amazing," and that a boy one year older than him was so "intense" and "passionate" that he had stripped Kunon bare.

She had no idea why he was reporting these things to her, of course. Still, this particular letter was her favorite one.

No women were mentioned, so she could read through it without feeling troubled. And above all, she enjoyed its contents.

It evoked the image of masculine interactions between men that felt, in some way, a bit scintillating perhaps?

Mirika was a girl, after all. The idea of cute boys roughhousing together…certainly appealed to her.

Apparently, some girls wished to be caught in the middle of such a scene. But Mirika was the type who just wanted to play the part of quiet observer.

Even so—she *did* wonder what in the world Kunon was up to.

"Princess Mirika, it's almost time."

"Yes."

Stuffing the letter back into its envelope, Mirika handed it to her private maid, Laura.

"Keep it somewhere secure," she said.

"Yes, Your Highness."

This was a safety precaution.

If someone rummaged through Mirika's rooms while she wasn't there, they wouldn't find anything important. It was no longer safe to leave any information connected to Kunon in her chambers. After reaching that conclusion, Mirika had begun entrusting the letters to Laura.

Mirika increasingly felt she was walking around in a powder keg—like there was no longer a private space in the castle. Whether that

was actually true, it was the conclusion she'd reached in her heightened state of wariness. That was how perilous her situation was of late.

Just before the senior school for nobles closed for winter break, the environment around Mirika had grown rather turbulent. That would all end tonight, however.

If things went to plan, that was. If they didn't—she'd be in trouble.

"It's here at last," said Laura. "A lot has happened recently."

She was right. Lately, it had been… Well, just thinking about it was enough to make Mirika's stomach churn.

Her older brothers and sisters with designs on the throne had begun to make their moves.

They must have heard about the achievements Kunon was racking up in the far-off magic city, and they wanted Kunon as a member of their own factions. To make that happen, they had to somehow deal with his fiancée, Mirika, and gather all the information about him that they could.

Surrounded on all sides in the royal castle, Ninth Princess Mirika had no hope of besting her siblings. They had been aiming for the throne since she was an infant, so no matter how hard she tried, she would never match them in terms of the quantity and quality of their allies.

And that meant Mirika had to play the game from somewhere outside the castle. Even if she could simply avoid being dragged into the fight, that would be enough. And she had been preparing for exactly that. It all depended on tonight.

To calm her nerves, Mirika lifted a cup of tea to her mouth and blew on it.

As much as she didn't want to, she couldn't help but replay recent events in her head.

She was sure that on this day, this night, everything was going to change.

All the more reason for reminiscing, she supposed.

One day, out of nowhere, Mirika received a summons from her elder brother, First Prince Quill.

"Mirika, what sort of man is your fiancé?"

She'd gone to meet him in the central courtyard. This was the pride of the royal palace, and it was always stunning. The seasonal flowers were in full bloom. Though it appeared wild and disorganized, the garden was actually designed for people to explore and enjoy.

First Prince Quill was there.

Despite his title of prince, he was already middle-aged; he could have been Mirika's father. In addition, since she was much further down the line of succession, Mirika had only ever exchanged greetings with him. They'd never spoken at length.

Naturally, this was also the first time he had summoned her.

"My fiancé?" she asked.

"Yes. The second son of the Gurion family."

Just as one would expect from the crown prince. He leveled a sharp gaze at Mirika that practically dared her to tell some foolish lie. Though he had yet to inherit the throne, Quill had the intimidating air of a king.

"Well… It is indeed true that the second son of the Gurion family is my fiancé, but what is it you want to know?"

In response, Mirika tried her absolute best to play the part of a total idiot. She wanted her expression to make it seem that she simply had *no clue* why he had called her here. She wanted to look helpless. Stupidly weak even.

"What kind of man is he?" asked Quill.

"Hmm…My fiancé, right? He's a sorcerer."

"I'm aware of that, obviously. I'm asking what he's like."

"What he's like…? To me, he's just an ordinary, adorable boy… Oh, and a sorcerer, of course."

"*…Tch.* Enough of this."

Not even bothering to hide his annoyance, Quill clicked his tongue and left abruptly.

I did it!

Mirika grinned. It was a wicked smile—a far cry from the airheaded expression of only moments before.

The serious, proud crown prince hadn't been able to bear Mirika's cluelessness… Or rather, her stupidity.

Quill was a capable man and valued his time accordingly. When he felt someone was not on his level conversationally, he would simply stop talking to them. That was just who he was, and stupid women were the sort of people he despised most.

Mirika was sure that Quill had just come to the following conclusion: "If the girl is this moronic, I'll be able to get what I want one way or another."

And he could, with his connections and manpower… But since he now deemed Mirika a total nonthreat, he probably wouldn't feel the need to take action anytime soon.

Acting rashly could end in disgrace or expose his weaknesses. Thus, Quill preferred to eliminate any obstacles carefully and discreetly. In the case of Mirika, he assumed he had plenty of time to figure something out.

"Phew, that was close," Mirika muttered, leaving in the opposite direction from her elder brother.

She probably wouldn't have to worry about Quill for a while.

Sometime later, Mirika's second eldest brother, Second Prince Illiam, called for her.

"Have you heard from your fiancé recently?"

They were in one of the castle's parlors.

From what Mirika had heard, this was one of the rooms Illiam reserved for his own personal use, where he *entertained*.

The complete opposite of their older brother Quill, Illiam was a frivolous, smooth-talking flirt. He was smart, but he was also an incorrigible playboy. In that respect, one might think he and Kunon were quite similar. But in fact, they were nothing alike.

Unlike Kunon, Illiam was a *true* philanderer. As it happened, he preferred women with fuller figures, so the slender-bodied Mirika was completely beneath his notice. He had summoned her here purely to speak in private.

Just to be safe, though, Mirika had concealed a pen she could use for self-defense on her person. She didn't think she would need to use it, but she'd brought it just in case. How could she let her guard down, given the person she was dealing with and the place he had called her to? Most likely, nothing would happen, but there was no such thing as being too cautious.

Because Illiam was fond of women, he would chat a bit with Mirika whenever they happened to run into each other, but that was the extent of their connection. He had certainly never called for her specifically before.

"We've exchanged letters, though not often," she replied. "He seems rather busy…"

"Oh?"

"The contents of his letters make me a tad anxious as well."

"Anxious? What about?"

"He's quite popular with girls, it appears… He's always writing about them in his letters. But, you know, my fiancé is still only a twelve-year-old boy, so I…I don't *think* he would cheat, but…"

"Indeed…? Well, I'm sure it's fine. He's twelve, so what trouble could he really get up to?"

After that, Mirika spent some time asking her brother for advice regarding Kunon, who she wouldn't be able to see again for a while, and then she left the parlor.

I did it!

Mirika grinned. She looked so sinister that a passing servant flinched at the sight.

She was sure that Illiam was thinking, "Kunon is like me, so it won't be difficult to win him over. I may even be able to disregard Mirika altogether and contact him directly."

Her engagement to Kunon had been decided by His Majesty the King. Breaking off an engagement wasn't easy, but the most expeditious route was for the people involved to ask for it.

If both betrothed parties insisted that they simply could not marry, the king would probably listen. Mirika didn't know how it was in other countries, but such a precedent existed in Hughlia, which meant there was a high chance of making a successful appeal.

But the truth was not as Illiam imagined it to be.

In reality, Kunon was nothing like him.

It was indeed true that when one heard talk of Kunon, he was most often described as a flirt and a playboy. But Kunon's regard for women was only a result of his upbringing as a gentleman. There was nothing more to it.

Mirika would be hard up if that turned out to not be true, so she chose to believe it. She simply trusted him. She had no other choice.

In retrospect, Mirika wished her younger self hadn't gotten carried away alongside her fiancé's former maid and instilled such ideas in his head. In her mind, those lessons had meant something a little different: "Be kind to women (to me, in other words)" and "Always be an attentive escort to women (that is, to me)."

That aside, Kunon wasn't really a playboy. He was not cut from the same cloth as Illiam.

"Phew, that was close," Mirika whispered as she started walking.

Just a little longer, and everything would work out. What she needed now was time.

As long as no one made a direct move against her, she would be fine.

A few days later, Mirika's elder sister, Fourth Princess Everille, came at her head-on.

"I'll get straight to the point. Break things off with your fiancé."

She had called Mirika to a restaurant in the city outside of the castle. They were having a meal, one-on-one, even though Everille had never so much as said a proper hello to Mirika inside the palace.

As they spoke, Mirika paid careful attention to every detail of their conversation. And then, as dessert arrived and the end was finally in sight, Everille struck.

Break things off with your fiancé.

This woman was a bit of a nuisance. Even though she had already moved out of the castle and married into the Marquess Kyegh's family… No, perhaps that was why. The palace wasn't her home court anymore, so she could afford to be a bit more reckless.

The ambitious Marquess Kyegh and the equally ambitious Everille—together they made a couple with very lofty aspirations. But it probably wasn't the throne they were aiming for—no, they had their sights set on something even better.

For instance, supposing they could get close to the much-rumored up-and-coming sorcerer Kunon… And then, if they snuggled up to and supported the next candidates for the throne—the first and second princes—and their chosen candidate became king, well…

In short, they wanted either to be second-in-command or in a position where they could enjoy the spoils.

"I have no reason to break off my engagement."

"My, my. What's this? You're talking back to me?"

"Let me ask you something, Sister. What would I say to His Majesty? That I want to break up with my fiancé because Sister Everille told me to? Or perhaps I should tell him it was the Marquess Kyegh's idea?"

"……"

"I'm sure you know this, but I can't break off my engagement without a suitable reason. It was established by order of the king."

Quill and some of her other older siblings had enough connections and influence to dissolve it, which is what made them troublesome. But Everille, who lived outside of the castle, had to use other methods.

In fact, Mirika had no obligation to comply with the orders of a sister who had moved out. But she didn't want to stir up unnecessary discord, either.

And so she had accepted Everille's invitation to dinner and avoided answering her demand with a flat-out refusal.

"A mere ninth princess shouldn't get too cocky, don't you think?"

"Pardon?"

"This is a private room I arranged for. Unless I call for it, nobody will come in."

Then two men walked into what was supposed to be a one-on-one playing field. They were both large and well-built, wearing cloth coverings around their heads to obscure their facial features.

Everille must have summoned them with some kind of signal. And no matter how much Mirika hollered or kicked up a fuss, no one was going to come to her aid.

"Sister," said Mirika.

Returning her sister's reproachful scowl with an unparalleled ill humor, Everille stood.

"Oh, calm down," she said. "They aren't going to do anything violent to you. They'll just tear off your clothes to make it *look like* they did."

"You realize that would destroy my reputation, yes?"

Indeed, it was exactly because they weren't inside the castle that her sister could use such a straightforward—not to mention, stupid—method.

"Well, I have to damage it a little if I want your engagement called off, don't I? I don't relish it, but you can blame yourself for being foolish enough to come here alone."

With that, Everille left the room.

Mirika had come here alone, that was true. It was just as her sister said. If she hadn't been by herself, however, Mirika was sure Everille had some sort of backup scheme in place.

"Please stay still. We're going to tear your clothes, but we don't wish to hurt you."

While one of the men moved to block the exit, the other approached her slowly.

It seemed everything had been prearranged.

"Excuse me." Mirika stood up. "Will you give my sister a message? Tell her—she owes me one."

Then she pounced.

"Whoa!"

When the closer man shielded his face from the fork Mirika had just flung, she darted into his personal space.

"Ow—!"

She stabbed a knife into his thigh before slamming an elbow into the side of his head.

"Wha…?!"

The man standing in the doorway was shaken. The sight of a beautiful young girl—a princess, no less—erupting so magnificently into violence was apparently too much for him to process.

But Mirika was also a student in the knighthood course and had real-world combat experience as an adventurer.

Having taken a single, tremendous strike to the skull, the man approaching Mirika collapsed and stopped moving. He seemed to be unconscious.

"That's enough—wouldn't you say? Withdraw before things get serious."

She wasn't going to make waves. She wouldn't look into their identities. She wouldn't even call the Marquess Kyegh into question for his culpability in the incident.

Mirika spoke to the man in the door—who was almost certainly a retainer for the Kyegh estate—so that the implications of her words would get through to him.

"…You have my sincere gratitude," he said.

Apparently, he understood. Their plan had already failed.

"Give my regards to my sister, will you?"

With those few words, Mirika strolled brazenly from the room.

She had expected this scenario. But if there had been more men, or if the ones there had been better trained, or if they hadn't gotten careless—what would have happened then?

Mirika was a little relieved that she had been able to fight her way out safely.

"Hey. All done?"

Walking out of the restaurant, Mirika climbed into the waiting carriage.

Inside, Sixth Prince Lyle was there to greet her.

She had needed someone with quick reflexes and decent strength. Who, at the same time, was rather well-versed in politics and, moreover, had some knowledge of the royal family's unspoken rules and diplomacy.

Only Lyle met all those conditions, and so Mirika had brought him along as an escort.

She'd done the same thing as Everille and arranged it so that, had Mirika given a specific signal, her reliable big brother would have barged into the room.

Mirika would never walk into an obvious trap without a plan.

"Nothing happened?"

"Let's just say…it's fine."

Despite her vagueness, Lyle seemed to get the message.

"Hmph. You shouldn't leave loose ends untied."

"I have to."

Mirika didn't know how many years in the future it would be, but she…or rather, she and Kunon, as husband and wife, would have to participate in high society.

An eye for an eye only resulted in more enemies. The scores she racked up now would only come back to her someday on a grander scale. But even if they didn't, Mirika wasn't going to change her mind.

She would be grateful if her restraint simply earned her a bit of respite.

If she made the foolhardy choice to make a fuss, her older siblings would have reason to find fault with her, and that was no good. They were looking for any reason to have her engagement called off, after all.

For the time being, it was best that nothing happened.

"Isn't the situation already a bit hairy?" asked Lyle.

"Yes, you're right…"

Somehow, she had managed to survive round one against the principal players on the field. But she didn't know if she would be able to do the same in round two.

"I guess it's about time."

Preparations were more or less complete.

All that was left was for Mirika to solidify her resolve.

"There really has been a lot happening of late, hasn't there?"

Though she didn't want to, Mirika spent a while reliving all the memories in her head.

First her eldest brother, then the second eldest. She had even gotten into it with the fourth princess, who had been married off to another family. On top of that, she had been repeatedly hassled by members of the aristocracy that she barely knew.

Quill, Illiam, and their ilk had been the most formidable. The rest were just riffraff, at best. She barely even remembered them.

Kunon was really, really popular. The girls in Dirashik liked him, and his social net worth in his homeland of Hughlia was on the rise. Mirika was desperate just to keep up.

"It's fortunate that Prince Rozsa was away."

"…That's for sure."

Fourth Prince Rozsa was Mirika's only brother who had shown a capacity for magic.

At present, due to some scheming between Quill, Illiam, and some of Mirika's elder sisters, Rozsa was away on a bit of an expedition.

They were, in short, freezing him out. Because Rozsa had appeared to be the prince best positioned for the throne, the others had joined forces to keep him at a distance.

While he was gone, they apparently intended to clinch some trump cards for their own attempts at the crown. And it seemed their sights were set on Mirika and Kunon's relationship.

Anyway—why waste time thinking about an opponent who wasn't even here?

"Your Highness, it's almost the appointed time."

"Finally."

Mirika stood up. She could continue reminiscing on all her recent difficulties, but the real moment of truth would undoubtedly be what came next.

Kunon, please give me courage.

With that silent plea, Mirika left her room.

"Excuse me." Mirika opened the door after receiving permission to enter.

"Ah yes."

Inside, an older man wearing a dressing gown sat at a table, drinking.

In the dim light, the man looked…well, like any man on the verge of being called "elderly." Perhaps a little less physically fit than average.

"Come here," he said.

"Yes."

Unlike the utterly relaxed old man, Mirika was practically shaking in her boots—she hid that, however, by purposely projecting a sense of calm.

This man was the reigning king of their country, Guorios Hughlia.

Mirika had been inside His Majesty's private rooms three times in her life.

The first was very shortly after her birth. The second was when the king congratulated her for starting school. The third time—was right now.

Seeing the space through more mature eyes, she thought it looked emptier than she remembered. Maybe the king didn't like clutter.

"You've gotten prettier since I last saw you, Mirika. You're the spitting image of your mother."

"You honor me."

They were parent and child, but her father was still the king of Hughlia. Getting an audience with the king wasn't so simple, and unless she had a very good reason, Mirika didn't really want to see him. In fact, she hadn't expected to be summoned to his private quarters at all.

"I am deeply grateful for the opportunity to speak with you, Your Majesty."

Any time that was convenient for the king would be fine—that was what she had said when she requested an appointment with him. She never anticipated it would lead to something terrifying, like being called to his rooms.

If Mirika didn't get everything settled here and now, there would be a lot of trouble down the line. Her two eldest brothers would definitely look into why she had met with their father and what the topic of conversation was. And the castle was teeming with servants who would supply them with answers. That was one of the reasons she couldn't hope to win a war of information against them.

She had bested them once, but they would probably force something out of her next time. Whether she would be able to fight them off again, Mirika wasn't so sure.

"Do you want a drink?" asked the king.

"I must beg your pardon. I'm not yet old enough."

"Ahhh, is that right? You're still fourteen, eh?" The legal drinking age in Hughlia was fifteen. "I really wanted to have a drink with my daughter before we become unable to see each other for a while."

"…?!"

Mirika hadn't yet told the king why she'd requested an audience with him. But somehow, he had accurately guessed the nature of her appeal.

The surprise on her face made the king smile with satisfaction.

"I *am* the king. How could I not know about your situation? I'm aware you're preparing to leave the castle, as well."

There was Kunon, accumulating a long list of accomplishments in a faraway land. And there was Mirika, in danger of having her fiancé

stolen away from her because of his achievements. And now Mirika had requested an audience.

Perhaps from the bird's-eye view offered by the throne, it wasn't hard to follow the flow of logic. But from Mirika's perspective, it had been a never-ending trek over very thin ice.

"In that case, may I have your approval…?" she asked.

"I need some pretense."

"…Pardon?"

"Say I sent you out of the castle right now. What would happen? You would no longer be under my watch or my protection. You would be much easier to eliminate. Hughlian royal succession is rather strictly regulated when it comes to murder. That's why no one tries anything so foolish. A fair few tragedies happened in days gone by, too."

Members of the royal family had that information drilled into them over and over.

For generations in Hughlia, the throne had been passed on to a capable royal heir. Essentially, the reigning monarch's children competed in a race to secure their inheritance, and whoever came out on top became the next king or queen. It wasn't uncommon for a crown prince to lose his position. Consequently, while heirs were allowed to knock one another down the rungs of the ladder, killing was forbidden.

But in the past, the laws regarding such matters had been a bit lax. As a result of intensifying succession battles, the question of who would inherit the throne had devolved into an utter morass and nearly wiped out the royal family. That, in turn, had led to the strict regulations they had now.

"But once you leave the castle, it's a different story," said the king. "Anything could happen."

Mirika agreed.

She wanted to believe her siblings wouldn't go so far as to have her killed…

But Mirika knew never to rely on that hope. History had taught her as much.

"So—a pretense. Something to ensure your protection as well as set you up for the future. If you have that, I'll give my permission. But I won't send you off to a meaningless death. And besides," the king went on. "Aren't you close with Kunon Gurion?"

"Huh?"

The conversation abruptly switched topics.

"What do you think Kunon would do if he heard that you had died? He'd abandon Hughlia. He'd have no reason to return anymore. I'd rather keep the odds of that happening as low as possible."

What *would* Kunon do if he heard she was dead?

Mirika didn't know.

She wasn't sure, but…she understood the king's desire to avoid that situation precisely because he could not say definitively what the outcome would be.

And on top of that, the king had already taken notice of Kunon and was eager to bring him home to Hughlia.

Kunon really *was* popular.

"In that case, wouldn't it benefit Your Majesty to provide me with a little more protection?"

The words slipped from Mirika's lips unbidden, heavily charged with the resentment she had been amassing in recent years.

If the king had known that much about what she was going through—could he not have given her even a little support, made things just a tad easier for her?

Her engagement had been established by *his* decree, and yet there were scores of people trying to interfere with it. How dare he just sit by and watch as that— *"Ah-ha-ha!"* The king burst out laughing at his daughter's intense look of displeasure. "Of course, I'd like to protect you. But if I started giving just one of my children preferential treatment, that would make things even worse."

He was right. If someone was thought of as the "king's favorite," they would be the first target in the race for succession.

"That's just how the Hughlian royal family operates. I'm sorry, but my hands are tied. However…" Pausing, the king took a sip of his drink. "If you can give me a pretense for it, then I can aid in what you wish to do. That's why we're having this conversation. You'll have to yield on this; it's the best I can do for only one of my daughters."

Once he said "yield," it was over. There was no retort Mirika could make.

He had even told her why he wasn't able to fulfill her request: She would be in danger if he simply turned her loose.

He couldn't give his permission, even if he wanted to. The king needed some pretense to keep her safe along with some reasoning for it. That was what he was trying to tell her.

"…Would this work?"

Mirika didn't have many cards in her hand. Because of that, she had to play them one at a time. She took out a piece of paper and handed it to her father.

"Hmm… Ah yes. I see. Not bad at all."

"Really?"

"Yes. With the Aglia family's backing, it won't be easy to make a move against you."

The paper Mirika had handed over was her contract with the Duchess of Aglia. Simply put, it was a document she'd drawn up with former Third Princess Miressa at their previous meeting.

"When Kunon Gurion returns to our country, he'll be given a title and territory," said the king. "I intend to have him establish a new settlement in an undeveloped region. The location has already been decided. With this document, you can obtain support from the Aglia estate. Though it will lead to trouble eventually if you rely on them too much. They're essentially giving you an advance. Still, this bodes well. At the very least, with this, those with the power to do anything won't be able to target you. Even Quill would be forced out of his position as crown prince if he incurred the wrath of the Aglia family."

Yeah, probably, Mirika thought.

Dukes were second only to royalty in the hierarchy of nobility. Both their influence and wealth were considerable. There wasn't a soul who would want to interfere with a promise made to a duchess. But considering the contents of the document, Mirika didn't want information about it getting around.

The contract would go into effect once Mirika and Kunon were married. In other words, if the Aglia family felt like it, they could draw up an identical document with Mirika's name swapped out for someone else's. The safest plan would be to reveal to her siblings only that she had the support of the Aglia estate without letting on to the details of the arrangement.

"You've already discussed this with the Aglia family, I assume?"

"Yes. I told them in advance that I would leave the castle once I had Your Majesty's permission. They will assist me as much as they are able to at that time."

"Very well." The king gave a stately nod. "Mirika Hughlia, I order you to aid in your fiancé's development work. You may set off whenever you like."

"Understood, thank you very much."

At long last, Mirika had gotten the words she'd wanted to hear. With this, she could leave behind the foe-riddled castle at any time.

Her relief was so great she could feel her knees threatening to give way, but she needed them to hold out for just a little longer. Now was no time to lose focus, she thought, summoning her remaining courage.

"In light of this, Your Majesty, I do have one request."

"Go on, then. Let's call it a farewell present. Even if it's a bit excessive, I'll consider it. You could ask for money or even manpower."

That was exactly what Mirika had hoped he would say.

"If someone wishes to assist me, may I take them along?" she asked.

"I'll allow it. But you may take no more than five people from the castle."

"Five including lady's maids?"

"Yes…is what I'd like to say, but it is a farewell gift, I suppose. The maids won't count."

"Thank you very much."

It wouldn't be long at all before the king regretted making that promise.

Having succeeded at the most critical moment, Mirika vanished from the royal palace in the middle of the night.

Mobilization began immediately following her secret meeting with the king. All the necessary preparations had been arranged in advance, and she was truly grateful they had not been done in vain.

First, Mirika took refuge at the Aglia family's villa in the royal capital along with her maid, Laura. From there, she reached out to various people. Then, before her siblings could find her, she completed her final preparations.

It took a mere three days for her to get everything done and leave the capital with her small group in tow. Her elder brothers and sisters stood no chance of keeping up with her.

Mirika's haste, combined with her long-standing reputation for misbehaving, led to some wildly unflattering rumors such as "the Delinquent Princess was exiled from the capital."

As agreed upon, Mirika took five people with her from the castle, not counting her maids. They were Sir Dario Sanz, her swordsmanship teacher; Warner Founds, the civil official who had served as her private tutor when she was very young, and who would hereafter teach her what she would otherwise be learning in senior school; Dame Ravielt Huus, a colleague of Dario's; Second Princess Raysha, Mirika's elder sister who was also a Royal Sorcerer; and finally…

"*Ha-ha-ha!* Now that's a bold move, Mirika!"

On the evening of the day Mirika left the capital, King Guorios received a report in his executive office that made him roar with laughter.

His daughter had certainly followed the stipulations of their deal to the letter. She hadn't done anything contrary to the king's order, not a single thing.

"Your Majesty, surely this cannot be allowed…" The civil official who had come to deliver the report frowned.

But Guorios's answer was definitive: "It is. I gave my permission."

Mirika had asked if she could bring along anyone who wanted to accompany her, and the king had said yes. And as a result…

"But I never expected she'd take Grand Master Londimonde! Some nerve he has agreeing to go with her, that miscreant."

Indeed, the fifth and last person Mirika took with her from the castle was the head of the Royal Sorcerers, Londimonde. Although to say she had taken him was a bit misleading.

Incidentally, as Raysha was also a Royal Sorcerer, taking her from the castle also posed some issues… But not only was there a more pressing matter at hand, one could argue the very fact that Londimonde, her supervisor, was with her, made her absence less of a problem.

"…So Your Majesty is truly going to allow this?"

"Yes. I won't go back on my word."

If the king had made his decision, the civil official couldn't argue.

"In that case, Your Majesty will agree to take over the Grand Master's assigned paperwork, I presume?"

"…Huh?"

"I'll have someone else handle anything only a sorcerer could understand. But regarding reports and requests from the Royal Sorcerers, as well as documents related to any problems they cause, I'll arrange to have them sent here."

The king already dealt with a mind-numbing amount of paperwork on a regular basis—and now there would be even more?

"…How much is it?"

"Not quite half of the volume Your Majesty processes daily."

Wasn't even half rather a lot? Didn't that mean his workload was about to increase by 50 percent?

As this dawned on the king, he finally realized exactly what had just happened.

"Londo, that scoundrel. He's run away."

There had been a slight mix-up.

Mirika had initially asked Royal Sorcerer Zeonly Finroll to accompany her.

He had been easy to approach since they were already acquainted with each other. Both his manner of speech and his attitude were nasty, but Zeonly's skills were indisputably first-rate. Plus, he was an earth sorcerer, which was ideal for land development.

And Zeonly had accepted Mirika's request on the basis that it was a favor for his disciple's fiancée. But in the end, things had gone a little differently.

"What lovely weather. Perfect for traveling, don't you think?"

An old man stretched his arms out wide under the blue sky.

This was Londimonde Achthard, the man who held the lofty position of Grand Master of the Royal Sorcerers. As it happened, he had snatched Zeonly's spot in the group right out from under him.

When he heard the circumstances regarding the journey Zeonly was to undertake, Londimonde realized something.

Hold on, he'd thought. *By those rules, wouldn't I be allowed to go?* If the king had said Mirika could bring anyone with her, didn't that include the Grand Master?

And so without a shred of remorse, Londimonde had stolen Zeonly's spot.

He spent most of his time cleaning up after his troublesome subordinates, so wasn't it only fair for him to take some of their fun for himself now and then?

It had also been quite amusing to see Zeonly look so annoyed. In Londimonde's opinion, putting the troublemakers in their places

every so often was just another part of his job.

"I haven't been on a trip in ages. Not since my honeymoon, I think… Was that about thirty years ago? Ha-ha-ha! This sense of freedom is addicting! Isn't it, Princess Mirika? Don't you think so, too?"

"Y-yes…"

Londimonde looked really happy, like he was having a ball.

Because of his position, he wasn't allowed to leave the capital. In fact, he wasn't even allowed to step outside castle grounds.

Mirika knew that, but she couldn't bring herself to say something.

I'd like to switch you for someone else, please.

She just couldn't say the words, no matter how much she wanted to.

Having someone so important around would only make things more difficult. They needed to work on land development, and she couldn't even imagine asking someone like him to do manual labor.

"Well then, Raysha, shall we go?" said Londimonde.

"Ah yes… Are you sure it's okay for you to leave the castle?"

"Oh, it's certainly not."

"……"

What a thing to say so brazenly.

"But you know, I'm human, too. There are times when I want to prioritize my own desires even though I know I shouldn't. You understand, don't you?"

"…Right. Yes."

Londimonde's eyes sparkled.

No one had the heart to tell an old man who was this excited, "No way, go back now."

But no matter. Based on the promise Mirika made with the king, it probably wasn't going to be an issue… Probably.

And so, with every member of their group still wondering if this was *really* okay, the group set off for unexplored territory.

The journey there—which was accomplished using wind sorcerer Raysha's flight magic—was extremely comfortable.

◆

About six months had passed.

"Princess Mirika, the post has arrived."

Mirika turned at the sound of her name. "Where from?"

"The Gurion estate. Most likely a letter they've forwarded from Master Kunon. A small parcel was sent with it, too."

It was from Kunon. In that case, she had to go now.

"Take over for me, Iko," she said, holding out the meat cleaver she was using to the new servant who had brought her the news.

"Huh? But I'm taking a break right now… Can I eat some of it?"

"Just a small amount from the ends."

Handing over the knife, Mirika left the hut. Outside, she took in a deep breath of fresh air.

She'd spent a while butchering demon carcasses, and she felt like the stench of blood was still lingering faintly in the back of her nose.

It was summer. The sun was strong, but it wasn't too bad in the shade.

Because they were in undeveloped land, there weren't many people around. And while they were still short on labor, even the princess had to work.

Actually—no, as the future wife of Kunon, the one who would be in charge of settling the area, Mirika had to take some initiative or else she would set a bad example for everyone else.

Starting development from the ground up had made the last six months difficult indeed…

"There's a bug over here I've never seen before!"

"Does anyone know what this plant is?!"

"Anybody wanna go hunting? Let's go hunt!"

……

And even now, more challenges remained.

Londimonde, who had made the original journey out with them, had been very quickly recalled to the capital. And then, as if to

replace him, other Royal Sorcerers started showing up. It was like they were each taking a little vacation.

Relaxed and carefree, they passed their time in the great outdoors as they wished. Occasionally they also helped with the development work, so no one minded. They hunted demons that posed a threat to humans and gathered ingredients that became the settlement's provisions. Though from an outsider's perspective, they did appear to be merely fooling around.

Mirika got the feeling that sorcerers were a crafty bunch. But there had always been a difference between magic users and everyone else, and there was no use pointing it out now.

Development had begun with seven people, including Mirika. Soon after, supplies arrived from the Aglia family, followed by a very slow influx of carefully recruited volunteers.

They were, at present, a tiny community of approximately thirty permanent residents.

Mirika washed her hands and made her way back to the mansion.

It was far too grand a manor for such an undeveloped area, but it would theoretically become the ruling lord's residence. Even if it was all empty rooms for now.

There was hardly anyone to live in it and still very few furnishings.

The mansion had been built in about a week by a very enthusiastic and completely unassisted Londimonde.

Though he might have seemed like nothing more than an aging man with a pompous title, it turned out that he hadn't been put in his position for no reason. Londimonde's power as a sorcerer was undeniable.

Even if, to an outsider, it looked like he was merely fooling around.

Truly, Mirika thought. *Sorcerers are a crafty bunch.*

"Oh, Your Highness. The post has arrived."

As soon as she entered the mansion, Mirika saw her maid, Laura.

The post had been delivered to the entry hall, and Laura appeared to be in the middle of checking it over.

“Where is the letter from the Gurion estate?” asked the princess.

“Here.”

Mirika took the small parcel from Laura. Letters from the Gurion estate were high priority in this region.

Since Kunon was the lord of the land, they had to handle his requests with flexibility. Though, in reality, he probably wasn’t yet aware of Mirika leaving the royal palace or about her starting development in his stead.

Kunon was studying abroad. What’s more, it had only been one year since he left for school. Not wanting to disturb his studies, Mirika figured there was no need to tell him anything yet.

She did, however, think that the rate at which the land was being developed might become something of a problem. It was all thanks to the Royal Sorcerers’ whims, of course. At the current rate, they would probably have a decent-sized town established by the time Kunon came to live here.

Well, things were fine, for now.

Mirika unwrapped the parcel she had received. Inside was a letter and…

“…This…is…”

…a small silver box. At first glance it looked like a cigar case, but that couldn’t be right.

“Oh my!”

Laura, gazing at it from the side, gasped in wonder.

The floral engravings on the box’s exterior were exquisitely done—so intricate and delicate that even to an aristocratic eye accustomed to fine art, the design was captivating.

Moreover, the flower depicted was…

“…Oh.”

The moment she recognized it, Mirika felt her eyes start to burn.

The flower in the design was a silver campion.

Silver campions symbolized magic silver. And to Kunon and Mirika, magic silver brought to mind a pair of matching bracelets. Mirika had given one of the pair to Kunon when he left Hughlia.

This box was a message from him. One that said he hadn't forgotten about her, that she was still precious to him. Mirika was certain that was the meaning behind the gift.

"…Sorry, Laura, but I'd like to be alone for a little while."

"Understood."

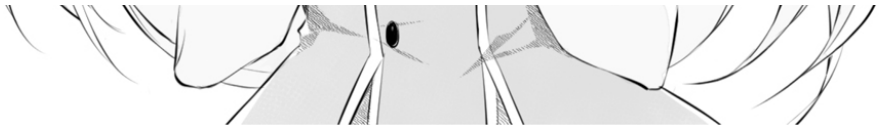
The land they were on was still undeveloped. There was a mountain of things that needed doing.

But for now—just for now, Mirika wanted to savor these feelings by herself.

She and Kunon had been apart for just over one year.

Mirika wondered how long it would be until they got to see each other again.





Afterword

Hello, I'm Umikaze Minamino.

The fourth volume of *Kunon the Sorcerer Can See* is out, and I hope it makes a strong showing.

Volume 4—can you believe it? You know, I think this volume will fit perfectly between Volumes 3 and 5. What do you think?

I'm writing this afterword at the close of March 2023.

A lot has happened recently, like all of Japan getting fired up over the World Baseball Classic, the phrase *Satsuma Hogwarts* becoming a hot topic, and Ash's *Pokémon* journey coming to an end.

I watched a little of the WBC, but I haven't really studied up on the others… Trends just keep overtaking me lately. The passage of time is scary. It's too fast to keep up with.

A lot of things catch my eye, but I can't seem to follow them all. I want to try a little harder to enjoy a wider variety of things.

Thank you as always to Laruha for this volume's beautiful illustrations. You're the reason readers pick up these books and bring them to the checkout line. I think it would be fair to call that a form of modern magic.

Thank you also to La-na, who is responsible for the manga version of this story serialized in *Monthly Comic Alive*, for always making the manga so enjoyable.

The second compiled volume of the manga will be released in the same month as this book! Please check it out!

To O, my lead editor, thank you yet again for all your help.

What can I say…? I'm always thinking about how difficult Japanese is. You had to make all sorts of corrections. I'm sorry, and thank you very much. I'm also grateful for everyone else involved in the making of this book.

Finally, to my dear readers: Thank you so much to everyone who has stuck with me since the web version of this story and to those I've met at bookstores. Your support made this volume happen. Isn't that amazing? This is Volume 4, after all!

Please welcome this book onto your shelves and place it next to Volume 3.

See you next time!

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