
The Magician Who Rose From Failure:
Tales of War and Magic
3
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Prologue: Trickery of Shadows A man walked the road, following the flow of people traveling the eastbound path to the capital, but his destination was different. He was concentrated solely on his own goal.

He left the road as soon as he was through the Mildoor Plains of Nadar territory. There was a shortcut here, one that not even the locals knew about. This man had used it before, fleeing from the kingdom's men long ago. It passed through a forest so thick nobody would ever be able to find their way out. There was just one path through it, which was barely noticeable. The man had made that path for himself and his companions, just in case they ever needed to use it. It ran beside the main road, but it was unknown to anyone but them.

Dusk was nearly upon that forest as he crossed the treeline, when the man's hopes were suddenly dashed.

"Hey. Stop right there."

A voice called to him out of nowhere, putting an end to his assured escape. He stopped and waited until a creature appeared before him from the darkness. At least, he had *thought* it was a creature, but it soon became apparent that it was a man with a beast's stature.

Well-groomed was the last word you would use to describe him. The clothes he wore were shabby. Only some of them were made of cloth; the rest were made from a patchwork of pelts. It wasn't a look you'd see on anyone who interacted regularly with civilization. The traveler took him for a thief who made his home among the mountains and fields around here. He must have stumbled across the man's path coincidentally.

"What do you want from me?"

"Oh, not much. Just stay still, and it'll all be over in a tick." At the man's words, his companions stepped out of the shadows of the trees. Their eyes

glimmered at the promise of spoils. “Give us everything you’ve got, and we’ll let you get outta here alive.”

“I’m afraid that would leave me in quite the predicament. I require these for my own errand.”

“We don’t care about your problems. If you don’t wanna die, hand it over.”

“Oh dear. And here I was thinking this path was safe.”

“Nah, you just ran outta luck, that’s all.”

“Luck? Yes, perhaps that’s what it is,” the man said in breathless exasperation before opening his mouth to recite an incantation.

“*The magpie sings a simple tune. That song flows from the heavens and into the ears of all who stand in the way. A never-ending round. The rain-soaked eaves. Despair from the heavens. The falling rain tastes of iron.*”

The moment the words left his lips, Artglyphs scattered out around him.

“Wh—this guy’s a magician?!”

“Loose a quarrel! Quick, before his spell starts!” The bandits started to panic, but they barely had time to act.

The magician scoffed. His incantation was already complete. “It is all down to luck, just as you said. If luck is on your side today, you may even survive.” He activated his spell just as the archer finished setting his aim, his mark fixed firmly on his target’s heart. It was a sure shot at this distance, but his certainty crumbled as an unfamiliar arrow shot out from behind the magician. Arrowheads came raining down from the sky. With nowhere to run, the bandits fell to the ground, turned to pincushions in the hail of fire. By some stroke of divine intervention, though the majority were wounded, none had died.

“Hmph. It seems you were incredibly lucky indeed.”

“Y-You...You’re not alone?”

“*You* weren’t alone. It was foolish to assume I should be.”

Another man stepped silently out from the shadows. Then another, and another, gathering in formation as they stood before the bandits. Their gazes

were sharp, and they eyed the bandits like ravenous beasts.

The man was traveling alone, so where did all these allies come from? These companions of his were clearly trained to fight on this terrain. That much was obvious from first glance.

The head thief knew then that this wasn't a man they should have gotten involved with. His companions were a pack of hungry wolves who roamed the darkest shadows of this place, darker than the places the thief and his gang knew.

The magician gave a pensive frown. "This is perfect. You can assist us. We're all outcasts; we should be able to catch this kingdom off guard easily. Doesn't that sound good?" The magician's lips twisted into a crazed smile. It was the smile of a man carrying a deep grudge in his chest, left in the dark to age. Here, finally, his chance presented itself. His plan was folly, a challenge posed to an enemy that would swat him like a fly, all so he could inflict a single wound.

The fallen bandits had no right to refuse. Refusal meant death.

The man left the bandits to his companions and continued on his way.

Revenge; it was all for revenge on those who had made him and his allies taste humiliation.

Part 1: Traveling West

Arcus and Sue walked together through one of the capital's bazaars. The huge Louro River—a trade artery that cut through the city—bordered the market on one side, keeping it fed with goods of all stripes, from fresh food to daily necessities and nobles' unwanted clothes to Seal Tools; as such, it was the largest of its kind in the capital. It was reminiscent of a European market, with simple, colorful stalls packed in close rows and boxes filled with fruit and vegetables. Vendors with their wares spread out on rugs and fast food stalls lay dotted around. The air was bright with life from the enthusiastic salespeople loudly advertising their goods to catch the interest of the passing consumers.

Much like the café and plaza where they studied magic, Arcus and Sue often came to this market together. They were here mainly for the food stalls, but at the same time they were always on the lookout for rare finds. There wasn't anything fancy to be had downtown, but the price was right, and it tasted good to boot.

The crème de la crème was the capital's famous duck sandwich. It consisted of fried duck meat coated in a classic gravy and sandwiched between huge steamed flour buns. It resembled Chinese food from the man's world, but the western filling gave it an interesting twist. They were served as soon as the buns were steamed, and the insides were piping hot. As if the smell wasn't appetizing enough, the brown sauce oozed temptingly out over the dry, white bun.

Sue stuffed her mouth as full as she could. "Mmph!" It was a muffled cry of satisfaction. Her euphoria was obvious from the huge smile on her face.

"You love those, huh?"

"Yup! Can't go downtown without having a duck sandwich! Aah, this is heavenly!" Sue pulled another sandwich out of the bag and continued gorging. A girl of her standing probably didn't have much opportunity to eat fast food like this. Each bite made her face light up with happiness. It wasn't an exaggeration; the sandwiches were really that delicious.

While she fell into a drunken stupor from the aftertaste, Arcus glimpsed a trail

of gravy dripping from the corner of her mouth. “Sue, you’ve got sauce on your face.”

“Huh? Where?”

“Right there.” Arcus tapped the corresponding spot on his own face. He knew Sue—she would go for the side he pointed at as though they were facing the same direction, and miss the spot completely. She always did, and it annoyed him, so he decided to grab a handkerchief and wipe it off himself.

Sue let out a surprised squeak.

“Stay still.”

“S-Sure...” Sue hunched her shoulders slightly, which was rare for her. She was probably embarrassed to confuse her left with her right. When Arcus was done, she thanked him quietly.

“No problem,” Arcus said, pocketing his handkerchief. He looked around at some of the other stalls. There was one selling eastern-style kebabs, and one selling western-style fruit juice. Just like the duck sandwich, there were several fast foods sold in the capital that seemed to mix eastern and western cuisines—possibly because the Crosellode family, Lainur’s founders, hailed from the east. When this region was still in the throes of war, they gathered several clans together to forge the kingdom. Eastern influences as a whole had also increased lately due to cultural exchange.

So, while the kingdom had a western foundation, there were spots here and there where cultures commingled. Food was probably the best example. Personally, Arcus lamented this world’s dearth of hamburgers.

One of the familiar stall owners called out to them enthusiastically. “Hey, Sue! On a date with your boyfriend again? You’re always so lovey-dovey together!”

“H-Hey! Arcus isn’t my boyfriend! Where did you get that idea from?!”

“If he’s not, how come you’re all over each other?”

“We’re not!”

“No? But he just wiped that sauce off your—”

Sue cut him off with a scream, waving her hands frantically in front of her. The

stall owner just grinned at her reaction, making her even madder. Even the people around them were starting to grin in amusement at the situation. Arcus and Sue had become frequent targets of this sort of teasing. Sue used to unabashedly stick to Arcus like glue, but she had grown pricklier of late. She was outgrowing the tactless mindset typical of children. Once she had become more aware that they were friends and what that meant, she had started avoiding unnecessary physical contact. Arcus, meanwhile, missed her unbridled displays of affection.

"Why not take a look at what we have, Miss Sue? Some of these might interest you!"

"You said that last time, and all the stuff you showed me was weird!"

"Sue! We've got some good apples in! Take one."

"Oh! Thanks!"

Sue was popular. No matter where she went, she was able to get on quickly with almost anyone. It must have been because of her cheerful and innocent nature. She also had a good sense of personal space. Most people were uncomfortable when others got too close, physically and mentally, but in Sue's case, she seemed to know just how much space to give people, which might explain why she was so well-liked. It was strange, then, that Arcus seemed to be her only real friend, but he didn't dwell too deeply on it.

To borrow a word from the man's world, he would describe her as blessed with chutzpah. The word described her through and through—an ineffable charm she gave off that drew people in. That included Arcus, even as he analyzed her right then and there. She was one of those people who could found their own religion or land a leadership role wherever they applied. If she decided to step up and make a speech in the middle of the bazaar, everyone would surely stop and listen.

Is it just me, or is everyone around me ridiculously amazing in some way?

Arcus couldn't help feeling distinctly average when he compared himself to his associates. The only thing that set him apart from them were the experiences and knowledge he had from the man's world. Unlike the heroes from that world's works of fiction, Arcus didn't have any kind of special powers,

and he only had as much aether as the next guy.

Sue, meanwhile, was exceptional. She had aether coming out of her ears, and some mysterious quality that seemed to make her magic far more powerful than anybody else's. She was physically strong too; Arcus would have to be crazy to try comparing himself to her. The other day, he boasted of how much stronger he was thanks to his uncle's daily training, to which Sue responded by challenging him to an arm wrestle.

He lost spectacularly.

Sue was inexplicably strong, and it wasn't the kind of strength you could beat just by training a little harder. It was baffling where in those slender arms of hers she hid such power. In this world, there were those who possessed incredible strength as well as magicians. Life was unfair. The second you took pride in something, someone who could do it better would come along and crush that pride. The only option left was to despair.

Sue was now thirteen years old and attending the Royal Institute of Magic. It was a wonder she still managed to meet up with Arcus as much as she did. He had asked her whether she ought to be studying, but she said the only lectures she went to were Professor String's. Apparently, the lectures that weren't run by state magicians weren't useful, and studying together with Arcus was much more valuable. It was likely because she had a magic tutor at home. Her tutor taught her all about magical history, grammar, and more, giving the institute's lectures very little value to Sue.

That wasn't to say the lectures themselves were bad. It was just that her studies with Arcus were more useful in the sense that she learned things there that she couldn't anywhere else.

"So you're done?" Arcus asked.

"Don't blame me! The lecturers keep bringing in those weird dramatized texts! It's totally unnecessary!"

"What, you mean creative stories 'inspired' by the original texts?"

"Yeah, them! They call them 'interpretations' just so they can force them in! It lowers your spells' effectiveness, but you can use a 'wider range,' and they're

‘easier to use’ too, so they end up teaching that stuff in lectures! And then they have the gall to call it education!”

“I’ve never seen you get mad like this.”

“Hey, I can get mad!” Sue grumbled and pouted.

She was right, though; there were several guides to the Ancient Chronicles which mixed in their authors’ opinions. To pick the right word for a spell, you needed to extract its meaning and the deeper intentions hidden within. That was why some authors read too deeply into the words, and ended up including overanalyzed conclusions in their writings. Lecturers would then likely teach those ideas as new discoveries rather than over-processed interpretations. They were absurd to anybody who studied the Ancient Chronicles directly from their source. Worse, Sue was now speaking of “stories.”

Despite the incident with the sauce, Sue was once again stuffing her face with a duck sandwich. As angry as she was, she still couldn’t help smiling once the delicious flavor hit her.

Sue was wearing her usual white cloak, paired with an outfit that was easy to move around in underneath. Her neat black hair rippled beautifully down her back, and her deep blue eyes shone with intermingled splashes of jade. Those eyes were wide now and sparkling with happiness, but Arcus knew they could narrow and turn piercing in an instant.

“What’s up?”

“Oh, uh, nothing.” Arcus quickly looked away, but it seemed Sue thought he was staring at her face for a different reason.

“Want some, Arcus? You can have a small bite if you want.”

“That’s not very generous of you.”

“Fine, then you can’t have any!”

“Okay, I’ll have a small bite.”

“Here!”

Arcus bit into the sandwich Sue offered him, and immediately the rich flavor of duck spread through his mouth. The bun around it only emphasized the

taste.

“It’s delicious.”

“I know, right?”

The two of them carried on strolling through the market, their conversation not getting much deeper than duck sandwiches. They didn’t come out to study magic today; Arcus had an errand to run. When he mentioned it to Sue, she insisted on coming along. Arcus’s errands were his top priority, and yet when Sue said she wanted to look around the bazaar, they ended up coming here first. Neither could tell whether that was because Arcus felt like being kind to her or because there was some invisible power imbalance in their relationship.

Arcus was bound for one of his regular haunts, a large vendor of materials for his aethometers and seals. The crown had commissioned him to produce even more aethometers, but for that he would need more Sorcerer’s Silver. He usually ordered materials from this particular shop, and he was here today to inquire after their stock.

“You’re completely out of Sorcerer’s Silver?” Arcus echoed what the clerk told him only moments after stepping inside.

The clerk lowered his head apologetically. “I’m afraid so, sir. We are completely sold out. I can only apologize for failing to meet your expectations when you are such a loyal customer.”

“But why have you sold out so suddenly? I thought I told you I’d need some.”

“You did, sir. Unfortunately, it’s a problem with the supplier.”

“The supplier?”

“Yes, sir. A short while ago, we received less than usual from our supplier. We were able to make do with what we had in stock already, but that sold out completely the other day.”

“You’ve been receiving less?”

“That’s right.”

It wasn’t unheard of for an item to be sold out. The question was *how*. Sorcerer’s Silver was an undeniably essential product, but you needed very little

for seals, and the number of people who actually carved their own was limited. There was no reason demand for the material should outstrip supply. Arcus was mulling over the issue in his mind when the clerk spoke again.

“We’ve never had a problem like this with our Sorcerer’s Silver stocks before. I just can’t think of why this might have happened.”

“Maybe the production of the silver used to make it has decreased?”

“Not from what I’ve heard. They should be producing the same as always. However, I have also heard that there are a small number of retailers buying up the Sorcerer’s Silver at a high price from the wholesalers, leaving less for us.”

If there was no change in production or output, that had to be the reason. Someone was buying it first. That, or someone was throwing their weight around.

“Wouldn’t that make everyone complain though?” Arcus asked.

“Apparently noble folk are involved, so the wholesalers can’t put up much resistance.”

“Right...”

While it was true that meant there was less that could be done about it, it gave rise to another problem. Presumably the nobles in question were using aligned merchants to stockpile silver. What did they want with it?

“Do you know who’s involved exactly?”

“No one knows for sure, but I have heard rumors that it is Count Nadar’s work. They are nothing more than rumors, you understand.”

“Nadar?”

Count Porque Nadar held territory to the west, bordering the Gillis Empire. So it was small retailers with connections to him who were buying up Sorcerer’s Silver at a markup...

“Could he be buying it to preserve his military power?”

“I’m afraid I don’t know much more than what I told you.”

“Hmm...”

The main reason to buy Sorcerer's Silver was for making seals. It was an important military commodity—any military body would need enough Sorcerer's Silver to engrave sufficient Seal Arms to outfit its soldiers.

"That doesn't make sense. If that was his goal, he shouldn't need so much that it creates a shortage..."

"We don't know the details. Until the issue is solved, however, we won't be able to restock very easily."

Arcus's only choice was probably to go above the store itself and exert pressure there. He was under a royal command to produce more aethometers. He suspected Craib or Godwald would be able to do something about it if he asked. That, of course, would take time—and might not be without its own hurdles. Arcus would need to get his hands on the silver he wanted before then.

"Where can I get some Sorcerer's Silver?"

"I suggest you go west to Rustinell, where you will be able to purchase it directly. The lady there owns several silver mines in her own name, and they produce the Sorcerer's Silver in that county as well."

"Rustinell. I'll ask Noah. Okay, thanks. I'll give it a try."

"You're very welcome, sir. Thank you for your continued patronage."

Only after they stepped out of the store did Sue open her mouth. "Someone's buying up all the Sorcerer's Silver?"

"Yeah. No clue why someone would do that, though."

"The most likely explanation is that they need a lot of it for something, right?"

Indeed. Sorcerer's Silver wasn't cheap, so unlike salt or wheat, it wasn't something you could stockpile easily. If military expansion wasn't the goal, then the most likely objective was market manipulation; that was illegal and not an easy trick to pull off. The Surveillance Office would come sniffing around if you were too obvious. You'd be punished in an instant.

"Maybe he does just want to improve his military, then."

Holding a border territory like Nadar's took frequent, consistent displays of strength to intimidate your neighbors out of any plans to invade they might

entertain. Improving your military was a good way to back up a strategy of deterrence. It was either that, or Nadar was playing catch-up with the bordering nations' armies. Arcus was convinced that Nadar's objective lay within his military rather than market manipulation. He explained his thoughts to Sue.

"Another possibility is that he's selling it on to someone else."

"Selling it on?"

"Yeah. I don't mean someone else inside the country, but maybe to a different nation—one he's got a good relationship with or something."

"Huh. It's not just people in our nation who're after our materials."

"Right! Nadar already trades in foreign currency, you know, like with the Empire."

"The Gillis Empire? Is that allowed?"

"Depends, but trading in certain items is fine. It turns a profit, after all. There's economic advantage to be had, too, depending on what you're exporting. It also sets up a good relationship with the other nation, and even if it's just superficial, it makes it harder for them to declare war on you. Oh, but trading in Sorcerer's Silver's illegal."

"A deal with an enemy nation..."

The first thing that sprang to Arcus's mind when he heard about hostile nations (likely because of his dream) was economic sanctions. The prospect that this count might be trading with the kingdom's largest enemy boded ill.

"It's necessary," Sue said. "I mean, we're at peace right now."

A small spat between the Gillis Empire and Lainur broke out a few years ago, but there had been no major conflicts to speak of recently. While there were sometimes minor disputes between adjoining counties, the kingdom was generally at peace, just like Sue said.

"Let me ask you a question then, Arcus. This one's for extra credit!"

Why she was suddenly speaking like a teacher, Arcus wasn't sure.

"Yes, ma'am," he replied with a sigh. "Go ahead, ma'am."

“I’ll take away points if you’re gonna be like that!”

“Oh no. What if I fail the class?” Arcus asked, his tone unconcerned.

“I’ll make you my slave temporarily!”

“No fair. This better be a question I can actually answer, then.”

“Oh, you just gave me an idea! Thanks!”

“You’re not welcome, so give it back!”

Sue was unpredictable at the best of times, so Arcus didn’t even want to imagine what she might make him do as her slave.

“Go on, then. What’s the question?”

“Why does Lainur maintain peace with the hostile Gillis Empire? Why does it *need* to? It’s not just ‘because we like peace.’ Nothing that pathetic.”

Arcus thought Sue must have had some very grandiose ideas about the kingdom if enjoying peace seemed beneath its dignity.

“Because we don’t wanna go to war, right?”

“Okay. And why don’t we wanna go to war?”

“It’d cause a lot of damage, I guess.”

“Fine, but the Empire wants to extend its territory into the southeast, which means it’s gonna try and advance on us one day. So what should Lainur do?”

Arcus was starting to see what she was getting at.

“At some point, the kingdom will be forced to fight with the Empire. Lainur will want to be powerful enough to stand up against it when that happens. That’s why it wants to keep the peace as long as possible, and to that end it can use trade and cultural exchange to keep up a superficial friendship. That’s why it wants the nobles on the border to maintain that ‘friendship’ as best they can.”

“You got it. Well done, Arcus.” Sue gave him a small round of applause.

Now the idea of Nadar striking a deal with the Empire made sense. It also meant that Lainur could get its hands on material and information from the

enemy, which would be strategically vital.

“Doesn’t the whole thing with the Sorcerer’s Silver mean the kingdom’s policies are working then? But also, for the border territories where tensions run high, isn’t there a chance they might do something by accident to trigger a fight with the Empire?”

“That’s when nobles get moved somewhere else. They get replaced with another who has no relation to the enemy nation and who’s good at diplomacy. Then they’re the ones on the firing line. That new noble and everyone above him do their best to avoid war, and the accidental trigger doesn’t end up as such a big deal.”

“What a dirty trick...” Forcing a noble to move territories altogether seemed a little extreme. “Wouldn’t the noble complain?”

“Of course they’re not gonna be happy about it, but it’s better than war, right?”

“They wouldn’t really be able to say anything against the king either, I guess.”

It still came across as excessive to Arcus. In a feudal society where one’s land was everything, exchanging territories was almost forbidden. While it’d be no problem for a newer noble who had only just received their land, for one who had spent years cultivating it and governing its people with pride and affection, having it exchanged would cause dissatisfaction, to put it mildly. Arcus had no doubt that the nobles subject to such an order would complain, but that just went to show how imperative it was that the kingdom use such methods to buy time before the inevitable war.

“It’s not all bad. For example, their new place might be even better than the old one, or they could get an order in exchange for going along with it. Or the crown could just find an excuse to say the noble’s not suited for the position—maybe frame them for something—and then take the territory by force.”

“I’m pretty sure that’s just downright tyranny, which is kinda scary to think about. Anyway, you’re saying that this is what Count Nadar has to put up with at the border?”

“You got it.”

“Okay, but what if the new noble they install is untrustworthy? That’d be really dangerous. I’m not accusing anyone of anything, but there’d be a risk of treason, wouldn’t there?”

Sue’s features stiffened suddenly. “That’s why there’s always a loyal martial house backing them, watching them constantly to make sure they don’t double-cross the kingdom. That makes it harder for them to try anything clever.”

“Threatened from the inside, huh?” Arcus didn’t know what to say. It was a little creepy.

Creepy, but effective. Betrayal meant bringing the enemy into your own country, but if that betrayal was foreseen, the fallout could be controlled, and nobles from nearby territories could move to surround the offender.

Arcus suddenly realized something. “You sure know a lot about this, Sue.”

“Oh, yeah. I’ve read up all about it!”

“This is the kinda thing you can just read about?”

“Y-You can learn about anything by reading! Anyway, how come you know so much about this when you *haven’t* studied?!”

“Hey, I have stud—”

“Huh? What? Does the Raytheft house really have strategic guides like that? D’you know how bad that is?”

“Wh-What? Well...” Arcus faltered.

His knowledge of these matters mostly came from the books the man read. The man was the type to read a book only once before being done with it, and Arcus was the type to remember anything after only seeing it once. As long as the man read the information somewhere, it wasn’t difficult for Arcus to pick it out and store it.

“Anyway, what do you care?”

“Well, y’know. I’m nobility too.”

Arcus let it slide for now. “A deal with the Empire, huh?”

“I dunno if it’s true or not. It was just an idea.” It was then that Sue tensed up,

and her tone grew cold again. “Either way, he’s buying way too much Sorcerer’s Silver. Something needs to be done about it.”

Arcus had seen this sharper side of hers before, and it usually came about without warning. It was like there was a chilling wind blowing about her which froze him down to the bone. Then she put her hand to her mouth and narrowed her eyes in thought. There was dignity in that pose which even an adult would find hard to replicate.

“I can smell rotten meat...” she murmured.

Her changing tone and demeanor were weird, but Arcus was more concerned with the matter at hand. “Something needs to be done?” he pressed.

“Yeah. That’s right.”

“And what can you do?”

Sue suddenly looked up with a light of realization in her eyes. “Huh? Oh! C’mon Arcus, what kinda question is that?! Of course I can’t do anything! You’re such a prankster!” she laughed.

“Your dad’s a duke, though. You’ve gotta have some influence?”

“I’ve got nothing! Nothing at all!”

“Huh? What about those guys you had in the shadows when we were—”

“They were just, uh, our servants!” She let out another awkward laugh, clearly trying to lead Arcus off the trail.

As he often did, Arcus found himself deeply curious about who exactly this friend of his was. He learned during their time with Gown that she was a daughter of the Algucia Dukedom, and she didn’t make much of a secret that she had a group of attendants at her beck and call. Each new thing Arcus learned about her just made her more mysterious. Arcus gave her a suspicious look, to which she responded with a glare.

“Keep looking at me like that and I’m gonna squish your cheeks!”

“I was just thinking that you—hey! Quit it! Don’t touch my cheeks!”

“Aaah, they’re always so soft!”

Perhaps unsurprisingly, this was how a lot of their interactions ended.

Rustinell. A territory in the west of Lainur, ruled by Louise Rustinell. As a mountainous region, it wasn't suited for farming, but it did have an abundance of mines, disproportionately for silver. It was said that thirty percent of the silver used in Lainur came from Rustinell.

Arcus had saddled up and ridden out from the capital's west gate, down the long, long road that led west and over a mountain, until he reached the very edges of the kingdom, where Rustinell waited. Needless to say, he was following the other day's lead regarding his best shot at laying hands on a fresh batch of Sorcerer's Silver. He had reported to the Guild and asked them to check with other companies, but none of them had enough to sell; they were waiting for more to be processed. Arcus had received a letter of authorization from the king to requisition the Sorcerer's Silver he needed for the time being, as well as some funds for the journey, and set off.

His horse held a steady pace along the road. Noah and Cazzy accompanied him as usual, as well as a local guide he had hired to lead the way. Thanks to his uncle's training, he was well used to horse riding; if for some reason he might need to cast a spell mid-gallop, he would be able to pull it off with ease.

Holding on to the horse's reins, Arcus surveyed the peaceful surroundings. "I never thought I'd have to go all the way to the source just to get some Sorcerer's Silver," he muttered to himself.



“Silver has many applications—kitchenware, decorative plating, and coinage, just to give some of the more common examples,” said Noah.

“How come they’re letting it run short if it’s so important then? Just when we started mass production too,” Arcus grumbled.

After a long period of research, Arcus finally had a set plan for his tempered aether. He had already taught a select few magicians, bound by contract, how to create and use it. Everything needed to increase the mass production of tempered silver (as was its provisional name) even further had only just been put into place.

And now here they were without the raw materials to do it. While Arcus knew life wasn’t always smooth sailing, he felt he encountered choppy waters much more frequently than most.

Cazzy was cackling to himself quietly, as though he had no stake in the expedition. “Is it really that hard? The king’s makin’ you produce these things, so why can’t he just force ’em to hand over the silver?”

“W-Well, I mean, technically he could, but...”

“It might cause issues,” Noah finished.

Making a big show of using the king’s influence to obtain the silver would quickly spread news that the Crown was in need of the metal. It would rouse neighboring nations’ suspicions, prompting them to investigate what exactly Lainur needed that silver for. That, in turn, would risk them finding out about the aethometer. After discussing with the Guild, they decided it was best for Arcus to collect the silver he needed for now and claim that it was for a personal project.

Meanwhile, the Guild had looked into Porque Nadar; he *was* apparently hoarding silver, but the investigation had fared poorly so far. While they found he had bought in bulk until recently, he’d since stopped, causing a blip in the circulation. The question now was where the silver was going, but that wasn’t something Arcus needed to answer himself.

“This is gonna take forever.” Arcus stretched out his legs and leaned back in his saddle to look at the vivid blue sky.

Noah frowned at him. “Are you sure about that? It is a mere two weeks, including the trip back.”

“Yeah! That’s looong!”

Still, his attendants frowned at him like they couldn’t understand his complaint.

Knowing how fast the planes, trains, and automobiles from the man’s dream could get them there, two weeks inevitably seemed like a long time to Arcus. He was grateful for the guide’s intermittent friendly remarks, which distracted from the monotony of the journey. He’d been guiding people down this road for twenty years, and it showed in the various stories he shared with them.

Arcus looked up at the sun, shielding his face with a hand. “I hate the sun.”

“Yeah, it’s real hot today.”

“Do make sure you’re keeping cool, Master Arcus.”

“Man, I miss air conditioning.” Arcus flopped down on top of his horse.

Cazzy looked concerned. “Hey, ya can’t let your guard down like that, no matter how peaceful it seems.”

“Indeed. Things will only get more perilous from this point onward.”

“How come?”

“Most of the dangers we may face will be direct. Thieves, for example.”

“You mean like bandits?”

“That’s right.”

“I didn’t know there were bandits around here...” Arcus sighed. Ex-mercenaries turning into bandits and causing trouble in their neighborhoods was a common theme in some of the books the man read. As soon as the characters stepped out of the city walls, bandits. If they took a single step into the mountains, bandits. Bandits, bandits, bandits, everywhere. “Bandits...”

Strictly speaking, Arcus didn’t have a clear idea of what bandits actually looked like. As far as the man, who lived in a relatively safe country, was concerned, they were no more than mythical creatures. The closest thing to

bandits he could think of were muggers. He had heard there were bandit-like criminals abroad, but he didn't know much more than that.

"If you are having a hard time imagining them, try recalling the mercenaries hired by Marquess Gaston. They are like that, but even less respectable. They hide in caves, old mining tunnels, or abandoned villages in the mountains and come out periodically to steal."

"How come you never mentioned them before now?"

Cazzy answered. "The area 'round the capital's well looked after, ain't it? They got guards on patrol and stuff, so you're never gonna see any bandits there. That's why you don't gotta be so careful."

"The situation is different out here in the country. Rustinell is a vaster territory than most, and very mountainous. There are several empty regions which cannot be maintained in such a manner."

"And that's where the bandits thrive?"

Makes sense...

"Wait a moment, everyone," their guide said suddenly, bringing his horse to a stop.

Arcus looked ahead. A man crouched unnaturally in the middle of the road. He was dressed like any other traveler, with a cloak to protect him from the sand and a black hat resembling a knitted beanie. Next to him was a single horse, and on closer inspection, he appeared to be tending to someone who had collapsed.

Noah urged his horse forward while Cazzy brought his to the back, keeping an eye out behind them. Arcus suddenly felt the lantern on his waist shake.

"Hm?"

Gown had gifted him the steel lantern as thanks for helping him. Opening the tiny window in the lantern would summon the elf's Phantom Pack. Arcus hadn't touched it though, so why, he wondered, was it behaving like this? He decided to let their guide, Bud, ask some questions first.

"What is the matter?"

“I spotted this young man collapsed on the road, and I was just wondering how to help him.”

“Is he sick?”

“I’m not sure; I’m no doctor.” The traveler turned back to the collapsed man and started talking to him to help him stay conscious. He seemed like the caring sort, helping keep the man comfortable.

At the mention of illness, Arcus got down from his horse. “Can I have a look?”

“A noble boy? Have you any medical knowledge?”

“No, but I know why someone would collapse in the heat like this.”

“Hmm.”

The fallen man wore simple clothes, and his skin was tanned. He must have been a farmer or peasant of some sort, likely from a nearby village. Arcus studied him closely. His skin was saggy and his tongue bone-dry.

“Are you okay?”

“Y-Yes. I suddenly started feeling unwell.”

“Have you had enough salt and water?”

“Plenty of water, but no salt...”

“Right. Heatstroke, then.”

“What is ‘heatstroke’?” asked Noah.

“It’s when you sweat too much under direct sunlight, and your body runs out of water. Your body fails to regulate its temperature, leading to a physical decline like this.”

“But he said he was drinking water,” the traveler said.

“Even if you drink water, if you don’t have enough salt and minerals, your body won’t be able to absorb it properly. That’s why you crave salt when you sweat.”

“I see. So that’s why you can feel unwell if you don’t ingest enough salt...”

It was so hot, and the sunlight so strong, that Arcus had no doubt about his

diagnosis. Now he just needed to treat it.

“His body’s hot, but he’s still conscious, so it’s not too serious yet. We have sugar and salt in the medicine box, right, Cazzy?”

“Sure do.”

“Get me some. And a flask.”

“Gotcha. Here ya go.” Cazzy took the items out of their medicine box.

Arcus mixed them together, heated them up with a quick one-off spell, and then cooled them again.

“You’re a magician?” the traveler asked.

“Sort of.”

“You seem skilled. It’s rare to see a man as young as you using magic so effortlessly.”

“Thanks, but this is really basic stuff.”

Arcus had the man drink his impromptu concoction while Noah cooled his body down with magic. It wasn’t long before the man looked a little better and sat up. “Thank you so much. I feel much better now. Thank you too, sir.”

“I didn’t do a thing. You were just lucky.”

Arcus passed the medicine box back to Noah. “Do you live around here? We’ll take you back.”

“I can’t possibly ask something like that of a noble boy!”

“What if you collapse again? All my help would’ve been for nothing. Let us take you back to make sure you’re okay. That’s an order, by the way. I’ll punish you in my house’s name if you disobey.” Arcus noted he was starting to sound like Sue.

The man paused. “Thank you, sir.” The young man bowed his head obediently.

The man explained that he was on the way back to his village when he fell ill and collapsed.

“What about you?” Arcus asked the man in the hat.

“I am on my way back west.”

“West? Why don’t we travel together for a bit, then?”

“We could, but I doubt traveling with me will be of any benefit to you.”

“If you could share some stories with us, that’d be enough.”

“A typical request of a young noble boy bored out of his mind.”

“Yep! I barely get out of the capital, so there’s not much variety in the stories I hear. It’s not like traveling together or apart makes much difference anyway, right?”

The man was also traveling on horseback. As long as they were going at the same speed, they’d naturally end up traveling together anyway. Arcus knew it might be careless to invite a stranger to go with them, but this was a man they found nursing another at the roadside. That seemed uncharacteristic of a villain.

With the villager riding behind Arcus on his horse, the group set off again. The man in the hat introduced himself as Eido.

“If you were on your way ‘back’ west, does that mean you stopped by the capital?” Arcus asked.

“That’s right,” the man replied. “I don’t have many good memories of the capital, so I was out of there as soon as possible.”

“Oh.”

“Mm.”

It was clear Eido wasn’t looking to elaborate.

“So you live in the west?” Arcus said.

“You could say that. I’m always on the move.”

“Huh.”

After that, Eido told them stories of the west parts of the kingdom, as well as of Sapphireberg, which was a little to the south. While the west was a peaceful place, Sapphireberg was home to ruins teeming with dark spirits that caused all

sorts of trouble for the people living there. Eido's tales of Sapphireberg were a far cry from anything Arcus heard about in the capital.

"Ever been to Sapphireberg, Noah?"

"Yes. I seem to recall a greater number of dark creatures compared to other countries."

"Really?"

"Indeed," said Noah. "That might be why mercenaries call themselves 'adventurers' over there, and explore the undeveloped areas of the country."

"Wow! Adventurers! Do they have an adventurers' guild or something too?!"

"Hm? Well, I believe there *is* some sort of organization like that."

"Whoa. I can't believe it!" Arcus's face was alight with astonishment. Noah, meanwhile, looked a little put out by his enthusiasm.

"Adventurers attract the sort who like to think big of their skills," Eido explained, "so you get a lot of ruffians. I've heard things improved once they built their own guild, though."

"Really?" Arcus said.

They were just approaching the next mountain at this point. Arcus was pondering how they'd cross it when their guide stopped his horse. Following his gaze, Arcus spotted an opening in the mountain and, for some reason, a throng of people gathered around it.

"I'll go and see what's happening," said the guide, leaving them behind. He came back a while later. "They say the road's closed."

"Closed?"

"Yes. Apparently there are bandits up ahead, so they've closed off this road temporarily."

It sounded like this was the region's officials taking action to avoid damage or injury. Just as Arcus suspected, this world was crawling with bandits.

"Do you know how long it'll be closed for?" Arcus asked.

"Not even the guards knew."

“Is there another route?”

“Well, technically yes, but it’s a very long way around indeed.”

“Oh...”

Either they could take a very long detour, or they could wait around doing nothing indefinitely until the road was open again. Some people had pitched tents by the entrance to wait for the restrictions to lift, but Arcus and his group didn’t have anything like that. Taking the detour might have been the only option. There was just one problem.

“If that other path takes too long, y’know the sun’s gonna go down,” Cazzy pointed out. “That’d be a pain.”

Time wasn’t on their side, simply because they weren’t expecting to take such a long route. Dusk could fall before they found anywhere to rest. Arcus didn’t want to travel at night if they could help it.

“Why not stay in my village?” the villager suggested. “If you leave tomorrow morning, you should be able to make it to your destination by the evening.”

“Hmm. Okay. Let’s do that.”

Hearing their decision, Eido stepped out of the formation. “In that case, this is where we part ways.”

“What? But the road’s blocked!”

“I’ll wait nearby, though if it starts taking too long, I may come to join you.”

Eido left the group and the others traveled on according to the villager’s directions. When they were gone, a lone traveler slipped out from the crowd in front of the blockade, approaching Eido and handing him a sheet of paper. “Here.”

Eido read it. “I see. How unfortunate,” he murmured, turning to look in the direction Arcus and his group had gone.

With the mountain pass to Rustinell’s capital blocked, Arcus and his companions chose to follow the villager’s directions. They turned off the main highway that connected eastern and western Lainur, and had been following a less-traveled road through stands of trees for a while now. It was only now that

they were able to spot a man-made structure in the distance. It was a simple protective wall made with uneven logs. Arcus couldn't help but let out a gasp of astonishment as he saw it. It reminded him of the fortress cities from fantasy and historical movies that he knew from the man's world.

Drawing closer, they soon spotted another line of people and carts up ahead. It seemed Arcus's group wasn't the only one impacted by the road closure. They were waiting in a line by the village gates to gain permission to enter. Seeing the length of the line, Arcus prepared himself for a long wait.

The young villager looked back over his shoulder. "I'll go ahead and talk to them."

"Oh, don't. I don't want there to be any trouble."

"Are you sure?"

If they got into the village ahead of the people who had been waiting, it might cause friction, which Arcus wanted to avoid. They brought their horses up to the end of the line and started to wait their turn patiently. Arcus stepped out of the line to check up ahead, where he saw a throng of people right at the front. There seemed to be a group of young men and older, wiser men from the village standing in front of the gate. They must have been there to pass a brief judgment on whether the people who wanted to enter were likely to cause trouble or not. The younger men were all lightly armed and were giving each cart a quick inspection.

"I didn't realize they'd check over everyone who wanted to come in."

"They're checking them to make sure they're not dangerous," the guide explained.

While it was inevitable that travelers would be armed to some degree, it was likely that the village didn't want anyone bringing in any prohibited items. The men were ignoring the bows and polearms carried by the travelers' escorts, instead looking through their luggage and asking them in detail about the items inside. Once the group of merchants in front of them were allowed entry, the young villager got down from his horse.

"I'll speak with them now. Please wait here for a moment," he said,

disappearing among the other villagers. They smiled at him when he raised a hand in greeting. He can't have said more than a few words before he started jogging back to Arcus and the others.

"Are we in?"

"Of course. You saved my life, Arcus, so they're happy to let you in. Plus..."

"Plus what?"

The villager smiled meekly. "I told them you were a noble boy, so you *shouldn't* have any trouble, but..."

"Oh, right. It's okay; I get it."

The villager likely didn't want to start any trouble with the inspectors. This wasn't the sort of place nobles stopped by very often, so no one really knew the proper ways to address nobility. The villager was asking Arcus to be lenient on anyone who spoke to him improperly.

As they reached the gates, an elderly man approached. "I am this village's mayor. I am afraid this isn't a particularly interesting place, but please make yourself at home."

"Sorry for showing up out of the blue."

"We've already heard about the situation with the mountain pass. It is most unfortunate."

"I must agree. Does that kind of thing happen often around these parts?" Noah asked.

"Now and then, especially because we've been seeing more bandits lately."

Arcus glanced back at Noah, Cazzy, and the guide, and they all looked as puzzled as he did about the news; it must have been a rare occurrence for the bandit population to surge like this. He wondered if a large gang had slipped into the region recently.

"And..." the mayor began, looking apologetic. He looked behind him, sweeping his gaze over the young men who looked unsure about how to greet Arcus. "As you can tell, we're all country dwellers out here. I would ask that you forgive any misconduct against you."

“You don’t need to worry about that kind of thing.”

“Thank you,” said the mayor.

Noah stepped forward. “Might we discuss the payment for staying a night in this village?”

“Oh! Thank you so much! I wasn’t sure how to broach that topic myself, you see...”

Demanding money from a noble must have seemed like an act of great discourtesy to him. Having said that, putting up travelers was no simple feat. They needed to prepare water, food, and bedding, assuming the travelers didn’t have any tents. None of those things were free, and if they didn’t ask the travelers to cover their costs, the villagers would have to do it themselves. The mayor and young men with him looked relieved to have the money talk out of the way.

“Why don’t ya offer to carve ’em some seals to pay?” Cazzy suddenly suggested.

“Seals?”

“Yeah, like on their farmin’ tools. Ya can do that easy, right?”

“Well, yeah.” Arcus had brought the necessary tools and Sorcerer’s Silver with him to carve seals, just in case. “But is it really worth it?”

“Whaddya mean?”

“Master Arcus. Engraving seals is highly specialized work.”

Both Cazzy and Noah looked like they were trying to hold in a put-upon sigh. Craib made Arcus carve his own seals so early on that he’d forgotten how technical a skill it was. And regardless, in Arcus’s mind nothing guaranteed that this village was in need of any work like that, specialist or not.

“Not everyone can just pick up some Sorcerer’s Silver an’ start engravin’, y’know. ’Specially in a place like this. I think these guys’ll really appreciate it.”

Most households in the capital had their own engraving tools, but they must have been much rarer in a small village like this.

“You know how to carve seals?”

“Yeah.” Arcus nodded.

The mayor exchanged a glance with the other villagers. They seemed unsure whether or not to believe him, especially given his age and the complexity of the art.

“I mean, the tools I use are just stuff you can pick up in any big store in the capital. This is something I carved myself. Take a look.” Arcus demonstrated by fishing out a small lighter-like device and flicking it on, to the villagers’ mild astonishment.

The mayor exchanged another glance with his entourage. “In that case, might we ask for your service?”

“Yes, but I can’t do too much, because I want to keep some silver on hand for the rest of the journey.”

“We understand. We’ll only ask for the bare minimum we need.”

“Okay.”

The mayor’s cheerful smile brightened even further. Even the little Arcus had to offer seemed to make them happy here. Some of the people who had gathered rushed back into the village, presumably to get the items they wanted Arcus to engrave.

“Now what?” Arcus asked.

“Now things’ll be easier for us here ’cause you’ve done somethin’ nice for ’em,” Cazzy, himself a rural farmer by birth, replied.

This place was a closed community, meaning that outsiders were generally disliked. A well-chosen favor was likely to turn the tide in your favor to a certain extent. The comfort of any stay in a place like this depended entirely on how the villagers felt about you. While they might not offer open hospitality, at least this way they wouldn’t have to worry about being treated cruelly.

On entering the village, they spotted several tents already pitched in empty spaces. This village didn’t have any inns, so those who had adequate preparations for braving the outdoors were setting up their own shelters. Arcus

and the others waited until they were able to go to the mayor's house.

"Bandits..." Arcus muttered again.

"Do you think he might be getting a sinister premonition of some sort?" Noah asked. "Master Arcus has been repeating that word ever since we first discussed the matter."

"Ooh, I bet they're gonna attack us *tonight*!" Cazzy broke into a cackling fit.

Now that it was just the three of them, those two saw fit to start making uncomfortable predictions.

"Guys..." Arcus couldn't help but sigh, as anyone would. He shot them a half-hearted glare, but they just seemed confused.

"Is something the matter?"

"Not yet, but if you keep saying stuff like that, we really will get attacked."

"Naw, you're just bein' superstitious!"

"You do have a tendency to think negatively," Noah said. "I fear you might become paranoid as you get older... Or perhaps I should say *more* paranoid."

"I bet he would!" Cazzy said, laughing.

They felt no remorse entertaining themselves by twisting their master's words. To put it simply, they were incorrigible. Even then, their lack of concern worried Arcus.

"You don't get it, do you?" Arcus said sternly. "Words are magical. When you say something like that in a situation like this, it activates a certain law."

"A law?"

"What sort of law?" asked Noah dubiously.

"Y'know, like the law of attraction, or Murphy's law."

Only when they probed him did Arcus realize he didn't have a precise answer. Neither of the examples he gave seemed quite right to him, and if the master didn't know, how were the servants supposed to understand? The three of them exchanged puzzled glances there in the middle of the village square.

“What I’m saying is that if we’re attacked tonight, I’m blaming you two.”

A jinx was what it was, and he hadn’t come across one this foreboding since the first time he met Sue, so of course he couldn’t help but feel a little uneasy.

Seal engraving was the art of carving Artglyphs into objects using Sorcerer’s Silver in order to imbue them with magical effects. They could be carved into any sort of material: wood, leather, resin, and so forth. Using a chisel to engrave metal was a particularly common scenario. The Artglyphs also needed to be carved in a pattern distinct from how you would render them with a brush and ink, but the style itself was left up to the individual.

An inexperienced engraver would copy the Artglyphs almost stroke for stroke, creating something that could hardly be called a “pattern.” The most famous engravers created their seals so beautifully, the finished product stood as a work of art on its own.

Engraving seals required several materials. The first was, of course, Sorcerer’s Silver. You then needed mineral pigments to fine-tune the seal’s effect. A small knife or a chisel and a mallet were needed to do the carving itself. You also needed a file to smooth down the surface when you were finished.

The purpose of most seals was to make the object last longer, which was why seals that had an anti-rust or anti-erosion effect were so commonplace. The difficulty of engraving weapons, such as knives, went up considerably. While making them sharper or resistant to rust wasn’t too hard, making them more durable, as people often wanted to, was a different matter. Simply engraving them with the seals to make them tougher would make them too tough to sharpen when you needed to. Balancing the utility of the seals with the ability to maintain your tool was vital.

Luckily, Arcus’s job this time wasn’t so tough. He just needed to engrave a few seals and patch up some older Seal Tools. He didn’t have much time to carve them in the first place, so the request wasn’t too time-consuming, nor did he need to use too many of his resources.

He did his work in the mayor’s living room, checking the seals for chips or grazes and repairing any he found. It was some time after their lunch break by the time Arcus got started on engraving new seals. It wouldn’t do for his

servants to lie around while their master worked, so they were out taking care of the horses, finding them a place to sleep, and negotiating with merchants, among other things. Cazzy was particularly helpful when it came to knowing this place's unspoken rules.

The villagers gathered curiously around the whetstone that Arcus had just finished working on, squealing like children with new toys when they saw how much more efficient it was now. It was then that the mayor came in with some tea for Arcus.

"Thank you so much for your help."

"It's no trouble at all, really. Most of it's been looking over and repairing stuff."

"It may not be much to you, but you have helped us out immensely by doing this." The mayor thanked him for the umpteenth time. "My wife is busy preparing you the best meal she can."

Arcus followed the mayor's gaze to see that the kitchen was already laden with food: wild plants, eggs, and even duck, which must have been slaughtered that morning.

"I haven't done anything that deserves a reward like this."

"Please, I insist. You've checked over so many of our tools that really we should be paying you for the service."

Arcus could only see the mayor's words as an exaggeration. As far as he was concerned, looking over and fixing up their Seal Tools was a fair trade for a night's stay here; if the two were not of exactly equal value, then they were close enough. Preparing a lavish meal for him on top of that would mean the village paid more for his work than they would normally. Unless...

"Don't tell me the cost of this sort of service has jumped up?" Arcus motioned to the tool he was working on.

The mayor responded with a troubled look and a nod. "I'm afraid so."

If Sorcerer's Silver was getting more expensive, then so would seals. It wasn't hard to conclude that even a village like this was feeling the knock-on effects of

the silver shortage, and the mayor seemed to confirm it.

“We used to buy Seal Tools and engraving services now and then, but the recent prices, even for a simple service, would make your jaw drop.”

“They really shot up that much, huh?”

“There are other commodities that suddenly spiked in price too. To be honest, it’s been a real struggle for us,” the mayor explained with a weighty sigh, giving wheat and salt as examples.

They were suffering even out here in Rustinell, right at the heart of Lainur’s silver trade.

This might be an even more serious problem than I thought.

“Oh! Here y’are!” a third voice interrupted their discussion. Arcus turned to see a young man wearing a tulip hat. He had pushed his way through the throng of people admiring the whetstone, and a plump middle-aged man gasping for breath followed him. It appeared he had business with the mayor, but it was obvious from the way he was dressed that he wasn’t a villager. He was in traveling clothes, and had likely stopped by here the same way Arcus’s group had.

The man in the tulip hat looked to be around Noah’s age, if not a little older. He wore a cloak and a large, curved blade at his hip. On his back, he carried a small knapsack. His eyes were slitted, like the mythical foxes Arcus knew from the man’s world. Those eyes were really the only feature that set him apart from your average person.

His companion was the spitting image of a typical merchant. Aside from his rounded waist, he was completely average in every other way.

“Ah, Mr. Gilles,” the mayor addressed the man in the tulip hat.

“Hi. Just stoppin’ by.” Gilles smiled and winked at the mayor before turning his grin on Arcus. Arcus looked back at him a little warily. “Heard a noble was staying here, so just thought I’d come say hi. Reckon it’s the right thing to do. That’s what they say, anyway.”

“R-Right.”

Gilles had a strong, rural accent. That accent, coupled with the fact that he rambled so openly to a stranger, reminded Arcus of the old women who lived out in the country in the man's world. Unsure how to deal with such an overwhelming character, Arcus looked to the mayor for help—but his eyes were also darting around this way and that. He was clearly at a loss too.

Noticing their discomfort, Gilles's companion spoke up. "M-Mr. G-Gilles. You shouldn't speak like that to a noble; it's rude."

"Why? Back in Imeria, we speak friendly to anyone we meet. Y'won't complain there, right? Right?" Gilles's eyes crinkled up as he smiled and approached Arcus, who felt he had no choice but to nod.

"R-Right."

"See? Even the noble kid's on my side! It wasn't a big deal!"

Every facet of Gilles's behavior had an odd charm that made it hard for Arcus to see his boldness as rude. His smile was packed with amicability, and every gesture he made was just a fraction over-the-top. It made him almost impossible to dislike.

Arcus put down his tools to take a break and drink the tea the mayor had brought him. He glanced out at the yard and spotted Noah. He must've been there to keep an eye on things. Arcus looked back to see Gilles sitting comfortably in the chair opposite and his companion gingerly taking a seat next to him. Gilles shrugged the knapsack from his back.

"Name's Gilles. Guess you'd call me a travelin' merchant. I sell stuff in the east, in the west, the north, and the south, and to countries all over the place. This guy is, uh... What was your name again?"

"I am Pilocolo, and I am also a merchant. A pleasure to make your acquaintance, um...Milady?"

"Ngh..." Arcus knew Pilocolo didn't mean anything by it, but that last word still made his face stiffen. Only just managing to pry his twitching mouth open again, Arcus choked out, "I-I'm a boy..."

"Oh! Please excuse me!" Pilocolo bowed his head immediately.

“I owe y’one, Pilocolo,” Gilles said. “I didn’t know myself which he was.”

“M-Mr. Gilles...”

“Well, you look serious, so I thought I’d bring you along so you could ask him. No hard feelings?”

Pilocolo stared at Gilles, his mouth opening and closing repeatedly before he eventually dropped his head into his hands. They were a strange duo—if duo was even the right word for it.

“You two don’t know each other?” Arcus asked.

“Naw. I only just met this fella.”

“That’s right. I was putting up my tent when Mr Gilles approached and asked me whether I’d accompany him to greet the noble...” Pilocolo trailed off.

“When you say ‘asked,’ do you mean ‘forced’?” Arcus said, raising the question on his mind.

“Yes,” The merchant answered wearily. Arcus couldn’t blame him for looking tired. He’d been trying to keep up with Gilles’ pace this whole time.

“Naw, that’s not it. You just looked bored, so I reckoned I’d invite you along.”

Arcus noted it might have been more polite to ask Pilocolo if he was bored, but it seemed Gilles already made up his mind.

“My name’s Arcus. We’re not gonna be staying here long, but it’s nice to meet you anyway.”

“So am I ’sposed to call you Lord Arcus or somethin’?”

“You can call me whatever you want.”

“Y’sure?”

“No one here’s gonna punish you for it, or think any less of me for it.”

Making a big deal about his social position here would only attract trouble. Besides, it wasn’t like they’d run into this pair of merchants again, so no-one stood to benefit if Arcus were high-handed about it.

“So I can just call y’Arcus?” Gilles asked.

“Yeah.”

Pilocolo was cringing uncomfortably, as though he couldn’t imagine calling Arcus by first name alone.

“So did you two come here because the mountain pass was closed too?” asked Arcus.

“Yep. Both me and Pilocolo were stranded because of it. I’m travelin’ alone, so I’m fine, but Pilocolo here’s with a huge group.”

“That’s right,” Pilocolo confirmed hesitantly.

“You mean... Were you that group with all the carts?” Arcus asked.

“Yes, that was us.”

“Huh.”

Gilles shot Pilocolo a suggestive smile. “I wanna know what you’re carryin’ with you so bad! It’s gotta be big if you’re usin’ carts that sturdy!”

“It’s refined silver. We’re transporting it from a nearby mine to Her Ladyship.”

“Whoa! Silver!”

“Silver?” Arcus’s ears pricked. Was this man really carrying just what he was after? It would be a strange coincidence, but more caught his attention about the situation than that. “Isn’t silver only to be transported on a lord’s orders?”

“Yes; we have Her Ladyship’s permission. Logistics is part of my work too, so she asked me to transport this silver for her this time.”

“I see...”

So they outsourced their shipping. Transporting heavy materials required both money and manpower, so it was probably more cost-effective to hire the experts.

Pilocolo pulled out a permit from his breast pocket and showed it to them. Gilles took it and looked over it with a curious hum. “That blockage must’ve done a real number on you guys then.”

“Yes. I wasn’t exactly enthused to hear about the thieves.” Pilocolo’s face was pale as he thought about the possibility of his cargo being stolen. From the way

he trembled, Arcus had the impression he was a rather weak-willed man.

“Silver. Think you could sell some to me? Everyone’s after it right now,” said Gilles.

“I am only transporting it for Her Ladyship, like I said, so I cannot sell you any of it. Besides, even if I sold you some, you’d have no way to carry it!”

Gilles laughed loudly. “Okay, you got me!”

No one else joined in.

Knowing the material he came here for was so close preyed on Arcus’s mind, but he couldn’t forget his journey’s original objective. It wasn’t like he could just negotiate with Pilocolo, buy some of his silver, and declare the journey over. Besides, buying some of his employer’s stock here was bound to get him in hot water. He had a letter from the king, so it was always possible to force Pilocolo to hand some over, but that would only cause relations between the crown and House Rustinell to sour. He needed to ask the lady herself and go through the proper channels to get what he wanted without doing anything rash.

“What are you doin’ then, Arcus?”

“I’m working on these seals. Can’t you tell?”

“Hey, I’m makin’ conversation. But man, you’re good for a kid. You’re even gettin’ all those details in.” Gilles picked up one of the whetstones Arcus was done with and began inspecting it. “Got any more stuff like this?”

Arcus showed him the lighter.

“Oh, hey. This is cool.” Gilles played with it, lighting it up and letting out an impressed hum. “Your seals look good, they’re carved good, and they work good. You got a swell pair of hands on you if you can make a tool as smart as this.”

“Have you got a good understanding of seals, Mr. Gilles?”

“I’ve seen a fair few in my time. None with a pattern like this though. What school d’you study at, Arcus?”

“I don’t.”

“Taught yourself, huh?”

From the sounds of it, Gilles was judging the seal more by the pattern than anything else. “What other Seal Tools d’you make, Arcus?”

“Just small stuff, or stuff that’s useful on a daily basis like that lighter.”

“That right?” Gilles sounded deeply impressed. For a split second, his eyes opened wide and studied Arcus with a piercing look, like he was sizing him up. Then he cracked into a smile. “Whaddya think, Arcus? Will you let me sell some of your Seal Tools?”

“’Fraid I can’t,” Arcus replied, trying to keep his tone neutral so Gilles couldn’t detect his real thoughts on the matter. He’d long learned that promising too much to someone like this without due consideration was *not* a good idea at all.

A suggestive smile rose to Gilles’s lips. “Arcus Raytheft.”

Arcus jumped.

“Ah! I knew it!” His expression was smug.

Arcus could feel his face growing pale. “How do you know my name?”

“Heard it through the grapevine,” Gilles said.

“Information that specific isn’t stuff you hear through the grapevine,’” Arcus said.

“Y’sure? Think about it. How many families in this kingdom have silver hair like that? That narrows things down by a ton.”

He had a point. The Raytheft house was famous for producing heirs with silvery blond hair. It wasn’t a difficult conclusion to come to if you already knew Arcus was nobility.

“They said yer talentless and got disinherited for it, but I guess rumors ain’t always right.”

So those rumors spread even among traveling merchants. Arcus felt his anger toward his father Joshua rising for the first time in a while.

“Y’after silver, ain’t you? That’s why you’re here.”

Arcus didn’t respond, not allowing the prickling irritation inside him to show

on his face. How did Gilles know that much? Arcus looked at him warily and Gilles, apparently realizing he'd broached a sensitive topic, grew flustered.

"That's easy to work out too, ain't it? Makin' seals means usin' Sorcerer's Silver. Sorcerer's Silver means gettin' regular silver. Makes sense, don't it?"

"Right..." Arcus replied listlessly.

"Master Arcus," Pilocolo said in an attempt to change the subject and dissipate the awkward air, "If you require silver, I may be able to assist you after I have finished my business in the capital."

"R-Really? I'd appreciate it."

Pilocolo's help wouldn't be necessary, given Arcus's letter from the king, but he decided to give him a vague thank you anyway. Pilocolo bowed his head, saying he was happy to be of assistance.

"We should probably make tracks, huh?" said Gilles.

"I agree."

"We're stayin' out by the tents, so let us know if y'need anythin'."

And with that, the peculiar man left the mayor's house, taking Pilocolo along with him.

Their stay in the village was less restful than Arcus had anticipated. There was no noble house to welcome him, and nobody assigned to take care of him or his business for him. He had to do everything himself. Thanks to Noah, Cazzy, and their guide, Arcus didn't have too many tasks, but it still took him until the evening to finish his work on the seals, prepare for tomorrow, and plan a new route to the capital.

Then it was time for dinner. The spread laid out on the mahogany table in front of him proved even fancier than he'd anticipated: soup made with eggs and wild greens, fresh-caught fish pie, herb-roasted ducks. And that was just the start.

Arcus took in the food in front of him, the likes of which these villagers probably only saw on special occasions. The Sol Glasses hung from the ceiling lit it all up brilliantly. The browned duck skin shone amber, the soup's fragrant

steam swirled upward, and the fish pie looked even more incredible. The fish-shaped, cream-colored crust was dotted with beautiful caramelization. Round lemon slices were layered on top, and boiled vegetables garnished the edges. And...

“It’s huge.”

Arcus’s eyes widened at the pie, which was bigger than the roasted ducks put together. When Arcus saw the dish big enough to dominate over half the table being brought in from the outside furnace, he couldn’t imagine what was sitting on top of it. Its simplicity and size were something he’d only seen in anime from the man’s country.

“This is white trout,” explained Noah. “I’m told it is a common fish here in the western regions.”

“White trout, huh? Usually I’d expect salmon in pies like this.”

“Ya know a similar dish? Guess I shouldn’t be surprised y’know a lot ’bout food,” Cazzy remarked.

Arcus was beginning to wonder whether they’d really be able to eat the entire thing. Even with the guide included, there were only four of them. He wasn’t even sure they could make a proper dent in it. While Arcus panicked internally, the mayor’s wife laughed to herself quietly.

“We’re not s’posed to eat all of this, y’know,” Cazzy said. “We should leave at least half.”

“It is tradition, no matter where you are, to prepare a lavish meal for a guest of honor. When that guest has had his fill, the leftovers go to the children.”

“Oh, that’s what this is.”

Now the sheer volume of food made sense, but even then Arcus shuddered to think how expensive all of this was. This world had no shortage of food, but offering several roasted ducks along with a pie like that wasn’t something you could do every day. The villagers must really have been grateful to him for helping the young man and looking at their Seal Tools. The villager they helped thanked Arcus again after they came back, and people would thank him every time he set foot outside. Both he and his servants were smacking their lips at

the first lavish meal they'd had in a while. The pie was especially exquisite, with cheese melting out between the white fish and the crust. Paired with the lemon slices, the fish and its aftertaste were perfectly balanced.

They continued to eat as the mayor's wife described the recipe. It would have been a wonderfully relaxed evening, if not for one thing.

"Beggin' y'pardon! Could I get some more of this pie? It's so good, I reckon I've never had anythin' like it!"

A tense silence filled the air. Arcus and his companions looked toward the voice, only to find a grinning Gilles sitting there. He sat next to their guide, who was struggling with a persistent string of cheese, his short brown hair now uncovered by his hat. He was a dinner guest too; the mayor had invited him as thanks for lending him several goods. Arcus didn't have anything against him, but his personality had a way of overwhelming the dinner table.

"Master Arcus. Might I suggest you select your acquaintances with a little more care in the future?"

"Whaddya lookin' at me for, Noah? Bastard..."

"You simply imagined it. Or does that mean you are aware of your own idiosyncrasies?"

Cazzy scowled at the handsome butler, who simply smiled serenely in response. Arcus was used to them arguing like this. Their personalities were complete opposites, yet they still managed to communicate jovially with each other. Noah wouldn't say such things to someone he wasn't comfortable around, and Cazzy being Cazzy, he wasn't troubled at all; he just shrugged the comment off.

But Cazzy wasn't the only person Noah was referring to, of course.

"Your standards are way too high, pretty boy," Gilles said.

"Why, I am delighted to receive such praise."

"You're cheeky to boot. Guy next to you's way easier to chat with," Gilles said, sidling up to Cazzy.

"Cram it. I don't like hangin' round with fishy types like you," Cazzy said with a

cackle.

Even Cazzy thinks there's something off about Gilles...

As far as Arcus was concerned, Gilles was fishier than their dinner. It was like his true motives were hidden deep inside him—so deep that Arcus had him pinned as someone to be particularly wary of. Cazzy was smiling, but Arcus could see the slight caution behind the gesture. Maybe Cazzy had picked up on what Gilles was actually after.

"Aaah, rejected! 'S no biggie! I guess Arcus can be my best bud, then!"

"I wouldn't go that far."

"Since we're pals, could y'help me out? Y'know what I said about them Seal Tools?"

"Why won't you listen to a word anyone says?"

"Well? Will y'think about it?"

"I dunno." Arcus's second vague response did nothing to discourage Gilles.

"I guarantee there's nothin' to lose! I'll make you rich! See? See?! Just like this!"

"Are you done?"

"Y'know, it's rare to see seals as fancy as yours. I wanna see where y'go from here!"

Arcus grumbled internally. He knew Gilles was praising him, but he couldn't for the life of him work out what the merchant was after. The praise pleased him, but he felt reluctant to take it at face value from the mouth of a merchant. At the same time, it seemed too rash to reject his offer outright. Arcus didn't know enough about him and more importantly about his activities as a merchant. Perhaps it was time to ask some questions.

"How many markets have you got? What kinda connections?"

"Oh, are y'bitin'? I sell in the Northern Confederation, Sapphireberg... Down south, I got connections from Granciel to the Hanai Archipelago."

"Huh..."

His connections seemed to cover several places with a connection to Lainur. Not all of them, of course, but the scale of his business could not be understated.

“That is rather impressive,” Noah said with a satisfied hum.

“I don’t travel round half the world n’ back for nothin’!”

“Just ’cause ya talk big don’t mean we’ll believe ya,” Cazzy said.

“Fair enough!” Gilles let the insinuation roll off of him like water off a duck’s back.

If Gilles was telling the truth, then Arcus could put himself at a disadvantage by *not* doing business with him. It wasn’t just about selling his products; if Arcus made friends with a merchant, he would be able to buy valuable information and goods as well. And yet, Gilles was traveling alone. Arcus had no idea whether he had some kind of team behind him, and if he did, who they were. It was only natural he should have doubts, and Gilles seemed to recognize as much.

“Look, I don’t like to show this to just anyone, but...” Gilles reached down to take something from the knapsack at his feet, as though that might convince Arcus of who he was. He produced a lump of resin which sparkled as brightly as any gem. Next was a dark-red fruit which smelled like cloying iron. Then came a branch whose round fruit seemed to shimmer in several different colors.

Noah gasped. “These are valuable items indeed,” he said, picking up the lump of resin through a handkerchief.

“Is that an iron clove? Man...” Cazzy was inspecting the fruit, which came from a rare plant that could only be found deep in the Cross Mountain Range.

Arcus questioned their reactions, and they both explained that these items were particularly rare, some of them to the point that even the capital’s larger stores didn’t carry them. Noah whispered that Gilles had to be legitimate if he was carrying stock this precious.

Gilles was grinning widely, but it was hard to tell if it was out of self-congratulation or just happiness at being believed. “Well? Think y’could talk out a deal with me now?”

“Hm...”

Gilles had shown Arcus stood to gain from getting involved with him. He had a far-reaching network, and the items he dealt in were rare. They didn’t even necessarily have to strike a deal; it was entirely possible for Arcus to form a more basic relationship with him than that. The problem was that it was still unclear who Gilles was exactly. That was enough to put Arcus off the whole thing, but he still hesitated. Were the advantages of refusing more desirable than the disadvantages of accepting?

Noah’s face was perfectly calm. Cazzy was tucking back into his food as though Arcus’s decision barely mattered to him at all. It was clear they were leaving it all up to their master’s judgment at this point. Arcus didn’t know whether that was because they trusted him, or because they thought it was too much hassle to think about, although he was sure they’d give him the answer if he asked.

Just then, the lantern at Arcus’s hip began to shake.

“Huh?”

It made a clear, bell-like sound as it shook. It was just like what happened earlier in the day, only this time the shaking was more powerful.

“Somethin’ wrong, Arcus?” asked Gilles.

“No. Nothing.”

He was getting ready to pick up where they left off when they heard loud noises from outside. A frantic banging came from the door. The mayor’s wife hurried to open it, letting in a young villager. He leaned against a shelf, bent double as he struggled to catch his breath.

“M-Mayor! There’s trouble!”

“What’s wrong?”

“The gatekeeper spotted lights outside the village! Th-There are loads of them!”

“At this time of the evening? Are you sure it’s not the county garrison on patrol?”

“We don’t know for sure, but they might be bandits! We’re rounding up all the fighting-fit villagers now!”

“No way. That’s too much of a coincidence,” Cazzy muttered.

“Has the Raytheft House given birth to a prophet?” Noah wondered aloud.

“Excuse me?” Arcus stared daggers at his servants. They both averted their gazes awkwardly. Arcus looked back at Gilles as though nothing had happened. The easygoing smile on his face was still perfectly intact, despite the urgency of the situation.

“Somethin’ troublin’ you, Arcus?”

“I just don’t get how you can be so calm right now.”

“I was expectin’ this to an extent; that’s why.”

“You were expecting bandits?” Arcus said. “Wait, they might not be bandits, but still...”

“I reckon that’s exactly what they are.”

“How come?”

“Obvious, ain’t it? Bandits are always lookin’ for folk to steal from, so of course they’re gonna show up where those folk are.”

“That’s why you’re not panicking?”

“Yup. If they were hangin’ round the mountain road, then you gotta expect they might show up at one of these nearby towns.”

Arcus couldn’t argue with that. It was curious why Gilles chose to stay overnight in one of those “nearby towns” if he was expecting danger like this. Any traveling merchant with a decent sense of self-preservation would surely have made the least risky move available—which meant staying far away from this village.

Gilles still had that mysterious smile plastered on his face. Arcus studied his narrow eyes, but he just couldn’t work out what the man was thinking—and right now he didn’t have time to work it out.

“Noah. Cazzy.”

“Yes, master.”

“Ugh.”

The two of them set to work immediately. Arcus set Noah to preparing weapons and sent Cazzy out to check on the situation outside.

The mayor’s voice took on a troubled tone as he saw what they were doing. “Um, Arcus...”

“We’ll fight with you if there’s trouble,” Arcus said.

“B-But...”

“Don’t worry. Those two are used to fighting. You wait here, Bud.”

The guide nodded. They’d be in trouble without him; Arcus couldn’t risk sending him into danger.

“Y’sure are brave for a kid. Like some prince or somethin’. Pretty cool.”

“Are you gonna fight too, Gilles?”

“Naw, I got my hands full with my own stuff. Gonna hide someplace, I am.”

So he said, but he was still hanging around Arcus.

What’s his deal?

Was he planning to hide behind Arcus, Noah, and Cazzy?

Noah leaned down to whisper into Arcus’s ear. “Be wary of him. I shall keep an eye open as well.”

“Thanks.”

Cazzy appeared from around the doorway then, his usual unsettling grin on his face. “I think yer some kinda prophet after all, O Master.”

“Maybe you’d better start worshiping me.”

Cazzy cackled. “What, my faithful service ain’t enough?”

Cazzy brandished a cane with a peculiar handle. He’d claimed he took it with him for the long journey, but Arcus hadn’t seen him use it before, so presumably it was some sort of weapon if he had it with him now.

“How are things out there?” the mayor asked Cazzy.

“They’re tryin’ to plow down the southern gate. The villagers are holdin’ ’em back for now, but I reckon they can’t hold on forever.”

“I-I see...” The mayor’s face was pale. This couldn’t have been a situation he was faced with very often.

Arcus had never experienced anything like this either, but he did have knowledge on his side. He had a plan in mind.

“Mr. Mayor. Please go outside and prepare to fight. Set up some bonfires too. After that, go around and make sure people know not to leave their houses.”

“U-Understood!”

“Mr. Mayor! Master Arcus!” Pilocolo cried, running up to them.

“Pilocolo. There’s trouble.”

“I know, but I have my cargo to think of. May we move it to the northern gate to wait there?”

“Won’t that endanger the villagers?” Arcus said.

“I can only apologize, but my cargo is to be delivered to Her Ladyship herself. I cannot allow anything to happen to it, and if the bandits appear at the northern gate, I shall make sure they are dealt with. Please.”

“Okay, but please send somebody to help at the southern end if you can spare them.”

“Of course.”

Arcus made his way to the southern gate together with Noah as Gilles followed behind them. A simple barricade had been erected there already, and a crew of armed villagers were gathered behind it. As Cazzy reported, the younger villagers were trying to secure the gate.

Arcus spotted the man they saved that afternoon approaching. “I’m so sorry this is happening, Arcus.”

“It looks like they came here because the mountain path was blocked off. Don’t worry about it; we’ll fight with you.”

The other villagers stared in astonishment at Arcus's declaration. He was aware how silly it sounded for a young boy like him to announce his intention to fight.

"I don't mean to be rude, but I think you ought to evacuate."

"I'm a magician; I can fight."

"Ah...okay." The man nodded, and the expression on the villagers' faces changed from shock to understanding. They didn't need much convincing, having already seen his skill with seals.

"It won't hold much longer!" cried one of the men at the gate.

Heavy thumps came in regular intervals from the gate, sending vibrations through Arcus's body. Arcus presumed they'd brought a battering ram of some kind. Wood began to splinter and fly off from the surface, and there were shouts from the other side of the boundary. The worn bolt began to warp and groan in protest. It would only be a matter of seconds before it gave in completely. The second it did, this place would be swarming with bandits. From the sheer force brought to bear on the gate, Arcus figured they were giddy with anticipation for killing, looting, and rape.

What they hadn't reckoned with was the fact that this was the worst place they could have chosen to attack.

Arcus hadn't expected the village to be so dark under the curtain of the night. He was used to the nights of the capital, illuminated by dazzling Sol Glasses everywhere you looked. The light of the stars and moon was too fickle, leaving the village oppressed by an inky darkness. Even as Sol Glasses spilled their light from residential windows, they only deepened the shadows that crawled out from the space between houses. The torches, bonfires, and extra Sol Glasses prepared by the villagers gave some visibility, but more of the surroundings were plunged into darkness than not.

Letting any of the bandits slip past them now almost guaranteed they would never be found again. Arcus could see it: they would hide themselves in the shadows and strike unseen. They would have to be defeated here, right by the gate.

“Bring the barricade forward as far as you can! Hammer the stakes as deep into the ground as possible! Do not still your hands!” Noah’s directions to the villagers behind them came loud and clear over the heavy slams from the other side of the gate.

The barricade, ropes, and stakes were laid out at random, breaking up clear paths inside and allowing the defenders to claim first blood from a safe distance with polearms and bows.

“Y’know what you’re doin’, huh, prettyboy? Y’done this before?” Gilles asked.

“My first battle was fought on the defending side,” Noah said.

“Oh yeah? Must’ve been a toughie.”

Noah nodded quietly. Arcus always assumed Noah’s first battle was alongside his uncle, Craib, but maybe that wasn’t the case after all.

Arcus turned his focus on preparing to fight. He turned his white cloak inside out and pulled his sword from its sheath. He checked his hip for Gown’s lantern, making sure it was available in case they were really backed into a corner. Then, he approached the barricade.

“Are you two ready?”

“Whenever you are.”

“Ya betcha!”

“Okay,” Arcus said, “I’ll launch the first attack. When that’s done, Noah, you go forward; Cazzy and I will stay behind.”

Cazzy stepped forward and tapped on his shoulder with his long cane. “Lemme take the front line as well this time.”

As Arcus suspected, it looked like he wanted to make use of that stick. It had an irregular profile; a multitude of grips and handles projected from it at strange angles. Arcus had no idea how you were supposed to use it, but he accepted Cazzy’s request before shifting his attention to the villagers trying to hold the gate.

“Jump back, everyone, and cover your ears!”

“That’s what you’re up to, huh?” Cazzy said.

“Yup, so get your earplugs in, guys.”

“Yes, master.”

“Aight!”

“What are y’doin’?” Gilles’s eyes were bright with curiosity as he brought them far too close to Arcus’s face.

“Just cover your ears, shut your mouth, and watch,” instructed Arcus, irritation creeping into his voice.

The villagers he commanded near the gate reacted with confusion. They knew that if they fell away from the gate now, it would crumble under the enemy’s assault. Arcus himself would probably be hesitant to follow his own orders in their position. Only when he added that he was about to use magic did they do as he said. Without the villagers’ support, the gate and its bolt weakened even more quickly. The gate warped from the center as the pressure mounted against its other side, and the creaking of the bolt became even more unpleasant as it began to crack.

Arcus repeated the order for the villagers to cover their ears. A split second passed where it was unclear whether the bandits had broken through or not, and Arcus opened his mouth.

“*Pop. Rage. A loud snore and the bugle at dawn. A clumsy cacophony of musicians amidst the shrill barking of dogs. A baby bawls as its father bellows. Come together, noise, and release here as a cascade of ear-piercing bubbles.*”

“*Bewildering Bubble.*”

Immediately after the incantation, Artglyphs filled the air and scattered widely. The shining white characters, tinged with blue, inflated until they became bubbles. Their soapy film reflected in rainbow shades as the bubbles floated, each taking their own path. It was as innocent a sight as if Arcus had simply blown them with a bubble wand. Only their larger size and the magic infused within them set them apart. The view of those bubbles and the gate behind them turned almost ethereal as the light of the fires gently illuminated them.

“Now that’s some fine-lookin’ magic!”

“I told you to keep quiet!”

“Aww, Arcus, y’sure are a sneaky one, ain’t you?” Gilles grinned and covered his ears.

Arcus quickly brushed off the indignation that rose up within him. He gestured to the unprotected villagers to get clear of the bubbles and to be careful not to touch them. The gate crashed apart, throwing the bandits clinging onto the battering log forward into the village. Others started surging in after them, but they didn’t get far before their vanguard smashed into the waiting bubbles.

A series of booms like scores of firecrackers being set off at once pierced the air. None of the bandits could withstand the direct assault to their eardrums, which drowned out even their screams. The villagers who’d followed Arcus’s instructions were all right, but the bandits started frothing at the mouth and collapsing where they stood. Those who stayed on their feet wobbled and stumbled around like drunkards. They tripped and fell over their fallen companions and made to crawl away without trying to stand up again. Heaps of collapsed bandits were piled in front of the village gate.

Their advantage lost, the second wave of bandits faltered. They were yelling to those outside the gate—likely warning them that they were facing at least one magician. They seemed confused, unable to gauge their own volume and not knowing whether any of their companions could actually hear them.

The bandits couldn’t coordinate themselves or each other. Not only had they lost too many of their own, but there were also several bubbles left floating in the air. If they pressed forward now while attempting to avoid them, their movements would become awkward, and they would inevitably trigger them anyway. One of the braver bandits charged forward alone, only to run headlong into a bubble that one of the villagers had burst with a fistful of thrown pebbles.

“Destroy all the bubbles first!” one of the bandits ordered.

The most effective attacks were those difficult to defend against. Sounds couldn’t be blocked by shields or physical obstacles, and their effects were felt in an instant. Arcus could easily have bought the time the village needed,

disabled the attackers, and broken the survivors' morale, by casting his spell over and over, but for the villagers' sake he deemed one usage enough. Without the seal-engraved earplugs he and his servants were wearing, it was possible their hearing would be damaged if he exposed them to the spell for too long. While it was aether-efficient and relatively easy to use, this was its downside when fighting in large groups.

Arrows and stones flew toward the bubbles from outside the gate. They burst apart loudly into fragmented Artglyphs which dissolved into the air, allowing more bandits to cautiously infiltrate the village. They numbered only ten or so; Arcus's Bewildering Bubble seemed to have knocked out most of their numbers. There might have been more hesitating outside the gate, but even then that hesitation was just another factor in the magicians' favor.

Cazzy suddenly leapt forward in front of Noah. Clearly thinking he was being careless, bandits moved to surround him straight away.

"*Algol's sickle. May the well-sharpened blade mow down the grass and vines of the garden. Cut down the weeds. Cut down the reed beds. Mow down and uproot everything.*"

"*Algol's Grass-Cutting Sickle.*"

The spell cited a tale from *The Spiritual Age* referenced often in legends and histories—that of the farmer Algol and his week of labors. The first day, Monday, was a day for clearing ground. Copper-colored Artglyphs began to gather at the tip of Cazzy's stick before taking shape. They drew a beautiful curve: a large blade. It looked like a scythe worthy of Death himself.

"W-Wow! It's a beam blade! A beam scythe!"

Arcus received a battery of confused looks in the wake of his proclamation. While he jumped up and down with excitement, Cazzy twisted his body at the hip and brought the weapon down.



He swung the scythe in a circle, cutting down everything around him. Needless to say, that included the bandits attempting to crowd him. Their bodies were cut cleanly apart, never to be reunited.

“Ew...”

“That is quite the blade,” remarked Noah.

“Y’guys got a whole ton of these impressive spells, huh?”

The reactions to Cazzy’s scythe could broadly be split into three categories. Some screwed their faces up at the brutal, gory results. Some couldn’t help but gasp in astonishment at its raw power. Others whistled appreciatively.

“Keep your distance!” one of the bandits cried when he saw the pool of blood surrounding Cazzy.

With Cazzy’s scythe and Noah’s rapier in the way, the bandits wouldn’t be able to get past easily. The same went for the other side; the bandits were still launching a scattering of arrows through the gate, limiting the options for a counterattack. The villagers held their positions behind the barricade with their spears, others continuing to shoot arrows and throw stones. That stalemate continued for a while.

“Noah.”

“Yes, I believe so.” Noah nodded, already knowing what Arcus was about to say.

The bandits’ tactics left an odd impression, like they had no real fight behind their actions. At the very least, they seemed like they were trying to win, but their attacks seemed too passive, especially for a group assault. By all rights they *should* have been making full use of their numbers to push through.

There were still bandits behind—that much was clear from the arrows and stones flying through the gate—but they weren’t committing any further than throwing projectiles. To their credit, they were sustaining pressure, but they could have been doing something much more effective.

It could only mean one thing.

“B-Bandits coming from the rear!” One of the villagers who had been keeping

watch on the northern gate ran up to them, panting for breath as he gave his report.

“Ngh! They’re attacking from multiple sides!” Arcus caught on a little too late.

“They’re a crafty bunch, huh?” Gilles said with a thin smile. Arcus couldn’t remember when the merchant had ended up next to him again. Even if there were bandits coming from the other side, the village should still have had the advantage. “Pilocolo’s got his guard with him, and lemme tell you, there’re a ton of ’em! They’ll sort ’em out. We just gotta deal with these fellas here.”

“Yeah,” Arcus said.

The guards protecting Pilocolo’s cargo were trained soldiers, and they’d give everything they had to protect it from the bandits. They might even have had more fighting power than the group by the southern gate, and if they really needed help, they could send somebody Arcus’s way. The best thing for Arcus’s group to do in the meantime would be to focus on defeating these bandits here.

It was then that the lackluster attack became more serious. Seeing their chance, the bandits in the rear began to rush the gate.

“What a spot of bother. Everybody, fall back!” Noah called out to the villagers.

“Why’re they switchin’ up attack patterns now?” Cazzy complained.

“It is likely their commander has changed,” Noah said.

He had barely finished his sentence when a large rock came flying over the gate. It slammed into the ground; the earth shook. Arcus doubted they would have a catapult in a place like this, and his suspicion was confirmed as the rock dissolved into the air in a cloud of hex.

“They’ve got magicians too! Everyone get back and spread out, or you’ll just be an easier target for the magic to hit!”

“Things ain’t lookin’ good, huh? What’re y’gonna do, Arcus?”

“There’s tons of stuff left to try.”

“Oh? I knew y’were a smart one! So whaddya got up your sleeve then?”

“Just watch.” It was time to try out the first idea of many. “It’s time for you to take to the battlefield for the first time. Protect the villagers for me.”

Arcus opened up the small window on Gown’s lantern. A blueish-white light sparked inside it and started to put its mysterious power to work. It flashed brightly, then settled into flickering like a will-o’-the-wisp before spilling from the lantern. It split into several smaller flames, until finally those flames gathered together again and burned as one. It changed shape again and again as if kneaded by an invisible hand, until eventually it took on a large, vaguely canine silhouette. It grew six legs, horns, and a forked tongue. To call it a dog or a wolf didn’t seem quite right, and yet it wasn’t clear what else you would call it.

It was Gown’s Phantom Hound, Tribe, an otherworldly creature under the elf’s command.

Gilles let out an impressed whistle, leaning forward with one hand on his tulip hat to keep it on his head. The creature let out an eerie bray, which turned into a deep growl as it glared at the bandits. Each step it took sent blue-white flames sparking up from the ground, as though it were walking the surface of a fiery lake. It leapt at the bandits, leaving a trail of pale flame.

“Wh-What the heck is that?!” the bandits cried out.



“Is it some kinda spell?!”

“No! It’s a phantom dog! It belongs to the wandering sprite, Gown!”

“Wh—What’s it doing *here*?! We haven’t done anything to Gown!”

The bandits seemed to recognize the creature. Knowing they were against one of the mystical monsters of *The Spiritual Age*, the bandits fell into a panic. They weren’t even bothering to look at the villagers anymore. They attacked recklessly, desperate to be rid of the hound. Swords swung, missing completely as the creature ran through the air suspended by some unseen surface, flames flickering at its feet. It looked like an inbound meteor against the night sky.

Arrows and stones flew through its phantom body, but when the creature plowed into the bandits, they fell at once as if they’d suddenly lost consciousness.

“Th-There’s no way we can win against something like that!”

“How’re we s’posed to beat it?”

“R-Retreat! Fall back!”

Before the bandits could break ranks, a voice spoke out through the darkness. “Impressive.”

It came from outside the gate. The voice was quiet, but it carried weight. Arcus looked to who had spoken. Moments later, a solitary figure slowly resolved against the blackness, like ink poured onto an inkstone. It was a skinny man in black wearing what closely resembled a beanie hat. His hair was bound behind him, and a single scar ran down one of his bony cheeks. His eyes were as sharp as a hungry wolf’s—and Arcus and his companions recognized him.

“Hey!”

“Ya gotta be kiddin’...”

“My...”

The man stepped forward through the waves of retreating bandits. It was none other than Eido, the man who had tended to the villager on the way here. “I never thought I would run into you three again. Isn’t fate funny sometimes?”

“Eido?! You were a bandit?” Arcus gawked.

“Unfortunately I am. But you should know that I don’t intend to harm these villagers.”

“You think we’ll believe that after everything you’ve just done?”

“No, but it is the truth.”

“You’re gonna say something like *you* don’t intend to harm them, but your men will, or you won’t do anything, as long as they hand over their women and money without a fuss, right?”

“No. I won’t do anything, as long as you behave for a short while.”

“Huh?” Arcus frowned. He accepted he was one of the bandits, but now he claimed he wasn’t going to do anything? That couldn’t be right.

One of the bandits who was still conscious called out to Eido. “You lied to us! You said there were only villagers here!”

“I did not expect this either. Life is full of surprises, you know. You people were just unlucky.”

The bandit spat. “Don’t think we’re gonna wait around and follow your orders now!”

“Fine. Go. Just follow the rest of the plan.”

The bandits made their full retreat, and Eido turned back to Arcus. “Well? Will you do me a favor and wait quietly for a bit?”

“What do you think?”

“So that’s your response. How unfortunate.”

“Yeah, it is. Y’know, I had you pegged as a good guy, seeing as you were helping a stranger out on the road.”

“You shouldn’t judge an entire person by one facet of their personality. Everyone has a hidden side to them.”

“Yeah, I know that *now*.”

Cazzy sidled up to Arcus, his scythe slung over his shoulder. He grinned

lopsidedly. “Ya gonna fight us, Eido, ol’ buddy?”

“It seems we have already run out of options,” said Noah, unsheathing his rapier.

“You know you’re totally outnumbered, right?” Arcus pointed out.

“Am I, now?”

Shapes started to form one after another in the shadows behind Eido. It wasn’t just one or two either. There were at least ten, perhaps closer to twenty.

“Those aren’t the rest of the bandits, are they?” Arcus said slowly.

“The heck are ya playin’ at? These guys seem a hundred times more serious than the guys before!”

Though it was unclear in the darkness, Arcus had a strong impression that the figures were a pack of hungry wolves, and that Eido was their leader.

“Listen, you two,” he said, addressing Noah and Cazzy. “We’ll defeat Eido first. That should make his underlings retreat.”

Noah stepped forward and Cazzy began to recite Algol’s Grass-Cutting Sickle once more. Eido’s composure didn’t break. He didn’t even move to prepare a weapon.

“You cannot win against me,” he said.

“We won’t know till we try!” shouted Arcus. “Noah!”

Noah rushed forward with his rapier at the ready. It was unclear what Eido would do without a weapon, but Arcus trusted Noah was skilled enough to respond to any sort of attack.

Eido opened his mouth, his voice quiet. “You don’t know until you try, you say? Perhaps I can show you something to change your mind.”

At the split second Noah was in range of Eido, the mysterious man let out a wave of aether. It rushed out of him and knocked into Noah, blasting him clear off the ground. The moment he landed, Noah jumped back slightly to regain balance, raising his rapier again to discourage any further attacks.

Eido’s body was still overflowing with aether, its pressure creating a powerful

barrier around him. The darkness around him seemed to spread out further under the effect of his power. It was overwhelming enough to rival the pressure Craib could emanate.

In this world, powerful people tended to exude an air of majesty like a physical force to intimidate their opponent. It was clear just how strong Eido was by the air around him.

“Just ’cause you have a lot of aether doesn’t mean you have the skill to back it up!” Arcus shouted.

“I quite agree, but as a magician yourself, you cannot deny that it gives one a certain advantage,” replied Eido.

“Shut up! You can’t know how hard I’ve worked to level the playing field!”

While Arcus argued, Noah made his next move. He made good use of his footwork to put pressure on the enemy, and it was only as Eido turned to him that Arcus took his chance.

“*Black Bullet. Keep the pale horse galloping through the skies in the blink of Death’s eye.*”

As he recited his spell, Arcus made his right hand into the shape of a gun in preparation for firing his Black Ammo. Eido seemed to pick up on what he was planning instantly. The moment before Arcus fired, he leapt away to the side. The bullet fired just a fraction of a second too late, hitting the village wall behind him.

“He dodged it?!” Arcus gasped.

“An invisible offensive spell? Impressive, especially considering how short the incantation is.”

“Yeah, invisible, but you still dodged it...”

“Remember this. Experience can teach you instincts that will keep death far from your door.”

Did that mean it was experience and intuition that allowed him to dodge Arcus’s attack?

“That can’t be enough to dodge it!”

“I agree. But didn’t you learn from the *Ancient Chronicles* that pointing puts you at a disadvantage?”

“Darné hua Neut...the one-eyed monster which turned everything it looked at into black iron.”

“That’s right. *The Fable of the Pointing Saints and Sages*.”

Noah took advantage of Eido stopping to explain, closing in on him again. Eido dodged the skilled and accurate jab of his rapier effortlessly. Noah kept up the assault, each thrust no more than a glint of light, as he easily matched the speed of any machine gun. Eido dodged every one as though he could see their trajectory clearly.

“You are rather skilled,” Noah admitted.

“The art of rapier fencing is common in Lainur. Of course, I have learned to counter it with the expectation that I might fight your ilk, even if I haven’t learned to use it for myself.”

“Fencin’ ain’t all we have! Noah!” Cazzy cried. Noah leapt toward him, as though this were a signal the two had prepared beforehand. Cazzy struck out with his scythe, sweeping it across the ground and over Eido’s feet—but it went right through them. “Whazzat? Some kinda magic?”

“You cannot simply attribute every unexplainable occurrence to magic,” said Eido.

“Some kinda weird dance then, was it?”

Eido raised his arm. The darkness outside the gate began to ripple, giving rise to a magic circle glittering with light. Just like before, a large rock came hurtling over the gate before falling to the ground. It must have been a meter across and was as heavy as you’d expect; nearby villagers fell on their rears in shock as it slammed into the ground. If more kept coming, everyone was in far graver danger than anticipated.

“*Danger on the road ahead. Animal crossing; road work ahead. Watch for falling rocks and crosswinds. Road slippery when wet. Stay alert. Better safe than sorry!*”

“Hm?”

“*Warning Sign*!”

Yellow Artglyphs burst into life and spun into a vortex that took the shape of a magic circle as it attached itself to Arcus’s right leg. Once the circle had worked its way down to the sole of his foot, he stamped it on the ground. The earth shook slightly, and the next second, familiar road signs sprang up all around. The rocks hurtling over the wall were sucked toward the road sign that warned against them.

“Tribe! Help the villagers now!”

Tribe let out a short bark. It began to grab the villagers who were too close to the scene by their collars, pulling them away in a single leap. On occasion a person took two leaps when it grabbed their sleeve. It didn’t seem to pose a threat to any human that wasn’t trying to hurt it, but they still let out screams of surprise as it pulled them back.

Noah and Cazzy stepped back warily to open up some distance between them and Eido, when he began to incant.

“*The magpie sings a simple tune. That song flows from the heavens and into the ears of all who stand in the way. A never-ending round. The rain-soaked eaves. Despair from the heavens. The falling rain tastes of iron.*”

“*Cascading Arrows.*”

“*Whether arrow or gun, rain is rain: unpleasant, damp. Put an end to the shower. Bring clear skies without thought of tomorrow. May the rain charm’s prayer fall silent!*”

“*Rain-Resistant Doll.*”

Countless arrows plummeted from the black sky. Seconds later, Arcus’s spell came into effect. A huge white doll shaped like a jellyfish appeared in the air and brushed the arrows aside. Eido didn’t hesitate before casting his next spell.

“*Bring the bunting down over the spilled ink. Galloping dark clouds. Cast heavy hoods over their eyes. Those surrounded cannot move with discretion.*”

“*Black Pavilion*.”

“*Bring the blinding echo of the sun, whether night or day. Fill the sky and cover the earth. Bring the sun to their eyes!*”

“*Blinding Flash.*”

The opponent was trying to impede Arcus’s vision, so it was only right that he return the favor. If Eido made the surroundings dark, Arcus simply needed to bring light. The spells canceled each other out, both of them losing their effectiveness. Arcus took his chance to get the next strike in first.

“*A greedy man longs to possess as much as he can without discretion. He is hungry even for the specks of dust on the ground. Take this unprejudiced right arm and receive all that it holds.*”

“*Scrapped Arms*.”

“*Dregs and trash must not be dropped where pleased. Bring it to the dump, where it belongs. The bigger the wastebasket, the more it holds.*”

“*Corner Dust.*”

The bandits’ abandoned weapons and arrows gathered around Arcus’s right arm. As soon as it reached the point it couldn’t take on anything more, it pulled his arm forward, along with his body.

“A-Ah! Quick, *fly*!”

Arcus launched the trash hurriedly. He would have liked to save some of it, but that wasn’t a luxury afforded to him. The arm-shaped garbage was sucked up by the magic circle formed by Eido’s waste management spell. It likely wasn’t meant to be a defensive spell, but a supportive one for daily use whose power Eido had adjusted.

“*A ten-span fan in the hand. From sand to snow, blow everything away.*”

“*Curcelrus’s Giant Fan.*”

Arcus waved his hand, which bore a green magic circle, as though summoning a wind. The next second, a powerful gust blew through the area. It burst out toward Eido, hindering his movements with a force so powerful he fought to stay on his feet. Though it wouldn’t cause him any serious injury, it was enough to make incanting a struggle.

“Hmph...”

As Arcus hoped, Eido wasn’t casting anything. Instead, he was shielding his face from the wind with both arms. Finding his opportunity now that the enemy was defenseless, Cazzy used the tailwind to rush in close, bearing his scythe.

“Got ’im!”

“*Colorless gauntlet, knock back the sword! Shapeless iron. Ostentatious ornament. Protect me with an unseen force!*”

“*Left Gauntlet of Transparency!*”

Eido’s defensive spell knocked Cazzy’s scythe from his grip.

“Gah! Dammit! *Algol’s rain barrel! One barrelful is more than enough for seven days! Come, overturn everywhere! Collecting and transporting water is no burden!*”

“*Algol’s Watering Can*!”

The area flooded as Cazzy turned and made his escape in the brief moment of distraction he’d bought. While turning one’s back to the enemy was never a good idea, Cazzy was almost able to make it safely away without suffering a further assault.

However, once Eido regained his senses, he went after Cazzy, throwing out a hidden blade to strike the retreating servant.

“*Work, work. A single pair of hands is insufficient. Lend me one hand extra. I care not for the source. Give it to me.*”

“*Borrowed Hand.*”

A hand appeared in midair and grabbed Cazzy’s scythe, dragging it clumsily back toward him. This spell was an improved version of Psychokinesis. His scythe now in hand, Cazzy managed to deflect Eido’s attack.

“Thanks! I owe ya one!”

“No problem!” Arcus said.

“Cazzy! Please stay back!” Noah called out, beginning an incantation of his own.

“A stone-cold assassin races for his target. Morning mist closes in. The evening dew falls. Shiver at the pillar that pierces the eyes. May the icicles race along the ground and shatter!”



“*Frozen Sprint!*”

Blue Artglyphs frosted the ground, icicles bursting up out of them. They flitted across the water left by Cazzy’s spell, kicking up a spray, and caught up to Eido swiftly, homing in on him. Their tips broke off as they continued racing across the ground.

“*Spring breeze. A mild wind to melt snow and ice.*”

“*Spring’s Thawing Breath.*”

The gentle breeze worked against the icicles. All of them, those which had already formed, and those midway through the process, began to melt. It wasn’t enough to wipe out Noah’s spell completely, but it stalled it long enough to win Eido his escape.

Though Eido was holding his own against the three of them, no trace of smugness showed on his face. It was as calm and composed as ever. The combined spells of the four magicians had ravaged the area in front of the gate. The villagers behind them were frozen prone with shock.

“It’s three against one! This is supposed to be easy!” Arcus complained.

“He has considerable skill,” Noah admitted.

“And his original spells ain’t nothin’ to sniff at. He’s a good fighter, and I’d bet he’d give some of them Institute professors a run for their money.”

He had impressed all three of them, to which Eido responded (his face still composed), “If not for the help I had, I might well be struggling at this point.”

“You don’t even look like you’re tired,” Arcus said.

“It doesn’t do to openly show one’s emotions in the midst of battle. That goes doubly so for the magician, who must remain calm at all times.”

“You’re way too used to magical combat for your own good...”

A shrill voice suddenly sounded from behind them. Arcus looked to the side to find Gilles applauding as though he had just finished watching a particularly enjoyable play.

“Talk about entertainin’! I could watch you guys for hours!”

“Gilles! Jeez! Stop messing around and go help the villagers! That’s not too tough for you, is it?” Arcus said.

“Aye aye, sir. C’mon, folks! This way!”

Clearly unenthused by his task, Gilles set to work dragging away the villagers who had trouble getting up. He kept his narrow gaze fixed firmly on the battlefield, loath as he was to miss a single second of the fight.

More arrows came flying in from the darkness through the gate, which Noah moved in to make quick work of. “Master Arcus. The men behind him are not mere bandits. They are too well-trained.”

“I was worried you might say that. Eido’s way too good too. Who are these guys?”

At this rate, they’d be stuck in a stalemate for hours. It was time to kick up the power a notch.

“*Infinitesimal. Join. Focus. Burst gently.*”

It was his Dwarf Star spell. Artglyphs flew out at random and gathered into a magic circle which attached itself to Eido. Arcus started to close his hand, ready to pull the trigger.

“Hmph? Tch! *The dream of a trickster’s slumber. Illusions in the dark. Floating bubbles. Twilit shadows. Shed the empty skin and let it fall.*”

“*Escape Shell.*”

An explosion of flame blossomed, followed by a powerful shock wave. Eido appeared a small distance away from the blast, even though he hadn’t seemed to make any move to escape.

“That guy’s way too fast...” Cazzy muttered in astonishment.

Arcus spotted movement in the corner of his eye. They were fragments of Eido’s cloak, smoldering as they drifted through the air. “He changed the spell’s target to his cloak! Is there anything he *can’t* counter?!”

The technique was much like an insect shedding its skin and leaving it behind; something Arcus only knew from ninja movies.

Then, Eido started to open up the distance between himself and Arcus. “Perhaps I was wrong about you, Arcus. You and your servants are impressive indeed.”

“Thanks. I’m so happy I could cry,” Arcus replied.

“I cannot help but be reminded of that man when I see your silvery hair,” Eido sighed.

“What man?”

“Craib Raytheft. Well, Craib Abend, as he is known now.”

“You know my uncle?”

“I wouldn’t go that far, although I have spoken to him on a number of occasions. I know him more as the right-hand man of another.”

“Who?”

Nobody immediately came to mind. After becoming a state magician and joining the kingdom’s military, the king had given Craib his own military force. While state magicians were led by the Magician Guild’s leader, Godwald Sylvester, that didn’t seem to be who Eido was speaking about. Nor did Eido seem willing to answer Arcus’s question. Instead, he turned to Gilles.

“Gilles the Erratic.”

“Huh? I don’t think we’ve met, uh... Where d’you know me from?”

“Is it your intention to fight too?”

“Naw. Not much one for violence, as y’can plainly see.”

“Really, now?” Eido’s voice dripped with sarcasm.

Suddenly, a whistling pierced through the night sky.

“It would seem the time is nearly upon us.”

“What time?” Arcus frowned.

“Farewell.” Eido turned on his heel.

“Huh? Hey, wait!”

Was he running away? If so, then that whistle had to be a signal of some kind

—but Arcus wasn't prepared to let such a skilled bandit get away. Tribe suddenly appeared beside him.

"Huh? What's up, Tribe? W-Wa—" No sooner was the question out of his mouth than Tribe knocked him to the ground. "H-Hey! What are you doing?!"

Four of its paws held down each of his limbs. It began to sniff quickly, before its mouth found the small lever on the side of Arcus's lantern. Taking it between its teeth, it deftly opened the lantern's tiny window, then melted down into blue-white flame and returned to the lantern.

"Hey, come back! Hey! I still need your help!"

The lantern didn't even twitch in response, and by that time, Eido and his troupe had already taken advantage of the confusion to disappear. The air, once fraught with danger from the hungry wolves outside the gate, was still once more.

Noah was frowning out into the darkness on the other side of the gate. "What are we to do now, Master Arcus?"

"I dunno. What d'you think? Should we go after them?"

"I wouldn't recommend it. There is no guarantee that the bandits' attack is over, and their retreat may well be a trap. I believe the best course of action would be to check the area around the village carefully while making sure it is left with adequate protection on the inside."

Arcus nodded and started by giving the order to arrest the fallen bandits. His mind was a whirlwind of questions without answers.

Surely their fight wouldn't end like this, would it?

The assault on the southern gate left practically no victims. After the bandits' retreat, those who fell to Arcus's Bewildering Bubble and Tribe's attack were rounded up and detained. The villagers set up another barricade and stakes inside the gate just in case. The northern gate had also been destroyed, but that side's bandit detachment had fled with the others. It still remained to be seen whether there were any victims from the northern side, but for now Arcus had left Cazzy behind in the village while he, Noah, and a handful of villagers (and guest) set out to patrol the area for stragglers hiding out within the village

walls. It stood to reason to suspect that the retreat might be a ploy to launch a second attack.

“Hmm...”

“Master Arcus, if you are feeling unwell, might I suggest you return to the village?”

“You know I can’t,” Arcus replied, holding a hand to his mouth. The better part of his attention went to keeping his stomach from emptying itself over scanning the terrain. It would’ve been worse if Noah hadn’t been rubbing a comforting hand down his back, but that wasn’t enough to quell the disgust in his chest.

“Huh, so even you can’t handle seein’ a couple dead guys.”

“Can anyone?” Arcus grumbled back at his plus-one.

In the heat of the fight, Arcus had been too focused on casting to really register the mounting casualties; now he took in the scene with sober eyes. He had caught a whiff of men’s internals made external—the commingling of a living thing’s separate elements into lifeless waste—and the nausea struck. He had seen men die in the battle at Marquess Gaston’s estate, but there the end had always been quick and clean: run through on the end of Noah’s sword, flash-frozen, their necks snapped by Cazzy’s magic, or consumed all at once in Arcus’s explosion. Up to this point, Arcus had been allowed a pleasant distance from the reality that a human body is a bag of garbage waiting to be opened and upended.

The humid stench of blood and offal reminded Arcus of the depictions of Hell from the man’s world. Even some of the villagers were left vomiting after the bandits’ retreat. And yet Gilles, who had witnessed the whole spectacle himself, seemed utterly unconcerned.

“Why’d you come with us, Gilles?” Arcus asked.

“Reckoned it’d be safer than stayin’ in the village, since there’s a couple mighty powerful magicians here to protect me.”

“I am obligated to prioritize Master Arcus’s safety.”

“Cazzy’s in the village, so it’s safe there too.”

“Yeah, but he’s one guy and you guys are two guys.” Gilles chortled.

Arcus didn’t trust Gilles’s answer; if he was really as scared as he claimed, he shouldn’t have been out here. Bandits aside, he still didn’t have a good read on the merchant.

“But hey, your magic was really somethin’, y’know? Knockin’ fellas down with noise, or sendin’ them flyin’ away in flames. Gotta be a real creative mind to come up with stuff like that.”

“You can do anything with magic,” said Arcus. “You just gotta have the right words and enough aether.”

“Reckon I’d rather have you as friend than foe!”

“Sure,” Arcus mumbled. “You sure sound impressed for someone who recognized my magic as ‘sneaky,’ though.”

“Huh? What do y’mean?”

“You know what I mean. Remember when I magicked up all those bubbles?” Arcus narrowed his eyes at Gilles and pursed his lips.

Gilles poked his tongue out playfully. “Y’got me, huh? I may not look it, but I reckon I know a fair bit about magic.”

“Thought so.”

When Gilles commented on Arcus’s spell, it sounded like he knew exactly what was going to happen. He’d only needed to look at the bubbles to know they were hiding a more sinister effect, whereas to an ordinary person they would have just looked like regular—albeit oversized—bubbles. Arcus reasoned that he must have deduced the spell’s effect from the incantation. He called himself a merchant, but the fact was that he had a deeper knowledge of magic than he let on—although it would certainly be useful knowledge in his journeys from country to country. Gilles’s secrets may be deeper than Arcus realized.

“Truth is, I’m more impressed with that thingy there.” Gilles was looking at Arcus’s lantern. “That’s uh...what was it? I’ve seen it before. Gown’s thingy.”

“Yeah, Gown’s lantern.”

“Thought I recognized it when I first saw it! Can’t believe it’s real!”

“Gown made me help him, then pushed this thing onto me as thanks.”

“Yup, yup. I sure know how to pick my best friends! Even the elves trust you! I’m seriously proud over here!”

“Who is this best friend? I’d sure like to meet him.”

“Y’kiddin’, Arcus? It’s you!”

“In that case it’s a one-sided thing.” Arcus looked back at the lantern. “I’m still kinda shocked Tribe went against me like that. It just went back into its lantern without listening to me.”

“Maybe it don’t accept you yet.”

“Yeah, that’s what I was thinking.”

Arcus couldn’t come up with a better reason. It did the bare minimum of what it was asked, and then decided it was done. That was the vibe Arcus got.

“It’s probably for the best though, right? I reckon y’shouldn’t chase down a dangerous guy like that too far.”

“Yeah, I agree.”

“I mean, he was tryin’ to fight ya out in the darkness. Y’run out there and he’ll have you as a midnight snack before y’know what hit you!”

“There are some—spies, for example—who rely more on manipulating darkness and noise than the power of their magic,” said Noah, who was walking up ahead. “For instance, he might be counting on the fact that your eyes are unaccustomed to the darkness and use it to surround you before you are even aware of it.”

“Yeah, that’s right. Maybe that’s what Tribe was thinkin’ too.”

Arcus had to admit Gilles might be right. Tribe might have realized he was considering going after Eido and moved to stop him.

“Y’knew that guy then?” Gilles asked the villager.

“I wouldn’t say that. We met him on our travels, spoke with him a bit, and then he traveled with us for a short while before splitting off. I never imagined

he would be a bandit," said Arcus.

"Yes. He didn't look or behave like one at all," added the villager.

"He helped a fallen man. I didn't think somebody like that would end up being a bad person." Arcus shot a glance at the young villager, who nodded in agreement.

While the villager was unwell, Eido had never left his side, keeping a close eye on him. Arcus still found it hard to wrap his head around the magician's true identity, and he was convinced there was something more to it.

"It's always the good ones who're fishy, y'know," Gilles said, as though he knew what was going through Arcus's mind.

"You can get fishy bad guys too," Arcus countered.

"Yeah? If y'can show me some, I'd be much obliged."

"I would, if I had a mirror on me."

Even as Noah and Arcus narrowed their eyes at him, their fishy companion showed no concern at all.

"Eido said he knew my uncle, right? Have you seen him before, Noah?"

"I am afraid not. He is likely an acquaintance— or perhaps an enemy—of Craib's from before I entered into his service."

"Huh..."

It was frustrating how little they knew about Eido. All they could do was keep searching the area the bandits fled to without straying too far from the village—but there was nothing to be found. It soon became clear no one was hiding out here, and so they decided to return to the village.

Arcus still couldn't help wondering what the purpose of the attack was. He couldn't work it out, no matter how much he analyzed the situation. He would've liked to put their retreat down to a realization that they couldn't win, but they hadn't even stolen or gained anything from the attack. They had just caused damage. Assuming the southern assault was a diversion to open the northern gate, their attack should only have gotten more intense. And yet they retreated so soon after breaking through the northern side, as if their only

objective was to get both gates open. Perhaps they just wanted to fatigue the villages' defenses on either side. These and other possibilities came to mind, but soon dissipated once Arcus realized none of them had any point to them.

The night sky above the village was tinged with red; the villagers had set up more bonfires. They didn't have many Sol Glasses, so fire was their primary source of light. The mayor approached the second the group stepped through the gate.

"Welcome back!" he cried.

"We didn't find any signs of bandits camping out in the area. How are things here?" Arcus asked.

"We've had a look, but there's no major damage. We cannot thank you enough for your assistance." The mayor bowed deeply, and the villagers gathered behind him followed suit.

"You don't have to be so formal, really," Arcus said.

"But Lord Arcus! We hadn't even realized that you've been granted powers by an elf! Surely it was the elf, or indeed the Twin Phantoms, who led you here! Thank you so much!"

Arcus chuckled nervously as the other villagers, including the man they helped, thanked him. Every pair of eyes looked at him as if he were some sort of divine hero. Like he was a deity to be worshiped. Was it really such a shock to see Tribe assisting him?

The tales went that Tribe was a dog belonging to the Grave Spirit Gown; it fought with him against evil spirits that sought revenge on humanity, and helped to capture anyone who dared disrupt the resting places of the dead. Villages tended to harbor particularly devout followers of phantoms and elves, so to them Arcus must have seemed like a divine messenger. So long as there were villagers with nothing better to do, the gratitude wasn't going to stop pouring in. Perhaps, thought Arcus, this was what it felt like to be the founder of a new religion.

"Will we be seeing the formation of Arcusism soon?" Noah said.

"No. I'm not here to start some weird cult. Besides, it'd only make the

phantoms and elves mad at me.”

“Seeing as you helped one of them, I’m sure it wouldn’t be an issue.”

“Would too. If you’re free enough to crack jokes, go see what’s going on or something.”

From what Arcus could tell, the only victims of the attack were the gates, although the ground around the southern gate could probably be counted too, given the disarray the exchange of spells had thrown it into. The villagers were working hard to take out the stakes and ropes they laid down; they would be finished soon. It was then that Arcus remembered.

“Where’s Pilocolo and his men?” he asked the mayor.

“They departed immediately.”

“What? Really?”

“Yes, although we tried to stop them.” The mayor hung his head regretfully.

They’re gone, huh? But why leave now?

Arcus frowned. It didn’t make any sense. Gilles seemed to harbor the same doubts.

“What?! But the night’s only just started! Doesn’t matter how antsy y’are to go, y’gotta be insane to leave at this hour!”

“I know. I told him several times that it would be dangerous to go out at this time, but he insisted that he must go and report this to the capital as soon as possible.”

“He needed to ‘report’ this?” said Arcus. “Why?”

“He said his cargo was stolen when the northern gate was attacked.”

“Stolen?”

The mayor nodded.

So the bandits were after Pilocolo’s cargo... thought Arcus.

Noah’s brow creased. “How peculiar. Did that gentleman not have several guards protecting him?”

“Apparently the bandits took advantage of the confusion when the gate was broken down to steal his entire cart.”

“Seriously?” Arcus muttered under his breath.

When they were waiting to be granted access to the village, Pilocolo had so many guards with him that they made up an entire convoy. Though Arcus hadn’t counted them, he’d wager there were somewhere between ten and twenty guards. How crafty must the bandits have been to slip past all those men and steal the cargo? There wasn’t even that much time between the northern gate breaking and the bandits’ retreat. It was baffling to say the least.

“Mr. Mayor!”

Arcus turned to see a villager rushing up to them.

“What’s wrong?”

“We managed to get in contact with the garrison. They said they’ll be here as soon as they can!”

“Now that *is* good news!” the mayor cried joyfully.

Once Arcus and the others had left to inspect the surrounding area, the villagers set to work informing neighboring settlements that there were bandits about. One of those settlements had managed to get hold of a garrison deployed to the area precisely for the suppression of bandits.

They waited for a while, still on their guard, and eventually a troop of armed men showed up to the village. Their weapons varied from swords to lances to bows and arrows, but their armor was uniform. Their equipment looked like it was perfectly made to order for each of them, and everything was engraved with appropriate seals. Their flag hung over their mighty horses, proof of their allegiance to the state. They even had a transport corps following behind them.

Their scale blew any kind of vigilante corps out of the water. There would be no doubt in Arcus’s mind that this was a fighting force of the state, if not for the fact that they were being led by a young redheaded boy with a greatsword on his back.

Arcus reckoned this boy was around the same age he was, although he looked

a little taller. What business he had sitting atop a horse and leading a garrison, Arcus didn't know, but even the older members of the group appeared to be treating him as a superior. Perhaps he was a high-ranking noble's son. As he looked the boy over, Arcus reasoned that it must have been quite the strict family if it was sending their son out at a time like this to round up bandits.

Rather than armor, he wore the type of practical clothing you'd see out in the town under a cloak. All he had for protection were a pair of carefully crafted boots and a bracelet. There was a single bandage across his nose that gave the impression that he was a bit of a rascal; there was a vitality to his expression that clashed with the darkness of the night. Perhaps "noble's son" wasn't the right phrase to describe him. He looked more like a young boy filled to the brim with an adventurous spirit. The most surprising thing about him was the greatsword on his back. It seemed impossible that anybody should be able to carry a sword that was even taller than they were, regardless of the seals on both the blade and the lad's bracelet that likely worked together to lighten the load.



The mayor took to one knee in front of the boy's horse.

He's definitely a noble or something like that...

The mayor then began to explain the situation, and when he was finished, the soldiers moved out one by one, either to help repair the gates or to check the village's defenses.

Only then did the boy turn to look at Arcus. At first he seemed suspicious, but after an explanation from the mayor, he broke into a satisfied smile. The boy dismounted his horse along with some of the men behind him and came over.

"You protected our citizens, right? Thanks a lot." His speech was far from the refined mannerisms of a typical noble child.

"S-Sure." Arcus didn't know what else to say; he hadn't expected the boy to be so friendly.

The boy frowned at him.

"What's the matter?" asked Arcus, frowning right back at the boy peering dubiously at his face.

The boy hopped from one side to the other, taking a good look at Arcus from various angles. He narrowed his eyes and hummed as though trying to focus.

Am I a person to him, or a puzzle?

"You're...a girl, right? Yup. You gotta be! I mean you're just so cute!"

"Look, Noah, he said you were cute," Arcus said, casting a glance at the man behind him.

"It does one no good to avert one's eyes from reality, Master Arcus," Noah said. "Those words were clearly directed at you."

"Play along, dammit! Gaaaaaaaah!" Arcus stamped his feet and let out a mighty roar. He was getting used to being mistaken for a girl, and he didn't like it. Arcus directed his next yell not only at the boy who was studying him curiously, but the men behind him. "I am a boy! A *boy*! Male!"

"Huh? Really? You sure?"

"Yes, I'm sure! Can't you tell from my clothes? No girl would wear stuff like

this!”

“Sorry, I really thought you were a girl. I mean, you’re shorter than me and everything.”

“By like, one inch! That’s nothing!” Arcus yelled back.

The boy let out a cheerful laugh. There was nothing to suggest he felt even the slightest hint of awkwardness at his mistake. One of the men stepped forward to whisper in the boy’s ear. That man must have been his advisor or something.

“Master. Master...”

“Huh? Oh, right. Yeah, I know. Because this is work, I’m gonna have to ask you a few questions.”

No doubt they were here to find out who exactly Arcus and his companions were.

“Let us go to my house,” suggested the mayor, and so they went to continue things there.

“I’m afraid we only have leftovers, Lord Deet.”

“That’s okay! I love this fish pie!” The russet-haired boy grinned as he took the slice of fish pie offered to him by the mayor. His assistant rebuked him incredulously as he proceeded to stuff his mouth with food.

Later, they were sitting in the mayor’s living room, each to his own chair. In front of Arcus was the red-haired boy, smiling happily now that his belly was full. Arcus felt like he was being questioned by the police, except without any of the threat—though that might have been because he hadn’t done anything wrong in protecting the village. Rather than accusing, the boy seemed excited and curious to be finding out more about the stranger in front of him.

Arcus would have to describe the boy as...cheerful, if nothing else. The way he smiled up at him with his body flopped down over the table reminded Arcus of a puppy. Meanwhile, both of their attendants stood behind them for the meeting. Once everything was in place, the russet-haired boy spoke.

“Lemme introduce myself again. My name’s Dietr—”

“M-Master!” the boy’s advisor suddenly interrupted him sharply.

The boy’s eyes widened slightly in surprise, but then he shook his head, as though realizing something. “Huh? O-Oh, right. My name’s Deet. Just Deet. Nice to meetcha.”

“Nice to meet you...” Arcus could only reply normally to his mysterious greeting. The moment he said his name was “just” Deet, it was obvious that something was off. The name was plainly fake, but it wasn’t quite clear whether it was his own idea or somebody else’s. Either way, he wasn’t here as his real self; rather, he was “undercover.”

However, the way in which he held himself and how other people reacted to him meant Arcus had quite a good guess at who he may be; in the meantime, he decided it would be wiser to keep his mouth shut and listen quietly.

“This is my advisor and chaperone, Galanger. The guys outside are all mine too.”

His advisor bowed his head politely. He had a fine physique, but the hairs on his head seemed to be in the middle of a mass exodus. While he appeared to be of a certain status, there was a crudeness to his speech. He gave off the impression that he was a long-standing veteran rather than an ordinary soldier or, to be more specific, an experienced sergeant tasked with assisting a newly commissioned officer. If even he was treating Deet with respect, then Deet was doubtlessly the leader of these men.

Deet was clearly too young to be doing anything of the sort, but in this world, even children as young as him could be tasked with such matters if their status was high enough. The idea was usually to give them experience leading troops from a young age to prepare them for the future. How young was too young depended on the house.

“My name is Galanger,” the assistant repeated after his master with another bow. “From your attire and the dignity with which you conduct yourself, I can only assume you hail from nobility yourself.”

Galanger’s gaze was sharp—the complete opposite of Deet’s bright eyes. It was a merciless look that said he was determined to uncover Arcus’s background no matter what it took. Arcus doubted the advisor would accept it

if he said he *wasn't* nobility.

This was Rustinell. Having another noble come in from outside without good reason was sure to raise eyebrows and invite dispute. There was a process to be followed if one wished to cross the border, but that wasn't common knowledge —hence the man's suspicion towards Arcus.

"My name is Arcus Raytheft. These are my servants, Noah and Cazzy. Behind them is Bud, our guide."

"Raytheft?" Deet looked like he was rummaging through his memory.

"They are an old viscountcy of Lainur. I believe Arcus is the name of their eldest son." A curious light appeared in Galanger's eyes, no doubt because he had heard the same rumors Gilles had.

"What does someone like you want out here?" Deet asked.

"Something important."

"Important?"

"Yeah. Here: I've got a letter of permission from His Majesty."

"The king?"

"That's right." Arcus pulled the letter and the sealed envelope addressed to Lady Louise Rustinell from his bag. Galanger stiffened very suddenly. Presenting something with the king's seal on it worked particularly well against people of a certain status. Their upbringing had drilled what that seal meant into them, so there was never any need to explain further. It worked doubly so against military personnel, especially the upper brass.

"Might I have a look?" asked Galanger.

"Yes, but please keep this one addressed to Her Ladyship sealed. It is a private letter."

"I understand."

Both Arcus and the person he passed it to would be in serious trouble if the letter was opened. Instead, Galanger scanned over the letter of permission. At first he read calmly, but it wasn't long until he began frowning, as though he

meant to take in every last sentence. When he was partway through, he let out a deep sigh.

“What d’you think, Galanger?”

“This is certainly an official letter, and a particularly urgent one at that. You can see His Majesty’s seal right here.” Galanger showed Deet the distinct seal at the very bottom of the letter.

“Hey, you’re right!” Satisfied that this letter came from the Crosellode family, Deet nodded.

The king had sealed the letter of permission too, to indicate that Arcus’s quest for more silver was an order from the crown. That would ensure they wouldn’t be subject to any annoying official processes—within the kingdom itself, at least.

Deet cocked his head. “Why didn’t you contact anyone in advance about this? We could’ve come to greet you if you’d given us some warning.”

“I mean, that’s sort of why we have that letter...”

Arcus’s journey for silver was supposed to be kept quiet. If they made a song and dance of announcing their arrival, they would surely be looked after, but it would also become quite a big deal indeed. It would be far harder to keep the aethometer’s existence secret under such pressures.

Deet and Galanger began whispering to each other. Deet was probably asking his assistant what exactly Arcus meant. He picked up on the phrase “top-secret order,” and soon Deet nodded again.

“I got it. I think I know why you stopped in this village too.”

“Yeah. We’re here because the mountain path was blocked off.”

“This is the best place to stop if you have to divert. No wonder you ended up here,” Galanger added.

“Yep. I gotta ask though: have you paid for your stay yet?”

“I did some maintenance and repairs on some Seal Tools as payment.”

“It was a big help,” the mayor added.

“Huh? You know how to engrave seals, Arcus?”

“W-Well, yeah, um... Why d’you ask?” Arcus hadn’t expected Deet to be so interested, but the boy carried on enthusiastically.

“Could you take a look at mine too, then? Here, on my sword. It’s been acting weird for a while, so I was thinking of taking it to someone anyway.” Deet turned to the greatsword he’d leaned against the wall before hopping out of his seat.

“Master...” Galanger began, the disappointment in his voice biting.

“What? It needs fixing up! It’s my weapon!”

“I understand, but there is a time and a place.”

“Not when it’s something so important! What if there’s another attack before the morning and I can’t slash with this thing?!” Deet pouted.

“With a weapon of that size, even a glancing blow would likely prove fatal,” Galanger responded calmly.

It looked like Deet could be immature when the situation called for it.

“I don’t mind having a look,” Arcus said. “I did just use a ton of aether though, so lemme rest for a bit first.”

“Really?! Thanks a bunch!” Deet beamed at him. It was a smile brimming with innocence, and Arcus was once again reminded of a puppy.

Galanger dipped his head apologetically.

“Were you guys trying to get rid of those bandits around the mountain path then?” Arcus asked.

“Yeah. There’s been a ton of them around here lately. It’s a real pain.”

“Master,” Galanger warned sharply.

“Huh? O-Oh, whoops.” Deet grinned sheepishly. Speaking so openly about the troubles of their county was the same as exposing their weaknesses. In the presence of certain nobles, such a mistake could be deadly, but Deet had only realized it too late.

Galanger’s next sigh carried a hint of resignation as he addressed Arcus. “If

you would kindly keep that information to yourself.”

“Of course.”

“It’s the surrounding counties too,” Galanger said. “I have heard that bandits are showing up and causing trouble all over the place.”

“And we’re always too late to do anything about it,” Deet muttered. “Even when we try to ambush them, it never goes well, and I don’t get why.”

Arcus got the sense Deet shouldn’t be sharing these thoughts with him either, but he was still just a kid, so some degree of honesty was to be expected.

“How have you been trying to catch them?” Arcus asked.

“We’ve been disguising ourselves as bandits to draw them out.”

Arcus didn’t know what to say.

“Or we’ve been carrying valuable objects to try and lure them that way too.”

Again, Arcus was speechless.

“We’ve tried almost everything...”

“And has it worked?” Arcus asked, fearing he already knew the answer.

“Not at all. I thought they were surefire plans myself, but...” Deet’s disappointed sigh was outmatched by Galanger’s. It must have been tough on the advisor, since he likely had to obey the majority of what Deet said. “We’re in even more of a fix because Prince Ceylan’s in the area.”

“The prince is around?”

“Yeah, that’s right. I dunno why, but I’ve heard he’s gone to Nadar territory for an inspection. Then he’ll be around here, but I’m not sure where exactly he is right now. He might still be around Nadar. But it’ll be bad news if he hears about our bandit trouble. I was hoping we could arrest them before he turns up.”

“There is probably somebody you should be more worried about than the prince,” said Galanger.

“Ugh... Mom’s gonna yell at me so bad if I don’t do something!” Deet buried his head in his hands and flopped down on the table, his eyes watering. Arcus

could only surmise that his mother was a frightening woman indeed.

“Either way, we are incredibly grateful for your assistance,” Galanger said, addressing Arcus. “Especially since you held off on killing them. That means we can question those you captured now.”

“Oh, hey! Great idea!” Deet said.

“Had you not thought of it yet, Master?”

“Wh—Of course I had!” Deet insisted, convincing nobody.

“But the most important members got away,” Arcus pointed out. He started telling the story of Eido and how they met him on their way—how he was a powerful magician, and about how they managed to repel his attacks, but that they ultimately couldn’t follow him.

“Was he really that powerful?” asked Deet.

“The intimidating air I felt from him was in the same league as my uncle’s.”

“You are referring to the renowned Crucible, are you not?” Galanger said.

“Yeah. Eido even seemed to know him.”

“From the sound of it, he didn’t seem particularly fond of him,” Noah added.

“I see.” Galanger frowned.

“Speakin’ personally for a sec,” said Cazzy, “his magic was really somethin’. I think he could even hold his own against the professors at the Institute. Well, maybe with one exception.”

“Despite how she looks, Miss Mercuria is rather powerful,” Noah interjected. “Incidentally, I believe this magician holds more aether than Cazzy or me.”

“More than 7,000 then?”

“Yes.”

“Whoa...” Arcus felt his spirit sink. He didn’t know there were magicians with more than four times his own aether. Again he was reminded of just how totally unfair life could be.

“Still, you caught a bunch of them! That should be a big lead, so thanks!” Deet

spoke up.

Arcus carried on describing the bandits' attack—its details and peculiarities. As Galanger implied, the only thing to do now was wait for more information to be pulled from those bandits' lips.

It was only a few minutes before Arcus and his companions retired for the night that the news came: the captured bandits had been found dead in their cells. They'd poisoned themselves.

Part 2: The Capital Offensive

The question of why the bandits killed themselves played on Arcus's mind. Apparently they had been hiding the poison inside their mouths and were already dead by the time Deet and his men went to question them. They were found in the barn with their bodies frozen mid-convulsion, their faces twisted into agonized grimaces. It was a horrific way to die. What Arcus didn't understand was why they'd done it.

The administration of justice here was not as sophisticated as in the man's world, but unless a wrongdoer's crimes were especially heinous, they wouldn't face a death sentence. The bandits hadn't been facing any immediate punishment in the first place. They would be taken to an appropriate place first, and could even plan an escape if they had to. If they did something to atone for their crimes, they might even earn release.

They messed up and got caught. Full of despair for their future, they drank the poison and killed themselves. The narrative didn't hold up.

Deet and Galanger seemed just as confused as Arcus. Deet was especially frustrated to have lost his leads, now forced to restart the investigation from square one. Because of that, Arcus was questioned again on what happened. It wasn't that the redhead suspected them; he just wanted to gather as much information as he could. They even questioned Gilles separately, but they let him go almost immediately.

He was a strange man indeed, and his identity was shrouded in mystery. Arcus would have expected him to be detained, at least until Deet could get him to the county's capital, but instead he was let go just like that. Arcus asked around and discovered that Gilles's release was thanks to the mayor putting in a good word for him. Arcus asked the mayor about this as soon as they got up that morning.

"There are some in our village who suffer from an illness that can only be alleviated by a herb that doesn't grow in these parts. Mr. Gilles supplied us with that herb."

Arcus recalled a similar thing being said at the dinner the previous evening.

“And that’s why you put in a good word for him?”

“Yes. He sold it to us as an independent transaction at a very generous price, likely at a considerable loss. I thought it only right that I pay him back.”

“But why did he sell it to you that cheaply in the first place? He hasn’t got any roots in this place or anything, right?”

“He does not. In fact, yesterday was the first time he’d ever come here.”

Arcus wasn’t surprised to hear it. With a strong Imerian accent like Gilles’s, there was no way he came from these parts.

“I thought it odd too, and so I asked him. Mr. Gilles responded by saying that he is currently visiting several rural villages and communities like ours.”

“How come?”

A lucky, keen-eyed merchant might turn up rare or valuable items out in impoverished villages like these, but it wouldn’t be worth the cost. He couldn’t be turning a profit; on the contrary, it seemed like a good way to empty your coffers. Arcus couldn’t work out for the life of him why Gilles might be traveling in these parts. The mayor smiled kindly, as though he knew exactly what Arcus was thinking.

“Lord Arcus, there is more to dealing in goods than simply making a profit.”

“What do you mean?”

“In this world, there are those who are motivated by feelings rather than money.”

“Feelings and actions... The kinda stuff you can’t measure on a scale.”

“Can you not relate?”

“I can. I just find those stories strange, you know? The ones where someone seriously dedicates their life to being selfless, and not because of peer pressure or a sudden whim.”

“That is understandable. Many people are motivated purely by their own interests.”

Some people, when they had the means and mental space to do so, longed to make others happy and to hear the words “thank you.”

“Our gratitude for the existence of people like him knows no bounds,” explained the mayor.

Something from the man’s life came to Arcus’s mind then. A special report on an evening infotainment show about a traveling salesman who went to rural communities to sell to the older generation who weren’t mobile enough to go shopping on their own. Maybe Gilles was like that salesman. They weren’t doing the exact same thing, but both were thinking of those in rural places as they carried out their work.

A bevy of motivations existed for such an attitude, from simply wanting to help people to wanting to repay a debt of gratitude. It would explain why Gilles was willing to come to a village like this when it was plagued by danger.

Arcus scratched his head. “Ugh. I always feel like I can’t understand someone unless I know exactly what sort of background they come from.”

“That is only natural. That’s the sort of environment you were born into.”

“Nobility is such a pain...”

An amused smile lit up the mayor’s face.

“It’s like that tale from the Anci—well, that old story. You know: Dunweed?” Arcus said.

Dunweed was a character from the Ancient Chronicles. He was a traveler who always sold the necessities of life to the needful at a price they could bear. He was known for being utterly selfless, helping many and earning their gratitude in return. Commoners in this world often cited him when teaching their children about magnanimity.

“Mr. Gilles did tell me that story when he was supplying us with the herb yesterday, so perhaps it inspired him.” The mayor let out a small, troubled sigh. “I am well aware that putting in a good word for him might have been a little forward.”

Arcus paused. “I’d have to agree, yeah.”

“I just cannot believe that anybody who speaks so passionately about Dunweed could be a bad person. I expected that herb to be rather expensive, but when I asked him for the price...”

“Awh, don’t worry ’bout it! Just treat me to a good meal if y’please!”

“He was a huge help to our village. I just cannot believe that he is a bad sort.”

“I see where you’re coming from,” said Arcus.

“Thank you. As far as we are concerned, that man is Dunweed himself.”

“I gotta be careful, then. He might see me as someone who’s easy to rip off or something.”

“I’m sure that isn’t the case! Nobody would target someone with the power of Gown on their side!”

“I dunno. He’s been acting strange toward me the entire time I’ve been here.”

Even if Gilles treated the villagers politely, there always seemed to be an extra layer of meaning in his behaviors around Arcus. He was a Dunweed to the mayor, but to Arcus, he might have been a chivalrous thief—one who defied authority and allied himself with the common people. Maybe even one who snatched away the ill-gotten gains of the rich to share among the poor. That being said, none of Arcus’s gains were ill-gotten, and he hadn’t done anything wrong, so he would have liked to think he wouldn’t be a target.

While he tried to keep his train of thought light-hearted, he was still unable to draw any conclusions about Gilles. He found it too implausible to take the mayor’s words at face value, but nevertheless he chose to note the possibility that Gilles was not driven purely by profit.

Once his morning discussion with the mayor was over, Arcus started his repair of Deet’s Seal Arms, as the russet-haired boy had asked of him the previous night. He had already been paid for his work, and since he needed to get it done before Deet and his men were due to leave the village, he got up especially early.

The two Arms that needed repairing were his greatsword and his bracelet. The sword was broad and longer than either Arcus or Deet. Every inch of it was

covered in seals—a fearsome weapon. The seals' intricacy was at complete odds with the sword's simple shape. The Artglyphs were carved in a similar manner to shorthand from the man's world; each sigil twined and braided with the next, arabesque and calligraphy all in one. It was clear that this weapon had been engraved by a true master.

Arcus had come across several styles of seals in his time studying them. He had seen several Seal Tools at his favorite store, and sometimes devoted time to going through the catalogs he bought at the bookstore. Deet's sword resembled nothing he'd ever seen before. Arcus deduced it must have been an ancient weapon.

There were seals to keep the blade sturdy and the edge keen, seals to guide the blade gracefully in the wielder's hands; water-repellent seals, likely there to stop blood or oils clinging to the metal, popped up here and there in the design. The engraver had laid them out in a perfect pattern, each enmeshing with all the others without interference. Arcus doubted anyone was left alive in this world capable of such intricate work. Even Arcus, who was well-versed in the Ancient Chronicles, couldn't make heads or tails of several of the symbols.

Arcus was just finishing his repair work when Deet woke. He had slept in quite a bit by this world's standards, but that was likely due to how late he stayed up with the investigation, on top of being on patrol before that. He was still young, and by his first impression somewhat cheeky, but it was clear that he was devoted to his work.

Deet yawned and rubbed at his eyes as he stumbled drowsily to fetch a glass of water for himself and his assistant, Galanger. Only when he was more awake did he approach Arcus.

"Thanks so much for this. My sword suddenly stopped working the way I was used to a little while ago. It's a relief to get it fixed up."

"Oh yeah?"

"It wasn't cutting as neatly, and it felt heavier. It wasn't long after I got it either. I dunno what crazy stuff Mom did with it..."

"I don't believe you're one to talk," said Galanger.

“H-Hey! I take good care of it!”

“Does ‘taking good care of it’ include forcing it into the ground the way you did the other day?”

“I didn’t have a choice! I take good care of it *the best I can*!” Deet protested before turning back to Arcus. “I’m just glad there was someone here who could take a look at it.”

“Mm hmm.” Galanger nodded his agreement.

“Now I’ll be able to slice clean through any bandits who get in our way easy!”

Deet may have had a sweet smile, but he clearly had an incredibly violent streak. In Arcus’s experience, military children tended to be a little calmer, but he supposed that sort of thing stemmed from family tradition.

Deet leaned forward to peer at Arcus’s work. “How’s it going? It looks way shinier now.”

“Yeah, I’m done with the work itself. I’m just checking it over to make sure I haven’t missed anything.”

“Huh! You did that so quick!” Deet remarked cheerfully.

“Here, hold it and see what you think.”

“Oooh!” With his bracelet around his arm, Deet lifted up the greatsword easily.

Arcus’s brain still had trouble processing the reality of a boy that small holding a sword that big, but at least he knew it meant his work was successful. “Well?” he prompted.

“This is incredible! *Really* incredible!” Deet laughed.

“Um—”

Deet was swinging the sword wildly around the room. It was a terrifying sight. The tip of the swords whooshed past the furniture in the room by no more than a hair’s breadth. One wrong move, and the mayor would have to redecorate.

And yet, Galanger made no move to stop his master. In fact, he was beaming at the boy. “How is it, Master?”

“Way better than before! Way better than when it was in good shape too! How’d you do this, Arcus? It’s incredible!”

Deet seemed to be feeling the difference just by holding it. Arcus recalled he had been complaining about the weight before, which would explain it. With his arm raised and holding the sword, he looked like an executioner waiting to enact his duty, and as the one standing across from him, Arcus had the distinct impression he’d done something worthy of the death penalty.

He put his hands up in front of him. “U-Um, watch where you’re swinging that thing, will you?”

“Hm? O-Oh. Sorry!” Deet stuck his tongue out sheepishly and leaned his sword back against the wall. Though he was close to seriously injuring Arcus, he looked more like a boy who’d been caught out mid-prank. Maybe swinging his sword around like that really wasn’t such a big deal to him. A shiver ran up Arcus’s spine.

“Anyway, I didn’t do much. I just fixed it up a bit.”

Galanger stepped up to the sword and scrutinized it. “The pattern seems more defined. I don’t think it was this clear even when I started working with the mistress.”

“It was probably even clearer when it was new. It must’ve been worn with use, and some of the seals disappeared completely without anyone around to fix them up properly.”

“Does that mean you’ve restored those parts?”

“I tried, but it’s not perfect. There were places even I couldn’t decipher.”

“Wow...” Galanger murmured.

“I don’t really get what you’re saying,” Deet said, “but I’ll be sure to bring it back to you when it needs another fix!”

“Sure, if you can’t find anyone else who can. If I keep studying, I might even be able to make it like new.”

“Like new? You mean, make it just like it was when it was originally made?” Galanger asked.

“Yeah. Might take a while though.”

“Seriously?! Then I’m definitely gonna ask you next time it goes weird! Thanks, Arcus!” Deet was practically jumping for joy now that he’d decided on an official seal master. “I’m gonna go test how well it cuts!”

“Don’t treat it too roughly, Master,” Galanger warned.

“Yeah, yeah!” Deet lifted the sword up onto his shoulder and raced outside.



Arcus sighed. Engraved bracelet or not, seeing him lifting that huge weapon was still impressive. “He’s a strong kid, huh?”

“It’s in his blood.”

“Oh. It’s one of those ‘natural talents,’ then.”

Galanger nodded. Arcus noticed he was looking at him strangely.

“What?”

“I was just thinking that rumors aren’t necessarily true.”

“Oh.”

“Thank you for helping with the master’s sword.” While the assistant had regarded Arcus with some suspicion before, there wasn’t a hint of it in his eyes now.

“It’s fine. You guys paid me for it.”

“Perhaps, but I still have dues of sentiment to pay.” Galanger turned to peer out of the window, his brow creased. “I wonder if the master will be all right. Now that his sword’s condition has improved, I’m worried he might push himself too much.”

Deet noticed he was being watched. “Hey! If you’re that worried, why don’t you come out here and see for yourself?”

Galanger sighed. “Yes, yes. Right away,” he mumbled, following his master’s steps outside.

Arcus looked out the window. Deet was swinging his sword around like before with a huge grin on his face. He must’ve been over the moon to finally get it fixed. He was charging around like a storm, and Arcus worried the waves of pressure trailing from his swings might uproot the village’s wooden houses, as though he were a big bad wolf blowing down the houses of innocent pigs. It was as though he hadn’t gotten out of bed mere moments ago.

“He sure is peppy,” Arcus murmured as one of his attendants appeared from thin air beside him.

“He is childlike befitting to his age. Unlike some people.”

“I’m ready to take that as an insult.”

“I was praising you. It makes the troubling duties of my job a whole lot easier to manage.”

“I’m not buyin’ it. You’re always grumbling about how I’m dragging you into trouble or causing weird ‘disturbances.’”

“If you are aware of that fact, then I would heartily suggest you take those comments into consideration.”

“Sorry, no can do. It’s a slippery slope-type deal.”

“Perhaps it might have been more prudent had you avoided that slope in the first place,” Noah remarked calmly.

Arcus shrugged. “Anyway, these new arrivals sure are strange, huh?”

“Indeed.”

Deet claimed that his troop’s goal was to investigate the bandits with an eye to quashing them. While Arcus found it strange that they were vague on the details of where they came from, he found it difficult to doubt their official ties to Rustinell. It wasn’t just their use of the territory’s military emblem, but the fact that the mayor recognized them immediately.

Even so, Arcus still had questions. Compared to who they claimed to be, they were too well-equipped and immaculately composed, and the villagers treated them with an unusual level of respect. Arcus had spoken to some of the others in the group and found they were just as plucky and willful as Deet and Galanger, something that seemed impossible for an ordinary military unit.

“Hey.” Arcus’s second attendant joined them.

“Good morning.”

“How’s the preparation going, Cazzy?” Arcus asked.

“We’re basically done. We’re ready to go whenever.” Cazzy jerked his chin in the direction of the door. He had been making the preparations for them to leave with their guide. “I also checked out that group that showed up. They got themselves a real solid formation. ’Snot just their stuff either. They got magicians in there and all.”

“How many?” said Noah. “Three?”

“Five. Two of ’em are with the vanguard and undercover. These guys aren’t messin’ around.”

“My, how curious.”

“Their formation ain’t like the ones we learn about in the Institute, but I reckon that’s ’cause of how powerful their vanguard is.”

Noah narrowed his eyes thoughtfully.

“So, what? They’re like this place’s best soldiers then?” Arcus asked.

“I don’t think so,” Cazzy replied.

“Huh?”

“Sure, they’re strong, but...I dunno how to put it...” Cazzy trailed off.

Once it was clear he didn’t know how to finish his sentence, Noah took over. “In my personal opinion, they are less a collection of soldiers, and more a collection of generals. I believe that these men who young Deet has brought with him are each powerful in their own right; both physically and socially speaking.”

“Huh?” Arcus blinked.

“That’s it. They’d probably be able to raze down that jumble of bandits no problem with that kinda strength,” Cazzy agreed.

A group of generals... In other words, a group of leaders. But somehow, that didn’t quite seem to describe what they were seeing here. It was likely more to do with their social position than what they actually *did*.

“Where did you get that idea from, Noah?”

“When that advisor introduced himself as Galanger.”

“Is he famous?”

“I believe he is one of Rustinell’s leading figures. Galanger Uiha, who presides over Azil. He is a fearless fighter famous for his many exploits in the fight against the Empire. There are others I recognize among them too. Clayton Baran, ruler of Gardalia. Skall Rosta, leader of Lowbell...”

Noah named these leaders of Rustinell territories one after the other.

“Huh? Wait! Hold up! Are you saying that Deet gathered up all these leaders to follow him?”

“It would appear so.”

“No way! That doesn’t make any sense! There’s supposed to be a chain of command, isn’t there?”

Rounding up bandits shouldn’t have been the work of such a powerful group of people. It was totally unfathomable.

“Different regions have different systems of command, formation styles, and so forth. It may well make sense.”

“How?”

“Like, say they care more about the region and its people than what they feel’s beneath ’em,” Cazzy chimed in. “Or I guess it’s more like they ain’t as snobby as the nobles ya get in this kingdom.”

It was then that Arcus realized something. House Rustinell was one of the regional monarchies under the kingdom’s rule. That didn’t just mean it was small, but also that it had an accepted royal family of its own. Just like Lainur, Rustinell would be split up into smaller territories with appointed lords to govern them.

If Noah and Cazzy’s explanation was correct, then the lords of Rustinell might be treated more as military commanders than nobles. They might have been using a similar practice to certain daimyo in the Sengoku period keeping their vassals and lords living nearer the royal family’s domain while their governors lived further out.

In that case, it would be possible for such a powerful group to gather like this and work together. Looking at it that way, one thing was clear.

“Does that mean Deet’s part of the royal family?”

“It would seem so, especially as I have heard the Rustinells have a son around his age.”

“And if he’s gonna be in charge of the whole of Rustinell, they’ll want him to

establish a hierarchical relationship with all these important people sooner rather than later, I'm guessing."

"In all likelihood."

Arcus' faint suspicions were confirmed. It explained how he could lead a group of men representing a wide range of social importance.

Cazzy glanced outside. "Does that make that thing Rustinell's Guillotine?"

"Most likely. Its appearance certainly lives up to the stories I've heard."

Arcus's ears pricked at the curious word choice. "Guillotine? You mean an execution device?"

"No, we are referring to a famous weapon that has been passed down the Rustinell House for generations. The sword which you were repairing a small while ago."

Arcus nearly choked on his own breath.

"I heard it lopped heads left and right in the fight against the Empire. And hey, I'm just some kid from the sticks, so ya know how famous it is when even I know 'bout it!" Cazzy cackled.

"I have heard it said that the blade was repurposed from an actual in-service guillotine," Noah said.

"Well, that's terrifying." A shiver ran up Arcus's spine as he suddenly realized the importance of the weapon he'd just been working on. It was no wonder Galanger started showing him respect after he repaired it successfully.

"But if Deet has it..."

"He must have inherited it from the head of the family, Louise Rustinell—known to some as the Headhunter Witch and Our Lady of the National Razor. The Gillis Empire fears her greatly, even now."

"There's a 'specially famous story of her stickin' the heads she collected in battle on pikes and linin' 'em up along the border after the Empire retreated."

"It's a wonder they don't call her Louise the Impaler..."

She sounded wild, violent, and cruel. She certainly seemed to be more of a

military ruler than a sophisticated noble, but such was the case with many of the higher-ranking figures in this world. Most regional monarchs like her relied on military force to govern their lands, so they behaved more like the powerful families they descended from than their more sophisticated counterparts. Skirmishes were common around Lainur, so the regional monarchs and martial nobles didn't exactly have the time to sit around drinking tea in their Sunday best all day.

The second they had hold of a likely successor, that child would be sent out into battle as soon as possible; that was a common practice among these families. It was something that could only happen because of the innate individual power of magic.

"Hey, Arcus!" a voice called from outside. "We're ready to go now!"

Arcus stuck his head out of the window. "We'll be there in a sec!"

He, Noah, and Cazzy made their way outside.

Arcus and his companions had agreed to travel with Deet's group to Rustinell's capital. Their guide came with them too, making Arcus's group four. Deet had left some of his men to patrol the area around the village, and so was left with around two thirds of them now. Their dubious plus one had chosen to tag along as well.

Before they left, all of the villagers came to see them off. They gave their thanks for Arcus's work on their Seal Tools and his group's help minimizing damage to the village. That didn't surprise Arcus. What surprised him was that *every last member* of the village had gathered in the plaza. Many chanted his name like a prayer, and he suspected that might have had something to do with their witnessing Tribe. They asked him to come visit again should he be in the area, and the mayor and his wife promised him another fish pie if he did so. After promising he'd come back one day, Arcus left with Deet and his men.

While before their guide had kept them entertained on the road, this time it was Deet who did most of the talking. The endless questions he posed made it sound like he didn't meet many people living in the royal capital, and when he was done, Gilles wasted no time in taking over. At least in Gilles's case, he mostly shared stories of his travels, so there were no questions to tire out

Arcus's brain.

The moment Deet wandered away, Gilles sidled up to Arcus as though to share a secret. He asked him what he wanted with that silver—whether he was just going to use it for seals or something else—and other questions of that nature. His questions were prying and unrelenting. Arcus remained committed to dodging them, telling Gilles he only needed the material for seals, but he was endlessly curious about what the merchant might be thinking. First there had been the comparison to Dunweed, and now these shamelessly brazen questions. Arcus still couldn't get a good read on Gilles's character.

The group took a long detour from the usual route. They traversed low mountains and skirted rivers, and it was only when the sun was setting again that they made it to their destination.

Like many others in the kingdom, Rustinell's capital was a round fortress city, and the most prosperous settlement in the area. Barracks lay scattered around outside the city walls. Unlike Lainur's capital, the river ran outside this city, disappearing far, far into the west. The city sat atop a slight plateau, lending it an illusion of even greater scale.

The group entered through the gates and into the busy city. The main street was illuminated by Sol Glasses, but they were not as prevalent as in Lainur's capital. Because of the abundance of silver in the area, there were several silver decorative pieces around, as well as shops which incorporated silver themes in their names.

Gilles left them as soon they entered, claiming he was off to make a few transactions. Arcus and the others left Deet too, and after finding somewhere to stay, headed to the restaurant to take a break. Tomorrow they would have an audience with Rustinell's leader, Louise Rustinell. They would have announced their arrival to her immediately, but Deet and his men were going to do that for them while giving their report on what had happened. Galanger assured them as much when they separated.

After finishing a satisfying meal, Arcus sat back in his chair and sighed.

"Is it just me, or has wheat gotten more expensive?"

"I heard the crops were bad this year. Salt's gone up too."

“Oh yeah, you’re right. Wonder what’s going on.”

“Who knows? I’m sure Lady Louise’ll do something about it at some point though.”

“Yeah.”

Arcus couldn’t help but overhear the other customers’ conversation. They didn’t seem too concerned about the rising prices they spoke of, instead raising a hearty toast to Lady Louise. Their deep trust in their leader allowed them to keep their spirits high.

The rumors Arcus had heard from the village mayor about the mounting costs of basic staples had proven true.

“Noah, what d’you think about the wheat and salt prices?”

“Are you referring to those patrons’ conversation? I believe those particular items are rising in price simply because everything else is.”

“I know this is kinda extreme, but isn’t this the sorta stuff that means there’s a war on the horizon?”

If the expression on his face was anything to go by, Cazzy was completely unimpressed. “It’s always somethin’ depressin’ with ya, ain’t it?”

“But listen. Wheat and salt prices are usually pretty stable, right? Once they start rising, the state tends to intervene before it gets too bad.”

There was no end to the effort put in to keep the cost of public essentials stable. The state wouldn’t turn a blind eye if somebody was trying to manipulate the market to massively inflate their value. That value had direct implications for the region’s profits, and there were laws preventing merchants from trying to interfere with that. The only reasons this would happen were crop failure or interference from another region.

“Ya got a point for sure. Just wonderin’ if there’re any peaceful thoughts in there is all.”

“Stop messing up my hair!”

“I would not be concerned about war,” Noah said. “If the kingdom was preparing for war on the Empire, these price changes would affect the entire

country, not just the western region. Nor are there any hostile leaders around this area who are powerful enough to consider such a conflict."

"Good point. I dunno who'd be going to war around here..."

A war needed two players, and Arcus failed to think of a second, making his hypothesis impossible. Even then, it was just too strange. He'd heard the harvest was good this year, so why were those prices rising, and in such a concentrated area too?

"Might be there's some numbskull merchant somewhere in the area buyin' it all up. Happens sometimes."

"If so, the state'll probably deal with them soon." Arcus took a sip of his tea. He probably wouldn't be thinking so deeply into this if he didn't have the pages of so many books stored in his memory.

"O-Oh! Master Arcus!" A voice called to him from behind.

Arcus turned to see a stout man dressed in the usual merchant's garb: Pilocolo.

"It's you..."

"Please forgive me for disturbing you! It's just that I caught sight of you, and I wanted to apologize for leaving the village without saying anything." Pilocolo bowed his head deeply.

From the timing, he must have headed straight here after leaving the village. His manner was just as humble as ever.

"I'm just glad you're safe," said Arcus. "I heard your cargo got stolen in the village though."

"Yes, it did. All of it, in that moment when the gate was broken down during the attack."

"And the silver?"

"Yes..." Pilocolo replied lamely. "I did hear about the increased bandit activity in the area, and I took precautions, but they took advantage when I was distracted helping the villagers."

His cargo had been stolen because he had prioritized the villagers' safety.

"So I hurried here as quickly as I could to report to Her Ladyship!"

"How did she react?"

Pilocolo had been acting under his ruler's orders. Allowing that cargo to be stolen from under his nose was definite grounds for punishment.

"I-It wasn't so bad. I was fined and scolded, but my punishment was surprisingly light. Her Ladyship feels a responsibility for being unable to suppress the bandits in the first place, you see."

"Right."

She sounded sympathetic. It was likely she had to punish him in *some* way—hence the fine—but she hadn't gone so far as to lock him up or anything so severe.

"What are you gonna do now then?" Arcus asked.

"Me? Oh, well..."

"Have you got other work lined up?"

"Er..."

Arcus had only intended to make some more small talk, but Pilocolo was being strangely evasive—suspiciously so, in fact. Arcus frowned at him in confusion, at which point he finally gave an answer.

"I can't take on more work, because I'm to head for the Nadar region."

"Nadar?"

"Y-Yes."

Nadar shared a border with Rustinell, so traveling there wasn't exactly a grand undertaking; you just needed to follow the river to get there. Any cargo could be transported by boat.

I wasn't expecting to hear "Nadar" again though... It's coming up a ton lately.

"Was that another order from Rustinell's leader?" Arcus asked.

"No, it's something else."

“You’re transporting more stuff?”

“Y-Yes, yes! That’s right!”

Pilocolo had behaved strangely ever since this topic came up. He ummed and ahhed, and the conversation wasn’t progressing smoothly or logically at all. Pilocolo had greeted Arcus completely naturally, suggesting it was this topic in particular that was the problem. It reminded Arcus of a child who’d been caught misbehaving, and was trying to come up with an excuse on the fly. He decided to try and pursue the matter further, but Pilocolo spoke before he could ask.

“I-If you’ll excuse me...”

“H-Hey, wait!” Arcus called, but Pilocolo ignored him and hurried out of the restaurant. He watched him go and sighed. “How come I always get the weird ones?”

“That remark is even more profound considering from whom it is coming.”

“Ya got that right!”

“I was talking about you two as well, y’know!” Arcus paused. “That guy sure has a lotta work lined up though.”

“Izzat so weird?”

Arcus frowned. “No, but think of it like this. He just messed up one job, and now he’s already got something in a different territory? If it was me, I’d consider canceling my request for him.”

“It is likely that Mr. Pilocolo is a well-known merchant in both Rustinell and Nadar. It might not be so strange for him to have so much work traveling between the two.”

“It’s probably just that he was goin’ to Rustinell, or comin’ back to Rustinell, whatever, so he picked up some work in Nadar before he went.”

Noah nodded in agreement, and Arcus had to admit they had a point. The river connecting the two territories made it easy. He could transport cargo along it one way, accept a job at his destination for the way back, and then do the reverse. This was a world where communication wasn’t as simple a matter as picking up a telephone. Accepting work further in advance made good

business sense.

In advance...

“In advance?” Arcus murmured. The word stuck out to him for some reason.

Pilocolo accepted a job in advance. His cargo was stolen. He left immediately. Eido didn’t behave like a typical bandit. The bandits acted irrationally both in retreating and killing themselves. The name “Nadar” kept coming up over and over.

All of a sudden, these seemingly random pieces of information started to connect together.

“So they were in cahoots!” Arcus sat bolt upright in his wooden seat.

He and his companions were still in the large restaurant where they had taken their dinner. The puzzle pieces in his mind had aligned all at once to form that answer. He reviewed his thoughts again one by one to evaluate whether he’d come to the correct conclusion.

Cazzy shot him a suspicious frown after his outburst. “What’sa matter now?”

“Pilocolo and the bandits. They were working together!”

“Th-They... Huh?!”

“Master Arcus...”

His attendants looked like they were struggling to believe him.

“I’m pretty sure about this. The bandits, Pilocolo, and Eido too.”

While Pilocolo and Eido hadn’t acted explicitly as though they were co-conspirators, Arcus couldn’t think of another explanation no matter how hard he tried. His conclusion was based chiefly on the behavior of Eido and his bandit crew.

First, they attacked a village in the dead of night—a diversion. Then, they broke through both the southern and northern gates. There was nothing wrong with the plan so far; in fact, it was a rather solid one. The problem was what came next.

Once the gates were down, they simply wasted time before retreating. That

would have been around the time they snatched Pilocolo's cargo. The village had money, goods, women—all sorts of prime targets, but they never showed an ounce of interest in them. As long as they didn't mind a few losses, they could have charged the gates and overwhelmed the village's defenses.

After destroying the gates, they could have set things alight. That would've forced the villagers to focus on putting the fires out on top of defending themselves. Then they could have taken advantage of the chaos to loot to their hearts' content. Their decision to retreat was made far too early.

With all that opportunity available to them, why did they only steal the silver and nothing else? Bandits were far greedier creatures than that. Their entire existence revolved around disregard for others; self-control should have been beyond them. They acted in the moment only to fulfill their own desires, even at the cost of their companions. Their behavior made no sense, unless...

Unless the silver was their sole target in the first place.

"If we assume Pilocolo and Eido were working together, everything falls into place."

"Hold up. Ya goin' a mile a minute. Mind startin' over for us?"

"I quite agree. While I do not ask that you simplify the facts, I would appreciate it were you to begin your explanation from the beginning."

"Right, sorry. Let's see..."

"You said that everything falls into place. Everything about what?"

They were asking him for a full explanation, free of any supposition. They had been with him long enough now to know that his ideas were more than jokes or the naive musings of a child.

"I'm talking about the attack on the village," Arcus began. "I'm almost certain that Eido and Pilocolo planned it together."

Arcus started to explain where he got the idea from.

"Why's that gotta mean they were workin' together?" Cazzy interjected. "I mean, who's to say it wasn't coincidence?"

"Sure, it could've been, except when you think about how the bandits

transported the silver. There were several carts of it. How are your run-of-the-mill bandits supposed to carry all that?"

"Mr. Pilocolo was in possession of several horse-drawn carts to carry his load. Surely, the bandits could have taken those horses too." Noah paused. "No, that *would* be rather difficult."

"Even if they were prepared for takin' home a ton of stuff, I don't think they could've managed all that silver," Cazzy agreed.

Silver was heavy, even after refinement. On top of the carts and horses Pilocolo had at his disposal, a lot of manpower would be needed to handle it all.

"There'd be no way they could carry something so heavy and unwieldy away without knowing it was there in advance and preparing for it. It'd slow their getaway massively too, so normally it shouldn't even be a contender for stuff to steal. Not only that, but the trade of silver is closely tracked."

These were criminals who made their homes in the wilderness: the kind of people who needed to live on the move, carrying nothing but absolute necessities. If they hadn't been targeting the silver, they must at least have known it was there in advance. Arcus knew that alone wasn't enough to prove they were working with Pilocolo—without one final piece.

"The most important clue in all of this is Pilocolo's behavior," said Arcus. "He made no attempt to retrieve his silver. Instead, he headed right to the capital to report its theft."

"That is rather unnatural behavior," Noah said.

"He had guards with him—that would've been plenty of fighting power. Eido wasn't with the bandits who took the silver, so taking it back should've been possible. The very least they could've done was chase after them, but they gave up without even trying."

"Hey, yeah. Also, they were carryin' that stuff for the rulers here. Most people'd be trippin' over themselves to get it back."

"Right? Pilocolo never intended to get the silver back. He came right here to make his excuses. That's the only explanation that makes sense, right?"

There was always the possibility that Pilocolo was so shaken by the theft that he wasn't thinking straight, but Arcus found that hard to believe. Anyone with common sense would've jumped to get the cargo back, and that should have included Pilocolo. He, however, made straight for the capital. It was nothing short of baffling.

"When the bandits were in the village, he led them to his cargo while he helped the villagers evacuate. That's the only way the process of breaking the gates, stealing the silver, and retreating could have happened so quickly and smoothly."

"And that is why you believe they were working together, is it?"

"Pilocolo had the means to get ahold of that silver legally. Eido and the bandits had the means to transport it. They had everything they needed to pull this off."

If the silver went missing for no apparent reason, Pilocolo would look suspicious, but if he made it look like it was stolen, he could get away with it. He had been scolded and fined for the loss, but that was a light sentence compared to being found out, and the fine would only be worth a fraction of what he'd pocketed. If he was lucky, he might even be tasked with transporting silver again.

"What about that Gilles guy, then?" Cazzy asked.

"I don't think he's involved. He was with us the whole time since the bandits showed up, and Deet and his men kept a close eye on him after that. There wouldn't be any advantage in him sticking to us so closely either, and he didn't do anything to interfere with our investigation in the end."

"Since he never had the chance to do anything of significance, he is automatically innocent?"

"So he's got nothin' to do with it, huh?" Cazzy frowned. "Okay, but why did these guys want that silver so bad in the first place? There's gotta be easier ways of gettin' it. Like buyin' it."

"Hm..."

Cazzy had a point: it was quite a complex scheme for something that, while

expensive, should have been within a merchant like Pilocolo's budget. He could have turned a tidy profit off of a stock of legitimate wholesale silver. The stuff was an inelastic good—even at its inflated price, he could have counted on selling out. The only conclusion was that Pilocolo didn't want it for trading purposes, and there had to be a reason to go to such cloak-and-dagger measures to get it.

Somebody needed silver, and they couldn't let anybody else find out about it. Arcus found it difficult to believe that it was Pilocolo himself. He was a merchant; he shouldn't need it *that* badly. So who *did* need it?

Arcus could think of somebody. Somebody whose name kept coming up in unexpected places.

"The rest of my idea is all based on a ton of supposition instead of any circumstantial evidence. Ready?"

Noah and Cazzy nodded.

"I think Count Nadar might be connected to all of this."

"Nadar... You are referring to Count Porque Nadar, are you not?"

"Why d'ya think that then?"

"His name keeps coming up. Those rumors about him buying up silver, and what Deet said about the prince investigating him. And then Pilocolo mentioned him just now. Plus, his territory is right next to Rustinell."

Even if Arcus had no solid proof, the frequency with which he heard that name was cause to suspect *something*.

"The Guild's investigation suggests there's some truth to the rumors he was buying up silver. For whatever reason, it's clear Count Nadar wanted silver. What isn't entirely clear is whether he *still* wants it."

"Ya think he might?"

"Yeah. But he was buying up so much before that it caused a ton of rumors, right? Enough to trigger an investigation. That means he can't be seen placing orders anymore. So he came up with a plan. He gathered himself a merchant and some bandits, then tasked them with obtaining and transporting some

silver for him. Have them get the silver legally... If that silver disappeared without a trace, that'd be suspicious, but if he can pin it on a third party, he could hide where that silver was *actually* going."

"Yeah. If he couldn't buy it, I guess his only option was stealin' it."

"That explains why the captured bandits killed themselves too. They were protecting the high-ranking noble who backed them. It's the same kinda thing spies do—dead men tell no tales and all that. Either that, or..."

"Eido disposed of them."

"Yeah. I wouldn't be surprised if he had a contact inside the village already."

"You believe, then, that those bandits were not bandits, but Count Nadar's subordinates."

Arcus was most convinced by the idea that they drank poison to avoid their master being found out, but it remained to be seen whether they were Nadar's men or not. At the very least, there had to be something big behind the scenes, or they wouldn't have needed to die.

"That's why there's been a shortage of silver, even though production's remained constant, huh?"

"It's not just Rustinell. There've been robberies all around the silver mines in the area. And that was why the capital's men have been struggling to work out where all the silver's going!"

"Gotcha. I'm bettin' the leaders around here don't wanna admit to the capital they keep gettin' their silver stolen either."

"Yeah. They're being lax about reporting the incidents and fudging the numbers, hoping they can just solve the problem themselves somehow. That's what Deet and his men are investigating, though I dunno if they suspect Nadar or not."

"They sure looked like they were pullin' out all the stops."

In this world, social status and ability tended to go hand-in-hand. Gathering the highest of the gentry into a fighting force and giving them both authority over others and a degree of autonomy would make for a team capable of

solving most problems. All that team really needed to do was to get the silver back to stabilize the supply, and the price would fall naturally. That would tie matters up, and there wouldn't be any need for the authorities to go out of their way to report their failings.

That, of course, would also explain why the investigation was having trouble. The crown still didn't know where the silver had gone, and they would never need to, just as long as the bandits were captured. Those in power would then be none the wiser as to what happened to the silver, and therefore they'd struggle to find out what was really going on behind the scenes. It was a sneaky way to manipulate the gaps in the state's red tape and the relationship between the regional monarchs here and the crown.

Assuming Arcus's deductions were true, Nadar must have had some very cunning men on his side. If so, he may have been hoarding even more silver than Arcus imagined. What was he planning to do with it? The most likely explanation was that he wanted to expand his military's armament.

But the silver was produced in this very spot. Normally you'd be more hungry for resources you didn't already have easy access to.

Arcus's eyes widened as he suddenly recalled something he'd said before to Sue. It was about building a good relationship with other territories to gather information from them. Trading goods was a part of that. But what if it all went too far?

"I think Count Nadar might be selling his silver to the Empire under the table."

If Nadar had an illegal trade deal with the Empire that included the sale of silver, everything would make sense. If the Empire kept demanding more and more, then he needed some way of obtaining the silver outside of his usual means.

Silver was a strategic resource as essential as oil was in the man's world, and a similar source of trouble. The Empire was currently at war with two separate countries, so it was only natural they'd want a lot of it.

"That is quite possible," Noah said.

"Yeah..." Cazzy said.

“I’m probably overthinking it, though,” Arcus admitted, leaning back in his chair to give his brain a rest.

No matter how much logical sense his thoughts made, he lacked conclusive proof, and a lot of it was mere speculation. It was too rash to decide that Pilocolo was working with the bandits, and that Count Nadar was pulling the strings. It was probably the man’s influence; he loved to read, but Arcus knew that reading too deeply into things would just cause biases in his thinking. So he decided to dismiss the line of thought for now.

Noah, however, was smiling. “I think it’s all rather fascinating, myself.”

“Really?”

“Put into those words, I cannot deny the possibility that what you say is true. In fact, I believe that it is quite probable.”

“You’ve got a darker mind than your face gives away. Remember that time when ya said we should start a fire to escape the tower? Never heard a noble say stuff like that.” Cazzy cackled.

“I’m sorry if that’s a bad thing,” Arcus sighed.

“This butler fella’s right, though. What yer sayin’ is pretty fascinatin’ stuff!” A familiar voice pitched in from out of nowhere.

It was only now that Arcus realized the strange man from Imeria was sitting right next to them, his feet up on the table as he rocked in his chair.

“Gilles.”

He was fiddling with a copper coin, looking like he had been sitting there long enough to find the most comfortable pose he could take.

“Wh-When did you...?”

“The heck did ya come from?!”

Noah leapt up from his seat and stood forward, ready to protect Arcus if need be. Cazzy reached for their gear.

“This is just one of my many talents. Don’t worry y’selves. I don’t wanna cause any trouble in this here establishment, either, so y’two can calm down. I just

came to speak to Arcus.” Gilles set down the sword he had on the floor and raised both hands, only continuing once he was sure Cazzy and Noah weren’t about to attack him. “So y’think Count Nadar’s sendin’ silver into the Empire? Y’don’t think it’s a bit much to be implicatin’ the count himself? I know it’s easy to assume the nobles are the bad guys, but still...”

“You might be right. There might be some other noble or leader or powerful merchant involved instead. Either way, silver’s easy to trace. It’s not something most thieves would go after, so if it’s been stolen, it means it’s going to somebody powerful enough to cover their tracks. Plus...”

“Plus?”

“The prince is already investigating Nadar. That means there’s reason to suspect him.”

“S’pose so. So y’think Count Nadar’s either sellin’ it on to the Empire, or traffickin’ it in?”

“Yeah. That way no one’ll be able to track it within the kingdom. The traces disappear the second it enters the Empire.”

“Y’thought this through good, huh?” Gilles nodded. “Anyway, what are your plans now, Arcus?”

“My plans?”

“Pilocolo’s been all friendly with those bandits, right? Don’t that make y’wanna punish ’em, seein’ as they’re havin’ their way with society and whatnot?”

“I mean, I don’t see what I can do about that.” Arcus sighed. Gilles had a very active imagination. Even if his deductions were true, it wasn’t like he had the power to stop any of it. Not only was it totally out of his jurisdiction, but it was still nothing more than speculation. There were already people whose job it was to deal with this sort of thing.

“Lemme ask y’somethin’, Arcus. Whaddya think Count Nadar’s gonna do if it comes out that he really was sellin’ silver to the Empire?”

“Well, first he’ll wanna protect himself, right? If he’s the kind to pull that sort

of stuff in the first place, he'll be looking to get his sentence lowered, so he'll come up with some kinda excuse or something, I guess."

"I reckon the same. And the prince is comin' down to sniff around himself, right? What if the count can't make no excuses? What then?"

"He'll..."

Arcus paused to think. Trafficking strategic resources to an enemy nation was nothing short of treason, and Nadar would be punished for sure. He would more than likely be sentenced to death. With the prince on his tail, the count must have been feeling the pinch right now. Would he allow them to take him quietly?

"Would he...attack the prince, maybe?"

"Ooh, interestin'. And then what?"

"Maybe he'd take the prince's head and bring it to the Empire as a gift..."

"Now that's creepy! I didn't know y'had those kinda thoughts in that head of yours, Arcus."

Arcus only spoke absentmindedly as the possibilities passed through his mind, but Gilles seemed very much on board with his ideas. He looked up suddenly to see the merchant grinning at him from ear to ear. Arcus barely had time to register where this was all going when Gilles posed yet another question.

"And then what? What'd happen next, Arcus?" The tone in Gilles's voice suggested this was the most significant question of all.

"Well, maybe Count Nadar would get caught and questioned about the prince's death, or maybe not. But the kingdom would be bound to try and destroy him. That's why Count Nadar would buy up all the wheat and salt, to prepare for a war, and..." Arcus's eyes widened.

"Oh, my..."

"Seriously..."

"To *prepare*. That's the keyword." Gilles snickered. "I'm gonna ask again now, Arcus. What are your plans now?"

“I can’t just pretend it’s got nothing to do with me after all that. That’s way too dangerous.”

“Yup.”

Arcus sighed.

“Don’t glare at me like that. I just helped y’get your thoughts together, didn’t I?”

He was right; without this conversation, it might have taken Arcus much longer to figure out what was going on behind the scenes. It made Arcus even more curious about who Gilles really was, and it put him doubly on his guard.

Just like that, the merchant stood up. “I wanna tell ya somethin’ interestin’ as thanks for a decent conversation, Arcus.”

“Something interesting?”

“Pilocolo’s at a warehouse in the north of the city right now. And he’s with some folk who look awful familiar.”

Arcus’s eyebrows shot up, and Gilles’s suspicious smile deepened. “Interestin’, right?”

“How long have you suspected Pilocolo?”

“From the start. But I knew for sure when I saw his transport permit. It was fake. Well-made, though. And I didn’t know anythin’ ’bout the bandits till later.”

Arcus couldn’t help wondering how much of that claim was true. It was possible it was Pilocolo’s destination which alerted Gilles to his untrustworthiness.

Seeing that Arcus still seemed cautious, Gilles lowered his voice. “This is the only time you can get your evidence, right?”

“Why?”

“Well, Pilocolo’s got a problem right now. He’s gotta get that silver he took to the count.”

It would take considerable effort to haul such heavy and unwieldy cargo. There had to be something here in the capital more suited to the task than

carts.

“That ‘new stuff’ he said he was transporting, and his ‘next job’... If he uses the river...”

“Uh huh. That’d be the easiest, safest, and most natural way for him to get it moved, right?”

Most traffic on the river passed through a warehouse district in the north of the capital. If Pilocolo was still in the city, then it was possible the silver was too. And if that was the case, now might be the only time to uncover his crimes.

What should we do?

“Now, this is just my gut talkin’, but didn’t y’reckon that Eido fella was kinda different from those bandits?”

“Yeah. He didn’t seem like a bandit at all to me.”

“It’s more than that—like he was actin’ separately from that group that crashed through the gates. I got the sense he was just usin’ ’em. Like fodder or somethin’, y’know.”

“You think maybe both Pilocolo and Eido were leading the bandits together?”

“I can’t be sure. He seemed sorta...independent, like there was somethin’ different about him, even compared to Pilocolo.”

“Different how?”

“Say Pilocolo’s someone’s tamed pet. Eido looked more like a fella who *couldn’t* be tamed. Didn’t y’get the same sorta feelin’ off of him? Like he wasn’t the type to be easily controlled by nobody. Not the type to answer to nobody. It was like he was only helpin’ out ’cause it benefited him in some way too.”

“You think?”

“I mean, why else would he promise you none of the villagers was gonna be harmed, like he’s got a personal code he wanted to stick to no matter what? It was like that code was his master, and no person could replace it.”

Arcus thought back to the fight. He could see where Gilles was coming from.

“Those’re just my thoughts,” Gilles said, “but if they’re wrong, I don’t think

they’re far off from the truth.”

“Eido...”

“Y’mentioned he helped some fella out on the road, right? I know it’s tough to sympathize with your enemy, but it pays to understand ’em before y’put ’em down. Y’can’t ask ’em important questions when they’re gone, no matter how much y’regret missin’ your chance.”

“You might be onto something there...”

With that, Gilles turned toward the entrance. “Try not to die, okay? I’ll be cheerin’ ya on from the shadows.” He waved a hand over his shoulder before walking off.

Gilles spoke as though he already knew what Arcus would decide to do. Arcus kept his eyes on him as he left. Gilles suddenly caught himself mid-stride and clapped his hands.

“Oh, right! I forgot to mention somethin’ really important!”

“What’s that?”

“Remember how I wanted to be sellin’ your Seal Tools and stuff? Mind thinkin’ it over properly? Next time we meet, I’ll have some real swell stuff for you.”

That again?

“Okay. Come see me again when you’ve got time,” said Arcus.

“Nice! Love you, Arcus!”

“D-Don’t touch me! It’s creepy!”

It was as though the mystery surrounding the merchant had dissipated the moment he turned around to embrace Arcus. Arcus shooed him away, terrified at the way he puckered his lips, even if it was in jest. That was enough to get the merchant to leave this time, though he made a show of running away.

He’s way too weird.

It wouldn’t hurt to be cautious around him given his behavior. Still, for better or worse, Arcus had the feeling it would be necessary to maintain ties.

“Master Arcus,” Noah began. “What are we to do now?”

“I’m technically nobility—or at least, I get paid by the state. That means I have a duty to act.”

“Ya don’t think that guy was just spoutin’ nonsense?”

“I can’t think of a reason for him to trick us. And if he was trying to manipulate us, there’d be easier ways to do it. He could’ve stuck to using the silver shortage against me without bringing Pilocolo or Eido into it,” Arcus reasoned. “Noah, Cazzy. I want you two to go check out the warehouse district to the north now. I’ll grab some backup, and then I’ll be on my way too.”

“Huh? Who is this ‘backup’?” Cazzy asked.

“Deet and his men.”

“Ooh.”

“That is wise thinking. Their presence may well be necessary.”

This may have been an emergency, but they were deep in Rustinell territory. Arcus couldn’t just do what he pleased without permission; he needed Deet on his side first. And if Eido was still hanging around, they’d need more fighting power than just the three of them.

Arcus exchanged a nod with his attendants before they moved out.

After splitting off from Noah and Cazzy outside the restaurant, Arcus hurried down the streets to see Deet and his men. Deet had told Arcus where they’d be when they’d split up, so he arrived quickly and without needing to ask too many people for the way.

“We’ll be at the military station all day today, so come by if you need us. We’ll help you out with whatever.”

“The master will have his hands full with writing out plans and paperwork for dealing with the bandits.”

“Can’t someone else do it?”

“No. This is your responsibility, Master.”

“Well, I *can’t do it! I gotta go report to Mom!”*

“I shall take care of that, so you may go ahead and focus on your paperwork.”

“Nooo! You’re so mean, Galanger!”

With his one means of escape blocked off by Galanger, Deet had sunk into the depths of despair. Forcing a child of his age to read through pages and pages of documents crammed with letters was nothing short of cruel. Even if reading and comprehending was his only task, it wouldn’t be long before he developed a headache. If the work was simple, perhaps it wouldn’t be so bad, but Arcus would wager there was a lot of difficult and technical language in those papers. He felt sorry for Deet, but no matter how much compassion Arcus felt for him and no matter how gloomy the look on his face, he couldn’t escape the clutches of the minor lords who dragged him away that afternoon.

It was just a little before sunset, so Arcus figured Deet must have been done around now. The city bell announcing twilight had just started chiming. Arcus corrected himself; if Deet was drawing up and sorting his own reports and documents, he might still be at it even now.

Arcus arrived at the station and announced himself to the gatekeepers, who appeared to recognize his name straight away. Deet must have warned them Arcus might show up. He had brought his letter from the king just in case, but in the end it’d proven pointless. The gatekeepers went to tell Deet of his arrival, and it wasn’t long until one of the local minor lords who Arcus had seen with Deet before appeared.

Arcus felt it was a little over-the-top to send a lord to see him when he was just a kid himself and the matter was trivial, but perhaps that was just how they did things here in Rustinell.

It could be they didn’t have enough lower-ranking personnel here, so they resorted to using lords as messengers, but Arcus suspected it was the opposite: by having a lord pass on the message like a common handmaid, Deet was showing just how much power *he* had. Personally, Arcus could think of more effective ways to flaunt one’s power, but then he had experience of a world where honor and titles didn’t mean nearly as much as they did here.

The lord spoke briefly with the gatekeepers. While they seemed nervous in his presence, they weren’t speaking overly formally with him either. Rather than

speaking to someone with absolute power over them, it was like they were speaking to a manager in their office. Once they were done, they exchanged a simple nod before the lord came to fetch Arcus and show him to a workroom.

The first thing he noticed was Deet slumped over the desk, apparently physically suffocating under the weight of his paperwork. His face was pale and shading here and there into violet, to the point that Arcus found himself suspecting cyanosis. Arcus pictured Deet's soul escaping his body in a plume of ectoplasm. In all fairness, the paperwork didn't seem *that* substantial, but Arcus was keenly reminded of why he hated the idea of children around his age being forced through such work. Even if this world was a meritocracy, he wished they had some child labor laws to go along with it. First, they needed child welfare centers. The labor unions could come after that.

Deet sprang back to life the moment he noticed Arcus. He jumped over his desk in a single leap and flung his arms around Arcus. "Arcus! I'm so glad you're here! Thank you! Thank you! Thanks so much!"

"Uh..." Arcus could only produce a confused croak as Deet's movements sent a flurry of papers flying into the air. He was acting as though one of the Twin Phantoms had appeared to save him from his plight. Arcus felt like a fireman who'd just saved a woman's kitten from a burning building.

Galanger, who appeared to have been supervising Deet as he worked, sighed. "Master, please don't tell me your threats of dying earlier were just a ruse?"

"Th-They weren't! I was seriously about to die! My thoughts were all mushing together and my consciousness was fading!"

"Are you sure you weren't just falling asleep?"

"No! I was dying!"

"It really is about time you started getting used to this kind of work."

"I prefer using my body to using my brain!"

With how energetic Deet was, Arcus could well believe it. Deet darted behind Arcus to glare back at Galanger.

"Even you can't do this kinda work, can you, Arcus?" he asked, making it

sound more like a statement than a question.

Arcus had only harsh truths to share. “Actually, I’ve been doing three times as much as this recently.”

“See?! This much isn’t norm—huh?!”

“I’m saying I do paperwork too.”

“Wait, really? And three times this much? Huh? What?!”

“Yeah.”

In Arcus’s case, his paperwork concerned the aethometer and its production. He was able to gain some time back after sharing his tempered aether technique, which started not long after the production increase. He naively thought he could use that extra time as he pleased, but instead it was filled with extra paperwork. Those documents included test reports, data from inspections, permission requests to use the device in a certain field, and so forth.

Since Arcus couldn’t carry out that paperwork at the Raytheft residence, he borrowed one of Craib’s rooms. Between the weekly load of new red tape and the reports he had to write up before their deadlines, he was left with as little free time as before.

No child his age should have to do so much work, and it was only increasing. Arcus sighed as he thought of it, reminding himself to make good on his plan to eventually divide the labor.

Deet stood speechless before him.

“You see, Master?” Galanger said. “Others have it even worse than you. Now get back to it.”

“No! It doesn’t make any sense! Something weird’s going on here!”

“You know, I think it’s about time you started speaking more suitably, considering your status,” said Galanger.

“Why? It’s easier speaking like this!”

While Deet hadn’t confirmed who he was to Arcus, his place on the social

ladder could not be doubted. He was Rustinell's son, and the minor lords stood below him. While Arcus himself was a noble's son, his father wasn't a very high-ranking one. He and Deet shouldn't have been conversing as casually as they did.

"But Master—"

"Okay, then I order you to let me speak however I want and you speak how you want! Now you can't do anything about it! Right?"

"Please, be reasonable..." The exasperation was clear on Galanger's face as he looked at Deet, even if his master's suggestion would make things easier for him as well.

From the way he spoke, an onlooker may well come to the conclusion that Deet didn't understand his own social status. The position of Rustinell's son counted for a lot, even across the entire kingdom. Deet outranked even Charlotte, who was daughter to a count—Arcus should have been addressing him much more politely.

"No! I'll speak properly when it matters, but I can speak how I want *here*!" Deet insisted.

"This is your workplace. You should be treating it as a formal environment, especially when you are working."

"Wrong! This is my private room!"

"I'm sure not even our visitor here could believe such an outrageous lie."

Deet was as immaturely stubborn as ever.

Eventually, Galanger relented. "Please speak with my master in accordance to his wishes."

"Okay. But I should be talking to you, and people like you, with more respect," Arcus pointed out, mainly to Deet.

"If that is how you feel..."

"It is, sir."

"Oh?"

With that, the conversation finally seemed to be coming to an end—until Deet brazenly opened his mouth to stop the matter being settled.

“‘Sir’? Don’t like it.”

“You do realize I hold a certain status myself, don’t you, Master?” Galanger pointed out with a smile. Despite how they argued, they seemed to be on good terms, and the discussion finally ended there.

“Can I move on to the main topic now?” Arcus asked, eager not to waste any more time.

“Is it about the thing with my mom tomorrow? Galanger already told her.”

“I did. Her Ladyship will see you, and I have made sure your visit will be kept confidential. There is no need to worry.”

“Thank you. But I’m actually here for something else.”

“What?” asked Deet.

“We think we know where those bandits are right now.”

“Really?! Tell us, tell us!” Deet asked eagerly, clearly hungry for any clue he could get his hands on.

“Are you sure?” Galanger asked. “This is a little sudden...”

“We can’t guarantee anything, but we’re very confident,” Arcus said.

Galanger called a number of important personnel into the room. When everyone was gathered, Arcus spoke about what he learned and figured out in the restaurant. He made sure to mention Gilles’s part in the development of his theories.

“That does all seem very logical,” Galanger remarked once he was done. “So the bandits managed to escape because they had a co-conspirator...”

“We think so. They knew precisely where their target would be, and were therefore able to make the preparations to carry the silver out.”

“I have to admit, I’m curious about the identity of that Imerian merchant. Didn’t you think to capture him?”

“Uh...”

Arcus hadn't thought of that. His head was too full of the new revelations and the threat to the prince.

Maybe that wasn't all though...

Gilles had shared useful information with them. Arcus couldn't call him an enemy, but neither could he call him an ally. That label stopped Arcus from even considering capture, but he could see that from Deet's perspective, they would want to question him again.

"I didn't think of it. It was careless of me and I apologize."

Deet stepped in front of Arcus protectively. "It's not like we treated that guy with enough suspicion either, Galanger. If you wanna blame Arcus, we need to take responsibility too. Besides, if he tried to capture some merchant out here in our territory, he would probably just get in trouble."

Deet turned to smile at Arcus. Arcus had to admit he was a good speaker, but that was likely because he had experience rattling off excuses like this.

"True. Maybe it was wrong of me to say anything."

"Doesn't matter anyway, 'cause we don't have time to talk about this now. We gotta go after this Pilocolo guy," said Deet. He turned to Arcus. "You were gonna go collect evidence now, right?"

"Yes. I hope you don't mind, but I sent Noah and Cazzy up to the warehouse already."

"That's fine. It's good you did, actually."

Arcus needed to be careful not to overstep the mark and do anything that would make Deet and his men lose face. Keeping an eye on the bandits and Pilocolo in case they changed course, however, was a necessity. After this, he could just leave the rest for Deet to deal with.

"What are your thoughts, Master?"

"We're going to stop 'em, of course! We can't just let them trample around here like they own the place!"

"Remember that this merchant might be entirely innocent."

“Hold on, Galanger! Are you saying you don’t trust Arcus?”

“Not at all. I’m just suggesting he might be mistaken.”

“If he’s not, the prince might be in trouble. We gotta at least check this out, especially since this is our turf. We gotta do something!”

“You may be right. We are sorely lacking information in any case, so it might be best to take action.”

The other minor lords voiced their agreement. Even if Arcus was wrong, they wouldn’t suffer for taking that risk here—they were too powerful. It was a simple matter for them to crush those who abused their privileges, and even if they were wrong, this wasn’t the kind of world where a lowly merchant could accuse the authorities of overreacting and be listened to.

But if Arcus was right and they did nothing, they had a problem. The prince was currently on his way out of Rustinell. Even if he was attacked after leaving the territory, there wasn’t much protecting Rustinell from suspicion, and that would be the worst possible outcome for these lords. At the very least, they were obliged to track down Pilocolo and investigate his cargo.

As the discussion wore on, one of the lords who’d temporarily left his seat returned with a document, which he passed to Deet.

“Here is a list of all the cargo that has entered the capital today.”

He sure moved quickly.

Deet opened up the document to make sure everyone could see it.

“There’s our merchant’s name,” one of the lords said.

“What does it say about his cargo?” asked another.

“It’s described as ‘general cargo.’ He does seem to have a lot of it, though.”

“I think we really ought to look into this.”

With that, Deet started to give his orders, and everyone moved out. The soldiers were already prepared to get to work and quickly separated themselves into troops. Galanger organized them further, directing each one to a separate position. The group that would be charging in was led by Deet. It consisted of

several lords and some of the more physically powerful soldiers. Meanwhile, other groups, led by lords, were sent to seal the gates and the river.

Arcus followed Deet's group to the warehouse district. Night had already fallen and work had finished in the area, leaving it almost devoid of human activity. Sol Glasses lit the path, likely to deter would-be criminals, so it wasn't hard to navigate despite the darkness. Uniform buildings set with huge doors lined the path, and carts and wagons had been left out here and there alongside them. The nearby river sent a cool wind through the air. If Arcus had to guess by feeling alone, this stretch was two or three degrees colder than other parts of the city.

As Arcus approached the entrance, Noah and Cazzy appeared from the shadow of a wall. They must have deduced that their master would come from this direction.

"Deet and his troop are with me. Did you manage everything I asked?"

"We did." Noah nodded, his countenance as calm as ever.

"So you found Pilocolo and the bandits?"

"Yes. Cazzy informed me that ne'er-do-wells tend to take their work seriously, so we searched for people who looked busy. It was unexpectedly simple to track them down."

"Whoa. Way to go, Cazzy."

"Indeed."

"I'm not as useless as I look, huh?" Cazzy cackled.

Trust Cazzy to know how a bad guy's mind works...

"We have confirmed Mr. Pilocolo entering and leaving that building over there several times," Noah said.

"He's got a ton of stuff with him. I'm thinkin' he's tryin' to get it all loaded up during the night so he can leave soon as the sun's up."

Arcus checked the report the minor lord had brought in. The amounts Cazzy spoke of looked like they matched the cargo that Pilocolo brought down the river this morning.

“Are the bandits who attacked the village in there?” Deet asked Noah.

“Yes, we are almost certain they are. While their attire is different, I have seen several faces I recognize.”

“There doesn’t seem to be any doubt,” said Galanger. “To think they’re carrying out their evil deeds right under our noses...”

It sounded like this warehouse district had been a blind spot for Deet and his troops.

“Did you see Eido at all?” Arcus asked the question that was pressing on his mind.

“No. Nor anybody resembling him.”

“He could be holed up inside there though,” Cazzy pointed out. “Safer to assume he is.”

“I dunno. I think he might not be here at all,” said Arcus.

“Why is that?” Noah asked.

“Gilles told us in no uncertain terms that Pilocolo was here, but he never said Eido was. He only mentioned Pilocolo and some familiar men. He knew Eido’s name, so he should’ve mentioned him by name—and straight away too.”

“That don’t sound like very strong reasonin’ to me,” Cazzy said.

“There’s something else. If I’m right about this, then there’s no doubt.” Arcus held up Gown’s lantern.

Within the last two to three days, the lantern had been behaving strangely from time to time. It rattled just before they met Eido and when the bandits attacked, as if it was trying to tell Arcus something. More specifically, Arcus guessed it meant to warn him when danger loomed ahead, and that the more violently it shook, the more dire the threat.

“What’s that, Arcus?” Deet asked.

“It’s a little present someone gave me. If my thinking’s correct...”

Arcus held up the lantern in the warehouse’s direction. It began to shake, though not as violently as before.

“Is it doing that by itself?”

“Yeah. But it shook way more the last two times, which means whoever’s in that warehouse isn’t too much of a threat.”

“I do recall the lantern reacting in a similar manner before those bandits attacked,” Noah remarked.

“That gift Gown gave ya wasn’t just for show then?” Cazzy cackled.

“Are you telling us that the magician you referred to isn’t with the group?” Galanger asked.

“Yes. He shouldn’t be with them,” Arcus replied. “Deet. What do you want us to do?”

All Arcus had intended to do was to lead Deet to Pilocolo. Their only objective in Rustinell was to obtain silver, and Arcus was cautious about stepping on anybody’s toes or getting involved in matters they had no right to be involved in. Leaving Deet and his men to take care of things here would probably be their best course of action. More than that, it probably wouldn’t reflect well on Deet to allow his mother’s guests from another territory to face a dangerous situation—but Deet’s answer surprised him.

“You’re here now. Could you help us out? You’re the one who found them, Arcus, so if you walk away now, you’ll barely get any credit for it.”

“I’m not really bothered about that...”

It seemed an odd point to bring up. Arcus had no connections to Rustinell whatsoever. However concerned Deet was about “credit” where it was due his underlings, he wasn’t obliged to worry about it when it came to this group of outsiders. Arcus would even go so far as to call it a foolish thing to say. He glanced up at Galanger to see his reaction; he was pinching the bridge of his nose.

“It is a tradition here in Rustinell to recognize those who have done our county a great service. It is gravely forbidden to take credit from others.”

“Yeah, what he said. You gotta recognize those who get results. Besides Arcus, don’t you wanna see this through to the end?”

“I guess...”

“It’s decided, then! Gather round, everyone! We’re going in!”

At Deet’s command, the armed soldiers began to rush the warehouse. Arcus and his attendants followed, bursting in after them.

Rivel Coast of the Empire’s southern field army let out an exhausted sigh as he carried out his work.

What did I do to deserve this?

He groaned and grumbled unconsciously under his breath; he wouldn’t have if he could at least tolerate his assigned position, but he’d been tasked with cataloging inventory—one of the simplest, most menial tasks out there. Anyone could tally up and classify cargo.

Rivel had graduated from the Empire’s military academy with outstanding results, been placed straight into the army’s elite course, and officially joined as a company officer. Everyone had high hopes for his future and expected him to join the highest ranks one day.

But now here he was, counting boxes in a warehouse. He’d only started his new duties three days ago, and he’d never expected to be told he was being transferred south to Lainur—far from a lively place to be in these current times. Then he was told to blend in with the locals and work as they did like some sort of *spy*.

Didn’t they see my grades?! I should be right in the heart of the army or out on a battlefield somewhere testing my mettle!

After graduation, most soldiers either went on to further study or were sent north in command of their first company to join the fight against inferior empires. Rivel was instead sent right into an enemy kingdom.

His task was both to observe and assist with the plan to seize silver from Lainur, for which the Empire had an ally in one of the kingdom’s counts. In other words, he was nothing more than the assistant to a cat burglar.

Much of Rivel’s education had been preparation for managing a fighting force. None of that looked like it would be of any use here. No matter how you cut it,

this was not where an elite soldier belonged.

This is all those imbeciles' fault! All of it!

Rivel dwelt on the classmates who had graduated with him. His relationship with them went well beyond simple antipathy: they saw everything he did as an attack against them, and their only talents lay in harassing him. It didn't matter how well Rivel did in school; they never accepted him, instead choosing to bully him over his personal appearance. He knew that one of them must have sabotaged things so he would be assigned here, doubtlessly borne out of jealousy for his outstanding achievement. Most likely they had slandered him to a lecturer or a high-ranking officer in the force.

They were all spoiled, incompetent hacks who only found their way into the brass because of their lineage. Their parents had simply applied a little pressure to get them in.

It was the only explanation that made sense. Why else would a talented man like Rivel be made to carry out such demeaning work in a place like this?

The Empire was a meritocracy. Those who lacked talent were treated with disdain, while those who had it could rise to a respectable post no matter how lowly their lineage. If the opposite was happening, it meant some worthless lowlife was pulling strings behind the scenes.

There was no doubt in Rivel's mind that someone had set him up.

It's the only explanation that makes sense!

Rivel resumed his grumbling. This went on for some time until he felt calmer, at which point he looked to the side. Documents and permits, as well as instructions from the count, sat piled haphazardly atop a wooden crate. Deeper inside the warehouse was the load of stolen silver. It was covered with a simple cloth, as though there was no need to be inconspicuous about it at all. No one had been punished for their slipshod methods; most of the people involved were confident that this hiding spot wouldn't be found.

Rivel himself didn't know why they had chosen Rustinell's capital city, a place ruled by the infamous Louise Rustinell, as a temporary store for the silver. Perhaps it was because of the river's convenience for moving cargo, or perhaps

it was the tendency for people to overlook what was happening right under their noses. As a military academy graduate, however, Rivel knew that storing the silver here was asking for trouble. If there was a good reason why it *had* to happen here, that was another matter, but Rivel knew that wasn't the case. He found it incredibly difficult to understand why the silver and even the count's instructions had to be kept here of all places.

It might not have amounted to anything more than the fact that this spot was the most convenient to receive the silver. The instructions were to be burnt after a certain period of time, but that hardly mattered when the incriminating silver was right there. If it was discovered, they'd all be arrested on the spot.

An operation like this called for minimum possible risk. Rivel tried to reason with the men here to do just that, but they hadn't listened to him—possibly out of laziness, possibly because they didn't have the foresight to even *consider* that they might get caught. They just followed their instructions mindlessly.

Imbeciles, the whole lot of them...

They were all like this: quick to look down on others and thus dismiss their every opinion out of hand. Their orders took precedence over all else and pushed out any semblance of intelligent thought. The leader of this pack of buffoons was a merchant named Pilocolo.

"G-Get to work please, everyone!"

His tone lacked even an ounce of confidence; it was painfully obvious how uncomfortable he was giving orders. The men working here were posing as merchants, so he must have been picked for his familiarity with the profession. For his part, Pilocolo seemed totally unsuited to such unsophisticated work.

"The hell are you talkin' about?! Y'know we lost some of our own in the attack yesterday, right? Or does your memory only go back three seconds?!"

That was precisely why these men had no qualms speaking to him like that.

"Y-Yes! I know, but...I didn't think they had any magicians on their side, so..."

"That kid was fixin' up seals, you moron! Of course he was a magician!" the bandit shouted.

“Eek! P-Please, forgive me!” Pilocolo shrank back like an injured animal.

The bandits had lost many men in the previous night’s attack. They had learned later that a group of magicians from the kingdom had been staying in the village who were happy using the full extent of their powers to protect it. Apparently, most of the group that attacked the southern gate was defeated and subsequently captured. Those captured were killed with strychnine in order to keep their mouths shut.

The bandit shouting at Pilocolo was the group’s leader, hired at the same time the merchant was. He was a typical small-time villain, the type to suck up to the strong and push around the weak. It was likely that personality that won him his career. Pilocolo was weak-willed, so the bandit took every chance he could to take his anger out on him. If Pilocolo had any sort of backbone, he might have been able to suppress this kind of disrespect, but instead he took the abuse every time he made even a tiny mistake. Count Nadar had made an error of judgment choosing him for a leadership role.

Rivel could already see the merchant breaking if he continued to work in this environment, and yet nobody was taking any steps to improve things. It was, simply put, foolish. Rivel found himself incredulous that other people could really be that stupid.

“Hey, Empire grunt.” A voice called out from beside Rivel.

Rivel despised being referred to as a grunt, but he swallowed his anger and turned to see who had addressed him. This slim man had been sent personally by Count Nadar. He was lying lackadaisically atop one of the wooden crates like it was his personal throne. His body was covered with too many piercings for it to be called stylish, and half of his face was covered with a tattoo of a fearsome beast. If he’d had a woman waiting on him by his side, he might have given the impression that he was some big shot from the underworld, but Rivel wasn’t confident in that evaluation.

Everyone around them was bustling about while he lounged around. Nobody called him out for this, however; he was a magician.

“What?” Rivel asked warily.

The man sneered. “You done checking the cargo yet, huh? No? What, you

haven’t learned to pick up the pace? Ugh. You’re a total waste of space.”

The magician made no attempt to keep his voice low as he ridiculed Rivel. It was like he was warning everyone else not to follow Rivel’s example. Rivel opened his mouth to defend himself, but the magician, who was better with his words, got in first.

“Y’know, I feel bad for guys like you who can’t do nothing. Too dumb to learn stuff no matter where you go, and you’ll always be treated like trash as long as you live.”

“I-I am not—”

“I gotta be right, or you wouldn’t get kicked out to a place like this. Oh, but wait. You’re one of the Empire’s elite soldiers, right? Sorry, forgot about that.”

“Grgh!”

“It’s pitiful, really. No matter what you do, you’ll never amount to nothing.” His sneer was filled with loathing.

Rivel knew he wasn’t working slowly enough to deserve being called “dumb.” He was sure this was a normal pace for anybody taking on work with which they were unaccustomed. This magician just liked to rile him up over every little thing, and had done so ever since Rivel’s arrival here. He probably liked to show contempt for people like Rivel in order to boost his self-esteem. Picking on an elite soldier after his fall from grace must have filled him with satisfaction.

Rivel could hear scornful laughter all around him as the other men joined in with the magician. While Rivel was distracted by them, the magician kicked down the papers he’d just piled up.

“Ah...”

The papers flew through the air and scattered over the floor. They were so neatly put together, and now they’d have to be sorted all over again.

“Oh, sorry!” exclaimed the magician, sounding anything but. “I didn’t see those there. I’m *so* sorry, Snivel.”

Rivel said nothing. Anybody could see he’d done it on purpose.

“What, you mad at me now? Hm? If you’re mad, why not tell me about it,

huh?” the magician said.

Rivel couldn’t let himself be riled up. If he did, the magician would only ramp up his efforts. He’d endured more than his fair share of bullying at school. If he reacted, it would never end.

The magician clicked his tongue in disappointment at Rivel’s lack of reaction. “When you’re done with that stuff, move on to this pile too.”

“You’re not my superior. Why don’t you do it, since you clearly don’t have anything better to do?”

“Huh? What’d you say?” The magician shot to his feet and glared at Rivel. Rivel suspected that wheels were already turning in his skull, assembling the syntax of some spell that would bring him to heel.

“I-I’m from the Empire! Is your boss really going to be pleased once he hears you’ve made a mockery of one of the Empire’s people?”

The magician scowled and clicked his tongue again. Even people like this wouldn’t want Count Nadar to think badly of them because he heard they hurt an Imperial officer.

“Laze around and contribute nothing if you want,” Rivel continued, “but I hope you know what you’re doing. Once we’re back in Nadar, the orders are that we are to attack Lainur’s prince from behind.”

“Huh? What, you think I *don’t* know that? I’m fighting right at the front—unlike you.”

“I’m just glad you understand.”

“That all you wanna say about it? Pathetic. You coulda come up with a smarter way to change the subject.”

Rivel didn’t respond.

“And now you’re not saying anything?! Guess it doesn’t matter; I’ll forgive you, since I’m in such a good mood. Can’t wait till I get to give the prince his dirt nap!” The magician’s lip curled cruelly like the shadow of a beast hungry for blood. “I can see it already. The prince and everyone around him, destroyed by my magic.”

“Aren’t you a citizen of Lainur?” Rivel asked. “Why are you so keen to attack your own prince?”

“Obvious, isn’t it? I wanna give back to this kingdom that’s spent so long treating me like dirt when I’m one of the most powerful magicians out there!”

“Give back?” Rivel echoed.

“Yeah. I’ve been using magic since I was a kid. Never met another who could outmatch me. But just because I didn’t go to their precious Institute, this country’s officials treat me the same as any other ‘unlicensed’ magician!”

“That’s your reason for attacking the prince?”

“That prince is the kid of the greatest magician in our land. What better target for my revenge could there be?” The magician smiled like a classic fairy-tale villain, and again Rivel kept silent.

He could see the deep loathing set in that disturbing smile. All this talk of unrecognized talent... It hardly seemed like something to get so resentful over. Rivel doubted this man was talented at all; otherwise there’d be no need for him to disgrace himself by getting in with the count.

“Got a problem?” asked the magician.

“No.”

“Tch. People without talent... All they’re good for is huddling up in the corner and staying out of our way.”

All this magician did was throw insults at Rivel and encourage others to do the same behind his back. He was clearly emotionally unstable.

Rivel found himself wondering again why he was being forced to work with such unpleasant people. They were obsessed with their own short-term desires and self-preservation, not even trying to look at the bigger picture. They were at the pinnacle of foolishness. Even worse were those who managed to get hustled by these imbeciles. This county’s garrison had no idea they were dealing with a corrupt count. They only assumed the transporters of the silver were attacked in the mountains, where they were now patrolling for bandits.

Foolish, foolish, foolish. No, foolish was too weak of a word for it.

“Rustinell’s leaders probably *still* don’t realize the silver’s gone. And then there’s the prince, running headfirst into danger...” Rivel started grumbling again, as had become his habit, before realizing he shouldn’t be speaking aloud and clapping a hand to his mouth.

“A careless mouth breeds trouble.”

So went the proverb in the Empire. If you voiced your disdain for others, something was bound to happen which would prove you wrong. This world and all that came to pass in it was dictated by the Elder Tongue. Every tongue had evolved from that origin, and each word spoken held some small degree of power—enough to influence matters with a poke here and a nudge there.

The military valued that philosophy a great deal. It was customary never to speak lightly of the opponent, or say anything that might breed bad luck, even if you held such thoughts in your head. While Rivel saw that as nothing more than superstition, he agreed with the notion that underestimating your opponent could lead to real trouble—so he kept his mouth shut.

“R-Rustinell soldiers! Outside!” a voice suddenly called.

“What?! At this time of night?”

“Why?!”

“They’re armed and everything!”

A cold shiver ran down Rivel’s spine. Had he caused this with his careless words?

One of the bandits grabbed Pilocolo. “This your fault? You do somethin’ stupid, you old bastard?!”

“N-No, I don’t think...” Pilocolo began, but he’d been making blunder after blunder since yesterday. Even he couldn’t deny the possibility he messed up again. If only he had been able to take better command of these men, there wouldn’t be this much discord between them. Pilocolo began giving orders. “We have to buy some time. Everybody get to the hidden room!”

Before anyone could follow those orders, the warehouse entrance was forced open, and the troops flooded inside.

Those muscular soldiers were led by a boy with russet hair and a greatsword. Some of them matched the descriptions passed on to Rivel and the others before they were assigned here—minor lords who held territory here in Rustinell, trusted retainers of Louise Rustinell, and well-known for their fierce fighting prowess. Rustinell didn't govern in the same way as other territories; each lord doubled as a commander of their territory to be called into action at any time. It was an old system kept from before Rustinell's rise to power, when it was still small. It was a policy that made efficient use of the territory's powerful people, most of which boasted a high status or impressive lineage, and the exact opposite to the Empire's reformed system of multiple chains of command that the sheer size of their army necessitated.

Rivel had learned all about efficient military systems at the military academy; to him, Rustinell's methods seemed terribly outdated.

Nevertheless, their soldiers were here now, and it was a terrifying sight to see them bursting into the warehouse with the power of a hundred men, even though they were much fewer than that. Some were plump and balding, some wielded swords and wore fine clothing, some were tanned like rough river bandits, some were overwhelmingly large, and some just looked indescribably unique, but each shared the same overwhelming and intimidating air. Rivel had the sense that any one of them could have come alone and single-handedly defeated the entire bandit crew.

Rivel hurried to hide behind a nearby wooden crate. His academy education was all about leading men. While he'd had basic weapons training, it was far from his specialty. He peered out from behind the crate to witness the man standing beside the red-haired boy shouting.

"We are Rustinell's troops! We are here on a special investigation! Everybody down on the floor! Anybody who fails to cooperate will be deemed a rebel!"

An investigation?!

Rivel hadn't heard of any other warehouse being investigated. Why did they pick this one specifically?

Everyone around him fell totally silent, too shocked to follow the lord's orders. At this rate, it would only be a matter of time before the troop worked

out just what was going on here.

Pilocolo stepped forward. “My name is Pilocolo; I am making use of this warehouse. Firstly, I’d like to thank you for all the hard work you do. Without your protection, there is no way we’d be able to devote ourselves to what we do in peace, day in and day out.” Pilocolo bowed his head deeply and appreciatively.

“Be quiet and do as you’re told.”

“Yes, well, it’s just that I hadn’t heard anything about any sort of investigation.”

“This is a *special* investigation. Get on the floor. Now.”

“Oh. Oh, gracious me... I don’t think I can...”

It sounded like Pilocolo was trying to find some way to leave without a fuss, while the soldier was trying to keep him in place so he wouldn’t have to resort to violent measures. Now that Rivel looked, he noticed a bribe set aside for this sort of situation. He shouldn’t have expected anything else from a cringing, unblooded merchant.

Pilocolo continued to praise and thank the soldiers, trying to turn the conversation in his favor. As he wittered on, the line of soldiers parted, revealing a group of three who weren’t dressed like any soldiers Rivel had ever seen. At the head was a young boy with silver hair. He must have been a noble; those behind him, his attendants.

Pilocolo’s face drained of color the instant he saw that group. “Y-You...”

“We meet again. I never imagined you were in league with the bandits,” the silver-haired boy said, in a tone suggesting he knew exactly what was going on here.

“I-I just can’t understand what’s going on here...”

“You can’t seriously be trying to play dumb now. You and the bandits who attacked the village were working together so you could fake your silver getting stolen.”

“U-Um, listen, Master Arcus. I think you might be mistaken. I don’t have

anything to do with those bandits from last night...”

“Huh? Mistaken, am I? That’s weird. Some of these guys are definitely the same ones from last night. That guy there, and the one standing next to that strut. Oh, and that guy face-down on the floor there.”

“I-I can explain...”

“Besides, didn’t you tell us all about it earlier? It didn’t sound like you were lying then.”

Suddenly it was like the air exploded.

“You bastard! You piece of shit merchant! This is all your fault!”

“N-No! You must stay back!” Pilocolo protested.

“Shut your mouth! We’re done for now anyway!”

An exasperated sigh fell from Rivel’s lips. What an idiot. He might as well have outright confessed, and Pilocolo’s attempt at covering up for him was no use at all.

A smug grin rose to the boy’s face. “Hey. We met yesterday, right?”

“You’re that brat, ain’t you?”

“You wanna know what that merchant told us in the restaurant before? He said he was going to Nadar for work.”

“What?!”

A murmur spread through the bandits, and they all turned their glares to Pilocolo at once. Their short temper had pushed them to play right into the silver-haired boy’s hands. He hadn’t even mentioned the crux of this whole scheme. All he’d done was made an implication. The bandits were so frightened of an attack that they jumped to the conclusion that their foe knew everything —likely on account of the losses they took the night before thanks to Pilocolo.

One thing was for sure: that boy truly believed Pilocolo was with these bandits, as proven with the copious confidence he made the claim with and the fact these men burst in so brazenly. The question was how he’d found out.

“Eido’s not here after all, huh?” the boy said.

“Hmph. He’ll be in Nadar already,” the bandit scoffed.

“So he wasn’t working with you?”

“Who’d wanna work with that greasy weirdo? Tch.”

“How dare you guys treat our Rustinell like your playground!” An angry shout cut through the air. It was the red-haired boy. The next second, a silver streak flashed through the air, leaving a flickering afterimage. A head appeared on the floor as if out of nowhere, blood squirting from its neck and splattering across the warehouse floor. It was the head of the bandit who’d shouted at Pilocolo. Only now did Rivel realize the boy had swung his sword. It was huge; it would have been cumbersome even for an adult.

A shaky voice rose from the crowd. “The Guillotine of Rustinell...”

It was a legendary weapon here in the western reach of Lainur: the ancestral blade of House Rustinell and its most steadfast executioner, whose grim shadow hung over the Empire’s designs on the kingdom. It was a masterpiece; it had parted the heads from generations of Imperial soldiers’ shoulders. Most of all, it was proof that the russet-haired boy standing there was heir to Rustinell’s throne.

The boy and his soldiers moved as one. The bandits and Pilocolo’s guards took up their weapons, ready to fight back. The silver-haired boy opened his mouth and muttered something in the Elder Tongue.

He must be a magician...

Rivel wondered—was this boy one of the travelers he’d heard about who’d helped capture several of the bandits? He seemed far too young, but there he was, chanting an incantation.

“Misty Haze.”

Artglyphs rose into the air and burst into a spray, enveloping the warehouse in mist. It happened so quickly that no one had time to hold their breath. It soon became apparent that the mist wasn’t harmful when inhaled. Had this boy just cast a spell which did nothing more than make it misty? If so, why? The bandits were watching the mist warily; suddenly, a derisive laughter filled the air.

“Hey, kid! That sorta trick might impress your pals, but it’s not gonna do nothing against us!” the voice scoffed.

It was the magician in the count’s employ. He must have heard the kid’s spell and understood its effects from that, but even then the silver-haired boy looked unshaken.

“Really?”

“Really. You didn’t use a single offensive word in the incantation! You just threw some mist in the air!”

It was just as Rivel suspected. There was no need to be scared of the mist. The bandits straightened up, reassured by the allied magician’s words, and prepared to attack the Rustinell soldiers again. The magician opened his mouth before they could move.

“*Understanding the path of darkness, clad in the whorl of...*”

Once his incantation was done, a gust swept through the warehouse. It was unclear whether the Artglyphs summoned that wind or created it themselves. Everyone grabbed at their loose ornamentation as the wind threatened to whip it away. The count’s magician remained totally unfazed, apparently unaffected by the wind swirling around him.

Eventually the spell seemed ready to launch as the wind gathered around the magician like a cloak. In an instant, it delivered him face-to-face with the russet-haired boy.

The boy roared, and a glimmer of light played across his sword’s surface as his grip shifted, but the magician struck back—along with the wind.

“Aargh!”

“Master!”

The boy managed to jump back at the very last second, avoiding the attack. As far as Rivel could see, the boy moved far too lightly considering the weight of his sword, but there wasn’t time for such analysis now. The spot on the stone floor he had stood seconds before was crushed to pieces.

“Whoa! You dodge good for a little kid! Nice job!”

“Sh-Shut up, idiot!”

“Get behind me, Master!” One of the lords ushered the boy to shelter behind him.

The others advanced to attack the magician without hesitation. It was clear what they were doing; the most standard way to defeat a magician was to deny them their magic. Naturally, the magician knew this too.

“*Wind. Corps. Party. Collide. Smash. Void. Rend. Wind, create an iron wheel!*”

“*Highwind Wheel-Blade.*”

As he chanted his incantation, the magician pointed his finger in the air. Artglyphs surrounded it and formed a whistling whirlwind. Before the soldiers had time to get away, it took the shape of a huge chakram before rushing toward them.

Along with its short incantation, the spell was quick to manifest. As a weapon made of wind, its movements were just as fast. That speed caught the soldiers off-guard, and they stumbled to jump clear, fearing for their lives. The wheel spun up into the air after passing them and came back the other way, bringing the dust it had swept up with it as it attacked the soldiers from behind.

The soldiers did all they could to dodge it on its return flight too.

The magician gave a deep belly laugh. “That’s it! Dance for me!”

It was like he said; the soldiers almost looked like they were dancing as they ducked and weaved out of the weapon’s reach, and the magician looked very much amused.

Perhaps he wasn’t being big-headed after all, and he really did have talent. With several more casts of the spell, conjuring yet more chakrams, he kept the soldiers locked tightly down. They were running about, trying to avoid being slashed to pieces by the wind.

“*A wicked spirit’s hand to slow the ship. You are one who floats through the skies. May the enemy of this world’s seafarers appear!*”

“*I call upon the frigid night air. Cool the wind. Wind, be frozen. Crush that which blows against you.*”

Two new spells battered against the sharp wheels of wind, their Artglyphs drawing up into them. Suddenly, a freezing chill rose up from the floor, and the next second, the chakrams disappeared.

The incantations had come from two men in morning coats. One was a man whose cool features were so beautiful he was almost feminine, and the other was a man who looked just as dastardly as the magician they faced. The minor lords blessed them for intervening.

“Thank you! That could’ve ended very badly!”

“It is our pleasure. Please stand back if you would,” one warned.

“Gotta fight magic with magic!” said the other, cackling.

The soldiers followed the beautiful butler’s advice and retreated behind the both of them. It was true; magicians were best suited to fighting each other.

The count’s magician’s eyes widened in disbelief. “You got magicians too, huh?”

“Indeed.”

“What, you missed us castin’ them spells just now?”

“That must make you part of the group who wreaked havoc in the village last night.”

“I can attest that I was personally uninvolved in ‘wreaking havoc,’ as you put it.”

“I might’ve done a little to, uh, set the stage, I guess!”

The silver-haired boy stepped forward while the less refined one was consumed with laughter. Both the magician and the bandits around him frowned in confusion.

“Noah, Cazzy, could you go back up Deet and the others?”

“Are you quite sure?”

“Yeah. I’ll take care of this guy.”

“Whatever, but if somethin’ happens, don’t think I ain’t leapin’ in to stop ya gettin’ killed.”

The boy nodded and took another step forward.

“Arcus!”

“Deet. Just leave this to me?”

“You sure?”

“Yup. I’ll show you the best magic you’ve ever seen!”

The russet-haired boy’s eyes lit up with excitement at his promise. The count’s magician looked exasperated that a boy of his age would be bragging in a situation like this.

“Huh? What, you think you can take me alone? All you know how to do is put some mist in the air!”

“I can. And I’ll only need one spell to do it. My servants won’t have to come in and save me either.”

“I’m impressed you still know how to bark after the greased lightning I just showed you. I don’t mind admitting you’re brave if that’s what you want.”

“‘Greased lightning’? It got shut down in no time at all. Why are you so proud of it?” The boy frowned.

“Wh—”

“Okay, I’ll accept that it’s fast, but I wouldn’t call it powerful. A spell’s power is all about...strengthening... No, I’d have to see... Hmm...” The boy fell into thought and started muttering to himself. He seemed to be taking the magician’s words to heart, but he reacted with impatience, clearly irritated by the boy’s behavior.

“You makin’ a fool of me, little brat?”

“I’m just paying you back in kind.” The boy stuck out his tongue. This time, however, the magician didn’t play ball. His anger had turned to deathly calm.

“*Wind. Corps. Party. Collide. Smash. Void. Rend. Wind, create an iron wheel!*”

“*Highwind Wheel-Blade.*”

The wind whipped up into a spinning wheel once more, which the magician launched right at the boy. It spun over the stone floor at the perfect angle to

split him stem to stern, kicking up white dust from where the wheel tore the floor to pieces. The boy jumped out of the way only seconds before it looked like he would be hit.

“Y-You’re fast...” the boy said, breathless.

“Ha ha! My magic’s the fastest there is! I’m gonna cut you clean in two and make you regret challengin’ me! I’ll kill you all! You, those soldiers, and the prince!”

The kid stared at him. “You’re from the kingdom, aren’t you?”

“And?! Doesn’t matter who they are; I’m gonna tear apart everyone who dares make a fool of me!” the magician cried maniacally.

“Right...” The kid’s voice suddenly dropped a tone.

The magician began to chant again.

“*Raging wind! Cascading landslide! Splintering rock! Gather into a current, shatter in the surging winds, and fall!*”

“*Stone Storm Well.*”

Knots of rippling wind formed in midair, coiling with such force and speed that they shimmered like heat haze. They surged toward the silver-haired boy as one, but he stepped clear of them as if he already knew the nature of the spell just from its incantation. Even then, the speed at which he acted was impressive. The spell was fast, and yet the boy dodged it without even a hint of fear in his eyes. Even as his enemy, Rivel had to admit he was struck with admiration.

“Tch. Again?” the magician grumbled.

“You’re not gonna hit me with spells like *that*! But feel free to keep trying!”

“Graaaaaaaaagh!”

Neither the Rustinell lords nor the bandits moved an inch as the two magicians faced off, fearing they might get caught up in the exchange. As fellow magicians, the boy’s servants were in a better place to act, but they just carried on watching as per their master’s orders.

Another coil of wind flew past the boy. At that moment he swung his fist. The count's magician stood some distance away, and yet, without chanting any sort of incantation—

"Gah!"

The magician clutched at his stomach and stumbled, doubling over as though he'd been struck in the guts. It would have been a perfect opportunity to attack, but the boy didn't take it.

"Wh-What did you—" the magician spluttered a second later, confusion coloring his words.

He didn't know what the boy had done either. The boy, meanwhile, continued to stand there in silence.

Why doesn't he take this chance to finish him off?!

"Why're you just *standing there*?!" the magician raged between coughs.

"I don't need to do anything else. I told you it'd only take one spell to defeat you, remember?"

"Wh—"

"Go on, launch another attack. Don't you wanna show off your super-fast magic?"

"Y-Y-You snotty li'l brat! You asked for this!" The magician threw his head back and roared.

He started chanting again, his face bright red. His stance was the exact same as before; he was pointing toward the ceiling to summon another wheel.

Rivel couldn't understand why the boy was goading him to cast another spell. Rivel doubted the boy could outspeed him.

His magic is so fast, nobody could ever match it. Wait... Could it be...?

A realization sparked in Rivel's mind. This boy had provoked the magician over and over, stirring up and chipping away at his inflated sense of pride. In other words...

"*Wind. Corps. Party. Collide. Smash. Void. Rend. Wind—*"

Artglyphs gathered and revolved at the tip of the magician's index finger. They glowed silver, whistling fiercely. Those characters called forth the wind, forming a silvery ring as the spell neared completion.

A smile came to the magician's face. He was confident that this was the spell that would cut that boy's body in two. The boy could start chanting his own spell now, but he wouldn't finish it in time. The magician's confidence was the very reason it didn't cross his mind that magic superior to his existed.

He was the kind of man you could lead along for miles with the right provocation. Once you knew which spell he would use, all you needed to do was to use a faster one, and you could defeat him. That had been the silver-haired boy's aim in getting him to cast this spell.

The next second, Rivel's reasoning was proven sound. He didn't even have time to shout at the magician to stop. The boy began his incantation right after the magician had started his.

"*Infinitesimal. Join. Focus. Burst gently.*"

Artglyphs surrounded his opponent in a magic circle, disrupting the formation of the magician's own glyphs. They burst apart into silver light, and their fragments scattered.

"Wh—What's with this spell?!"



“This is the spell that’s gonna blow you away!” the boy said.

“D-Don’t be stupid! There’s no spell faster than—”

The magician didn’t have time to finish his complaint. The silver-haired boy closed his open right fist. The magic circle contracted sharply around the magician’s body. The next second, an ear-piercing crash and sparking flames burst forth.

“Nnrgh...”

The impact was so powerful that Rivel couldn’t catch sight of what was happening. He was too focused on holding his own against the wind and the wave of heat that followed. He heard the boy’s voice among the noise.

“It’s easy to create a fast-acting spell with a quick activation time if you just string a bunch of words together. But those words won’t necessarily gel if you disregard their context, which makes it easier for your opponent to disrupt your spell—just like this.”

That was the weakness in the magician’s spells. The afterimages crowding Rivel’s vision started to fade, allowing him to make sense of his surroundings. Crushed iron. Splintered wooden crates. Smashed glass in the windows. There should have been a man standing in the center—but there wasn’t.

All that was left were the tiny charred fragments that used to make up his body, left clinging to the surroundings.

That spell had incinerated him. He wasn’t even graced with an opportunity to scream in his final moments. The stench of soot filled the air, and dust fluttered down from above. There were others lying unmoving on the floor who had been caught up in the blast.

Rivel could only let out a whimper of terror. Even if this was a man who had bullied him constantly, it was terrifying to think somebody he had spoken to not hours before had died so atrociously before his very eyes. Shock dulled his mind and rusted his thoughts. It wasn’t just him. He heard his allies crying out in terror.

“H-He just disappeared! No... No way!”

Some fell to the floor where they stood. Some trembled and made inhuman noises. Some tried to stagger backward before falling over spectacularly. Pilocolo, weak-willed as he was, had wet himself. The majority of the bandits were in no state to fight anymore.

"Whoa! What *was* that?!" The russet-haired boy's eyes were wide with astonishment and admiration and devoid of any fear of his ally's magic. The next words out of his mouth were even more terrifying. "Do it again! I wanna see it again!"

The silver-haired boy brushed him away with an awkward smile before turning back to the bandits, eyeing them carefully.

Rivel had observed some of the magicians' practice during his time at the military academy. They simply decided on a limited number of offensive spells and would shoot them at the designated target all at once: Burning Laughter, Earth-Piercing Needle, Muddy Insanity...

They refined those limited spells to use in battle, and lined up in a perfect formation when casting them. In Rivel's experience, that was how magicians fought, and he believed his fellow students and teachers were of the same opinion.

He had just been proven wrong. This wasn't like the Empire's magic—highly regulated and limited in its use to a select few situations. These techniques were developed and refined by individuals with their own goals in mind.

These were the kingdom's magicians.

Rivel shuddered violently. It wasn't a chill that ran up his spine; it was a frost that enveloped his heart and spread out from the core of his body until it ran along every inch of his skin. He could be thrown out naked in the snow of the north and still not feel cold like it.

The beautiful butler stepped forward to praise the silver-haired boy. "That was most impressive. You carried out your plan perfectly."

"He got riled up when I needed him to; that's all. It helped that he was a hothead."

"He had skills for sure, but his prose was crappy. They wouldn't have let him

in the Institute with spells like that."

"I quite agree. It is among one of the first lessons the students of the Institute are taught that simply collating words without thought will lower the efficacy of one's spell; the more so the longer one makes it."

The sinister-looking one turned to the boy. "That spell's still way too spooky, 'specially in a place like this."

"That's why I started with Misty Haze to act as a buffer."

"Which means ya planned all this from the start. You're way too scary, Master!"

"I gotta use that spell to get used to it," the boy pointed out.

"Yeah, ya don't want people dodgin' it left, right, and center like before. That don't make it less violent though!"

"I cannot help but yearn for the Master Arcus I used to know whose face would light up at the sight of even the simplest spells."

"Hey! I'm still right here!"

The three spoke casually, as if the horrific events of the past few minutes hadn't happened. It sounded like this sort of thing was part of their everyday life. Their lack of concern stood out among the bandits and even the Rustinell soldiers, who were stiff with terror.

Eventually, the silver-haired boy's face darkened, and he took a step forward. The bandits took a step back. The boy glared at them. He had a sweet face, one that would be fawned over by anybody under normal circumstances. By appearance alone, he lacked even an ounce of threat—but the frost in his eyes at that moment bred raw terror. The bandits cowered.

"If you try to fight back, I'll destroy you with *dorfster* just like I did that magician!"

Those were the final words he needed to say. Those who still had the will to fight were now frightened and faltering. The Rustinell lords did not miss their chance.

"Arrest them all! Now!" the red-haired boy ordered.

The soldiers moved out and restrained the bandits one by one, even going so far as to gag them so they couldn't poison themselves. There was no way for them to escape this time and no clear means to destroy the evidence.

Dammit! Why?! Why did they send me here?!

The usual complaints filled Rivel's head as he pulled a seal-engraved lighter from inside his jacket. Setting everything alight was the only option left. The flames would consume all traces of their crime and create the chaos he needed to escape.

The lighter didn't work. Rivel knew he was using it correctly, but there were no flames; not even a spark.

Why?! Why now of all times?!

Panic flared up inside him—panic that, after everything that happened, he couldn't suppress. There had to be others thinking along the same lines as him.

"Fire! Someone start a fire!" he cried out.

"I-It's humid..." came the response.

"So?! Use Seal Tools! What on earth are you doing?!"

"I'm telling you it won't light! It's too humid!"

"H-Humid... Wait..."

It was then that Rivel recalled the first spell that silver-haired boy had cast. That mist, which the count's magician dismissed as a party trick. Its purpose wasn't just to weaken his own spell; it was to stop the bandits from starting a fire.

Did he foresee that we might try to burn the evidence? Would a kid as young as him even be capable *of thinking so far ahead?!*

Not only had he known how to manipulate the magician, he'd even thought about what the bandits would try after that. It would be obvious to any adult that they'd want to burn the evidence, but to a kid who barely looked more than ten?!

"I found it! The silver! And that's not all..." one of the soldiers yelled.

He was right—silver wasn't the only thing they'd been planning to transport. There were forged crests of other territories, permits, and other documentation in there—and the document containing their instructions.

The soldiers started to cheer. They'd found the evidence and rendered the culprits powerless. Rivel knew he couldn't talk himself out of this anymore. It was just as he thought; this was a stupid place to carry out the scheme. This was all the fault of those imbeciles for not listening to him.

"It's... It's over..."

The count's betrayal would be exposed by Rustinell. As for Rivel, he wasn't prepared to let things end here for himself. He had to run away somehow. His capture would alert the kingdom to the Empire's involvement; that alone wasn't enough to make him want to poison himself.

He'd only just graduated from the academy after years of hard work. He had a bright future ahead of him. There was no way he could die here. He had to do something.

Part 3: Eido's Shadow

Louise Rustinell, the territory's leader, hurried through the dark city with her guard. Night was only just setting in, and she had meant to take some wine and relax after finishing the last scraps of work she had left. Her butler had been reviewing her choice of wine when she received an emergency message from one of her vassals: Rustinell's minor lords had reported that Deet and his men were raiding the hideout of a reprehensible group.

Reports of bandits in the territory had been increasing lately, and they weren't just targeting small villages or travelers. They'd gone after armed merchant caravans and anyone else who happened to cross their path. These attacks happened so often that the sharper-eared merchants were starting to spread rumors. The bandits appeared all over the territory, and once they fled the scene, they were impossible to find again.

Lady Rustinell fought back by tightening measures on food and other necessary resources and putting a complete stop to the flow of military provisions—but these policies fell very short of the intended result. All it did was discourage economic activity, push people to stockpile, and force prices up. It was a frustrating situation, and all Louise could really do was sit there grinding her teeth.

Meanwhile, the bandits were getting more and more confident and increased their activities, leaving behind neither hide nor hair for the authorities to grasp. It was at that point Louise started suspecting there was something bigger going on behind the scenes, and it was at *that* point she received her vassal's good news.

Porque Nadar, count of the neighboring Nadar, was the mastermind behind the bandit epidemic. He had set up merchants and bandits to steal silver from Rustinell and other territories, and Louise was shocked to find that the merchant who had come to apologize that very morning was one of them.

When his part was done, the merchant would have gone on to undertake work in another territory under a different name until the heat died down. He'd build up his reputation to earn the trust of the local lord and then continue to

curry favor with them.

Now that I think of it, this "Pilocolo" came with a letter of introduction from Count Nadar.

If the count sent him back to Nadar to work under a different name, Louise doubted she would suspect the merchant at all.

The "hideout" Deet was storming was apparently where they meant to ship the stolen silver from. On top of that, it sounded like the group intended to attack the prince later, who was presently on his way to Nadar. The count would come out to "greet" the prince before attacking, while the bandits would then pincer him from behind. What would have happened to the prince if Deet hadn't found this group's hideout that night?

Louise had nothing but gratitude for the silver-haired noble boy who'd informed Deet of the entire scheme as soon as he realized what was happening. He was young and well-dressed as any noble, with a sweet face that could easily be mistaken for a girl's. His name was Arcus Raytheft, the eldest son of House Raytheft.

While Deet's men worked to tidy things up in the warehouse district, Arcus waited with his servants for Louise to arrive. The moment he saw her, his mouth dropped open. He likely never imagined a lady might look like *this*: unkempt red hair, an eye patch, and to top it all off, a greatsword. The cloak around her shoulders was made from a wild beast's pelt. Not only was Louise not dressed like a lady, she lacked very much femininity at all.

Galanger smiled knowingly as he approached. "The young man thinks you look like a bandit, ma'am."

"Hm? He hasn't said anything yet."

"He doesn't need to. The look on his face says—ouch!" The clown was rewarded with a painful smack upside the head—perhaps deserved, as he was the highest-ranking vassal in Rustinell and had no right speaking to his leader like that. Less so in such a smooth and put-together tone. The lady hit him again, this time in his paunchy gut. Apparently deciding it was enough, Galanger clutched his stomach and doubled over.

Louise turned to the boy kneeling before her. “You are Arcus Raytheft, yes?”

“My Lady!” After witnessing what he had, Arcus’s face was taut with anxiety, and he stood up unnaturally straight.

“I’m Louise Rustinell. I’m thankful for your information about these wrongdoings in our territory. I see now why the Raytheft House is so highly regarded.”

“Please allow me to apologize for acting with so much impertinence within your ladyship’s territory.”

“There’s nothing to apologize for. Without you, we’d have been in *real* trouble.”

Arcus bowed his head again.

He’d shown his integrity from the moment he reported the bandits’ location and helped Deet to suppress them. More importantly, he had the opportunity to deal with the bandits and take all the credit himself, or even work to bring Rustinell down. The fact that he hadn’t done either told Louise he might have been a little too naive for a noble boy.



That has nothing to do with it. It's because he's so young.

As Louise became engrossed in more superfluous thoughts, one of her vassals stepped up with documents in hand.

"My lady. We've seized their instructions."

Louise skimmed the materials. Everything written there matched Arcus's report.

"This here is solid proof that Nadar's been betraying the kingdom for the Empire. He can't have picked particularly sharp men for it if they left evidence like this lying around."

Not taking the proper measures to destroy evidence was more than just an oversight, but perhaps hiring intelligent personnel was not a luxury treasonous thieves could afford.

Louise spotted Deet at the warehouse entrance, and he locked eyes with her.

"Ah! Mom!" He waved his arms in the air with glee as he ran up to her. He seemed exceedingly happy for somebody who had just been through a violent raid after a long patrol.

"Deet! I've told you a hundred times to stop calling me 'Mom'!"

"What?! But you're my mom! What else am I s'posed to call you?!"

A fist came down on the stubborn Deet's head. Tears filled his eyes within seconds as he crouched down.

"Owwwwww!"

"You call yourself my son, and yet you still can't grasp how to speak properly!" Louise grumbled. She noticed her vassals looking at her coldly, like they always did for some reason when this topic came up.

Louise looked back at Arcus, who was stroking at his own head. What Louise didn't know was that he knew the pain of such a strike all too well himself.

"You did a good job, Deet."

"Nah, it was all thanks to Arcus. I just rounded the bad guys up after." Deet gave her a sheepish grin, but his smile soon faded. "It looks like these guys were

kidnapping women as well.”

“They were?”

“We found a young woman stuffed naked in a crate and trembling.”

“Their lack of respect for our territory is worse than I thought. Make sure that girl gets home safely.”

“I will.”

These bandits’ outrageous crimes stretched far beyond stealing silver, and they had their sights set on harming the prince on top of it all. Louise found herself angrier and angrier at Porque Nadar by the second.

“I’ll take a closer look at things here, and then I’ll gather the soldiers to track down and report to Prince Ceylan. Do you want to come, Deet?”

“Yeah, I’ll go! Arcus? You’re coming too, right?”

“What, me?”

“You shouldn’t make such rash invitations, Deet.”

“But Mom! They were saying how some super strong magician was going after His Highness, and only Arcus and his servants know what that magician looks like!”

“It does sound like their presence would be useful. Okay. Will you come with us?”

“Yes, please, if we are permitted.”

“Sorry. I know you’ve probably got your own problems to worry about,” said Louise.

“We are grateful for the concern, ma’am.”

Galanger had already told Louise that Arcus would prefer this matter be dealt with as quietly as possible. She felt the sweet-faced, silver-haired boy could be genuinely naive at times, but he had a shrewd understanding of things where it mattered. It was almost as though he was *acting* the innocent child on purpose. Comparing him to Deet, you wouldn’t think they were similar in age.

“Clayton!”

“Milady. The soldiers are all up and waiting outside the city gates.”

“Good. Make sure they’re in formation and ready to depart by the time I’m done with my quick look at the warehouse.”

“Yes, milady.”

The next stage would be the most critical. They would have to race across the border with Nadar so they could head off the prince and his troop before the count could make contact. The vanguard would need to prioritize speed over numbers to join with the prince posthaste. If necessary, reinforcements could come in to bolster their defenses and help with extracting the prince. A successful escape would be the best possible outcome. Catching up with the prince before he got too deep into Nadar was vital.

They would need to inform the prince of the severe error they’d made by allowing Nadar to steal their silver, of course, but if they played the role of epic heroes come to save the prince, he would likely turn a blind eye to their mistake. Making the threat seem as big as possible would minimize any lasting damage.

That would also raise this boy’s status, I suppose... Hm?

Louise was looking around the warehouse with Galanger and planning her next move when she noticed something odd—a crushed iron beam and broken building materials. It looked like there had been a very fierce but very localized attack. The nearby window had been smashed and the glass blown outward. Most of the wooden fixtures were in pieces. On closer inspection she spotted charred flesh burnt fast to the floor and surrounding objects.

“What’s this all about, Galanger?”

“This is the result of Arcus Raytheft’s magic.”

“Oh? The boy did this?”

“Yes, ma’am. During the fight with an opposing magician.”

The utter destruction made sense if it was caused by magic, but it also raised further questions.

“This looks,” Louise paused, “a little too strong for fire magic.”

“It was quite the spectacle. There wasn’t much of the magician left at all afterward. These ribbons of flesh are all that’s left.”

“Oh.” That just made things even more curious. “What sort of spell was it?”

“I asked our magicians about it, but they didn’t have a clue.”

“Really? So we don’t know?”

“Those who were present said it *looked* more or less like fire magic to them. But they can’t be certain, because it caused massive destruction in only a second.”

Galanger was a man who liked precision and clear-cut answers, but even he didn’t have an explanation. The first offensive fire-based spell that sprang to Louise’s mind was Flamrune. It was popular among the kingdom’s fire-magic users for its one-two punch of ravenous flame and a skewering blow.

It was also part of Lainur’s arcane military portfolio; its destructive power was feared by other nations. However, its main effect was burning the target rather than destroying it—that effect came second. There was always a chance of something exploding with Flamrune, but it shouldn’t have left behind what they were seeing now. The damage was more in keeping with what a conjured boulder might leave behind, but that wouldn’t make sense either.

Louise looked at Galanger and spotted a bead of sweat dripping down his forehead.

“It’s rare to see a reckless man like you breaking out in a cold sweat.”

“I just... I’m thinking back to when the spell was used. I’m not ashamed to *admit* it’s making me break out in a cold sweat.” Galanger lowered his voice as though muttering to himself. “According to our magicians, a short incantation like that shouldn’t have been able to create such a powerful spell. It was half the length of Flamrune’s incantation, and yet it created something just as—if not more—powerful. If only I were more like the young master, and could keep smiling in the wake of such a horror.”

Simply put, Arcus Raytheft was a skilled magician.

“That’s odd,” said Louise. “The rumors say his aether amounts to scrap, and

that he was disinherited for lacking any sort of talent.”

“I’ve heard the same.”

Did that make the rumors false? Something didn’t quite add up.

“What’s your opinion on the boy, Galanger?”

“Arcus Raytheft is intelligent far beyond his years. Not only is he skilled in the art of seals, but he has the courage to step right into a situation like this evening’s. His magic is as Your Ladyship has seen here. I can only think his disinheritance must be some kind of unfunny practical joke, because I can see no other reason for it.”

“I’d have to agree.”

“On top of that, his servants are both top graduates from the Institute. Even the greatest nobles would have trouble getting their hands on servants like that, so I can’t help but wonder how a boy like him managed it.”

Craib Abend, one of Lainur’s state magicians and perhaps better known as Crucible, was also a former Raytheft, so the servants were likely a result of his connections. Even then, affording a boy who was famously “talentless” such prestigious personnel would have been far from easy.

“What is Arcus Raytheft doing here in Rustinell?”

“I’m not sure yet. He has a letter from King Shinlu for Your Ladyship, but of course I haven’t read it. Like I said, he was supposed to explain his reasoning in his audience with you tomorrow.”

“Hmm...”

Such letters were usually shared between people of a similar status, and yet it was a disinherited noble boy who had one for her this time. He shouldn’t have any business carrying a letter from the king, which only went to show how highly the king thought of him.

“Ma’am?” Galanger prompted.

“Milady. I told you ‘ma’am’ sounds too much like ‘mom.’ You’re reminding me of Deet.”

“Oh, um. Apologies.” Galanger smiled sheepishly.

“Honestly. Anyway, you’ve heard the rumor concerning Lainur’s magic infantry and their exponential growth in power, haven’t you?”

“Yes, I have. Apparently, their command and operations are going exceedingly well, possibly because they’ve refined their formations. I’ve also heard there’s a bumper crop of skilled magicians within the medical sector lately.”

“There’s said to be some link to silver there as well.”

“Silver? Could that be what this Arcus Raytheft is after?”

“He’s here with a sealed letter from the king. The timing matches up. Most people come here seeking silver, after all; he could be involved in all of this.”

Louise realized it might be a bit of a stretch to link Arcus to the improvements in Lainur’s military, but the same could be said for a young disinherited boy showing up with an official letter in the first place. It was still supposition on her part, but the possibility was there.

“But then why do they call him talentless?” Galanger wondered aloud.

“Who knows. Maybe it’s a front. Perhaps his loving parents ‘disinherited’ him because they recognized his true power and wanted him to establish his own house.”

“That makes no sense at all! The way that rumor’s spreading, there has to be something more to it.”

“I think so too. Maybe they favored their daughter to take over the family for whatever reason,” Louise murmured. “That viscountcy has a long history in the kingdom. If that boy isn’t good enough for them, then their chosen heir must be very special indeed.”

The Raythefts went back several generations, and yet their house remained a viscountcy. Flourishing was definitely not the first word to come to mind. Viscounts were assistants to higher-ranking houses, meaning each heir had to be powerful and talented. Arcus’s sister must have been just as powerful if she was chosen over him. That aside, what he had done here was astounding for a boy of his age. With the future in mind, Louise surmised it might be

advantageous to tell Deet to befriend Arcus.

By the time Louise had finished inspecting the warehouse with Galanger, there was a party already lined up and waiting for them outside. They had with them a great number of warhorses. Their formation was perfect; not a single body twitched.

Louise swept her gaze over the line of her soldiers. “Well done for gathering here when you could have been out enjoying the nightlife. I’m sorry to make you abandon your flagons, but I can assure you I’m in the same position. If only I’d passed out drunk, I wouldn’t have to deal with this nonsense...”

A wave of laughter rippled through the soldiers.

“However, the Prince of Lainur is in danger. If we do well here, we can retreat without a fight, and Rustinell will earn favor with the kingdom. I trust you’ll do your best to make me look good here!” Louise declared.

The soldiers replied with a good-hearted cheer. They had enough morale for the mission ahead, both for the twenty-four-hour journey and for enduring the fight afterwards.

“Retreat without a fight...” Louise’s lip curled.

Not having to fight would be the best outcome. But if they *did* have to fight... That would make things interesting. The Guillotine was Deet’s now, and she’d not yet had the chance to slake her new weapon’s thirst...

Pilocolo and the bandits had safely been arrested, and Arcus and his companions had joined Louise Rustinell’s march to chase after Lainur’s prince, Ceylan Crosellode. Their path led even further west outside Rustinell and into Nadar. If Louise’s estimation was correct, the prince would already have crossed into Nadar by now, in which case he may already have been facing the count’s soldiers or assassins.

Louise already knew which route they needed to take, so all Arcus’s party had to do was follow her, but that didn’t make the journey an easy one. Their haste meant they had to keep moving with no long periods to eat or sleep, and they needed to change horses several times. Arcus had no experience traveling so urgently, and he found it a struggle to keep up. He was only aware of the

scenery rushing past them, with very little idea of what was going on at any one time.

It was the evening of the second day after leaving Rustinell's capital. There was a single checkpoint on the border between Rustinell and Nadar, and they passed through it surprisingly easily. All Louise had to do was present Arcus's letter from the king, and they were allowed passage without a fight.

A few hours after passing the checkpoint, the evening turned to night.

Arcus was gasping atop his horse. "I-I don't think I'm gonna make it..."

He was worn out and ragged from being tossed back and forth atop his horse, which had been at full gallop this entire time. The blurred scenery passing them by made his head spin, and he kept muttering about his fast-approaching death.

Cazzy seemed to be thinking along the same lines. "Yeah, this is real tough. I thought that old man's trainin' toughened me up and everythin', but this emergency military stuff is somethin' else." He cackled, but it lacked its usual spirit.

Noah wiped the sweat from his brow. "I must agree with you both in this instance."

"Even you're strugglin', huh?"

"Admittedly, yes. I experienced forced marches like this one several times under Craib, but it is not something one grows accustomed to with ease."

"How are you guys even talking right now?"

"How are *you* even keepin' up?! A ten-year-old kid shouldn't be able to ride horseback for such a long time, y'know."

"I'm twelve! *Twelve*! At least get my age right!"

"Ya know you're a kid, so what's your precise age matter?"

"It looks to me as though you have plenty of energy to keep going," Noah remarked.

Just then, a black charger from ahead dropped its speed to fall in with them. It was at least one, if not two, sizes bigger than Arcus's horse. It was as though he

was riding a dog, and this horse was an elephant. The beastly horse was ridden by the russet-haired Deet. His chaperone Galanger appeared a moment later.

“How’re you doing, Arcus?”

“Okay...kinda. You look fine.”

“This is paradise compared to all that paperwork! All you gotta do is sit on a horse! Easy peasy!”

“It’s not easy! It’s exhausting!”

“Huh. Are you outta shape or something, Arcus?”

“Grgh! N-No! I don’t think so, anyway...”

“You sure? None of us are sweating like that!”

“That doesn’t make any sense! Something weird’s going on here! Wait...”

“We’ve had this conversation before but in reverse, right?!” Deet laughed.

Arcus wished he could laugh like that right now. “Did you wanna talk to me about something?”

“Right. Mom said we’ll be catching up any second now.”

“That means it won’t be long, then.”

“Huh? What won’t be long?”

“Master, we will be running into some magicians soon. The most dangerous positions will be at the front or rear of the group,” said Galanger.

“Oh...”

The moment before they made contact with the prince would be the best opportunity for them to be attacked. It was likely that Count Nadar had considered his own party would be ambushed, and the detachment from Rustinell needed to act with that in mind.

“We’re nearly there now! Don’t let your guard down!” Louise called from ahead to rouse her soldiers.

All of a sudden, Gown’s lantern started shaking.

“Careful! There’s an enemy nearby!” Arcus cried.

“What?!”

“Is that thing you showed us at the warehouse reacting?” Deet asked.

“Yeah. There’s gotta be someone approaching us.”

“Galanger! Go tell Mom!”

“Yes, Master! You should form up with Her Ladyship as well!”

“Get ready to fight, Noah, Cazzy!”

“Man, I’m gonna die if I hafta fight after all this horse-ridin’!” Cazzy cackled.

“This sort of situation is to be expected. We must hold out a short while longer.”

They kept their horses moving while keeping a steady watch over their surroundings. They soon arrived in a clearing surrounded by dark rocky cliffs. Its appearance suggested that lava used to flow here. There was something mystical about it; a dark energy gathered and stewed there, as if they stood at the mouth of the land of the dead.

The lantern started shaking even more violently than before. Their enemies must have been hidden here; Arcus could see several spots where they might be concealed. He braced himself, and it wasn’t long before they caught up with the rest of the group stopped in front of them. The knights formed a circle around Louise, their riders wary.

“Mom!”

“Deet. This place seems dangerous. Keep your guard up.”

“Got it!”

Arcus led his horse to Louise. “I believe there are enemies hiding here, My Lady.”

“Galanger told me. How did you come to that conclusion?”

“I was alerted by the tool passed to me by Gown. It reacts when there are hostile forces nearby.”

“Oh? The Grave Sprite? That sounds like a very interesting tool indeed.” Louise sounded intrigued at first, but then she took a deep breath and let out a

roar. “We know you’re here! Stop hiding and show yourselves!”

Louise’s cry bounced off the dark rocks. A single shadow slid out from behind one. He wore a knitted hat and black clothing.

“The Headhunter Witch, I see.”

“Are you the assassin sent to eliminate the prince?”

“I am. Well, one of many.”

“Eido...”

“Arcus. What a surprise to see you all the way out here. Maybe I should have expected as much; you are unlike any other child your age.”

“Pilocolo and those bandits have been caught.”

“It would appear so. My luck must have fallen short this time.”

“Arcus!” Deet yelled. “Is this that magician?”

“That’s right! Be careful! He’s way more powerful than the magician back at the warehouse!”

“Galanger, Clayton!” Louise called. “I’m leaving this to you. Assist Deet.”

“Yes, ma’am!” came Galanger’s response.

“Please take care, My Lady,” said Clayton.

“If he attacks, Deet, don’t hold back,” said Louise. “Tear him to shreds!”

“Yay! I haven’t fought properly in ages!” Deet cheered. Swinging that huge sword on top of that giant horse like that, he looked more troublesome than heroic.

Louise must have been splitting her forces here so that she could carry on after the prince. The prince was her priority; it was a wise decision. She was just about to leave when Eido spoke.

“Do you really think I’ll just let you go?”

Louise paused. The next second, the rocky path ahead was blocked by Eido’s subordinates. Some slid out from the shadows, while others stood in plain sight atop the rocks. Each had a crossbow aimed squarely at Louise.

“So that’s your game, is it? Be warned! I’m pushing through!” Louise cried.

The archers prepared to fire, but before they could, they were attacked by a blueish-white shadow.

“Guarrgh!”

“Wh-What?!”

The beam of light passed each archer one by one and left them unconscious, crashing into each body before slipping right through and moving on to the next target. Eido was the first to recognize it for what it was.

“I almost forgot you had that.”

The phantom dog Tribe stood atop one of the largest rocks in the clearing. Arcus had opened the window the second the lantern started shaking so he would be ready to release it at any time.

Deet’s eyes lit up with excitement when he saw Tribe. “Arcus! Arcus, what’s that?! What is it?!”

“It’s Gown’s hunting dog! Tribe, go after Prince Ceylan with Her Ladyship!” Arcus cried.

Tribe let out an eerie bray and leaped away in a flurry of blue-white arcs of light.

“I am in your debt!” Louise called, before following Tribe and disappearing into the darkness with her men.

Arcus was left in the clearing with his servants, Deet, and his handful of powerful lords. They faced Eido and a few of his subordinates.

“The ability to command a beast from *The Spiritual Age*. Just who are you, Arcus?”

“Just some kid disinherited by his parents.”

“You were disinherited for being ‘talentless.’ That is not a word I would use to describe somebody capable of such extraordinary magic, and who has received such a power from Gown. You remind me of the protagonist of some epic saga.”

“Thanks. If only my piece-of-crap dad thought the same way.”

“Oh yes. But you see, fate is cruel to absolutely everybody.”

Arcus led his horse in front of Deet’s.

“Arcus?” Deet asked.

“Can you give me some time?”

“Huh? Uh, I guess so. Sure.”

There was something Arcus wanted to confirm with Eido. Gilles had said that there was something about Eido which set him apart from Pilocolo and the bandits.

“Eido. Why are you targeting the prince? Do you answer to Porque Nadar? Or are you from the Empire?”

“You should have worked that much out yourself by now.”

“You act alone. You don’t take orders from anybody.”

“That’s right. I am not Porque Nadar’s subordinate, nor am I from the Empire. If you must know, I was born and raised in Lainur’s capital just like you.”

“Why are you after the prince, then? Are you a hired mercenary?”

“Yes and no.”

“Stop speaking in riddles.”

“I have a personal grudge,” Eido explained without hesitation. “Not with the prince, but with His Majesty the King.”

“A grudge against King Shinlu?” Arcus was so taken aback that he’d asked the question before even thinking about it.

Eido nodded, and his eyes took on a faraway look. “It all happened a very long time ago—more than twenty years now. I led a group of vigilantes in the capital at the time.”

“Vigilantes?”

“Yes. Back then, in those more troubled days, slums sprang up in the capital where many good-for-nothings made their home. It was too dangerous for

children to just walk the streets as they liked."

"I've heard the same sorts of stories from older people."

"I'm sure you have. The government officials back then were dogs chasing after the scraps at the nobles' dinner tables. They were useless, and on top of that, the royal military wasn't as well-regulated as it is today. That time was probably the least influential the crown had ever been." Eido sighed before continuing. "Others, like me, refused to stand by and let things continue as they were. Since we were powerful enough to do something about it, we formed a group and claimed territories that the nobles and bureaucracy knew of, but refused to acknowledge."

"What's that got to do with your grudge against the king?"

"If you're willing to hear me out, you have to understand that this story isn't a short one."

Arcus felt a prick of indignation, but he knew there was value in the fact that Eido was willing to speak to him in the first place. Eido was their enemy, and he didn't necessarily deserve a chance to explain himself, yet Arcus found himself wanting to know what the magician stood to gain in all of this. That feeling stemmed from the time they'd spent on the road together—even if that time was a very short one.

"There were two large vigilante groups in the capital at that time. Mine, and one led by a man who named himself Lai. Our groups formed at different times, but we both held the same desire to protect the capital. Lai's group was strong right from its conception; Lai himself was an absurdly powerful magician. The men who followed him were talented and independently minded, but they idolized him from the deepest depths of their hearts. There was a mysterious air about him. He was so crude, but for some reason everybody found him exceedingly charming—I as well, now that I look back on it. Lai's group gradually gained control over the darker corners of society. Our group came before his, and I clung to the fact we had been contributing to public safety long before he had. It sparked a competitiveness in me, and I led my group to continue suppressing evil-doers in our own way."

"As time passed, our two groups' bonds deepened. We needed to exchange

information, share our territory, and cooperate in order to carry out our work. We clashed now and then, but we drank together and fought together to protect the capital. In some ways, it was the most fulfilled I'd ever been in my life."

"It all changed under King Shinlu's predecessor, when his policies to reform the rotten aristocracy and bureaucracy started to take effect. Their golden hour was over, and the entire capital was cleansed of its villains in one fell swoop. I was identified as their leader."

"Huh? But you were the one catching them!" Arcus protested.

"Yes, I was. Everything I've told you so far is true. Nevertheless, I was branded a criminal. They put up wanted posters all around the capital, and even the surrounding towns and villages."

"You mean you were sacrificed so that the bureaucrats could claim your capture as an accomplishment?"

"Yes. You catch on quickly."

By the sounds of it, when the reforms came around, there weren't any villains left to round up because Eido and his men had already done the job. That left the nobility and the bureaucracy wanting for proof that they were doing their work properly. Eido's group was large and unauthorized, making it a perfect target.

"I asked Lai for his assistance. I feel foolish for it now, but back then I felt like he might be able to bail me out. Instead, he spurred on his men to kill mine, and the rest of us who survived were driven out of the capital."

"But what's that got to do with His Majesty?" asked Arcus.

"You live in the capital, so you should know: the true identity of Lainur's prince is kept a secret until he is of age."

"Right. That's a customary—Wait!"

"You realize it now? That man, Lai, is in fact Lainur's current king: Shinlu Crosellode."

"So that's where the connection is! Was that when you met my uncle too?"

“Yes. Craib Abend and Stronghold—Renault Einfast. They were Shinlu Crosellode’s right-hand men at the time. Your uncle hadn’t developed his famous molten magic yet though.”

“Uncle Craib was a vigilante?”

“It’s true. Whether you believe or not, it’s not really any of your concern. Whatever you take to be the truth, you and I remain enemies.”

There was no point doubting Craib or his past doings right now, and all Arcus had to go on was Eido’s word anyway. Whichever it was, the two of them would have to fight once this conversation ended.

“I’ll grant I never expected Craib’s nephew to stand in my way like this. What a strange twist of fate.” Eido’s lip twisted sardonically. “This is why I am doing all of this, Arcus. Does my explanation satisfy you?”

“Yeah. I learned everything I wanted to.”

“Good.” Eido’s eyes scanned the forces standing behind Arcus.

“Are you still planning to fight?” Arcus asked. “I think it’s clear we’ve got the advantage this time.”

“Of course not. I’m facing the fierce warriors of Rustinell, you, and your servants. I am clearly outmatched, so I will be taking my leave.”

“You think we’re just gonna let you?”

“Perhaps not...without some sort of offering.” Eido pulled something from his breast.

“Huh? What’s that?” Arcus asked, but he then realized he recognized it.

To anybody else, it would look like an ordinary bundle of papers, like the sort you might find in an office. But when Arcus looked at it, he felt like his heart had stopped. Those documents concerned his aethometer, and they should have been in the Magician’s Guild.

“This is what you came to Rustinell for, isn’t it?”

“Wait... How did you get those?!”

“There are people in this world who make a profession out of snatching items

like this. People like me.”

“You mean you broke into the Guild?!”

“There are only two places in the capital I cannot gain entrance to. They are the king’s and the prince’s bedrooms, and the Holy Tower. The Guild has been reconstructed and moved several times, but as long as the hole I made in its defenses long ago remains undetected, well...”

Arcus felt the color drain from his face. He couldn’t be sure Eido was just bluffing, and if his story were true, he’d measured up with Shinlu and Craib before. With that experience, assuming he’d spent his fair share of it honing his stealth, slipping into the Guild would have been easy.

“I have to admit, I’m surprised this was all I could find. Spreading out the information like you did rather than guarding everything tightly made things all the more difficult. If I weren’t a magician, I’m sure I wouldn’t be holding on to these papers now.”

“What’s that, Arcus?” Deet asked with a puzzled frown.

“Don’t ask. You’ll lose your hand if you touch a fallen star.”

“R-Right...”

That was all Arcus needed to say for Deet to understand how dangerous those documents were. The idiom came from a story in the *Ancient Chronicles:* a fable about a man so greedy for gold that he lost his hand to the fires of a star that had come loose from the heavens. It was a warning that acting on superfluous greed or curiosity could do real harm, often used in this world to rebuke somebody about to make such a mistake.

“Well?” Eido prompted.

“If we beat you in battle, we don’t need to make a deal.”

“Correct. But if that were to happen and I or somebody else with these documents escaped, you’d be in real trouble.”

“Those documents will become public knowledge eventually anyway.”

“Eventually. Not yet. Why else would you still be content sitting back while the rumors of your lack of talent fly incessantly overhead?”

Eido was right; those rumors were useful in keeping Arcus out of the spotlight while the right time to announce the aethometer was decided, according in no small part to Shinlu's judgment.

"Is that all you took?" Arcus asked slowly.

"What's the point in asking me that?"

"Answer me."

"This is everything; I have yet to make any copies."

Arcus couldn't just let Eido go; he was an enemy. However, the risk of him escaping was a hefty one. Should the Empire get ahold of these documents, then even if they didn't include instructions on how to create tempered aether themselves, they would learn of its existence. That would certainly encourage them to send more spies into Lainur.

Accepting Eido's trade was an option, but he had no guarantee that the document in the magician's hand was all he had, and that he hadn't made any copies. Everything could be solved if they managed to capture Eido and his men. Eido wouldn't be suggesting such a deal if he didn't feel he was in danger of losing.

If Arcus turned him down, the chances of victory were high. The problem lay with how powerful Eido's companions were, and to what extent they were willing to risk their lives in battle. Arcus couldn't rule out the worst-case scenario if they fought. He was starting to regret sending Tribe ahead with Louise.

"Do not worry. I am not lying when I say this is everything I took, and I didn't take it to pass to Porque Nadar or the Empire either. I merely borrowed it to protect myself."

"To protect yourself?"

"Yes. To stop either the count or the Empire stabbing me in the back."

"So you're keeping those documents to show them you can still be useful?"

"Yes—and to strike deals like this one."

Eido's position was a precarious one. His relationships relied on being

mutually beneficial. Once his work was done or he stopped being valuable, there was nothing to stop the other party from eradicating him.

Arcus was still grappling with indecision. Whatever he chose needed to be the right answer.

“I’ll accept on one condition.”

“What condition?”

“Arcus!” Deet protested loudly, but Arcus was already out of options.

“If we let you leave, you can’t go straight after the prince.”

“I wouldn’t dream of it. I wouldn’t want to get caught between you and the Headhunter Witch.”

“Arcus!” Deet called out again. “I can’t just let him go!”

“We have our positions to think of.” Galanger added his voice. “I’m afraid we can’t let you do this.”

“Sorry, but I need to do this. You can ask His Majesty about this matter later, if you need to.”

“His Majesty?” Galanger echoed.

A thin smile stretched Eido’s lips. “Lord Galanger Uiha. Would you understand if I were to say this concerns the little trick the royal military is using to power up its magicians? That this boy created something revolutionary like that?”

“Eido!” Arcus snapped.

“Please, I’m trying to save my skin here.”

A flicker of understanding appeared in Galanger’s eyes. “I see. So that’s what this is about.”

“Um, er... Galanger? What’s going on?” Deet asked.

“If Nadar or the Empire got hold of those documents, it would be very bad indeed,” he explained. “Lady Rustinell was right about this all along...”

It was clear to Galanger now too how precarious the situation was. The Magician’s Guild messed up by allowing the documents to be stolen in the first

place, but this could also have serious repercussions for Rustinell and its authority. Rustinell was a vassal territory that had been granted autonomy from Lainur's king, but that didn't mean they could defy his rule. As such, the king's own values and potential judgment had to be considered at all times.

Their best bet would be to defeat Eido before he had the chance to sell the information on, but while they had enough men here to suppress him, they didn't necessarily have enough to eliminate him. There was more than enough reason to think twice before making such a decision.

"It's decided, then? I'll put these papers on that rock over there. Don't move until I'm done, and don't even think about casting any spells. It only takes one or two of us escaping for these documents to disappear."

Eido vanished into the shadows behind the rocky outcrop, and a few moments later the documents appeared on the rock he'd pointed out.

Arcus darted forward to pick them up and looked around carefully, but Eido was already nowhere to be seen. Neither were his fallen companions. "Ugh. He got us good."

Deet sighed. "What's Mom gonna say when I tell her he got away?"

"It was my fault. I'll explain it to her."

Arcus stared at the rocky area Eido disappeared from. There was nothing stopping him from running away and taking the documents with him. Instead, he had chosen to trade in those documents to allow his companions to get out too.

"Huh. He really isn't such a bad guy after all."

"Perhaps he isn't," Noah agreed.

"Who knows," said Cazzy.

But Arcus was sure now. There had to be some good in him, or he wouldn't have struck that deal, nor would he have tried to save the heat-stricken villager. It was only because of his past that he ended up on a more crooked path.

The group got into formation again and set their sights back on the road ahead.

“Now we just gotta hope the prince’s rescue’s going well.”

“Don’t worry about that!” Deet beamed. “Mom’ll take care of it!”

Deet’s optimism gave Arcus confidence. Still, he couldn’t shake the knowledge that he would have to square things up with Eido one day—and he didn’t yet know what form that confrontation might take.



Epilogue: The Lion and the Pig When Leon Grantz stepped into the drawing room, he found his host, Porque Nadar, already there and seething.

Porque Nadar. One of the kingdom's counts, who held the territory of Nadar in the far west. His buttoned jacket, of a style popular among the kingdom's nobles, did little to hide his paunchy stomach, evidence of his less-than-healthy vices. His stomach certainly wasn't the only part of his body holding excess fat—the wages of an indolent life. His cheeks drooped. His eyelids were thin, crushed by the flab around them. There were dark splotches over his face, as though his organs were working overtime to keep him alive.

Porque reminded Leon of an overfed pig, or perhaps a bullfrog keeping an unhealthy diet. Most of his fat gathered on his front, giving off the impression that he was permanently leaning back. It only made him look more arrogant.

Porque was sitting deeply on the drawing room sofa and receiving a report from one of his subordinates. Said subordinate was taking a knee in front of the count, whose cigar smoke swept over the vassal like a gale. The entire room was suspended in a haze, as the poor ventilation could not keep up with Porque. It seemed the cigar was meant to hide his irritation but, as usual, it was obvious just by his attitude that things weren't going well.

"Ceylan managed to escape? Lucky bastard."

"My Lord. They have returned to Rustinell to gather the lords. I wouldn't be surprised if their aim is to invade Nadar after that."

"I'd have to agree. They know all about my betrayal. I doubt they will give me a chance to defend myself." Porque Nadar let out another plume of smoke, further thickening the air.

His subordinate coughed lightly a few times before continuing. "If I might make a suggestion, My Lord..."

“Speak.”

“If the prince is gathering troops, I believe it is essential we launch a counter-invasion before his men are fully ready. We may not have time to put much thought into our formations, but attacking as soon as we are able is one possibility to consider.”

Leon thought the idea quite reasonable. Porque didn’t.

“Hmph! Ceylan is nobody worth fearing! We will take our time, and then we will be fully ready to face them. That’ll be easier on our soldiers too.”

“M-My Lord, the longer we take, the more men they’ll have.”

“I’m well aware of that. But it is not the *king* gathering these troops; it is the prince. The lords will hesitate. Moreover, we have the Empire on our side. We can hole up and fight from here, calling for support whenever we need it. That’s right, isn’t it, General Grantz?” Porque opened his eyes as wide as he could, and turned to goggle at Leon.

It was clear he had full confidence that the Empire would be willing to support him.

“I wouldn’t count on it.”

“Wh—Why on earth not?!”

“The Empire has already decided not to send any reinforcements for this fight.”

Porque slammed his fists down on the table in front of him in a vain effort to squash the hard, cold truth. His eyes sparked with panicked rage, and as he lashed out at Leon, the general was surprised foam wasn’t flying from the corners of his mouth.

“*Why*?! With the Empire’s support, Ceylan would be as good as dead! What could possibly compel the Empire to let this chance slip away?!”

“Count. The Empire is not currently seeking open war with the kingdom. It has enough on its plate with the two battlefields to the north. Adding another would risk undermining our own effort.”

“And that’s enough of a reason to abandon me?! You *do* understand how

much risk I've taken on for *your* Empire, don't you, General?!"

"I do."

"Well, then!"

"Count. The decision has already been made. I have my orders from His Imperial Majesty, and a lowly general like me can't go against them."

"That... You... It..." Porque attempted to croak out a sentence but instead ended up holding his head in his hands.

"Don't go grasping at the wrong end of the stick here. The Empire isn't abandoning you. We've already prepared a reward for your devotion."

"That means nothing if I do not win this battle!"

"Then win. Take Ceylan's head as planned. If you do, you may keep the title of count when you defect. And, even if the Empire can't send reinforcements, that doesn't mean *I'm* unwilling to help you."

The color returned to Porque's face before Leon's very eyes. He let out a deep sigh of relief and anguish.

"There was no need to mislead me like that," he said.

"Sorry. I just think breaking the bad news first is better."

"How many reinforcements can you supply me with?"

"If we're talking some of my field soldiers... Maybe five hundred men."

"F-Five hundred?! *Only* five hundred?! You should have far more men under your command than that! Why can you only offer me so few?!"

"My men are supplied by His Imperial Majesty. I'm powerful enough to command ten thousand men, but that's only if I'm commanded to from above. I can't just order men around however I please. Five hundred is the most I can offer. I'm going to have to ask you to take it or leave it."

"U-Ugh..." Porque's face turned a deep shade of red.

His subordinate looked up at him imploringly. "M-My Lord. What should we do?"

“Nrk... We cannot sustain a siege here without promise of reinforcements. We shall move out as soon as the soldiers are ready! We must carve our own path of survival. My faithful retainer, Byle Ern! Make the preparations!”

“Yes, My Lord!” The servant sped from the room with his orders in hand.

He was no doubt off to gather and organize troops, something that would take a great deal of effort. But it had to be done, to avoid his and his master’s death on the field, or barring that, capture and execution.

“The prince has never gathered troops without waiting for orders from his father before,” a youthful female voice remarked.

The haze evanesced, revealing a woman in a white mask: Aluas. She stood behind Porque Nadar, clad in black that borrowed its color from the shadows in the room’s corners. She spoke like she had been listening in on the entire conversation.

Porque flinched, but quickly let out a sigh. “Ms. Aluas.”

“It has been a long time, My Lord. Please forgive my impudence.”

“Of course.”

What Aluas said was pertinent; the prince may have been exceeding his authority by gathering men. Gathering soldiers and commanding lords was a right that belonged solely to the king or queen in any country, and not one which extended to the rest of the royal family. That included the king’s own son. After all, gathering troops without permission could be seen as an attempt to upset the balance of power, or even to incite an insurrection.

Ceylan had gone straight back to Rustinell to gather the lords. He must have been planning to attack Porque without giving him any breathing room, and wasn’t even waiting for the king’s approval: a contravention of the norm.

“Exactly right, Ms. Aluas. Ceylan is committing treason against his own father, and I do not think that is an exaggeration.”

“That makes everything much simpler. Your Lordship just needs to make use of that fact.”

“You mean, encourage those both within and without Lainur to criticize

Ceylan for making a mockery of his father?”

“Yes. Lainur’s king will then have no choice but to punish him.”

If he didn’t, Ceylan’s influence would suffer, and Shinlu would subsequently lose face, both in the kingdom and outside.

“Impossible,” declared Porque.

“My Lord?”

“Your suggestion would have been possible until very recently. But things have changed concerning Ceylan.”

“Changed?”

“That’s right. His position within the kingdom amounts to more than just the prince now.”

“So it’s true?” Aluas asked, realizing what Porque was getting at.

“Yes.” Porque nodded.

The rumors had flown around for a while. They seemed credible enough, but there was never any hard evidence. The story went that there was something about Ceylan and his lineage which made him more powerful than even King Shinlu himself.

“If so,” said Leon, “then there’s no doubt the troops will cooperate with him. Even if nothing’s been officially confirmed, I’m sure there are lords like you who know the truth.”

“We cannot be sure. Ceylan has always had the right to call together soldiers like this, but this is the first time he’s making use of it. There will still be those who are hesitant to act without the king’s approval. Unlike in the Empire, our leaders do not rule with such ironclad authority; some lords take more liberties than others in their actions. Until Ceylan’s position is made crystal clear, some lords will no doubt remain on the fence.”

From what Porque was saying, the lords with misgivings would not be few in number.

The count suddenly raised an eyebrow. “You should be well aware of that

yourself, General."

"Yep."

"Then why speak as if you weren't?"

"I just wanted to hear your opinion. I was curious what you thought about Ceylan."

It was clear from how Porque spoke that he didn't think *too* lowly of the prince, but Leon wanted to make sure the count had a good grasp on the current situation. It was essential that Porque had some rudimentary cunning, or the plan wouldn't work.

Porque seemed unperturbed by Leon's test. "General Grantz. I shall look forward to receiving your reinforcements when the time comes."

"Please do. I can assure you that what my men lack in numbers they will make up for in skill."

"Good. Do not fail me." Porque stood up. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I must get to work."

The count left Leon and Aluas alone in the drawing room with Leon's men. His servants looked anxious at Aluas's unnerving air.

Aluas waited until Porque's footsteps could no longer be heard from the corridor. "I always thought Nadar was as dim as he looked, but he's surprisingly sharp."

"He has to be, or Shinlu wouldn't have given him territory on the border. He may be a greedy pig, but he's a clever one for sure."

"You seem to admire him, General."

"He has a good head on his shoulders. That's all."

"Lainur's king didn't pick particularly well when placing Nadar here. Perhaps he didn't foresee the count betraying him under his very nose."

"I'd wager it was more a case of the king not *caring* if he was betrayed. Why else would the neighboring rulers move without hesitation?"

Lainur's king, Shinlu Crosellode. During the previous king's rule, Lainur

cowered under the Empire's influence for a time, but Shinlu built the kingdom back up to where it was today. It was impossible that such a man wouldn't consider that Porque might betray him. Porque was merely a stopgap to the king. If he weren't, Shinlu would have had the count return to a central territory the moment the kingdom's diplomatic relations were stable.

There was something pitiful about Porque's role as a sacrificial pawn to Lainur and the Empire alike.

"Politics can be very deep, and the finer points are especially difficult to understand for a mere magician like myself," Aluas said.

Leon couldn't help but wonder how much of her statement she meant. She seemed well acquainted with the basics for somebody who found politics "difficult to understand."

"But..." The next second, Aluas had swooped down to stand directly behind Leon. Her movements were so quick that his men didn't have the time to stop her. Aluas's next words came in a faint whisper. "You were too greedy, General."

Leon didn't say anything, but he knew she was referring to his promise of reinforcements. The original plan was to supply Porque with nothing and have him face everything alone. That would protect the Empire from harm and buy it deniability. However, taking the prince's head in this battle would deal a huge blow to the kingdom. That was why Leon had asked the emperor for permission to dispatch troops.

Perhaps it was greed. Perhaps greed was the reason Leon felt that, if he just reached a little further, the prince's head could be within his grasp. Aluas certainly seemed to think so.

As for Leon himself, he could not think what else it could be.

Side Story: Lecia’s Trial

Lecia Raytheft was in a forest in Raytheft territory, which lay in the east of the kingdom. This forest lay deep within the territory and was thick and gloomy, even during the day. It was so dark that mere words fell short of describing it.

The vegetation here was unique within the kingdom. The plants that grew here were native to the Cross Mountain Range of the north-east, also known as the backbone of the continent. The leaves on the trees were not green, but tinged with purple and black, and their bark was lifeless and ashen. Vines wrapped around their branches, connecting one tree to the next and filling the gaps between them, which only gave the sun even less room to shine through. A sunny day here was gloomy; a cloudy day was as good as night. The labyrinth beneath the canopy belonged to the dark.

The puddles dotting the ground were black on even the brightest days, and the musty water kept the air thick and cloying. The humidity and heat made it impossible for the untrained to spend an entire day here.

The path Lecia walked was an animal trail, nearly invisible. It had already been two hours since she left the camp. The path she followed could barely be called a path anymore, and she felt like an explorer uncovering new lands—something she hadn’t experienced for a while.

She was dressed lightly, having chosen only waterproofed boots and a cloak to shield her from dirt and sand. Two men walked behind her. One was a man in his prime whose face bore a dark five o’clock shadow. He was tall and well-built. His light clothing and leather breastplate did little to disguise the toned muscles that ripped through his body. An easygoing smile lit up his face, but he was tensed to respond to a threat at any moment.

The other was a quiet young man in a black cloak. A bandana was wrapped around his head, and the lower half of his face was completely covered by his cloak’s collar. Unlike his companion, he rarely spoke. Lecia did notice, however, that he would cast his eyes over the surroundings now and then. A sharp light would shine in them when he did.

These men were currently hired as Lecia's guards by her father. They had been mercenaries their entire lives. Joshua recognized them as skilled and dependable. Their movements were quick and precise, with neither of them leaving the slightest opening to attack. Quick-witted and resourceful, they'd offered Lecia survival advice frequently on the journey here from the capital. They were careful to keep an eye on both her and the local terrain as well.

The trio carried on through the dense forest until finally they reached a wide clearing. The soil here was black. While there were no trees, black puddles lay scattered around like pitfalls. According to the map, the group was not far off their destination.

"There are beasts nearby, Madame," the older, unshaven mercenary warned.

"You can tell?" Lecia asked.

"Yes. From the smell and the...feel in the air, I guess. There's a peculiar animal scent that's followed us, and if you listen closely, you can hear a ragged breathing, like a dog in front of its meal."

"So it is a smell paired with a sound..." Lecia focused all five of her senses. Sure enough, she could smell what he described and sense that something was there. It smelled like a pet that had gone unwashed for days combined with a hint of urine. The breathing she heard was like that of a slavering, untrained hunting hound. "I can sense it too."

"You see?"

"It truly is fascinating that you can sense all that without even being very near the creature," Lecia said.

"It's my job. In this line of work, I would've died long ago if I couldn't detect things like this."

The quiet man suddenly shifted, thrusting out a hand to prevent his companions from making any careless movements. "Caution. It moves closer."

"Right. Madame? What do you want to do?"

"If we need to fight, I shall fight as well."

It wasn't long until the undergrowth began to rustle, and the creature

appeared. It was larger than your average hound or guard dog. Its pelt was speckled and stained with dirt. Its long, tapered tongue flicked back and forth like a flame in the night. Others like it slipped out from various shadows, apparently part of the same pack.

"Tribreeds."

"These are tribreeds?"

These creatures were mentioned in *The Spiritual Age*. They were originally descended from the favored hounds of the elves, which had gone feral in their absence. They did seem to resemble Gown's dog, Tribe, very much. Joshua had told Lecia that they often appeared in the backwaters of Raytheft territory, but this was her first encounter with them.

"You don't need to worry about these, Madame. They are clever; they won't pick a fight with an enemy they know outmatches them."

"What are we to do then?"

"Well, since you're our leader, why not make sure they know we really are stronger than them?"

"Very well. Please step far back."

"Yes, Madame," the first mercenary agreed cheerfully.

The other mercenary was silent in his retreat.

Lecia took one more look around before allowing her aether to overflow and opening her mouth.

"*May that grand body be engulfed in flame and become a warrior. Take up your shield in your left hand, and your sword in your right. May the burning crimson of the sky gird your body. Strangle the four devils, and destroy the three obstacles. Eight consciousnesses as one. Stick fast to your reason, and become the origin. O, fire king of the trailing dust, keep careful watch over our backs.*"

A huge pillar of flame shot into the air behind Lecia. It quickly reshaped itself into human form, like a giant torso and head made of fire. It leaned forward to wrap its arms around Lecia to protect her. As the incantation implied, it held a sword in its right hand and shield in its left. When Lecia flicked her arm out to

the side, it mimicked her movement and swung its sword. It was just like she was controlling a robot via a power suit.

The intense heat of the flames evaporated the clearing's black puddles in an instant, and the flick of the giant's sword created a gust of wind, sending leaves and branches flying from the trees.

The tribreeds cowered from the fiery titan, raising a warning growl as they crept back before turning tail and fleeing. Once the danger had passed, Lecia allowed the giant to dissipate.

"Well done, Madame," the older man said with a smile.

"It was nothing."

"It was an impressive display of magic. But perhaps it is nothing to somebody blessed with as much aether as you."

"Yes. It might be quite a difficult spell to use for an average magician," Lecia admitted.

Lecia was understating it; it would be very taxing on most magicians to expel that much aether. It took at least 1,000 to cast, and even more to sustain it. Most magicians averaged in the vicinity of 2,000; they would not be able to use it on a whim.

"That was The Flaming King's Path, yes? A traditional Raytheft spell. I've seen His Lordship use it before, but it was amazing even seeing it again just now. A spell perfect both for attacking and defending. It was this spell that allowed His Lordship to completely destroy those wretched Hans."

"It is said the Raythefts created the spell themselves," Lecia said.

"They definitely came up with some fantastic stuff back in the past. Of course, the state magicians of today are just as good."

"I must agree. I have heard that every last one of them is incredibly skilled."

"Should we move on, Madame?" the quiet mercenary suggested.

"Yes; let's."

They did just that, moving further toward their destination: a cave even

deeper into the territory. It was Joshua's words which had set off the chain of events that led Lecia here.

"Lecia. I know this is sudden, but I would like you to journey into Raytheft territory." Those were the first words out of Joshua's mouth when Lecia joined him in the drawing room of the Raythefts' capital estate.

Across from her sat Joshua and her mother, Celine, and they were surrounded by butlers and two men who Lecia didn't recognize.

Celine shot a confused glance at her husband. "Darling? What is it you would have Lecia do?"

"I would like her to complete the trial required of all future heirs of the Raytheft name."

"Trial?" said Lecia.

"Considering your age, it might be a little too early for you. However, there have been heirs in the past who were successful at your age. And you, Lecia, have talent. I believe you can do it, despite your youth." Joshua closed his eyes and gave a solemn nod.

"What does this trial consist of, Father?" Lecia asked.

"You are to delve deep into Raytheft territory and reach a shrine that sits within a cave deep in the forest."

"A shrine?"

"Indeed. There you will be able to retrieve proof that you reached your goal. Take this token. Exchange this for the proof, and then come back." Joshua placed the token on the table, earning another look of confusion from his wife.

"Are you saying she only needs to go there and come back? That sounds rather simple for something purporting itself a 'trial.'"

"That forest is home to vicious creatures, as is the cave. Strategy will be required to get through."

"Vicious creatures? Are you sure Lecia really isn't too young?"

"I am sure. She is already proficient in offensive magic, and has mastered

fluent incantation. She is a far more exceptional magician than I was at her age."

"I wouldn't know," said Celine, "but if you insist, I shall believe you."

"Do you not wish to test your skills, Lecia? It is only natural to want a chance to use everything you have learned. Furthermore, you cannot compare yourself to others reliably without first knowing what you are capable of. In turn, it will be difficult to improve yourself."

"Yes, I understand."

"Once you complete this trial, you will be officially recognized as the next heir by our branch families, as you must before you can move forward in securing your inheritance." Joshua passed the token to Lecia.

It was made from wood and around the size of an adult's palm. A prayer was written on it in the Elder Tongue.

"I will send some guards with you."

"Guards?"

"That's right. It is not required that you complete the trial alone. We are magicians, after all."

"Who will those guards be?"

"The two men behind me, whose presence I am sure you have already noticed."

The strangers dipped their heads at Lecia.

"The man on the right is Ralph. The left is Chauger. They are both skilled and attentive."

The guards each took a step forward.

"A pleasure to meet you, Madame. My name is Ralph." The older man spoke, shooting Lecia a friendly smile.

"I'm Chauger." The other man clearly felt no need to say anything more.

"You may find Ralph to be somewhat overfamiliar, but try to see it as him making things less tense for you. Although I would forgive a kick to his rear if he

gets too impudent. More than forgive it, I would welcome it."

"M-Milord..."

"I have warned you several times to speak with the proper respect. Until you do, I cannot change my rear-kicking policy."

Ralph shrunk back slightly while Chauger snorted. The latter hastily excused himself before losing the smile on his face.

"Chauger is... Well. You may think him to be a part of your shadow, or perhaps the air around you. The trick to getting on with him is not to pay him any mind. That is how he likes it," Joshua explained.

Chauger nodded in agreement.

"Are you sure?" Lecia asked.

"What makes us feel comfortable is unique to us all. When we stand superior to somebody, generosity comes in the form of making sure their working environment is the best it can be. We must not force things onto those below us."

"Yes, father."

"You are to be the next heir. It is important that you learn how to deal with people and how to use them effectively." Joshua paused and studied Lecia carefully before continuing. "Lecia. You must go into the cave and return with the proof. Can you do that?"

"Yes, father! I shall!"

"Very well."

That was why Lecia had set off to journey deep into Raytheft territory. It took more than ten days for her and the guards to enter the territory by carriage. After meeting with the governor, Lecia moved to face her trial.

On the journey, she learned that Ralph and Chauger made their livelihoods as "adventurers," or specialized mercenaries who worked in the neighboring kingdom of Sapphireberg. They put together a guild much like the Magician's Guild, where they took requests from nobles, merchants, and ordinary citizens alike. The most popular requests were for convoys and bodyguards. They also

took on work exploring areas where dark spirits were known to appear, or cleaning up ancient ruins where they had snuck in. Ralph and Chauger were both experienced adventurers, and it showed in the way they conducted themselves.

The three of them stepped into the cave.

“From the way you spoke to him in the drawing room, it sounds as though you’ve both known my father for a long time,” Lecia remarked.

“His Lordship has hired us a lot in the past,” Ralph explained.

“He has called on us for battle a fair few times too, although only as retainers,” Chauger said.

Joshua must have trusted them a great deal. It was customary for retainers to be well-acquainted with their masters. They could be battle-worthy servants or other staff hired by the family, but most of all they had to be people you could leave with a blade in hand while your back was turned. The men Joshua had sent with Lecia were not just chosen for their skill, it seemed.

“I did not expect you to come all this way with me,” Lecia said.

“No?”

“I expected to be coming into this cave alone while you two waited in the forest.”

“It’s common practice for magicians to have a vanguard. I think that’s what lies behind His Lordship’s decision.”

This didn’t seem to be a case of overprotectiveness on Joshua’s part. On the battlefield, a mage could count on skilled close-range fighters to hold their front line, freeing them up to stay back and incant. It was one of the most basic concepts of tactical magic, so much so that it was considered common sense.

Ralph frowned and stroked his stubbly chin. “I still find it weird His Lordship wanted you to do this. It seems a bit much, seeing as you haven’t even started at the Institute yet. Oh, but I’m not doubting your ability, of course! Not after what you showed us back there.”

“I agree. She’s too young.”

“You too? Is there really any need for this proof stuff? It’s clear she’s skilled enough to be the next heir by a single spell.”

“Yes. That wasn’t a spell other children her age could use, gifted or not.”

Lecia agreed with them. Even her peers from noble and magically trained stock did not receive the combat training she did. Whether that was because the Raytheft line was particularly strict or because her father believed in practical over theoretical education, she didn’t know. On the other hand, she did have some idea as to what was behind the timing of all this.

“I believe father is growing impatient.”

“Really?” Ralph said.

“Yes, although I do not think he is aware of it himself.”

“Impatient? Impatient that you are officially named the next heir?”

Lecia nodded. “I believe father wants to show everybody that I am indeed worthy.”

“Why would that be?”

“Are you aware I have an elder brother?”

Ralph averted his gaze awkwardly. “Oh, um... I’ve heard rumors.”

“You knew?”

“Well, I do spend a lot of time at the Raytheft estate. You pick up on these things. In this case, His Lordship was...grieving about it, at the time.”

“Father’s impatience has to do with my brother.”

“Your brother? His Lordship’s son?”

“Father disinherited my brother in favor of me. I believe that is why he wishes me to prove myself worthy sooner rather than later.”

“Do you think His Lordship regrets his decision then, Madam?”

“No, I do not believe he has given it that much thought. However, my brother is currently thriving, and I think it... How do I put this? I believe it pains my father to see it.”

“Hmm.” Ralph still sounded confused.

“Allow me to put something to you. Imagine you see a young, disinherited boy spending hours practicing magic in the garden, even long after the sun has set, or devoting himself wholeheartedly to his magic studies. As his father—as anybody, for that matter—what would you think?”

“It would... Oh, I see. His Lordship is angered with him running about the place, and so wants to crush him. And he wants to solidify your position to do that.”

“I think so. I doubt my brother has any appetite for the Raytheft inheritance anymore; I think father is just trying to put pressure on him.”

“His Lordship was right, wasn’t he?” Chauger said. “Forgive me, but I heard your brother is talentless.”

“If my brother is talentless, then I have all the talent of a pebble on the wayside.”

“Ah—No! No, not at all! Please do not speak of yourself like that, Madam!”

“My brother is intelligent and a skilled magic user. I constantly feel that I cannot hope to be half the person he is.”

“But His Lordship has disinherited him. There must’ve been a serious reason for that.”

“His aether falls below the expected standard. That is all.”

“That *is* serious,” Ralph insisted. “Aether is vital to a military family, right?”

“I am not confident of that; in fact, I have always found it baffling. If aether were really the be-all and end-all, then why should my uncle have taken my brother as his student?”

“Your uncle... The renowned state magician Crucible, yes? You... Wait, you mean your brother is studying under *him*?!”

“Your brother is receiving direct training from a state magician?” Chauger asked.

“Are you sure it’s not just because he feels a familial obligation?”

“I think that is likely what started it, at the very least,” Lecia said.

That was probably how Craib saw it at first, and she couldn’t blame him. He started teaching Arcus the basics out of pity for his disinherited nephew. Her uncle placed a high value on family relations, and when Arcus begged him to teach him magic, her brother had not yet done anything to prove himself. With her uncle being who he was, she doubted he would have noticed any kind of sprouting talent in Arcus either—and yet talented ended up being the perfect word to describe him.

“Have you two heard of hex fiends, perchance?”

Ralph gulped audibly and Chauger stayed quiet, but their expressions were equally grim. Though neither of them answered Lecia’s question, those faces told her everything she needed to know.

“You have seen them, haven’t you?”

“Yeah, back in Sapphireberg...” Ralph said.

“It was a horrible experience. We lost many.”

“Goodness!”

“It was Shurelia Rimaleon—Twisted Karma—who led a troop of magicians, soldiers, and adventurers to wipe them out. That was how we survived. But I’d really hate to cross their path ever again...”

“Was there much damage?” asked Lecia.

“‘Damage’ doesn’t begin to describe it. Anyone who got too close was swallowed up by the hex. The area had been rendered uninhabitable by hex taint. Without Shurelia, we’d have been waiting for reinforcements from the kingdom. If that happened...things would have been much worse, for sure.”

“Eighteen villages. Five towns. Destroyed. Countless people died.”

Both guards grit their teeth, their complexions dulled by misery. That incident with the hex fiends was clearly a dark blot on their memories. Lecia paused, sending up a silent prayer for the lost lives.

“Hex fiends—how do they relate to your brother, Madam?” Ralph asked.

“A short while ago, a hex fiend appeared in the capital.”

“What?! No! Impossible! Those things are huge! It would have been carnage!”

“A hex fiend could destroy half the city, even with the state magicians protecting it,” Chauger agreed.

“Yes; had it not been for my brother destroying the thing before that could happen.”

The mercenaries gawked at her as though they meant to say something but didn’t know what. Only once his brain had processed Lecia’s words did Ralph speak.

“D-Destroyed, you say?!” he cried. “He destroyed a...a hex fiend?!”

“Yes.”

“Y-You’re joking, Madam! Oh, but it’s a good one! Ha ha...”

“I assure you I am not.”

“We have seen the damage those creatures cause, Madam,” Chauger said. “You should not make light of them.”

“I can understand why you are upset, Chauger; however, I speak the truth. I bore witness to it myself, and can therefore describe the creature. It was a large... Well, originally it was a human, so it was much like a giant, which used the bands of hex surrounding it to damage and pick up nearby objects, all the while absorbing more hex to grow in size.”

“That...is an accurate description. But...”

“If you cannot believe me even now, then may I take you to the cemetery once our business here is done?”

“Cemetery? Which cemetery?”

“Any one will suffice. There we shall meet Gown; he can attest that what I say is true. After all, it was he who initially asked my brother for assistance.”

At the mention of the grave sprite, the mercenaries’ doubt dissipated.

“I-I... Apologies. Your story really is true, isn’t it?” Chauger said.

“It is true, though I can well understand why you would struggle to believe it.”

Confusion was still written across Ralph’s face. “Begging your pardon, Madam, but how did your brother defeat the monster? Shurelia had to throw a ton of magicians at it, and could only deal the final blow after it was weakened. He tore it into pieces, and then destroyed each piece to the last. It’s hard to believe there was a battle of that magnitude in the capital.”

“Gown lent my brother aether, which he used to create a large pillar of light that pierced the heavens. That light magic reduced the hex fiend to salt.”

“Salt?”

“Do you recall a peculiar type of salt being sold in the capital for a time?”

“I remember.” Chauger nodded. “They spoke of it coming from the slu— Madam, are you saying that salt was made of hex fiend?!”

“I am. The vendors saw only a goldmine of salt to sell, and did not know where it came from.”

“Er... I... I bought some of that and used it...” Ralph stuttered.

“Do not worry. It was safe for consumption. Gown would have said something had it been dangerous. There were those at the scene who tasted it immediately after the fact.”

Ralph put a hand to his chest and let out a sigh of relief.

A small light appeared in Chauger’s eyes. “A pillar of light and salt... That reminds me of a tale from the Chronicles.”

“Gown mentioned something similar. You must be thinking of one of the Ten Fables. The *Light of the Heavens* which purifies everything that stands atop the ground. My brother said that was the story he based his spell on.”

“He used magic linked to creation itself. That sounds like something a state magician would do.”

Ralph and Chauger fell into a thoughtful silence, words having escaped them. Perhaps the conversation had shocked them. A creature so powerful it had caused untold damage right before their eyes was defeated by a “talentless” boy. What must they have been feeling now?

After a long pause, Ralph spoke again. “Is His Lordship aware of this?”

“No. I doubt he would believe me even if I told him. He detests my brother.” Lecia lowered her gaze.

“Are you saying you think your brother is more worthy of the inheritance than you, Madam?” asked Chauger.

“I do. As much as I am aware it is impossible now, I fully believe he should have inherited the Raytheft name.”

There was nothing Lecia could do about the state of things but sigh. Why did her father have to be so stubborn? She couldn’t work it out, no matter how hard she tried. Gown had said that humans were creatures who acted according to emotion, but even that wasn’t a satisfying explanation for her.

“If only he had more aether...” she said.

None of this would have happened if that were the case. At the same time, Lecia wondered if Arcus would ever have reached his full potential had he not been disinherited.

“I know it’s not my place to say anything, but the fact stands that most magicians wherever you go see how much aether you have as a really big deal.”

“Battle prowess, usable spells, *powerful* spells... A lot is influenced by one’s aether. Low aether would risk you being looked down upon by other magical martial houses.”

Lecia could understand where they were coming from, but their ideas were based on a very generalized view of the situation. If they saw Arcus’s power for themselves they might change their minds, but right now he was just a boy with low aether and a good grasp of magic. Lecia couldn’t even be certain they were listening to everything she was saying.

Gloom weighed heavy on her heart, but she didn’t have time to dwell on it for long.

Chauger directed his torchlight deeper into the cave. “It’s here.”

Lecia followed his gaze to see a group of very strange creatures indeed. Perhaps *monsters* would be a more appropriate word. Great arachnid frames

carried doll-like bodies that, with each twitch, wavered back and forth like jellyfish battered by waves. They were the dark, mottled color of a common house spider, but their eyes glowed a rich scarlet.

According to Joshua, the creatures in the cave were not like those found out on the plains. They were monsters descended from the dark spirits that appeared in the Cross Mountain Range. Their movements and behaviors were far removed from any ordinary creature's.

Ralph grimaced at the sight of the monster. "Are those...bald spiders?!"

"No, not quite. They descend from that line."

"R-Right. Yeah, because there's no hex... Ugh, they nearly had me jumping outta my skin." Though Ralph let out a deep sigh of relief, his expression remained guarded. He kept his eyes on the monsters and kept his breathing quiet.

"This bald spider," Lecia asked. "Is that what these creatures used to be?"

"More or less. It's a terrifying dark spirit."

"Unlike these things, its entire body is pitch black, and it's even more disturbing. It's kinda the same shape, though, which is why I got confused."

The beasts looked dismaying enough as far as Lecia was concerned, even if they weren't the pitch black Ralph described. The worst part was the human torsos on top, which moved as if guided by invisible strings.

"A bald spider can take an entire vanguard to kill, with five or six magicians."

"How about these beasts, Chauger?" Lecia asked.

"We should be able to defeat them. They are not dark spirits, which already makes them much less of a threat."

"Yeah, you're right about that." Still holding his torch in one hand, Ralph unsheathed a sword he'd prepared for its ease of use in an enclosed space like this. As his partner Chauger favored rapiers but was without the space to use one to much effect, he pulled a fistful of throwing daggers from his cloak.

Chauger explained that these creatures were arachmen. The humanoid parts fought with spear-like spines plucked from their abdomens, exploiting the reach

and mobility conferred by their lower halves. They were so unlike any creature Lecia had seen before that she wondered whether they were even alive.

There were three of the creatures before them. Six red eyes watching them. Lecia was unable to suppress the fear that rose up within her, or the shiver that raised goosebumps over her skin—a sensation all too easy to confuse with the scrabble and tickle of eight chitinous legs.

Lecia doubted the arachmen would have trouble standing on the cave's sloped walls with the way they crawled all around as they pleased, not once losing balance.

"Please be careful, Madam."

"Thank you. I shall cast a spell."

The first step was to light up the area.

"*Wandering soul. An untouchable will-o'-wisp; a quiet glimmer.*"

Yellow-green balls of light appeared from the magic circle. They floated through the air and illuminated the cave. Though it was a far cry from daylight, it was a vast improvement over the mercenaries' torches, leaving both their hands free for battle.

Ralph tossed his torch aside and leaped at the closest arachman. His skill was evident in the way he kept up easily with the creature's calculated movements. Meanwhile, Chauger took up position next to Lecia, throwing his daggers at the arachmen to hold them back.

Lecia was their greatest source of firepower, but she didn't move immediately; she had remembered a vital warning not to use fire magic in enclosed areas under any circumstances. Fire consumed the finite air in an enclosed space, so using too powerful a flame spell would risk you and your allies fainting, if not dying. With the limited space here, using too strong a spell of any kind was risky in its own right. Lecia had to think carefully to avoid harsh consequences for her side.

"*Judgment of the sword that threatens passage. Savagely tear and penetrate our enemy. Allow our hopes to reach the earth and edify those before us.*"

“*Stone-Sharpened Sword.*”

This was a spell Lecia had learned from the salon of southern magicians her father brought her to. It was one of the basic spells of the south, and perfect for formation fighting.

A magic circle appeared on the ground right under the arachman near Ralph. Sensing danger, the creature tried to leap away, but not before a giant stone sword pierced through the ground. It narrowly missed the arachman’s body, but lopped off several of its legs and destroyed its balance.

Ralph leaped forward to attack it, roaring as he went. He sliced through the human part’s arms and pierced his sword through the now-defenseless spider’s head. It looked like the upper humanoid part was just an appendage, and the arachman’s brain lay elsewhere.

Lecia prepared to launch another Stone-Sharpened Sword. It was the perfect spell for the situation. The spiders’ bodies were wide for ease of movement but made them easy targets, and even if the sword missed its mark, it would still hinder their maneuverability, creating the perfect opening for Ralph or Chauger to finish the job.

Lecia worked on boxing the monsters in. Some of the swords warded the arachmen away from an easy escape up the walls, while others attacked them more directly. If fire magic was out, then physical attacks were the next best thing. If the arachmen got too close, Lecia simply blocked them off with a stone sword and immediately created another to strike their backs. If the creature near Ralph tried to back away, it would find its path blocked from behind. Lecia even created several smaller swords to make the ground around her and her guards uneven and difficult to traverse for the beasts.

Before long, the arachmen were reduced to lifeless husks.

Ralph sheathed his sword. “Excellent work, Madam.”

“Thank you.”

“You supported us well,” Chauger said. “You didn’t lose your cool for a second. It’s hard to believe that was your first fight.”

“Is this not how all magicians fight?”

“Not at all.” Ralph said. “A lot of magicians have an inflated sense of self-importance; they’re convinced they have the greatest role in the battle. They just use the spells they want and expect everyone else to keep up. You matched your spells to our tactics, and things went very smoothly because of it. I feel just as safe with you as I do His Lordship.”

“Is it not natural to adapt your magic to the situation? My brother taught me that it is crucial to study your surroundings and make use of them.”

“Your brother?”

“Yes. If you use what is already on hand around you, you can use shorter spells. Those spells will therefore be quicker, and you will not have to expend unnecessary aether creating things out of thin air.”

“I see. You did seem to prioritize that over the magic you specialized in.”

“I believe the most important skills magicians should rely on are observing the environment and staying calm at all times.”

“Sorry for underestimating you, Madam. If only some of the magicians at the Adventurer’s Guild had the same mindset.”

The mercenaries continued to lavish praise on Lecia. It sounded very much like magicians in other lands were much further behind than those in Lainur.

Lecia made to move forward.

“Oh?”

Without warning, the ground suddenly collapsed underneath them.

Lecia barely had time to register she was falling before she felt a shock through her rear.

“Ah! Ouch!”

It hadn’t been a vertical drop; she had instead slid down a sharp-angled slope, so the impact wasn’t as painful as it might have been. The real pain came from the embarrassment of something hitting her square on the backside. For a while Lecia lay there on her stomach, gathering her bearings.

“Oh, how could I have been so careless?”



The pain was too much for her to move. She was supposed to be the next heir, and yet she'd let herself make a careless mistake. Her only saving grace was that there was no one around to see her.

Once the pain had ebbed enough, she rose to her feet. It hadn't even occurred to her that there would be a vast and empty space like this beneath them; her magic must have destabilized the thin integument that stood between herself and the vast hollow below.

"Madam?! Are you okay?!" a voice echoed down from above.

"Yes, I am! How are things up there?!"

"Everything's fine! Hold tight for now; we're preparing to pull you up."

"Understood!" Lecia called back up to the dark ceiling.

She used her spell from before to secure herself a light source. The space was bathed in yellow-green light once more, allowing her to study her surroundings. Lecia looked around; this place was fairly open. The ceiling was high and the walls spaced far apart. It was completely different from the narrow passage the three of them had been traversing before.

A tall structure stood before her. On closer inspection, Lecia decided it must have been some sort of altar. A time-worn box sat atop it.

"What is this, I wonder?"

The box was so decrepit that even a fairly light blow would do it in now. It must have been what had broken her fall; the faint divot in the top was proof of that.

"Oh dear..." Lecia began to study the box before the embarrassment could overwhelm her.

She moved the lid aside and found that it was empty. Lecia frowned at it in puzzlement. Suddenly, she heard sounds of a struggle from above.

"Ralph? What is happening?!"

"There were more of them! We'll deal with them quickly, so just keep sitting tight!"

“Very well! Please be care—”

It wasn’t just the area above that was harboring more arachmen.

Hearing scuffling behind her, Lecia spun around to see several red, glimmering beads of light in the darkness her spell failed to reach. There was no doubt they were the same creatures as before. Several of them too: five, six... No, perhaps even seven.

“This must be their nest!”

There was no doubt with this many of them in front of her. The ones they fought earlier were scouts. The ones Ralph and Chauger grappled with now were the main fighting force, and the ones in front of Lecia were those that had stayed behind in the nest.

Lecia released some aether the second the arachmen made to move—a formidable threat display. While it wouldn’t do any physical harm, it would cause the enemy to flinch. The arachmen scuttled back a little, but it was clear they still intended to fight Lecia. They hid away in the shadows and kept their sights firmly set on her. Lecia wasn’t frightened, since they had managed to drive off the earlier creatures easily enough. If she was too hasty, however, things might be different this time.

Although this portion of the cave was wider, it was still an enclosed space, which made things trickier. Bare wall stood behind her. She was stuck here. The Flaming King’s Path would practically hand her the victory, but it would be hard to maneuver it in a narrow arena like this.

Panic was starting to claw at Lecia’s calm and rational mind, and before she had time to do anything else, an arachman leaped at her. Lecia launched herself forward and rolled across the ground to dodge it. Grit clung to her teeth and tongue, and she spat it out before getting to her feet again.

“I shall not fall here! I shall not allow him to leave me behind!”

He had an unwavering goal. He was intelligent, resourceful, and yet he never let it get to his head. He always had time for kindness, no matter the struggles he faced, and he was always moving forward. At some point Lecia started finding herself fearful that he may leave her behind. Maybe it was when he

started creating and learning his own spells. Or maybe it was when she found he was the creator behind the aether gauge. It didn't matter. She always felt he was moving further and further away from her, and before she knew it, she found herself anxious about it.

Lecia worried they wouldn't be able to play together anymore. That they wouldn't be able to speak freely together anymore. That he might go off somewhere where she'd never be able to see him again. The fear grew stronger every time he achieved something new, and she hated it. There should have been no reason they couldn't spend more time together, play together, or speak together. Those things should have been so normal, and yet she worried he would slip out of reach before they even got the chance to try.

Lecia knew it was probably a silly thing to be afraid of. She didn't even want him to praise her or be kind to her. She just wanted to be with him. Just that would be enough. The thought that even that tiny wish might not come to pass pierced her heart. That was why she kept chasing after him. That was why she kept on moving forward. Even if she'd never be able to catch up, at least she wouldn't be left behind.

"*Turn my will to flame. May this single spear set the sky alight and burn through all who stand in my way.*"

Lecia spoke the incantation quickly before stabbing the arachman before her with a flaming lance. She'd resorted to fire magic without thinking, but she reasoned that once or twice would be fine, considering the open area. As she tried to predict which arachman would attack next, she suddenly heard a voice from behind.

Mind your sides. Focus too much on what's in front of you, and you're leaving yourself wide open.

The voice sounded like it belonged to a young boy. Lecia looked to the side, only to find an arachman brandishing a spine, its eyes glowing. She leaped to the side and loosed a spell at it. The spell missed, but its impact still threw the creature back.

Nice dodge. Good job! Keep this up—and watch out to the right!

Lecia had no idea where the voice was coming from, but she didn't have the

time to work it out either. All she needed to know was that it was helping her; she just needed to listen to it. Turning to her right, she saw that there was indeed an arachman heading for her.

"*O, sand, stones, and earth of the grave. Band together by an unseen hand and fly. The ground heaves violently as it births every existence. May the earth take breath and roar. Let the crumbling spirits descend, urged on by raging screams.*"

"Sailing Graveyard."

Lecia used the spell she knew from Gown to pull up a part of the earth, blocking the arachman's path and sealing off a section of the cave. Now that she had limited the areas accessible to the arachmen, she didn't need to worry as much about being attacked from a blind spot or from several directions at once.

Three arachmen crowded together and crawled towards her through the narrow space. Their movement suggested they didn't understand that giving each other room might be advantageous. They were getting caught on each other's bodies and getting in each other's way. It would be a while before they reached Lecia, but their mass would make it difficult for a magician like her to fight back at close quarters.

These creatures are weak to light.

"Weak to light?"

Yes. Take a look. They're trying to avoid the lights you created before. They're not even turning in the lights' direction. Most creatures that live in dark places like this hate strong light.

"In that case..."

Lecia immediately used the blinding spell her brother had taught her.

"*Bring the blinding echo of the sun whether night or day. Fill the sky and cover the earth. Bring the sun to their eyes!*"

"Blinding Flash!"

The resulting light was several times brighter than the small orbs Lecia

created before. The arachmen's movements became erratic, as though they had been completely blinded. They crashed into the bare rocks of the cave and each other. All the while, Lecia concealed herself behind the end of a rocky wall and used Stone-Sharpened Spear to pick off four arachmen one by one. Now there were only three left.

Nice one! But don't let your guard down just yet. That one there in the shadows is coming for you. Look! It's jumping back and to the right!

The voice was right; the creature jumped, and the next second there was a sharp spine in the ground just where it had been moments earlier. If Lecia hadn't listened to the voice, that spine would be inside her right now. The voice's instructions were incredibly precise, as though it had a bird's eye view of the fight.

"*Strike. Hit. Beat. May all which fills the sky become a hand-shaped mass and deal a severe blow. As the crushing arm moves forth, its power forces back. Your wind is thrashing and ceaseless even while calm.*"

"Fist of the Wind."

The wind spell forced the arachmen back, while the earthen wall created by Sailing Graveyard dissipated and unsealed the area that was blocked off. At this rate, the rest of the arachmen would rush her. Lecia wanted to take them all out with a single spell. One spell suddenly came to mind. A powerful spell with a short incantation. And this space was relatively open...

The spell she had in mind was one *he'd* taught her shortly after the incident with Gown. Its power was such that she was told to mind that she not use it in front of an audience—especially her father. If she used it here, she stood a good chance of completely wiping out every arachman in front of her. He'd also warned her not to use it in an enclosed space like this, but she didn't have time to worry about that right now.

"*Infinitesimal. Join. Focus. Burst gently.*"

"Dwarf Star!"

Lecia threw herself onto the ground, put in the earplugs her brother had given her, and closed her extended right hand. The magic circle that had surrounded

the arachman closed in on it at once, and the next second, its body exploded. Lecia felt the impact washing overhead in a storm of dust. The arachman's body was blown to bits, and the others next to it were caught up in the explosion and left lifeless. The spell shook the entire cave, sending rock fragments raining down from the ceiling.

Now that was impressive. To think those words together could create something so powerful... And the amount of aether used was perfectly attuned to create that effect... It's a well-crafted spell for sure.

All sense of joviality was gone from the voice now, a testament to how much the spell's composition had impressed its owner. It seemed the spells that boy made were enough to draw praise from anybody who saw them. Lecia realized she was still hearing the voice even with earplugs in. Just where was it coming from?

Either way, the arachmen were wiped out. Lecia examined the area just in case there were more hiding, and to make sure the cave wasn't suddenly going to collapse in on her.

That's right; it's important to check your surroundings. If you don't have a death wish, that is.

The voice was raspy, as though deriding those who had died in such a manner. Lecia ignored the voice and surveyed the area carefully. She wanted to make sure there was no twitching from the arachmen's spidery parts in case they were simply unconscious. Once she was confident there was no immediate danger, she addressed the voice.

"I do not know who you are, but may I confirm you were indeed speaking to me?"

"That's right, young lady. A pleasure to meet you," came the response.

While Lecia's own voice bounced off the cave walls, there was no echo in the reply at all, as though the voice were confined to her mind.

"Who are you? And where are you speaking from?"

"I'm behind you. Though I don't think you can see me."

“I cannot see you?” Lecia directed one of her light orbs to the space behind her, but sure enough, there was no one there. No matter which direction she was facing, the voice always seemed to come from behind. “Where are you?”

“Behind you, like I said. Or do you mean where did I come from? D’you remember hitting your butt against something?”

“My bu—”

“Yes. You were writhing on the ground with your butt in the air. It was quite sweet actually. Especially the way you were trying so hard not to whimper in pain.”

“P-Please erase that from your mind!”

“Anyway, that’s where I came from. You released me.”

The box hadn’t been empty after all. Lecia found herself anxious that she might have released some sort of terrible beast.

“This cave lies in Raytheft territory. Have you some sort of connection to this place?” she asked.

“‘Raytheft’? I’ve never heard that name before, but I do know that a lot has gone to ruin in the outside world...”

“Gone to ruin?”

“Don’t worry; I’m just talking to myself. Anyway, just know that I don’t know anything about these Ray...something or other.”

If that was true, then that box must have been here from before the first Raytheft was granted this land from the crown.

“I think it is rather cowardly that you are concealing yourself from me!” Lecia cried. “Reveal yourself at once!”

“Cowardly or not, there’s nothing I can do about it.”

“What do you mean? Are you some sort of gh-ghost?”

“If I was, life’d be more fun I think. I could even possess you! Would you like me to possess you?”

“P-Possess me?!”

“Yes. I’d start from your right shoulder like so...”

“Stay away from me!”

“Oh no. I think it would be quite interesting to possess you. Don’t worry; I won’t harm you. If you get into any danger, I’ll guide you just like before. I don’t think it’s such a bad deal, do you?” The voice laughed.

“It sounds like a most troublesome deal to me!”

“Don’t worry now. I won’t make you absorb anything funny. I can’t anyway. And if I find someone more interesting to possess, I’ll simply move on. Just host me for now...”

“Hmph!” Lecia pouted. This demon, or whatever it was, wasn’t listening to her at all!

She turned around and lashed out with her fists, but of course she didn’t hit anything.

The voice laughed again. “That’s not going to achieve much, is it?”

“I-It might! It is a ritual to chase you away!” Lecia kept on hitting the air with her fists.

The voice just kept on laughing. “You are too adorable! Oh, I really like you!”

“You mustn’t like me! It does not make me happy one bit!”

“Don’t be like that. Let’s be friends!”

“I believe I have made it quite clear that I do not wish to be!”

Despite her protests, Lecia had no way to get rid of this thing. Magic might work, but she had no idea what *type* of magic would do the trick.

“Give it up. I’m not going anywhere, no matter how much you glare at me.”

“Ngh...”

“Now, young lady. What is your name?”

“I refuse to tell you.”

“Don’t say that. I’m not going to stop asking until you tell me. What’s your name? What’s your name? What’s your name?”

The voice repeated the question at the volume of a shout. Lecia ran out of patience very quickly.

“Fine! I shall tell you! If you stop asking!”

“What is it, then?”

“Lecia. Lecia Raytheft.”

“Lecia?”

“That is correct. And since I have told you my name, you would do well to tell me yours.”

“Yes, that’s only fair, isn’t it? My name is... Hmm. I wonder what it should be...”

“Is it that much of a problem?”

“Of course! Names are important! Names are how people will judge you. Hmm... Okay! I know! Just call me ‘demon’!”

“D-Demon? You are a demon?!”

“That depends on your definition of demon. But I suppose I am. Or, we’ll say I am for now.”

Lecia couldn’t understand why it wanted to be seen as a demon. Demons were entities from *The Spiritual Age* that were hostile to the Twin Phantoms: paranormal beings that attempted to rid the world of life and replace it with evil spirits. That included humankind; the idea of a demon trying to help Lecia was absurd. Then there was the fact that it took so long to think about what it should call itself. In all likelihood, this voice didn’t belong to a demon at all.

“You don’t trust me?”

“Not when you are reading my thoughts like that!”

“If you don’t want others reading your thoughts, you shouldn’t write them all over your face.”

Fragments of rock fell from the hole above while Lecia spoke to the demon. A rope dangled down, and Ralph came sliding down it moments later.

“Are you okay, Madam?”

“Hm? Oh, yes. I am well.”

“We heard a huge crash. Was that a spell of yours?”

“Yes. Or rather, it was a spell my brother made.”

“Hm... Ah! What’s this?! There are pieces of arachman all over the place...” Ralph gawked at what little remained of the monsters. It struck Lecia then how terrible a scene it was. She too could remember being totally aghast when she first saw what the spell was capable of. “You don’t fail to impress, Madam. This many arachmen were nothing to you.”

“I almost lost my composure. There were seven in all, you see.”

“Seven? And you beat them all by yourself? Now I see why His Lordship was so confident you could manage.” Ralph continued praising Lecia for some time before he suddenly looked around. “I thought I heard you talking to someone just now. Was there someone here?”

“Oh! You see...”

Lecia was about to explain when she found she couldn’t open her mouth. It felt like there was something physically holding her mouth closed. Even when she tried to explain that there was a demon forcing her to keep quiet, she couldn’t.

You can’t tell him about me. I’m not going to let you either.

Lecia gritted her teeth. Apparently, this thing really was intent on possessing her.

“Something wrong, Madam?”

“No, nothing. Let us return to the upper level.”

“Yeah, it’s probably not a good idea to stay down here for too long. Hold on to my back.”

“Thank you.”

Lecia clambered onto the back Ralph offered her. He wrapped the rope tightly around the both of them before scaling the wall. Lecia kept glancing behind her as they climbed, but she didn’t see anything.

Don’t worry. I’ll be here no matter how many times you check.

She *was* worried. She didn’t want it to be there.

After that, Lecia successfully made it to the shrine and retrieved the proof she needed, after which she made it home. But there was always somebody else behind her.

Afterword

A pleasure to see you again. I am the author, Gamei Hitsuji.

The Magician Who Rose From Failure is now on its third volume! Thank you so much for taking the time to read three books as long as these!

In this volume, young Arcus travels west with Noah and Cazzy to obtain the silver he needs for the aethometer's production. It's a journey packed with delicious food, tricky troubles, and new encounters. Arcus doesn't fail to make use of his magic and extensive knowledge on the way, of course.

Just like with the other volumes, there were parts I added that weren't in the web novels. New characters, new spells, and new battles. I also wrote in the item that Arcus got from Gown at the end of the previous volume. I tried to make the new fights even more spectacular too, so they ended up with a lot of extra spells...

Just like with previous volumes, I was working on the spells right up until the last minute. Word choice was, of course, important, but I wanted the spells to flow smoothly when spoken aloud too. I couldn't just slap them together haphazardly! (This old chuunibyou is rambling again, I fear...) Anyway, I think that even those who have read the web novel will be satisfied after reading this version. And now we move onto the next volume while this volume's ends remain loose. Web novel readers will already know this, but the next volume is where the war part of the "*Tales of War and Magic*" subheading starts to develop.

Those lurking in the shadows at the end of volumes 2 and 3 will finally start to make their moves, and Arcus will finally face off against you-know-who... It will also be revealed how Eido slots in to everything.

Oh, and if you're worried about the girls missing out, you probably might not necessarily need to be, maybe!

To wrap up, I'd like to give my thanks. To GC Novels; my editor, K; my illustrator, Saika Fushimi; my proofreading company, Oraido; and all of my supportive readers. Thank you so much.



The group took a long detour from the usual route.
They traversed low mountains and skirted rivers,
and it was only when the sun was setting again that they made it to their destination.


"Pop. Rage. A loud snore and the bugle at dawn. A clumsy cacophony of musicians amidst the shrill barking of dogs. A baby bawls as its father bellows. Come together, noise, and release here as a cascade of ear-piercing bubbles."
"Bewildering Bubble."
Immediately after the incantation, Artglyphs filled the air and scattered widely. The shining white characters, tinged with blue, inflated until they became bubbles. Their soapy film reflected in rainbow shades as the bubbles floated, each taking their own path.

Glossary Duck Sandwich A street food Arcus ate with Sue in the capital. Generations ago, the king of Lainur ate a dish in the great eastern Bailese Union, and was so taken with it that he set to work trying to recreate it via trial and error. The duck sandwich is the result of that. It consists of fried duck coated in a traditional gravy sauce and wrapped in a large steamed wheat bun, much like a meat dumpling. It is famous as fast food hailing from the capital.

Adventurers

The name groups of mercenaries took on after forming a guild; they mostly conduct their activities in Lainur's neighboring land of Sapphireberg. They are ranked according to their achievements, with the lower ranks being treated as jacks-of-all-trades, and the higher ranks being recognized as equal to first-class mercenary leaders, even by the state. There are no restrictions to joining the Guild, and success all depends on individual skill, so it's a popular occupation among the common folk. A wide variety of requests come from nobles, merchants, and ordinary people alike, and at times, adventurers even take on tasks such as exterminating dark spirits. Adventurers tend to be wild and rough, but they are still well-liked within Sapphireberg.

Dunweed

A traveling merchant described in the second Ancient Chronicle, *The Spiritual Age*. A selfless man, he traveled around impoverished villages and sold them necessities at a low price. His benevolent acts earned him the gratitude of many. The stories of Dunweed are still beloved by many, with commoners often using them to teach their children morals.

Regional Monarchs A group of feudal lords under the kingdom's rule. Their territories tend to be larger than nobles', and they hold more power and military force. They include powerful families who have owned their land since time immemorial and kingdoms which subsequently fell under Lainur's rule. The Ten Monarchs who pledge allegiance to Lainur's royal family also come under this definition.

Guillotine

Dietria Rustinell's greatsword. It has been handed down the heads of the Rustinell House for generations and is covered from top to bottom with seals. It is incredibly durable and seems somewhat out of place in the modern world. The weapon is accompanied by a bracelet. It is common knowledge that the blade used to belong to a guillotine for executing prisoners until it was repurposed, and it has beheaded many a soldier of the Empire. Its seals have become less effective with years of use, and their power would have dissipated completely had Arcus not restored them.

Tribreed

Creatures encountered by Lecia that closely resemble canines. They are intelligent and avoid picking fights with those they know are stronger. It is said they are from the same pack as Gown’s phantom hound, Tribe.

Arachman

A beast Lecia and her companions came across in the caverns of the Raytheft territory. Its appearance is unsettling: that of a puppet set atop the body of a large spider. With its many legs, it has spent years roaming where it pleases and devolving into something far more corrupt than the dark spirit it originated as.

Grimoire

Cascading Arrows

A spell used by Eido several times throughout the story. An offensive spell inspired by weaponry. It is designed for fighting multiple enemies, sending arrows raining down over the targeted area. By adding extra phrases to the incantation, it can be made to cover a wider range. Simple yet powerful, it is one of Eido's favorites. The incantation is: "*The magpie sings a simple tune. That song flows from the heavens and into the ears of all who stand in the way. A never ending round. The rain-soaked eaves. Despair from the heavens. The falling rain tastes of iron.*"

Warning Sign

A spell Arcus used to defend against falling rocks. A defensive spell that uses signs. It is based on the various warning signs Arcus saw in the man's world. Each sign sprouts up from the ground and attracts the appropriate magic attacking the caster.

Whether animals, dangers from construction work, landslides or falling rocks, high winds, or slippery or uneven surfaces, this spell can defend against them all. While it can't protect against every single danger, it is very effective at limiting the above phenomena and is therefore more convenient than it may seem at first glance. The incantation is: "*Danger on the road ahead. Animal crossing; road work ahead. Watch for falling rocks and crosswinds. Road slippery when wet. Stay alert. Better safe than sorry!"*

Rain-Resistant Doll

A spell Arcus used to defend against Eido's Cascading Arrows. A defensive spell best used against magic in the outdoors. Its purpose is to defend the user against rain and rain-like spells by creating a large doll in the air. In this case, it deflected Eido's arrows. While its effects may remind one of a scarecrow, its appearance resembles how a child's mental image of a simple sheet ghost. The incantation is: "*Whether arrow or gun, rain is rain: unpleasant damp. Put an end to the shower. Bring clear skies without thought of tomorrow. May the rain charm's prayer fall silent!*"

Black Pavilion

A spell Eido used while exchanging blows with Arcus. A simple supportive spell which makes use of darkness to cause confusion. The target is plunged into darkness and rendered unconscious. The incantation is: "*Bring the bunting down over the spilled ink. Galloping dark clouds. Cast heavy hoods over their eyes. Those surrounded cannot move with discretion.*"

Blinding Flash

The spell Arcus used to counter Eido's attempt at snatching his vision. A supportive spell which uses the power of light to disrupt. In the story, Arcus used it to cancel out Black Pavilion. Arcus based it on a technique he saw in a certain manga in the man's world. He originally wanted to combine it with Bewildering Bubble to recreate the effects of a stun grenade, but his experiments didn't go well, and he ended up separating the concepts into two separate spells. The incantation is: "*Bring the blinding echo of the sun whether night or day. Fill the sky and cover the earth. Bring the sun to their eyes*!"

Corner Dust

The spell Eido used to counter Arcus's Scrapped Arms. It is a supportive spell for everyday use; one which pulls trash to a specified place. It is not a combative spell, instead having been created to help regular people clean up scattered garbage, but Eido reworked it on the spot after hearing Arcus's incantation. It could be described as the perfect spell for lazy people. The incantation is: "*Dregs and trash must not be dropped where pleased. Bring it to the dump, where it belongs. The bigger the wastebasket, the more it holds.*"

Left Gauntlet of Transparency

The spell Eido used to counter Cazzy's Algol's Grass-Cutting Sickle. A defensive spell inspired by weaponry. It creates an invisible protector on the caster's left arm to defend against the opponent's attack. To any onlookers, it looks like the caster is wearing an invisible gauntlet, but it can only be used to defend and therefore isn't very versatile. The incantation is: "*Colorless gauntlet, knock back the sword! Shapeless iron. Ostentatious ornament. Protect me with an unseen force!*"

Curcelrus's Giant Fan

A spell Arcus used to hinder Eido's movements. An offensive, wind-based spell. It creates a strong wind which rushes toward the opponent to send them flying. To activate the spell's effect, you need to twirl your hand as though stirring up the wind before waving it in a wide sweeping motion like a fan. The incantation is: "*A ten-span fan in the hand. From sand to snow, blow everything away.*"

Spring's Thawing Breath

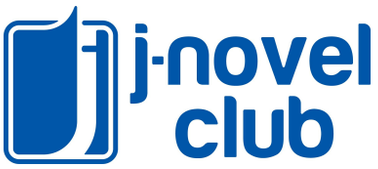
The spell Eido used to cancel out Noah's Frozen Sprint. A supportive spell meant to thaw snow and ice. It replicates the spring breeze that loosens winter's grip, forcing ice and snow to melt. While it wasn't fast enough to completely thaw Frozen Sprint, it bought Eido enough time to escape unscathed. The incantation is: "*Spring breeze. A mild wind to melt snow and ice.*"

Escape Shell

The spell Eido used to escape Dwarf Star. A defensive spell which changes its opponent's target. It is similar to certain ninja techniques which resemble insects shedding their skin. Getting the timing right with the incantation is difficult, but Eido managed partly due to his skill, and partly because Dwarf Star's activation time is relatively predictable. The incantation is: "*The dream of a trickster's slumber. Illusions in the dark. Floating bubbles. Twilit shadows. Shed the empty skin and let it fall.*"

Borrowed Hand

The spell Arcus used to pass Cazzy his sickle. A supporting spell that can move objects, and an improved version of Psychokinesis. It creates a large hand in the air, which the caster can use to grab and move an object of his choice, making it faster than the spell it is based on. The incantation is: "*Work, work. A single pair of hands is insufficient. Lend me one hand extra. I care not for the source. Give it to me.*"



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The Magician Who Rose From Failure: Volume 3

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3
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