

The Magician Who Rose from Failure:

Tales of War and Magic

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Prologue: Alcohol and Its Allure Arcus and Noah were visiting Craib's library, which he kept inside a small storehouse in one corner of his estate. He called it a storehouse, at least, but as haphazardly organized as it was, "dump" suited the place better. Had it been a closet, it would be fit to bursting with everything Craib casually crammed in there, but fortunately it was a mite bigger. The thick layers of dust spread about the place gave the impression that nothing in here was important enough to bother caring for. The shutters nailed onto the building to keep out the rain meant there wasn't a lick of natural light allowed inside. Arcus and Noah were forced to bring in a Sol Glass lantern to carry out their search.

"This place feels kinda haunted," said Arcus.

"I have heard that Craib does not exactly prioritize keeping this place in order."

"Ugh! Look at the size of that spider! There's enough webbing here to lose a grown man in it."

Arcus shuddered as the creature came into view under the light of the lantern. Even compared to the most impressive spiders from the man's world,

this one was on the larger side.

“If I might ask, Master Arcus, what exactly is your objective in coming here?” Noah asked, without even batting an eyelid at the sinister arachnid.

“I was thinking I might be able to find something that my uncle overlooked. I know he’s smarter than me, but we don’t look at things from the same perspective; I thought it was worth having a rummage through here.”

“I see. And your real reason?”

Arcus paused. “Things’ve been kinda slow on my end lately. I haven’t made any new discoveries for ages, and to be honest, I’m pretty desperate.”

Though he laughed to hide his embarrassment, it was true that his studies had slowed to a snail’s pace. His work with the Ancient Chronicles was very stop-and-go, with more stopping than going, and it had been a long time since he had learned any new artglyphs. He’d been beating his head against spell development, too; if he was lucky, something in here might provide the critical spark of inspiration.

“Don’t get me wrong, I’m doing what I can, but it’s just that my uncle has so much more stuff than I do.”

“Indeed he does. However, it may surprise you to know that this is not where he keeps his most valuable materials.”

“Yeah, I know!” Arcus replied, a little more snippily than he intended.

It was as he was rifling through one of the bookshelves, frustration quickening his movements, that a pile of books atop it came crashing down. Arcus let out a cry.

“Try not to be so impatient,” Noah sighed, moving in to pick up the books and sweep away the dust. “Has anything caught your eye just yet?”

“Dunno. I’m gonna keep looking.”

Arcus continued his search along and around the dust-covered shelves. Going through each book, he opened it up and brought the lantern up to skim it. None of these books had been opened for several years, as evidenced by each one housing a family of booklice which Arcus wiped away under his glove. After a

while, he found what appeared to be a discarded bundle of books.

“Huh?”

Just like everything else in this place, it had not been treasured in the slightest, stuffed away in here because its owner deemed it unnecessary. Arcus was instinctively intrigued by it. Even if Craib scanned these books, he doubted his uncle would have paid much attention to their details. It was quite possible that there were secrets inside waiting for Arcus to be the first to discover them.

He rummaged through them and pulled out one with a peculiar-looking cover. The book was written in the Elder Tongue.

“This looks interesting...”

Arcus’s heart began to race in anticipation. The rush he felt was stronger than usual, because it had been so long since he found anything like this. He read the cover: *Klin Botter’s Guide to Surreptitious Distillation*.

“What?! It’s just a guide to moonshining!” Arcus growled, slamming his fist on the floor in frustration.

Noah stopped what he was doing to approach his master. “Is something the matter?”

“Nah, it’s nothing. How are you getting on?”

“I am afraid I haven’t found anything particularly relevant.”

The search went on long after that, but the pair found nothing magic-related at all. As the only thing that looked slightly interesting, Arcus reluctantly took the moonshining guide home to look through. It was written in the Elder Tongue, after all. Even if the contents had nothing to do with magic, there was a chance he might pick up some new words or phrases.

“I guess it’s worth a read.”

His expectations low, Arcus did just that. To his surprise, the book was more about brewing alcohol legitimately than moonshining.

Still, it’s not much more than a book of recipes...

Most of the words and expressions in the book were ones Arcus knew

already. The recipes themselves were simply altered versions of common ones found in any book. Why the author had gone through the effort of writing it all out in the Elder Tongue remained a total mystery.

“Wait, what’s this? ‘Thaumaturgical Strategies for Optimal Beveragecraft’?”

It was a section tucked away at the very back of the book. The process was written out in detail, and even included accounts of how different temperatures affected brewing.

Temperature. Humidity. These were concepts that Arcus only knew from the man’s world; in this world, they remained undiscovered—so much so that even the way his aethometer combined the expansion of a material with a measure seemed innovative to this world’s people.

The way temperature was described in this book in such a matter of fact way meant that, whenever it was written, it was a well-known concept that could be measured.

They do say that civilization was at its height when The Magician’s Elegy was written...

It had been a time where magical knowledge and innovation was at its peak—but it was that very same technology that had brought about the period’s downfall. That had been several centuries ago now, though.

“Optimal beverages, huh?”

Arcus knew the taste of alcohol from the man’s world. The alcohol he drank in celebration was particularly delicious. Of course, Arcus was too young to drink anything like that here, but it wouldn’t hurt to begin preparations in any case. Something he could drink as a toast when the aethometer was finally announced to the world on a mass scale. His mouth was already watering at the prospect, and he was forced to swallow to avoid drooling.

“The stuff sure is tempting...”

Arcus wasted no time in getting to work. He quickly scribbled out a list of the required ingredients in plain text. The key was to imbue a certain plant with a secret magic, creating a new plant known as soma.

“Now to give this list to Noah and ask him to get all this stuff for me.”

And that was how Arcus got into brewing alcohol.

Part 1: The Aethometer, Revealed

Today, Arcus was visiting the Magician's Guild with Craib, Noah, and Cazzy. They were here regarding the aethometer; it was finally time for its official unveiling, and it was to be announced at the Guild itself.

That being said, the announcement would be limited to a very select few. The meeting could almost be considered secret, with only a number of state magicians, medical luminaries, generals, and important military figures in attendance. There was a good reason for keeping the meeting so small, and that was to do with the aethometer's inherent nature.

One of the biggest advantages of the device was its potential to increase the pace of magical acquisition, which could lead to an explosion of powerful magicians in a very short span. This potential would have a direct influence on military affairs. Not only would this boom of powerful magicians create more might for the armed forces to make use of, but those already in the army would benefit from the aethometer as well.

This was also why unveiling the aethometer on a grand scale was risky. Assuming its existence became common knowledge, the device could easily leak to foreign powers, meaning Lainur would not be the only country to reap the benefits. Even if it was just a matter of time before rumors spread anyway, it was paramount that the kingdom treat it like any other secret weapon; the overwhelming advantage it offered would only last as long as its mystique.

The representatives had gathered in the Guild's Blue Room. The room was reserved for large meetings and high-priority gatherings of state magicians. The room was long, narrow, and windowless. The embroidered carpet was bright red. Tapestries hung from the ceiling. The abundant pillars were hung with the royal family's flag. In the very center of the room was a glass, C-shaped table, with nameplates set at each seat.

All in all, it was everything a meeting room should be, with the flair of a medieval European castle to boot. The state magicians and military leaders who Godwald and Craib had summoned were already in their seats. In less clandestine circumstances they would have called on the heads of more military

families. Purce Cremelia was present, but Joshua Raytheft was not, which was likely a decision made by Godwald and Craib.

It took ages, but I finally made it...

Arcus was waiting to speak, partitioned off in a small space in the room and trembling in joyful anticipation. It had taken two whole years to get to this announcement. Two years of finalizing and fine-tuning his invention, and acquiring the means to mass produce it. His age played no small part in the timing, and while he knew that it was important to unveil it at the right time, two years was not an insignificant wait for a child.

“Nervous? You’re shakin’ like a leaf,” Craib, who was waiting with Arcus, said.

“Yeah, I mean... look at where we are.”

“You need not be nervous, Arcus Raytheft,” Godwald chipped in from behind him, his expression as grim as ever. “Should anything go wrong, we are here to step in.”

“Th-Thank you, Guildmaster.”

“Though it’s not like we know as much about your invention as you do,” Craib added.

“Indeed,” Godwald said with a small smile.

Despite their attempts to calm him, Arcus was unable to feel completely at ease. He was about to address Lainur’s highest authority figures. Anybody with even an ounce of respect for them would feel nervous. Craib and Godwald, of course, were exceptions.

“These are not the type of people you need to be nervous around,” Godwald said.

“Yeah, just look at ’em.”

At Craib’s encouragement, Arcus peered around the side of the partition. Everyone in the room was currently enjoying themselves and partaking in high-spirited conversation. Only the military leaders were quiet, presumably because they knew this announcement was magic-related, and therefore decided it didn’t directly concern them. The magicians, on the other hand, were brimming

with excitement as they chattered earnestly among themselves. Arcus studied them one by one.

There was a slender man who looked equally likely to be fifteen or forty; an elegant, elderly gentleman dressed to the absolute nines; a magician who busied himself by playing with the walnuts on the table as he leaned back in his chair, hardly seeming to care where he was; a woman with long bangs clad in a white dress; and a young girl who was the spitting image of a stereotypical witch, hat and all.

Arcus pricked his ears to see if he could pick up any interesting tidbits of conversation.

The walnut magician let out a deep sigh. "I can't be assed with this..."

Whoever he was, he had quite a nerve to be speaking like that in a place filled with so many important people. Quite aside from his words, even his tone of voice gave off a clear message that he didn't want to be there.

The witch in the high-peaked hat sitting across from him glared at him. "Why did you attend if you would rather be somewhere else?"

"Crucible asked me, that's why. It was easier to come than to argue with him."

"Really, it shouldn't matter who invited you. We have a duty to attend these meetings. I cannot understand why you wouldn't be excited about this, either."

The walnut magician's expression hardened. "I had to give up something incredibly important to be here, y'know."

"And what would that be?"

"Sleep."

"Oh, you are awful!" The witch glared coldly at him.

Meanwhile, the magician in the white dress was speaking to the man sitting at the head of the table.

"Have you heard anything about today's presentation, Roheim?"

"I have. The Guildmaster explained it to me in great detail."

“And?”

“Well, listen to the presentation, and you shall see for yourself.”

“O-Oh, of course. Please excuse me.” Clearly, she felt he was chastising her for being too impatient. She bowed her head several times in apology.

“No need to apologize,” Roheim responded. Apparently he didn’t mean to criticize her.

The walnut magician smiled suggestively at Roheim. “You sure you just don’t know yourself, Master Waterwheel?”

Roheim chuckled, neither confirming nor denying his question.

“Hey, don’t just laugh! I wanna know!”

“Waterwheel, if I may. I believe he is trying to get the information from you so that he might leave before the presentation.”

“Yeah, ’course I am.”

“Is that right, Frederick? Well, please be assured that you would regret sitting this one out.”

“Ugh...”

Despite his attitude, even he didn’t dare to speak back to his superiors.

The older gentleman sitting opposite Roheim spoke up. “From your words, I gather the presentation we are due to witness is not to be sniffed at.”

“Indeed, although I’m surprised the Guildmaster hasn’t already told you all about it, Gastarque.”

“I’ve been busy planning our new stronghold, not to mention training up my disciple. I didn’t have the time to ask him.” Gastarque turned to the general sitting next to him, Purce Cremelia. “How about you, Count Cremelia? Heard anything? You are fairly close to Mr. Abend, aren’t you?”

“Nothing this time, I’m afraid, My Lord.”

“Is that so? It would appear that anything substantive regarding this project is being kept closely guarded.”

“Oh?”

“Information like this spreads very easily through the routes the researchers use to procure their materials or consult their documents, or through the state magicians they ask to assist them. Yet in this case, nobody even knows who will be presenting; whoever it is has been very careful to circulate the information to a small and tight-lipped circle.”

Purce and the other generals let out a hum of admiration at Gastarque’s deduction.

Roheim looked back at him. “I have heard that the project in question was not Craib’s.”

“What? But he’s the one who called us here.”

“What could this mean?”

“It shan’t be long until you all find out. From the looks of things, the presentation is ready.”

The Guildmaster stepped out onto the stage, and all at once the curious magicians fell silent. Reaching the center of the stage, he began to address the members in front of him, his voice as stern as ever.

“Thank you very much for taking the time out of your busy schedules to join us today.” The Guildmaster swept his gaze over the crowd, leaving a highly-charged tension in its wake.

This man was the leader of the state magicians, and even the generals respected his authority. The only people in the room who weren’t shrinking back were Gastarque, Roheim, and Purce, who looked to be the eldest among the military representatives.

Aside from them, there was someone who reacted very differently. It was the young witch in the robe and hat. Arcus studied her closely, his curiosity piqued.

“That is Mercuria String,” Noah whispered in his ear, noticing his confusion. “I understand what you might be thinking, but she is actually in her late twenties.”

For whatever reason, Mercuria was burying her face in her hands.

Godwald cleared his throat. “Mercuria? What is the matter?”

“I’m sorry, sir! Your face is just too terrifying! I cannot bear to look at it!”

Arcus felt a prick of pity in his chest for the poor Guildmaster. Godwald waited patiently until Mercuria slowly began to peer out from under her fingers.

“C-Can I look now, sir?”

“Yes. Don’t worry, I shan’t look your way anymore,” Godwald lied, staring right at her.

Mercuria, however, seemed to believe him, and removed her hands from her face... before swiftly flying into a panic.

“A-Ah! S-S-Sir! You deceived me! You’re looking right at me!”

“Simply seeing my face should not fill you with despair!” Godwald snapped.

“Eeeek! I’m sorry, sir! I’m so sorry! Please! Spare my life!” Mercuria wailed.

Arcus thought back to the last time they visited the Guild. It seemed there were a lot of people who decided the Guildmaster was after their blood. Perhaps he had a very dark past Arcus wasn’t aware of. It wasn’t too hard to imagine, given the scar on his face.

“Good show as always, sir,” Gastarque said. “Your very existence strikes fear into the hearts of even us state magicians.”

“That... wasn’t...” Godwald’s eyebrow twitched.

Once he somehow managed to finish up his address, Arcus took to the stage alongside Craib. His uncle was acting as his guardian today, with Noah and Cazzy as Arcus’s assistants.

The crowd couldn’t disguise its surprise at the sudden appearance of a child and his two unconventional attendants. Craib was the first to speak once everyone was in position.

“I cannot thank you enough for taking the time to be here today.”

It took Arcus a split second to realize those words really had come from his uncle, and no one else. He didn’t know Craib was capable of being so polite, given how blunt he usually was. Undoubtedly it was to do with the number of

people in the audience who outranked him. He recalled the last time Craib and Purce met; Craib had surprised Arcus the same way.

Once Craib finished speaking, the walnut magician opened his mouth. “Hey, Crucible! Could ya try and keep things short today? I wouldn’t even be here if it wasn’t you and the Guildmaster who summoned us.”

“Huh? Who’dya think you are? You saying if Gastarque or Roheim called you here, you’d have skipped?” Craib asked.

“What? Uh, no, I didn’t...” he glanced at the two older magicians, a stream of flustered excuses gushing from his mouth.

Roheim raised a finger in the air. “Don’t worry, Frederick. Every generation of state magicians has its troublemaker. You’ve always been difficult to deal with, and we are very much used to it.”

“U-Uh... Um...”

“Look at you, stumbling over your words,” Mercuria said.

“Shut your mouth,” Frederick grumbled.

“Hold on a second, Roheim,” Craib chimed in. “If every generation has a troublemaker, who was ours?”

“I am sure I do not need to answer that question.”

At that, every head in the room turned to look at Craib. It seemed the rumors were true. Roheim started to chuckle, leaving Craib with a very uncomfortable look on his face. Since he wasn’t speaking back, Arcus guessed that Roheim was also one of his superiors, just like Godwald.

Craib cleared his throat before sweeping his gaze over the room. “Alicia’s not here for obvious reasons, but has anybody heard from Renault or Cassim?”

It was Godwald who answered his question. “I’m having Renault keep an eye on the south, and His Majesty has asked Cassim to keep watch over Alicia.”

“Right. I was hoping everyone would be here, but I guess we’ll just put it down to bad luck.”

“Bad luck?” Roheim asked quietly with a raised eyebrow.

“The worst of luck. I can see Renault throwing a fit when he realizes what he missed.”

“Renault? Throwing a fit? Are we thinking of the same man?”

“That’s exactly how big this announcement is.”

Gastarque watched their exchange with great amusement. Arcus meanwhile, couldn’t help but frown. Craib implied there were three magicians missing tonight, but even counting those three, the numbers didn’t add up.

“Noah,” he whispered, “there are twelve state magicians, right, including Alicia Rotterbell? But that means there are more than just three missing, doesn’t it?”

“Indeed. The remaining two, however, come from and reside in different kingdoms. Twisted Karma, or Shurelia Rimaleon, is a general of Sapphireberg, one of Lainur’s allied nations. Swift Wind, better known as His Majesty Al Ritsuellie Baldan, is king of Zelipus, a kingdom which falls under Lainur’s jurisdiction.”

“Oh... I didn’t know Lainur appointed state magicians from different nations.”

That would explain why they weren’t in attendance. Sapphireberg was one of Lainur’s neighbors, but it was still a long way from the latter’s capital. As for the king of Zelipus, it wouldn’t be a great look for you to rush off at the request of another country when you had your own country’s problems to deal with and territory to look after. Then there was the aforementioned issue of wanting to keep the aethometer a secret within Lainur’s borders...

Arcus suddenly realized that the female magician in the white dress was looking at him. “Who is that young girl with you, Craib? I’m assuming she must be related, with hair like that.”

“Indeed. She looks as though she’ll be a stunningly beautiful woman in five years or so,” Gastarque added with an unsettling chuckle.

Arcus began to tremble, but couldn’t quite pinpoint why. Perhaps it was the lecherous glint in the old man’s eye.

“Please, Gastarque, he’s my nephew.”

Frederick's eyes widened. "'Nephew'?! He's a boy? A boy, with a face like that?! Or is this a wolf in sheep's clothing-type deal?"

Meanwhile, Gastarque was completely stiff for a split second, before he righted himself. "Oh, I see. He's a boy. Unusually pretty, for a boy. What a shame!"

The old magician wasn't even trying to hide his disappointment. Arcus wished he would stop sobbing about it. Despite how well he was dressed, he couldn't conceal his moral bankruptcy. If he wasn't mistaken, the two women in the room had shifted their chairs ever so slightly away from him.

So this was the real Gastarque Rondiel, the state magician known as Fortress. He was the most famous magician in the land, and Arcus was a little disappointed to find out the true nature behind this national hero. He was a soldier from the previous king's generation, and it was common knowledge that, without Fortress and his military exploits, Lainur would long have been absorbed by the more powerful Empire.

...But he was also a freak of the highest order.

Quickly gathering his bearings, Arcus introduced himself with a hurried bow. "My name is Arcus Raythef. It's a pleasure to be here."

There was a stir throughout the room. Many of the attendees here likely knew of him as Joshua's talentless son.

Frederick was the first to voice his confusion. "So what's this nephew of yours doin' here, then, Craib?"

"He's the one givin' the presentation, that's why."

"What? Really?" Frederick turned to Godwald this time.

"That's right." The Guildmaster nodded. He then stepped forward to stop the place descending into chaos. "Please, if I may have order. I understand you might have your doubts; however..."

Sensing what was about to happen, everybody in the Blue Room got to their feet at the Guildmaster's words.

"In the absence of the usual chair, Renault Einfast, please allow me, Godwald

Sylvester, to whom His Majesty has bestowed the title of Magician's Guildmaster, to lead the oath instead." Godwald's deep, somber voice boomed out over the room. "First, however, we have some absentees. As mentioned already, the fifth state magician, Stronghold: Renault Einfast. The eighth state magician, Swift Wind: His Majesty, Al Ritsuellie Baldan. The tenth state magician, Twisted Karma: Shurelia Rimaleon. The eleventh state magician, Blinding Flare: Cassim Lowry. The twelfth state magician, Dry Spell: Alicia Rotterbell. The above state magicians cannot be in attendance for various reasons, and I ask for your understanding on the matter."

Godwald paused before continuing in a loud voice.

"Please join me. For His Majesty the King!"

"For His Majesty the King!" the room echoed.

The magicians, the military leaders... Everyone in the room swore their eternal loyalty to the king in one clear voice, their hands on their hearts and their boots stomped firmly on the floor. The booming tapestry of their voices seemed to shake the entire building. Arcus felt like the gravity in the room increased tenfold.

Wh-Whoa...

Darkness seemed to overtake his vision for a split second. Lights flashed before his eyes. It didn't take him long to realize it was an accumulation of the intense majesty of every person in the room. He looked at their faces, but not one of them looked calm any longer. They all seemed to have a bloodcurdling shadow cast over them. That included the military reps, despite their former lack of interest in this magical presentation. It fell on the young witch, who had cowered at the Guildmaster's face; the indolent walnut magician; the lecherous national hero. Even Craib, who was standing right next to him, was not exempt.

Every face in the room was so starkly stoic, they almost gave off an air of a total disconnect from reality. Every last pair of eyes burnt with the unwavering desire to die for their king, should it come to that. Arcus didn't need to ask them to know that everyone here was willing to sacrifice their life, not just for the king, but for their country and its honor too.

They were united by a force stronger than iron. Arcus only managed to hold

on to consciousness because of how much time he spent in Craib's overwhelming presence.

Just then, Arcus felt Noah's face by his ear. "Are you all right, Master Arcus?"

"I-I think so. What about you?"

"More or less, although I'm having some difficulty remaining upright."

Cazzy's face looked gaunter by the second. "I wanna go home."

"No."

"You can't."

"I was just sayin'..." He let out a tired sigh.

Arcus could sympathize completely, but if they didn't stand their ground now, they were essentially throwing years of hard work down the drain.

The pledge finished, Godwald moved on to the main topic. "Today's presentation concerns the creation of a new device based on research by the eldest son of the Raytheft house, Arcus Raytheft. It has the potential to revolutionize this kingdom's magical advancement, and so I would like you all to pay close attention."

"Revolutionize?"

"Correct. That is what I believe."

"Yes, but..."

"I understand you may have your doubts, but please listen to the presentation first. Arcus, could you step forward?"

"Yes, sir," Arcus replied, stepping up onto the stand Noah prepared for him.

Though the fact that he needed a stand like this would usually irritate him, this meeting was too important for him to worry about that now.

Arcus took as deep a breath as he could, holding the air in his lungs for a moment before speaking. "Today, I would like to introduce you all to a tool that is capable of measuring aether."

It was finally time for the first step in unveiling his invention to the entire

world.

Arcus had just concluded his opening statement on the aethometer. The Blue Room was so quiet, you could hear a pin drop. It wasn't that the attendees hadn't understood the presentation; far from it. They needed time to let the vast significance and implications of Arcus's invention sink in.

After a long, long pause, finally the magicians began to stir.

"A-A tool which measures aether?" The magician in the white dress murmured.

"That certainly is something..." Gastarque remarked.

Next, the walnut-bearing magician came back to his senses, and he turned towards Craib.

"Hold up, hold up! Is this for real?! Crucible, this isn't some kinda joke, right?!"

"Gimme some credit. I wouldn't call on the most important folks in the kingdom for a joke."

"Well, yeah, I know, but...is this...really for real?" Frederick began to mutter under his breath over and over, as though he couldn't believe his ears.

The tiniest of smug smiles rose to Craib's lips as he witnessed the confusion Arcus had unleashed within the Guild. "Like I said, Fred, this ain't a joke. I mean, look, even old man Godwald's here!"

"I-I know. But..."

"Right, so this is clearly real," Roheim cut in. "Now, Craib, does this mean that you—no, that this nephew of yours has actually created said tool?"

Craib nodded. The next moment, the magician in the white dress was on her feet, leaning across the table. The skidding of her chair was amplified in the silent room, causing everyone to look at her. They waited patiently for her to speak, but so far her mouth was just opening and closing like a fish gasping for air.

"C-Craib," she finally managed. "Is this... It *is* real, isn't it? I mean..."

“I know it’s a shock, Muller. I get it. Just keep listening, and all’ll become clear, yeah?”

“Oh! Yes, I’m sorry... I was just...it really *is* a surprise.” Muller bowed her head repeatedly at every corner of the room, firing out apologies at a breakneck pace.

From the looks of things, the presentation had shocked her more than anyone else, and it seemed like Craib knew exactly why.

Craib turned his gaze back to Frederick. “Hey, Fred. Still wish you sat this one out?”

“Nope. This is way more interesting than sleep. To think I was gonna skip, huh? Feel free to praise me for workin’ up the motivation.”

“Yeah, well done. Now you just gotta keep quiet till the end, ’kay?”

“Course.” Frederick was practically on the edge of his seat at this point.

He sat back down and straightened his back, as if to show that he wasn’t going to move an inch until the presentation was done.

“Oh, that’s right, Crucible. You must have been keeping this amazing thing under wraps all this time.”

“Well, yeah. Actually, that was Godwald’s fault.”

“I beg your pardon?!”

“I mean, it was, right? You said we should keep it quiet for a while.”

“Yes, but you needn’t make it sound like a bad thing...”

“C’mon, it’d be way nicer to have a Guildmaster who’s totally honest, right?”

“I’ll have you know I had very good reasons for suggesting we keep it quiet!”

Craib seemed to be picking on Godwald in an attempt to lighten the mood. No one was ready to point out that he was being particularly insolent to his superior, likely because they were already aware of the bond the two shared.

“Um... may I start presenting the details now?” Arcus spoke up tentatively.

At those words, Noah smoothly passed his master some documents. Aside

from that, he didn't make any move to help Arcus catch everyone's attention. He was probably enjoying this as much as they were. The subtle twitching at the corner of his lip showed as much. Arcus doubted that he'd ever grow out of this immature streak.

Once he had Craib's and Godwald's permission, Arcus spoke up again.

"Noah, Cazzy, if you please."

His servants nodded, stepping towards the magicians. Each carried a pre-prepared paper bag.

"There's an aethometer for each magician in these bags, which my attendants will hand out to you. I would like to ask the non-magicians to pay close attention too."

Every attendant received a manual, as well as a reference sheet with the mana required for various words and phrases. The magicians in particular wasted no time in studying the materials they received.

"What is this?"

"A wooden frame with numbers, a glass tube, and some... red liquid?"

"I haven't seen anything like this before. Although I can't quite see how it would work..."

Aethometers were being lightly shaken and turned upside down all around the table. However, thanks to the red liquid's cohesive properties, it didn't move an inch.

"The liquid inside those tubes is a specially-processed form of Sorcerer's Silver. If you release a little aether, the colored Silver will react and expand, moving as far up the tube as the amount of aether that has been released. Please stand the device upright and try releasing some aether now."

The magicians immediately followed his instructions as the military leaders looked on with bated breath. The next moment, the room was filled with gasps.

"Wow!"

"Oh, my!"

“Th-The liquid’s moving! A-And you say it’s in response to my aether?!”

Every magician was staring at the Sorcerer’s Silver as if nothing else in the room mattered.

“The numbers on the aethometer represent mana, the unit of measure for aether. Using psychokinesis requires ten mana. If we split the spell into its three components, it’s three plus three plus four mana, equaling ten.”

The spell’s full incantation was: *“Guide the object according to my will.”*

Split into three, it became “Guide,” “the object according(ly),” and “according to my will,” with the two final phrases overlapping somewhat. Each of these components cost roughly three, three, and four mana respectively.

Psychokinesis was the most basic spell around, and would be as simple as breathing for the magicians gathered here. They cast it one by one, each aethometer showing the exact same result. The magicians eagerly began to compare their aethometers to the mana guides in front of them.

One of the military leaders leaned forward to speak to Muller. “Madame Quint? Does the tool match up with what it says on that paper there?”

“Yes, indeed it does. It’s a perfect match.” Muller showed the aethometer and paper to him.

“You’re right...”

Arcus looked at the rest of the magicians. It looked like they were done explaining to their neighbors, too. Even Frederick was leaning back in his chair like before, though he seemed to be in a daze of astonishment.

“Maybe I really am sleepin’, and this is all a crazy dream...”

“Come on now, if this were a dream you’d have woken up from the shock. Although you’d likely have gone straight back to sleep,” Mercuria said.

“I guess.”

The magicians were still playing around with their aethometers, looking even more surprised with each consistent result.

“What do you think?” Arcus asked, once the magicians finally started to calm

down. “I’d be happy to answer any questions.”



Roheim put his hand up in the air. “Arcus, was it? I’m afraid I have several questions—is that all right?”

“Ask as many as you like.”

Noah leaned in to whisper in Arcus’s ear and remind him that this was Roheim Langula, the state magician known as Waterwheel.

“I know it was already in your explanation, but could you tell us again about this liquid?”

“Certainly. This is ordinary Sorcerer’s Silver, which has been specially processed and colored with cinnabar. I have yet to give it a name.”

“Understood. And from what distance is this tool—this aethometer—effective?”

“From around three to six-and-a-half feet. Any further than that, and although it is likely to detect aether, it will not guarantee an accurate reading.”

“In other words, it could not be used for detecting aether.”

“That is correct.”

“Equally, one of these could not be used dishonestly to learn how much aether is required for another magician’s spells,” Roheim said. “What about measuring aether in continuous increments?”

“I could not recommend that, either. It takes a while for the Silver to react, so it would be difficult to measure a single spell all at once. You would get a much more accurate reading by breaking a spell down into its components and measuring each one by one.”

The aethometer was slow, and the Silver needed time to expand and contract. It would be difficult to keep track of if you were trying to feed it too much information at once. It wasn’t like a speedometer, scales, or indeed a traditional thermometer, which could react in an instant. Although the aethometer was sensitive, it was also still rather primitive.

Arcus had toyed with ideas to fix this issue, such as introducing a new metal into the mix, but the man’s memories proved to hold very few solutions so far.

“So you must take your time in relaying each part of a spell to it. There aren’t many situations where you would need to measure a lot of aether in a short space of time, so I suppose that’s not an issue. Hmm...” Roheim paused. “Can this special Sorcerer’s Silver react to anything other than aether?”

“Not that we know of, no, but we have looked into it. The Silver has been processed twice, so it shouldn’t be affected by heat or humidity, either.”

“Does the Silver degrade at all? And what about the other materials? Would that lead to inconsistent measurements?”

“We’re still studying the Silver itself, but the tube is made of glass, so we can assume that it will deform when cooled or heated rapidly.”

“Oh?” A light frown appeared on Roheim’s brow.

Arcus still wasn’t sure how knowledgeable this world was about the concept of temperature, particularly freezing point. Magicians knew about ice, of course, or they couldn’t use it in their spells, but Arcus was wary of speaking in terms specific to the man’s world.

The magicians were taking rapid notes, so perhaps Arcus *had* introduced them to a new concept.

“What I mean to say is that, yes, the tool can lose accuracy as a result of its materials degrading. Glass can expand or contract due to rapid temperature changes, and it can also degrade over time. These situations would cause the aethometer to lose accuracy.”

Arcus was talking about the phenomenon that occurred when glass is heated to a high temperature before being cooled rapidly. In a thermometer’s case, the heat would cause the glass to expand, but the difference in temperature from the cooling would be too great for it to return to its original form, increasing its volume temporarily. Where the mercury inside would usually have accurately measured zero degrees, with the extra volume, it would actually show below zero at the same temperature—a false measurement. In turn, every measurement would show up slightly lower than it actually was.

An opposite effect was also possible. This was something that occurred over a long period of time after the thermometer’s production. As time went by, the

glass would begin to shrink, slowly decreasing its volume and the amount of mercury it could hold. This would end up putting pressure on the mercury and pushing it up, causing the thermometer to display a higher temperature than it actually was.

As long as the aethometer was made of glass, it was in danger of falling victim to these twin phenomena.

“In other words, we cannot expect it to remain accurate forever.”

“That’s right. We’re still looking into how long it can measure accurately for, and so far we’ve found that it stays accurate for a year at the very least.”

“Should we be storing these in any particular way?”

“There are cases where the Silver has remained expanded if it received a shock during use or was stored at an improper angle for too long. I would recommend storing it as upright as possible.”

“I see. May I ask just one more question?” Roheim said. “What exactly is it about the aether that allows this device to measure it?”

This was it: the most vital part of the aethometer’s inner workings. Arcus was expecting someone to ask him that very question. Unlike other measuring tools, the aethometer did not measure things directly. It wasn’t like a pair of scales, which directly compared weights, nor a newton meter, which worked with a spring. It wasn’t so much measuring the *amount* of aether as it was its value.

It was obvious when you considered the aethometer’s roots. Temperature could not be measured in amounts, either. It held no physical weight. At the same time, to say that the aethometer measured *how much* aether was released was not entirely wrong.

“The aethometer measures how much pressure the released aether creates, which comes in the form of waves.”

There was a stir among the magicians. The military leaders, meanwhile, had lost track a while ago.

This continued for a while before Roheim opened his mouth again. “Understood. Simply put, this liquid expands in response to the aether released,

meaning that these numbers represent how much aether there is, correct?”

“That’s right.”

Roheim studied his aethometer thoughtfully. Despite what he said about his question being the last, Arcus was sure he would come up with more. Arcus tried to anticipate what these questions might be.

If this were a thermometer, he’d probably be asked about using it in liquids. When a thermometer was placed partway into a liquid, it would read the temperature from both the liquid and the air around the exposed part at the same time, leading to an inaccurate measurement. Since the aethometer only measured pressure and waves, it wasn’t vulnerable to this kind of problem.

Arcus was readying himself for Roheim to throw him a curveball, but instead the state magician raised his aethometer up to the Sol Glasses in the ceiling and gazed at it, a twinkle of deep admiration in his eyes.

“It seems so obvious now that it’s been invented. If only we dug a little deeper, perhaps we would have noticed the absence of such a useful tool before.” He sighed. “This is a wonderful invention.”

He had the air of a man who had at long last achieved his dream after many, many years of trying. This time, the military leaders began to stir.

“Look! Even Roheim’s impressed!”

“This must really be something, then!”

Even if they couldn’t follow Arcus’s explanation completely, seeing one of the top state magicians express his admiration made them realize the gravity of the invention.

Suddenly, one of the generals spoke. “Can I ask something?”

“Of course,” Arcus replied.

“There should be research on this sort of thing already. So why has no one come up with a way to measure aether before?”

“Um...”

As Arcus hesitated, Roheim raised a finger. “Allow me to explain. In the past,

there have been several forays into measuring aether. For example, a previous study relied on using aether to push up water in a container and comparing it to a measure. However, due to varying amounts of excess aether getting mixed up in the air and surrounding water, the results were never consistent. Unable to overcome this hurdle, research on measuring aether has been stuck ever since.”

“I-I see.” The general nodded.

Another general turned to Muller. “So, what exactly does this mean?”

“Until now, magicians had to rely on their intuition to determine how much aether was needed for each word and phrase in their incantations. With this, we will be able to determine the needed amount accurately and objectively. This will make mastering magic several times... no, at least ten times faster!”

“It’s *that* amazing?”

“It’ll also make switching between troops on the battlefield that much easier, as the magicians in the field will no longer have to work out or remember how much aether they need to cast their spells.”

“It also means that it will be easier to pass down spells to the next generation. Very handy for someone like me, who’s already got one foot in the grave.”

“I’m hoping, Gastarque, that you will still be able to serve this country for many years to come. You are one of our best magicians.”

“You’d think I would have done enough to earn my retirement by now,” Gastarque replied with a gentle smile.

“With this,” Mercuria burst out suddenly, “the very nature of magic has changed! The Guildmaster was right! This *is* revolutionary! It’s a masterpiece!”

The magicians were overcome with excitement, just as Craib, Noah, and Godwald had been when they had first laid eyes on the aethometer. They were like children on a field trip, while the military generals discussed the usefulness of this new invention among themselves.

“What sort of effects do you think this will have on the future of magical technologies, Roheim?”

“Now that we have a way of measuring aether, we will be able to standardize

all forms of magical advancements. All sorts of output, from human resources to production, will become more efficient and therefore accelerated.”

“Yes, yes! It will help those magicians who struggle with controlling their magic, and allow us to train many more to enter our military forces! Our national and military strength will be through the roof!”

“Really?!”

“Yes,” Roheim confirmed. “I have no doubt.”

With the mention of military power, the generals were finally starting to understand the aethometer’s full potential. Only now were they beginning to look *really* interested.

Just then, Arcus noticed Muller drawing back slightly, her gaze slightly downcast under her long bangs. On closer inspection, she was trembling. Whether from surprise, excitement, or pure emotion, Arcus couldn’t tell, but she was clearly having trouble suppressing her delight.

“This will do absolute wonders for the medical sector. Treating wounds has always required a very even distribution of aether and a level of control that very few magicians are capable of. But with this, so many more could learn to be healers... and so many people will be saved because of it.”

Muller must have worked in the medical sector. If that was the case, Arcus could well understand how excited she must have been. He himself had already considered how helpful his invention would be in healing people, although it admittedly wasn’t one of the first uses that crossed his mind.

Suddenly, Muller leapt to her feet. “You... You have invented something truly wonderful, young man!”

“Th-Thank you!”

“Please allow me to thank you on behalf of the entire medical sector! The very *announcement* of your device has already removed one of the greatest roadblocks in magical medicine!”

“N-No, I am grateful that you are here!” Arcus replied, not knowing what else to say.

It was likely a habit he picked up from his dream: the habit to say thank you or apologize, often for no reason at all. It usually resulted in a long back-and-forth of sorries and thank yous.

“When are you gonna start selling these doodads?” Frederick asked.

“Come on. You just want him to tell you you’re allowed to take it home with you.”

“Well, yeah. I wanna give this baby a spin soon as I can.”

“This isn’t something that can be sold. It’s far too precious for that.”

“Yes, yes! With something as powerful as this, the king could lose his head!”

“The aethometers I have handed out are yours to keep,” Arcus cut in.

“You mean it?!”

“Yes. I even have a spare for each of you, in case your aethometers become inaccurate due to the factors I spoke about before.”

“You gotta be yanking my chain! Don’t come crying to me later if you’re kidding right now and I’ve already taken it with me!”

“I am being completely serious. Please, everyone, feel free to take it with you.”

The magicians broke out into cheers at the unexpected, but extremely welcome, development.

“I must warn you now that any attempt to sell it on the black market, or any instances of your aethometer going ‘missing,’ will result in severe punishment. Please look after them very, very carefully,” Godwald added in his booming voice.

Of course, every person here was hand-picked precisely because they would *not* do that sort of thing, but that didn’t stop him from giving the warning.

“How many of these can you make?” This time, the generals were asking the questions.

“Good point. It doesn’t look too complex, so we’ll have them in the military soon, right?”

“It’ll be good if we can get some of these to the nobles at the borders, too.”

“I’m sure His Majesty’d have something to say about that! He’ll want to see anyone who requests one of these to make sure they won’t abuse it!”

Aside from the national armed forces, several nobles kept their own private militaries. For the most part, they answered only to those nobles, making them risky candidates for handing over aethometers.

“In that case, we should prioritize the national army!”

“No!” Muller objected. “We should prioritize the medical sector!”

“Yes, medicine is important too, but we are talking about national security over here!”

“I’m sorry, but I cannot agree! Do not forget that this would help tend to injured soldiers as well!”

“Well, yes, but—”

“Please, General Ruedmann, try and understand my position!”

Arcus wasn’t surprised to see a fight breaking out between the magicians and the military.

“May I say something?” he said.

“Hm? What is it?”

“The Guild is already in possession of five hundred aethometers, each complete with a manual.”

“F-Five hundred?!”

Both the general and Muller gawked at him.

“Plenty to go around, then,” Roheim said. “I’m happy to see you planned for this.”

“Does this mean our troops will be equipped with them immediately, Guildmaster?”

“We won’t have enough for every magician, but in theory, we would be ready to send some to each unit as early as tomorrow.”

“A-And what about the hospitals?!”

“There are more than enough for them too. Of course, we must first decide how to distribute and manage the stock. Please allow us the time to do so.”

“Would you mind lending me a few, Godwald? I still have so many spells I would like to teach my sons.”

“Yes, of course.”

Gastarque held a long catalog of spells that only he fully understood, and it was in the best interests of the kingdom that he passed them down.

The old magician looked back at Arcus. “I never thought something like this would end up quashing one of my fears so perfectly. Arcus, young man, though I may not be around much longer, please keep my eternal gratitude close to your heart.”

“Y-Yes, sir,” Arcus replied a little stiffly.

Having one of the kingdom’s heroes remember his name almost floored him... even if he did have a dubious side.

“By the way, Crucible,” Frederick said, “y’sure it wasn’t actually you who made this?”

“What, you don’t believe me?”

“I mean...this kid looks like he’s barely out of his diapers. I’m surprised no one else thinks it’s fishy.”

“Look, I could never have come up with somethin’ like this. All I did was give ‘im a couple of suggestions for the design around... oh, two years back.”

“H-How many?!”

“When he was eight... or even seven?!”

Astonishment rippled through the attendees. Having a ten-year-old come up with an invention like the aethometer was surprising enough, but this new knowledge dealt yet another blow.

Roheim, however, remained perfectly calm. “If this tool was in development two years ago, why did it take so long to announce?”

“The production of the aethometer is relatively unique, and there was a lot of data left to collect about its use. We had to be sure that there were no discrepancies in how two different aethometers measured aether. I didn’t want to announce the aethometer until every last model was perfect.” Arcus paused. “If they were going to be passed over to the medical sector, there could be no room for inaccuracy. These factors combined meant it took years to get to this point.”

“I see. Well, you’ve certainly thought this all through,” Roheim said.

Roheim had no idea. Those two years of calibration testing had caused Arcus no end of grief. The entire batch of aethometers had to be scrapped entirely several times over; the manufacturing costs nearly drove Craib to bankruptcy.

“And...” Arcus continued.

“And?”

“My uncle, Craib, said that everyone was going to want one, so we should be ready to meet demand as soon as we announced it.”

“Makes sense.”

“Naturally.”

“Yes, yes!”

At least they were admitting to it. Just like Craib and Noah, these magicians were eager to refine their art. He could see them holing themselves up in their houses with their aethometers for days, if not weeks, on end.

Eventually, Godwald decided it was time to bring the meeting to a close.

“Although we have yet to determine when the aethometer will be officially announced to the world, Arcus will be named as its creator. I trust there are no objections?”

The room responded with silence. Arcus couldn’t imagine why anybody might object, but he still found himself breathing a sigh of relief. It would be a long time before the public unveiling anyway.

“The Magician’s Guild shall pay for the manufacture of the aethometer and provide Arcus a monetary award for his invention. Any objections?” Godwald

waited, but nobody said anything. “Then it’s settled.”

“Godwald, what about awarding him an order?” Gastarque asked.

“That is a decision to be made by His Majesty. I shall be allowed an audience at the palace in due time.”

“In that case, perhaps I shall pay a visit to His Majesty too, hopefully before I’m in my grave.”

“Me too,” Roheim added.

Arcus felt a pat on his back, and he looked up to see his uncle smiling warmly at him.

“Look at you. You just got the top three state magicians on your side.”

“Yeah...”

Arcus felt warmth spreading through him. Orders were serious business. Even Arcus hadn’t expected this much.

“We done yet?” Frederick asked suddenly, inviting a round of exasperated sighs from his compatriots.

The end of the meeting didn’t mean the end of the questions.

“How many aethometers can you make in a month?”

“Will you prioritize state magicians in the distribution?”

“Will you make them available to the Royal Institute of Magic? If so, when?”

“I’ll probably be asking for some custom-made ones soon, so look out for that!”

“I would like you to come and guide us on how to use them with patients!”

...And many more. Around halfway through, the questions started to transform into “polite requests.” Not that Arcus was surprised. He received questions about the “processing” of the Sorcerer’s Silver too, but he wasn’t ready to reveal the existence of tempered aether. There was still too much he wanted to research about the phenomenon. Tempered aether itself wasn’t suited to casting spells, but seals were a different story. Arcus was sure it had potential.

He didn't know when or how it might come to his advantage in the future, and so he didn't want to announce it until he was absolutely ready. Tempered aether was instrumental in producing the aethometer, too, so any new aethometers would have to wait until he announced its existence, as long as he didn't want to be making them all by himself.

It was a magician's etiquette to respect the secrets of other magic users, so Arcus didn't have too much trouble deflecting the questions he didn't want to answer.

After that, there were discussions about the aethometer's use in the military and medical sector. It wasn't necessary for Arcus to be present for these, though, so he left those matters to Godwald and Craib, and exited the meeting room.

The second he opened the door, he heard voices behind him.

"Truly astounding. Noble or not, it's a wonder he can speak so comfortably in an environment like this."

"He's only ten, isn't he? I have a nephew around the same age, but I couldn't imagine him standing up there!"

"Did you see how he answered Roheim's questions, too?"

"Who in their right mind would disinherit a boy like that? I just don't understand what some of these magical folks are thinking sometimes."

"I believe Your Lordship mentioned that those rumors concerning him were completely unfounded."

"Well, yes, although I only discovered that myself recently."

"His Majesty will take a great interest in him. Your Lordship is so lucky to be acquainted with such an intelligent young magician!"

The generals were full of admiration for Arcus.

"Arcus spoke wonderfully!"

"Yes."

"I don't understand how anybody would call him talentless. It makes no

sense!”

“This sort of thing would be difficult enough for an adult to deal with.”

From the magicians’ conversation, Arcus wouldn’t be surprised if he was the first magician with no history whatsoever to come out with research like this. Normally, you would probably have to be a state magician, or a magician who was already famous and had a long list of previous achievements.

If he weren’t already related to a state magician, Arcus would have had a lot more trouble getting to this point, even if the production of the aethometer went smoothly. His mind was caught up in what could have been, when he suddenly heard excited footsteps rushing up to him.

“Hey, kid! Thanks so much! I’m gonna use this thing right away!”

“Oh, um. You’re welcome.”

It was Frederick, the state magician with a fondness for walnuts. Arcus gathered a polite response as quickly as he could, but the moment the words were out of his mouth, Frederick had already waved and rushed off again.

It was clear he cared more about using the aethometer than having a conversation with its young creator. Arcus couldn’t blame him.

“One minute he’s whining about losing out on sleep, the next he’s rushing around like a headless chicken.”

Arcus heard somebody sigh behind him. He turned around to find Mercuria String standing there. He recognized her from the witch’s hat she wore low over her face. Her hair was brown, and her eyes russet, a common combination within the kingdom. Despite looking like she was in her mid-teens, she was quite a bit taller than Arcus.

Arcus opened his mouth to thank her for attending, but she raised a hand to stop him. Apparently, she didn’t value that sort of thing particularly highly.

Mercuria turned to Noah. “Noah. It is good to see you again.”

“The pleasure is all mine, Miss Mercuria.” Noah bowed his head.

Despite the formality of their words, there was a friendly warmth within them.

“Do you know each other?” Arcus asked Noah.

“Noah was my first student after I started lecturing.” It was Mercuria who answered.

“Indeed. She taught me a great deal.”

“Oh, please! You’re making me blush!”

“But you did teach me a great deal. That was your job.”

“Oh, but you make it sound like such a big thing!”

“It wasn’t. You are a teacher; it was your job. Although I am grateful, of course...”

“You know, you really need to learn a thing or two about manners!” Mercuria glared at him. Then she sighed. “Though I suppose it was my fault for expecting you to have changed.”

So he was always like this...

“I see you are serving Arcus Raytheft now and not Crucible?”

“Correct. Craib handed me over to him to help with the aethometer’s development. It has been a very interesting couple of years.”

“I can imagine. You are serving the mind that came up with such a fantastic idea, after all.”

“The same mind who got himself sent to the Holy Tower,” Noah added.

“The Holy Tower?”

“Yes.”

“Oh...” Suddenly, Mercuria’s eyes widened. “W-Wait! Were you the one who escaped?! Do you know how much trouble you caused?! How on earth did you manage to end up there?!”

“Now, now. Please remember that Master Arcus was just another one of Marquess Gaston’s victims. He was an incredibly wicked man.” Noah let out a pained sigh and dabbed at the corners of his eyes with a handkerchief.

Mercuria didn’t fall for his theatrics, and was now hopping around on the spot

angrily. "A victim, you say?! How did you escape in the first place?! We had to put extra measures in place to make sure it would never happen again, you know!"

"I'm afraid I cannot disclose my master's secrets."

"Grr! That's cowardly!"

"Cowardly and effective." Noah bowed his head.

Mercuria could do nothing but let out another sigh and glare at him before turning to Arcus. "He may look like a perfect gentleman, but he's stubborn as a mule. Watch out for that."

"I know," Arcus said.

"Yes, yes. Keep your guard up."

Despite her passive aggressive warning, Noah was smiling.

"Now, Pinioneer. Where do you think you're going?" Mercuria asked.

"Gah..."



Arcus followed Mercuria's gaze to find Cazzy halfway through trying to sneak away unnoticed.

"Well?" she demanded. "Explain yourself!"

"Are the two of you acquainted?" Noah asked.

"He was in the year below me at the Institute. If you told me then he'd become a servant, I would've laughed in your face."

His escape attempt thwarted, Cazzy rearranged his features into an obsequious grin. "Oh, Peacemaker! Didn't expect to catch ya here!"

"This is a meeting for state magicians. I am a state magician. Your logic is flawed."

"Peacemaker'?" Arcus said.

"His Majesty conferred Miss Mercuria's title upon her for her research on countering foreign magicians," Noah whispered into his ear.

So she was involved in military matters; she was much more impressive than she looked.

"I've heard a lot of rumors from the guards about you, Pinioneer," she remarked. "You disappeared immediately after you left the Institute too. What on earth were you doing?"

"Oh, y'know. This 'n' that."

"Was 'this and that' to do with the marquess?"

"Might've been."

Arcus wasn't the only "victim" of the marquess, as Noah had put it.

"You know Cassim was looking for you, don't you?"

"Yeah, I thought so."

The name rang a bell. He was one of the state magicians absent from the meeting—the one they called Blinding Flare. Arcus had been surprised enough to find that Cazzy knew the Chief of the Surveillance Office, but apparently he had acquaintances among the state magicians too.

“Blinding Flare too?” Noah said. “How exactly are you acquainted with him?”

“Same as Lisa. He was with me at the Institute.”

“Pinioneer is kinder... *much* kinder than he looks,” Mercuria interjected. “He had a bad habit of getting under his seniors and lecturers’ skin, but his underclassmen admired his spirit. Blinding Flare was no exception. But he certainly doesn’t look kind, does he?”

“I think ya could stand to be kinder, personally speakin’,” Cazzy grumbled.

“Well, you certainly clean up well,” she added.

“That ain’t fair! They *made* me wear this!”

“I think it makes him look rather more suspicious. Don’t you, Master Arcus?”

“Uh...”

“Says the guy with the stupid fancy hair!”

Arcus shot a questioning glance at Mercuria, wondering if she really had run out of nice things to say about Cazzy. Fortunately, that wasn’t the case.

“Still, he was top of the class. Given that only the very best make it into the Institute, that is saying a lot. He certainly has the potential to become a state magician, even if he lacks the motivation.”

“Ya can say that again...”

“This is exactly why it is easy to get the wrong idea about you. Honestly...”
Mercuria sighed.

“You really do speak to everyone like that, don’t you, Cazzy?” Arcus asked.

It was clear that Mercuria had her defenses down, but even then there was an intimidating air of majesty about her, one beyond comparison with the late Marquess Gaston’s. It was enough to strike fear in anybody’s heart, but Cazzy still seemed able to be totally casual with her.

“Eh, I guess it’s ’cause I know her. I mean, you’re the same with that old geezer, right?”

“My uncle? I s’pose, yeah. Though I think he holds back for me,” said Arcus.

If Craib let the intimidating air around him run unchecked, Arcus would likely faint from it multiple times a day—and for all he knew, the actual result might be worse than that.

“Master Arcus is likely feeling somewhat numb,” said Noah. “I was surprised he even managed to speak in a room full of state magicians, with all that majesty you give off.”

“Oh? Was it really that bad?”

“It was. Even during our time at the Institute, anybody who came near you would start trembling with nerves, student or otherwise.”

“State magicians are a symbol of the kingdom’s power. If our presence doesn’t strike fear into the hearts of others, then what good are we?” Mercuria shot a sly glance at Cazzy.

“The old geezer’s been workin’ me like a horse for the last month. So, y’know, I’m used to bein’ around grand magicians, even if it ain’t easy. Still, ya look like you’ve grown since we last met. I mean, dignity-wise, at least.”

“On the contrary, you have not grown enough. Cassim has made a lot of progress too, I’ll have you know.”

“What, that old softie?” Cazzy said, frowning.

“Now, if you’ll excuse me, I should be heading off. I am looking forward to seeing what this aethometer can do.”

“If you have any problems with it, please feel free to contact me,” Arcus said.

“I will do so. Likewise, if you require any assistance, please do let me know. And rest assured I shall be contacting you with regards to a custom order later.” Mercuria stuck her tongue out cheekily.

Pairing her request with an offer for help was quite the shrewd move. It made sense for a woman known as a “Peacemaker,” though. She was much sharper than she looked and knew how to aim for people’s weaknesses to get what she wanted. When she spoke to Cazzy and Noah, Arcus got the impression she judged people on their appearance, but clearly that wasn’t the case.

Their conversation over, Mercuria skipped away, finally leaving Arcus free to

head home. He would gladly have done so, had he not felt a familiar presence nearby. He spun around and quickly fell to one knee. Before him stood Purce Cremelia.

Purce was Charlotte's father and a general in the armed forces; Arcus had met him during the incident with the marquess.

"At ease," the count said. "Well, Arcus. I believe the last time we met was in the marquess's garden."

"It is good to see you again, My Lord. Many thanks for attending the presentation."

"That aethometer is a fine invention you've been hiding up your sleeve, young man. I am not a magician myself, so take this with a grain of salt, but I can see it contributing greatly to our kingdom's advancement."

"As a magician, nothing would please me more, My Lord."

"I do, of course, have a number of magicians within my forces. It can be difficult to organize them into companies sometimes, but I believe your tool will make the task much easier."

"It is an honor, My Lord."

"Your invention is a boon to the kingdom and the royal family. You should be very proud."

"I could not have done it without the help of my uncle."

"If you plan on being modest, my boy, you might wish to stop smiling so much."

"Ah, um..."

The count let out a hearty chuckle. As far as Arcus was aware, it was only the corners of his mouth which were twitching, but Cremelia had seen right through him. His pride exposed, Arcus fixated his gaze on the floor, embarrassed.

"Arcus, you have not yet told Joshua about your invention, have you?"

"No, My Lord. I don't feel comfortable doing so."

"I see." The count's eyes narrowed thoughtfully. He was already well aware of

the circumstances surrounding Arcus's home life. "An invention of this caliber comes with much risk, you understand. Have you already prepared yourself for what is to come?"

"Yes, My Lord. *Many* of my plans involve avoiding trouble wherever possible."

"Caution will serve you well, but I would also suggest surrounding yourself with people you can trust. You do not want to find, somewhere down the line, that you have been abandoned."

"I shall take that to heart."

He was right—the more allies Arcus had, the better. He could have all the foresight in the world, but if he didn't have enough people on his side to tackle the issue, he was helpless. Arcus knew, too, that the count would not be giving him this warning without reason.

"Pardon my rudeness, My Lord, but might I ask a favor?"

"What is it?"

"Your Lordship sees a lot of Joshua. When the time comes for him to find out about the aethometer, I would like to ask Your Lordship to keep its inventor a secret."

This was Arcus's way of protecting himself. Joshua was head of a magical family, and once the aethometer was distributed widely, it would only be a matter of time before he found out about it. If he found out Arcus was its inventor, there was no telling what he might do.

Now that the presentation was over, at least Joshua wouldn't be able to try to take credit, but the chance of him retaliating in some way was pretty high—not to mention that he might take out his anger on Lecia.

"I could certainly keep the information to myself, but he is a powerful man. Should he look into it, I am sure he would come up with your name eventually."

"I understand, but at the very least, Your Lordship would be buying me some time. Time enough for me to solidify my position and prepare for what he might try."

The count looked away, and hesitated before opening his mouth again.

“Arcus. Do you resent your father?”

“Yes, My Lord.”

Cremelia’s eyes widened slightly, as though he hadn’t expected such a direct answer. “I suppose your aethometer would be a way to get back at him then.”

“I agree, My Lord, but I think it’s still too early for that. I don’t believe I am strong enough to allow my emotions to control me like that yet. I need to grow older, more powerful, until I can face him properly. And then I’ll...”

I’ll destroy the Raytheft house.

There was no way he could say those last words aloud. The man in front of him had the power to control every house in the east if he needed to. To give him any cause for alarm now was foolish and, quite frankly, dangerous.

“You know to hold back when your defeat is assured otherwise.”

“That’s right, My Lord.”

“It seems Joshua has made quite the tenacious enemy.” There was a glint of sadness in Cremelia’s eye, that emotion leading into his next question. “Arcus. Do you not think it tragic that a son should be at odds with his father?”

“I do, My Lord. However, I also believe that there are some conflicts which must be fought.” Arcus paused before continuing. “A boy’s father is the first hurdle he must face. For some, that struggle might be internal, but for me, my father has stood brazenly in my way for almost as long as I can remember. That’s why I must face him brazenly, too, if I wish to overcome this hurdle.”

“That certainly is an interesting way of seeing things.”

“It’s the only point of view that allows me to move forward.”

“Still, it is a sad state of affairs. To be backed into a corner like that, forcing you to think in this way,” the count murmured towards the ceiling. He paused reflectively. “Perhaps that is just the fate that awaits each Raytheft heir.”

“Fate, My Lord?”

“Oh, just speaking to myself. Forget I said anything.”

“Yes, My Lord.”

Still not taking his eyes off the ceiling, Cremelia continued. “Arcus. What exactly is your goal?”

Arcus remembered having a similar conversation with Sue. His goal... Prestige? Power? Arcus had a feeling that those weren’t the answers the count was searching for.

“I do not know,” he finally replied.

“I see. Well, I cannot say I blame you. I don’t think anybody knows what they want at your age.”

Arcus didn’t know who he would become. He wasn’t sure who he *wanted* to become. Once he had attained a stable status and found himself employment, what next? Only when he had decided who he wanted to be would Arcus be able to answer the count’s question.

“Arcus. If all you focus on is prestige and power, you are very likely to lose your way. For the time being, you can focus on those goals, or not know what you want, but you should be prepared to come up with a solid answer sooner rather than later. Who do you want to be? As long as you keep that answer with you, you will not lose sight of your path, or even yourself.”

“Yes, My Lord.”

“I shall keep quiet around Joshua, as you asked. Just remember that I cannot do much more for you than that.”

“It is already more than enough.”

Cremelia had his own position to worry about. He couldn’t justify putting Joshua at a disadvantage for Arcus’s sake. That in turn risked damaging the noble hierarchy’s stability. As a man whose job it was to unite the firepower of the martial houses below him, it was not a risk he could take. At the same time, Arcus was grateful for Cremelia’s concern, shown by the abundance of advice he received today. For that reason, Arcus considered him a true role model.

Gathering his attendants, the count left Arcus alone in the hallway. For a moment, Arcus watched his retreating back before turning himself and leaving the Magician’s Guild behind with Noah and Cazzy alongside him.

On the evening of the aethometer's announcement, Craib Abend arrived at Lainur's royal castle. He was received in one of the building's many man-made gardens. Though some of the gardens were used to receive noble guests, this one was not. This was the king's private garden. Sol Glasses lit it up like fireflies, making it look like a dreamland in the darkness of night. There were lamps which looked like antique lanterns, and pole lights illuminating a path. There were even lights embedded in the earth itself. Lights resembling bunches of grapes hung from some of the trees. Simply put, it was as well-lit as any modern garden from the man's world. The architecture of the garden too. The light and shadow. The beauty. It was incredible, even by those standards—not to mention much more expensive, most likely.

As for the flowers, they were all the same shade of blue. The Sol Glasses illuminated them just as vividly as the sun would. In the center of the garden sat a marble gazebo with a crystal-clear glass table underneath, lit up by the light sources in the floor.

Craib had taken a knee outside that structure, prostrating himself before a certain man inside it. Like many of Lainur's nobles, he had long, golden hair, and he looked young enough to be in his teenage years. As if the gold in his hair wasn't enough, his jacket was embroidered by a thread of the same shade. The shirt he wore underneath was unbuttoned, leaving his chest bare. There was a wildness to his expression that made him just a touch rougher than a typical king.

This man's name was Shinlu Crosellode: Lainur's ruler and strongest magician. He sat on a marble throne with one leg folded over the other. One arm leaned on the arm rest, its hand supporting his chin. The ennui in his posture and expression exceeded even that of his son, Ceylan. It was only his position at the absolute top that let him get away with dressing as outrageously as he did—a sort of warning coloration, suggesting that he could get away with *anything*.

Craib was here to tell Shinlu of the aethometer's existence. Its inventor was nowhere to be seen. With Arcus's current status (or rather, his lack thereof), there would be no way he could get an audience with the king, save through a proxy of greater standing.

Shinlu picked up his wine glass from the table and sipped from it as he held up

the tool that had sent the state magicians into a frenzy.

“Looks like you’ve been keeping quite the secret from me.”

“Yes, Your Majesty. That is just how much potential this invention has.”

“Oh, come on, Craib. You can drop the formalities now. It’s almost creepy to hear you speak like that. Besides, there’s no one else here.”

“Sure thing.” Craib got to his feet and stepped inside the marble gazebo before flopping down in a chair opposite the king.

His actions would have been unthinkable but for the closeness of their friendship. They had bonded in the days when Shinlu would slip free of the palace grounds to wander the country in disguise. Shinlu expected this nostalgic indulgence of familiarity from Craib in private moments like this.

“Why didn’t you tell me about this thing right away, then? I hope you’ve got a good explanation, because I could always part your head from your shoulders if I felt like it.”

“You say that every time we meet. You can’t blame me, though. If I showed up with a half-baked tube in a frame that wasn’t even accurate, you’d start tellin’ me how I should improve it and stuff.”

“Of course. I’d want to take a good look at it, after all.”

Even now Shinlu was releasing his aether, carefully checking how the aethometer reacted. If Craib brought it to him before it was ready, the king would only find that it fell short of his standards and scold Craib for getting his hopes up.

“Also, you’d already be tellin’ us what we had to do with it next before it was even finished.”

“Naturally. This is a device which measures aether. I’d need to know about your production goals, and what sort of tests you were running. If you couldn’t give me answers, I’d be awfully close to taking your head.”

“That’s why I didn’t show you back then, ’cause that’s what I thought you’d say.” Craib glared at the king, pointing a finger at him in accusation.

It was his way of showing his friend that it could be very difficult to work out if

his threats of beheading were genuine or not. For any normal person, it was an impossible distinction. Just because he *could* make such a threat didn't mean he should—it was one of the reasons why people were so afraid of him. It should be noted now that Shinlu had never taken anybody's head on a whim before.

Having a sense of humor was fine, but Shinlu was Lainur's ruler. He was swift to execute a subject at the first sign that they were working counter to the kingdom's interest, discarding them as offhandedly as one would a spent tissue. He wasn't incapable of compassion; it was just that his sense of duty as king invariably overruled any feelings of kindness. Perhaps if people truly understood how he operated, they wouldn't be so scared of him. In the end, he was as human as his subjects. If he weren't, he wouldn't be able to make friends like Craib.

"Isn't it better for the people to be scared of their king?" Shinlu said.

"You think?"

"I mean, you know I'm charming enough to capture their hearts if I wanted to, right?"

"Sure you are. I didn't say you weren't."

The fact was, Shinlu had a good number of admirers, which included many of the kingdom's citizens. More so than any ruler before him.

"Anyway. Is this thing in proper production yet? If so, how are things looking?" Shinlu asked.

"I've just come back from the Guild; we sorted all of that out. There's been an urgent summons to all of the kingdom's magic troops. They're all gonna be learning how to use these as early as tomorrow."

"Good. Very good." Shinlu let out a small chuckle. The extent of his joy was audible, even within that quiet sound. "I'm glad to hear it's already being used to increase the kingdom's military power."

"Yup. All the groundwork's bein' laid out right now. Shouldn't be more than six months before we start seein' some results."

"The magic troops always did have trouble getting their magicians on equal

footing. I can't believe that issue's been solved so easily."

"You shoulda seen the smile on Godwald's face."

"I'm not surprised." Shinlu laughed. "Can't imagine what a smile on that old gargoyle's face looks like, though."

"It's terrifyin'."

Shinlu let out an even louder laugh. The king mentioned before that he was thinking about giving the Guildmaster the name "Grimace." Whether it was a joke or not was unclear, but it didn't matter. Godwald firmly refused, claiming it would damage the reputation of the Guild and its state magicians.

"So what are your plans, as a man whose job it is to unite the army's magicians?"

"I guess we start by measuring just how much aether our magicians pack in total. Then we can start work on gettin' 'em all to the same level."

"Is that what that's for?" Shinlu motioned to a tremendous aethometer sitting in front of them.

It was an aethometer designed for measuring greater volumes of aether than the smaller types, and it was the only one of its kind produced. Made specially for the royal family, there were no plans for any more to be made, either.

"You got it. Hope it's big enough to show how powerful you guys are, huh?"

Once the army's magicians saw it, they would be abuzz with how the royal family had such a unique, grand-scale version of the amazing device already. At the same time, it was so ridiculously huge that it almost looked like a toy. Despite that, its size was nothing to sniff at.

"First, we'll lend this to each company and get them to measure up their magicians one by one."

"I trust those men will weep in gratitude at the crown allowing them to ascertain their strength objectively?"

"Who knows?"

At the very least, Craib was sure they'd be thankful, both at being able to

measure themselves up and at being allowed the use of a tool normally reserved for the royal family. Whether it would make them cry remained to be seen, but there was no doubt that it would boost their morale.

“Was this Godwald’s idea, too?”

“Yep.” Craib reached into the bag he brought with him and pulled out a handful of aethometers. “And these are for His Royal Highness.”

“He’ll be pleased. I bet I won’t see him coming out of his room for days.”

“Same goes for you, right?”

“Of course. You should know by now that you and I share the same object of our romance.”

“Just don’t shirk your duties, yeah?”

“If I do, it’ll be your fault.”

“Hey, that ain’t fair! Just ‘cause you’re the king doesn’t mean you can blame everything on everyone else.”

Shinlu burst into joyful laughter. Craib hadn’t seen him this happy in a long time. Lately he’d been so overworked with diplomacy and other kingly issues that he’d fallen into an almost permanently stormy mood. As his friend, Craib was glad to have done something to get the more troubling worries off his mind, if only for a few moments.

Once his laughter died down, a serious glint returned to the king’s eye. “The next thing to worry about is the public unveiling and how we time it. Your nephew, Arcus, invented this thing. He’s only ten years old, but he’s already been disinherited, and his father seems to have it in for him. That’s what I’ve heard, anyway.”

“He’s got it worse than I did, too. If we had him use all his aether on that aethometer right there, I reckon we’d get about 2000 mana out of him.”

“What about you?”

“I’d probably manage 13,000. Maybe a bit more.”

“So I could do at least three times that.”

“Oh, wow, Your Majesty. Truly you are the greatest magician in the land whose light unites us all!”

“Surely you could have come up with a funnier line than that. Anyway... Is that part of why Arcus came up with this? Since he doesn’t have much aether, being able to measure it would allow him to put it to more effective use.”

“I’m guessin’ so, yeah. One of the first things he asked me when I started trainin’ him was how to measure aether accurately. He was sayin’ stuff about units and calculations and stuff. Kinda threw me off.”

“He must have spent a long time thinking about it to come up with something like this.”

“Y’know, I don’t think so. He said he came up with it by total coincidence.”

“A magnificent coincidence, in that case. What I wouldn’t give to see what goes on in his head.”

“As long as you don’t take it off him.”

“Unfortunately, beheading people opens windows only on the rudest of their inner workings.” Shinlu suddenly raised his eyebrows. “That reminds me: the Raythefts have a daughter too, don’t they? Is she lacking in aether as well?”

“Nope. She’s got tons, even when you compare her to some of the former heirs. She’s got a lotta drive, too, probably ’cause she doesn’t want her brother leavin’ her behind.”

“You’ll want to be careful, then. You don’t want her taking any of the backlash from her brother’s success.”

“Well... Joshua sure seems to take good care of her right now, but I guess that’s a possibility. Though I don’t think he would.”

So far, Joshua was raising Lecia with love and care. According to Noah and some of the other servants, although he was strict with her, he never lashed out or went overboard. Knowing his brother as he did, Craib expected Joshua to try and expedite Lecia’s education once he learned of Arcus’s achievement—but nothing more than that. Having said that, he never expected Joshua to strip Arcus of his inheritance either, so anything was possible.

“What’s your answer, then?” Craib asked, bringing the conversation back to the main topic.

“As you may expect, I plan to make use of the public announcement politically.”

“I think Arcus had an inkling of that. He’s not pesterin’ me to announce it right away, after all.”

Shinlu clearly wanted to use the aethometer as a symbol of Lainur’s national power. Should the crown need to make any unpopular changes in policy, the announcement would make for a convenient distraction. Otherwise, this invention made for a powerful card to keep up Lainur’s sleeve. As was mentioned at the Guild meeting, it was totally revolutionary; it had the potential to take the kingdom by storm. Looking outwards, too, it would make for a useful diplomatic and commercial bargaining chip. The king had a range of options before him, but he would want to ponder those options very, very carefully. Moreover, he couldn’t very well give an order to a young man without any reason, and so that would have to wait until the public announcement, too.

“We shall have to give Arcus a suitable reward. Do you know if there’s anything he’d like?”

The Guild was already rewarding him financially, and he had an order in the works, too. Craib paused to think about what else his nephew wanted.

“He’ll need supporters. People backing him.”

“Are you sure? Wouldn’t you want to keep him on a short leash?”

“Hey, he’s still just a kid, y’know.”

“That’s why I said it. Best to keep him and milk him for everything he’s worth before sending him out there. Tactically speaking, it’d be best to keep him to yourself.” Shinlu narrowed his eyes. “Anyway, he’s only ten. Has he told you he wants people backing him? Isn’t he too young to be asking for that sort of thing?”

“Well, the Guild’s already giving him money, and he’s gettin’ an order too. Backing’s the next thing on the list, right?”

All of a sudden, Shinlu's voice turned cold. "Is he really that ambitious?"

"He just wants to make a name for himself. I don't think he was after that at first, so someone must've planted the idea in his head."

It was only in the past couple of years or so that Craib recognized just how much ambition Arcus had. Originally, all he wanted was to get revenge on his parents, but his goal seemed to have inflated. Craib didn't see this as a bad thing; quite the contrary. However, ambition was something the king had to keep an eye on, especially if it wasn't clear how deep it ran.

"Are people approaching him already?" Shinlu asked.

"Not yet. I'm thinkin' some of the generals at the meeting might start makin' moves, though."

"What about Cremelia? Arcus would probably be interested in his support, especially since he has a daughter around the same age."

"Huh. Gettin' suspicious of Purce now?"

"I don't doubt his loyalty. In fact, I can't think of a martial head who's done more for us across the entire kingdom. It's just..."

"You don't wanna give him more power than necessary, right?"

The king never did like the nobles having too much power, and it wasn't hard to figure out why. Shinlu trusted Purce, and so he was unlikely to fear rebellion no matter how much influence the count had. However, power was something that was handed down across generations. He couldn't guarantee he would have the same trust in Purce's children and grandchildren, or even the vassals in his territory. It wouldn't be the first time a change in family head led to a breach of trust, leading to the crown confiscating their territory.

"Considering the relationship between the Cremelias and the Raythefts, Purce is certainly in a position to help Arcus fulfill his ambitions."

"And what if Arcus wanted to start a new house?"

"We would allow it, if he insisted. Although, even if we were being generous, we would allow him up to two wives maximum."

"So you'll be restricting his marriages now?"

“It’s necessary. The aethometer is impressive enough, but I doubt this is the last thing he’ll be coming up with.”

“Right. I bet his brain’s workin’ on all sorts of stuff even now.”

“We shall take care of his marriage plans, then.”

Arcus’s invention was huge. If he wanted to get married, the crown would likely want to prevent him gaining too much power from it. As such, it would try to pair him with a wife from a family who already had close ties to the royal family. In the first instance, at least. In this case, Charlotte would be a perfect choice if Arcus was happy to accept her.

Craib understood completely. He had married after he ran away from the Raytheft house, to a daughter of a noble Sapphireberg family. They had married because they were in love, but when Craib returned to Lainur, he hadn’t been allowed to take her with him. Both the monarchs of Sapphireberg and Lainur wanted the couple to live separately. Sapphireberg wanted the connection to a state magician, while Lainur wanted to be able to interfere in Sapphireberg’s affairs from time to time. Shinlu also used that as an excuse to allow Craib to go and see his wife as often as he wanted.

Unfortunately, anybody above a certain rung of society was destined to have their marital affairs interfered with. However, allowing his marriage to be decided by the crown also meant that Arcus would have the royal family’s protection. The number of nobles who were forced to marry due to their status was significant. It could prove to be a real inconvenience, but with this deal, Arcus would have nothing to worry about.

Shinlu was a magician himself. He knew that it was freedom which allowed them to progress in their research more than anything else. Craib had no doubt that Shinlu would put his carrot-and-stick approach to good use when it came to granting Arcus that freedom.

“He might end up being a bit of a handful,” Shinlu said thoughtfully.

“Hey, if worse comes to worst, I could always adopt him. Then I could keep a close eye on him without restrictin’ him.”

“Let’s raise a glass. Come on.” With the conversation winding down, Shinlu

picked up his glass in a most dramatic fashion.

Craib lazily reached out for the wine bottle. “Yeah, yeah. As you wish, Your Majesty.”

“I hope you’ll keep helping me out, for the sake of the kingdom’s advancement.”

“Yes, Your Majesty.”

And with that, the two drained their glasses.

Lecia Raytheft and her father Joshua were attending a salon hosted by a certain noble. Salons were a special kind of reception where the host would invite intellectuals to enjoy discussions of all things lofty and arcane. It was a popular place for nobles to network; these sorts of private gatherings were common among the nobility in France, a country in the man’s world.

Magicians held salons too, of course. Famous magicians would be invited to share their knowledge with the attendees. Magicians were already considered a sort of aristocracy on their own, and it was only those with a noble rank who were invited to these things. Not only did you need to have a high level of magic skill, but you needed to know how to carry yourself and hold a certain amount of political knowledge.

This particular salon was being hosted by the Rondiel house. Marquess Gastarque Rondiel was possibly the most famous magician in the kingdom, and even among the salons started by his third son, Casister Rondiel, this one was particularly exclusive.

This was the second time Lecia had attended. She had been to several other magical salons before with her father, but she was particularly nervous about this one. At those gatherings, the other attendees were of similar status and had a similar knowledge of magic, but this was different. The Raythefts and the Rondiels belonged to two different schools of magic. One historically favored the use of fire magic, and the other magical manipulation of physical objects. Their divergent interests created differences in their ways of thinking, and since salons sometimes involved discussion of secret techniques, it was important to try to avoid topics that the other side considered taboo, or to touch too heavily upon controversy.

Though Lecia wouldn't go so far as to call them her enemies, there were certainly some attendees to be very wary of, and as such she found herself feeling somewhat self-conscious. At the same time, their own attendance was a testament to Joshua's incredible skill.

Even compared to other houses kingdom-wide, the Raythefts had a long history and consistently produced strong magicians with every successive generation. They had a long list of military achievements, too, meaning many nobles were eager to invite them to their gatherings. Upon hearing that Casister was eager to invite magical families from across factional lines to his salons, Joshua immediately started networking and laying the groundwork for the Raythefts to receive an invitation.

Casister Rondiel, the host, was already in the reception hall. He was in his mid-forties and was a good-looking, elegant man. He had foregone the traditional noble wear for a jacket paired with long pants, which had been gaining popularity recently. Countless medals adorned his chest. He flashed his charming smile every which way, greeting his guests in a most cheerful manner.

The martial nobles Lecia had met before tended to be energetic but dignified, holding a certain level of majesty stemming from their social position and level of power. Casister seemed meek in comparison.

He also seemed to be paying particular attention to the ladies, which was to be expected with the blood that ran through his veins. There was a special sparkle in his eye as he spoke to them too. Joshua told her that the Rondiel men were very much "ladies' men." Starting with Gastarque, his sons—and even his daughters—had a fondness for adorable girls. Lecia herself didn't quite understand what it all meant.

"This is your second salon, Lecia," Joshua said. "I understand you might be nervous, but this is an incredibly valuable chance to speak to some fine magicians. You should really make an effort to insert yourself into the conversation."

"Yes, Father."

"There are also many high-ranking children in attendance tonight. Before you speak to anybody, watch how they behave and how they are dressed, so you

know how to approach them. I shall be doing the very same thing.”

“Yes, Father,” Lecia said again.

At these sorts of gatherings, it was uncouth for lower-ranking nobles to address those above them without being invited to first. Trying to work out where you stood compared to children was particularly tricky, but Lecia knew that everyone here was likely her equal or better, and so she would have to keep her wits about her at all times. The way nobles dressed themselves these days was also changing rapidly, meaning their clothing was not as reliable an indicator of status as it once was.

“Well, if it isn’t Viscount Raytheft!”

“Hello, Viscount Lazrael! I am glad to see you are doing well.”

Viscount Lazrael had territory in the south of Lainur, and his magic focused on using earth and rock. He wasn’t in attendance at the last salon, but he was here now, and not alone: beside him walked a young boy around Lecia’s age. He had the same brown hair as his father and a sense of youthful gallantry about him. He was dressed in typical young noble fashion, too. Though his expression was kind and gentle, there was no denying the strong spark of determination in his eye.

“I’m Kane Lazrael. A pleasure to meet you.” Though his greeting was relatively informal, his bow was nothing short of perfect.

That one beautifully fluid action made it clear how strict his upbringing was, likely at the behest of his father, Viscount Lazrael. His manners were exquisite, yet his tone remained friendly. It was a refreshing change from the stiff manner of speech Lecia was used to hearing from other nobles, and was likely a tool to allow him to make friends with other noble children quickly.

Kane Lazrael was a famous name in the magical world. He boasted a magnificent store of aether, which impressed everyone who was there to witness the long ordeal that was his examination. There were even rumors that he was the reincarnation of the hero described in the Ancient Chronicles, but no solid evidence had emerged to back up the claim.

“My name is Lecia Raytheft.” Lecia responded to Kane’s greeting with a

standard one of her own.

Kane continued in his amicable way, a touch of confidence shining through his words. “I’ve heard a lot about you. It looks like we’re both going to be supporting this kingdom through the use of our magic; I’ll look forward to working with you.”

“And I as well.”

Though it was a little too familiar for an initial meeting, his friendly smile helped to put Lecia at ease. Lecia turned her attention to their fathers’ conversation. They seemed to be paying close attention to one of the other guests.

“She is Duke Saifice’s daughter, isn’t she?”

“Yes, Lady Claudia. It is said that she possesses a fine amount of aether as well.”

They were looking at an elegant young girl around the same age as Lecia and Kane.

She was Claudia Saifice. The Saifice dukedom was one of the four cornerstone dukedoms of the royal family, and Claudia was their daughter.

“I have heard that this generation is a particularly talented one.”

“Your son being one of them, of course.”

“Your daughter, too.” The viscount smiled back at Joshua.

It was a common formality to compliment the offspring of another noble, but that didn’t make it any less embarrassing for the children. Lecia exchanged an uncomfortable glance with Kane, but their parents kept going.

“Well, I wouldn’t want to be one of those parents who brags endlessly about their children, but I am very much looking forward to when my son enrolls in the Institute. I know that he has the potential to carve his name into magical history.”

“I can assure you that Lecia shall not be overshadowed by him.”

Lazrael let out a hearty laugh. “We shall see how things go in three years’

time.”

“Indeed we shall.”

It was in the middle of this jovial exchange that Casister finally made his way to them.

“Pardon me for interrupting, but might I take this opportunity to welcome you?”

The laughter dissolved completely at the marquess’s arrival, and the two viscounts set about giving him a formal greeting. Lecia and Kane followed their fathers’ example and turned their attention to their host. Lazrael gave his greeting first.

Like Lazrael, the Rondiels’ territory lay in the south, and they belonged to the same faction; they were likely to know each other quite well. Casister smiled at them warmly before turning to the Raythefts.

“Lord Casister. I am Joshua, of the Raytheft house.”

“Ah, yes, Viscount Joshua and young Miss Lecia. This is your second salon, if I’m not mistaken. I must apologize for not having the chance to speak with you last time.”

“Not at all, My Lord! We are honored to speak with Your Lordship now,” Joshua said.

“Come now, I am simply the third son of the marquess. My father had no title left for me but viscount.”

“My Lord, if I may say, there is no need to be so modest.” Joshua seemed unsure what to do with Casister’s sudden display of self-deprecation.

Although they both held the title of viscount, Casister was older than Joshua, not to mention that his father was a marquess. As such, he was the higher ranked of the two. You only had to look at the scope of this salon to know that. Hosting a salon like this would be far beyond the capabilities of a regular viscount. The modesty was simply part of Casister’s character.

Lecia gave a curtsy to Casister, following her father’s greeting.

“I have heard you are focusing a great deal on your daughter’s magical

education. How far are you in your studies now, Miss Lecia?"

"My Lord, recently I was able to destroy some stone using Flamrune."

"Oh, but that's marvelous!" Casister gasped.

Some of the surrounding nobles and their children, who had also been listening in, turned to look at Lecia in astonishment.

Magic was not just about being able to incant properly; it also required prodigious imagination. Even if you spoke the incantation flawlessly, if the amount of aether you used was off, or your imagination was too dull, the intended result would be beyond you.

Unlike other kinds of magic, fire magic was not about manipulating something physically in front of you. Being able to destroy stone with Flamrune was a clear indicator that you had mastered fire magic. On top of that, Flamrune was a staple spell in the kingdom's armed forces. Mastering it meant you were more or less battle-ready.

"Impressive," Casister continued. "Meanwhile, the children coming to Harveston this year have been struggling with their aether management."

Harveston was a small private establishment which trained children in the use of magic, staffed by magicians of a distinguished caliber. In some ways, it was similar to a training hall for martial arts. Harveston produced a disproportionate number of talented magicians; many of them went on to teach at the Royal Institute. Even among the children who attended, it was rare for a child of Lecia's age to be so adept at magic.

"Wonderful. I trust this is down to your father's instruction?" Casister said.

"No, My Lord," Joshua said, speaking on Lecia's behalf, "it is down to her resourcefulness. I remember struggling a great deal with magic when I was her age."

Lazrael and his son gasped at Joshua's admission.

"I didn't realize Raytheft children were taught so much so young."

"I've only just learned how to use Rearth Sword myself..."

"I still have much to learn," Lecia cut in, hoping to maintain an image of

modesty.

“I suppose you cannot help but compare yourself to your father,” Casister said.

Lecia paused. “Yes, My Lord. My father is an incredibly talented magician.”

Joshua was not the first person who came to mind when it came to weighing herself against others. In terms of magical power, the person she was thinking of wasn't as good as Joshua, Craib, or even Noah or Cazzy. His natural levels of aether were paltry.

But his image was there waiting for her whenever the lens of her inner thoughts came to rest on her aspirations. He was already using more powerful magic than Flamrune two whole years ago. Recently, and unbeknownst to her parents, he had taught her a new spell called Scrapped Impact, which was apparently a stronger version of a spell he created before. He already had more than twenty of these original spells, even if some of them were mostly unusable.

Even Joshua admitted to her that it was a struggle for him to command his imagination when it came to creating new spells. To Lecia, it was like her brother was capable of performing each of his spells perfectly as soon as he had the incantation down. His biggest problem was that he didn't seem to have the time to create all the spells he wanted to.

As they waited for the main lecture to start, Joshua continued chatting with Lazrael, while Lecia discussed magic with Kane. All of a sudden, there was a cheer at the hall's entrance, and the crowd around it parted to reveal an older gentleman dressed similarly to Casister. He had an attendant on either side of him and walked with a stick with a bent handle. He wore a fedora atop his head—a hat which was very much in vogue.

The crowd whispered his name in awe: “Marquess Gastarque!”

“I am so very sorry to disturb the peace like this.”

As he walked, the nobility stepped back to allow him passage. Perhaps they were being polite, or perhaps they were cowering from the majesty that flowed out about him. Either way, a wide path was opened up for him, and the people

bowed as he passed. Tension sparked in the room, accompanied with a heaviness that made it seem as though gravity had increased tenfold. Despite that, the eyes that surveyed him were full of an adoration that tempered the fear they felt. They admired him not only as a national hero, but a great magician—one they could only dream of emulating.

Only his son, Casister, could greet him normally. Joshua maintained his bow, the nerves rippling through his body. Lecia herself could barely move. Even when she tried lifting a finger, it felt as heavy as lead.

Casister approached Gastarque with a graceful gait, and the tension in the room began to loosen.

“It is good to see you here, Father.”

“I apologize for intruding so suddenly.”

“Not at all, Father! You are always welcome.”

The two of them began to engage in light conversation.

“My, there are a lot of pretty ladies here tonight,” Gastarque remarked.

“There are indeed! So many beautiful women, and young girls who will no doubt grow up to be just as stunning. See that girl over there! Isn’t she darling?”

“Oho. I should like to see her in five years’ time...”

The rest of their conversation wasn’t worth repeating. It wasn’t long before they were tittering lecherously together. At the very least, it completely broke down the tension that was in the air moments before. The guests took the chance to straighten up from their bows. Even now, there was a quiet, oppressive dignity in the air, but it was not as strong as before. The Raythefts and Lazraels were close enough to hear snippets of the Rondiels’ conversation.

“How was it, Father?”

“It was quite something. Really, I should like to speak to the entire family at once.”

“Oh?”

Gastarque leaned in to whisper something into his son’s ear. Casister’s mouth

dropped open as he heard what he had to say.

“I-Is that the truth?!”

“It is.”

“But who could have created such a thing? Was it perhaps one of the other state magicians?!”

“I am not allowed to say. You should have worked that much out by the nature of the thing.”

“O-Oh. Yes, Father!”

“Godwald has lent me a good number of them, as well, although there are conditions pertaining to their use, of course.”

“So I suppose you wish the family to gather so we can use them?”

“Correct. I hope you are ready to receive my instruction, as it has certainly been a while!”

“Of course I am, Father!” Casister exclaimed joyfully.

From his tone of voice, Lecia was surprised he wasn’t currently leaping into the air.

Joshua leaned in to speak to Lazrael. “Whatever it is, it certainly looks like good news.”

“Yes.”

All of a sudden, Gastarque turned in their direction. His glare was particularly sharp and much more keen than the unsettling gaze he had used looking over the hall on his arrival. His eyes widened slightly.

“That silver hair... might you belong to the Raytheft house?”

“Yes, Father.” Casister answered in Joshua’s stead. “I believed it prudent to deepen our ties with magicians from different factions. On this occasion, Viscount Raytheft was more than happy to pay us a visit.”

“I see. Well, it is very heartwarming to see one of Lainur’s oldest families so eager.” Gastarque approached them.

He had a powerful stride, despite his age. Though he was only a little taller than Joshua, to Lecia he almost seemed three times as big. Lecia had a close encounter with a marquess previously, but Gastarque was much more impressive than that man was.

Joshua took to one knee and bowed. "It is good to see Your Lordship this evening. I am Joshua Raytheft. This is my daughter."

"My name is Lecia. It is a pleasure to make Your Lordship's acquaintance."

"Mm," the marquess grunted.

Lecia's heart was pounding, but she was pleased that she didn't mess up the greeting. She was grateful now for her strict upbringing. She had been trained day after day to get her used to dealing with the overwhelming majesty that higher-ranking nobles gave off. Even if her father's aura wasn't as powerful as her uncle's, it was nothing to be sniffed at. Some auras were enough to render someone completely immobile.

Gastarque seemed impressed. "Even in my old age, I have rarely seen a young girl like you greet me so properly. I shall be looking forward to seeing how you develop."

"Y-Yes, My Lord."

"His Lordship praised her!"

"Amazing!"

The other guests murmured among themselves. Their gazes were making Lecia uncomfortable, but she didn't have time to squirm. She had to focus on the state magician before her.

"I met your brother this evening."

"I-I beg your pardon?" The statement caught Lecia entirely off guard.

Why would Gastarque be talking about Arcus?

Seeing her confusion, the old magician continued in a gentle, yet firm, tone. "Keep working hard, young lady. You must continue to put in the effort, else you may find yourself falling far behind."

Confusion aside, Lecia only had one answer for him. She didn't want Arcus to leave her in the dust, either.

"I shall do my very best, My Lord. More so than before."

"I am glad to hear it," Gastarque said.

"Please forgive me for being so impudent, My Lord," Joshua began.

"However, please allow me to ask what Your Lordship is referring to."

"I am afraid I do not wish to answer your question."

"Yes, My Lord," Joshua said quickly, not daring to push it any further.

Afterwards, Gastarque left the hall with Casister and his servants in tow. The salon continued without them, but not once did the frown leave Joshua's face that evening.

One day, Lecia was called to Joshua's main office in the Raytheft estate. This was the room in which the successive heads of the Raytheft house had conducted their business for generations. Two of the Raythefts' flags hung crossed on the wall behind the desk. The carpet and curtains were a calming color, and the leather sofa and glass table let the office double as a drawing room.

The Raythefts had always kept their home spartan since before they gained their title, eschewing the elaborate ornaments and fixtures other noble households treasured. Rather than overspending on superfluous furnishings, the Raythefts preferred to funnel the money into their military budget, or for the good of the crown. This creed had been passed down from the very founding of the viscountry. Believing their money could be better spent elsewhere, the only objects in the house that had been bought recently were the Sol Glasses and tables, as well as some screens made of frosted glass.

Lecia sat next to her father on the sofa in front of the desk. Joshua's brother, Craib Abend, sat across from them on the other side of the glass table. Lecia loved her uncle. Even putting aside his legendary station, he spoiled her as if she were his own daughter.

"Thank you for accepting my invitation, Brother," Joshua said.

“Yeah, no worries. What’s wrong, though? You’re lookin’ awful serious.” Craib frowned at him.

Joshua was being particularly formal, given how he usually spoke to his brother. Despite the resentments they held, they both acknowledged each other as family.

Lecia wondered why her father was acting so strange. Was he angry about something? Annoyed? Whatever it was, it felt rooted in something negative.

Without answering Craib’s question, Joshua pulled something out of the bundle next to him. It appeared to be a glass tube contained within a wooden frame. At the bottom of the glass tube sat a small amount of red liquid. There were perfectly equidistant numbers carved into the frame like a scale. Lecia had never seen such a thing before and couldn’t imagine what it might be used for.

Joshua placed it on the table in front of them.

“I have some questions for you about this,” he announced curtly.

Craib exhaled the cigar smoke in his mouth towards the ceiling before answering.

“Fine, but I gotta ask you somethin’ first, since I’m a state magician and all. Where exactly did ya get this?” Craib’s tone of voice was even sharper than Joshua’s, as if Joshua was in deep trouble.

“I understand that this tool is being guarded incredibly tightly. Somebody lent it to me as a special favor.”

“Blackmail, was it? Bastard...”

“Those were the lengths I was forced to go to in order to obtain one.”

Even if she didn’t know what was going on, Lecia inferred from the conversation that the thing on the table was very important.

“Father, what exactly is that object?”

“It is... a tool which can measure aetheric volume.”

“I-It can measure aether?”

“Correct. The magician simply releases some aether like so...”

As Joshua did so, the red liquid at the bottom of the glass tube started to travel up it. The numbers, Lecia realized, must indicate how much aether was being detected. She gasped. Having studied magic for as long as she had, she instantly understood how significant a device like this was. As a magician, too, she immediately wanted to try it out for herself, but she also knew it wasn't something to be treated so lightly.

"Lecia," Craib began firmly, "this is a national secret. It hasn't even been announced publicly yet. You can't tell anyone about it, or about what we say in this meeting now. Got it?"

"Y-Yes, sir." She paused before daring to ask, "Not even my brother?"

"That's right."

"...I understand."

Lecia was disappointed. If her brother found out something like this existed, he would be overcome with excitement. He taught her so much, too. It was a shame she couldn't repay him by sharing a secret of her own. She barely held back a frustrated sigh. She hadn't missed the frown that flickered across Joshua's face when she asked about her brother. He didn't say anything, though, opting instead to ask more about the tool itself.

"Brother," Joshua said.

"Look, I dunno why you're askin' me about this."

"I have already eliminated all other possibilities about this invention's origin. You are the only one left now."

"Huh?"

"Did you invent this?"

"Nope."

"Please do not feign ignorance."

"I didn't make it. What, you really think I'm that smart?"

"If not you, then where on earth did it come from?!" Joshua suddenly demanded.

Lecia flinched as her father raised his voice. Craib, on the other hand, grinned.

“Whaddya mean ‘where did it come from’? I thought you were sure it was me?”

“For goodness’s sake, stop with the theatrics!”

“Okay, okay. I’m bein’ a pain, I know.” Craib took another puff of his cigar.

The room fell into an uncomfortable silence. A small burst of courage racing through her, Lecia reached over to pick up the device. It was easy to hold, and not too heavy either. She tried releasing a little aether. Sure enough, the red liquid started to move up the tube. The units were clearly etched into the wood, too, so clear that you only needed a single glance to see how much aether you had just put out. In certain parts of the wood, there were some characters that belonged to neither Lainur’s language nor the Elder Tongue. Lecia wondered if it was a signature of some sort. At the same time, they seemed somewhat familiar to her.

Oh!

She remembered. She understood. She knew who made this.

The meticulous detail. The seals, each stroke made with the utmost care. She would know them anywhere. It was him. *He* made this.

When Craib said it wasn’t him, he was telling the truth.

Brother...

Lecia already knew he was talented, but this was something else entirely. It was then that she realized something else: it was because of this device that Gastarque had approached her at the salon. His conversation with his son made sense. He must have come back from an important meeting where this device and its inventor were revealed. That was why Gastarque warned her about falling behind and brushed Joshua off when he asked about it.

Her brother had always been shunned by her parents and even the servants. But now he had achieved something that completely overshadowed the years of misery he spent growing up. Lecia felt her heart welling up with joy.

“Give that back to whoever you took it from, Joshua, and I’ll let this one

slide.”

“Very well.”

“You sure? The king’s keepin’ a close eye on this, y’know, and I already spoke with him about it. You pull anythin’ funny, and he won’t hesitate to destroy the Raytheft name.”

“But... But, I...”



Joshua began to protest, but gave up almost immediately. His shoulders sagged with the weight of his disappointment.

“I get it’s annoyin’. I swear I didn’t make this, though. I woulda told you if it was me.”

Was it Craib’s refusal to answer any more questions that filled Lecia’s father with disappointment right now? She didn’t feel as if that was quite right. Instead, it must have been because Joshua was worried Craib wouldn’t tell him even if he *had* created something like this. Even though they were brothers, Joshua could be pretty stern with Craib sometimes. Craib would usually tease him when he did so. Their relationship was a complicated one, to say the least, but if there was one thing Lecia knew for sure, it was that they didn’t dislike each other. If they did, there was no way Joshua would permit Craib to show up at the estate without warning, and they wouldn’t call on each other to discuss certain things as they did. If they couldn’t stand each other, they wouldn’t meet so often. They would be openly hostile with each other. Despite their history, they shared a special bond. That was why Joshua got so upset when Craib—his brother— wouldn’t say anything.

But it was Arcus who made this device, and Craib was trying to hide that fact from Joshua.

Joshua put the tool away again and Craib put a bag on top of the table. Taking something out of it, he handed it towards Lecia.

“This one’s for you.”

“For me?”

“That’s right.”

It was another device just like the one Joshua put away.

Joshua’s eyebrows leaped up in surprise. “Are you quite sure?”

“This is what the inventor wanted. Take care of it, yeah? You can’t be lettin’ other people use it, and whatever you do, don’t lose it.”

“Yes, yes, we know.”

“And don’t *you* pinch it.”

“I wouldn’t dream of it!”

“Good. And don’t forget that the king’s got his eye on this, yeah? That’s all I can really tell you, though.”

“We shall bear it in mind,” Joshua said, and left it at that.

If the crown was involved, there wasn’t anything he would dare do to interfere. Lecia was sure that, if her father really put the thought into it, he would realize who created it. But it seemed he wasn’t going to. Lecia wondered why.

Then she realized: he didn’t want to accept it. That was why he was so desperate to discover that its inventor was somebody else. He wanted to keep believing that the boy he disinherited was as talentless as he always claimed. Despite his magical skills, despite what he had created, Joshua didn’t want to accept the truth.

Craib must have understood and was using that stubbornness against him now. Joshua would only believe the truth when he was forced to confront it head-on. That was why Craib never answered his question directly: because there was no point. Maybe it was the inventor himself who foresaw this happening. Maybe he knew that people preferred to believe what they wanted to believe. He came out with similar ideas when he spoke about the situation with the marquess, too, and about the mercenary he fought that day. Once Arcus convinced that mercenary that he was talentless, his enemy clung to that perception until the very end. What was happening in front of Lecia now was the exact same thing. Even now, Joshua would continue to call her brother useless. As far as he was concerned, Arcus had to stay that way.

Lecia fully expected her magic training to become much tougher from that day on. She welcomed it. If she didn’t start upping her game now, she would only be left behind.

Months had passed since the aethometer’s unveiling. It was the greatest invention to hit the kingdom in recent years, but there was relatively little excitement. The Guild had maintained its promised veil of secrecy and exclusivity; even in the least scrupulous corners of Lainur, not even *rumors* of the device’s existence had entered circulation.

Arcus found this atmosphere exciting and briefly considered giving the aethometer a code name at one point, but that never came to fruition. He made the decision not to come out as the tool's inventor until he was a self-reliant adult; any earlier, and he would be unlikely to reap the full rewards of his achievement. At the moment, its general unveiling was being delayed to serve the crown's interests; for the time being, that suited Arcus's plans nicely.

For now, he was just happy that his invention was being funded and that, as things stood, he could probably get away with asking a favor of the crown if he needed to. Nothing would come of being greedy or impatient, Arcus reasoned, and it was always best to act in clear-sighted accord with one's situation.

There was a certain idiom in the man's world: "Tall trees catch much wind." In those terms, Arcus was already tall enough as it was; he'd resolved to conduct himself with the utmost caution from now on.

As promised at the meeting, the aethometer began making its way into the military the very next day, and the state magicians had already put the invention to work in their training. Since there had been nothing like it before, it would take a few months before Arcus could assess its effects objectively. Apparently it was already proving invaluable in the medical field. Unlike in military efforts, where it was used for a whole unit, in hospitals it could be used for one person at a time. All signs on the medical front pointed towards the aethometer's effectiveness both in leveling the playing field for healers and accelerating their training, improving both the quality and accessibility of magical care. Arcus was surprised to find that a letter of thanks had found its way to him.

He even heard that various enterprises overseen by the royal family, including soda-and paper-making, were seeing vast improvements thanks to the aethometer. Mismanagement of aether caused accidents on an almost daily basis in those industries; the introduction of the aethometer had made a marked difference.

Arcus even heard that they wanted to introduce aethometers into lectures at the Royal Institute, but that they were waiting for the right time to do so. Finally, there was the matter of producing more aethometers. Requests had begun to come from the royal family itself through the Magician's Guild. They

left Arcus at an impasse; expanding the parameters of manufacture would call for him to disclose the secret of tempered aether, and just as with the aethometer itself, he preferred to guard that secret until the moment it would be most profitable to publicize.

Today, Arcus was at work in the garden at the Abend estate, dabbling with brewing again, as he did whenever he had a moment to spare now. He was, of course, not without the help of Klin Botter on these occasions. He'd only recently managed to cultivate a live specimen of the herbal ingredient he needed. Usually it thrived on the plains in the northern reaches of Lainur, but fortunately one of the state magicians—Muller “Welcome Rain” Quint, the medic-magician who had been driven nearly to tears by the aethometer's unveiling—was growing some of her own and proved more than happy to share. When she'd received Arcus to hand off the plant, she made it clear that he needed only to say the word, and she would make the time to assist with his work in whatever way she could.

Arcus had started growing the specimen in Craib's garden, magically guiding its growth according to the book's instructions. The end goal was to transform it into the “soma” described in the book—and now it sat right in front of him.

Arcus found himself at a loss for words. As it turned out, soma was more than just a plant. It was a tree, and a prodigiously sized tree at that. To think that such a tiny plant could transform into an entire tree purely by magical means. It had started to grow from the very first time Arcus cast magic on it, and he'd kept it growing for months. It had grown so quickly that Arcus was afraid he might have accidentally caused a kind of freakish genetic mutation.

He gave the trunk an experimental knock. It was as sturdy and thick as any tree.

“If you ever wanted to take up carpentry, you now have the materials to do so,” Noah remarked when he had seen it.

“Hey, Arcus,” said Craib, knocking Arcus out of his recollective fugue.

“Yeah?”

“I gave you the all clear to practice your magic in my garden. I never said you could start your own forest in my backyard.”

“It’d be too dangerous to do at my house, though,” Arcus objected. “Joshua and Celine would kill me.”

“What, so my garden’s fine? How d’you even get a tree to grow so big in a few months, anyway?”

“Er... I don’t actually know myself.”

“Are you kidding me?”

“Aaaah! Ow! Ow! Stop it!” Arcus squirmed as his uncle ground his fist lightly against his head. He really didn’t like this habit of Craib’s. He was worried it would stunt his growth.

Arcus had created a tap-like device similar to the one used to harvest sap from maple trees. When he fixed it into the bark, sap came out. Taking some on his finger, he licked it.

“Huh. It’s sweet.”

The flavor was subtle, but there was a note of rich sweetness to it.

Craib followed his nephew’s example. “What’s your plan for this then, Arcus?”

“What? Oh, um... Not telling!”

“Ah, right, so it’s still a secret, huh? Well, I’ll look forward to when you can tell me, then,” Craib said, heading back inside the house.

Arcus couldn’t bring himself to admit that he was planning to brew alcohol with it, though he didn’t think Craib would be mad at him or anything.

It’s just...

For some reason, he felt like making the admission might spark some sort of trouble, even though he knew he couldn’t keep it a secret forever. Half of him was tempted to give up on the whole thing.

“The next step is to put this stuff in a barrel with some yeast...”

Arcus wouldn’t know which would work best until he tried it, but he was hoping there was a winner among the varieties Noah already procured. In terms of preservation, all he needed was the right seals on the barrels. There were already seals in the cellar to keep it at a constant temperature. It took a year for

it to get to this point, but it now functioned as a mini distillery. It was Craib who very kindly gave Arcus that space to work with, and, thanks to the seals taking the place of electrical appliances, it was fit for a brewery's purpose in the man's world. Aside from temperature regulation, Arcus could manipulate the seals to freeze his products and ingredients as well.

“You know, maybe if seals really can do the same stuff as electronics, our worlds don't need to be so different after all.”

Without incantations or aether, seals weren't nearly as versatile as ordinary spells. Regardless of their limitations, however, Arcus was prepared to give this little hobby his best shot.

Part 2: Arcus Raytheft, Age 12

It had been two years since the aethometer's initial announcement, and Arcus was now twelve years old. He had grown (a little bit), and his frame had become just a touch more masculine. As usual, his facial features were a different matter, and he still often glared at himself in the mirror. His Adam's apple was still nowhere to be seen, and his eyes were large and bright, framed with long eyelashes.

It was getting to the point where Arcus suspected he might be cursed. Nowadays he had more time to poke and pinch at his cheeks in front of the mirror, much as he knew it wouldn't make a difference. Unlike his face, the environment around Arcus was slowly changing. He'd asked Craib to pass an aethometer on to Lecia, and in a stroke of luck, none of his fears surrounding the gift had materialized. Craib never answered Joshua when he asked who made it, and the device itself still hadn't leaked into public knowledge. Arcus was satisfied, too, that Joshua wasn't taking his frustrations out on his sister, aside from having her work just a little harder than before. If he did, Lecia would likely tell Arcus so.

Arcus didn't get to see as much of his sister as he used to, and it was as much to do with the increased intensity of her education as the fact that she was expected to participate more actively in noble gatherings, from salons to parties to simple dinners with the Raythefts' branch families. Other houses were already recognizing her magical aptitude, and based on that alone, her place as the future head of the Raytheft house was practically confirmed at this point.

Arcus himself had less time and more responsibilities now, many of which were linked to the aethometer. Often he was out or staying at his uncle's place, so he only met with Lecia around once a month, if that. Her parents being around as much as they were didn't help matters either.

During the past couple of years, Arcus had also started exchanging letters with Charlotte Cremelia, eldest daughter to the count and one of the girls he saved from the marquess. It was her idea, and the first letter was sent as soon as the excitement around the aethometer started to die down. Letters were the

most convenient form of communication for them, both because they were busy, and because it was easier than meeting in person, considering their houses' circumstances.



Charlotte was fourteen. The Royal Institute of Magic accepted students from the age of thirteen, so she had been studying there for a whole year now. Though not a magician herself, she was learning how to hold her own against them, and was still keeping up with her fencing training. She had already challenged Arcus to a duel in their letters too. Despite her ladylike appearance, there was no mistaking the fiery spark in her military blood.

As for Arcus himself, he was still making good use of the aethometer, and things were going well for him. He was still studying the Ancient Chronicles and testing out all kinds of magic. He also managed to save up a fair bit of money, thanks in no small part to the reward granted to him by the Magician's Guild.

Right now, he was having Noah and Cazzy scour the capital to find him a place to live. Arcus felt it was about time he left the Raytheft estate for good, and he couldn't just impose on his uncle forever either. Even if he needed to use Craib's place to carry on his work with the aethometer, he wanted a separate, permanent home to call his own, and if his vast savings weren't enough, he could just borrow some more money. If *that* didn't work, then all he needed to do was sell some of his spells or tricks to the Guild. He was going to get his dream home somehow, and he was expecting it to be sooner rather than later.

Aside from magic, he was also making progress with his brewing. He followed the book's instructions over and over, trying to make the perfect product. Appearance-wise, at least, he seemed to be succeeding. He was still borrowing Craib's basement, both for the brewing itself and the storage of his products. The seals in the walls there had kept the place cool and the humidity stable for the entire year. He also engraved the barrels with the suggested seals from Klin Botter's guide, which made it easier for the mixture to ferment. Everyone who came down here said the same thing: that they had never seen so many seals all in one place.

Arcus was in the cellar again that day, and he removed the lid from one of his barrels, revealing the drink within. It was separated into two layers. The top layer was clear, while the liquid underneath was white and cloudy and spotted with sediment. This bottom layer made up around eighty percent of the barrel's content. The most popular drinks in this world included mead, ale, and wine, but Arcus's product reminded him more of vodka, gin, or sake. If he wanted to

make sake, that bottom layer would need to be pressed—but for the moment, that was neither here nor there. To be honest, Arcus had expected much less of his foray into brewing, and was quite pleased with himself.

“It’s come out really well.”

He did everything according to the book. He used the right ingredients, regulated the temperature, mixed it periodically, and let it brew for just the right amount of time. Arcus was satisfied that his beverage was ready. He was admiring his work when he heard two pairs of footsteps coming down into the cellar.

Arcus turned to find his two attendants at the bottom of the stairs. The first was a young man in his early twenties, whose beauty was almost feminine in nature. His indigo hair was cut into a bob, with the left side barely reaching his shoulder and the right side plaited into a braid. He wore a monocle over his right eye and a rapier on his hip. With his black morning coat, he was the perfect picture of a stereotypical butler.

The second servant had dark hair gelled all the way back and the face of a troublemaker. He was either in his early thirties or his late twenties. His eyes, which held tiny irises, were narrow and slanted upwards at the ends, and his mouth was permanently twisted into a scornful smile. The buttons on his shirt remained open until decency demanded otherwise, and there was too large a gap between the knot on his tie and his neck. He wore a scarf on his arm and on his hip, a ring of keys. There was also a smaller object that jangled alongside them, although its purpose was unclear at first glance.

“Hey, Noah. Cazzy.”

His servants were Noah Ingvayne and Cazzy Guari.

Cazzy’s face crumpled into a frown. “What the heck are ya doin’ down ’ere?”

“Just flexing my creative muscles.”

“Ay?”

“I’m making stuff,” Arcus clarified.

Now and then, he had the tendency to use idioms from the man’s world that

were unfamiliar to the inhabitants of Lainur by accident. Though he was trying to get out of the habit, it was sometimes hard to come up with a suitable alternative.

Noah stepped up behind Arcus and peered into the barrel. “Ah, these must be the ingredients which I fetched for you. What precisely are you making here?”

“Alcohol.”

“What?! As if ya know how to make that!”

“I do know! I’ve already made some!”

“Ya don’t even know what the stuff tastes like!” Cazzy let out an exasperated sigh.

Arcus would probably react the exact same way to any other twelve-year-old trying to brew.

Noah let out a deep sigh of his own. “I let you out of my sight for a few seconds, and you drive yourself instantly to drink...”

“It’s not that bad. I’m not even drinking it; I’m *making* it.”

“Naturally. You wouldn’t be allowed to buy it, after all. Your sins are twofold.”

Personally, Arcus thought he was going a bit far. It wasn’t like he was kidnapping girls to cover up his political corruption, after all. He did feel a bit guilty about avoiding alcohol duty—but that didn’t even exist in this world, and if he wasn’t drinking this stuff, he technically wasn’t doing anything wrong. Depending on the territory, it was also common to add alcohol to drinks as a preservative.

“Look, this is just a little side project,” Arcus insisted.

“You have gone to rather extreme lengths for something like that.”

You only had to look around the cellar to know he was right. Not only the walls, but every last piece of equipment was covered in seals. It was hard to find a spot that was completely clear of them. Even Cazzy was speechless as his eyes darted around the room.

“So, are you continuing your work on this project today?” Noah asked.

“Not quite. It’s actually finished, so I was hoping you guys could taste test it for me.”

“Oh?”

Arcus picked up a cup he brought with him and scooped some of the upper layer into it. He held it up to his servants, causing Cazzy to break into his usual crooked grin.

“You go first!” He cackled.

“Very well.” Noah took the cup from Arcus and brought it to his lips, taking a sip. “Oh. I say.”

Arcus watched him carefully. Noah’s hand was pressed over his mouth, and there was a hint of surprise in his eye.

Arcus was hopeful this was a good reaction, but he asked just in case. “How is it?”

“Delicious. Unfortunately, I am not well-versed enough in the art of wine-tasting to give you a much more detailed description than that...”

Arcus was pleased that even someone as articulate as Noah was unable to describe his creation, whether or not he was a bit of a teetotaler.

“Is it different from white wine?” Cazzy asked.

“It is.”

“What about akvavit?”

“Quite different. It is not so obviously alcoholic, and has a mild sweetness to it.”

“Ooh...” Cazzy stroked the bottom of his chin thoughtfully.

Arcus prepared another cup and held it out to him. “Here.”

“I’ll go last.”

It was Arcus’s turn, then. He gave it a try.

“Whoa!”

A soft fragrance enveloped his tongue. That delicate flavor then started to

melt and release a smooth yet keen sweetness. Somehow, the sharpness of the sugary taste made it all the more intense. It was incomparable to sake, whiskey, or even wine. From time to time, there was even a hint of milkiness to it. It was unlike anything Arcus had experienced before.

“Damn, this is some fine tasting hooch!”

The man from Arcus’s dream wasn’t exactly big on drinking, but even through his limited experience, Arcus knew he had something good here. Even in that world, where the alcoholic beverages were far more varied, he had never come across something like this. He felt like he could drink the entire barrel and not get sick of it.

“Would you repeat that, Master Arcus?” Noah asked dryly.

“Huh? Oh, um. I mean, it’s, uh, very nice.”

“I see.”

Again, he had accidentally used some of the man’s vocabulary. Noah seemed to be getting used to it. Once he asked for clarification, he usually just nodded vaguely when it was given.

Finally, Arcus passed Cazzy his portion.

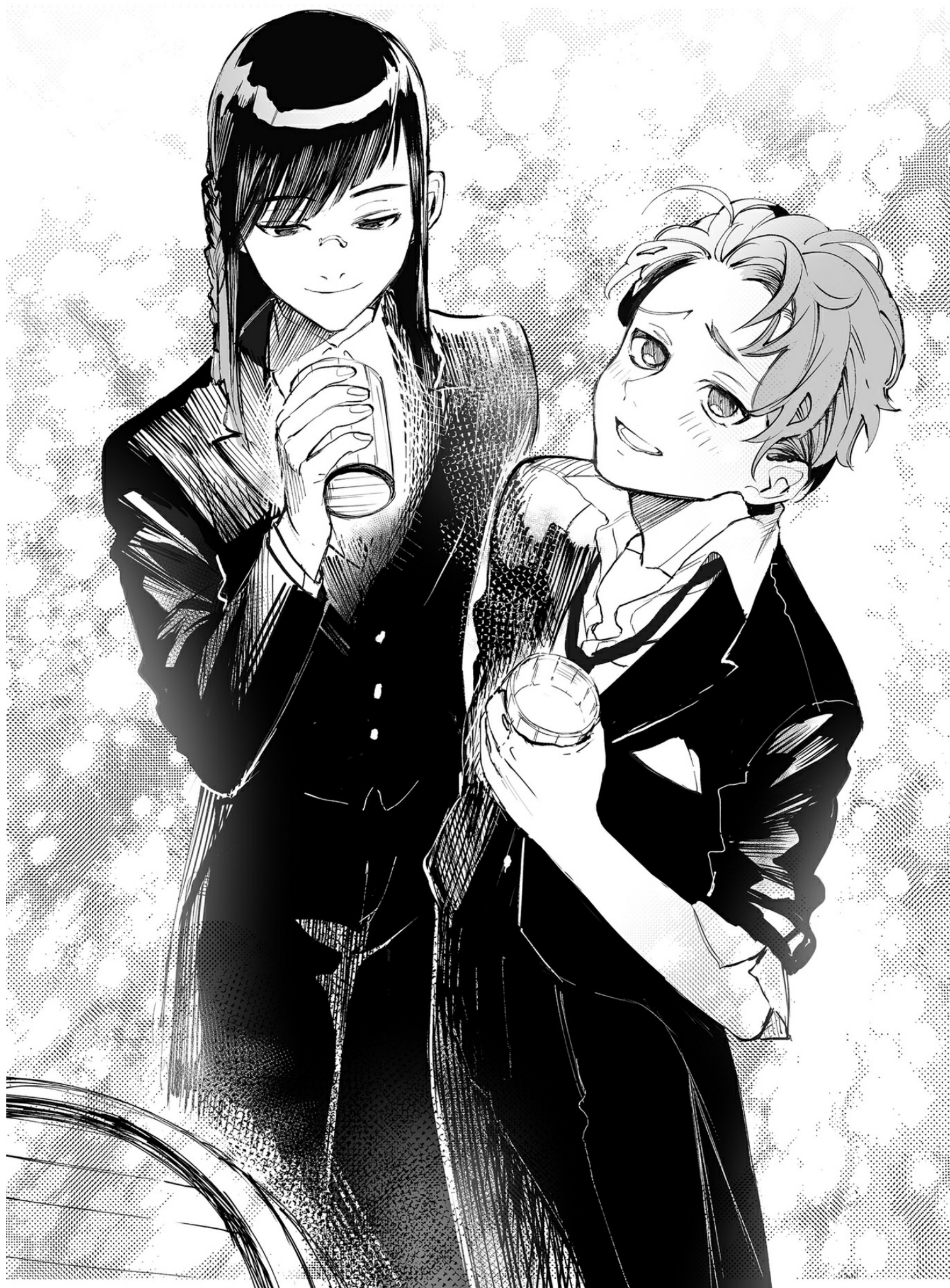
“Huh. Smells like fruit.”

“Wow, sounds like you know your stuff.”

“I sure do. Ya gotta know it to enjoy it. Makes ya look impressive, as well!” Cazzy cackled to himself before taking a sip. His eyes widened. *“This is good!”*

“I thought so!”

“Makes everything else I ever drank taste like crap. Actually, given the budget I used to drink on, I’m probably only half jokin’. Maybe as little as one-third...”



Cazzy downed the remaining contents of his cup before letting out a satisfied sigh.

“It’s nice ‘n’ sweet, but not in a way I’ve tasted before.” Even the usual smirk had been wiped from his face.

Arcus wasn’t about to admit that the secret ingredient was a suspicious plant he’d imbued with magic. They continued to drink, little by little.

“Hey, guys,” Arcus said.

“What is it?”

“Doesn’t drinking this make you feel like you’ve got a little more aether than normal?”

“Aether?”

“I used a lot of it training today, but I kinda feel replenished now...”

Noah and Cazzy paused thoughtfully.

“Now that you mention it...”

“Yeah, I can feel it, too!”

It was such a subtle change, Arcus worried it was just his imagination, but his servants felt it too. In Arcus’s case, he had so little aether to start with, any change in it was obvious to him. Suddenly, he was struck with an idea.

“Wait! What if you drank this after you used up a whole ton of aether?!”

You would be able to replenish your stocks in an instant. Noah and Cazzy, however, weren’t as enthusiastic.

“It would indeed replenish the aether you lost...” Noah began.

“...But you’d have to drink barrels of the stuff!” Cazzy concluded.

“You guys are right...”

Arcus had to admit it was unrealistic. From the increase in aether he felt, and quickly putting together some sums in his head, a single flask could net you around 400 to 500 mana of extra aether. Drinking that much would make you pass out before you could cast another spell, and get you a healthy dose of

alcohol poisoning.

“Guess it’s just a yummy drink, then.”

“Hey, this tastes great, though. Doesn’t hafta be a super magic potion or nothin’ on top of that.”

Cazzy was right. In the first place, Arcus was only looking to successfully brew something that was drinkable. It should be enough, he assured himself, that he managed to do just that.

“How about I pay you in drink, then?” Arcus said to Cazzy.

“Sure thing. I could make a killin’ if I sold it off!” He cackled.

“Sell it...” Arcus repeated thoughtfully. “I wanna get my uncle to try some too, though.”

“I would caution against it. The moment that drunkard catches wind of this, you shall have none left, either to sell or to enjoy for yourself.”

“Yeah, that’s kinda what I was worried about.”

“Right,” said Cazzy, “the old geezer does look like he could drink the whole damn country under the table.”

It wouldn’t help that Arcus’s drink was so delicious, either. It would probably drive any career inebriate crazy the moment they took a sip.

“Maybe I’ll just give him a little bit and pretend that’s all I’ve got.”

“Wonderful. Then he shall press you incessantly for the details as to where you obtained it, and you shall be umming and ahing until you cannot possibly keep it a secret any longer.”

“You’re getting way too specific there...”

“Oh? So I am correct?” Noah raised his eyebrow half an inch.

The only answer Arcus could give was “yes,” so he said nothing at all.

“Well then, Master Arcus. Have you got a name for your concoction?” Noah asked.

“Soma wine,” Arcus replied.

“Soma wine?”

That was what Klin Botter called it in his guide to whatever-it-was. Though the way it was brewed and its effects reminded Arcus of some of the liquors described in legends in the man’s world, it didn’t seem mystical enough to compare. In any case, he was glad he managed to complete it. What remained was deciding what to do with it, but he could take his time on that front.

“Damn, it’s so good!”

“I must agree...”

Even as he picked through his thoughts, Cazzy kept on gulping the stuff down and Noah sipped on it elegantly. At this rate, it would all be gone before Arcus even decided on a use for the stuff. As his servants drank, Arcus scooped out some of the white dregs from the bottom of the barrel and wrapped them in a clean cloth. He tied it up above a container to catch the drops of clear liquid that seeped through the material.

“What are you doing there?” Noah asked, a curious glint in his eye.

“Just trying to get what I can before I start doing some more processing...”

This time, he was going to see if extracting his drink in a different way would change the taste.

Books were for exploring, not reading. That was what the man’s father always said. You had to be constantly inquisitive to make proper use of your literacy, first in finding the books that were meant for you to read, then in properly ferreting out the information you needed from within them, and lastly in determining the area in your life where you could apply said information practically. Anything less fell short of “exploring.”

It was an easy view to take when the world you lived in had an abundance of books. It even sounded a little extreme at times, but Arcus knew what the man’s father meant. It was thanks to those words that the man turned into an avid reader, and it was thanks to that reading that Arcus gained as much as he had from his dream. He would often thank that man silently for it.

The utility of the man’s knowledge extended far beyond Arcus’s magical studies. It had familiarized him with all the practical, everyday skills of that

other world's adults and given him a well-honed eye for the nuances of human affairs. Arcus also had a particular talent for taking in information; he only needed to read or see something once to commit it to memory. On command, he could recall in perfect detail every book the man had ever read—or even just skimmed over—and put that information to work.

Arcus was in his uncle's garden, holding up an annotated book of all the phrases and vocabulary he had taken from the Ancient Chronicles so far. He was hoping to wring a new spell or two out of it. If he wanted to succeed in life, broadening his repertoire of spells was indispensable. Power was important when it came to magic, but so was versatility, and between the two, only the latter was within his control. Marquess Gaston was only a faint, passing omen of the threats waiting for Arcus; he meant to be ready when the next one reared its head.

His biggest problem at the moment was the length of his incantations. It didn't matter so much if his opponent was also a magician, but the extended recitations his current spells called for left him open to any quick fool with a bludgeon or half-competent archer.

He'd considered a couple of stratagems. The first was to wade into close combat from the jump and resort to spells while the opponent was still reeling. The other would be to count on allies to hold the enemy off as he prepared his spell on the back lines. The latter idea wouldn't do; he couldn't count on having cohorts to take hits for him in every situation.

"Looks like I'll have to work on my sword technique..."

The man from Arcus's dream was trained in sword fighting. In the man's country, it was common to use a bamboo sword when practicing, but the man preferred using the real thing in his training, as it helped him train his mind at the same time.

There was a special technique where he unsheathed his sword from a sitting position that the man would practice again and again, sometimes cutting through a dummy on top of that. Though not fully trained in actual combat, the man had an elderly teacher skilled in several sword arts who drilled the fundamentals into him. Arcus started practicing the same techniques four years

ago and already had a good enough grip on them that he would soon be able to move on to techniques the man had only read about.

Anyway, right now his focus was magic.

He had a handful of parameters to pin down—whether to develop for close combat or a front-line substitute, the gritty details of the spell’s function, and whether to build towards a spell with an extended effect or if a quick, simple, fire-and-forget option deserved his most immediate attention. In terms of a spell with a long duration, he wanted something more akin to a defensive spell. His uncle Craib had a few spells in this vein, and so did Noah; his Frozen Sword of Jacqueline was a perfect example. These spells required vast swathes of power, so Arcus wasn’t sure he could set his sights so high. With his meager aether reserves, he needed to be constantly vigilant about each spell’s impact on his budget. Using a spell like one of his uncle’s could clean him out in one go.

Realistically, his only way forward was to make his incantations shorter. It was already common sense to make your incantations as short as possible, but you could only make them so short before they lost their intended effects. There were three golden questions you needed to ask yourself when creating magic. Which phenomenon would the spell make use of? How would the spell manifest? What effect would the spell have? Without a clear answer to all three of them, your spell would never be perfected. Once you started chopping out words, these answers would lose clarity, and no matter what you did, the spell would become a shadow of its full potential and lose much of its strength.

Therefore, Arcus needed to come up with a way to make his spell both short and powerful. If he couldn’t resort to the usual powerful phrases due to their length, he would have to rummage through the rarely-used words.

Blaze, blazing, thunder, lightning, blizzard, avalanche...

As standalone words, they were difficult to make behave. They would either cause out-of-control effects, or cancel out other words, hamstringing the spell’s effect. That wasn’t to say their use needed to be avoided at all costs. If Arcus could find the right words to rein in their effects, then in theory they could be quite useful. He took his vocabulary book and began to flick through it.

“Burst...”

“Burst” was a word he discovered in his reading the other day. It came from the sixth Ancient Chronicle, *Demons and Society’s Collapse*, and was a word relating to explosions.

“Blazes burst forth. Roar and fall in sheets like rain. Ferocious fires rage onwards, blocking out the horizon with heat. Keep the grieving cries alive in their throats. Keep the lamentations forever sounding. Obliterate everything and return it to ashes. One demon king, Ganjaldie. Leave nothing after our victory but a wasteland of despair.”

This was a spell which described Ganjaldie, the demons’ ruler, who destroyed human civilization with relentless flames, turning it all into a wasteland. This spell used a fair number of powerful words: *roar, ferocious, obliterate, ashes, forever...*

Arcus had no doubt that “burst” was one of these words. However, just because a word was powerful didn’t mean it could constitute a spell all by itself. To use them, you needed to make your intentions clear and fit them into an incantation with other words—further complicating matters, using “burst” in a spell required words powerful enough to restrict its effects, else Arcus might find his life cut very short indeed.

“If I use this, I can’t use that...”

Introducing the appropriate limiter-words threatened to overextend the syntax and put Arcus right back where he started. If he was going to use them, he wanted a spell of no more than five words or phrases, each as short as possible. For that, he would have to resort to a special, creative technique: Repetition.

Arcus had determined in his research into spell structure that repeating a word amplified and focused its effect. It wasn’t complicated either: you just needed to use the same word consecutively several times in the incantation. Using the word three times in a row seemed to be the most effective method; any longer and diminishing returns kicked in hard. In some ways, its simplicity could be a magician’s downfall. It was tempting just to use any old word and repeat until it seemed to lose its meaning, but this was pointless. Keeping that in mind, Arcus put together an incantation.

“Embers. Embers. Embers. Burst.”

With that spell, Arcus pictured an explosion around thirty feet in front of him. Artglyphs rose up around him when he chanted the spell, which then flew to the spot he was concentrating on. Arcus waited for some kind of explosion where they gathered, but instead there was just a half-hearted crackling sound accompanied with puffs of black smoke.

“Dammit...”

Though Arcus cursed under his breath, his failure wasn't necessarily a bad thing. This much was normal; no spell resolved as intended on the first attempt. Making a spell was about troubleshooting incantations until a promising candidate stood out from the prototypes, then polishing it to a perfect finish. Anything that was too easy to come up with was bound to be useless in the majority of situations.

Arcus deduced that he tempered the power of “burst” too much on that attempt. Three uses of “ember” proved more powerful than a single utterance of “burst.” In the first place, he didn't really like the sound of the spell, so he would have ended up changing it even if it was a success. He decided to go with something different for his next attempt.

If using the same word too much doesn't work...

This time, he decided to go with words which would allow more of “burst's” power to come through.

“Embers. Embers. Gather and burst forth.”

As before, the Artglyphs rose up and flew to the spot Arcus was focused on. When they reached their destination, they were torn apart in a tiny explosion that was no more violent than a firecracker. There was no real fire or heat behind it, and offensively speaking, it was useless. It wouldn't even make the opponent flinch. Besides, Arcus already had a spell to make people jump—a cheeky little number he called “Bewildering Bubble.”

“I guess it wasn't too bad. I mean, it did kinda explode...”

He decided to scrap the repetition angle, since it seemed to be holding him back. He needed some way to hold back the full power of “burst,” of course,

but it was clear the combination of word choice and repetition was taking the legs out from under the spell; he doubted he would get a proper explosion out of it at this rate.

What should I try next?

Arcus had to start by keeping the effects and the power small, so that he could keep his spell under control. That meant adding several words to weaken the incantation. He decided to swap out the “embers” each for a different word—ideally ones that rolled off the tongue better. That also meant refining the image he had of the spell’s effects in his mind.

Unlike before, where the Artglyphs were scattered about, he imagined them joining together and forming a magic circle. That would be the precursor to the explosion. The circle would then contract to focus on the target before creating a centralized explosion. That circle would focus on only one person, but the explosion could catch up to four or five more. For the first trial, Arcus picked a nearby rock in the garden.

Let’s see how it goes!

Arcus opened his mouth, hoping this would be a success.

“Infinitesimal. Join. Focus. Burst gently!”

Artglyphs rose up around him and wove themselves into a ring before turning into a thicker circle. Aether overflowed from them like ink, drawing lines, circles, and shapes, which joined together to fill in the details of the magic circle. It contracted around the rock, like it was squeezing it tightly. It was just as Arcus imagined. Just when it looked like it couldn’t get any tighter, the magic circle crumpled in on itself.

Then, red and orange flames whooshed out of it, followed by a plume of black smoke. The shock wave of the explosion smashed into Arcus’s body all at once. For a second, all he could feel was heat. The rumble of the explosion suddenly vanished, replaced with a high-pitched ringing sound. The stench of smoke filled his nostrils, and in front of him lay a great gouge in the earth. The rock was smashed into pieces.



Arcus looked up to see fragments of Artglyphs flying into the air between reams of black smoke.

“It worked! It really worked!”

Arcus was absolutely elated. He wasn't in as much control of the explosion as he would have liked, but this was the closest result to what he envisioned so far. Three words and one short phrase. He never saw another spell this powerful with such a short incantation. Restricted by the length, the spell would never be anything more sophisticated than a powerful explosion, but that was enough. It wasn't as quick to resolve or as wide-ranging as Flamlarune, but it was certainly just as strong, if not stronger. It was very economical in terms of aether, too, thanks to its length.

Arcus could barely contain the excitement he felt at creating such a useful spell. The enduring process of trial and error made the results that much more satisfying when you got it right; here lay all the joy of spell development. From now on, he would focus on wringing the greatest possible effect from the shortest possible incantation.

He would prefer if the explosion wasn't so loud, though.

“Maybe I should make some earplugs using seals or something...” Arcus folded his arms and began to think, even as the joy from his success continued to pulse through him.

“Penny for your thoughts?”

“U-Uncle? What's the matter?”

Arcus spun around to find Craib grinning at him. It was a wider grin than he'd ever seen him don before. A chill ran up his spine. His instincts were warning him that Craib was mad. Very mad, though the question of *why* escaped him.

“Listen, it's great to see you havin' fun, but could you at least try not to do stuff like... that?”

“Stuff like... Oh.”

Craib was looking at the area of the garden where Arcus made his explosion. The ground was torn to shreds, rocks and soil scattered everywhere. From that

area alone, you would have a hard time knowing there was ever any lawn there at all.

“Oh, um! You see... I just...”

“Just think about where you’re explodin’ stuff next time, dumbass!”

Craib’s fist came down on Arcus’s head and began to grind into his scalp.

“Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

For all his magic-making efforts, he was rewarded with a healthy Dutch rub.

Noah Ingwayne left the capital, headed for Abend territory under Arcus’s orders. He was going to a certain training ground that Arcus was using for spell development. Normally, Arcus practiced in the Raytheft or the Abend garden, but since his little incident the other day, Craib forbade him from using his land like that again. Even before that, the enormous tree Arcus grew for his soma wine ruined any landscaping plans his uncle might have had. Even as laid back as he was, Craib snapped.

Once he calmed down, he gave Arcus permission to use the training grounds out in the Abend territory as much as he liked for his magical experiments. Though he called it a “training ground,” in reality it was just an area among the mountains and wastelands that no one ever visited. Those mountains, overgrown with trees, were so tranquil that it was easy to forget time even existed. You had to strain your ears to hear the song of wild birds or the blowing of the wind. Sunlight filtered through the leaves and branches to light up the ground, highlighting the rough gravel path travelers were supposed to take.

Noah and his fellow servant, Cazzy Guari, had left to fetch some food and water and were returning with their spoils.

“After all this time, do you not think you should start to speak properly?” Noah said.

“Ya think so? Thought I was gettin’ better at it.” Cazzy let out his peculiar cackle.

“No matter your thoughts, you have much room for improvement.”

“Oh yeah? Like where?”

Noah pulled out a notebook. “Yesterday, I counted four instances of inappropriate speech towards our master, and already two more today.”

“Why the heck are ya writin’ that down for?! Ya take this way too seriously!”

“Even if you were my superior at the Institute, my tenure as a butler is far longer than yours.”

Noah felt he had a duty to point out where Cazzy could improve. Even if his personality presented a hurdle to clear, speech and register was vital for a butler to get right. It wasn’t so bad with Arcus and Craib, because they knew what Cazzy was like, but if he spoke as roughly around others as he did to them, then it could reflect badly on both him and their master.

While Noah did feel he’d made some improvement, there were still times where he forgot himself completely. As an absolute minimum, he had to be sure Cazzy would speak politely to the nobles of other houses.

“I must implore you to be more careful. We must both support Master Arcus as best we can for the future.”

“‘We,’ huh?”

“Yes. We. Or are you dissatisfied with your post? Personally speaking, I think you would be hard pressed to find a more entertaining master.”

“I gotta agree with that! Kid’s insane!” Cazzy cackled again.

The former kidnapper complained about a lot of things, but rarely were they to do with Arcus. Noah guessed it was because Arcus wasn’t too different from most commoners, what with his cheeky streak and casual diction. He often wondered why that was, despite his upbringing, but the mysteries surrounding his master were already too many to count. In any case, Cazzy and Arcus spoke too much like old friends, and Noah thought it was high time that changed.

“Hey, be quiet a sec.”

“What’s wrong?” Noah whispered.

Cazzy bent forward slightly and craned his neck, looking around. Noah heard that Cazzy was a former peasant, and even went out into the hills and fields to hunt using his magic. He must have had a fine-tuned ear for unusual sounds in

the wilderness. Noah listened too, and soon he heard it: an intermittent crash that sounded like the banging of drums, followed by the clamor of wings from the panicked flight of birds and a vibration like something big crashing to the ground. Whatever those sounds were, they were *not* natural.

“Goodness me...”

“Sounds like a riot, but I know who’s behind it!”

“I have an awful feeling I know, too.”

The boy was a rolling catastrophe smartly packaged in an aristocrat’s clothes.

Cazzy let out his high-pitched cackle. “You’re dyin’ to know what he’s done, ain’t ya?”

“How could you tell?”

“It’s all over your face!”

Noah didn’t realize he was being so obvious.

“To be quite honest with you, I am much more curious about what he cast to make a war zone of Craib’s garden.”

“That’s why we had to come all the way out here, right? What’s the kid even want with a spell that can do so much damage?”

“I am sure he has some objection to Craib’s landscaping sensibilities. That mess was merely the first phase of his conspiracy against respectable horticulture.”

“And you’re tellin’ me / gotta show more respect to our master, huh?”

It didn’t take the pair long to reach ground zero. Arcus was practicing in a sizable clearing. Already expecting them, he walked up to them the moment they came into view.

“Hey, guys. Welcome back!”

“We have the food and water you asked for.”

“Thanks!” Arcus took the flask Noah handed to him, adding another “thanks” as he did so.

Noah could not fault him for his habits concerning proper shows of courtesy. Noah pointed out before that it wasn't normal for nobility to thank their servants for every little thing; Arcus replied that if someone did something for him, he was going to be grateful for it—his implication being that to do otherwise would be a breach of basic cause and effect.

Noah caught a whiff of smoke. He turned to look towards the trees and gasped. Despite the sound that fell from his lips at the destruction before him, he managed to regain his composure almost at once. He was inured to almost every conceivable surprise at this point.

Cazzy grimaced. Compared to Noah, he had two years less experience dealing with the boy. The trees in front of them had fallen down into the shape of a fan. That much wasn't worth raising an eyebrow. The real surprise came when he noticed that each tree had several small holes in it. Whether their trunks were gouged out intentionally or whether they had simply broken under an intense destructive force wasn't clear, but none of them were cleanly felled.

The Artglyphs still dissipating into the air made it obvious Arcus had used some sort of spell, but not one Noah recognized.

Aware his servants noticed them, Arcus glanced at the trees. "Oh, don't worry about that. I was just trying out some new stuff."

"Is that what that loud sound was before? Ya think ya could make a nice, peaceful spell for once?"

"I was just thinking this kind of combative magic'll come in handy eventually."

"I've seen undertakers less pessimistic than ya..." Cazzy groaned.

"I mean, this world isn't exactly peaceful, right?" Arcus pointed out calmly.

"Eh, can't argue with that..."

Neither could Noah. Although Lainur was not currently among the belligerents in any major war, there were always border skirmishes here and there that needed someone's attention. The Hans tribe in the east never went long without a sortie. In the south, the maritime kingdom of Granciel fought hard to bar Lainur from making too much progress in their seaward exploits. The Gillis Empire to the west took any chance it could to launch an invasion. It

was only Lainur's northern allies which kept up peaceful diplomatic relations. As things stood, a war could break out at any time.

That wasn't what piqued Noah's curiosity most about Arcus's words though. What did he mean by "this world?" What other worlds were there to weigh it against?

"So then, Master Arcus. Was the spell you cast just now a success?" Noah asked, noticing his master looked a little worried.

He already had an idea of the answer. When this boy's magic went just as he hoped, he would shout and jump and run around in joy, losing all sight of his surroundings. Instead, Arcus noticed Cazzy and Noah as soon as they arrived and greeted them calmly.

"No, it isn't quite there yet. I keep trying out different phrases and stuff, but I can't get it to work out how I want it to. The *bull let* keeps coming out too big. I dunno what's going wrong," Arcus muttered.

Bull let—that strange phrase tickled at Noah's memory of another spell of Arcus's devising: Black Armor, or something like that. Noah wasn't sure, but he must have been trying to launch the same kind of projectile with this new spell. Seeing the destruction Arcus caused, though, Noah couldn't help but think that any other magician would be over the moon with such a result.

"Do you not want your 'bull let' to be as big as possible?" Noah asked.

"Bigger means more power, yeah, but the *moss* changes how long I can keep control over the spell. I can't even keep it up for ten seconds like this. The incantation should be perfect, but it just flies out of control..."

"I beg your pardon, Master Arcus, but would you mind repeating that?"

"What? Oh, sure!" Arcus cleared his throat. "Well, y'know. When I use Black Armor, I make the shape of a *gum* with my hand, right? So this time I'm trying to make my arm like a *rye full*, but then the barrel gets too hot..."

"Ahem."

"Uh..."

Asking him to repeat himself only made things more complicated, and neither

Noah nor Cazzy were able to add anything of use.

Arcus grimaced as he realized they had no idea what he was talking about. “It’s hard to explain without any equivalent words... Hmm...”

Arcus fell into deep thought and started muttering, using even more incoherent language than before. It wasn’t unusual to see magicians talking to themselves like this. Hearing their own words out loud helped to focus their thoughts. The only problem was he seemed to be speaking nonsense.

Noah’s master often used unnatural-sounding words that he never heard either in Lainur’s tongue or in the Elder Tongue. Those words seemed to relate to theories and phenomena he had no point of reference for, which only baffled Noah further. He exchanged a glance with Cazzy, who shrugged his shoulders and shook his head as always. They were both utterly clueless. It was just like in the Holy Tower when Arcus was explaining his One Small Step spell. He really had to get down to the basics for Noah and Cazzy to even have an inkling of how it worked.

“So, what you’re sayin’ is that ya don’t want it to be too strong?” Cazzy asked.

“Yeah, because it makes my arm too heavy. I don’t want it to be powerful as much as I want to be able to fire rapidly. I’ve still got enough aether, so I’ll show you.”

“Neverending, penetrating torrent of evil. The dark blinking of soapberry and its crimson tide after the downpour. It runs and turns according to nature’s will. Heat never cool, and know not your target. Pierce the soldiers’ ears and drown out their battle cries. Run an incessant rampage.”

“Spinning Barrel.”

Artglyphs floated in front of Arcus before gathering together and forming several magic circles in midair. Arcus put his right arm through them, at which point they contracted until they constricted it like manacles. The magic circles in place, Arcus repositioned his arm so that it pointed straight ahead. The circles began to spin, gathering speed until they blurred beyond recognition.

“Volley.”

The air screeched, and several black lumps launched from his arm at a

horrifying speed. The lumps flew in great numbers at unpredictable intervals. The only word Noah could think of to describe that movement was “scattering,” but it wasn’t enough to describe the force with which those projectiles flew. Unlike Arcus’s Black “Armor,” where the attack flew too fast for the eye to see, these were at least visible, but they still moved too quickly to dodge reliably. The magic stones flew straight, as if they were pulled by invisible strings. They blew fist-sized holes in the trees in their path. Some were uprooted, while the thicker trees looked like they had been gnawed at by a million caterpillars. Any human standing in front of Arcus would have no escape.

It looked like a spell to be used on multiple targets. Arcus needed only to launch his spell, and even a whole crowd in front of him would end up like those trees. A chill ran down Noah’s spine. What concerned him more than the spell’s power was its uniqueness. Just like his Black “Armor,” this spell was unlike any other Noah could think of.

Just then, Arcus jerked his hand back, as if he touched something incredibly hot.

“Ouch! I really need to make the *bull lets* smaller... That’s why I can’t keep it up for long. I guess trying to make magic copy *sigh ants* isn’t as easy as I thought,” Arcus muttered, shaking his hand in the air to cool it off.

Noah wasn’t surprised the spell was such a burden on his arm, although he didn’t understand where Arcus came up with the idea to launch it from his own body like that in the first place.

“How the heck does he come up with this creepy stuff?” Cazzy muttered.

“I must agree. Master Arcus, might you share with us what you are basing this spell on?”

There were already several spells based on projectile weapons. Bows, slingshots, catapults, javelins... but none of those weapons could launch attacks as rapidly and mercilessly as what they just witnessed. To make your own spells, it was important to work from some kind of conceptual raw material—something solid to aid your imagination of how the spell was going to work; otherwise the risk of failure shot up. As much as Noah tried, he couldn’t think of what Arcus’s starting point might be.

“I based it on a *mash-sheen gum*.”

As usual, his answer didn't help. It was as though he was talking about something otherworldly, impossible as it seemed. The very first line of *The Birth of Heaven and Earth*, one of the Ancient Chronicles, laid out that “*Everything that exists in this world was born from words*.” Language was the starting point for everything. Mountains, seas, skies, and earth... everything came from the Artglyphs which flew out from Molten Reason, the beginning of creation.

If language was the basis for everything, then conversely everything in the world could be described with the words that already existed. However, Arcus's spell didn't seem to follow this rule, which meant...

“I'm sorry guys, but I don't think I can really explain what I based this spell on.”

I thought not...

“Why not?” Noah pressed.

“Well...” Arcus paused and lowered his voice. “Because it's based on something that doesn't exist in this world.”

Part 3: The Elf's Wish Today, there was a meeting in Lainur's castle. It was being held in the Firefly Garden, one of the gardens reserved for the king's private use. At night, the Sol Glasses illuminated the garden and its many flowers beautifully, lighting them up just like blue, twinkling fireflies. The first of this meeting's attendants was the master of the castle himself, King Shinlu Crosellode.

His guest was a young woman, only just past twenty. She had wavy, chestnut-blond hair; her violet eyes had a bewitching sparkle to them, as if they were made of polished amethyst. Her skin was white as the first snow in her northern homeland. She wore a black military uniform.

At her age, she would have been unfit for a direct audience with the king if not for her status. She was Meifa Darnénes, a consul from the Northern Confederation, which presided over the Cross Mountain Range bordering Lainur.

Meifa took a sip from her teacup. "I hear you've bolstered your kingdom's magic forces lately."

Her voice was sweet and smoky, but her tone was stiff; she felt suffocated in the king's presence.

Shinlu didn't raise an eyebrow at the hint of accusation to her statement. "That's right; it's all thanks to the hard work of our country's magicians. I really am blessed to be king to such diligent citizens."

"I wouldn't expect it from any other nation, that's for sure. You are always one step—if not two—ahead of us when it comes to magic. But," she added

sourly, “I am deathly curious to know how exactly you managed it. While other powerful nations struggle to give their magicians an edge, you have improved yours in leaps and bounds. There must be something behind it.”

“What? You don’t think it’s possible they just worked really, *really* hard?”

“I find it doubtful. Short of working your magicians day and night or beating them into shape more viciously than has ever been seen in recorded history, I fail to see how you could produce your results. You understand where I’m coming from, don’t you?”

“U-Uh, I guess...” Shinlu tried desperately to play dumb, but the sharp glint in Meifa’s gaze was making it difficult.

Even so, he refused to let her wheedle out the truth from him. He curled his lips into an intentionally vague smile.

Meifa wasn’t about to give up. “I heard a very interesting rumor on my way here, you know.”

“Really? I’d love to hear it.”

“Shinlu Crosellode has a new tool to power up his magicians. It’s so effective that the army’s magicians have grown stronger practically overnight!”

“Oh, come on. You know the type, don’t you? So in denial about the absolute power of my magicians that they insist it comes down to a ‘tool’ or ‘trick.’ Those rumors are completely unfounded.”

“They say where there’s smoke, there’s fire... Where did that phrase come from, again?”

“One of the fables in *The Spiritual Age*. The Mistletoe Knight, Floam, and Saint Astia pursued a band of looters and only found them when they followed a far-ranging rumor. The phrase was inspired by that story.”

“Impressive. A story with two of the three sages.”

“Anyway, I find it hard to believe such sour-grapes conspiracy theories would give a Confederate consul so much pause for thought. I didn’t take you for the gullible type.”

“I mentioned it to you precisely because I have reason to believe in its

credibility.”

“Funny. In my experience the rumors that spread among commoners tend to be the more fantastical ones.” Shinlu laughed.

Meifa continued, her voice low. “You don’t deny the sudden increase in your magicians’ power, though, do you?”

“Nope. That’s the one part the rumors got right.”

“I see. Now, our nations are allies, yes? We both want to hold the line against the Empire’s aggression. Don’t you think that sharing any helpful tools you may or may not have is in our best interest?”

“I guess so. If you like, you’re welcome to come and see some of our drills along with your magical companions. It’s just like you said: we’re allies. I’m happy to cooperate fully with the Confederation.”

Meifa narrowed her eyes, wondering what had turned him so eager. She could understand why Shinlu would want to keep his secret, especially since Lainur was an international leader in the field of magical innovation. Until the official announcement, it was possible he didn’t even want his allies knowing about it.

Just because she understood didn’t mean she was happy about it.

It had been two years since the aethometer’s announcement. While much changed, one of the biggest changes was in the invention’s production: namely, that there was now a system allowing it to be manufactured on a much larger scale than before. Until now, aethometers were produced by a small team of three: Arcus, Noah, and Cazzy, using their tempered aether. Exposing Sorcerer’s Silver to that aether would transform it into a special kind of “tempered silver.” The creator would then move the silver into a sealed glass tube. Removing the air from the tube would result in a completed aethometer, but this final step was no easy task. The process itself wasn’t difficult; it was making sure the device remained accurate that was tricky. Allowing even the slightest inaccuracy would leave the aethometer useless. Each successful aethometer created around three or four failed attempts, making the production very wasteful.

With that method, Arcus would never be able to answer the crown's request, so he was forced to devise a way to increase his output. He had perfected his aether tempering technique long ago and decided he wouldn't mind teaching it to a select few. He asked the Guild to pick out a number of trustworthy magicians for him to contract and train. Fearing that the creation process of the aethometer might leak, Arcus made sure that each contractor was trained and assigned to a single step in its creation, and he even had each step carried out in a separate location to avoid any one person learning too much.

He remembered a certain grumpy-faced magician's objection.

"Arcus Raytheft. Is this really necessary? It seems like a waste of money if you ask me."

"Guildmaster, His Majesty has asked that I carry out the aethometer's production as securely and secretly as possible, and I don't intend to take any risks. Even under these conditions, if one of my magicians were to be rehired or kidnapped, there's still a chance the production process could leak."

"At this rate, your workers will think you do not trust them. They might start resenting you."

Arcus couldn't argue with that. The magicians and workers he hired were handpicked from the very top of their fields. Anyone would think he was being overly suspicious, but it was a small price to pay for the reduced chance of leaks. It was better to go overboard than to do too little.

"This is more than a matter of trusting them, Guildmaster. I don't doubt that the information would make its way out somehow if I let my guard down."

"Do you really believe so?"

"Anything which has a chance of happening eventually does. Anything with a chance of failure fails, given time. It's exactly like all those defective aethometers we produce. It's always only a matter of time. If I don't put in place the strictest of measures, the process will leak."

"That's certainly an interesting way of seeing things..."

Murphy's Law gave Godwald pause. Personally, Arcus thought the Guildmaster wasn't worried enough, but since most magical research was dealt

with and spoken about in code, he likely didn't see why further measures than that were necessary. Despite the precision the aethometer's production demanded, compared to casting spells and making magic, the process itself was fairly simple. If you knew how it worked, you only needed a basic knowledge and command of magic to recreate it—making it all the more likely to be leaked.

With the Guildmaster persuaded and the magicians capable of producing tempered silver, Arcus finalized the new production line, centralized in the Guild's grounds. With the new divided labor system, he expected his involvement to decrease opening up a lot more free time. Unfortunately, reality was rarely so kind.

"*Why?!*" Arcus cried out, buried under mountains of documents in one room of the Abend estate.

His dreams of any respite were crushed under piles and piles of forms, files, and papers. They were all reports and requests to do with the aethometer and its role in creating spells and practicing magic. They came in like clockwork, swamping the poor twelve-year-old with work.

"This isn't fair, right? It's not fair!"

Noah remained unmoved as he answered. "This much is perfectly normal. I daresay it was your expectations which were unfair."

"My expectations?! I'm only twelve, you know! I'm just a kid! Shouldn't I be outside frolicking or something?!"

"You claim to be a child, yet you rarely ever act like one."

"What? Is that how you're gonna speak to your master? And stop looking at me like *I'm* the crazy one!"

Cazzy frowned. "Ain't ya the one always tellin' us to stop treatin' ya like a baby?"

"Forget about that now. Haven't you guys ever heard of child labor laws? I oughta report this. Why can't you guys just let me out to play or something?"

"Spoutin' nonsense words again?"

Noah ignored Arcus's outburst, instead piling more papers onto the desk. "Master Arcus. Perhaps you should stop talking and start working? Otherwise you shall never finish. This is all a result of your invention, so you ought to take responsibility and see that this work is done."

"I'd love to, but my motivation's gone out the window. Ugh..."

"In that case, I shall take care of these..."

"Really?! Noah, you're a lifesaver! Thanks!"

"However, you have to deal with this." Noah picked up a thick file and a bundle of papers.

Cazzy stuck his tongue out as though he had just swallowed a particularly bitter pill. "The heck?! There's more?!"

"Indeed. These arrived this morning. A new unit wishes to use the aethometer and has asked for instructions on its use and any precautions they need to take. Of course, we already have a document containing that information; it just needs to be transcribed."

"Ugh. 'N' how many copies do we need?"

"We shouldn't need to make more than a hundred if we account for spares."

"Gimme a break..."

"It is simply a matter of copying them out. What is so difficult about that?" Noah rearranged the position of the monocle over his eye, but otherwise his face didn't even twitch.

Cazzy glared at Noah. "If ya got any more surprise work like this in store, ya better tell me 'bout it now or I'm gonna snap, ya demon!"

"Mind your language. A simple increase in work should not be worth an affront to the twin phantoms."

"The real demons are the guys wasting my time with all this crap!" Arcus said.

Cazzy let out a high-pitched cackle. "See, even the kid's doin' it! Listen, boss, ya know that usually 'demons' are supposed to be the kinda guys who destroy the world an' all that, not just send ya paperwork!"

“Well, they’re destroying *my* world!” Arcus glared at Cazzy with everything he could muster.

Cazzy threw his hands up. “Of course, sir! They’re all demons, sir!”

“Now that you two have settled down, I shall prepare your portion of the work, Cazzy.”

“C’mon, yer sayin’ that like I wasn’t gonna help all along!”

Tired of pushing back, Arcus and Cazzy resigned themselves to the work.

“Could you pass me that stack of papers, Cazzy?” Arcus said.

“What, all that? Ya know ya can leave a lot of this to us, right?”

“Sure, I know that. But watch this first.” Arcus put the papers and documents down and opened his mouth again.

“Read the left and copy the right. Copy with a hand more practiced than the most excellent of transcribers. Not a character out of place, not a character improved. The single glow of a mysterious light. No tricks, no deceptions, and no illusions. Behold the perfect work of these well-intentioned hands.”

Perfect Copywrite. A spell designed to replicate writing from one page on another.

Artglyphs wrapped themselves around both of Arcus’s hands. He placed his left hand on the pile to be copied and the right on the blank sheets of paper. He muttered “copy” in the Elder Tongue, causing his right hand to flash once. When the light was gone, the once-blank sheets under his hand displayed text identical to the sheets on the left.

“Well?”

“My goodness...”

“Whoa...”

Both his servants stared at him, wide-eyed. They likely never even considered using magic in this way. More precisely, they had never seen text being copied nigh-instantly like that, so it wasn’t something their imaginations had room for.

Noah slammed his hands on the desk and leaned forward, his eyes sparkling

with interest. “Master Arcus! Tell me more about that spell!”

Arcus grinned. “This is a photocopier spell I came up with in secret. It prints perfect copies of any page, whether it’s got words or pictures on. With this, I’m more powerful than the entire world’s printing presses put together!”

Arcus threw his head back and let out a hearty, sinister laugh. Noah and Cazzy quickly turned to each other and lowered their voices.

“Master Arcus seems to be in a particularly good mood today.”

“Nah, I think he’s just tired. Or lost his mind from all this paperwork.”

Though Arcus caught them whispering to each other, he didn’t care what they said. He had to be able to laugh and have fun with this, or the pressure of all this work would crush him.

“Take a look! There’s not a letter missing or out of place! Plus, it barely uses any aether at all. Even a common magician could use it!”

“It is quite something.”

“I know, right? Even if I had to make a billion copies, I could do it just like that!” Arcus said, snapping his fingers.

“How d’ya keep comin’ up with all these crazy new ideas? Ya only just started feelin’ the burn from this paperwork, and ya already know how to deal with it so quick.”

“It’s because I know what true convenience looks like.”

“Whaddya mean?”

“Huh? Well, you know.”

“I keep tellin’ ya, I don’t! But whatever...”

“As usual,” said Noah, “I would like you to explain *why* you didn’t tell us about this spell sooner! I hope you have a reasonable explanation, because I am not letting you go until I am satisfied!”

“It’s ’cause I forgot to, of course.”

“Oh? That’s odd, considering how powerful your memory normally tends to be.”

“Cause I only remember certain stuff! Anyway! Isn't this the greatest thing you've ever seen?! Isn't this a miracle of modern civilization?! Photocopiers are the best thing ever! I'm gonna have this stuff done in like, two seconds!”

The spell wasn't a one-and-done thing. He could keep plugging away, right hand flashing and left hand transcribing, for minutes at a time. A hundred copies was a walk in the park, even for someone with Arcus's aether stocks. At last, the final copy was finished.

“I'm done, Noah! I'm done!”

“Good work. Now...”

“Now nothing! You're like, the best butler ever, but I know that demonic light in your eye! I know what you're gonna say!”

“I beg your pardon?”

“I'm *done* for the day! I'm outta aether, okay? So I'm gonna go on break!” Without waiting for a response, Arcus leaped up from his chair and dashed out of the room and the estate as fast as his legs would carry him.

“I was only going to offer him a cup of tea...” Noah said after an awkward pause.

“You're kiddin'?”

“Perhaps.” Noah smiled unnervingly.

“Sometimes I dunno if you're a butler or a comedian...” Cazzy grimaced.

Having escaped Noah's dastardly clutches, Arcus arrived at a certain park in the capital. He didn't have any business here; it was just the first place he thought to run off to. Going back to the Raytheft place meant he might bump into his parents, and he wasn't a fan of sitting in cafés by himself either.

Though he ended up in the park, there weren't many people about, and taking a walk in such a deserted place felt kind of sad. It was strange, but perhaps it was due to the time of day. This place was usually filled with children playing and people stretching their legs on the footpaths. Even the weather was looking gloomy, and there was an unpleasant, damp smell in the air, as if it were about to rain. It didn't look like Arcus would be able to stick around for

long.

“Where do I go now?”

He left in such a hurry that he didn’t really have anything with him except his dark blue cloak, hat, and sword. He didn’t have the bag he kept his study materials in either, leaving him with very little he could actually do to pass the time. Taking a break now wouldn’t do anything to reduce his workload. He considered if he should just head back.

Just then, he heard a voice from behind him.

“Hey!”

Arcus couldn’t tell if it was a boy or a girl who spoke, but it was definitely a child.

“Hey!”

It was obvious that whoever it was wanted him to turn around, because when he didn’t, they began to tug on his sleeve.

“What are—” Arcus began, but then he froze in shock.

He couldn’t remember ever being so startled before. The figure behind him wore an oversized blue robe with the hood drawn. They were around the same height as him. A steel lantern hung from their hip. The bottom of the robe dragged across the ground, and the sleeves were so long they hung over their hands. That wasn’t what surprised Arcus most. Even though he was facing them head on, he couldn’t see their face. It wasn’t that the hood covered it; where the figure’s face was supposed to be, there was just a dark space. It was like he was staring into a bottomless abyss. As he kept staring, eventually two yellow eyes appeared and narrowed, as if they were smiling at him.

“Hello!”

“H-Hi...” Arcus replied automatically.



His head was a jumble of incomplete thoughts, but the mysterious figure didn't seem concerned in the least. They raised up both arms, the sleeves draping, apparently looking for a handshake.

"Nice to meet you!"

Arcus stared.

"You... don't think it's nice for us to meet?"

Arcus didn't know how to react. The yellow eyes in the dark hood turned sadly to the ground. Overcome with a sudden guilt, Arcus stuck out his hand.

"I-It *is* nice to meet you!"

"Yay!" The figure grabbed his hand between its sleeves and shook it enthusiastically up and down as the smile returned to its eyes.

"S-So, uh... what... I mean, *who* are you?" Arcus finally asked.

Whatever they were, he doubted they were human. From the way they moved to the way the robe hung at rest, he got the impression that there was no body to speak of beneath the flowing cloth. It wasn't just its appearance either; everything about it gave Arcus an uncanny feeling. At least it didn't seem dangerous.

"My name is Gown! You know me, right?"

"Gown? Uh, you mean..."

"Yeah! You got it!" Gown nodded.

It wasn't the first time Arcus had come across that name. "Gown" was a name as ubiquitous as the Twin Phantoms—a supernatural being, the Grave Sprite. He was first mentioned in the second Ancient Chronicle, *The Spiritual Age*, and from there disseminated into folklore. He was said to be immortal, forever patrolling cemeteries at night and grieving the dead. He offered them flowers and songs to keep them at peace and stop them from unearthing themselves. Gown was also known as a tomb guardian and a watchman of the underworld.

Despite the propagation of Sol Glasses widely abolishing darkness in public places, Gown was still widely spoken of. He still watered the plants around

graveyards and still picked flowers to lay at tombstones. He still comforted the dead with his song. He carried on his work in the light of day, sitting on cemetery benches and basking in the warm sun. Some descriptions of Gown made him a sort of bogeyman, but most people saw him as a figure to be respected.

This was Arcus's first encounter with a figure from legend. He could count the cemeteries he'd been to on one hand, so he had no reason to believe he would bump into the sprite itself, nor that it would be so friendly. He suddenly realized he hadn't introduced himself yet.

"My name is—"

"Arcus! Arcus Raytheft, right?"

Arcus paused. "How did you know?"

"Because you're Arcus!"

"That doesn't make sense!"

"But that's how I know!"

"But it..."

Gown genuinely didn't seem to realize what was wrong with his answer. Even if Arcus asked again, he could only see this conversation looping back to where they'd started. He decided just to put it down to Gown's supernatural insight.

"So, uh, what are you doing here, Gown? You seem a little far from your usual haunts."

"Yeah! I had to come to this park instead today!"

"You mean something's up?"

"Yeah! Yeah, and that's why I came to see you, Arcus!"

It's here to see me specifically? Why?

"I wanna ask you something, Arcus!"

"Sure, go ahead."

"Thanks! A little bit ago, there was a group of humans that threatened our

promise! I want you to help me catch them!”

“Your promise?”

“Yeah! They dug up an old graveyard in the north and stole the bodies!”

“The north? North of the capital or north of Lainur?”

“No! More north than that! In Alnorsace!”

“Al... You mean the Northern Confederation?”

“Yeah!”

The Northern Confederation was made up of several smaller states separating Lainur from the mountains. As a neighboring country, it naturally engaged in small territorial scuffles with the kingdom, and sometimes relations would sour somewhat. So far they’d avoided any large-scale struggle, for historical reasons bound up in one particular spot on the border that were too intricate for Arcus to reflect on in the moment. On average, it was one of Lainur’s allies.

Was Gown saying he chased the tomb robbers out of Alnorsace? Arcus wasn’t sure; it wasn’t uncommon for beings of his caliber to possess a degree of omnipresence.

“So how come they were grave-robbing?”

“I dunno! But I don’t like it! It’s untidy and disrespectful!”

“And you chased them here?”

Gown nodded. In *The Spiritual Age*, it was said that Gown sent a pack of hunting dogs to chase grave robbers to the very ends of the world in order to punish them.

“But why are you here, then? Can’t you send your hounds like in the story?”

“This is more serious than that! Those guys made a very evil herb that uses the bones of the dead!”

“An evil herb?”

“Yeah!”

Arcus frowned thoughtfully. “You mean like cannabis or something? Or

something that turns people into zombies?”

“Huh? No! It makes you into a monster!”

“A-A monster?” Arcus’s eyes widened.

Monsters came in many forms. What exactly was Gown talking about?

“What about the promise you mentioned?”

“Oh! That’s a promise us elves made with Chain and Wedge years and years and *years* ago!”

“Huh?”

“It was an important promise we made that must never be broken! We have to do all we can to make sure life carries on in the world! That’s why anyone who interferes has to be punished!”

“Whoa...”

Life in all forms ceasing to exist was a scary thought, but what really sent a shiver down Arcus’s spine was the tone of Gown’s voice when he spoke about punishment.

“I think those bad guys found something written by someone who lived long, long ago! And now they’re using it to do evil stuff!”

“I never knew you could make herbs from dead bodies...”

“It’s not just any bodies! They must have been buried first!”

“Huh? Why does that matter?”

“It’s easier to attach hex to a body that’s been dug up!”

When a spell was cast, the leftover Artglyphs shattered into pieces and became hex. It was said that this leftover power led to the birth of demons. Though it didn’t sound like these ne’er-do-wells wanted to sire any demons, their activities still sounded incredibly dangerous.

“So will you help?” Gown pressed.

“Uh...”

“You won’t?”

“Well...”

“Aww...” Gown’s shoulders slumped.

Seeing his head drooping and his eyes downcast, Arcus couldn’t help but feel a stab of compassion in his chest. Thinking about it, he didn’t have a good reason to refuse. In this world, phantoms and elves were creatures to be revered by all living things. They protected human life long ago and even now supported it from the shadows. One of them sought Arcus out specifically to ask for his help. This was about more than his own wants and goals. As an inhabitant of this world, he owed elvenkind a great deal.

“All right. I’ll help.”

“Really? Yahoo! Thanks a bunch!” Gown grabbed his hand again and shook it eagerly up and down.

“I still wanna know why you need my help in the first place, though.”

If the stories were to be believed, supernatural creatures like him held incredible power. Gown ought to have been far more powerful than any human, and Arcus wasn’t sure why he couldn’t rely on his Phantom Pack.

“Well, we gotta get rid of all the herbs they made! And they set their cats on me!”

“Cats? Oh, right.”

Thinking back, a passage in *The Spiritual Age* described Gown’s fear of cats. Even in the man’s world, fairy tales and urban legends spoke of otherwise powerful creatures that feared small animals for whatever reason. A couple of cats should have been no problem for Gown to deal with, but Arcus didn’t know enough about elves to push it.

“That doesn’t explain why you can’t send the pack.”

“Well, ’cause I don’t want the cats to get hurt...”

Gown never was a creature to achieve his goals by “any means possible.”

“I don’t want them to send their cats after me again, so I decided to ask someone else for help!”

“I see. But why did you pick me? There are plenty of trustworthy magicians around, and I’m just a kid.”

“I picked you ‘cause you’re Arcus!”

“That doesn’t explain anything.”

“But that’s why I picked you!”

Given its alien logic, Arcus didn’t see this line of questioning going anywhere. Then again, perhaps it was Arcus who was being unreasonable...

“I’ll spend the rest of the day looking for the perpetrators! Catch you later!”

His compact with Arcus set, Gown vanished from the park, the light of his lantern fading last. Arcus didn’t get the chance to ask any more questions. He had no idea who they were searching for or what that group’s goal was. He wasn’t even sure what he was supposed to be doing in the meantime, so he settled on just waiting for now.

The next day, Arcus thought about going for a walk through the cemetery. Gown never mentioned where they should meet up, but the graveyard seemed a likely candidate. There were some chores he wanted to finish at the Raytheft estate first, though.

“Master Arcus,” came a voice at the door.

“Oh hi, Noah. What’s up?”

“You have a... peculiar visitor.”

“Peculiar?”

“Indeed. That is what I have been told.”

“By who?” Arcus asked.

“The maid who went to greet this visitor. She seemed particularly perplexed. Have you perhaps found a new friend? One of... unorthodox nature?”

“Huh. I guess you could say that...”

An “unorthodox” friend. Only one girl came to mind. It’s not like there were other friends it might have been. She had never come to the Raytheft estate, and she wasn’t so odd as to perplex on first contact, so it was in a state of

puzzlement that Arcus went to see who this mysterious visitor was, with Noah in tow. It was just as they came down the stairs that Arcus spotted Gown in the entrance hall, waving an oversized sleeve.

“Whoa...”

“Arcus!”

The maid gave Arcus a troubled expression, as though she had no idea how to deal with their fae guest. Unwitting of her confusion, Gown kept waving, his eyes sparkling with joy.

“Goodness me,” Noah murmured, half in exasperation and half in amusement. It was a tone Arcus was used to.

Arcus signaled to the maid that she could stand down and walked up to Gown.

“Why are you at my house?”

“Huh? I told you yesterday I was gonna come and see you!”

“I know, but I didn’t think you’d just stroll into my house like that.”

As Arcus sighed, Gown slipped past him and offered a long sleeve to Noah.
“Hello, Noah!”

“Good day, Master Gown. It’s been quite a while.”

“You’re so tall now! I couldn’t even touch your head if I jumped!”

Their handshake finished, Gown reached up to pat Noah on the head, compelling him to stoop. Arcus couldn’t help wondering where they met before. It was only then that Cazzy arrived.

“Cazzy!” Gown called.

Arcus was less surprised that Gown recognized his other servant. Cazzy’s past was mired in misdeeds; it seemed fitting that he’d spent more than his share of time on Gown’s territory.

“What on earth is going on here?” a disgruntled voice asked from behind the group.

Joshua was making his way down the hall.

He had to show up now, huh?

Joshua's face twisted into its usual contemptuous scowl as he looked at Arcus.

"Hello, Joshua!" Gown called cheerfully.

"O-Oh. Hello..."

Joshua knew Gown, too? He looked perplexed to see the elf in his house, but nevertheless returned his enthusiastic handshake. Once he was done being polite, he turned his sharp gaze on Arcus.

"What nonsense are you up to inside *my* house?"

"I'm not doing anything!"

"Then how do you explain this ruckus?" Joshua shouted.

Arcus couldn't even breathe in his presence without him accusing him of something. Cazzy and Noah were silent, on their master's orders not to react in the midst of one of Joshua's tempers. If they raised objections or got into an argument with Joshua, then they might be barred from the estate.

A voice spoke up from Arcus's side. "How come you're so mad?"

"Hm?"

"How come you're so mad at Arcus, Joshua?" Gown asked again. "He hasn't done anything wrong!"

"W-Well..."

"Arcus is gonna help me with something! Is he not allowed?" Gown stepped forward, causing Joshua to take a step back.

Gown was only the height of a child, but he intimidated Joshua. His upbeat demeanor fell away, a prickly tension rising in its place. It would have made Arcus lose his nerve, too. Elves belonged to a higher order of life; the years of work Joshua put in to earn his high-ranking title meant nothing in the face of a sublime being.

"Are you mad 'cause he's gonna help me?"

"No."

“Are you mad ’cause *I’m* asking for his help?”

“N-Not at all.”

“So how come you’re so mad? I don’t get it! Tell me!”

“I’m... very sorry.”

Joshua’s apology was a clear surrender. Gown clearly wasn’t one to beat around the bush—his questions were plain and fair, as a child’s wisest questions are, and they afforded Joshua no room for excuses.

“Can I take Arcus with me, then?”

“Be my guest...”

“Yay!” Gown’s eyes lit up, and he began to bob away, his long robe dragging along the floor behind him.

Arcus had no choice but to follow, but even as he turned around, he could feel that hateful glare on his back.

“You know what will happen if you dare do anything to bring shame on the Raytheft name, don’t you, Arcus?”

“I won’t be doing anything like that. Noah, Cazzy, do you mind finishing up?”

Leaving his servants to finish their work with the aethometer, Arcus followed Gown out of the Raytheft estate.

“Gown, Gown, the Grave Sprite parades the garden of endless sleep:

by lantern-light, for ghosts it sings, for them a peaceful slumber brings, by lyric bound to buried stay and never to their hearths should stray, Secured, the bound ’twixt life and death, Gown watches after our last breath.”

Lainur’s people learned Gown’s praise-song as children; for many, it was their sole point of reference. The lyrics made him sound like a dignified creature, and yet...

“Look! A butterfly! Here, butterfly!”

Gown stretched out an oversized sleeve as he tottered after the object of his attention. He looked like a child taking its first steps; he’d been like this since he left the estate. Arcus walked along the flowerbeds beside the road, no longer

sure whether they were on an important errand or taking a leisurely stroll. Passing pedestrians' reactions to the elf varied. Some stared at his strange outfit and absent face. Those who recognized him bowed their heads or gave him words of thanks. For the most part, Gown was too intent on chasing that butterfly to pay them any attention; Arcus was grateful that they were saving time, given that he wasn't stopping to greet anyone.

"Here, butterfly, butterfly!"

Eventually the small insect landed on Gown's sleeve. He studied it intently for a spell before his eyes lit up and he released it into the air.

"Thanks for before," Arcus said.

"You mean with Joshua?"

"Yeah." Arcus nodded.

He was so used to taking the full brunt of the viscount's anger that he felt genuinely lighter having someone stand up for him.

Gown turned his gaze away. "Joshua hates you, doesn't he?"

"Yeah. I don't really get why, though."

"As long as people have feelings, there's always gonna be love and hate, and feelings always get in the way of clear thinking. It's just the way things are."

He was right. All you could do was acknowledge the weight of your strong feelings as your membership dues to the human race.

"I'm sorry, Arcus."

"Oh... Thanks."

Gown tottered up to Arcus and gave him a gentle pat on the head. It felt like an incredibly kind and tender gesture, but that might have been because Arcus was used to Craib's overly rough tousling. Gown's long sleeve got in the way of Arcus's face, but that just added to the charm of it all.

"Arcus!" Suddenly, a voice called his name from behind, making him jump.

"Gah!"

Taking a few deep breaths to steady his heart, Arcus turned to find a girl

standing there. It was Sue, his study partner. They had no plans to meet today, so she must have spotted him by coincidence.

Sue had long black hair and blue eyes with a faint upward slant that reminded Arcus of a cat's eyes. Her clothing was light beneath her white cloak, and her appearance was as tidy as ever. Arcus knew she always took the time to groom herself before heading outside. Lately, she had taken to wearing a sword on her hip.

"Don't sneak up on me like that! I thought I was gonna have a heart attack."

"It's your fault for keeping your guard down! Imagine if I was an assassin! You'd be dead meat by now!"

"Nah, I would've felt your bloodlust first."

"Oh! I guess so."

"Yeah..."

She accepted his defense too easily, given that palpable bloodlust was a grave fact of life.

"So, what are you doing today?" Sue asked.

"I've got, uh...an errand to run." Arcus glanced at Gown.

Sue followed his gaze. "Who's—eep!"

Her eyes widened when she caught sight of the elf. Arcus remembered having the same sort of reaction in his first encounter. Her face stiffened as she stared into the bottomless dark within Gown's hood.

"This is Gown," Arcus said. "Y'know, the Grave Sprite."

"G-Gown? Th-This is Gown? Gown like...from that song?"

Arcus nodded, and Gown walked up to her.

"Hello!"

"H-Hi..." Despite her confusion, Sue didn't forget her manners.

Gown shook her hand as enthusiastically as he had Arcus's.

"My name is Gown! And you're..." Gown paused, tilting his head from one

side to the other in confusion. He should know her name like he did everyone else's, but he was hesitating. "What should I call you?"

"Oh, um... just Sue is fine."

"Sue! Okay! Sue!"

"So why are you here with Arcus? I thought you only hang around graveyards."

"I have lots of stuff I gotta do, and Arcus said he'll help me!"

"What kind of help?" Sue glanced back at Arcus.

He opened his mouth to explain the situation when there was another voice from behind them. This one had a timid tone to it.

"Brother?"

Arcus turned. There was another girl there, this one with his silver hair and crimson eyes.

"Lecia? What are you—"

Arcus spotted Charlotte Cremelia beside her, with her golden-brown hair and amber eyes. She was still a little taller than Arcus. Her clothing was casual like Sue's, but it gave off an air of luxury quality with a price tag to match. She'd accessorized in white and red, but what stood out most was the rapier on her hip. As the count's daughter and the heir to the house that founded the kingdom's rapier fencing style, appearances were of the utmost importance. The rapier's sheath and handle were beautifully decorated—a masterwork of swordsmithing.

Charlotte curtsied. "It is a pleasure to see you again, Arcus."

"It has been a long time, Lady Charlotte." Arcus responded with a quick bow.

Their difference in status meant it wasn't as easy for Arcus to meet with Charlotte as Sue. At the moment, she seemed to be going somewhere with Lecia. Arcus had heard they often went to the capitol together.

"Lady Susia, is that you?" Charlotte asked, glancing at the girl.

"It is lovely to see you again, Charlotte."

“The pleasure is all mine.” Charlotte stepped up to Sue and curtsayed.

“You each know Lady Charlotte?” Arcus asked, surprised to hear Sue speaking so formally.

“Yeah. Charlotte’s at the Institute with me.”

“I was not expecting you to know Lady Susia, Arcus.”

“We have studied magic together for a long time,” Arcus explained.

“Is Lady Susia the friend you always talk about?” Lecia asked.

“Yeah.” Arcus turned to Charlotte. “May I ask why you address Sue so respectfully, My Lady?”

Sue let out a self-conscious giggle under Arcus’s glance.

“Do you mean to say you haven’t heard of Lady Susia?” Charlotte asked.

“No, My Lady. She hasn’t told me much of her background at all.”

Charlotte cleared her throat. “This is Lady Susia Algucia, daughter of Duke Algucia.”

“Duke Algucia...”

Lecia gasped. “They’re one of the closest houses to the royal family!”

Not just one of, but *the* closest house to the royal family, as far as the citizenry was concerned. It was said they were the most powerful house in all of Lainur, second only to the crown itself. Arcus always suspected she was more than she claimed, but he wasn’t expecting *this*.

“So you really are a big deal, huh?”

“I guess! But I don’t want you to change the way you talk to me, if that’s okay.”

“Not a problem.”

Sue frowned. “It should be a *bit* of a problem, you know! My father’s a duke!”

“Sue, we’ve known each other for years!”

“A *duke*! You know what that word means, right?”

“You just told me *not* to change how I talk to you!”

“Well, I think you could stand to treat me with just a *little* more respect.”

Arcus felt Charlotte’s gaze on them. “Lady Charlotte? Is something the matter?”

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

Sue turned to Lecia. “You must be Arcus’s sister.”

“Y-Yes, My Lady. It’s a pleasure to meet you. My name is Lecia Raytheft.”

“No need to be so nervous! It’s nice to meet you!”

Having greeted his sister, Sue returned to Arcus’s side.

Charlotte shot her a questioning glance. “Lady Susia... are you not perhaps a little *too* close to Arcus there?”

“Is that a problem?”

“He happens to be my betrothed. I believe you should keep some small distance from others’ fiancés, My Lady.”

“Huh? I thought the engagement got called off?” Sue said.

“Wh-Where did you hear that, My Lady?”

It was supposed to be a private matter between the Raythefts and the Cremelias. Arcus was just as confused as Charlotte, and even Lecia looked shocked.

Sue suddenly took Arcus’s arm. “So it doesn’t matter how close I am to him, right?”

“I-I’m afraid it does, My Lady!” Charlotte dived in to grab Arcus’s other arm and pulled on it like she was trying to separate it from its socket.

“U-Um, please stop!” Arcus begged, scared he was about to be ripped in half.

The girls began to giggle. Arcus wasn’t sure whether he should join them. He could only see things getting worse.

Lecia! Save me!

He sent his sister a silent cry for help, but since both Sue and Charlotte

outranked her, all she could do was waver. Were they doing this because they were fond of him, or was it some form of childish competition? Either way, neither seemed willing to compromise. If either of them stepped back, it would be the same as allowing the other to steal Arcus away and stow him within their own noble house. There seemed to be no way out of this situation.



“Hey, can I talk now?!” Gown suddenly spoke up impatiently.

Lecia and Charlotte turned towards Gown, only just now noticing him. They gasped as they realized he didn’t have a face, their eyes wide with shock. It was probably time to explain what was going on.

After Gown greeted the two of them with his favorite hearty handshake, Sue spoke.

“You said you were helping Gown, right, Arcus? What are you gonna help him with?”

“You’re helping him, Arcus?” Lecia asked, blinking at him in astonishment.

“Yeah. There’s a bunch of people digging up graves in the north, and Gown asked me to give him a hand catching them.”

“Why did Gown pick you?” asked Charlotte.

“I have no idea, My Lady. I asked him, but he just said because it’s me...”

“Yeah! I picked you ’cause you’re Arcus!” Gown reaffirmed as Arcus shot him a questioning glance.

Arcus made a show of shrugging at the girls. He already knew there would be no point in pressing Gown for a better answer.

“An elf asked you for help!” Lecia suddenly said, her eyes lighting up.

“Huh? I guess he did...”

“He couldn’t have picked a better young man to rely on,” Charlotte said.

“Yup! You’re super reliable, Arcus!” added Sue.

“Erm... uh...”

At least Charlotte and Sue found something they agreed on; they exchanged a series of satisfied nods. Arcus’s arms were safe for the moment. In any case, he felt disarmed by the volume of open praise.

“I have a thought,” Charlotte said, clapping her hands together gracefully.

“What would that be, Lady Charlotte?”

“I shall accompany you. It would be safer if you had company, would it not?”

“I... Pardon?”

“Oh! That’s a great idea! I’ll come, too!” Sue added excitedly.

Arcus couldn’t share in their enthusiasm. These were two young ladies from incredibly important families. He knew the road ahead would be potentially lethal, and he couldn’t justify taking them along, but he couldn’t deny that he would feel better with them by his side.

“I’m sorry, Lady Charlotte, but it is far too dangerous,” he said.

“I have been training from the day we met, Arcus. Far from being a burden on you, I can guarantee that my presence shall be invaluable.”

“I understand how you feel, My Lady, but...”

“Do I look frail and delicate to you?” Charlotte asked earnestly.

Arcus knew she wasn’t just being petty, but that only made things more troublesome. She was only fourteen (though Arcus wasn’t in a position to be nitpicking about age), and from his experiences through the man’s eyes, that was far too young to be going on such an adventure. On the other hand, he knew she was more than capable of holding her own from the rumors that spoke of her strength. She could really make things easier for him, which was what made it more difficult to come to a decision.

“Please allow me to help you as well, Brother,” Lecia said.

“Lecia...”

“Having as many magicians as possible would be a good idea. And I... I have much aether, which would doubtlessly be helpful.”

“That’s true...”

Arcus still couldn’t agree. He was dwelling on how to talk them out of it, when suddenly Sue grinned—and he didn’t like that look on her face one bit.

“You know, you don’t need Arcus’s permission.”

“Whatever do you mean by that, Lady Susia?”

“Why don’t we just ask Gown?” She turned to the elf.

“Me?”

“That’s right! Can we help you too, Gown?”

“That would make me really happy! But you know it’s gonna be dangerous, right?”

“We know! But even if we get into danger, you’re a famous elf. You’ll be able to get us out of it, right?”

Gown’s yellow eyes narrowed thoughtfully. The intellectual air he gave off now was at complete odds with his usual innocent demeanour. “You’re all children. And elves are supposed to protect children! We always have. So if you get in danger, I will protect you!”

“We’re coming, then!”

“Yeah! But don’t worry, I won’t put you into danger if I can help it!”

“Gown...” Arcus began.

“To most children I would say no! But these girls are strong! Stronger than some grown-ups I know! They’re all powerful and talented!”

There was no arguing with that. Arcus felt obliged to count himself lucky that he was getting extra help.

“Hey, Gown? When you said you weren’t gonna put them in danger, did that include me?”

“Huh? No, you’ll be fine! Because you’re Arcus!”

“Why has everyone suddenly stopped treating me like a kid?”

It wasn’t fair, but this world’s lack of lawyers or fair trials meant Arcus had no means to fight back against the injustice of it all. Gown brought the girls up to speed with Arcus in his usual circuitous way.

“What’s that herb you were talking about, Gown?” Sue asked, frowning at the sky.

“Oh, apparently it’s an herb that turns people into monsters,” Arcus explained.

“Huh?”

“M-Monsters?” Charlotte cried, causing everyone to turn in her direction.

“Lady Charlotte?”

“Oh, I beg your pardon. Please excuse me.”

Despite her cry, her face was a picture of tranquility. She coughed into her hand, as if nothing had happened. Arcus decided to do the polite thing and not press her further.

“What about the promise between the elves, Chain, and Wedge?” Sue asked.

“Well,” Gown began—but he never got to finish his sentence.

A bloodcurdling feminine scream pealed in the distance. Gown lifted his head and scanned the environs. Either he could see something the others couldn’t, or he already knew what was going on.

“What is it, Gown?”

“One of those bad people! They’re causing trouble!”

“No way...”

They’d been afforded no reprieve between Gown’s explanation and first contact with the enemy.

“You were trying to flush them out yesterday, right?” Sue asked.

“I was! But I think now they’ve split up and are causing trouble all over!”

“Here in the capital?” said Arcus.

“That’s right!”

Arcus couldn’t imagine why they’d go out of their way to draw so much attention to themselves, but if they really were the ones Gown was after, there was no choice but to investigate—if only to get a concrete idea of who they were and what they meant to achieve.

“Let’s go!” Gown led the group in the direction of the scream.

They ended up in the public square facing the capital’s main street. A crowd of onlookers was already gathered on the road, watching the scene unfold from a distance. Horse-drawn carriages were stopped on the street, and there were guards already on the scene.

Arcus and the others slipped through the crowd to find a single man standing in its center. He was dressed like any other traveler passing through the capital, save that he carried neither baggage nor arms. His hands were clasped to his head, and he was writhing in agony. It would have been easy to write him off as an unwell man, if not for the luminous bands encircling his body.

They were light belts, streams of Artglyphs which resulted from using them to draw magic circles. These lacked the aetherial sparkle and luster that usually came about from the casting of a spell. It was as though each character was clinging to and drawing in every last speck of light around it, leaving the surrounding area gloomy.

The crowd raised a clamor of surprise and horror, but since nothing was damaged so far, it appeared that no one felt the urge to run just yet.

“I knew this would happen!” Gown cried, his voice close to a scream.

“This is one of the people you’re after?”

“Yeah! He’s one of the really bad guys!”

“What’s happening to him?”

“It’s just like I was gonna explain before we got interrupted! When a human uses that herb but its body can’t handle it, it absorbs hex from all around and goes crazy!”

Arcus opened his mouth to say something, but Sue got in first. “Gown, what’s that weird band of light?”

“That’s where the hex has gathered! It sticks to the afflicted body, destroys everything around it, and spills all over the place!”

“Does that mean the hex has a mind of its own?” said Sue.

“No, that’s not it.”

“So it’s more like hex has certain properties which cause it to act in that way?” Arcus suggested.

“Yes! Yes, that’s it!”

As they spoke, city guards were attempting to put a stop to the hexed man’s

rampage, but the moment they tried getting close to him, the hex unwound itself into long tendrils and thrashed violently to keep them away. Getting into close contact with it was impossible; the guards were already calling for magicians and Seal Arms among themselves.

“How can we stop that thing, Gown?”

“Once it goes crazy like that, it’s difficult to stop! The only way to scatter the hex again is to destroy the body it’s clinging to!”

“You mean... we shall have to kill him?” Charlotte asked, but Gown shook his head.

“When the hex attaches itself to someone, they’re practically dead already. We have to destroy the body now, or it’ll be dangerous for everyone!”

Gown was right. It was uncontrollable and unpredictable. There was no time to worry about whether the man was technically dead yet or not.

“Allow me to try,” Lecia said, immediately launching into a spell.

“Turn my will to flame. May this single spear set the sky alight and burn through all who stand in my way.”

Burning-hot Artglyphs gathered in the palm of her raised hand, taking the shape of a fiery spear. Lecia launched the Flamrune at the raging man. The spear distorted the air as it flew, roaring like a gale until its tip reached her target. Her throw was fast and her aim keen, but the spear hit one of the bands of light around the man and bounced off, dispersing into the air.

“It didn’t work!” she gasped.

“The hex is protecting him! You need something really powerful to break through it!”

Charlotte unsheathed her rapier. “How about cutting through them?”

“You can’t! If you get too close, the hex’ll get you, too!”

“...Of course.”

The hex flew wildly, approaching the onlookers.

“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 yell. Let the crumbling spirits descend, urged on by raging screams."

"Sailing Graveyard."

This time, it was Gown who cast a spell. Artglyphs appeared and clung to the ground, pulling earth up violently through the stone paving of the sidewalk. The earth took shape in the air as though invisible fingers were kneading it like clay, stretching out towards the bands of hex and intercepting them before they reached the crowd.

"Everyone get back!" Gown called out to them.

Though the crowd heard him, it was already too late. With the crowd in the way, the guards couldn't escape, leaving Arcus and his companions with very few options. At this rate, people were going to get hurt.

"Gown! Could you focus on protecting the onlookers?" Arcus asked.

"Okay! You guys try and fight!"

Arcus nodded, and Lecia looked up at him apologetically.

"Brother, Flamrune is the most powerful spell I can cast..."

"Then you should focus on protecting too. It might be hard to hold back that hex, but you should be able to do it with some good defensive spells."

"I shall do my very best!"

"Um, Arcus..." Sue began.

"You don't wanna let other people see your spells, right? Don't worry, I'll handle this. Could you let the guards know what's going on?"

"Got it." Sue raced off towards the muddle of guards.

Arcus wanted to respect Sue's family secrets if he could.

He stepped towards the rampaging man to prepare an attack, only just leaping clear of the next flurry of blows. Probing its threatened space as he tumbled and wove between strikes, he approached the limits of the distance he could close.

“I dunno if I can get in as tight as I’d like...”

The bands of hex curved as they threw themselves this way and that, and it was hard to tell where they would strike next. Arcus watched carefully, searching for some kind of pattern. Just then, Charlotte appeared next to him.

“Allow me to move in and draw its attacks. Then you can use that opportunity to get closer.”

“Are you sure, My Lady?”

“I promised you I would be of use, did I not?”

“W-Wait!” Arcus called, but it was too late.

Charlotte leaned forward and dashed towards the man and the hex. The surrounding guards cried out for her to stop, but she ignored them, her long, golden-brown hair streaming out behind her as she ran. A band of hex flew out at her, but she dodged it gracefully. It was like she could predict its movements, even when they showed no discernible pattern. She leaped over its sweeping strikes and stepped past the tight lashes. The hex was unable to catch even a strand from the end of her hair.

Now that Arcus watched carefully, he realized she seemed to be moving in anticipation of each attack.

How is she doing that?

It was almost comical how trivial she made the hex look. Charlotte cast a glance over her shoulder at Arcus mid-dodge. By showing him she was in a position to take her eyes off the target, she was telling him to act now.

She really was a reliable fighting partner. This was Arcus’s chance.

“What spell are you gonna use, Arcus?” Sue called before he could act, having come back from the guards.

“It’s a big one,” he warned.

“I can’t wait to see it.” She grinned.

“Try and take this seriously, would you?”

Arcus shot a glance at Gown, who waved a sleeve at him to let him know he

should go for it. More earth rose up from the ground around the onlookers. Arcus wouldn't need to worry about the power of his spell now.

"Lady Charlotte! Please retreat once my spell is cast!"

"Understood!"

Arcus readied his spell. He needed simplicity, speed, and power. He already had the perfect spell.

"Infinitesimal. Join. Focus..."

Artglyphs rose up and flew towards the raging man, slipping past the bands of hex and coiling around the man's body to form a huge magic circle. Charlotte stepped back with perfect timing, struck by her premonition of what was to come.

Arcus closed his right hand, and the magic circle contracted around its target. Making a fist, he spoke the final words of the spell.

"Burst gently."

"Dwarf Star."

Once the circle could draw no tighter, it exploded. Flames burst from its center. Black smoke smoldered into the air. A powerful boom shattered the air and stayed ringing in the crowd's ears for moments after. Pure power and force flew out from the ring. Arcus was already on the ground to protect himself from the shock wave, and eventually the smog began to clear.

Dust flew up and around the square. Static charges sparked and crackled as they gathered in the air. The area where the hexed man once stood was now nothing more than a hole of paving stone and rubble. There was nothing left of the man himself. The crowd, guards, and Arcus's friends looked on in shock.

"Whoa! Arcus, what was that?! That was amazing!" Sue's shout smashed through the charged silence.

He looked at her to find her eyes shining and a wide smile on her face. It was jarring to see her warm enthusiasm in the midst of the frigid tension in the air.

"What was that spell? I can't believe you never told me about it! That's so unfair!" Sue whined.

“Well, I only just came up with it recently...”

“Recently, right?! Not yesterday or today! You’ve had tons of time to tell me! Why didn’t you say anything?!”

“C’mon, quit it! We’ve got more important stuff to worry about right now!” Arcus complained as Sue invaded his personal space.

As for Lecia, she was still in a state of shock. “Th-The incantation was so short, and he barely used any aether, and yet the spell itself was so powerful...”

“It was rather impressive,” said Charlotte. “Even with all the offensive magic I’ve had the pleasure of witnessing at the Institute, I have never seen something like that.”

“My brother really is amazing!”

“I still fail to understand why his father deemed him ‘talentless.’” Charlotte sighed, an anxious crease appearing in her forehead.

Meanwhile, Arcus only just succeeded in pulling Sue away from him. “This is the result of that herb, huh?”

“Yes! His body couldn’t handle it at all, but that herb isn’t suited to human bodies, anyway. This was a very bad case!” Gown explained.

“Why does it make the hex gather like that?” Arcus asked.

“I told you yesterday that hex attaches more easily to bodies that have been buried! It’s the earth they were buried in that attracts it! The herb they made has that same property to attract hex!”

“So it attracts hex just like the graves do...”

“Hey, Gown! What would happen to that guy if we didn’t do anything?” Sue asked.

“He would’ve become a hex fiend!”

Sue and Arcus gasped.

“Um, Brother,” Lecia cut in. “What exactly is hex? And what is a hex fiend?”

“Hex is something extra that’s left whenever someone uses magic. You sometimes see broken Artglyphs released at the end of a spell, right? Those

become hex.”

“A hex fiend is like a creature made from a huge collection of hex,” Sue said. “I never knew hex could latch onto an actual living creature to be reborn like that, but all you need to remember is that hex fiends are terrifying monsters. They were powerful enough to destroy whole cities and even whole kingdoms in the past.”

Charlotte listened with a grim expression on her face. “They teach about these creatures at the Institute, too, and in great detail. I had a lecture on them recently.”

Lecia frowned. “In that case, we cannot underestimate the danger to our capital.”

“Is that true, Gown?” Arcus asked. “Is it as bad as we’re all thinking?”

“It’s very bad! I wanna do something about it as quickly as we can! But it would be best if we could choose the time and place of these battles. If we fight in the middle of the day when everyone’s outside, we will be putting lots of people in danger!”

Gown was right, but it wouldn’t be an easy problem to solve. As long as the herb was involved, more scenes like this would ensue.

“What do we do then?” said Sue.

“I think we should follow the bad guys, then come out and attack them when they’re in a place with no people!”

“They may not be in the habit of gathering in those kinds of places normally,” Charlotte pointed out.

“Actually, bad guys like to hang around where no one will see them do their bad stuff! We should follow them to their hideout and then attack when the time is right!” Gown declared, curling his sleeves up into fists.

Sue scanned the area. “I’ll go pass word of the situation up the chain of command.”

“Good idea.”

Sue raced off to do just that, while Arcus and Gown explained the situation to

the guards.

After Sue came back from reporting the incident, Arcus felt like there were more guards on patrol than before, but he wasn't quite sure. After all, no matter Sue's status, one girl's word wasn't enough to make too big a move.

"We still don't really know what this group is trying to achieve," Arcus said.

"No, but we couldn't ask that guy when he was going all crazy like that," said Gown.

Gown didn't seem that concerned about their objective. As an elf, it was probably enough that they were digging up dead bodies, but Arcus felt that the more information they had, the better. Were they dealing with petty thieves or a large criminal organization run by a legitimate strategist?

For now, the square was mostly calm again.

"They're in here," Gown said, having led the group to a tavern in the low-lying part of the capital.

It looked like any other watering hole in the city, albeit on the larger side. They were open even now in the afternoon, and there were many people dotted around inside, still chatting over the tail-ends of their lunch.

"Are we dealing with a bunch of drunks?" Arcus wondered aloud.

"Perhaps they are celebrating their success?" Charlotte suggested.

"Hmm..."

"Maybe they're just killing time," said Sue. "It'd be easy for them to hide away in a popular place like this."

"Do you believe that they already have something planned, Lady Susia?"

"It's possible. What reason would they have to come to the capital otherwise? They must be up to something. Plus..."

"What is it, My Lady?"

Sue's nose twitched. "I can smell it. Grave soil. It's like a mix of earth, stagnant water, and vinegar."

"O-Oh..."

As usual, Sue wasn't making much sense, but if she could really smell that, it meant that the group they were chasing were here for sure.

"But right now, I feel like we're the ones who look suspicious," Sue continued.

"True. Why don't we wait outside for them to leave?" Arcus suggested.

Even if they were serving lunch right now, this was still a tavern in the city's backstreets. It wasn't a place for young noble children. They were bound to get looks from the staff and the customers.

"If we enter, we might be able to gather some information about their objective," Charlotte said. "I believe we should consider that possibility, too."

"That's also true."

The more he thought about it, the more desperate Arcus was to find out what they were after. It would just make it so much easier to plan how to counter them. After a quick discussion, the group decided to go along with Charlotte's suggestion.

"Do you think it's all right for me to be here dressed as I am, Brother?"

"Er. Well, you do stand out quite a lot."

Moreso even than Sue's and Charlotte's, Lecia's outfit was laden with frills.

"In that case, I shall soil the whole ensemble!" Lecia declared.

"No, I think that'd just make it stand out even more."

"O-Oh."

Sue took Lecia's arm. "You're so sweet when you're trying to do your best!"

"L-Lady Susia..."

"Lady Susia, please do not touch Lecia so lightly. She is *my* friend."

"She's allowed more than one!"

Their decision made, the group decided to start moving.

"I'll stay here!" said Gown. "Otherwise people might recognize me!"

"All right. Just wait here, then."

“Sorry I can’t help much! But please do your best!” Gown waved a sleeve at the group as they made their way inside.

At this point, they could still pretend they were a group of children wandering in by mistake.

“What now? We don’t wanna make the staff suspicious,” Arcus said.

“I have an idea,” Sue said, pulling out some money from her breast pocket. She approached one of the staff members who was waiting tables. “We need a place to hide. We promise we won’t be any trouble, so would we be allowed to stay here for a bit?”

Her voice was as smooth as any secret agent’s as she flashed the waiter her family crest and passed him a gold coin. After pausing in surprise, the waiter nodded.

It was only natural that he recognized that crest. It was common to see the crests of any family ranked marquess or above on flags during public events, much like sponsorships at sporting events in the man’s world. Among the citizens of the capital, these crests were common knowledge.

“We should be good now,” Sue informed the others with a grin.

All they needed to do now was to pinpoint the people they were after. They scanned the tavern. Bright Sol Glasses hung from the ceiling, and others were placed around the room as extra lighting. The counter was lined with several different kinds of alcohol, with two or three bartenders serving drinks. The sound of sizzling cooking could be heard, suggesting there was a kitchen just out of view of the dining area.

Several customers were enjoying their drink, some rowdy, and some slumped and dozing on the countertop. There were others who were here just to eat, sitting at the tables. None of them looked like the troublemakers Gown was after, although there may have been more further inside the tavern. The group walked further into the establishment, keeping an eye on the tables. In return, they received a few confused glances.

It was then that they spotted some people sitting at a table in the corner of the room, wearing familiar clothing.

“Is that them?” Arcus whispered.

“That rampaging man was dressed in a similar fashion!” Charlotte agreed under her breath.

They were wearing traveler’s clothes, the likes of which were common in the capital. Though they couldn’t be sure it wasn’t just coincidence, they were the most likely candidates. Arcus and his friends took a nearby table and began to listen as best they could among the din of the other patrons.

“Are...sure...afe?”

“...ctly safe. You don’t need much...ake yourself...porarily intangible.”

It sounded as though one of them was trying to convince the other of something. They could well be talking about a transformative herb like the one Gown spoke of.

“What about...?”

“Su...armful...ffects?”

“Pain in the...”

“N...idence...orget about it.”

Now they appeared to be talking about the man afflicted by the hex. It sounded like they abandoned him to his fate.

“...easure...aether.”

“And...gician...uild...”

Arcus’s eyes widened, and he almost fell out of his chair in surprise, the legs clattering against the floor.

“Uh oh!” he breathed.

“Arcus! What are you doing?!” Sue gasped, horrified.

The group at the next table turned to look at the commotion. Would they realize the children were listening to them? Arcus held his breath.

“What are a bunch of kids doing in a place like this? And they’re nobles to boot! Didn’t know this kingdom was so lowbrow.”

Out of nowhere, a voice called to them. Arcus turned and gaped at the newcomer. He must have been one of the largest men Arcus had ever seen. He took up two or three stools all by himself, and even sitting down he would tower over the children if they stood. He must have been at least seven feet standing up, if not eight. “Giant” didn’t even begin to describe it. There was a large cutlass on his back and a tricorn hat on his head. Arcus couldn’t help but wonder whether that was rum in his cup, too. Standing up smoothly from his seat, the large man approached them.

“Why don’t you come with me? I’ll teach you about all the wonders of the world!” The man reached out and picked Arcus up by the scruff of his neck.

“L-Let go of him!” Sue cried.

As Arcus groaned and freed himself, the man bent over and peered at the other children at the table.

“Calm down,” he whispered, his voice too low for his table to hear. “You want them to know you’re here? You gotta keep quiet.”

“Huh? R-Right...” Arcus quickly composed himself at the unexpected words.

Lecia sprang up from her seat. “Brother! Brother, look! Look at all of this! I’ve never seen such things before!”

Arcus recognized instantly that she was trying to stop them looking suspicious.

“O-Of course,” he joined in. “It’s your first time in a tavern.”

“Wow! I’d love to try some alcohol!”

“Me too,” Charlotte chipped in.

“Now, now, you two. You’re too young! You gotta make do with milk for now, okay?” the man said.

“Oh...” Lecia lowered her gaze.

“What a pity...” Charlotte turned away in a huff.

Anybody watching would probably find it quite endearing. At the very least, they weren’t arousing too much suspicion anymore.

“Good thinking, Lecia!” Arcus whispered.

“It was nothing.”

“Thank you too, Lady Charlotte.”

“Not at all.”

At that moment, Sue looked at Arcus. “Come with me a sec,” she whispered.

“What? Now? But—”

“Yes, now.”

Eventually, Arcus agreed, and the two started preparing to leave, waiting for a chance to tell the others.

“What is it?” he asked Sue. “You know we took a lot of trouble just to get in here?”

“I know. But just trust me.”

“Fine, but it’s kinda hard to leave right now...”

“...I know.” Still, Sue looked like she wanted to be anywhere but in this tavern right now.

“So, why are you guys so interested in that group?” the large man asked.

“This and that.”

“Hey, I got you kids out of trouble. You can tell me somethin’, right?” the man pressed.

Arcus frowned. Something didn’t feel right about this guy.

“Look, we’re grateful for that, but why did you even save us in the first place?”

“Simple. You guys were fightin’ together with Gown earlier, right?”

“You saw us?”

“Yup. I was impressed, see, because you put up a good fight for a bunch of kids. I got a little curious, and felt like having a chat with you all.”

“So you followed us here?”

“Yup!” A small smile formed on the man’s lips.

If that was true, it meant they had come all the way here without realizing there was a huge man tailing them. In the first place, it was strange that he was curious enough to follow them at all, but that they hadn’t noticed made things all the stranger.

“So?” he said.

Arcus paused. “That group seems to be connected to the rampaging man from before.”

“That’s why you followed ’em? That takes some real guts. Now you guys wanna play the hero and take ’em down?”

“More or less.”

“Nah, there’s gotta be more to it, or Gown wouldn’t be with you. But whatever, I’ll take it. I know it’s not really my business. How long are you plannin’ to stay here, anyway? I think they’re here for the long haul, y’know?”

“Well, we’ll wait till they do something.”

There was no other choice. This was definitely the group they were after.

“Hey, I know! You wanna help me out with something?” the man suddenly said.

“What?”

“Huh?”

“You look like smart kids. To me, at least.” The man pulled a sheet of cloth and what looked like a chess piece from his bag. “You kids ever play any battle chess?”

“A little,” said Arcus.

“Now and again,” Charlotte said.

“Okay, good.”

What the man had didn’t look like battle chess at all. The pieces mainly looked like little ships, and there was a sheet instead of a board, mostly marked with blue ink.

“Is this nautical themed?”

“You got it. You probably don’t see many of this version around these parts, but it’s your standard battle chess, really. I’m facing an old friend of mine now, but I’m not doing too hot. Been asking ’most everyone I meet for advice for a while now.” He let out a loud laugh.

“This isn’t a game,” Sue said. “You’re in an actual battle with somebody.”

“Ah, you’re a sharp one, missy.”

Sue didn’t respond.

“You mean something like this is supposed to help in an actual battle?” Arcus said.

The “battle chess” the man pulled out was nothing like shogi, nor any battle chess board Arcus had ever seen. It looked more like a strategic map for war, and without any clear rules, Arcus doubted it could even be called a “game.” It was hard to know how helpful the children could be, given the man hadn’t given them much subjective detail on the situation at all.

The man laughed. “Look, it’s just a small scuffle between friends. Don’t sweat the small stuff.”

“I’m sorry, but we don’t really have time for this.”

“You’re keepin’ an eye on that group over there, right? It’s not like you guys are short on numbers. One of you can help me with this, while the others watch those guys. I’ll keep an eye on them too.”

“I’m not having anything to do with this,” Sue announced bluntly.

It was a rare tone for her to take. Out of all of them, Arcus expected her to take the most interest in this sort of thing. Perhaps she was in a bad mood. In fact, she seemed to change her manner the moment this man showed up.

“I only know about inland combat,” Charlotte said. “Nothing about fighting on the seas.”

Lecia shook her head to indicate she was as clueless as everybody else. It wasn’t like they could let this man’s favor go unreturned, though.

The man began to set the pieces on the cloth. Despite his large hands, his movements were precise. Arcus studied the cloth when he was finished. There was a stronghold surrounded by the ocean on three sides. The curved border of a city projected out from the land, marked by high walls. Naval fleets were gathered in the sea, as battalions approached from land. The fortress was completely surrounded.

“Which side is yours?”

“I’m attacking, and my friend’s defending.”

His numbers were impressive, but it was clear that attacking the stronghold would be no easy feat.

“This is more like running strategic simulations than playing a game,” Arcus muttered.

“Quit it. It’s more fun if you think of it like a game,” said the man.

“Why don’t you try cutting off his supplies?” Arcus suggested.

“I won’t go into it, but just assume it’s impossible.”

“How about attacking from the land side?”

“That’d mean having to deal with these tough walls here, and we’d lose a lot of men in the time it took to break through. That’d put us at a disadvantage once we’re actually in there.”

“What about invading through this inlet here?”

“Might not surprise you to know the sea routes are sealed off. Take a look ’ere.” He pointed to the inlet, which had a chain-like marking cutting off the entrance.

With all these restrictions, capturing the castle would be tough. There didn’t seem to be any gaps in the defense at all.

Suddenly, Arcus realized the map seemed familiar; not from his life in this world, but from his dream.

“Hey, is this Constantinople?”

“Consta-what-what?”

“Never mind.”

The map looked just like Constantinople, a city famed for its highly defensible position for nearly a thousand years since its construction. Surrounded on three sides by the sea, and protected by several layers of walls inland, it wasn't difficult to see why. Those walls were stronger than the technology of the time should have permitted, so it was hard to overstate just how impressive the city was.

Despite this, it fell to the Ottoman Empire's attack. Arcus tried to remember what exactly happened then.

“If you take these ships over the land and into the inlet from here...”

During the Ottoman siege on Constantinople, the Ottomans moved their ships by land over a hill. Taken by surprise, the defenders moved some of their forces from the land-facing territory, leading to the city being taken within three months.

Arcus moved the ships to the area with the shortest distance between the land and the inlet.

“This'll give you a new place to attack from.”

“Don't be silly, Arcus,” Sue scoffed.

“I fail to see how you would move ships across land,” Charlotte added.

“I-I'm sorry, but I agree with Lady Charlotte,” Lecia said.

The girls stared at him in disbelief. He was perfectly aware of how crazy the idea sounded.

“I'm not gonna dismiss it without thinkin' it through first,” the man said. “So, how d'you propose we get the ships to this side of the inlet? It's easy when they're tiny pieces on a board, but not so easy when you're faced with huge vessels.”

Arcus took a moment to think back. “Place the ships onto oiled logs and have livestock pull them along.”

“Ah, just like transporting any other heavy cargo, then.”

“It’s not gonna work if the angle’s too steep or the boats are too big. You need enough hands to do it, too. I know it sounds crazy, but it’s not impossible with enough manpower. Worst case scenario, you’ll have to build a path yourself or something.”

It wasn’t unheard of for large swathes of men to move huge rocks carved from the mountains, even in this world, and there were plenty of ancient structures in the man’s world with unclear construction processes—and they didn’t even have magic to help them. Moving a few wooden ships across land was perfectly doable.

“What about the sandy soil? Won’t the ships sink into it?”

“Not if you water it down first to create a capillary bridge. That should make it solid enough to pass over.”

“Uh...”

“You know how sand clumps up when it’s wet? It’s the same thing.”

“It still sounds a bit far-fetched,” Sue said.

“That’s part of what makes it great. Wars are often won by catching the opponent entirely off guard. If the opponent doesn’t think an area needs defending, there are hardly gonna be any troops there, which makes it the best place to attack from. Identifying those spots which are easy to fight from is also a part of war.”

“You know, I know it makes sense, but...”

Arcus knew what Sue meant to say. Just because something made sense didn’t mean it would work. Nor, Arcus wanted to retort, did it mean it wouldn’t. Besides, assuming this was just a friendly match, why did it matter?

All of a sudden, the man started to chuckle, and it wasn’t long before he was slapping his knees in delight. “Kid, you’re exactly right! I never even thought to attack from there!”

“Satisfied?”

“Completely! I think you’ve just given me a shot at victory!” The man laughed.

“Hey, Captain! We finally found you!” a voice called from the tavern entrance.

Arcus followed the voice to find a group of men gathered. It wasn't hard to conclude they were the man's associates.

"Hey, guys!" the man cried happily. "You came at just the right moment! We've found a route into that confounded inlet!"

"You mean it?!"

"Yup! Victory's in our grasp!"

He seemed almost too happy for someone in a friendly competition.

"Brother, look."

"What is... Oh."

Among the cheers, the group they were tailing stood up, possibly because the man's laughter was irritating them. They moved to pay before heading for the entrance.

"Let's go," Arcus said, and the three girls nodded back at him. He was just about to stand up himself when the man grabbed him again. "Wh-What is it now?"

"You kids don't have to hurry off, y'know? Lemme treat you to something as thanks."

"No, we *do* need to hurry. You should know we don't have time to sit around."

"All right. Off you go, then." The man released Arcus from his grip. Gathering his men, he followed the children out. "You don't mind us coming with you to say hi to your elf friend, right?"

Arcus doubted he would take no for an answer, and so the children and the seafarers made their way back to Gown.

"C-Captain!" one of the men gasped, as they approached the elf.

"You guys've never seen him before, right? Meet Gown, the Grave Sprite! Make sure you thank him for all he does!"

His men lowered their heads towards Gown.

"Barbaros! Hello!" the elf said happily.

“Hello there! You’re always working so hard, huh? Oh, and call me Captain, please!”

“Aye-aye Captain!” Gown raised his arms in a cheer.

If Gown’s so happy to see him, I guess we can trust him.

“You guys go back for the day, yeah?” the captain said to his men.

“Huh?”

“I got business.”

“We can attend that business with you, Captain!”

“No need, no need! You guys have some preparing to do anyway. Things are about to get critical.” The captain pulled a heavy pouch out of his bag and passed it to one of his men, eliciting a cheer from them.

“When you say business...” Arcus began.

“Yup, I’m gonna help you lot. As thanks, y’see.”

“You didn’t even ask us.”

“Hey, you gotta admit having a grown-up on your side’ll be helpful.”

“I know, but...” Arcus glanced at Gown.

“I don’t mind if he helps us! The Captain’s super reliable!”

“See? If the elf agrees, it’s settled, right?”

“I guess I don’t have a choice.” Arcus sighed.

“Favors are to be returned! That’s what it means to fare the sea! And it’s best to return favors while they’re still fresh!” The man smiled. “The name’s Barbaros. I’m a seafarer. I won’t be stickin’ around for long, but I hope we’ll get on swimmingly!”

Arcus was inclined to trust Gown’s judgment, but he still had his reservations. The children introduced themselves to Barbaros. It was then that Arcus realized Sue was strangely quiet. She was glaring quietly at Barbaros’s back.

“Sue?”

“It’s nothing. I promise,” Sue replied with a smile.

With that, the children and Barbaros followed Gown to chase after the conspirators once again.

From what Arcus had heard at the tavern, there was a possibility that the group Gown was after were industrial spies from another kingdom. The words “aether” and “Guild” definitely cropped up in their conversation. The word “measure” was the final nail in the coffin. They were likely putting together a plan to infiltrate the Magician’s Guild. Though they made no mention of the aethometer itself, it sounded like they were aware that a device like it existed.

It wasn’t hard to work out how they caught wind of it. From their fragmented conversation, it sounded like ingesting the herb gave you the power to make yourself temporarily intangible. If that was true, it was possible for them to infiltrate the Guild and gather information, even if they didn’t get to sneak into the production line itself. The best course of action, he reasoned, would be to split away from the group and head for the Guild.

The children left the tavern and the backstreets behind, along with their new companion, Barbaros. Gown was leading them after the perpetrators. Arcus needed to let the others know of his intentions.

“Lecia,” he whispered.

“What is it?”

“You know about the aethometer, right?”

“I do! You are its inventor, aren’t you, Brother?”

“That’s right.”

Lecia’s eyes lit up and she broke into a smile. The next moment, however, she was frowning dubiously. “Why are you telling me this now?”

“Hey, is this to do with what those guys in the tavern were saying?” Sue asked.

“I’m afraid I have no idea what you are talking about,” said Charlotte.

“Around two years ago, I presented a certain magical tool to the Magician’s Guild. It appears the group we are chasing are after it, My Lady,” Arcus explained.

“It’s really something! The power of our army’s magicians shot up practically overnight!” Sue said.

“It’s truly remarkable,” Lecia agreed. “I have several myself.”

“It sounds like quite the feat,” Charlotte said.

“Anyway, the Guildmaster allowed me a workshop inside the Guild’s grounds. It sounded to me like the group in the tavern were planning to infiltrate it.”

“Are you saying they wish to steal your invention?” asked Charlotte.

“I believe so. The invention and the technology behind it.”

Charlotte quickly put two and two together and frowned. “But if they are using that herb for these plans...”

“They can come and go into the Guild as they like!” Sue gasped.

It wasn’t just that. Should the herbs prove too much for their host, they could end up causing untold damage. The Guild was a powder keg of aetheric forces—the ideal condition for a hex fiend to spawn with the introduction of a little chaos. Things were worse than Arcus anticipated. They were in urgent need of a plan.

“What should we do, Brother?”

“I’ll run ahead to the Guild and warn them to step up their security. Hopefully that’ll make these guys think twice about targeting it.”

Even if the herb allowed them to pass through walls, with more guards around, they’d have to be careful. They were likely aiming for a period of time when defenses were low. Arcus’s warning would shift the window of opportunity and force them to reassess—maybe even regroup—buying the children more time.

“They’ll listen to you, won’t they, Arcus?” Charlotte asked.

“It’s policy for them to take me seriously since my invention got approved; they’ve already trusted me with production and security around it. I’d like it if we had some more people on our side, though.”

“The Guild wouldn’t be in a position to lend you anybody, would it?”

It was just as Charlotte said. Once Arcus gave his warning, the Guild's top priority would be defending itself, and all of their magicians would be dispatched to that end. Even the magicians on the aethometer project would need to dedicate themselves to the defense effort, or be available to destroy any critical documents if necessary. It was too risky to ask them to leave their post. He could always ask for some lower-ranking workers or the capital's guards to help, but getting through all the red tape to have them transferred to him would take too long.

Arcus glanced at Sue, wondering if her status might give them some advantage, but she shook her head. Arcus called Gown over to explain the situation, after which the elf agreed he could split off from the group. He was now more grateful than ever that he and Gown ran into Sue and the others. With a strong fighting force accompanying him, Gown didn't need Arcus to stick around. The girls were even more powerful than him.

Noticing the ripples of commotion, Barbaros spoke up. "What's goin' on?"

"There's somewhere I've gotta go by myself," Arcus said.

"That's right!" Gown added helpfully. "So please can you stay with us to chase the bad guys, Captain?"

"Hold up."

"You won't help?"

Barbaros paused. "I don't really got a choice, seeing as you were kind enough to lemme join you. I'm just curious about what's come up all of a sudden."

It was probable that Barbaros had joined up out of interest in Arcus and his solution to his war scenario. Sue's dismissive attitude towards the captain wasn't ameliorating his frustration at being forced to part ways.

"Whaddya gonna do after that, though? How are you gonna find us again when you're done?"

"That's no problem!" Gown took the lantern from his hip and lit it.

The next moment, there was a second Gown standing next to him. Everyone stared and gasped, aside from Barbaros. He was stroking the stubble on his chin

thoughtfully.

“This is how you manage to be everywhere at once, huh little guy?”

“That’s right!”

“So, uh... did you cut your consciousness in half, or is it like a copy-type deal?”

“I’m Gown! Both of us are a whole me!” The Gowns chimed in unison.

“I’m afraid I’m getting a headache,” Charlotte murmured.

Arcus and the second Gown raced through the darkening capital, bound for the Magician’s Guild. The longer they took, the more likely it was for the aethometer project to spring a leak. Given the effects of the herb, it was unlikely the spies’ objective was to steal the device itself, but with even the slightest hole in the veil of secrecy around it, all of Arcus’s efforts would come to naught.

There was no time to waste. Just running would take too long, so the pair had bolstered their strength with spells; the people they sped past gawked at them. They darted between pedestrians like a gust of wind and ran side-by-side with horses and the government officials astride them. Arcus felt a small twang of smugness at the astonishment in everyone’s gazes, but he didn’t have time to dwell on it.

It wasn’t long until the Magician’s Guild came into view. It was the symbol of the kingdom’s magical advancements and a place where magicians carried out their research nonstop. Since there was always somebody hard at work, the Sol Glasses were permanently set inside to keep the building bright around the clock.

The black building was surrounded by a high, spiked wall, and the land around it was kept completely bare to deter anyone from peering in over those walls. Since the place was active twenty-four hours a day, there were a great many guards who had a permanent station at the Guild. It was so well-defended that even an entity as powerful as a foreign nation would be foolish to try to infiltrate it.

In Arcus’s case, he was recognized as the inventor of the aethometer, so he was allowed through without question. He quickly explained the urgency of the

situation to the guard at the main gate, who then allowed him passage. Leaving Gown waiting with the guard, Arcus hurried to the main building.

He informed the receptionist that there was an urgent situation threatening the aethometer, and asked whether the Guildmaster Godwald or his secretary, Balgeuse, were around. Fortunately, they were both currently at the Guild's testing grounds.

Arcus quickly thanked the receptionist before rushing off again, only to run into a frightening, scar-covered face at the corner of the cloister. He screamed, the first thought in his mind that this was either a mafia boss or a demon from hell. It was a cheaper jump scare than any low-budget horror movie, and yet Arcus still reeled, landing firmly on his rear.

That terrifying face belonged to Guildmaster Godwald Sylvester himself.

His crumpled face crumpled further as he looked down at Arcus. "Arcus? You seem surprised to see me."

"Uh. O-Oh, well..."

Arcus wasn't about to admit that it was the Guildmaster's face which had scared him most of all. He'd known Godwald long enough to understand that even a child's admission of fright would set off his complex about his severe appearance.

Though Arcus held his tongue, he needn't have bothered; Balgeuse was there to ruin his efforts.

"I am sure anyone would have the same reaction seeing your face appear from around a corner, sir. You've caused many a fright in your time."

"Yes, yes! There may even have been fatalities! You ought to be more careful!" said Mercuria, who was also with Godwald.

"You don't have to comment every time, you two!" Godwald growled.

Mercuria pulled the rim of her pointy hat over her face while Balgeuse chuckled to himself. That was quite a way to speak to one's superior, but perhaps the old secretary and Noah were birds of a feather.

Aside from those two, the Guildmaster was trailing quite the entourage. They

didn't seem to be clerks or magicians from the Guild either, judging from their dress. They conducted themselves elegantly, much like nobles or high officials, yet their attire did not match the styles common in the kingdom.

There was no doubt they were important, but they were not from Lainur. The woman in the middle of the group exuded a particularly powerful air of importance. She was a young woman with dark, wavy, blonde hair. Arcus would place her in her twenties. She was dressed in an unfamiliar military uniform, and her eyes held a glint of arrogance that was unique among the group.

Arcus gave a simple bow before the Guildmaster cut in.

"Oh, excuse me for not speaking up earlier. This young master has done much for the Guild. Arcus, you do not need to worry about these guests."

"Yes, sir."

That wasn't a problem. He didn't want to bother with long-winded self-introductions right now, given the circumstances.

"So what brings you to the Guild, Arcus?" Mercuria asked.

"Well, you see..." Arcus paused before turning to Balgeuse. "Mr. Balgeuse. Please, could you invoke a Code C?"

"Code C? This must be quite the predicament indeed." Though his expression remained calm, there was a small twitch in Balgeuse's eyebrow.

Godwald turned pale. "What exactly is going on?"

"Yes, yes! Code C means the destruction of all documents, doesn't it?"

Arcus gathered the three of them together and lowered his voice. "There's a chance the information will be stolen."

"Stolen? Where did you hear that? We've certainly heard nothing of it!"

"From the Grave Sprite!"

"G-Gown? Why did he tell you that?"

"Well, it's a long story, but right now I'm helping him out with something, and I overheard a group which had those sorts of intentions."

Godwald frowned. Arcus found himself trembling and wondering if the

Guildmaster was mad at him.

“I have much I would like to say, but I understand the urgency of the situation. Balgeuse.”

“At your service, sir.”

“Cassim is in the capital. Summon him and have him take charge of the defense.”

“Very good, sir.” Balgeuse bowed at the dark-blond woman too before leaving.

“What will you do, Arcus?”

“I’m going back to meet with Gown, and we’re going to chase down the perpetrators. I’m sorry, but would you mind taking care of the production area?”

“I can’t very well say no when our esteemed elf is involved. Don’t put yourself in too much danger now.”

“Yes, sir. Sorry to be in such a rush.” Arcus bowed, and then...

“O, fresh blood in the vessel. O, flesh and bone that make up man. Continue down your well-traveled paths. Fill this body with unyielding strength and quench my unending thirst. As my voice opens the door, may this flesh and blood awaken.”

This was Arcus’s spell to enhance his physical abilities temporarily: *Tenfold Performance*. With that power coursing through his body once more, Arcus raced away and leaped over the spiked walls around the Guild.

“I think it’s about time we made those walls a little higher.”

“A spell to increase one’s physical abilities, hm?”

“It didn’t sound to me like it would work on others. Craib was right when he said the boy comes up with some unusual magic.”

“Yes, yes! I’m sure even Frederick wouldn’t mind losing sleep if he got to hear about this!” Mercuria said. “Now, please allow me to help.”

“Thank you. If you wouldn’t mind, could you start devising some defense

plans? It shouldn't be too long until Cassim joins you."

"Yes, sir!"

The Guildmaster then turned to Meifa Darnénes, the dark-blonde woman. "I do apologize for the delay in your tour."

"Has something happened, Vajra?"

"No, no, nothing major. Again, please allow me to apologize for the interruption."

"Nothing major..." Meifa murmured, turning to look up at the wall across from the cloister. "Still, it is in keeping with this kingdom's reputation that such a young boy would be able to use magic like that."

"Arcus is a prodigy. Most children cannot compare."

"Is that right?"

"Yes, although we are blessed with many talented young spirits. He is just one of them," Godwald said quickly.

"I see."

Though the Guildmaster put an end to the topic, Meifa still stared thoughtfully at the wall Arcus leaped over.

When Arcus had left the Guild, the sun was close to disappearing from the sky. Now it had sunk fully, leaving Sol Glasses to twinkle here and there across the city. Unlike the man's world, there were no high-rises here, and so a glance up at the sky revealed nothing but darkness, the stars blocked out by the low-hanging Sol Glasses of houses. That same light created a band of purple under the blackness of the night sky.

Arcus and Gown ran from the city center as if they were trying to escape that light. They arrived at a quiet suburb on the capital's east side.

"Are we heading for the slums?" Arcus asked. Not far out from here, this part of the city fell into disuse; even the capital's most desperate had abandoned the ruins.

"Yes! That's where we chased the bad guys to!"

“It was nice of them to bring us somewhere empty.”

“It must be an advantage for them too.”

With designs as grand as theirs, they would need somewhere to gather out of sight.

“Where are they now?”

“They left again after coming together here. They might be going back to the same square as before, but I don’t know.”

“As long as they’re not headed for the Guild yet.”

Otherwise the staff might not have time to prepare...

“This way!”

Even though Arcus was running as fast as he could, Gown always seemed to be a step ahead of him. His apparent speed and the terrain didn’t seem to matter. Gown was always in front, waving a long sleeve at him.

The pair skirted flowerbeds, sneaked through shadows, and scaled roofs. Eventually, they crossed the boundary between habitable and uninhabitable; tumbledown houses and free-standing walls sprawled out ahead. Some of the tougher buildings kept their original structure, but their windows were broken, their insides bared to the wind. Rubble piled up along the road like makeshift curbs. It was a testament to the speed at which entropy took hold of a city in the absence of human care. Only the panting of wild dogs and the shine of their eyes in the omnipresent gloom suggested the presence of life.

Arcus followed Gown into a building, where the gigantic Barbaros had propped himself against a wall.

Gown threw his sleeves high above his head. “We’re back, Captain!”

“Oh hey. I thought you’d be longer.”

“Where are the others?” said Arcus.

“They’re out with the other Gown searching for those guys’ headquarters. Left me here ’cause they thought I stood out too much.”

“What are they planning to do once they find them?”

“Decide if they should attack or not. Said they’d get back to me if they wanna go ahead with it.”

They were probably waiting for the right timing. If the whole crew was there, Gown and the children could deal with all of them at once.

“I’m gonna go back now!” Gown announced, disappearing into flickers of gentle flame.

Must be handy to be able to create a copy of yourself whenever you need it, Arcus thought, finding a flat piece of rubble to sit down on.

“So, how come you’re helpin’ Gown out?” Barbaros asked.

“I thought I already told you. He asked me to. It’s nothing more than that.”

“You’d help anyone who asks?”

“No. It depends what’s in it for me and what I’m risking. This time, it’s ‘cause it was Gown who asked. You can’t really turn down a request from an elf, right?”

“Huh. Makes sense. You sure you weren’t just excited to be asked for help by someone so special?”

“That’s...part of it, probably.”

Though it wasn’t the most sensitive question in the world, Arcus found himself answering honestly. He liked being relied on, especially by those who wouldn’t usually ask for help. The thought that Gown chose Arcus specifically filled his heart with warmth. What he didn’t like was the way Barbaros seemed to be able to read his mind on the matter.

The pirate burst into laughter. “Sorry, kid. Don’t put too much thought into it. I was just curious, y’see.”

Arcus didn’t respond.

“I was just thinkin’, not everyone works totally on pure motives. You don’t gotta pretend you do, either.”

“What about revenge as a motive?”

“Huh?”

“I’m just asking what you think...and I answered your question.”

Arcus had discussed this topic with Sue before too. Arcus could never figure out whether revenge was a noble pursuit or not, and perhaps that was because, deep down, he thought it wasn’t. At the same time, he knew that asking everyone he met about it showed cowardice on his part.

Barbaros was quick on the uptake.

“I get it. Right now, you’re meanin’ to avenge yourself on someone. Problem is, you can’t figure the weight of it, so you asked me...a total stranger.”

“You’re pretty perceptive, huh?”

“Gotta be if you wanna be a captain. We gotta read lots of things. The wind, humans... Y’know.”

Spoken like a true seafarer...

“So...revenge. What do you think?”

“It’s fine, ain’t it? I mean, if it’s blowin’ steady, it’d be a waste not to tack into it.”

“Huh. I never thought about it like that.”

“Humans need power to get most anything done. Not just physical power, but power of spirit, and that don’t come just by callin’ for it.”

Arcus knew already that you could have the *means* to an end, but not the resolve.

“Every human breathin’ prefers tellin’ themselves they’ve a reason behind what they do. They want to possess something, or they want to achieve something... If they’ve whipped up cause for it, it’s easier to build up the will to follow through.” Barbaros put a large hand on Arcus’s shoulder. “Arcus. I get that you might wanna fair, clean victory. But life ain’t always sunshine and rainbows. Sometimes, you won’t be able to win unless you’re ready to get your hands dirty. ’Nfact, you’ll be lucky to get through life with one or two totally fair victories. The real question is, what are you gonna do with all those dark, murky emotions inside you?”

““What I’m gonna do?””

“You’re what, ten? That means you’ve got sixty, seventy years ahead of you. You’re gonna have hopes and dreams you haven’t even thought of yet. You’re a kid, which means you’ve got endless potential. If there’s a chance to take something you want, go for it. Keep movin’ forward. You gotta move, or nothin’ll change. Keep going and going till you can’t anymore. Take what you want. That’ll be your victory. Once you’ve won, who’s gonna care what it took?”

“Hmm...”

“Tell you what, if us seafarers stopped moving we’d be stuck in the middle of the sea!” Barbaros guffawed.

It was an oafish laugh, but somehow it calmed Arcus’s heart.

“And you think that’s a good way to live?”

“Sure! I mean, you’re a kid, so who cares what’s good or bad? Also, if you’re gonna restrict yourself to choices which have right answers, then you’re not gonna get very far, are ya?” Barbaros lowered his voice. “If you can use somethin’ to win, then use it. It doesn’t matter what it is; it matters what you’re usin’ it *for*. All most people see is your success, not what’s behind it.”

“Might makes right, huh? You’re kinda evil, aren’t you?”

“Course. Young kid like you doesn’t need to worry about holdin’ back. You gotta dream big. There’s tons of people out there livin’ just how they want. And why wouldn’t they? What’s wrong with that sorta life? Kids like you gotta live that way more than anyone. If you do somethin’ wrong, it’s up to the adults to scold ya for it.”

Dream big?

Arcus could see his point. The weight of an extra lifetime tended to foster reservations within him. Barbaros must have picked up on that, or he wouldn’t be telling him all of this. It was a wholly satisfying answer, and Arcus’s heart felt a little lighter.

“By the by, Arcus, d’you know Craib Abend?”

Arcus gaped at him. “How did you know?”

“Hey, you’re a Raytheft, right? That’d make it pretty likely.”

Arcus was surprised, but he knew he shouldn't be. Craib wasn't just a famous state magician, but a well-traveled one.

"He's my paternal uncle."

"Which makes you his nephew, huh?"

"Do you know him, Captain?"

"We've met a ton. Spoken too."

"Huh."

I guess this is a small world too.

Arcus smiled, feeling like he found a friend in an unexpected place. "My uncle is teaching me magic."

"Oh? Ain't you lucky, havin' a state magician teach you personally?"

"Yeah, but I wasn't so lucky before he agreed to teach me..."

"Huh? Oh, I get it. That's why you were talkin' about revenge and such."

As before, Barbaros was right on the money with his predictions.

"So how did you meet my uncle?"

"He ended up on my ship once, back in his rovin' days. I asked him if he wanted to join my crew."

"What did he... Well, I guess I already know the answer."

"Yup. He told me flat out, 'no.' Said he wanted to get back to his own country and make a name for himself there. 'Course, he ended up as a state magician. I regret not insisting he stay, y'know."

"You think he's too good to be a state magician or something?"

"Of course I do. Takes a real man to be my first mate, and he was just the sort I needed."

"My uncle as a seafarer..."

Arcus tried to imagine it. With Craib's brawny body and his tanned skin, it seemed almost too perfect a role for him.

“Hey, thinkin’ about it now, I think he talked about revenge and stuff too. Guess you two are kinda alike, huh?”

Arcus stayed quiet.

“See what I was sayin’ now? You didn’t realize, ’cause he’s a successful guy.”

Arcus never put much thought into his uncle’s past, but he did know there was a lot of suffering and hard work involved. He didn’t realize how little he’d thought of it until Barbaros pointed it out. The seafarer was getting him to think a lot today. A question arose in Arcus’s mind.

“How old are you, Captain?”

“Huh? I dunno, but I think around fifty or so.”

“No way! I thought you were in your late thirties or something!”

“Hey, I’ll take the compliment.” Barbaros flashed Arcus a friendly grin.

Now that Arcus looked, he noticed the wrinkles on his face, as well as the whiter hairs among his dark gray ones. It was just that he seemed too full of vitality to be as old as he claimed. Arcus’s surprise was interrupted by the sound of approaching footsteps. It was Lecia, her silver hair and red eyes glowing in the dim light, here to give an update.

“Brother, you’re here!”

“Hey. How’re things looking?”

“Gown said we should attack as soon as we are able.”

“Looks like I got here just in time.” Arcus paused. “Lecia?”

“What is it?” Lecia blinked at him.

Arcus cleared his throat. “I mean, I probably should’ve asked you this earlier, but... Listen. We’re going to be fighting for real. Are you okay with that?”

“What do you mean by that?”

“I mean what I said. Are you prepared to kill someone? Are you prepared to be killed?”

Lecia didn’t respond.

“Once we meet with Gown, we’ll be attacking right away, and they’re gonna try and fight back. They’ll probably be trying to kill us. As long as they are, we can’t show them any mercy of our own. They should be lucky if any one of them remains alive.”

They were dealing with spies here. Anyone interfering with their efforts could not be allowed to live, and by extension, Arcus and the others were obliged to extend them the same courtesy.

“We need to kill every last one of them, and you’ve gotta be on board with that. If you’re not, then you should wait here.”

When Arcus had gone to rescue his sister from the marquess, he hadn’t had time to question himself like this. He wanted to offer Lecia that chance. If she came along with them unprepared for what was waiting, then she might freeze up and lose her will to fight—assuming Joshua had yet to teach her to overcome such fears.

“I shall be fine. If I am to inherit the Raytheft house, this is a rite of passage I must take eventually,” Lecia said, returning Arcus’s gaze evenly.

Arcus couldn’t tell whether the look in her eyes was determination, nor whether there was real strength behind it—neither of his lives had prepared him to answer that question—but if Lecia could declare something like that so openly, her words must have had a solid foundation.

“Okay. D’you mind keeping an eye on Lecia, Captain?”

“It’d be way more impressive if you promised to take care of her yourself, y’know.”

“I’m not so naive to think I can do anything. I’m just a kid, remember?”

“Sure, you’re a kid, but it’s not very kid-like to admit it! Welp, okay then. Don’t worry about a thing, little lady. I’ll keep an eye on you.”

“Thank you.”

They set off to meet up with Gown and the others.

Arcus and Barbaros followed Lecia into a building so run down, it didn’t even have a roof. Sue peered out from around a dilapidated pillar. Charlotte was

crouched down behind the remains of a collapsed wall. Gown was poking his head out from a glassless window. Men lay sprawled out on the ground nearby, all dressed similarly to the group Gown was after.

Charlotte and Sue spotted Arcus and beckoned him over.

“What’s with these guys?” Arcus asked under his breath, motioning to the men on the floor.

“They were guarding the area,” Charlotte replied.

“There weren’t that many of them, so we didn’t have to kill them! We just knocked them out!” Gown giggled.

“The main group is gathered over there.” Sue pointed.

Arcus looked over to see several men a small distance away from the building. They appeared to be talking in the low light of some Sol Glasses.

Are they forming a plan to sneak into the Guild?

“A new guy joined them just now. He said the Guild raised their guard,” Gown explained.

“Looks like our plan worked.” Arcus let out a sigh of relief.

“If we are going to attack, perhaps we ought to start with a strong opening volley of spells,” Lecia suggested.

“Sounds good. What do you think, Gown?”

“Sounds like a plan!”

Sue shook her head, despite Gown’s agreement. “I don’t think it’s a good idea to try and kill all of them. If we leave some alive, we can get more information.”

“Huh. That’s a good point, too.”

“Let’s attack with that in mind, then.”

Their first step decided, Lecia and Sue launched their spells at the group of spies. The fiery magic hit the group square in their center. For a moment, it looked like the closest men would be engulfed by the flames, but then the fire seemed to be swept away by the wind and vanished.

“They totally blocked it!”

“Does that mean they were expecting an attack?”

Though a few of the men were panicking, a handful of them carried on as though nothing happened. Those men ignored the shouting and turned their gazes towards the ruined building. Arcus wagered these were the magicians who had set up their wards.

“Over there!”

The entire group turned Arcus’s way at that call. One of the magicians stepped forward self-importantly and sneered. “Still trying to get in our way, Gown? Wait... you brought a load of kids with you? I hope you’re not expecting us to be their playmates. We’re busy.”

“What did you say?!”

The spy was clearly mocking Gown’s childish nature—an old standard among those unimpressed by his reputation.

“You know what to do,” said the magician.

Immediately, one of his men reached into a basket and released a cat.

When Gown had spoken about this group and their cats, Arcus imagined he was talking about regular house cats. This creature was twice if not three times the size of a domestic feline—a wildcat. If *this* was the kind of animal Gown feared, Arcus no longer found the phobia strange. It was only just smaller than a panther or cheetah. It looked agile, and with those strong jaws, it would only need to clamp them around a human’s neck to dispatch them immediately. Its fierce, golden eyes glinted in the darkness.

Arcus blinked, and Gown was now peering out from behind him.

“Th-That’s so unfair!”

“Who cares about fairness, as long as we win?” said the spy.

“Win?! Do you even understand the horrible things you’re doing?!”

“We understand, and we don’t care.”

“Dummies! I’ve got Arcus and his friends with me this time! They’re gonna

beat you up real good! They're the strongest ever!" Gown shouted.

"What can they do? They're just kids, you moron!"

"Go ahead and think they're useless! They'll show you!"

"That's right! We may be young, but we can fight!" Lecia said.

"Correct! So you should prepare yourselves for the worst!" Charlotte added.

Gown's words were clearly filling Arcus's companions with courage.

Obviously unaffected by the young girls' threats, the magician turned his gaze to Barbaros. "You with the pipsqueak pixie, too?"

"Turned out that way, yeah. Guess you could call me these kids' bodyguard," Barbaros said, pulling the giant cutlass from the sheath slung across his back. From where Arcus stood, it looked like a head-lobbing blade fit for an ogre.

Sue stepped forward and declared, "I'm not gonna stand back and let you treat this capital as your playground!"

The magician snorted and raised his right arm. Knives flitted from under the sleeves of the other spies.

"Fancy yourselves assassins, huh?" said Barbaros. "You guys are an interestin' bunch."

"Silence."

The spies moved all at once, running out and flitting this way and that unpredictably.

"Start with that girl, there! She'll be sorry she ever stood up to us!"

The spies closed in on Sue.

"Sue, get ba—"

Before Arcus could finish his warning, she released her intense aether. The extent of that power was far beyond the imagination of the average person. Even three state magicians together would fail to match it. It was so overwhelming that it drew lightning from the sky. The spies faltered and stumbled in the face of it.

“Do not underestimate me.” Her voice was icy.

She pulled her straight sword from its sheath and began to spin it in her hand. She leapt forward in a flash, ripping the nearest spy apart with the blade. Moonlight bounced from every angle of her sword every time she moved, the decorative cord around the pommel whipping this way and that. Sue’s body twirled and pranced around in front of the spies more elegantly than any dancer’s.

The spies’ arms flew free of their bodies; their hidden blades followed suit before decapitating their owners in their swift descent. A straight sword like hers shouldn’t have been suitable for ripping through flesh, and it wasn’t even long enough to strike its opponent directly, and yet she’d pulled off an otherwise impossible feat. It reminded Arcus of a certain sword technique from the man’s training known as yokogumo.

Sue leapt forward, pressing her onslaught against the oncoming spies. Using a pair of shoulders as a stepping stone, she somersaulted into the air, slashing another spy to ribbons, then spinning around him before he could find his footing and delivering a swift kick to his back. The spy flew through the air as though he were no lighter than a rubber ball and froze.

“A flurry of five departing spirits, lively as possessed puppets even after death. Your master is that heavenly silk, so dance to its delusions. Dance, dance, dance into the throes of insanity. Dance ’til your essence vanishes from my palm.”

“Deathbound Marionette.”



Artglyphs sparked into life and flew towards the collapsed spy. They coiled around his body as Sue twisted her arm out in front of her, her gaze cold. The corpse started to move clumsily under the command of her hand. It straightened up and hung in midair, posed as if it were held aloft by invisible strings. Its elbows were suspended to line up with its shoulders, and its legs hung limp underneath. Its thighs pointed outwards, its toes brushed the ground, and its head lolled to one side.

Sue moved her hand, causing the corpse's joints to jerk a few times before it danced swiftly towards the spy whose shoulders she'd vaulted. More than a dance, it was a frenzy. The puppet, no more than a blood-filled sack of flesh now, closed in on its target at an impossible speed.

"Guargh! Dammit!"

The corpse slammed into him; he struggled to rid himself of its weight. Sue used the opportunity to deliver a lunging slash.

"AAAAAAAARGH!"

There was more than enough power in the attack for its purpose. It sliced through both bodies as though they were paper, even ripping through the ruins behind them. With a crash, dust and dirt from the rubble billowed out from the ruins. Sue cleared the air with a swipe of her blade, then returned to spinning the weapon in her hand, anticipating her next attacker.

"Wh-What was that?"

"No way..."

Two of the spies gawked at her in awe.

Barbaros stroked his beard. "See what's gonna happen if you throw more men at us?"

"Ngh! Go for the other girl!" The other spies turned to Lecia.

Lecia had a sweet and docile appearance. Next to the energetic Sue and Charlotte, who was clearly a skilled fencer, she stood out like a sore thumb, especially against the backdrop of the slums. To them it must have looked like she was hiding behind Barbaros, making her an easy target—a woeful

misreading.

The spies dropped into low stances and rushed her. Already prepared, Lecia lifted her left arm into the air and began an incantation.

“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 all that is tucked under the sleeve of this unprejudiced left arm and vanquish the enemy before me!”

“Scrapped Impact!”

She couldn't have picked a more suitable spell for a battlefield so choked with debris. Arcus had taught her the spell himself and advised her to use it in places like this.

Artglyphs carried rubble and trash to her arm, making her look like a masked hero mid-transformation. Passing flotsam slammed into spies and narrowly missed others. Once her gigantic sleeve of debris was complete, Lecia brandished it like a whip.

“Wh—Even this kid's a magician?!”

“G-Get out of the way! Run!”

“Fly!” Lecia commanded.

The garbage did just that, blowing outwards over a wide range. It smashed into one spy after another, sending them sprawling to the ground. Lecia wasted no time following up.

“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.”

“The Flaming King's Path.”

This was a traditional spell of the Raytheft house. Arcus was amazed Lecia already knew how to use it, considering she had only mastered Flamrune a short while ago.

Red Artglyphs gathered behind Lecia before whooshing into a pillar of flame

all at once, as if fed by a vast bellows. They took on the shape of a human body, complete with a fiery headpiece and armor. The figure held a sword in its right hand and a shield in its left, its light dyeing the night air crimson. Its arms came forward to surround Lecia, as if to cradle her. Then it began to mimic the movements of her body.

It was an impressive spell. The size of the fire king meant that a single sweep of its sword had an incredible range, and with it standing behind Lecia, the enemy couldn't flank her. It was a perfect balance of offense and defense.

Overwhelmed by the figure of flame, the spies froze in place; Lecia took the opportunity to attack them mercilessly.

"I know I told her we couldn't hold back, but this is kinda ridiculous."

Lecia's attack was ruthless; even after devastating the enemy with Scrapped Impact, she was making full use of her aether to stamp out whatever was left. Maybe Arcus hadn't needed to ask if she was ready.

A single blow from that fiery sword turned the spies' bodies to charcoal in an instant. Those who escaped a direct hit were swept off their feet from the pressure. Some of the spies attacked with crossbows, but their bolts burned away the moment they came within reach of the king's shield. There was no way they could even land a hit. Lecia attacked them relentlessly, even when they gave up trying to get close. It was a nightmarish scene, and it lasted until Lecia finally pressed her offensive. At that moment, the fire king behind her vanished.

Arcus would have thought that Lecia couldn't keep it up anymore, if he didn't know how much aether she had. The only other thing he could think of was that her concentration lapsed.

"Now! Get her!"

The spies who had fled the flames a moment ago changed their course. They dived towards Lecia, the blades on their arms glinting in the moonlight.

"Lecia!" Arcus cried.

Just then, a large shadow reared up behind her.

“I gotcha.”

It was Barbaros. He stepped in front of Lecia to defend her, his cutlass wheeling through the air. The spies' bodies were torn apart, riven torsos and gleaming blades cast skyward.

Given Barbaros's titanic stature, if he wanted to, he could have cut through the ruin walls just as Sue had, if not deeper.

“Th-Thank you!” Lecia said.

“No worries. Just focus on the enemies ahead!”

“Captain!”

“You told me to keep an eye on her, right? So you go back to focusin' on the fight.”

I'm glad I picked him to look after my sister, thought Arcus. He's really showing himself to be a reliable ally!

Charlotte had her own share of the fight. It was her duty, as the daughter of a martial family and successor to the national fencing style. Barbaros aside, she was the oldest one here. She said she would help, and so to stand back and let the others fight alone was unthinkable. She needed to protect them.

What spurred her on more than anything else was the will to change. She didn't want to be the same helpless girl who allowed herself and her friend to be captured by the marquess anymore. She could fight back now. She would use everything she learned during her training for this skirmish. She was going to fight fearlessly, like Arcus had against Gaston's right-hand mercenary.

The blades the spies wielded were nothing to take lightly, but Charlotte had hours upon hours of serious daily combat practice with far deadlier sparring partners behind her. In fact, these spies were so unskilled that they only had their weapons to rely on. The holes in their defenses stood out plainly to her. Dodging a sweeping blade, Charlotte thrust out her rapier.

“Gah!”

Charlotte could feel the presence of another spy circling around to flank her.

“Gwah!”

She turned and dispatched him with her gleaming blade.

Okay...

Charlotte glanced over at her inspiration, who was just as embroiled in the melee. Just like before, he was having no trouble holding his own against full-grown adults. He parried and dodged, striking only when they showed an opening. He was more skilled than anybody she had seen in the training hall.

From what Charlotte heard from Lecia and from his letters, when he wasn't studying magic, he was sparring with Craib or Noah. She could believe that he would struggle more against an opponent his own age than an adult.

It was how he used space that impressed her most. He observed his opponent closely, never taking an unnecessary step, and always keeping a fixed distance between them. Everything was stacked in his opponent's favor. They were taller, their arms longer, and their weapons bigger. Somehow, he bent their advantages to his own ends.

With his cryptic footwork, the opponent misread the distance between them. They swung their swords uselessly. Then he would slip in close and deal a deadly blow, sometimes striking their chest, sometimes their neck. When that was impossible, he would go for the tendons in their arms and knock them off balance.

The way he used his off hand was also peculiar. Charlotte saw that gesture before at the marquess' estate. He would chant an incantation, make that gesture, and point a finger at the enemy, who would begin to bleed as if some unseen stiletto found its mark in them.

"Retre—" The spy's call was cut off by a dry crack.

Charlotte looked up. There was a small hole in the man's forehead. The sight filled her with confidence. At this rate, they would win.

She had forgotten that the spies themselves weren't the only danger they faced.

"Ugh! I didn't think I'd ever struggle against a *cat*!"

The wild cat was another matter entirely. Its agile movements were

impossible to follow as it bounded around in front of its enemy. It was always just out of reach of his sword, and it dodged his spells with ease. Arcus was clearly trying to work out a solution, Gown peering out from behind him.

“You can do it, Arcus! Now! Get him there! Quick!”

“Aaaaaah! Shuddup! And stop clinging to me!”

“But what if the cat gets me?”

“You’re in the way!” Arcus cried.

Two spies stepped towards the quarreling pair. One was the apparent leader, the magician who had made fun of Gown earlier. The other was a man wielding a sword. As the swordsman stepped forward, Susia cast a spell to launch a blade of wind at him. He dodged it, bending like a willow branch. Barbaros bolted forward with his cutlass, but the man parried him skillfully.

“Huh. That’s some fightin’ sense you got there.”

“That’s not the end of it either,” said the swordsman as flames erupted from his blade.

They licked at the metal like fire crawling from the window of a burning house. There were seals engraved in the sword. The flames grew long, twisting from the surface of the blade before flying towards Barbaros.

“Captain!” The moment Arcus shouted, Barbaros’s body was already engulfed in fire.

“Yowch!” Barbaros waved it away with his hands as if it were nothing more than a cloud of dust.

“Tch.” The swordsman lamented his attack’s impotence.

It had, at least, discouraged Barbaros from getting too close, though this was as much because of the swordsman’s talent as the flames. The spies were bringing out their best now: Sue and Lecia were locked in combat with the magician, Gown was following Arcus around, and Arcus was still preoccupied with the wild cat.

Charlotte failed to defend her friends before, but now things were different—and she worked hard to make them so.

“Now!”

Charlotte used her gift of foresight to sense the cat’s movements. It screeched as she skewered it in a full-bore fleche. She felt a prick of guilt at hurting an animal, but she didn’t have time to worry about that now.

“Thank you, Lady Charlotte!”

“I shall go forth and attack. Arcus, please back me up!”

Arcus didn’t hesitate to open his mouth.

“Grant me the power of wind’s magic and wind’s sword in accordance with my heart. Ill-fortuned wheel. Disturbed convoy. Neverending drive. Unexpected road. Amplify Gown’s voice, parch the air, and freeze the wind. Set the streets alive with screams. The sword is at its sharpest, now shred it into shards.”

“Auster’s Sword.”

“Hey, I’m in your spell!” Gown cheered from behind Arcus.

Artglyphs appeared in the air and began to wrap themselves around the blade of Charlotte’s rapier before spinning rapidly. Before she knew it, it transformed into a whirlwind.

“Wh-What is happening?”

“Strike with it, Lady Charlotte!” Arcus said.

“O-Of course! Thank you!”

The wind coiled around the rapier as though it were the eye of the storm. Charlotte was amazed that it didn’t seem to be harming her at all. She turned to the spies’ swordsman, ready to face him head on. It wasn’t long before her foresight kicked into action.

She would miss, too taken aback by the strength of Arcus’s magic. Misjudging the distance between her and her opponent, she wouldn’t get in close enough. The flames from the man’s sealed arms would engulf her and rip her body apart. Every image her foresight showed ended in her failure. In other words, if she avoided those outcomes, she would win.

Those problems were easy to solve.

She would account for the magic's strength and move so that it wouldn't go after the wrong target. She would consider the length added to her rapier when measuring the distance between her and the swordsman. She would use the winds enveloping her sword to sweep away the flames from his.

All that remained was making sure her strike connected. Her opponent didn't know just how powerful Arcus's spell was; he would count on the strength of his flames to overcome it.

Charlotte thrust her rapier forward to keep him back, and he matched her thrust with his own. The blades met in midair, marking the start of their battle. The flames and his sword were swept out of position by the rapid whirlwind. Charlotte and her opponent staggered backwards.

Taking up their arms, they faced each other again.

"You little brat!"

The swordsman's second strike came from below.

Now!

Normally she would have trouble meeting an attack like that head-on, but right now she was so focused that she managed to parry him with a downward-sweeping prise de fer.

"Gaaaaaaaah!"

The wind weakened his sword's momentum, catching the flames up in its rotation and dissipating every last ember. The man was unable to keep hold of his weapon in the face of the whirlwind.

"Gah!"

The wind forced his arm and the sword in it away. Charlotte didn't miss her chance.

"Burning Thrust!"

This was a technique from the nation's school of fencing. The attacker spun their body before transferring their momentum to the tip of the rapier, causing the opponent paralyzing burns as though from real flames.

The spy wouldn't be able to hold his sword properly for a while, especially not with the force of the wind against him. Still in her fighting stance, Charlotte dropped into a low stance, until her torso was mere inches away from the ground. The man was above her now, and slightly to her left. Charlotte delivered the upward blow, her sword wrapped in fiery wind.

The man screamed in agony as the burning blade twisted in his flesh. Charlotte flung his body away, and he passed out.

Arcus watched as Charlotte took down the swordsman.

"Impossible. That's not the sort of magic you can cast with an incantation that short and with that little aether!" the magician exclaimed.

The swordsman's weapon wasn't just any blade either. Not only was it sharp, but the seals engraved in it were of the utmost quality, making the flames it put out even fiercer. There was something that the magician didn't realize, however.

"That's right," Arcus said. "That spell was likely less powerful than the magic in those seal arms."

"Then why—"

"Because we've got Gown on our side."

"Gown?"

"That's right. Gown's with us, and he wants us to win this fight."

"What, so any incantations which mention him are going to be more powerful?"

"That makes perfect sense, right? If we're calling on the power of a supernatural being, then the closer he is, the more powerful the spell."

The magician fell silent, only able to grind his teeth in frustration. Arcus took that as a sign that he understood the logic behind it loud and clear. If anything, it showed that he had a deep understanding of magic.

This magician was now the only opponent left, and yet he showed no signs of retreat. Did he realize there was no way for him to escape now? Somehow, Arcus doubted he was a noble enough character to face his death head-on like

this.

“I’ve played your silly games for long enough.” The magician pulled a small vial out of his breast pocket.

He held it up to the moonlight and grinned at the liquid inside; in a moment of insight, Arcus gathered that it must have been the refined form of the herb at the root of this mess. It was clearly the last trick he had up his sleeve. If he drank that concoction, he would be invincible to physical attacks—and since he was a magician, he didn’t need a physical weapon to fight, either.

“Brother!” said Lecia.

“Don’t worry! There’s still a way to fight him!”

Arcus not only had a plan, but the aether he needed to carry it out. There were two unaccounted-for variables. The first was whether his spell would affect the opponent. The second was whether it could slip past his spells.

“The second I drink this stuff, I’ll kill every one of you! Think about it! You won’t have done anything to help anybody!”

“You shouldn’t use that stuff!” Gown shouted.

The man roared with laughter at the elf’s warning before tipping the contents of the vial down his throat. The effects were instant. The magician’s body became hazy, like the sudden rise of mist shortly after dawn. Sue flung a small knife she had been concealing at the magician, but it passed right through his body.

“It didn’t even hurt him.” Sue narrowed her eyes.

“Of course not!” The magician’s guffaw echoed through the night. “You’re going to regret playing at heroes now, kids!”

The magician opened his mouth, and Arcus waited for the oncoming incantation.

Instead, the man screamed, his body changing once again.

“That’s why I told him not to use it!” Gown yelled, barely heard over the man’s cries of agony.

The magician's misty figure became solid once more, but the changes didn't stop there. A gloomy luminescence began to emanate from his body, and it wasn't long before bands of hex appeared around him.

"Aaaah! Aaaaaaaargh!"

His screams were beyond the point of pain now. He clutched at his head, achieving nothing but pulling out his hair as he cried out in anguish. He was clearly no longer in control of his own body.

"It's started!" Gown cried.

"This the same thing that happened to that guy this afternoon?" Barbaros asked.

"That's right! It feeds on the hex and the aether from the magical beings around it and becomes a hex fiend! Right now, it's only a near-fiend. How powerful it becomes depends on a lot of stuff..."

"Really?"

"Yes, really! Really really!"

Arcus hadn't seen Gown get this upset in all their time together so far. This wasn't exactly the same case the children witnessed earlier.

"He's become bigger! And very quickly, too!" Charlotte called.

"We have to stop him before he becomes a full hex fiend!" Gown cried.

"How do we stop something like that?" asked Lecia.

"If we destroy the body holding it together, it won't become a hex fiend. I can deal with things after that. It's just..."

"What?"

"There isn't much I can help with now. I'm only allowed to interfere when it comes to the promise! That means dealing with the herb, catching the perpetrators, and punishing them! But when it becomes a hex fiend, there's nothing I can do!"

"Uh, what's stoppin' you? Or you just wanna leave us to deal with the hard part?" Barbaros said.

“I know how it might look, but I can’t break the promise,” Gown replied glumly.

Arcus knew of legends and fairy tales from the man’s world where a promise could bar supernatural beings from acting. Perhaps elves like Gown were kept under similar rules, so that they couldn’t use their extraordinary powers however they liked. That was how it sounded from his earlier explanation, anyway.

“Why not?” Lecia asked.

“Elves and phantoms used to play a major role in solving problems, but that was a long time ago now. After that, we passed the world over to your humans, and the most we can do is support you when there’s trouble. We can’t break that rule.”

In that case, it was obvious why the elf needed to ask for a human’s help. If something truly unforeseen were to happen, Gown wouldn’t be able to deal with it by himself, so he probably wanted to take a human with him just in case.

The magician’s body continued to grow as it soaked in ambient hex, even as they spoke. He was already taller than a two-story building. Even out here, it wouldn’t be long before he attracted public attention and set off a panic.

“That thing is gonna destroy the entire capital at this rate,” Sue remarked coolly.

Arcus knew that tone, coming from a magician as powerful as Sue, meant they had only moments to act; they were already markedly out of their depth.

“This, uh, ain’t lookin’ good. I sure think we oughta do somethin’, but how’re we gonna get close when he’s that huge?” Barbaros scratched his head worriedly, as though they were dealing with nothing more serious than a petulant child.

“I am really not sure what we can do,” Lecia agreed.

“If it were me, I’d say we should give up and run.”

Arcus considered the captain’s words. If only they had a state magician or two on their side, bringing down an opponent like this would be no problem, but it

would take far too long to fetch one. It was always possible that one would realize what was happening and come of their own accord, but there was no guarantee out here in the slums. The chance was too remote to even consider. Their enemy was big, but not yet big enough to be spotted from that far away.

Arcus exchanged an anxious glance with the others. Gown was still looking up at the huge magician, the concern raw in his gaze.

Finally, Sue let out a determined sigh and stepped forward. “Okay. I’m gonna —”

“Arcus.” Not taking his eyes off the near-fiend, Gown beckoned to Arcus with a sleeve.

“What’s up?”

“Come here, quick!”

“Uh, but—”

“Quickly!” Gown’s beckoning became more frantic.

Arcus did as he was told, as their companions looked to the elf with hopeful gazes. Once he was there, Gown darted behind his back.

What’s he doing? We don’t have time for messing around!

Gown put his sleeves on Arcus’s back. “Okay, let’s go!”

“Huh?!” Arcus felt large streams of liquid flowing down his back. “Gah?”

He bent over backwards at the uncomfortable sensation—but he already knew what it was. Any magician would recognize it, and it was something Arcus had been after for a long, long time.

It was aether. Almost enough aether to put him on equal footing with his sister. Sensing the movement of such a huge reserve of aether, the other four stared at Arcus wide-eyed.

“G-Gown! What did you do?” Arcus spun around to face the elf.

“I don’t do this for just anyone! But this means you can beat that guy, right?”

“Uh, I dunno about that. I mean, just ‘cause I’ve got enough aether doesn’t mean I can put it to its best use...”

If aether was the only issue here, Sue and Lecia would already have been able to act. They wouldn't be at the loss they were if the solution were so simple. Arcus looked at Gown in confusion, but the elf didn't say a word, his eyes merely softening in a cheeky smile.

"Have you got any spells that can get us outta this, Arcus?" asked Sue.

"Um, I guess I've got some that might work..."

"What are you waiting for then?"

"I've never used them before because I've never had enough aether."

The spells he spoke of were totally untested. He just put the incantations together to amuse himself.

Barbaros gave him a comforting pat on the shoulder. "You don't really have a choice but to give it a try, right?"

"It's not that simple. Not with this amount of aether in me. If I mess up, there's no telling the extent of the damage I'll do."

"Sure, but if you do nothin', there's no doubt that monster's gonna kill us, right? The elf can't do nothin' to help. There's only one option here."

Arcus didn't reply. Was Barbaros really okay with entrusting his fate to a twelve-year-old boy?

"You can do it Arcus!" Gown cheered. "You've been studying real hard! Your smarts will pull you through!"

"But Gown—"

"Give it a try, kid. You only get one shot at times like this. That's how it's always been, and that's how it always will be, right?"

"He's right, Arcus," Sue said. "There are tons of examples in the Chronicles of victories won by taking a gamble."

"The elf thinks you can do it too. C'mon, show these ladies you're a real man!"

"I know I am unreliable, but I shall help you!" Lecia said.

Charlotte sighed. "May I say something?"

“Lady Charlotte?”

“If you do not think you can do it, Arcus, there is no shame in running away.”

“Sorry?”

Arcus looked back into Charlotte’s gentle gaze. Was she offering him that path out of kindness? Whichever it was, now he was offered a choice, he was sure of his answer.

“I’m going to fight, My Lady,” he said.

“In that case, you may rely on me to be by your side until the very end.”

Arcus had the sense she already knew how he would respond. Arcus looked at his companions in turn. They nodded at him. His acceptance of the situation along with the new aether flowing through him lifted Arcus’s spirits a little.

“Be ready to back me up,” he said.

Sue and Lecia nodded.

Charlotte glanced at the rapier in her hand. “What should I do with this wind, Arcus?”

“Let’s see... Please hit the magician with it at the right time.”

It was a vague answer, but Arcus trusted that Charlotte’s judgment would lead her to do the right thing.

“Understood.”

“Gown, I’m gonna head for the tallest building over there,” said Arcus.

“Okay! I’ll make a path for you!”

“Thanks. *O, fresh blood in the vessel. O, flesh and bone that make up man. Continue down your well-traveled paths. Fill this body with unyielding strength and quench my unending thirst. As my voice opens the door, may this flesh and blood awaken.*”

“*Tenfold Performance.*”

Artglyphs swirled around Arcus’s body before melting away into the air. The next second, he felt power flowing through him. It was a similar feeling to when

he was in high spirits and unable to keep still.

Arcus thought that spells to increase one's physical abilities would be commonplace, but so far he had yet to come across any texts referencing anything like that.

The next second he was surrounded by mysterious floating balls of flame from Gown's lantern. Those balls were soon encased in lanterns of their own, each accompanied by a Gown.

"Huh?"

"Now there's somethin' you don't see every day!"

Arcus's companions stared up at the Gowns in astonishment. They were all around. Some of them appeared close by. Some stood atop broken roofs. Some in the corners of ruins. Some behind broken windows. They all began to chant together.

"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."

Countless brown Artglyphs filled the air. They gathered to form a large, thick pillar with a pointed end like a spear, which pierced into the ground. The earth rumbled, and another pillar broke up through the ground, spinning out in the opposite direction of the Artglyphs from before. The pillar twisted, and its tip grew out towards the point Arcus was aiming for.

Though the tip hadn't yet reached Arcus's destination, he stepped onto the pillar anyway.

"Arcus."

Arcus turned to find Barbaros beckoning to him. The pirate bent his legs and put his fists together as though preparing to receive a volleyball.

"Get over here. I'll throw you up there."

"Okay!"

Barbaros caught Arcus's foot in his hand and then launched him into the air.

"Gaaaaargh!" Barbaros yelled.

With the force behind Barbaros's powerful toss and his physical abilities strengthened by magic, Arcus took a massive leap. He flew along the pillar of earth up towards the sky. Eventually, he lost his height and caught the pillar with his foot, running up along it. He followed those steps towards the heavens, aiming for the best position to fire his spell from.

Bands of hex chased after him from all directions. With all the aether flowing through him now, the hex must have been desperate to take it from him. Arcus ducked to dodge those striking from above, and jumped to avoid those swiping at his feet from below, but he never stopped moving forward, where more hex waited to ambush him.

He *tsked* at the sight of the enemy's relentless defenses, when all at once they were destroyed before his eyes by a stream of fire. The attack came from behind. It must have been Lecia, backing him up with Flamrune. The fiery spears flew through the air from below at regular intervals. Charlotte knocked tendrils of hex out of the air with Auster's Sword.

Following the path Gown made for him, Arcus eventually reached his destination. There was nothing there but piles of sooty rubble and the dark silence of the night. Sol Glasses twinkled like stars in the distance. If they didn't defeat the near-fiend now, those stars would extinguish.

The hex still pursued Arcus relentlessly. There were surprisingly few places he could use as cover on top of this building.

"Tch."

What do I do now?

Anxiety, fear, and every sensible bone in his body threatened to overwhelm him in a split second. Just then, an incantation reached his ears.

"Lifeless luster. Breakable film. Here shines a small light of hope. Though the armor is plated, it lacks durability."

He barely had time to register that it was a defensive spell before Artglyphs

spread out to form a hemisphere in front of him. They transformed into a thin film of light, creating a rounded wall. They cut off the hex just before it reached Arcus, deflecting the bands away.

“Arcus!” Just as he registered who the voice belonged to, it spoke again, resonating from above him. “You can’t let your guard down like that!”

He turned to look at the black-haired girl. “S-Sue? What are you doing here?”

“I just felt like coming up here!” Sue winked and stuck out her tongue at him.

“Don’t you know it’s dangerous?”

“This whole place is dangerous! Doesn’t matter if I’m up here or down there.”

“I guess...”

Sue had clearly made up her mind. She moved around behind Arcus.

“Remember that you’re not alone in this fight. I’m right here.”

“Sue...”

“Let me handle the defense. You go all out with your attack!”

“Got it! I’m counting on you,” Arcus said, the reassurance of her presence warming his chest.

He felt powerful enough to do anything right now.

Is this how it feels to have so much aether?

He almost let out an envious sigh.

But this wasn’t the time for envy. He had to prepare his spell. A spell which would launch a pressurized bundle of particles. Call it a beam, call it a laser, the idea at the root of it—abundant in fiction and the dreams of children raised on anime and hero shows—hung faintly out of reach of the man’s world’s technology. There was a strong possibility that this kind of power would remain fiction forever.

This world was different.

Even if science couldn’t recreate such an effect, this world had magic, and Arcus had the overflowing aether lent to him by Gown. Arcus had everything he

needed. All that was left was to see whether he had enough knowledge and creativity to pull it off.

His target was two hundred meters ahead. He was going to defeat it using everything he'd learned up until now. He held out his hand towards his opponent. Could he do it? Would his attack reach? The raw power pulsing through him was his answer.

He *could* do it. He just needed to say the words.

Let this work. Let me achieve the dream.

He felt someone's hand on his arm.

"Raised crown. Ever-shining light of sagacity. Abyss of understanding. May the beautiful weight of reality crush the naivety of mercy. Victory is dazzling glory. This kingdom is an unshakeable foundation. All knowledge flows from the tree of paradise. Light of the heavens, desires of the adoring. Let these beams of luminescence grant you unending light, endless brightness, and eternal death."

"Ohr Ein Sof."

That dream which so many yearned for was within his grasp.

Having done what they could to support Arcus, Charlotte and the others dodged the whips of hex as they followed Gown to safe ground. She watched with Lecia from below as Arcus faced the monster born of cursed power. The remaining spies lay unconscious around them. Barbaros, who had carried them, was rolling his shoulder, checking for damage. Gown was looking up, watching over Arcus's fight. Sue went to meet him up there.

Charlotte let out a sudden sigh.

"Somethin' troublin' you, Milady?"

"I feel helpless. If I were a magician, I might be able to do more... However, it seems all I ever do is rely on the magic of others to save me."

"You're not helpless. You did a ton for Arcus!"

"I am not so certain. If that is true, then why is it that I can do nothing but watch?"

“Sometimes that’s how it is. But if you’re thinkin’ of him and rootin’ for him, then I’m sure he’ll recognize that.”

“That isn’t enough. I swear that you shall see me fighting by his side on the next occasion.”

“Oho? You’ve got your work cut out for you, Milady.”

“I am well aware.”

“I feel the same way,” Lecia said. “I feel as though, if I do not put in the work, he shall leave me behind.”

“You know his power better than anyone, huh?”

“Yes. Just take a look.”

Charlotte and Barbaros followed Lecia’s gaze back to Arcus and Sue on top of the building. Vast reams of aether gathered where they stood, distorting and drawing in the air around it. An incantation was uttered, and a tiny spark set things rolling. Artglyphs prickling with lightning flashed into existence intermittently, and the vibrations from the spell sent dust flying up into the air.

Barbaros grimaced, sensing that they were about to witness something big. “Just what kinda crazy spell is that kid tryin’ to cast?”

The golden Artglyphs glimmered, light scattering from them like dust as they converged into concentric circles. They surrounded Arcus and began to spin, their golden light never fading. They were so bright that the rooftop looked like it was bathed in the midday sun. Eventually Arcus reached out his hands, and the circles aligned themselves in front of his palm.

A ball of light formed at their end. It grew gradually bigger, as if it was sucking away the energy of every other light. It was like meteors had flocked from the night sky to gather in front of his hands.

In the face of that power, the beast seemed to realize that danger was imminent. It reached out a hand tangled in hex towards Arcus, but the weight of its rapidly-growing body made it sluggish, like some behemoth struggling to breach the surface of the ocean. Bands of hex unraveled from its arm in an attempt to reach Arcus, but it was already too late.

The ball of light let out a blinding flash. The next second, a ray flew from Arcus's hand towards the beast. It pierced through the approaching hex, ripped through the creature's arm, and burned out from its back. The stream of luminous stars cut through the clouds and disappeared into the darkness of the night sky.

"I knew I picked the right boy to ask for help!"

"What is happening to the beast, Gown?"

Gown gave Lecia a reassuring nod. The near-fiend convulsed once. Then, as if freed from the hex, it started to melt away, no longer recognizable as a human shape.

"He did it..."

"To think a kid like him could destroy a brute that big! I can't help but laugh!" Barbaros gave a hearty guffaw. For a long time, it seemed he was unable to stop, as though overcome with a bout of madness.

The creature's arm and the bands of hex started to collapse towards Arcus's perch.

"Gown! Arcus and Lady Susia are in trouble!" Charlotte cried.

"Don't worry! They'll be fine!"

As the building crumbled under the weight of the creature's body, the two children were flung into the air. Arcus was holding Sue close to him. Proving Gown's words true, the two of them floated gently in the air, unbound by the pull of the ground. Sue looked astonished to find they weren't falling. Arcus brought her down to where Charlotte and the others were waiting, and at last they were on solid ground again.

With its host's body destroyed, the beast's unending growth was stopped. A beautiful melody rang out through the night sky. It was Gown's song. His voice was so pure and clear that it sounded like an instrument from the heavens. Arcus doubted he could ever listen to any human sing again and find it beautiful after hearing Gown's melody.

No matter how beautiful the elf's voice, there was a clear note of sadness in

his song, for it was a requiem. As Arcus and the others were enraptured, the disastrous swathes of hex that filled the air began to scatter, sent away by the power of Gown's voice.

The hex melted into the star-filled sky with the song's last notes.

"What's that?" Arcus gasped as the beast's body dissolved into white dust.

That dust was finer than the sands of a beach.

"This is...salt," Barbaros said, scooping up some of the dust on his finger and giving it a lick.

"Salt?"

"I wouldn't have licked that if I were you..." Arcus said.

"You gotta have courage to sail the seas!"

Salt...

There was a legend in the man's world about a human turning into a pillar of salt—but that wasn't all.

"The flute of destruction echoes and calls light down from the heavens. In the wake of grace's light, all shall crumble into white dust before the judgment.' That's a passage from *The Birth of Heaven and Earth*, and *The Prophecy of Shadows*," Gown explained.

There must have been some part of it in his song.

Just then, Sue returned from her stupor, and her eyes lit up. "Wait, wait! Did you see that spell Arcus used?! That big light thingy?! And then we *flew*! Why didn't you tell me you could do that stuff, Arcus?!"

She's like this even after we barely escaped with our lives, huh?

"It was magnificent. I shouldn't be surprised if state magicians would struggle to perform such a feat, whether they had Gown's help or not!"

"I really couldn't have done it *without* Gown, My Lady."

"Perhaps, but you certainly deserve credit for coming up with the spell."

"Brother, I would love to know how you managed to fly! I *must* try it for

myself!” Lecia sprang up to Arcus, a fiery enthusiasm in her eyes that matched Sue’s.

“Don’t we have more important things to worry about right now, guys?” Arcus said. “You can ask me about it later.”

“Oh, you’re right,” Lecia said, taking a sensible step back.

“No! Tell me now! Right now!” Sue demanded.

“Why are you always like this whenever there’s magic involved?” Arcus sighed, attempting to calm her down before things devolved into a full-blown tantrum.

They needed to decide what to do with the spies. Some were already white mountains of salt, while others simply lay dead. However, there were a few still breathing. It was probably the ideal choice to tie them up now while they were still unconscious.

Gown tottered up to the fallen spies. He held his long sleeves over each of them before muttering something and moving on to the next.

When he finished seeing to all of them, he let out a satisfied sigh. “That should do it!”

“What did you just do, Gown?” asked Lecia.

“I filled their minds up with fog so they’d forget all about the herb! Now we can rest easy!” Gown replied, his eyes narrowing with relief. “I was supposed to punish them too, but I think I can leave that to the humans.”

“Yeah, that’d be better for us too.”

Arcus wanted to leave himself the opportunity to dissect the spies’ plan so that he could better defend the aethometer in the future, and he was sure the Guild would want a report on what happened. He didn’t know what Gown had in store for them, but at least this way he wouldn’t need to worry about losing the opportunity to interrogate them.

“Thanks!”

Gown pulled a rope out of thin air, which he let hang there for a while before directing it to bind the survivors.

Barbaros sighed. “I guess it’s over, huh? Y’know, I never thought I’d end up banding with a bunch of Lainur kids to catch some ruffians.”

“Thank you, Barbaros!” Gown said.

“No worries, bud. The bedlam I saw out here is gonna stick with me for the rest of my life, so it was worth it. Plus, now you owe me a favor!”

“What?! No fair!”

“Yes fair! C’mon, don’t paint me like I’m the bad guy here!”

“But you weren’t doing it for me! You did it ’cause Arcus caught your eye!”

“Top marks for your memory, but I’m still gonna call in a favor, okay?”

“Okay... I guess I’ll remember that, too!”

“I suppose that means we are finished here,” Charlotte said, stepping up next to Arcus.

“Yes, My Lady.”

“You must be exhausted, Brother!”

Arcus didn’t respond.

“Brother?”

It wasn’t long until the others realized Arcus was in a daze too. They turned their curious gazes on him.

It was over. It was finished. Every time somebody voiced that thought, the tiny speck of uneasiness in Arcus’s chest continued to grow. If it was really over, why did he feel like this? They defeated the group Gown was chasing. They put a stop to their plans to steal information about the aethometer. It sounded conclusive, so why didn’t it *feel* conclusive? Something was amiss—but what was it?

The resolution they’d arrived at was too cleanly won to call this “done with.” Admittedly, they’d had Gown on their side, and that could account for how quickly they had tied things up. He had already known everything vital by the time he asked for Arcus’s help.

Speaking of the spies, presumably they had been through intensive training,

so why was it that they were so easily apprehended? By *children*, nonetheless (supernatural aid notwithstanding). Sue and Charlotte were powerful, of course, and Barbaros was a wild card. The battle wasn't easy, by any means. It wasn't *easy*...but shouldn't it have cost them something?

"Hey, Sue. If these guys are stopped, who d'you think is gonna benefit from it?"

"Huh? What kinda question is that?"

"It just kind of feels to me like...it was only *natural* that we were able to stop them."

"Natural?" Sue fell silent as she considered his words. Sue was wise beyond her years. Arcus knew that if she seriously thought about the question, she would come up with a good answer.

"Are you not overthinking things, Brother?"

"I might be. It just doesn't feel right. Like it was all too easy..."

"That is simply because things went well," said Charlotte.

"That's what I mean, My Lady. I can't help but think that things went *too* well."

"I am afraid I don't quite follow..."

Arcus began to explain, this time addressing everyone. "It's nothing major. To put it simply, it's a question of balance. These are trained spies. Meanwhile, we're a bunch of kids who know nothing about espionage. Even with Gown and the Captain, don't you find it strange that we could find and take our enemy down so easily?"

"That was all thanks to Gown, was it not?" Charlotte said.

"Yes, that's how we made it here. They knew that Gown was guiding us too, or they wouldn't have prepared a cat. But they *never* ran away. Why not, if they knew we were coming?"

Right up until the final magician became a near-fiend, the spies had had several opportunities to retreat. If he were in their shoes, Arcus would have bailed the moment Sue revealed the extent of her power, but not one of the

men made to escape. Spies were supposed to value information above all else, so why didn't they run to keep it safe?

"That's an interestin' way of seein' things," Barbaros said. "You think there's someone behind all this pullin' the strings, is it?"

"Yeah, in which case there's something more to all of this. Maybe they changed their plans in reaction to Gown's or the captain's involvement, but that change isn't immediately obvious. I think it's quite possible that they allowed us to capture these men on purpose."

"That makes sense," said Barbaros, scratching at the beard on his chin. "Hey, Gown. The tombs these guys were diggin' up were all in the north, right?"

"Yeah, that's right. In the area we call Alnorsace. That's around where you put the border."

Sue was checking something with some of the spies. Suddenly realizing something, her expression grew dark. "The Iron Rose of the north is staying at His Majesty's castle right now."

"The Iron Rose?"

"Never heard of her? Darnénes. She leads the Eldyne Stronghold up north."

"Uh..." Even after Barbaros's brief explanation, Arcus didn't have a clue.

"Meifa Darnénes," said Sue. "She governs the stronghold city of Eldyne and serves on the Northern Confederation's consulate. She's here on a diplomatic visit."

"Dark blonde, military uniform?"

"You *do* know her?"

"I saw her when I went to the Guild earlier. The Guildmaster was showing her around, so I thought she had to be super important."

It never crossed Arcus's mind that she might have been from the north.

"Lady Susia," Charlotte began. "Do you mean to suggest the Iron Rose is behind all of this?"

"No, that's not it."

Arcus glanced at her, surprised.

“Think about it, Charlotte. If we got spies from the north causing trouble down here and word got out, who d’you think would be blamed?”

“Why, I should think it would be Meifa Darnénes, My Lady.”

“Right. But the Iron Rose isn’t overly popular with the other leaders in the north. Suppose this was all part of a plot to remove her from power?”

“That sounds plausible.”

Gown tilted his head in thought. “I don’t really know about this kinda stuff, but if that’s true, it shouldn’t be your guys’ problem, right?”

“I mean, if you put it that way, I guess you’re right.”

Even if the children were concerned with such matters, there wasn’t much they could do. Once they handed these guys over to the officials, they could leave the rest up to the people in charge. They could theorize all they wanted to, but at the end of the day, it was out of their hands.

“Hey, imagine it *was* our job to deal with this kinda problem. What would you guys do with this lot?” Sue asked.

“Huh?” Arcus blinked.

“Well, first I would determine their motive, and then use their capture to curry favor with the Iron Rose...I suppose,” suggested Lecia.

“We could also have them tried in this kingdom,” said Charlotte.

That made sense. While their capture could be used for political advantage, if the kingdom wished to keep a favorable relationship with the Northern Confederation, sweeping all of this under the rug would be a good way to do it.

“What d’you think, Arcus?” Sue asked.

“I guess it depends what this consul is like. If she’s clever, it might be best to hand these guys over and expose their crimes to remove her from power. If not, it would be a better idea to use their capture to create obligation, or just pretend nothing happened.”

“Huh...” Sue fell into a thoughtful silence.

“Hey, that makes sense.” Barbaros smiled, obviously impressed with Arcus’s response.

As for Lecia and Charlotte, it seemed they didn’t quite grasp what he meant.

“Would you mind explaining further?”

“Yes, My Lady. Before a competent foreign leader even does anything to directly harm another kingdom, they are already considered a powerful political enemy. Things become much simpler if they are incompetent to start with. Of course, between Lainur, the Northern Confederation, and the Empire, there are several other factors to consider, such as geography and military matters, so it isn’t as simple as it sounds.”

In the man’s world too, there was a philosophy to criticize competent foreign diplomats and praise the incompetent ones. Through that criticism, the competent diplomat could be pulled from power, putting the criticizing nation in an advantageous position, while praising the incompetent diplomats would keep them in their post, allowing the same nation to keep themselves in their favorable position. The same idea was at play in Arcus’s response.

“That sounds rather underhanded, if you ask me,” said Charlotte.

“Maybe, but it works. For countries, at least. For a ship, you need a captain who knows what he’s doin’, or you’ll find yourself at the bottom of the sea!” Barbaros laughed, but Arcus wasn’t sure if that was a true reflection of his mood.

“What do you think, Sue?” he asked.

“From what you said, I think it’d be best not to make a big deal of it. It’s better to let the Northern Confederation remain a threat to discourage the Empire from expediting its military efforts.”

“So you’re saying it would be bad for the Kingdom if the north was weakened?”

“That’s right.”

“Wait, why are we talking about this anyway?”

“Hey, you started it!” Sue smiled, but it vanished instantly. “Who’s there?!”

“Ha ha!”

Several mysterious figures appeared from the shadows. At first, Arcus thought they must be guards watching over her from the shadows, but...

“You guys are here, too?”

“Yo, we’ve been twiddling our thumbs for ages!”

“You knew we were here, right Captain?”

“Aye.” Barbaros grinned.

Sue frowned at her guards suspiciously. “Where’s Lisa?”

“We’re here because she said she had something else important to do, My Lady.”

“Oh? I think you know what to do.”

“Yes, My Lady.”

She must’ve meant for the guard to summon Lisa. The name was familiar to Arcus.

“What did you just order him to do? It was kinda scary...”

“Don’t worry about it.” Sue turned to Gown. “You saw those people running away just now, right?”

Arcus’s eyes widened. Were there still others who were spying on them?

Gown didn’t seem concerned. “Yeah, but don’t worry! I’m already after them! They don’t have any cats, and I’ve got my pack!”

“I guess we’re good, then.”

“Yup! Thanks so much for your help today, everyone!”

Things were calming down, and it looked like it was time to leave.

“Arcus,” Barbaros called.

“What’s the matter, Captain?”

“Wanna come with me?”

“With you?”

Barbaros nodded. "That's right. I'd love to have someone like you on board."

"You sure? I'm just a kid. What can I do?"

"Fulfill my dream, that's what!" A wistful look crossed his eyes. "We're after somethin' big. You wanna come with us to get it?"

"What is this 'big thing'?"

"Everything. Everything in the world."

"*Everything?*" Inexplicable goosebumps sprang up along Arcus's skin. All he knew was Barbaros's words were a hundred percent serious.

"It's not like we're lookin' to control absolutely everythin'. I'm not interested in makin' some kinda perfect world or nothin'. I just wanna be top dog. That's all." A grin appeared on his face. "Well, Arcus? You got ambitions, right? All men gotta dream big. Why don't you share mine with me?"

Arcus fell silent. There could be no shadier invitation, and yet the captain's smile stirred him, and his large, outstretched hand shone brightly. The man was completely serious about his offer. Arcus could see himself taking that hand. It fascinated him. Perhaps it was divine intervention which made the choice for him.

"You don't think I'd have something to say about this?"

It was Sue.

"You mean you do, little lady?"

"Of course I do! I've got the highest social position of everyone here!"

"That gives you a right to share your opinion, does it?"

"Yup! Arcus isn't going anywhere!"

Barbaros paused. Then, to Arcus's surprise, he took a step back and laughed. "Okay, maybe I got a little ahead of myself. Forget what I said, kid."

He shook his hand flippantly, as though it was all a joke.

Sue then bowed her head politely, as though making sure the matter was closed. "Thank you for your assistance in this matter, Captain Barbaros zan Grandon."

“Knew who I was, huh?”

“I make a point of memorizing the faces of important figures from foreign lands. Not that it takes much to remember a giant like you.”

“True, true,” Barbaros laughed. “I stand out pretty badly, right? Anyway, who’re you to need to remember people like me?”

Sue glared at him and didn’t reply.

“Ah, guess I don’t need to know, huh?” Barbaros cackled and turned to leave, but not before making one final remark. “If you want somethin’, you gotta take it by any means possible. That means I’m comin’ back for you later, Arcus.”

A man fled through the capital in the dead of night, running along roofs and occasionally ducking down into alleyways to stay out of sight. He ran as fast as he could, with no regard for the countrymen and co-conspirators he left behind. He never considered them allies in the first place. They were mere pawns to be discarded once their role was fulfilled—no, not even that. They were to be used until they reached their breaking point, and then until there wasn’t a bone nor a hair left to expend.

The events of the night took the man by surprise. He had hoped to infiltrate the Magician’s Guild so that he might learn what trickery had enabled Lainur’s magicians’ sudden leap forward, but the Guild was heavily guarded by the time he arrived. When he took Death’s Tonic to aid in his mission, the Guild transformed into a labyrinth, and he never made it to his destination.

Gown even found himself some allies and launched an attack. Those allies were just children, but they possessed enough power to give the most proficient magicians a run for their money, and the man’s forces were wiped out in the blink of an eye. The man never anticipated the tonic’s transformative effect on the last of his magicians.

These upsets aside, the bigger, more important pieces were falling into place. The children just needed to hand the remaining spies to the authorities, and Meifa would be blamed for the incident both domestically and internationally. These “spies” were untrained dunces. Even the lightest forms of torture would be enough for them to spill everything they knew—all of it lies spoon-fed to them in their mission briefings. All the man needed to do now was escape

Lainur and report his success to his master. First, he would return to the alternative hiding spot he prepared and wait for his opportunity.

That was his intention when he ran into three figures blocking his path. An icy voice snaked out of the darkness.

“I am afraid this path is closed.”

The intention was clear. The man would not be escaping anywhere tonight. He heard footsteps, and soon the figures emerged from the shadows: two men and one woman.

One of the men was young. His blue hair fell to the tips of his shoulders, and he wore a monocle. He wore his butler-like uniform immaculately; it was doubtful you would find a more picture-perfect servant anywhere. The only thing separating him from that gentle image was a sharp glint in his eye.

The other man wore the same uniform but had an inherently unrefined look about him. His black hair was smoothed down with wax, and the teeth in his eerie, permanent grin were crooked.

Then there was the woman. Her pale pink hair was tied back, and her eyes were a light violet color, set behind a pair of silver-rimmed glasses. The fur on her cloak was a symbol of status in Lainur. Her overall presentation seemed one degree more particular than the blue-haired man's.

These were, of course, Noah, Cazzy, and Chief Officer Lisa Lauzei from the Surveillance Office.

“So I have to deal with more than Gown and those brats, do I?” the man muttered, a slight anxiety rising in his chest.

“But of course,” said Noah. “Children must always be accompanied by their parents or guardians.”

Cazzy cackled. “Though our master'd probably yell at us if he heard ya sayin' that, askin' why we don't treat him like a kid all the time, then!”

“First Gown asks him for a favor, and then he destroys a gigantic beast,” said Lisa. “I cannot help but wonder how far that boy is going to go.”

They spoke in three separate tones: civilized, amused, and bewildered. The

spy made to run away while they were speaking, but Cazzy immediately noticed and shook a hand at him dismissively.

“I wouldn’t bother if I was in your shoes. Ya don’t stand a chance against us three. Two of us are pretty good at fencin’, y’know.”

“Are you not including yourself in that assessment?” asked Noah.

“Nah, I ain’t good at no fancy noble arts like that.”

“As I recall, you preferred to fight with your bare hands,” remarked Lisa.

Why are they standing around cracking jokes? I don’t need to bother fighting. I can just run, thought the man.

Just then, the man felt a jolt running through his shoulder. He gasped. The next moment, a burning heat spread from the area of impact. It wasn’t until after he felt his body slam against a dilapidated wall that he realized Lisa had struck him with her rapier.

“Burning Thrust!” Lisa shouted, still holding out her sword.

The man had already witnessed this technique, a jewel of Lainur’s fencing style. Stabbing her sword back into his shoulder, Lisa thrust forward, using all her power to send him flying again.

“I-Impossible...” the spy coughed.

He’d seen this attack before, so why couldn’t he counter it? It was simple. Lisa’s technique was much faster and much more precise than Charlotte’s. It was too much of a difference to be accounted for merely by age, and the spy started to tremble.

“Anyway...”

“Mm.”

“I believe Your Excellency may reveal herself now,” said Lisa.

At Lisa’s words, a figure stepped out of the alleyway.

“And to think I was just here for sight-seeing...” The figure sighed, its silhouette etched out by the moonlight.

It was a dark-blond woman in a military uniform: Meifa Darnénes.

Lisa bowed immediately. "It is a pleasure to meet you at last, Your Excellency. I am Lisa Lauzei, Countess of Lainur."

"I know. You chiefly work behind the scenes, if I am not mistaken. Are those your subordinates?"

"Nope!"

"We are not."

"That would make you servants belonging to one of the other actors on the scene, correct?"

Just then, more figures appeared behind her to reinforce her insinuation that she had eyes on the incident. They must have been her guards.

One of them stepped forward to whisper in Meifa's ear. "Your Excellency. They are Noah Ingwayne and Cazzy Guari. They are both fine magicians who were top of their classes at the kingdom's Royal Institute of Magic."

"Is that so?" Meifa paused. "That would make you the servants to that silver-haired boy, yes? He must be talented himself to receive a request from Gown. It would make sense that his servants are top class."

"I am afraid not. In fact, our master has been disinherited for lacking in aether."

"Yeah... I dunno where all this talk of talent is comin' from."

Meifa wasn't able to take the servants' disparaging remarks at face value. "It astounds me that you would speak ill of your master like that, and I can only think that you have a powerful...*motive* to do so. I saw the boy use magic not unlike that described in *The Spiritual Age* or *The Birth of Heaven and Earth*. I understand why you would want to downplay his abilities."

Noah and Cazzy remained silent. Meifa gracefully swept her hair over her shoulder. The deep arrogance of the gesture drowned out its inherent elegance.

"I shall stop wasting time and get to the point. Pass that man over to me."

"Unfortunately, Your Excellency, we have no choice but to refuse. We have need to question him, and we have not yet determined whether he might be one of Your Excellency's men," explained Lisa.

“Th-That’s right!” the spy suddenly burst out. “She told me to—”

“Silence,” Meifa barked. “Who are you but a filthy dog who plays with old bones?”

The weight of her words reflected her position as head of a nation. Having taken those words at full force, the man fell to the ground and started trembling in fear once more.

Satisfied, Meifa turned back to Lisa. “Let us strike a deal. If you hand this man over to me, I shall stop pursuing information about this kingdom’s magic forces.”

“May I take that to mean Your Excellency will cut this observational visit short?”

“That’s right. Although I would have liked to stay for longer, I will drop it for now.”

“Does Your Excellency believe this is a fair deal?”

“There is clearly some trick behind the sudden rise in strength of your magicians. I believe it relates to a device made primarily of glass,” said Meifa.

Though she didn’t show it on her face, Lisa was surprised by Meifa’s words.

“I’ll admit, you’ve been keeping your secret well. Separating the production lines to keep any one person from knowing too much is genius. I shall keep it in mind for future reference.”

“Did Your Excellency manage to slip men past the Guild’s guard?”

“No, it was much too tight. My people couldn’t even get close to this glass device’s workshop. The method of production was something I had to discover for myself, and your country didn’t make it easy.” Meifa paused. “So, which is it? I have no objections to staying in Lainur a little longer.”

“Very well. We accept. However, we shall deal with the rest of the men who were captured.”

“As you wish. One more thing. When that device is announced, I expect to be the first invited to negotiate. Until then, I will speak no more of it. We will, of course, make these miscreants pay for the damages they have caused. How’s

that?”

“I shall inform His Majesty.”

“Honestly, I have no idea why you’re taking so long. Perhaps it is misplaced pride. However, I wish you’d unveil that thing sooner rather than later. It’s clear how far it would boost a nation’s magic forces. There’s no need to wait; you’ve already reaped the benefits.” Meifa dropped her gaze to the spy. That cold stare was like the sharp glint of polished steel. “You have caused our nation an insurmountable loss. If you hadn’t interfered, I might have been negotiating already.”

“Grk!”

Meifa’s guards moved in to tie up the spy.

“Wait!” a childish voice called out from afar. Not long after, its owner came rushing up in a hurry.

Everyone stopped in their tracks, completely caught off-guard by the new arrival. It was Gown, the Grave Sprite, his shadowy figure hidden under his blue robe.

He trotted up to Meifa. “Hello, Meifa!”

“Good evening.”

“Hmmhmm!” Gown gave a satisfied nod at her response before turning to look at the spy on the ground. “You can take him with you, okay? But I need to wipe his memory first! So please wait!”

“But Gown...” Meifa began hesitantly.

She was clearly conflicted. If she allowed Gown to fix the man’s memory, she might miss out on valuable information.

The elf didn’t wait for her to finish, instead trotting up to the spy and preparing to lift a sleeve in the air.

“I can’t let you do that.”

“Please don’t get in my way!”

The figures next to Meifa sprang into action in a foolish attempt to stop

Gown.

“Wait! Stay ba—” Meifa called.

“Get them.”

She was cut off by Gown’s cool order. The next second, the light from Gown’s lantern gave shape to a pack of beastly shadows. Long tongues lolled from their mouths; no one watching could keep count of their legs. They didn’t look like the sorts of creatures an elf should be handling. They darted through the night, passing the guards’ position within seconds. Defenseless, they fell immediately.

“I don’t try and get in your way. Please don’t get in mine, because there’s stuff I have to do.” There was a sad tone in his voice, a far cry from his usual cheerful disposition. His eyes narrowed, Gown turned to Meifa. “Are you going to get in my way too, Meifa?”

“No. We humans owe too much to you. I wouldn’t even consider doing something so rude.”

“Good!” Gown’s eyes scrunched up into a smile, and he approached the spy once more.

The spy trembled in fear and tried to pull back, but Gown’s sleeve was on his head in an instant. The next second, the man fell gently into unconsciousness. Next, Gown approached Lisa.

“Hello, Lisa!”

“Hello, Master Gown.”

Gown beckoned to her, and Lisa crouched down to hear what he had to say.

“I’ll make sure no one remembers about the aethometer either,” he whispered.

“Are you sure?”

“It’s Arcus’s special tool, and he helped me a lot,” Gown said, patting the heads of his phantom pack gently. The next moment, the elf disappeared into the darkness.

It was hard to keep up with him sometimes; he did everything in his own

time.

“Uh, what are we gonna do with these guys, anyway?” Cazzy suddenly said, gesturing to the blacked-out guards and the spy.

There were five men all together. They couldn’t just leave them lying around.

“Well, we shall have to do *something*,” remarked Noah.

“I could go and fetch some help when I go and report this,” said Lisa.

“No way! You’re just tryin’ a run!”

Though Cazzy tried to stop her, Lisa was gone before he was able.

“It’s like she said. You have to do something.”

With those words, it was clear that Meifa wasn’t expecting to take on any of the responsibility herself.

A month had passed since the incident, and Lainur castle’s Firefly Garden had a visitor: a man with a gray beard. His apparel was hardly suitable for a visitor of sufficient status to be received in the king’s private garden; he wore a splendid fringed cloak with a cutlass too big for ordinary human hands affixed to his back and topped it all off a tricorn hat. Even though he was alone, his appearance would make anyone suspect that a pirate ship had just docked in the nearest port.

This man’s name was Barbaros. He swaggered comfortably up the stone path to the garden’s central gazebo. The owner of the garden, Shinlu Crosellode, was waiting for him with somebody else. He looked to be around ten years old and wore an extravagant outfit embroidered with golden dragons. A black veil fell from his noble cap, obscuring his face. He was Lainur’s crown prince: Ceylan Crosellode.

Behind the two royals stood Lainur’s state magicians, the nation’s pride and joy. They were here to guard Shinlu and Ceylan. Among them was Craib Abend, also known as Crucible.

Barbaros mounted the gazebo steps and opened his mouth, speaking in a casual tone. “Hey. Sorry to interrupt.”

“If you know you’re interrupting,” said Shinlu, “then make this quick. I’ve got

other business to deal with.”

“No need to be mean. We’re pals, ain’t we?”

“Maybe from your perspective.”

“Huh. I gotta say I was expectin’ a warmer welcome after all this time.”

Barbaros frowned and stroked his beard.

Shinlu kept his sharp gaze on the seafarer, treating him as he would any hostile figure.

Barbaros’s eyes widened as he spotted the child standing next to the king.

“Hey, is that the prodigious prince I’ve been hearin’ so much about?”

He looked Ceylan up and down. Each passing second of his presence added breaches of conduct in the face of royalty to the pile, but the king wasn’t bothering to pick them out one by one—and that was due to Barbaros’s own status.

“A pleasure to meet you, King Barbaros zan Grandon of Granciel.”

For some reason, Barbaros frowned. He turned to Shinlu. “He’s pretty stiff. You sure he’s your son?”

“We’ve brought him up well. He might even have better manners than me.”

“No, Father. I still have much to learn.” Ceylan dipped his head.

“See?”

“Yeah,” Barbaros agreed with a shrug, dropping down into the seat prepared for him. “I’ve heard you guys are doin’ well for yourselves over here lately. Economically speaking.”

“Well, we’re not especially looking to get rich.”

“You kiddin’? I can practically smell the lucre rollin’ off you.”

“You always were fond of that kind of thing, weren’t you?” Shinlu pointed to his wine glass to have it refilled.

The two gave a toast before bringing their glasses to their lips.

Barbaros drained his glass in one go before shifting his gaze over to Craib.

“You’re lookin’ well, Craib.”

“It has certainly been a long time, Your Majesty.”

“Isn’t it about time you joined my crew already? I can’t think of a better time than now.”

“I believe I already declined Your Majesty’s generous offer.”

“You did? Sorry, must’ve forgotten. Happens at my age!” Barbaros guffawed briefly, before a serious look crossed his face once more. “Oh, right. I wanted to ask about your nephew, Arcus.”

Craib’s eyes widened slightly in surprise. He wasn’t expecting to hear Arcus’s name this evening, nor from the king of Granciel’s mouth.

“What about Arcus?”

“I want you to give him to me.” Barbaros shot Craib a meaningful grin. It was the grin of a greedy pirate warning his rival not to hog all the treasure for himself.

“If I may ask, where did Your Majesty meet my nephew?”

“Ran into him about a month ago during a trip here.”

“Your Majesty came to Lainur?”

“I had them set some special drink aside for me at my favorite tavern,” Barbaros boasted. “Listen, I’ll pay you however much it takes for the boy. I’ll pack our biggest ship with cash and give her to you, if y’want.”

The other state magicians stared in astonishment at his brazen offer.

“I’m not going to hand him over, no matter how many ships I’m offered,” Craib said firmly.

“Thought not. He’s too special for that. If he was ordinary enough to be bought, we’d have Arcuses springin’ up all over the place,” Barbaros said, finally dropping the subject.

At that moment, there was a commotion from the cloister which led onto the garden. A man in seafarer’s dress was being led to the garden by the royal guard.

“Captain! I have a report!”

“Speak!” Barbaros ordered in a thunderous roar.

The sailor’s eyes lit up. “We won, Captain! Zeilner has fallen!”

Shinlu narrowed his eyes thoughtfully. “You captured Zeilner?”

Barbaros rumbled with laughter. “Sounds like it! Nice!”

“Congratulations, Captain!” the seafarer cheered.

“Finally time to crack out the good stuff!”

“We have already prepared it for the toast.”

Barbaros kept laughing for some time before turning back to Craib. “Craib. I gotta thank you. This victory’s all thanks to your nephew!”

“I’m sorry?”

“He walked me through just how we were gonna capture Zeilner.”

“Arcus did *that*?” Craib frowned dubiously.

Why would Arcus help the king of another nation, let alone a rival one? The other magicians looked just as uneasy as he did.

“I was already aware of this,” Ceylan said. “This man was hiding his true identity and asked Arcus to show him the path to victory by disguising the battle plans as an idle war game.”

“It’s true. I’m surprised you know, Prince Prodigy. Or maybe not. You are s’posed to be keepin’ an eye on that kinda thing, after all.”

Ceylan didn’t respond.

Craib glared at Barbaros. “I must ask Your Majesty to refrain from using Arcus like that again.”

“Don’t get me wrong—I was just foolin’ around. I just thought askin’ a couple of kids would give me a fresh perspective, but then he came out with this crazy strategy, see?”

“A strategy which led to victory?” Shinlu prompted.

“Yup. I thought it was a funny idea, but I never thought it would actually *work*.

The Empire tried to get their mitts on that place for ten years, and here I am doin' it in a month! I can't think of anythin' more hilarious than that!" Barbaros let out a hearty laugh.

Zeilner was a fortress with near-impregnable defenses. Three sides of the city were surrounded by ocean, and the fourth side was protected by high walls. Even with its vast military power, the Empire failed to capture the city and was eventually forced to give up—a mark against them they'd yet to live down.

"See, this is why I want you to hand Arcus over to me."

"Not happening."

"Oh, and there was that noble girl, Susia or somethin'. She was one powerful little magician; I want her too. Not to mention I think she'll grow up to be a fine lass. Just like me." Barbaros kept talking without regard for Craib's objection.

Shinlu didn't say anything, clearly used to the captain's attitude.

"I cannot believe you made Arcus's absurd plan a reality," said Ceylan.

"Surprised, Prince? I was sold on it pretty quickly, y'know, mostly 'cause he just seemed so confident. Besides, it wasn't the plan itself that impressed me."

"You didn't think the plan itself useful?"

"Not really. It was when he said 'Wars are often won by catching the opponent entirely off guard.' If he never said that, I might not've tried it out. It makes sense, right? Doing somethin' the opponent never thought of practically guarantees you a breakthrough." Barbaros took a sip of his wine. "There's nothin' like the first drink after hearin' news of victory. Gimme the vintage on this once we're done here. I'll grab myself some with my new ship on the way out."

"The taste's been ruined for me," said Shinlu. "I'll sell the whole batch to you if you want. Just be prepared for the tariffs."

"I'll pay whatever you want. Any price you name'll be worth less than a bird's tears compared to the prize I just got me." Barbaros looked up at the sky.

"Arcus is a good kid. He'll help me achieve tons of dreams. What about you, Shinlu? He ever fulfill one of your dreams for you?"

“He’s a mere child.”

“Hey, I know that. But you’re king of one of the most powerful nations in this world, and you sure seem to know a lot about him. Why’s that, then?”

“Who can say?”

Barbaros exploded into laughter.

“I get it. He’s doing somethin’ to help this country out, and not somethin’ small neither.” The captain’s face suddenly twisted into a sneer. “Shinlu. You remember our promise, don’t you?”

“If you manage a successful attack on our kingdom, I will submit myself to you without question. I do remember that ‘promise.’ I prefer to call it nonsense.”

“‘Slong as you remember. I’m lookin’ forward to seeing how things pan out, especially once everything that’s yours becomes mine.”

“I believe that is more *idealistic* an outlook than is healthy,” Ceylan said, trying to defend his beloved father’s honor.

“Lan,” Shinlu warned before Ceylan could go any further to suggest the full extent of Lainur’s military might.

Barbaros laughed again, his face still twisted with the intense greed of a seafarer. “Say whatever you want! Doesn’t change the fact that it’ll all be mine in the end. You, your children, Craib, the state magicians, the ten monarchs, and Arcus. Granciel will become the most powerful nation in the world!”

“Barbaros,” said Shinlu. “You are like a man with a fine abacus, but no money to count on it.”

“A man of the sea’s gotta dream big and let people know, else he loses the salt in his soul.” Barbaros slowly got to his feet. “I’ll get outta your hair now. Make sure the Empire doesn’t conquer you before I get my chance.”

“Nobody shall be conquering Lainur. Not you, nor the Empire.”

“Nice to hear you’re confident. Makes things more interestin’.”

“If you don’t keep your sights straight, your ship’ll sink. And I might have something to do with that.”

“What then? You gonna make me into your personal captain?”

“No. Lan will have you.”

Barbaros rolled his eyes and sighed. “Don’t you think it’s about time you stop dotin’ on the kid?”

“Quiet. I thought you said you were leaving? Go and play with your abacus on Zeilner’s throne.” Shinlu snapped.

Barbaros merely smiled. He turned and left the Firefly Garden behind. His boisterous laugh could be heard through the entire castle as he went.

“Father.” Ceylan spoke up once the walking tempest had gone.

“Remember him, Lan. Barbaros zan Grandon. If there’s one enemy more troublesome than the Empire, it’s him.”

“I shall keep it in mind,” Ceylan replied, even now glaring at the spot the captain disappeared from.

The captured spies were turned over to some guards that Sue called, putting an end to the ordeal. How to deal with them would be up to the authorities and those above them. As far as Arcus was concerned, he avoided the leak of anything relating to the aethometer, and that was enough for him. He had no need to worry about the matter further, nor to hope for things to go well. Not that he had the time to worry anyway, since in his absence his paperwork had bred explosively.

Having finished his work for now, Arcus’s eyes were drawn to an object on his desk: a steel lantern, just like the one Gown carried. The elf had left it here when he visited after the incident.

“This is to say thanks for your help!”

“What is it?”

“It’s my lantern! If you open this part here when the light is burning, you can call on my pack! You should call them if you ever get in trouble! They’ll help you out!”

“Huh...”

Gown's pack, otherwise known as the Phantom Pack, was a team of hunting dogs who could chase down anything, given Gown's consent. Arcus had seen them when they were chasing down the spies.

"Isn't this a bit too—"

"I'm really proud of my hunting dogs!" Gown said, standing up a little straighter.

The pack's purpose was to help the elf carry out his duties in the world. What was Arcus supposed to do with them? He couldn't even begin to imagine.

"Uh... What kind of trouble will they help me with?" Arcus asked.

"You don't have to think too hard about it! Just call them when you need some help, or if you think you're in danger!"

"And why did you give me this thing exactly? Wait, don't tell me..."

"Because you're Arcus! And this isn't just for you, y'know!"

"Huh?"

"I already told you, right? The time when phantoms and elves helped to solve problems is long over!"

Which was why humans needed to solve their own problems from now on. Gown had clearly been steering towards something.

"You've given this to someone who you think will be able to help solve problems?"

"That's right!"

Arcus sighed. "I dunno if you picked the right guy. I mean, I barely have any aether, for a start."

"But you're proof that lots of aether doesn't always mean you're stronger! Remember? You defeated that huge near-fiend!"

"Yeah, because you gave me the aether to do it."

"So all you need is aether, and you can do anything!"

"But I *don't* have aether! Not much, anyway."

“You can do it!” Gown said.

As usual, their discussion lacked any sort of logical thread.

Gown had turned around to leave, but glanced back over his shoulder and waved a sleeve at Arcus. “Bye! I’ll come by to play again some time, okay?”

“R-Right.”

And that was how Arcus made friends (if you could call it a friendship) with an elf.



Epilogue: Triple Motives

Count Porque Nadar bore the responsibility for Lainur's first line of defense against Imperial attack. He formerly held territory in the north, but due to his poor handling of the revolt and misgivings about the way he ran his domain, he was relocated to Nadar in the west. Nadar bordered the Empire, and the count was expected to preserve Lainur's diplomatic relations. While it sounded impressive, the prestige merely sugarcoated the truth.

Should he fail to prevent a war, his territory would be the first to suffer. It was supposed to motivate him to do all he could to avoid that outcome, but all it really did was make him anxious. He had developed passable diplomatic skills, but little else had changed for the better since his relocation.

A few days past, a report had filtered up to him that sent him into a spiral of anger and panic that had yet to subside. The crown prince, Ceylan Crosellode, was coming for inspection. The moment he heard the news, his face drained of color. Whatever he was expecting, it wasn't *this*.

If the crown had a complaint, it would usually send an official to the territory to investigate first; here, one of the most powerful people in the land threw that precedent out the window. It defied all logic.

Porque's mind was whirring at full speed.

Has he learned of my corruption?

He can't have. He would have summoned me to the palace—in chains, if it suited him.

Is he visiting to look for proof, then?

What's going to happen?

Is he actually coming?

What will happen once he's gone?

Porque's thoughts blurred together and numbed his mind. At the same time, his pace picked up as he approached the drawing room. Though his servants called from behind him, he barely heard them.

“...wait...”

“...documents...”

They tried to keep up with him, but he didn't have the wherewithal to even acknowledge their existence. He was keeping his guest and co-conspirator waiting. Porque stepped into the drawing room to find a man sitting on the couch. He looked to be in his mid-forties. Two of his attendants stood behind that fine leather couch, while he sat with his legs folded, smoking a cigarette in a manner unbecoming of one meeting a high-ranking noble. He was clearly treating this visit as a right, not as a privilege.

Porque was more than willing to overlook his insolence. Where his visitor hailed from, the kingdom's noble titles meant nothing. If Porque were to compare his guest with him, he might well find himself outranked.

His black hair was painstakingly waxed into shape. Despite his disrespectful demeanor, his face was a picture of honesty. Looking at that face of his gave the impression that he acted this way because that was how he was *supposed* to behave. Which was the case; he was only showing through his actions that he held a higher position than the master of the house.

He was dressed in a fashion peculiar to the kingdom. The majority of his uniform was black. A golden aiguillette lay across his shoulder. He wore star- and cross-shaped medals on his chest. His uniform was perfect to the smallest detail—an immaculately tended uniform of an officer of the hostile Gillis Empire.

The man glanced at Porque, a small smile appearing on his lips. “Count Porque Nadar. Lovely to see you doing so well.”

“Well? I am not doing well at all! I'd prefer if you held off on the jokes, General Grantz.”

“Apologies. I didn't mean to be rude.”

Leon Grantz of the Gillis Empire's eastern field army was one general of many, but he led as many as ten thousand men. Though Leon apologized, he made no move to bow his head. His was an air of complete relaxation—and it upset Porque greatly.

Leon held out his hand and asked, as though this was his estate, “Why don’t you have a seat?”

“Of course,” Porque replied meekly, despite taking exception to the dig at his pride. He slumped down on the couch.

“You must know why I asked you here if you read my letter.”

“The prince is coming for an inspection.”

“Yes! What could that little brat be thinking?”

“If he’s as clever as they say, he’s likely caught on to your malfeasance.”

“How could he have?! I covered all my tracks! Even the Surveillance Office’s spies wouldn’t have a clue!”

“That’s true.”

As far as Leon had investigated, there were no signs of suspicion from the Surveillance Office or the wider government. Porque was always careful to make sure he wasn’t suspected, and the moment he thought he might be, he always bribed the necessary parties. Leon could only admire him for that.

“You’ve taken good care of the officials, but the common people are a different matter.”

“What?”

“Our investigations revealed holes in your defenses. Don’t you know that merchants on the street like to talk?”

“Those rats!” Porque spat.

Leon smirked. “It’s perfect, isn’t it? Think about the timing of it all.”

“The timing...” Porque frowned and turned his attention to the documents Leon sent him before their meeting.

Those documents laid out a plan for Porque’s future, and came directly from the Empire. The plan was a tricky one. As a noble of Lainur, it had the power to completely destroy him should things go wrong. However, it was fast becoming apparent that Porque had no choice but to follow through.

“And this plan guarantees me a worthy position in the Empire?” Porque

demanded.

The words out of his mouth never showed more than concern for his own interests and self-preservation. Leon was fed up with it. Porque Nadar. A portly man with a weak will, prone to irritation and disproportionate reaction. Even now he fidgeted and bit at his nails restlessly. This was how he always ended up the second something didn't go his way. Leon watched him with a cold gaze.

“General Grantz!”

“There is no doubt about it. His Imperial Majesty already knows about your situation.”

“And I’m just supposed to take your word for it?! I need solid proof!”

“There is none. Perhaps I could furnish you with documents, but there’s no way to prove their validity.”

“I am doing more than committing treason here! I’m throwing away my territory *and* my title!”

Leon suppressed a sigh. Why was this man so unreasonable? Didn't he realize this was a potential consequence of his actions all along? He had nothing to blame for this but his own avarice.

“You have no obligation to follow the plan if you don’t wish to. However, I don’t think you have a choice but to trust us here, do you?”

“Gngh...”

“If your crimes are discovered, you’ll lose everything anyway—including your life. You’ve thrown yourself at our mercy precisely because you don’t want that to happen. Am I right?”

The fact that Leon was here now was a sign that Porque had no options left. The prince was sharp. The moment he set foot in this place, Porque’s crimes were guaranteed exposure. The only path that didn’t lead to death was to betray the crown and side with the Empire.

“Tell me what I have to do next.”

“There’s no rush. We were always prepared for this outcome. In fact, the prince’s personal involvement is a blessing in disguise. All you need to do is

follow the plan as we discussed at the very start.”

“Very well. I trust you will take care of everything else?”

“Of course.”

The moment Porque left the room, Leon let out the exhausted sigh he was holding back. He lived his whole life according to honest, steadfast values, and he considered Porque to be nothing more than a lazy, greedy swine. Beyond his dabbling in illicit relations with the Empire, he’d lined his pockets by quietly overlooking embargoes on the trade of certain goods, in a clear betrayal of Lainur’s royal family. Now that his crimes were about to be exposed, he clung to the Empire, completely forgetting all his own country had done for him. At the first sign of danger, he no longer cared how his actions looked to other people. You would be hard pressed to find a more perfect example of a corrupt nobleman.

Somehow, he still had an overdeveloped sense of pride. Even if he tried to hide it, it was clear how dissatisfied he was with the uncertainties of the plan as Leon spoke to him. It was all Leon could do not to burst out in laughter.

For a while, Leon sat and let the smoke from his cigarette clear his head. He disliked speaking with the greasy pig so much, he needed some time to recover. Once he finished his cigarette, he turned to one corner of the drawing room. At first glance, that spot was empty, but the next second, a floating white mask appeared. Next came the figure’s dark-blue robe, appearing as though dissolving the darkness around it. While Leon’s attendants stiffened up at the newcomer, Leon himself remained perfectly calm. The masked figure sat down across from him.

Leon pushed his cigarette into the ashtray and raised an eyebrow. “Aluas. How was that?”

“You did well. This is more than enough in exchange for my Three-Walled Altar,” a young woman’s voice declared from beneath the mask. Her voice placed her in her twenties, if not her late teens.

Behind the scenes, the conversation between Porque and Leon had never been about the deal they’d struck, nor the agreement between Leon and Aluas, but a deal between the Empire and Aluas’s organization. In exchange for a new

kind of defensive spell, Porque Nadar was to betray Lainur.

“What exactly is your intention with all of this?” Leon asked. “Why do you want to destroy this particular noble? It sounds to me like you mean to start a war.”

“There’s no need for me to tell you, General Leon Grantz. This is a deal between us and His Imperial Majesty.”

“But—”

“You cannot comprehend it, can you? Not as a general...nor as an individual.”

“Of course not.”

Aluas’s organization was not a hostile country, nor a competing noble house, so why should they desire to see Porque fall? Something didn’t add up, and he wanted to get to the bottom of it.

“General Grantz. As a member of the military, surely you know to follow the orders of your superiors?”

Leon made a noncommittal grunt. As an honest man, he had no answer. A soldier was a single cogwheel in a bigger picture. If that cogwheel moved by itself, the entire structure would collapse. The Emperor had already decided on this matter, so whether Leon found out the meaning behind it or not, his course of action would not change.

“This is advantageous to the Empire too,” he said, “is it not?”

Leon could hear the faint smile behind her mask.

“Well...”

She was correct. There were more and more reports of Lainur’s magic troops’ meteoric rise in power. Said reports remained unconfirmed, and if they *were* true, it was ambiguous how dramatic the change really was. Whether the rumors were true or not, the Empire would want the kingdom’s newfound strength for itself somehow. That was why Aluas’s appearance could be considered very fortunate indeed.

If the plan worked, the Empire could avoid war with Lainur, learn the information it needed, and carry on as though nothing had happened.

“As long as you understand, I don’t see why you would have any objections.”

“I understand, yes.”

A rise in the quality of Lainur’s magicians was a threat to the Empire. Their magic was already strong enough as it was, and this new development could only mean trouble for the Empire’s plans to extend its territory out to the south. The Empire was already struggling to bring its own magicians to the kingdom’s standards. The molehill that was Lainur’s magic troops was fast becoming a mountain. The only option was to find out what was really going on.

“Have you got any new information, Aluas?”

“We are still looking into it, but it is almost certain it has something to do with their increased silver consumption.”

“I thought so.”

The kingdom’s consumption of silver gradually started increasing around the same time the rumors began to circulate. Porque was the Empire’s probe into the matter, and now things were coming to a head.

“Let us sacrifice Porque Nadar.”

That was what Aluas had said before the count was even involved. The memory of those words sent a chill down Leon’s spine even now. An elegant laugh chimed through the drawing room like a silver bell. It was a sound most unbecoming of someone planning the downfall of an otherwise unconcerned party. The disconnect made it sound even eerier.

Aluas stood up from her seat and melted away into the darkness of the room’s corner once more.

“The Silver Heralds of the Dawn, huh?” Leon murmured, sending a puff of smoke up towards the ceiling.

Afterword

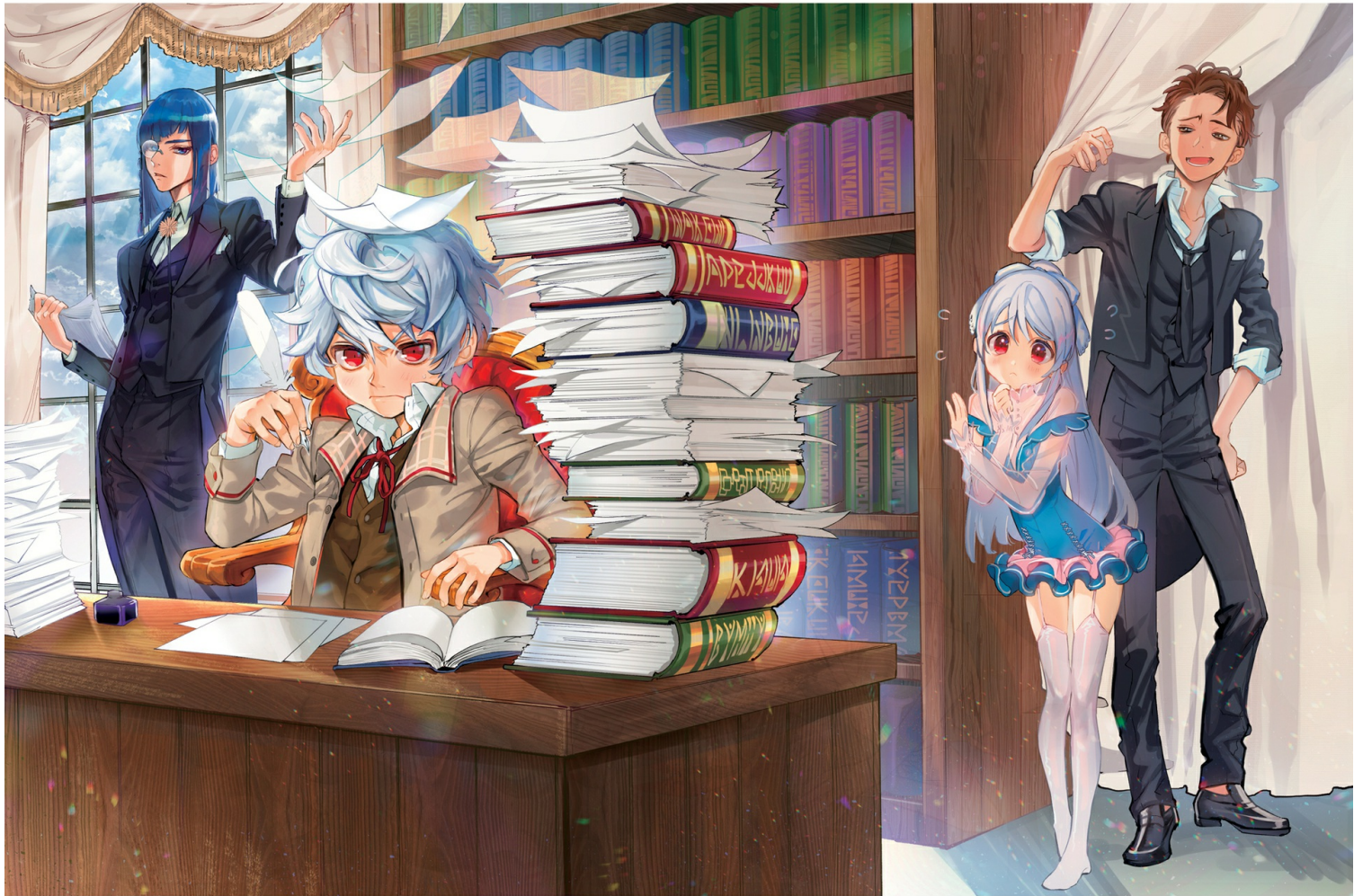
It's nice to see you again. This is the author, Gamei Hitsuji.

Firstly, I'd like to thank you for picking up a copy of the second volume of *The Magician Who Rose From Failure*. In this volume, Arcus spans the ages of ten to twelve and announces the aethometer, a scene which I know everyone was eager to see. How will his incredible invention go on to affect his life?


After suffering years of misfortune, Arcus is finally recognized as the genius he is. Hopefully that will be a cathartic development for many of you. Well done, Arcus!

The second half of this volume was written exclusively for the published version. It's filled with new characters and magic which never appeared in the web novel, so I think you will find a lot to enjoy about it, even if you have already read the online version.

Finally, I'd like to thank GC Novels, my editor K, my illustrator Saika Fushimi, my proofreading company Oraido, and of course, all of my supportive readers. Thank you so much.



“Why?!” Arcus cried out, buried under mountains of documents in one room of the Abend estate.



“Raised crown. Ever-shining light of sagacity. Abyss of understanding. May the beautiful weight of reality crush the naivety of mercy. Victory is dazzling glory. This kingdom is an unshakeable foundation. All knowledge flows from the tree of paradise. Light of the heavens, desires of the adoring. Let these beams of luminescence grant you unending light, endless brightness, and eternal death.”

“Ohr Ein Sof.”

That dream which so many yearned for was within his grasp.

Glossary Crucible

Arcus's uncle, Craib Abend's, alias as a state magician. When Craib left Lainur to search for a method to increase aether, he trained and developed his magic, starting with his Iron Tsunami spell. It is based on one of the Ten Fables from the Ancient Chronicles' first installment, *The Birth of Heaven and Earth*. The spell recreates the red tsunami that gave birth to the Iron Mountains. King Shinlu granted him his name due to his ability to freely control molten iron.

The Birth of Heaven and Earth The first of the Ancient Chronicles, written in the Elder Tongue. It describes the creation of the world and all life upon it. More than a simple historical account, it describes the powerful natural phenomena that created the world; only by studying the entire text can you hope to create an offensive spell of the highest caliber. The famous Ten Fables are included in this account. It is considered the second hardest of the Chronicles to decipher, after *The Prophecy of Shadows*.

The Spiritual Age The second of the Ancient Chronicles, written in the Elder Tongue. Set in a time when the world was still in chaos, and mankind was threatened by the forces of nature and demons. It tells of the twin phantoms Wedge and Chain, who traveled the world in order to bring peace to it. It reads like a sampling of legends, folklore, epics, and fairy tales from the man's world. It includes stories such as *The Travels of the Twin Phantoms*, *Algol's Week of Farming*, and *The Adventures of the Mistletoe Knight*.

The magicians belonging to the noble houses which hold territory in the south of Lainur. The magic forces led by the Raytheft house in the east favor fire

magic. Those in the north favor water, while those in the west favor wind. Magic houses in the south favor earth-and stone-based spells which can manipulate physical objects. Some of the houses in the south include the Rondiel house, led by the state magician Gastarque Rondiel, and the Lazrael house.

Harveston

A private cram school in Lainur that teaches magic. As it mainly caters to the southern magicians and their earth-based magic, it is chiefly associated with the south and its nobles. It produces a handful of talented magicians on a regular basis, with many of the teaching staff at the Royal Institute being graduates.

Types of Magic

There are three major types of magic. Offensive magic is used to harm the opponent, either directly or indirectly. Defensive magic is used to protect the caster or another target. Any spell which falls outside of these two categories is known as supporting magic. There are also spells which fall under multiple categories. For example, a spell which is primarily supporting but has offensive properties is called supporting-offensive magic. Spells which are both offensive and defensive in nature are offensive-defensive magic. Spells with elements of all three are known as hybrid magic. The aforementioned are not the only types; several different families of spells exist outside of this taxonomy. The categorizing of a spell usually depends on the intention of its creator.

The Northern Confederation A nation to the north of Lainur made up of several smaller countries banded together. Its current leader is Meifa Darnénes. It is allied with Lainur and opposes the Gillis Empire, as all the Empire's neighbors do. It was known as Alnorsace in ancient times.

Tempered Aether (Updated) Tempered aether is used to process Sorcerer's Silver, a key material of the aethometer. Though it cannot be used to cast spells, its density means it can make for a powerful physical attack when released.

Gown

One of the six elves which appear in *The Spiritual Age*. Also known as the Grave Sprite. He wears a long robe which covers his head, reminiscent of Jack-O'-Lantern (AKA Stingy Jack) from the man's world, although with much more charm. Although he is described in the Chronicles, he exists as a supernatural figure in the real world. He mainly appears in graveyards to cleanse them of hex and grieve for the souls of the dead. Incredibly friendly and hates wild cats. His spells involve the manipulation of wind and earth.

Battle Chess

A board game which exists in Arcus's world. A pastime with wide appeal regardless of status or age. Though the concept is similar to shogi, the names of the pieces are somewhat simpler, and it includes unusual pieces such as "magicians."

Hex

A byproduct of spell-casting which can cause the birth of demons. Higher levels of hex are found where magic is used more often, and it has a tendency to accumulate in gloomy and dirty places such as sewage conduits. Hex is made from the Artglyph fragments which come about and vanish after a spell's effects come to an end.

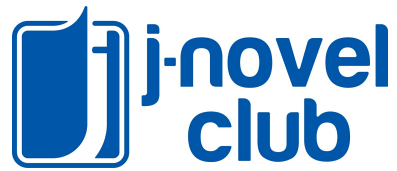
Hex Fiend

A huge beast created when large amounts of hex band together. It feeds off the negative energy gathered by hex. The fiend requires a biological organism at its core, around which it brandishes several hex bands. It is said that hex fiends were created by the advanced magical civilization of old, but the precise details are lost to time.

Locivity

The level or quality of word-related knowledge. The higher a magician's locivity, the more skilled they are. A magician with high locivity will often spend more time revising their spells, but that is only because they have a better sense of what makes a spell effective. Arcus's world was created from words, and so someone who is more familiar with language is more highly valued. It is said that those who will arrive at the true meaning behind the world are those with a high locivity.

The Maritime Nation of Granciel A nation to the south of Lainur. Its southern side faces the ocean, and it controls the majority of those waters. Barbaros zan Grandon is the nation's head of state. Rather than a maritime nation, calling it a pirate nation may be more accurate. Although technically a long-time rival nation of Lainur, the relationship between the two countries is not as bad as you might expect.



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The Magician Who Rose From Failure: Volume 2

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The Magician Who Rose from Failure:

Tales of War and Magic

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