

The Magician Who Rose From Failure:

Tales of War and Magic

6

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*The rain is short, the raindrops gentle, the shower swift.
It is sharp, like a gleaming blade thrust into the ground. Fall like a downpour.
Evening Shower.*



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Prologue: Meeting of the Four Dukedoms

At the center of one of many magnificent rooms within Lainur's royal palace, a pentagonal table stood, with five chairs surrounding it. One of those chairs was all but covered in gold, giving it a spectacular appearance that the others, while adorned with embellishments of their own, were clearly not meant to live up to. Perhaps more obvious was the fact that the quality of each chair was meant to represent the status of the person sitting in it. In the most splendid chair sat none other than Ceylan Crosellode, Lainur's Crown Prince himself.

He wore a headdress reminiscent of those worn by Buddhist priests, adorned with eye-catching ornaments. His face was covered by a black veil. His hair and ears, too, were hidden beneath the headdress, anonymizing him from the shoulders up. Presently, he wore a white robe embroidered with golden dragons, and had propped his chin up on the armrest of his chair.

Three men sat across from him. They were heads of the Four Dukedoms, noblemen tasked with supporting the very foundations of the kingdom itself, and therefore allowed in the prince's presence. Five chairs, but only four attendants. No one made any mention of the empty spot, for it had never been filled.

Ceylan spoke to the three men before him. "I would like to begin by thanking you for your presence here today."

"This is not enough to deserve your thanks, Your Royal Highness."

"For you, we would traverse hot coals and fields of ice."

"There is no risk I would not undertake on the orders of you and your family, Your Royal Highness."

The speakers were the heads of the Romalius, Saifice, and Zeele Dukedoms, respectively.

Brendan Romalius, clad in a military uniform, was a man in the prime of his life. His crew cut and muscular frame made him the living model of a military

house's patriarch, and yet he had a curiously sharp eye when it came to political matters. In a space like this, one had the sense that brute strength was not his only point of excellence.

Egberd Saifice was a tall, older man, with a stern countenance. His age afforded him pure-white hair and a long beard to rival that of a mountain hermit. He was currently wearing traditional noble attire under his robe; he sat in his chair in a state of utmost calm.

Quorido Zeele headed the dukedom with the shortest history among the three, and was therefore the youngest. He wore a constant amiable smile that reflected his personality, and his constitution and majesty were severely lacking compared to his tablemates. In some ways, however, that was his greatest asset.

"I believe this is only the second meeting I have held with the three of you. I ask for your patience while I acquire a feel for how we ought to converse with one another."

His words elicited a grin from Brendan. "Your nerves are unfounded, Your Royal Highness. Anything you ask of me will receive an honest answer."

"In that case, I shall endeavor to afford you the same generosity," the prince replied.

"In fact, I should like to ask Your Royal Highness for your patience myself. I am a military man; merely conversing does not come naturally to me."

It was unclear whether their exchange was banter or whether Ceylan was testing the waters. Naturally, all of the dukes were aware that the prince had used Gaston's unforgivable behavior as an excuse to tie the noose around the necks of a great number of nobles. They would not dare to make light of him, despite the fact that he was still a child.

"I would be most interested to see Your Royal Highness's countenance."

"There is not one thing interesting about it. Yes, you three have never seen the face beyond this veil when we have met like this, but I am sure that you can picture it in your mind's eye."

"Your Royal Highness, there exists a wide gap between one's educated

guesses and the reality of seeing things for oneself.” Quorido added his thoughts.

The disputed veil turned to the third man, who sat as still as a plaster bust. “Do you share these sentiments, Egberd?”

“I would not deign to, sir.”

“Saifice is a deeply serious man,” Brendan said. “While I am deeply fretful. Unbearably impatient, even.”

“Truth be told, I agree with my fellow dukes,” Egberd said. “It is by no means my intention to make light of a royal tradition, but I do believe that Your Royal Highness’s power is such that the veil becomes unnecessary.”

Brendan laughed. “My thoughts on the matter exactly!”

“I heartily look forward to seeing the face of our kingdom’s next ruler,” Egberd summarized.

When Quorido spotted a gap in their eager bootlicking, he spoke. “Your Royal Highness. There is something I wish to tell you before we move on to our main agenda. I understand that it is a great affront to do so, but I beg your forgiveness on this occasion.”

“Speak,” Ceylan commanded.

“I beg your pardon, Your Royal Highness. It concerns the matter of attendants. It is common knowledge among those of us privileged enough to visit the palace that you do not have any in the same capacity we might expect. It is my humble belief that you may require one, as you are likely to become much busier from now on. I would very much like to offer an appropriate candidate for your consideration, sir.”

“An attendant?” The prince hummed. “Your thoughtfulness pleases me, Quorido.”

“Sir.”

“Whom do you have in mind?”

“Kane Lazrael, sir. Eldest son to House Lazrael of the south.”

Brendan's eyebrows shot upward. "Ah, the man believed to be the reincarnation of the Paragon of Courage."

"Indeed. Having seen his talents for myself, I fully believe him to be up to the task."

"I *have* heard that he has mastered almost all of the southern magic. Is he as impressive as they say?" Ceylan asked.

"The last time I met him, he was able to perform *Mighty Fortress* right before my eyes."

"Hm. The Paragon of Courage," the prince muttered, as though to himself.

The Paragon of Courage was a hero described in *Demons and Society's Collapse*, one of the volumes that made up the Ancient Chronicles. Said to have played a significant role in defeating the Demon Kings, his name (and its synonym, "Lionheart,") was often used as a moniker to describe those who excelled in the magical or sword arts.

"As Romalius alluded to," Quorido went on, "they say he might be the reincarnation of the paragon himself."

"It is true that there are many examples of reincarnation within the Chronicles. What similarities are there, then, between Kane and the paragon?"

"I am afraid that I am unfamiliar with the specifics, but I do believe him to be an excellent choice, especially if such talk were to be true."

Ceylan nodded thoughtfully. "Brendan, Egberd, what are your thoughts on my appointing an attendant?"

"I have no objections, Your Royal Highness, so long as the chosen candidate has the requisite ability," replied Brendan.

"My suggestion would be for Your Royal Highness to meet with Mr. Lazrael before coming to a decision," Egberd said.

"Then that is what I shall do," Ceylan decided. "You will arrange the meeting for me, Quorido."

"Yes, sir."

“Brendan, Egberd. Have you knowledge of any other capable candidates?”

“No one in particular, sir,” Brendan said. “Although I have heard that Saifice’s grandson has demonstrated remarkable talent.”

“He is much too inexperienced at this stage,” Egberd said, “and such an appointment would hinder my family’s current duties.”

“Those duties being the investigation surrounding the Institute of Magic?” Ceylan prompted.

“The very same, sir, as His Majesty is also aware. My house has been tasked with keeping an eye on *them* since before Lainur held the power that it does.”

“Yes... Something will have to be done sooner or later—the threat to our royal capital is too great. It is my intention to have the whole thing dealt with by the time father passes the crown to me.” Ceylan’s tone was courageous and resolute.

But Egberd shook his head. “I ought to tell you, sir, that the one to defeat them has already been decided.”

“What? Elaborate.”

“Sir. That person’s feat has been foretold in *The Prophecy of Shadows*. For generations, my house has been told that we must do nothing to intervene until that person should appear, nor should we allow anyone else to attempt such intervention.”

“A final request from your house’s founder... Well, then, can you tell me about the one who will appear?”

“The Saint,” was all he said.

Quorido frowned. “Are you talking about one of the three sages from *The Spiritual Age*?”

“Indeed, I am.”

“Mistletoe. Saint. Chime,” Brendan said. “I remember those names well from my childhood and the fairy tales recounted to me before bed. However, I struggle to believe that one of them is to appear in the flesh.”

“It could be a reincarnation, or a new Saint altogether. That much is not clear. All I know is that it is my family’s duty to wait for them.”

“According to the promise made with Lainur’s very first king,” Ceylan said knowingly.

“Indeed, sir. The hope we hold for their defeat cannot be fulfilled until the Saint appears.”

“Yes, I remember now. *The Prophecy of Shadows*... In that case, I have no choice but to stay my hand,” the prince said.

“There is a purpose behind the securing of every locked box,” Egberd agreed.

“Yes, and that purpose sometimes goes beyond keeping out thieves.” Satisfied, Ceylan nodded before moving on. “I believe it is about time we discussed the topics at hand. Are we all agreed?”

The three dukes humbly voiced their assent.

“The first is a matter I have already discussed with you,” Ceylan began.

“Sir?” Brendan asked.

The young royal responded by producing an aethometer from his breast pocket and sliding it across the pentagonal table.

The muscular duke recognized it at once. “Ah. The aethometer.”

Quorido beamed at the introduction of the device. “There have been more offices lent to its production at the Magician’s Guild lately, if I am not mistaken. Speaking of which, are you all aware of the new ‘switch’-type Sol Glasses that have come from there? They, too, are utterly fascinating. One is able to dismiss and retrieve the light at will by the simple pulling of a string. It completely removes the issue of light leaking out from the cloth one covers it with!”

“Ah, yes,” said Ceylan. “I witnessed several such marvels on my visit to the Guild.”

“You have seen them then, sir? House Zeele is already in negotiations to introduce them to our home.”

“They will soon transform the palace too...but again, I digress.”

“No, sir, I sincerely apologize for distracting us from the matter at hand. To you as well, Romalius and Saifice.”

“If anything, less serious discussion is also a necessity,” Brendan said.

“I am sure that it helps to put His Royal Highness at ease,” Egberd agreed.

Though the pair seemed forgiving enough, it was impossible to know what they were really thinking. They may have been in agreement, or not, or perhaps they were simply impressed by Quorido’s ability to converse so lightheartedly with the prince.

“Nonetheless, the preparations to announce the aethometer’s existence to the public are complete,” said Ceylan.

“How exciting,” Brendan said.

“Indeed. It will not be possible to sweep Nadar’s uprising under the rug. Instead, we shall unveil this extraordinary device in order to wipe that shameful incident from the public’s mind.”

“Sir, it is difficult to find a connection between that incident and this invention that will make such a gambit successful.”

“Not so. The aethometer was used to train a number of the units that took part in the war. Our military gains in the conflict were impressive, and we were able to suppress the insurrection at the earliest stages. That result will be known by the nations surrounding us, and its cause attributed to our thorough preparedness. And that is no exaggeration; the magic troops deployed for the fighting showed remarkable improvement compared to any we have known before.”

“I expect the difference comes in the quality of the incantations?”

“Correct. Not one of our magicians mis-incanted during the conflict. Furthermore, I hear they kept perfect time with one another.”

“Will the device’s creator be made known at the same time?” Quorido asked.

“No, it is too soon for that. We shall announce that the aethometer exists and nothing more.”

“Might I ask why? The creator is sure to become a household name.”

“People will be more grateful for the blessing that is the aethometer *after* they have experienced it for themselves. Its full benefits are not immediately obvious. Only once its usefulness is widely known will the inventor be able to receive maximum renown.”

“But we already know of its full potential...” The amount of thought that Ceylan had put into this surprised Quorido. However, House Zeele was made up of civil officials rather than soldiers; the full benefits of the aethometer eluded them.

Egberd was staring intently at the device and stroking his long beard thoughtfully. “When one looks back at Lainur’s history, the number of inventions as impactful as this one can be counted on a single hand. I daresay it even rivals the development of Sol Glasses. Personally, I believe its maker ought to be handsomely rewarded.”

“Is it truly that magnificent a thing?” Quorido asked.

“It is. When I first got ahold of it, my heart danced like it hadn’t in many, many years. It won’t be long now until it becomes a staple for every student of magic, and nothing could bring me more joy. It will reduce the time required to learn any spell, allowing that extra time to be put to good use elsewhere.”

“Egberd,” Ceylan began, “it grieves both my father and myself that we could not have the aethometer introduced to the Institute any earlier.”

“It was unavoidable. The device being what it is, I do not think anyone can refute that.” Egberd bowed his head.

“I shall now officially share with you three the name of its creator. He is Arcus Raytheft of the eastern military houses. Brendan, you were present for the presentation at the Guild, so you should already know his name and face. What about you, Egberd?”

“I have heard the name, sir.”

“You know him, Saifice?” Brendan said. “I could barely believe my eyes when I first saw him at the presentation.”

“Because he was so young?” Ceylan prompted.

“Indeed. Especially since I was expecting *Abend* to be unveiling something.”

Quorido, the least informed in the room, spoke then. “Are you talking about the Raythefts’ eldest son? I heard he accompanied Your Royal Highness on the battlefield and achieved great things.”

“You heard correctly. Were it not for Arcus, I might not be here today.”

“However, there is a much more prominent rumor that he was disinherited for his shocking lack of skill compared to the other magic houses.”

“That can be attributed to his father’s blindness,” Ceylan explained. “His skill with a blade and his grasp of magic saw him fit to fight by my side.”

“Said father is younger brother to a state magician, and he himself achieved great success fighting on the front lines to subjugate the Hans. They are a capable pair,” said Brendan.

“The Raythefts are certainly one of the most prominent noble houses of Lainur, and one with a long history,” Egberd added. “When offered the chance to rise through the ranks, however, they have historically refused. Otherwise it might have been a march by now, having surpassed even House Cremelia that stands above them.”

“I was not aware of that,” said Brendan.

“Alas, but it is true. The situation is rather complex.”

“I have heard the same,” Ceylan interjected. “Hence the house’s good name, despite its relatively low standing.”

Egberd began to explain, his words flowing like a fast river. “From what I have heard, it all started shortly after the kingdom’s sudden rise in power. Disapproving of the Crosellodes’ prosperity, a militant faction from Bǎi Liánbāng invaded. The kingdom was still small, and had very few vassals it could rely on. The Raytheft head went to buy time until the royal family could get its forces together, meeting the enemy accompanied by a flaming titan. Once the eastern houses and royal family were able to join the fighting, they succeeded in pushing back the invasion. Raytheft, however, had fought hard and died in the battle, leaving his territory and population heavily damaged. That was one of the main factors behind the Raythefts’ decline in power and House Cremelia

granting them its protection.”

“That is also why the bond between the Raythefts and the Cremelias is stronger than those between the other eastern houses,” Brendan said. “Purce Cremelia was likely looking to strengthen that connection further by having his daughter marry into House Raytheft.”

“It was their pride as a guardian of Lainur’s eastern front that led the house to turn down promotions too,” Egberd continued. “The same pride that presumably sees it stick stubbornly to certain outdated traditions.”

“And yet, their loyalty to the royal family is unwavering. It used to be said that the Raythefts would be the last family standing by His Majesty’s side, although not as many people are aware of that reputation these days.”

Quorido listened carefully to his seniors’ assessment. “About Arcus Raytheft, then. Is it true that his aether runs lower than the average for those military houses?”

“Unfortunately, it is so. If only his aether had been higher, he, too, might be known as a Lionheart.” Ceylan sighed before continuing. “I am considering making him a state magician.”

The three dukes looked at him in surprise.

Brendan knitted his brow. “Is it not too soon to be making such a decision, sir?”

“Oh? He ought to be rewarded for his efforts, and I believe that would include conferring unto him a suitable position.”

“Do you really mean that, sir?”

“It was in jest. As you said, it would be rather hasty to make that decision at this point.”

Though Ceylan laughed it off, Egberd looked none too pleased. “If I may, sir, he ought to be made to take the exam, lest the public suspect favoritism.”

“Certainly. I was not suggesting anything as tyrannical as neglecting due process. I *do* consider it something of a waste of time, however. I can already predict how he will fare. Unfortunately...”

“His lack of aether will pose a problem, won’t it?” Egberd said.

“Yes. I doubt that the other military houses will stay quiet, considering that his aether lies below the average.”

“So unveiling this device will also serve to lay the groundwork for his eventual appointment?”

“Frankly speaking, yes. However, I am not asking you to act at this time. Nor is his magic yet at a level worthy of the title of state magician. Do not forget that father and I are keeping a very close eye on him, given what he has created.”

Ceylan’s message was clear: the royal family expected great things from Arcus and favored him besides. They had laid *claim* to him, and woe betide any of the dukes should they do anything to interfere.

Having already established himself as the one to ask the most questions at this meeting, Quorido turned to Brendan. “What are your thoughts, Romalius?”

“The boy may have invented the aethometer, but that is all he has done. That is indeed impressive in its own right, but is it enough to become a state magician? I agree with His Royal Highness. A state magician must possess both tremendous magic and the power with which to use it.”

“And you, Saifice?”

“It is difficult to say without having met the boy in question. I shall no doubt have plenty of opportunities to do so at the Institute.”

Neither of them had given Quorido an especially satisfying answer.

“In any case, the aethometer will be announced to the public shortly. Now, on to the next topic of our agenda...”

With that, Ceylan moved on to other matters.

Part 1: The Aethometer's Unveiling

That day, Arcus was visiting one of his favorite large stores. While a nobleman with his own estate might very well call on a merchant to visit, he felt it would be too arrogant; he didn't yet have his own title and he was still a child. So, as usual, he sent word to let them know he was coming before setting off.

When he arrived, he was greeted by the proprietor and the clerk with whom he often dealt, who then showed him into the reception office. Inside was a glass table, leather couches, and a faint, floral scent. Arcus took a seat on the couch, at which the other two men sat across from him. The maid, who had come in with them, held a glass water jug with red petals floating in it. When Arcus took a sip from the glass he was poured, the aroma of roses spread over his tongue, and he took a moment to savor it.

"Thanks for agreeing to meet with me." He addressed the broad-shouldered storekeeper.

"Not at all! We are honored that you choose our store for all your engraving needs. It pains me to think that you so often call on us, when we should be coming to you."

"It's no big deal."

"Oh, but it is! You hold the Order of the Silver Cross, at your age, and you even have a workshop within the Magician's Guild! We are endlessly grateful that you still continue to do business with us."

"Oh... Oh, right. I guess when I start getting more responsibilities, I'll have you come to my estate instead."

"Are you expecting things to change in that regard?"

"Not expecting. Hoping, I guess."

"My, my. Well, it is certainly our intention to maintain a good relationship with you, no matter what happens."

“Same here.”

The storekeeper bowed his head.

Unless he was dealing with especially important seals, Arcus tended to deal only with the clerk. Lately, however, the storekeeper had been coming to see him too, providing he had the time to do so. Arcus supposed he shouldn't be surprised—as the proprietor had alluded to, he *did* have his own seal workshop in the Guild now.

“How have the sales been on those pull-cord Sol Glasses?” Arcus asked.

“They have been very popular. The authorities have been eager to get them in their offices, and we have had floods of requests from novelty-loving nobles hoping their own employees will reverse-engineer them.”

“In that case, please be sure they put forward the necessary royalty forms for the regular switch versions to the Magician's and Artisan's Guilds, as we agreed.”

“Certainly.”

Arcus had developed two forms of Sol Glass that could be turned on and off on demand: one with a simple switch and one with a pull cord. This store was acting as a mediator for their sale. The Magician's Guild didn't sell anything directly, so it was common to sell one's products and technology wholesale to a trusted venue, then collect a portion of the profits as royalties. Though both he and the Guild were dipping into those profits by quite a bit, it seemed the store was not faring too badly at all from the arrangement. Otherwise the storekeeper wouldn't be beaming like he was.

“We look forward to serving you again,” he said. After handing a few bills to Arcus, he left, still bowing.

The boy turned back to the clerk, who, as ever, was rubbing his hands together eagerly enough to start a fire. Arcus had to wonder whether he still had fingerprints, or whether they had been dissolved by friction long ago.

“Have you got what I asked for?” he asked the clerk.

“Aah,” the clerk sighed dramatically. “This is the first time you've ever asked

for a gemstone. Might there be a lovely young lady you wish to gift it to?”

“It’s nothing like that. Sorry to get your hopes up, but I just need it for magic—as usual.”

“Is that right? Well, if you ever find yourself in need of a gift, I would be happy to help. I guarantee to find you something sure to put a smile on the face of the recipient.”

Arcus laughed nervously. “I’ll bear that in mind. Thanks.”

When he had contacted the store to give warning of his arrival, he had requested to be shown a certain jewel.

“You must seek an emerald.”

That was the instruction Chain had given him—something she had claimed would “prove useful.” He wasn’t sure how the jewel would help him, but he figured the first step would be to get ahold of one.

The clerk spread a cloth over the glass table, upon which he lined up a number of gemstones. “This one is sodalite, mined in the Stone Valley. Here we have a ruby, and this one is a diamond from Zeilner. And finally, a sapphire—one of Sapphireberg’s finest.”

“Wow, look at them! Is that all of them?” Arcus asked.

“Yes. These are all the gemstones we have in stock at the moment.”

The sun streaming in through the window caught each stone and set it aglow with shimmering light. Their vivid colors and clarity spoke to their quality. None of them, however, were what Arcus was looking for.

“Um, would you happen to have any emeralds?”

“Emer... I am afraid I might be unfamiliar.”

“An emerald. Haven’t you heard of them? It’s a green stone and, when you polish it, its color gets even brighter.”

“A green stone? I know of jades, but...in all the thirty years I’ve worked here, I’ve never seen anything like what you are describing.”

“Oh...”

Arcus must have looked disappointed, because the clerk bowed his head deeply.

“I apologize that I could not be of more use.”

“It’s fine. If you don’t have it, you don’t have it.”

“An...‘emerald,’ was it? Would you like me to see if I can locate one for you?”

“Yeah, that’d be great. They’re not the same shade of green as jades. If you could be as thorough as possible in your search, I’d appreciate it.”

“Understood.”

Now that the arrangement was made, it was back to the drawing board for Arcus. Thinking about it now, he had never seen anything resembling an emerald either. The only time he had even heard the word was when Chain had appeared in his dream. His knowledge was limited to the pictures and videos from the man’s world—the man whose life he had once experienced through another dream. It was quite possible that the precious stone wasn’t a part of the gem industry in this world. That was likely why he had been told to “seek” one, rather than to “obtain” one, which also seemed to suggest that “obtaining” one would be far from an easy task. All things considered, however, Arcus did not possess a mine of his own, and he had no idea in which sort of mine he might find an emerald. Though he revisited the man’s memories, he couldn’t recall any sorts of documents that might help him either.

“Wait... I *did* get that letter saying Gilles was planning to show up soon.”

The sudden memory put a stop to his reverie.

There was a room in the tower of Arcus’s home that acted as both a library and a reception area. He sat there now, across from a young man who wore a tulip hat. He was as suspicious as they came, with his narrow, fox-like eyes and a thin smile that never seemed to leave his lips. When he spoke, he did so with sweeping, theatrical gestures, all the while taking a good look at his surroundings. No doubt he was searching for any sort of business opportunity. His name was Gilles, and he was a traveling merchant.

It wasn’t long after Arcus received his letter that Gilles turned up at the

estate. His commercial spirit was as robust as ever. No sooner had Arcus shown him in than his eyes sparkled at the pull-cord Sol Glasses, and he came out with a deluge of questions about the items around the boy's home.

They had only been speaking in the reception room for a short time when Arcus was forced to speak those ruthless words. "No deal. And that's final."

"Whoa, whoa, hold up a sec!" Gilles cried, springing up from the couch.

But Arcus wasn't about to back down. He stayed seated, folding his arms and giving the merchant a hard stare. "Sorry, but I've made my decision."

"Y'said y'were gonna listen to me, Arcus! What's changed?!"

"Yeah, *listen*. I didn't say I was gonna *deal* with you."

"Well, sure, but..."

Arcus knew he still ought to be wary of Gilles. The merchant's background and goals were unclear, and sometimes he said things that mystified Arcus. He doubted this man was setting him up for anything, but he was definitely the type to covertly benefit from any dealings "by accident"—the shameless type, who didn't consider lying by omission to be dishonest. There was no such thing as being overly cautious around people like that.

"You *really* want to deal in the stuff I've made?"

"You betcha."

"What sorts of profits would we be looking at?"

"I reckon it'd take a while before we'd find out. But I can promise y'a heckton of new connections!"

"You want me to take a loss initially? Listen, I'm new to all this stuff. You're gonna have to explain the exact benefits having all these new connections is gonna bring. Otherwise I can't deal."

"Yeah, thought not..."

"And what would *you* gain from selling my stuff?"

"Oh, y'know. A *teeny* portion of the profits."

"That's not all though, is it?"

Gilles chuckled like he thought it constituted an answer.

“You can tell me that much, right?” Arcus pressed.

“Now, Arcus, y’gotta understand that I can’t tell y’*everythin’*.” The merchant grinned, but that tactic wasn’t about to work.

“All right. Deal’s off, then.”

“Grrk!”

Arcus didn’t have enough experience dealing with merchants—the only technique in his arsenal was to be a stone wall. He had to remain stubborn until his negotiating partner gave in out of frustration. There was no reason to force himself into a contract with Gilles at this very moment. It was almost relaxing to be able to put up a firm front.

“Listen, Arcus. I *guarantee* this’ll make you a profit.”

“Well yeah, that’s the most basic of my conditions. What kind of merchant is gonna try and offer me a deal where I lose out? I need to know how this is gonna benefit me *on top* of making money.”

“I can’t tell y’that till the stuff starts to sell big.”

“Forget about how much it sells. Give me some immediate benefits.”

“You’re gonna be makin’ a ton of new acquaintances, that’s for sure. The more folk y’know, the better, right? Least for nobles like yourself. They can help y’out in a pinch and stuff.”

Arcus couldn’t argue with that, especially from a noble point of view. It was quite common for nobles to create a widespread network to help protect their vested interests. The question was whether a single deal with a mere merchant could really help him foster that network. Furthermore, Arcus didn’t *need* so many connections at this point, so it wasn’t exactly an enticing offer for him.

Man, this is all so complicated...

His lack of experience meant he was really struggling to judge this deal. Not to mention...

I’d have to put a whole lot of trust into Gilles for this one.

When someone came to you *guaranteeing* a profit, common sense said they were trying to scam you. There was no such thing as a risk-free investment. Arcus could remember an encounter between the man in his dreams and an acquaintance who worked as a salesman. The salesman had offered him guaranteed *work*, but with the risk of a loss. As he recalled, the offer had come over a drink.

Their experiences in Rustinell meant Arcus didn't entirely *distrust* Gilles—but he still wasn't entirely comfortable with all of this.

"C'mon, you're lookin' at me like I'm a crook!" Gilles protested.

"But you *know* how fishy all of this sounds, right? I feel like you're making it fishier on purpose."

"Maybe I am." Gilles smiled at him thinly.

"And *that's* why I'm frowning at you."

What on earth was this man thinking? Arcus was starting to think that *he* didn't want to go through with this deal.

An impish grin rose to the merchant's face. "Y'know, what I'm hearin' is y'don't have anythin' y'think is actually gonna sell."

"Now that's *definitely* not true." Arcus produced one of his inventions and placed it on the table. It was the kettle he had made in his workshop, a device that heated up water in an instant that had greatly impressed the group he'd shown it to.

"Whazzat?" Gilles asked.

"It boils water instantly."

"Instantly? Y'mean..."

"Well, okay, not *instantly*, but it's pretty quick. You fill it with water like this and then put it on this stand here..."

It wasn't long until steam was emitting from the kettle's spout.

"Wah!"

"Now you can have hot water quickly without the need to start a fire." As he

spoke, Arcus poured the water into a glass pot filled with tea leaves. Steam clouded the top part of the pot as the stream of water sent the leaves dashing this way and that. Soon, the hot water leached the color from them, leaving the liquid a reddish brown. Arcus poured the tea into a cup, from which a puff of steam and a gentle aroma rose.

Gilles's eyes sparkled like he had found a rare treasure. "I could sell that! 'Specially up north! It'd sell like crazy over there!"

"Oh yeah?"

"*Yeah!* It's mighty cold up there, and there ain't no easy way to get hot water."

"That's true. All you'd need to do is melt some snow and stick it in here. Though I guess it'd need some reworking to bear the temperatures..."

"True, true! This is gonna be great! Even the folk outside the mountains are gonna love this!"

That wasn't news to Arcus. Products like this were wildly popular in the man's world. To people who bought them for the first time, they were a total game changer.

In certain rural areas of this world, it could take anywhere from thirty minutes to an hour to heat up water. A product that could do it in seconds was bound to be popular.

Although Arcus was selling his pull-cord Sol Glasses through the store, there were a number of other items that he was selling by himself. The kettle and anything utilizing a similar technique, however, were things he had been saving.

"Y'can't show me somethin' like this and then tell me 'deal's off'!"

"You're the only person I've shown this to, apart from my close associates. That should be enough for you."

"Eh, I guess you're right..."

"I owe you one for giving us that info back in Rustinell, which is why I'm doing this. Think about it like this. Selling this means you won't have to rely on weapons all the time, right?"

“Yeah... I way prefer sellin’ stuff that’s useful over weapons.”

“I want you to think about what you can offer me before we meet again.”

“Aight. I’ll have a potential market for you next time. Can I look at that pull-cord Sol Glass again for a bit?”

“Sure.”

A while after their conversation ended, Arcus asked, “Say, Gilles, have you ever heard of an emerald?”

“An eme-what-what?”

“An *emerald*.”

“Naw.” Gilles frowned, puzzled.

“Huh. I thought there was a chance *you* might know something...” Arcus mirrored the merchant’s expression.

He had been to jewelers all over the capital since speaking to the clerk, but none of his efforts had borne any fruit. All the dealers he had asked had told him they’d never heard of or seen such a gemstone, and now he was at a loss. It didn’t make any sense. This world had sapphires, rubies, and even aquamarines, which had the same composition as emeralds, but there was no trace of the stone itself.

“This eme-thingy important to you, Arcus?”

“I dunno if I’d say that. I just haven’t spotted any.”

“Huh? Y’seen ’em before, then?”

“Yeah, a while back.”

“What do they look like?”

“When polished, they shine with a green light. But they’re not jades. You ever seen anything like that?”

“Dunno... But if y’want one, I’ll see what I can find.”

“Thanks. You don’t have to *get* me one or anything. Just let me know if you see one.”

With that, their first round of talks was over, ending with as much success as Arcus's last hunt for an emerald.

The aethometer's announcement had now been officially confirmed. There was still much to do before the exact date was decided, but there was little doubt that it would happen sometime in the near future. Porque Nadar's abortive civil war had pushed the royal family to make the decision.

The kingdom's reputation had suffered thanks to Nadar's treason. The royal family would rather the kingdom remain seen as a great power than one prone to dissension and internal strife. Likewise, the royal family's desired narrative was that the war had been a fluke, only made possible by the Empire's interference. They had decided to announce the aethometer in order to strengthen this posture.

The aethometer was a symbol of innovation. It would likely be enough to instantly kill off all conversation of an isolated nobleman's minor rebellion. Lainur's magicians, who were already known for their prowess, were set to grow even stronger. The announcement would set that knowledge firmly in the minds of other nations, and any who might have been hoping to take advantage of the kingdom's perceived weakness would be forced to reconsider.

Any hostile nation that charged blindly ahead regardless of the announcement would find its military reduced to fodder for Lainur's magicians. Meanwhile, any allied nations that got on the kingdom's bad side would find it reluctant to export aethometers to them. And *every* nation would be forced to change its diplomatic strategy in regards to Lainur. It was unlikely that any of them would try to meddle even slightly in the nation's affairs for the time being.

Domestically, the announcement was sure to bolster the nation's sense of solidarity. With a powerful military force behind it, nobles would be less inclined to leave the kingdom or, indeed, rebel. Nobody would want to become the next Porque Nadar.

The nation's interests aside, Arcus was personally rather satisfied with the timing. He was settled into his new house and had everything he needed to prepare for the announcement. The only caveat was that his name was not to be announced with it; he would be known as talentless for a while longer.

Apparently, it would be more of a boon to his renown if his name was revealed *after* the aethometer and its blessings were widely known. And so, they would wait a year to do so—two at most.

Though it struck Arcus as odd that the royal family was putting so much work into the reveal, he was also aware that there were things they weren't telling him. Ceylan confirmed as much when he called Arcus to the palace.

“Your Royal Highness wishes for me to create more powerful spells?”

“Correct. I am expecting great things from you. And it should not be too much to ask of a boy of your talents. You have already created the aethometer; your name's place in this nation's history is guaranteed. What remains is a necessity to excel as a magician. You must create spells to impress even the most seasoned mages and make a real name for yourself.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Good. I shall look forward to your success.”

Though Arcus accepted the instruction, he had no idea how he was actually going to accomplish it. Creating a powerful spell wasn't exactly easy, but his status was such that he could not deny a request from the prince.

His lack of aether would be the bottleneck to producing such spells. His levels were equivalent to the average magician one might find on the street; any spell he made needed to be light on its aether consumption and, even then, he would quickly run out when experimenting. That would make the process even longer. He had been trying to solve his aether troubles for quite some time; he hadn't thought such a large request would be made of him before he had found a way to do so.

“I can't believe how late it is...”

By the time Arcus left the palace and finished up at the Magician's Guild, where he was preparing for the announcement, the sun had already set. The Sol Glasses spread through the capital meant he wasn't traveling in total darkness, but it was far from the bright towns of the man's world. There, lamps and the lights from people's windows flooded the streets with brightness,

whereas here, it only took a turn into an alleyway for things to turn gloomy.

I guess that's what they have lanterns for here...

As Arcus turned a corner, a figure emerged from one such alleyway. They stood in the middle of the path as though they were preventing passage. Suspicious was the only word for them. They just stood there, with no lantern of their own.

Arcus knew that it would be wiser to ignore them. There was nothing stopping him from taking a detour, but to do so would be highly annoying. If only he could get past, he would be home in minutes.

He raised his lantern as he walked, casually inspecting the figure. Their hood was pulled too low to draw any conclusions about their face. They were definitely taller than five feet, but perhaps not by much. Their attire was the most distinctive thing about them. The clothing they wore beneath their cloak reminded Arcus of an elegant kimono, especially in its use of color.

Could they be a nobleman expelled from the capital? Their clothing seemed too conspicuous for a criminal. He could discern nothing underneath that might suggest their sex. Did they mean harm or were they just odd?

Wary, Arcus made a move to swerve around them, but they seemed to draw closer. So they likely *did* mean harm.

Though these may have been the capital's outskirts, it was still within the nobles' quarter. If anyone wanted to harm a noble, this wasn't the place to do it—but there were exceptions to every rule.

Preparing for the worst, Arcus covertly focused his attention on the sword on his hip. He ran through his repertoire of spells, picking out a few that would serve him well in a space like this. On top of that, he cast his senses out to his surroundings; the figure might have been a decoy. Then he continued forward, even prepared to summon Tribe, the Phantom Hound, if need be.

Wait...

Speaking of Tribe, Gown's lantern wasn't shaking like it tended to when it wanted to warn Arcus of danger. He didn't have to be so wary.

“Seer,” the hooded figure spoke to him.

Seer, Arcus Raytheft.

It reminded him of the unnatural way Chain had addressed him during her final blessing. It threw him off guard, but that wasn't the only thing that drew his attention. The high-pitched tones they spoke in were as clear as the peeling of a silver bell—a decidedly feminine voice.

When he showed no response, she called out to him again. “Seer.”

“Are you talking to me?” he asked.

The apologetic drop in her tone suggested she hadn't meant to evoke suspicion. “I am sorry. I was still in high spirits from my success in having found you. Please forgive my transgression.” She silently took a knee.

Arcus struggled to disguise his bewilderment. It was the kind of gesture one would make to show reverence to a lord. While he may have had noble blood, he was still a child. No one had ever knelt before him like that, and it only served to make him less trusting.

He pulled out his sword and leveled it at her. “I don't trust you.”

“I can well understand why. However, I ask that you hear me out before making any judgment.”

He considered this. Ordinarily, he wouldn't feel the need to lend his ear to someone who had ambushed him like this. But the fact that she had addressed him just as Chain had changed matters. There was a possibility that she was connected to the spirits, and even if she wasn't, she might have known something he didn't.

“Will you listen to what I have to say?” she prompted.

“All right. But step back first.”

She did as he asked, rising to her feet and drawing away from him. The long material of her kimono obscured her feet, and he couldn't hear the clacking or scraping of stone beneath them. But her body *must* have been stabilized somehow, because her upper half stayed remarkably still.

Arcus kept his focus on her as he took a step back himself. One step kept him

in danger. Another, but he still wasn't out of the woods. So he took a third step—but she would still be able to strike in a single bound.

Just how much reach does she have?

He could tell from her movements. The ability to discern such a thing was a recent development, likely from his experience on the battlefield and his practice bouts with Craib and Noah. In order to escape her range, he would have to create a distance between them that would necessitate her raising her voice. Whether that was down to her skill or innate physical ability was unclear.

“Am I far back enough now?” she asked.

“No. Lemme use a spell real quick—*Tenfold Performance*.”

It was a spell that would temporarily elevate his physical capabilities. He would pair this with Focus, a skill he had recently mastered in the rapier hall which allowed him to manipulate his speed. Now she wouldn't be able to harm him by any ordinary means.

He hopped on the ground a few times to test out the efficacy of his spell and skill.

“You really are wary,” the figure remarked, sounding somewhat amused.

“Obviously. You're super sketchy. I gotta be ready in case you try something.”

“I haven't the slightest intention of harming you. Please allow me to introduce myself before anything else. My name is Ursula. I am from the Heoga Tribe.”

“The Heoga Tribe...” Arcus frowned.

“You have heard of us?” Ursula lowered her hood.

The face that appeared underneath took Arcus's breath away. First, there was her small, well-shaped nose, and her delicate lips. Beneath one of her almond-shaped eyes was a beauty mark, a point of appeal regardless of one's world of origin. It was difficult to tell her age, but if Arcus had to guess, he would assume she was a young adult. Her smooth skin looked like it had never seen a blemish in its life. Her long, black hair was gathered together by an ornamental pin, and its luster made it look almost indigo.

Ursula was gorgeous. Arcus had never seen anyone so beautiful—a living,

breathing model of the feminine ideal. Her features bordered on miraculous, the likes of which the hand of an artist might conjure, but nature itself could not.

He had heard of the Heoga Tribe. They were a people who inhabited the plateaus that ran from the northeast of the kingdom up to the border with the Northern Confederation. Unaffiliated with any country, the land they lived on was a neutral zone. They did, however, have dealings with Lainur, and their fabrics and products could be found in the capital's markets.

Members of the Heoga Tribe were recognizable by the tiny horns that grew where their forehead met their hairlines. Arcus raised his lantern up high. Though it was mostly hidden by her hair, Ursula had these horns too. They weren't even half an inch long.

It wasn't unheard of in the man's world for tumors or keratin to harden and take on a hornlike shape. These horns came by themselves, or as asymmetrical pairs, and their forms could not be predicted. Ursula's appeared to be made of bone and were perfectly symmetrical—clearly a separate phenomenon.

Arcus distracted himself from her beauty with a question. "And what does a woman of the Heoga Tribe want with a noble kid like me?"

"I have come to greet you, Seer."

"And you think I'm important enough that you came all the way to the capital to do it?"

"That you are."

"I think you've got the wrong guy. See ya." Sheathing his sword, Arcus made to leave. It was partly a test.

It still wasn't apparent what she wanted from him. He didn't know how she had decided that he was the "Seer" she was after either. That was the question he wanted answered first. Pretending to leave might draw something out of her.

"Please wait. I have proof."

"Where?"

“Your left arm.”

“Huh?”

Arcus’s left arm was currently wrapped in bandages. Was that how she had identified him? Deciding someone was a “Seer” solely on the basis of an injured arm seemed a little flimsy to him.

But Ursula looked as serious as anything. She definitely wasn’t making fun of him.

When he asked her to elaborate, she said, “Before I explain, Seer, there is something I wish to ask of you. Do you know of *The Prophecy of Shadows*?”

“Yeah. And stop calling me ‘Seer.’ Who said that’s what I was? I don’t even know what it means.”

“Very well. May I call you Arcus?”

“So you *do* know my name...”

He was obliged to assume that she knew about his background too. There had likely been a lot of preparation put into this visit of hers.

“*The Prophecy of Shadows* writes of a leader to the Heoga Tribe. You match the description of that leader perfectly.”

“What leader?”

“The Seer is said to be a youth with silver hair and scarlet eyes.”

“Everyone in my family has those. I bet you’d find people with the same hair and eye colors in other countries too.”

“I quite agree. That is why I would like to see your left arm. It is written that there is a phoenixlike pattern on the Seer’s left arm.”

“A phoenix?” Arcus’s heart thumped once. “Pattern” was a strange way of putting it, but he did have a birthmark shaped like one. He hadn’t been aware of it until Sue pointed it out the other day as she was treating his arm. It was an unsettling coincidence.

“Yes. The mark of the one destined to bring peace to the tribe.”

His birthmark may have resembled a phoenix, but it was just that: a

birthmark. Was this woman really putting her faith in something borne of random chance?

Arcus suddenly realized his gaze had dropped to the location of the mark.

“So, the prophecy was true,” Ursula said.

“It *kinda* looks like a phoenix, but that’s it.”

He unwrapped his bandages to show his arm to a smug Ursula. What she saw left her beaming like her heart was overflowing.

“There it is...”

“It’s gotta be a coincidence, though. And besides...”

This sort of thing happened in fairy tales. Not real life.

Ursula shook her head vigorously before he could point that out. “That mark, along with your hair and eyes... I doubt it is an especially common combination. I do not believe there is any room for doubt. What’s more, this is not the first time you have been called ‘Seer,’ is it? Else there would have been no need for you to stay and listen.”

“I might look exactly like this ‘Seer’ is supposed to, but how come you’re so sure I’m the one you want? Aren’t prophecies supposed to be a little unreliable?”

“The events foretold in *The Prophecy of Shadows* are all linked to future events.”

“Yeah, I’ve heard that too, but—”

“And in fact, it has already proven itself to be true about many things.”

“Like what?”

“Led by a previous Seer, all forty-two clans that make up the Heoga Tribe overcame a period of suffering.”

“And you’re expecting me to lead you in the same way?”

“Yes. I understand how presumptuous it is to appear before you without warning and make such a request of you; however, this too has been foretold.”

At least she was self-aware. However, the fact that she had sought him out despite that showed how pressing the matter was to her. A part of Arcus was incredulous about her unconditional belief in the prophecy. The other side of the coin was that, to a true believer, the prophecy was infallible. In fact, he was the odd one out. The prevailing line of thought in this world was that the events described in *The Prophecy of Shadows* were literal certainties. It was one of the reasons magicians took such pains trying to decipher it. Chain herself may as well have outright corroborated it in his dream.

Arcus decided it would be best to assume the prophecy was true for now, although it didn't alleviate all his doubts.

"This is all too sudden," he said, "and I really don't have the kind of abilities you'd need in a leader."

"Even if that is the case now, you will surely attain them."

"And if I do, you want me to help you? Do you guys even *need* a leader?"

"The Heoga Tribe does not own land, and each turning point in our history has been marked by a journey to a new place. We dearly wish to find a land where we may live in peace."

"Right now you're occupying...the northeast part of the Lamacan Plateau and part of the Cross Mountain Range, right?"

"We settled in our current home less than two decades ago, but there is much that we are dissatisfied with. That being said, we have no complaints about the climate or terrain."

Arcus could think of one thing that might make living in such a location difficult. "It's the water causing you problems, isn't it?"

"That is exactly right."

A change in the drinking water could be explained by a change in the soil. High-quality water was vital for good health, whereas poor water could lead to hives, unhealthy skin, and diarrhea.

"I don't think that's a problem you need me to solve," Arcus said. "Your tribe could easily find a sizable territory elsewhere. Maybe even two."

“I completely agree.”

Though the Heoga Tribe didn't own any land itself, they were proficient fighters to the extent that their small population could rival the military might of a minor nation. Their leader was treated with the same reverence as a duke by various countries, with many of them working constantly to earn his favor in an effort to secure the tribe's fighting potential for themselves. Lainur was no exception.

Ursula suddenly shook her head. “However, the territory and rank we might earn by fighting would be incompatible with our desire for peace. That is why we decided to wait for the one whose arrival is foretold in *The Prophecy of Shadows*.”

“So you already considered fighting, huh? I guess this *is* the less risky option.”

“Less risky, but highly discourteous. I can only ask that you accept our sincerest apologies.”

Arcus supposed it was a mark in her favor that she wasn't trying to obfuscate that they were just using him. They wouldn't even have thought to ask a boy as young as him if not for the prophecy, and he doubted it was a decision they would have come to easily.

“As I have said, we are well aware of how presumptuous it is to ask for your help, and yet I *beg* of you to help us. And of course, we wish to offer you something in return. You need only ask, and you will have the might of the entire Heoga Tribe at your disposal. As assurance, let us be bound by a vow of master and servant.”

“Wait, wait, *wait!* Remember what I said about this all being too sudden?”

Taking on that vow wouldn't just guarantee their assistance; it would mean he was obligated to help them too. It would be like he was in possession of a powerful bomb. It wouldn't matter if it exploded somewhere out of his sight, but if it exploded while in his hands, he would be directly in harm's way. He would be undertaking a great responsibility. There was no way he could agree without thinking things through properly.

“You do not trust in my words?” Ursula pressed.

“Of course I don’t. You’ve *told* me *The Prophecy of Shadows* says all this stuff, but how do I know if that’s actually true? Can you give me the exact passage?”

She fell into an uneasy silence. Clearly, her knowledge of this account came from oral tradition, rather than her having sat down and interpreted the text herself.

On the other hand, she addressed him in the same way as Chain, and he *did* have that birthmark on his arm. He didn’t think what Ursula was saying was wrong exactly. It was just that there was a wary voice deep in his heart cautioning him against believing her unconditionally. Was it really wise to put such trust into something as indefinite as a prophecy?

Perhaps he wouldn’t be asking himself these questions if not for the heavy influence the man’s world had on him.

“Why have you come to me *now*?” Arcus asked the question that had just struck him.

“I first saw you at the order ceremony. I worried that, if I did not make contact soon, the opportunity to do so would slip away.”

“Why?”

“The higher your status climbed, the more difficult it would become to meet you.”

“You really think I’m gonna be that big of a deal?”

“It is not difficult to imagine what your future may look like, given you received an Order of the Silver Cross at your age.”

“So now was the only time you could approach me, huh?”

Arcus certainly *wanted* to make his name as a magician. If he managed to pull it off, it would indeed be more difficult for anyone to make contact with him. Even if the situation wasn’t so dire that Ursula couldn’t wait to speak with him any longer, he could understand why she had decided that now was a good time to do so.

So what was *he* supposed to do?

He certainly wasn’t about to agree to anything without due consideration.

That would just be asking for trouble. On the other hand, refusing outright probably wasn't a good idea either. It was hard to think that her addressing him as "Seer" could be mere coincidence.

The crux of the matter was the prophecy. In the man's world, the same prophecy would be regarded with suspicion; here, it was *truth*. Arcus needed to be careful not to let his prejudices cloud his judgment.

"I'm not gonna say whether I believe your story one way or the other, but I won't forget what we spoke about."

"That is enough to satisfy me for now. Thank you very much for your consideration, Arcus." Ursula moved to the edge of the path like a vassal kneeling down to allow their king passage.

I guess the title of Seer really would be that prestigious, if everything she's said is true...

Arcus walked ahead for a bit, then took a moment to look back over his shoulder. Ursula was still kneeling, as still as a statue. Returning his attention to the road ahead, he made for home.

Once Arcus was gone, Ursula rose to her feet and gazed for a while in the direction he had disappeared. Darkness had overcome the alleyway, wedged between two buildings, leaving moonlight as the only source of illumination. If she stayed much longer, even that wouldn't be enough to save this path from drowning in the black.

Ursula pulled out a lantern and lit the wick. The walls around her were bathed in an orange flame that elongated the shadows and deepened the darkness it could not reach. Then, she raised her head.

"I know you are there, Yahanni."

At her call, a hooded figure slipped out from a shadowy corner beyond her lamp. They were shorter than Ursula and wore the same style of windbreaker cloak over their kimono-like attire. They kept half of themselves steeped in the coiling shadows as they replied.

"He was the Seer, wasn't he? He bears all the signs."

“Yes, *and* he seemed familiar with that form of address. He must be the one we are looking for.”

“He did not seem to agree.” There was a teasing lilt to Yahanni’s tone that failed to elicit a reaction from Ursula.

“Would you not react the same way in his position? I think he was rather calm, given his age.”

“Yes... No child could do what we are asking of him.” Yahanni let out a resigned sigh.

The same held true for his vigilance. Arcus’s alertness had struck both Ursula and Yahanni as being far beyond his years.

“Look into Arcus,” Ursula instructed her companion, “but do so within the confines of courtesy.”

“Are you certain? Wouldn’t sneaking around in his shadow make him even more wary?”

“We must know the Seer well before we can do anything else. Only then can we be sure not to offend him.”

“Likewise, I must avoid offending him as I go about my investigation.”

“Exactly.”

“That will not be easy.” But Yahanni did not say that it would be impossible. “I do have to wonder whether that child truly *is* the magnificent Seer the prophecy speaks of.”

“Do you distrust our lore, Yahanni?”

Despite Ursula’s sharp gaze, Yahanni came back with a jovial response. “I have heard it enough to make my ears drop off. But seeing it all with my own eyes, I am forced to wonder.”

“Did he not seem like the Seer to you?”

“No. What about you?”

Ursula did not respond. She was particularly devout, even among the Heoga Tribe. Yahanni knew well the resolute faith she held for the legend.

“Do we even need to play along with prophecy?” Yahanni went on. “The Seer himself suggested invasion as an option; he wasn’t wrong.”

“That would break the taboos set by our tribe’s founders.”

“It does not make sense to me to let our clans suffer so for tradition’s sake alone.”

Indeed, the Heoga Tribe was on the decline. It was partly due to their lack of a permanent home, and the pressure placed on them by the surrounding nations had recently led to skirmishes that’d exacerbated the problem. It didn’t make sense to wait for the prophecy’s fulfillment if it meant the Heoga Tribe would be wiped out in the meantime. Yahanni was far from the only one who felt that was a concern.

“You are far from the first tribemate of mine to so openly chafe against our ways,” Ursula said. “It speaks to the desperation of our situation.”

“A situation that now looks all the bleaker. Our ‘Seer’ is the spitting image of a pampered child.”

Ursula shook her head. “It seems our opinions differ on that front.”

“Did you see something in him that I did not?”

“I agree that he looked like a pampered child on the outside, but his spirit was genuine. It was as though he could judge the threat I might pose to him from the subtlest of my cues.”

“That explains his peculiar reactions. And why he was granted the Order of the Silver Cross.”

Still, it wasn’t enough to convince Yahanni that Arcus was worthy of being their Seer. In her eyes, he simply didn’t look the part.

“And then there was the lantern on his hip,” Ursula continued.

“Oh? Oh, yes—he had two of them, didn’t he? What about it?”

“What need would a person have for two lanterns?”

“I’m guessing you aren’t about to tell me that one is simply a spare.” Yahanni gave a puzzled look. The boy had seemed too prudent to carry around a lantern

that was on the verge of breaking and the weight of an extra one besides.

“I recognized the one on his hip.”

“From where?”

“It was identical to that carried by the Grave Sprite, Gown.”

“It was? Is Gown’s lantern not a tool meant to call on Tribe? I thought the dog’s purpose was to punish grave robbers.”

“Before he drew his sword, the Seer’s eyes kept darting to the lantern on his hip. That was the impression I had, at least.”

“But why would the Seer carry Gown’s lantern?”

“Because he is the Seer...”

Yahanni fell silent. Tribe was said to be a hunting dog that flickered with mesmerizing blue-white flames and absorbed the life force of thieves. If the lantern the boy held was truly its window of summons, then perhaps the prophecy was true after all.

Yahanni said no more, and so Ursula continued.

“I shall return home. You know who to contact now, don’t you?”

“We are going ahead as planned?”

“Yes, I think we have just seen that it is our best option. Be vigilant, and keep what we have spoken of here ever in mind as you carry out my instructions.”

“Understood.”

With that, the pair vanished into the capital’s darkest shadows.

At thirteen years old, Arcus would be enrolling in the Institute of Magic in a matter of months. But first he had the announcement of the aethometer to contend with, which was scheduled for the very beginning of the year.

The Magician’s Guild was set to make the existence of the device public and, where it had so far been limited to military and medical use, it would now be available for the authorities, the Institute, and magical noble houses to benefit from. So that knowledge of the aethometer would be spread both domestically

and internationally, there would be a large-scale launch party at the palace. The invitation list didn't stop at Lainur's nobility, reaching out to include the head of House Darnénes from the Northern Confederation, Sapphireberg's monarch, a scholar-bureaucrat from Bǎi Liánbāng sympathetic to the kingdom, and Lainur's ten monarchs.

The party was held in a reception hall in the palace, and its scope was just as impressive as the order ceremony. Lavish decorations adorned every inch of the hall, and the tables were laden with food. The sheer number of esteemed guests meant that the palace courtyard had also been opened. The enormous aethometer that Arcus had gifted the royal family sat in one corner of the hall.

Despite its designation as a launch party, it seemed more like a social banquet, rather than a reception to share in the kingdom's success. Arcus supposed it was human nature to find any excuse to celebrate, and this was a chance for Lainur to use its magnificent entertainments to show off its wondrous prosperity to those within and without its borders. More importantly, the aethometer was set to make great contributions to the magical industry. The party had to match the device's prestige, lest people claim it to be a waste of taxes.

Since Arcus was not yet to be revealed as its inventor, he was attending the party as his uncle Craib's "attendant." Having been told that *his* introduction would be a much larger affair, accompanied by a parade and the creation of a memorial day, Arcus was filled with trepidation for the future.

Shortly after the start of the glamorous event, it was time for the aethometer to be officially unveiled. Craib, who had helped to develop the invention and had invested heavily in it, would be giving the presentation. It was a little jarring to see a rugged, muscular mage giving such a technical explanation, but that was beside the point.

Several sample aethometers had been placed in the hall's center. That was where the guests were gathered, taking the devices in hand and scrutinizing them. Each seemed to have a different method of trying to identify their inner workings. Some studied them like a bottle of fine wine, holding them up to the light. Others simply stared intently enough that it was a wonder they didn't burn holes in them.

“Now this is rather something.”

“I would never have thought such an invention possible.”

“Only Lainur, with its technical prowess, could have come up with something like this.”

Every last guest sang the invention’s praises, lauding it as revolutionary, and by the same token, marveling at what the future would hold once the kingdom’s magical mastery developed even further. It was difficult to discern the emotions behind those voices. They could just have easily been admiration as surprise or fear. Whichever it was, the emotional impact on the guests was undeniable. Amidst their flattery, a number of them were pressing their magic attendants to probe the device’s workings.

The aethometer’s construction was really very simple. With enough skill in engineering glass and industrial workmanship, replicating its appearance would be far from difficult. The complications came in reproducing its *contents*. The tempered silver central to the aethometer’s workings required the creation of tempered aether. It was the knowledge of such aether that was key to the device’s production. Someone would have to read and decipher the same book that Arcus himself had come across. Then, they would need to spend several patient hours putting the book’s instructions into practice. The resulting tempered aether would then need to be applied to Sorcerer’s Silver in order to alter the metal’s properties. In short, replicating the liquid of an aethometer required a long string of unlikely coincidences. Furthermore, the tempered silver inside the glass had been colored red with cinnabar, so simply looking at it would give no clue as to its identity.

Even if someone was able to recreate the silver, it would take a colossal amount of time to work out how to make practical use of it. And then there was the matter of ensuring that the device you had produced was as accurate as the genuine article, in the same way that a watch was useless if you couldn’t adjust its time. Any measuring device required that its base standards were both perfectly tuned and well known among its users. Every owner of an aethometer used it as though it were the simplest thing in the world, but Arcus had gone through an arduous process of fine-tuning its specifications before releasing it. In fact, he personally felt that the knowledge behind the aethometer was more

valuable than the thing itself in this regard. But even if a rival nation were to try and make the devices on their own, they would be looking at *years* before they'd be able to perfect the creation's delicacies, such as the tempered silver's rate of expansion. There was a reason there was so much paperwork involved in engineering the aethometer.

Despite Arcus's impressive memory and the spell he had developed to copy paper, it had still taken close to five years to perfect his invention. He had worked hard to speed up the process as much as possible, and he was confident that he had contributed to a paradigm shift in magic technology. It was not something to be easily replicated, and he would not stand for someone pulling off the same feat without as much grueling effort as he himself had put in. And of course, concerns about other countries trying to copy the technology had been discussed anew prior to the party's opening.

"Yes, I can see that it would be no mean feat to replicate it." The remark came from Ceylan.

The prince, his father Shinlu, and the state magicians had gathered for a presentation. The magicians said nothing, seeming to agree with him, and were either focused on the aethometer itself or flicking through the documentation in front of them.

As before, Arcus was the speaker, armed with a paper in one hand. Once he was finished, the room fell into a silence that was eventually broken by Godwald, the Guildmaster.

"Had you expected this level of success, Arcus?"

"I wouldn't say that. My aim was to optimize it as best I could. That my optimization has proven itself is an added bonus. I would attribute it more to my uncle's bountiful advice and the enthusiasm shown by various magicians for its implementation."

Arcus couldn't imagine having come this far without the eager support of influential and specialist magic users. There was always going to be a strong pushback against any new technology introduced to society. The aethometer would not have found success as quickly as it had if the kingdom's magicians fancied themselves craftsmen who judged everything superficially. *Those* types

inevitably lacked insight when it came to new technologies. But the state magicians held sufficient influence to silence such people. Else the aethometer would have encountered many more hurdles than it had since its initial, limited announcement.

“I realize this has already been addressed,” Godwald went on, “but are you *certain* that there is no risk of the technology being replicated?”

“Yes, sir. Suppose another nation set out to make one of its own. They would have to contend with the tempered silver’s manufacture, the design of the specialized glass container, the establishment of a vacuum as a concept, and the homogenization of the silver’s rate of expansion. That is before you consider the standardization of the device’s units, and the need to equip its users with knowledge of said standard. You can see just how much information that requires in these.” Arcus gestured to the documentation. Reports as thick as dictionaries from the man’s world lay in two piles. These were the documents pertaining to the research that went into the aethometer. One look at the stack left an indelible impression of the apocalyptic *thump* they would make with even a short drop.

“Yes, that *does* seem like a lot of information to compile just like that,” said Godwald. “Especially considering that Lainur is one step ahead of our neighbors when it comes to magic technology. I cannot see us being overtaken.”

“I must agree.” Roheim Langula nodded. “It is one thing to come *up* with a unit, the mechanism itself, and a plan to spread such knowledge through one’s users. It is quite another to implement all of those things. I daresay it would take even more time and trouble than young Arcus did inventing the aethometer in the first place.”

“Yes, yes!” Mercuria String chimed in. “More than ten years, if we are to consider the level of magic advancement in some of these countries. And Lainur would not rest on her laurels when it comes to research during that time either!”

The kingdom had already analyzed the aether required for its principal spells, down to each individual word. In all other nations, which did not have access to aethometers, magicians still had no choice but to rely on their instincts. Not

only that, but even if those countries were to get their hands on the device, they would first need to take pains to investigate how it worked. All the while, Lainur would be using the aethometer to make even greater magical developments.

“For our part, we have simply been given the aethometer and the means to use it,” Muller Quint pointed out. “We have been eagerly poring over the documents sent to us on a month-by-month basis and have used it in our own research. Who is to say that it shouldn’t have taken even *longer* for us to reach this point?”

“Yes. Its usage has taken on remarkably well, even when one considers that it has the backing of the Magician’s Guild and the royal family,” said Gastarque Rondiel.

The next man to speak had a heavy belly and was clad in extravagant, traditional noble dress. He looked to be around thirty years old. The perpetual smile on his face gave him an affable air. He was Al Ritsuellie Baldan, or Swift Wind. He ruled Zelipus, one of Lainur’s vassal states.

“Mmm, I do enjoy making things myself, but I never get to finishing any of them! Creates much work for many people. I can only imagine how much work went into *this*.” He turned to Arcus. “I can tell that you are going to be a worthy rival.”

“You honor me, Your Majesty.”

“Mmm. Aah, I look forward to the day when we can discuss our creative exploits.” The king grinned. He was much friendlier than his title implied. “Merry” and “pleasant” were also suitable descriptions. Then there was his large frame, which suggested that there was nothing “swift” about him. He contradicted himself; he contained multitudes.

Al wasn’t the only guest to have missed out on the previous presentation.

“A question for you, little bunny.” It was a girl in a wheelchair who spoke, with long, light-blue hair and eyes of the same shade. She stuck out among the other magicians by the fact that she wore the uniform of a prisoner of the Holy Tower. She was in a wheelchair not because she couldn’t use her legs, but in order to keep her restrained. The belts that bound her hand and foot were

reminiscent of the bandages that preserved the bodies of mummies.

This was Alicia “Dry Spell” Rotterbell, youngest of the state magicians. When Arcus had been sent to the Holy Tower, she’d assisted him in his escape. As he recalled, he had found her endlessly curious, and that impression had not changed. All she did was smile thinly at him, giving no clues as to what she might be thinking. Perhaps unsurprisingly, her state of perpetual bondage was a protective measure for everyone else. That being the case, it struck Arcus as odd that neither Shinlu nor the other state magicians seemed especially wary of her.

Arcus grimaced slightly at the way she addressed him, which only served to elicit a smile from her. “Yes?” he asked.

“Why not just keep this all to yourself?”

“Please elaborate.”

“You could have changed the standards for magic in this country single-handedly. If you’d *really* wanted, you could’ve used your little invention to create spells that blew our old magic out of the water, then spread those throughout the kingdom. You would have become the sole master of Lainur’s magic. You still could, actually. Oh, and it might even be *easier* now that you have your foot—your entire leg, in fact—in the door already.”

Alicia did have a point. There were certain fundamental spells in the kingdom, and the documents detailing the aether they required were the basis for the aethometer’s manual. If Arcus had gone through the same process, but instead restricted those documents to a new slate of spells, he could indeed have become the “master” of the kingdom’s magic, as she put it.

“The thought never crossed my mind,” he said.

“No? I would’ve thought it’d be the first thing *anyone* would think of. You’re definitely smart enough.”

“Even then, I don’t think there would be much point. Any spells that were too difficult would quickly fall out of use, and even if my new magic were to catch on, magicians are constantly coming up with new spells anyway. Besides, it wouldn’t be enough to wipe out the old local standbys.”

“You have the royal family’s support,” Alicia pointed out. “You could reform the entire magic system if you wanted.”

“Even then, think of the backlash if I were to try and erase the spells handed down by the thaumaturgical pioneers who went before us. Besides, there are still improvements to be made concerning the device’s precision, which requires competition—something that wouldn’t exist if I monopolized it. Progress *needs* that competition.”

“Ooh. It sounds like you already know *exactly* what everyone’s going to do with your little invention.”

Arcus had thought she might just be acting weird again, but perhaps she just saw things in a different light from most. He could well understand how people might think him capable of looking into the future (when really, he was just drawing on his knowledge of the man’s world); he’d just never expected to be called out on it. While he struggled to come up with something that wouldn’t arouse suspicion, Alicia shot him a bewitching smile that should have been beyond her years.

“There’s no need to be *frightened* of me, wittle bunny. You *know* the nature of our relationship.”

“I ask that you choose your words carefully so as not to elicit misunderstandings.”

“Misunderstandings? What a horrible way to turn me down!” Alicia certainly *looked* upset, but it was difficult to tell how much was an act. And when Arcus, fed up with her nonsense, didn’t say anything, she giggled. Once she’d had her fun laughing at her own joke, her expression turned serious. “*Well*, then. What are you going to do now you’ve finished putting these documents together?”

“I’m going to make sure that any measuring devices produced hereafter conform to the same standards.”

“Ooh, go on.”

“Well, for example... Say someone made a device for measuring hex. The units for doing so would need to match both the mana used in casting the spell, and the unit in which the resultant hex itself is measured.”

Roheim nodded sagely. “Yes. Yes, that does make sense.”

Meanwhile, a number of the other magicians seemed to be struggling to figure out what he was saying. Muller asked Roheim the question that was on all their minds. “Would you be so kind as to explain it to us?”

“There is little to explain, Madame Quint. What Arcus proposes would both make everything easier to understand and facilitate the use of these devices in conjunction with each other.”

“Oh?”

“Indeed. Presently, we measure aether in mana. If the standard is set such that a spell that consumes ten mana of aether *also* produces ten units of hex, it precludes the need for a lengthy calculation every time one wishes to measure the latter.”

“Oh, *and* it would mean that no one would struggle to remember any equations between the two units,” Muller said. “Else they would need a chart, especially when relaying the information onward!”

Indeed, if the two units were developed separately from each other, it would complicate communication. They would become like unto Celsius and Fahrenheit, metric and imperial. Imperial was a particularly tricky system, as some of the values could vary ever so slightly between countries. Although the first step would be to identify the mechanism behind hex’s production, it was essential that the unit be mapped to mana thereafter.

“I see. You must have come across some very difficult things to have thought of that, little bunny.” Alicia giggled. “I wonder *where* you encountered those things.”

Again, she proved that she was oddly perceptive. But engaging with her remarks would likely consume too much time with nothing to show for it. Arcus figured that his best bet was to respond with silence rather than risk saying something careless.

There was amusement in Alicia’s eyes as she regarded him, as though she had picked up on his wariness. Arcus was again reminded that he didn’t like dealing with people like her. He was filled with a sense of unease, like he needed to

keep his guard up if he didn't want to end up wrapped around her little finger.

Another attendant—a woman in a black hood with protrusions shaped like cat ears—then turned her gaze on Arcus. “Have you already got plans for this device to measure hex?”

“Sorry? Oh, um, no. I was just using it as an example. I haven't started work on anything like that yet.”

“Oh.” She sounded vaguely disappointed.

She was Shurelia “Twisted Fate” Rimaleon, a state magician chosen from the friendly nation of Sapphireberg. A brilliant hunter of dark spirits, it was said that she was nominated for her position after slaying the hex fiends that had previously appeared in Sapphireberg. Her interest in the hypothetical device likely stemmed from the fact that damage caused by dark spirits was a periodic problem in Sapphireberg. Dark spirits came from hex, so being able to measure it could help prevent otherwise-unpredictable damage.

“Your Majesty?” Godwald addressed Shinlu. “I see no issue. These usage standards are based on extensive research. As long as we strictly defend the device's documentation, other countries will have no choice but to adopt the same units and standards that Arcus has created. The same goes for magic research; they will be forced to rely on the kingdom's advancements more than ever. What say you, Gastarque?”

“Assuming the aethometer will become much more common, I say we distribute these standards before another nation attempts to make a set of its own.”

“Roheim?”

“I agree. By anticipating other nations and creating our own standards first, we maintain the advantage. While it may be somewhat politically risky, I believe that implementing them will pay off.”

Godwald nodded thoughtfully. He had always been on Arcus's side, and with the assent of the two senior magicians, the top three mages in the room had given the proposal their stamp of approval.

“Your Majesty?” he prompted.

“Let it be done.” The king’s response settled it.

The proposal was passed around the state magicians, and each of them affixed their seal to it. As the work for the aethometer’s announcement was already underway, this part of the process was likely little more than a formality. Nevertheless, it set the coming announcement in stone.

Once everyone had stamped their seal, Shinlu turned to Arcus and called his name.

“Sir.”

“We’ve accepted this policy, but that’s it. Just like you’ve perfected these standards based on our use of the device. That’s all there is to it. But you’ve been working all this time to simplify this stage of the process. It would’ve been no surprise to anyone if you’d needed a lot more time and effort to put these standards together.”

“I agree, sir.”

“This is going to sound like Alicia’s question, but where did you get all this information from?”

“I put it together based on my knowledge, sir. That is all.”

“Really? These are like no formulas I’ve ever seen. But you understand perfectly how they work, do you?”

“Um...”

Shinlu grinned. “I guess it’s not impossible that you came up with them and refined them to within an inch of their lives! I really would like to crack your skull open and take a look inside.” He let out a full-bellied laugh.

Arcus found it difficult to be amused.

“You have a free pass from me to undertake whatever research you wish from now on. Make sure the rest of you keep your noses out.”

The magicians nodded their assent. Arcus was grateful for the king’s warning. As long as he was left alone and not asked any questions, he wouldn’t have to go through the awkwardness of trying to come up with answers.

And so, the recent meeting at the Magician's Guild paved the way for this evening's party. Naturally, the state magicians were also in attendance.

Craib was giving the presentation; Godwald was accompanying Shinlu and his guard; Roheim, the third-highest ranking of the state magicians, was by Ceylan's side; and the heroic Gastarque was with his family in one section of the hall. Frederick Benjamin, who made a great show of playing with walnuts, was watching over the palace with a number of the imperial guard and fellow state magician, Cassim Lowry. Muller and Mercuria were making the rounds greeting the nobles and vassals. Al and Shurelia rounded out the state magicians' numbers, making Alicia the only absentee among them.

Arcus was doing his best not to be seen talking to anyone but Craib. He had just finished the food on his plate when he caught sight of someone unexpected. The man did not hide his displeasure as he too spotted Arcus and made his way toward the boy. The very sight of that man made the anger he had buried beneath coals bubble up like molten rock inside him.

Lecia Raytheft had come to the aethometer's launch party with her father, Joshua. She had been to magic salons and parties hosted by the aristocrats who lived in the capital, but never had she been to something so large-scale as this, hosted in the palace and with the royal family in attendance. That might have explained her mother's enthusiasm. Celine had been rushing back and forth prior to the event, despite not attending herself. She had picked out a dress, made sure the maids dressing her daughter made her look absolutely perfect, and even selected a number of accessories that would really make a statement. Celine had even taken the opportunity to have Lecia's older dresses retailored to fit her again. While that should have been reasonable, her mother's enthusiasm made it feel excessive. Lecia's outfit was perfectly coordinated from head to toe. When she examined herself in the full-length mirror, she felt several times prettier than she usually did before going to a salon or party.

Joshua's traditional noble outfit was mostly red, and with the cane in his right hand, he looked as imposing as ever. The pair of them went around the hall greeting any guests they recognized.

Presently, they were listening to Craib give his presentation. The way he had

his jacket draped around his shoulders, he looked like he was a general preparing his troops to go to war. However, he'd reined in his usual openness, speaking solemnly and assertively. He was making good use of his intonation to draw the listeners in. Lecia would not have expected the kind, hearty Craib to be capable of such perfect and calculated delivery. Needless to say, it elicited several gasps and impressed murmurs from the audience.

The presentation focused less on the materials and theory behind the aethometer, and more on what it could do and the results it had already achieved. The standards of magic technology in the kingdom were high enough already, but Craib's explanation made it clear that this was on another level entirely. One of the points where this was most apparent was how the device had reduced the rate of mis-incantations. Your average magician would mis-incant twenty to thirty percent of the time. The aethometer reduced that to almost zero.

Suffice to say, the guests from foreign nations were likely more scared than they were impressed. Lainur's magic troops were enough of a threat on the battlefield already without the aethometer making things ten times worse. Any thoughts of invading the kingdom should now have been wiped from their minds. Much like their domestic counterparts, the magicians from these nations were unbearably eager to get their hands on the device, so much so that they were losing their composure.

As Lecia listened to the presentation, she suddenly felt a presence at her back, but when she turned around, there was nobody there. *Nobody*, but *something*: the demon that dwelled behind her. It had been following her around ever since she'd released it from the cave in Raytheft territory, and would speak to her at every opportunity. At first, she had feared that it was a ghost, which unsettled her. However, it had never pulled any tricks on her and was actually rather friendly, so she'd gotten used to it surprisingly quickly. Moreover, it shared with her perceptions and knowledge that were otherwise beyond her, and recently *she* had been the more frequent instigator of conversation.

"I told you this wasn't a bad deal," it had said, prompting her to picture a smug grin of satisfaction. Perhaps it was a truly odious creature after all.

Although, given how much she relied on it, she knew it wasn't fair to say so. Either way, when it spoke to her, she responded in kind, but she was careful not to engage in lengthy conversations. Those around her couldn't hear the demon's voice, and she didn't want to garner negative attention. She had already been careless enough times that her parents had recently urged her to break the habit of "talking to herself."

The demon spoke to her then. "The aethometer... You've used one too, haven't you?"

"Yes. And?" Lecia kept her voice down; there were too many people about—not least her father.

"The invention of such a device strikes me as strange. That's all."

"Strange in what sense?"

"Think about it. There's no way a thing like that lies within reach of your country's current technology. I wouldn't say it's *impossible*—there are archeological finds across the land that would suggest otherwise—but it's definitely *strange*."

Lecia didn't understand its point. It seemed to pick up on this.

"The device contains denatured silver, right?"

"Denatured silver? I cannot remember it being referred to as such."

"It's *definitely* denatured silver. And yes, its use lets you measure the intensity of aether rays without other wavelengths getting in the way."

"Is that so?"

"It is. That instrument gives you a numerical value based on how much the denatured silver expands in response to the aether's waves. Aether rays change depending on the amount of aether released, so you'd only need to keep the silver's rate of expansion fixed to use it for measuring purposes," the demon explained. "But you would also need to undergo the delicate process of making compressed aether, which is necessary for the creation of denatured silver. And you can't do that without a high-velocity magical amplifier. It's weird that this thing was made *first*."

It was quite normal for the demon to use unfamiliar words in its explanations, leaving Lecia relatively confused. It reminded her very much of listening to her brother—except the demon wasn't nearly as patient and would change subjects without bothering to explain any details.

"Anyway, primitive though it may be, there's definitely a stroke of genius in recreating a thermometer."

"What is a...thermometer?"

"A device that measures temperature, whether in the air or a liquid."

"It measures air temperature? I have heard that it is possible to do so with the assistance of alcohol."

"Yes, that's a...*basic* method. The thermometer is much simpler to use. Have you ever seen a device that uses mercury?"

"I haven't, no. Nor have I heard of anything like that."

"What? You *must* have. How could this 'aethometer' look *just* like a thermometer otherwise?"

"I am afraid I cannot provide an answer. Is the aethometer not simply the result of making this 'denatured silver' easier to implement?"

"I can't argue with that, but the order's all wrong! The thermometer should have come *first*. But if it didn't, then this aether-measuring device should look completely different. The glass tube would need to be filled with a special gas that blocks out other wavelengths, allowing you to read the aether rays accurately. Oh, but you would need electrodes for that, which can't come about without astrasia. But I haven't seen any evidence of mankind using astrasia here... Still, I can't think why the aethometer looks so much like a thermometer."

"I am afraid I wouldn't know."

"Your uncle made the device, didn't he?"

"No, my brother."

"*Brother?*"

“Yes. That is him over there.” Lecia cast her gaze to the boy in the corner.

He wasn’t in the standard noble dress, but a muted jacket. Much as he deserved to wear something more intricate, it suited him. He was still easy to spot in the crowd with his silver hair and red eyes. Sure enough, the demon followed her gaze and found him.

“You’re toying with me. I know all about him—I saw him at that party. But did he *really* come up with this thing?”

“He did.”

“*Really* though? I mean, when did he get the ball rolling on all of this?”

“I believe that he began production when he was eight years old.”

“You can’t be serious! That doesn’t make a lick of sense!”

“Be that as it may, the evidence is right in front of our eyes.”

“While primitive, this device measures aether rays! And it’s obviously based on a thermometer for ease of use, but the thermometer doesn’t exist! All of this without even a device to create denatured silver. It’s just mystery after mystery!” The demon sounded utterly perplexed. Lecia had never heard it lose its composure like this.

Certainly, the aethometer was an impressive invention. Its very existence was close to unfathomable. The demon, however, seemed shocked for a reason that was beyond ordinary understanding. Lecia wasn’t sure, but it sounded like it was saying the device was too advanced.

“Say, he made soma wine too, didn’t he?”

“Yes. I was surprised you recognized it.”

“I was around when it was common.”

“When was that?”

“Who knows?”

As usual, the demon had said something that sounded interesting before completely clamming up when it came to the important details. In truth, Lecia wasn’t even sure that it *was* a demon. When she’d met Gown at Arcus’s party,

the Grave Sprite hadn't seemed overly concerned at the presence on her shoulder.

"You recall that Gown saw you?" Lecia said.

"Sure. It wasn't the first time we'd spoken."

"Are you *truly* a demon, or was that a lie?"

"Who knows?"

There it goes again.

"Lecia."

She could imagine it whistling nonchalantly behind her.

"Lecia?"

"Oh! Y-Yes, father?"

"Are you all right? You aren't feeling unwell, are you?"

"Not at all! I feel fine."

"Then perhaps you are nervous? The level of prestige among these guests is doubtlessly higher than you are used to. But this will be far from your last time attending such a function, so you ought to get used to it as soon as you can."

"Yes, father." Lecia gave her response as heartily as she could so that her father wouldn't suspect anything. Conversely, she let out a mental sigh of relief. She had been so occupied with talking to the demon that she had failed to pay proper attention to her surroundings. She would have to be careful, lest she give off the impression that she was absent-minded.

"You let your guard down," the demon said.

"Perhaps, but it was not entirely *my* fault," she whispered back.

Joshua surveyed the hall. "This is an event hosted by the royal family. I am not surprised that so many people are in attendance to see the aethometer's publication either."

"Yes, father."

"And each guest holds an important position in our society. It is an honor that

we were invited also.”

It wasn’t just Lainur’s highest-ranking nobility that populated the guest list, but several esteemed visitors from abroad. Under normal circumstances, Lecia and her father would not even be permitted the opportunity to lay eyes on them, let alone speak with them.

“Of course, not *every* guest deserves to be here.”

To that, Lecia had no response. Joshua’s face twisted bitterly. Apparently he had spotted Arcus too, and he was now glaring coldly at him like they were mortal enemies, not father and son. She wished that would be the extent of it, but Joshua began to approach Arcus silently, despite the fact that Craib was still speaking.

“Father?” Although Lecia called out to him, her father’s brisk steps showed no sign of slowing. She hurried after him, but even then he did not stop.

It wasn’t long until Arcus noticed Joshua and turned to face him. Her brother’s expression was overcome with an intense wariness. Both he and her father regarded each other with narrowed eyes, as if confronted with a bitter enemy.

Joshua took up his position in front of Arcus and spoke, his voice taut with a quiet threat. “What are *you* doing here?”

“I am here as Uncle’s attendant. I hope that doesn’t pose any problems.”

“This gathering has been organized by the royal family. It is no place for riffraff such as yourself to be hanging about. The sensible thing to do would be to remember your place and leave. But I suppose to do so would go beyond your intellectual capabilities.”

“On the contrary, I asked Uncle if I might be allowed to forgo my attendance, but he insisted—and I daren’t defy an order from a state magician.”

Sparks were flying between their glares.

“You could have feigned illness and withdrawn,” Joshua said.

“I have more self-respect than to tell falsehoods that are easily found out.”

“Hmph. That you would be found out only goes to show your lack of intelligence. You are talentless indeed.”

Arcus let out a deep sigh. “Piece of shit doesn’t know when to shut his mouth.”

“Wh—”

“Why do I need to ‘remember my place,’ just because the sight of me offends you? Kinda funny how you’ve failed in all your fatherly duties, but you still feel like you can walk up here and lecture me.” A composed smile took to Arcus’s lips as he gave an exaggerated shrug.

Lecia was by no means surprised to see her father’s face visibly redden.

“Why, you...”

“What? Does my standing up for myself make you mad? Doesn’t take much, does it, even though you pretend none of this bothers you.”

When Joshua moved to raise his arm, Arcus continued.

“Gonna beat me again to vent your anger, huh? In the middle of the palace? Sure, go ahead. Ruin the Raytheft name forever.”

“I would merely punish your impudence. To do so would have no effect on the family name.”

“Wouldn’t it? It’d definitely cause a commotion. I could help, if you wanted. Cry like the little boy I am and make sure everyone pays attention to us. I wonder what’d happen to your house if you ruined the party like that?”

“There would be negative consequences for you as well.”

“Okay. I don’t care, as long as I get to take you down with me. How does an early retirement for the head of the Raytheft House sound?” Arcus glared at Lecia’s father. His gambit was to use the setting and his lack of status against Joshua.

“Your brother’s really something,” the demon remarked. Lecia could hear the grimace in its voice.

Indeed, it was at times like these that Arcus’s daring side came out, no doubt because he was used to highly volatile situations. His courage and resolve went far beyond that of a regular child.

With his house at risk, Joshua could no longer lay a finger on Arcus.

“How dare you!” her father snapped.

“How dare *you*?!”

Neither of them was making any attempt at defusing the situation. The sparks were still there, colored red by bloodlust. The intimidating air that Joshua emitted was impressive, but so was Arcus’s. While her brother had no choice but to yield to the pressure before, now he could endure it. The problem was that they were clashing with so much force that the people around them were liable to notice.

If I do nothing to intervene, this could lead to disaster...

“Why, if it isn’t Raytheft!”

Out of nowhere came a woman’s voice. It lacked the refinement that one would expect from an esteemed guest of the palace.

Lecia turned to see Louise Rustinell, whom she had formerly met at Arcus’s house. Though she retained her eye patch, she was wearing her uniform properly today, aware of the public eye.

“Lady Louise...” Brought back to his senses at last, Joshua gave a quick bow. “Please allow me to apologize for my disgraceful behavior.”

“Something doesn’t feel quite right here. Is there a problem?”

“Not at all, My Lady. It is a private matter regarding my family, so I ask that you overlook it.”

“Really? Sorry to stick my nose in. But you should keep in mind who your hosts are. And, as a vassal to His Majesty, it’s my duty to make sure nothing threatens the occasion,” Louise said, sounding rather prickly indeed.

“Of course. I am frightfully sorry, My Lady.” Joshua bowed his head, but no more deeply than he would to greet someone.

The smile Louise gave in return was pregnant with warning. “Anyway, I do hope you’re enjoying the party. It feels to me that today marks the dawn of a new era in the kingdom’s magic history. As a magician, I’m sure you feel the same.”

Joshua hesitated, eventually saying, “Yes, My Lady,” as Louise’s smile impelled him to. That smile went on to warn him not to cause a commotion, lest he face the consequences. He averted his gaze then, and bowed his head.

Once she seemed sure that she had warded off trouble, Louise turned to Lecia. “You look well, Miss Lecia.”

“It is a pleasure to see you again, My Lady.”

“You have met Her Ladyship before, Lecia?” Joshua asked. “Where?”

“It was quite recently,” Louise said. “She came to see me with Lady Charlotte.”

“I see...” he stuttered.

Nothing the Rustinell leader had said was technically untrue. That said, if Lecia was going to intervene, now was the time.

Shooting Louise an apologetic look, she turned to Joshua. “We ought to pay attention to the presentation, father.”

“Yes, indeed. Do make sure to keep the family’s reputation at the forefront of your mind,” he warned Arcus, but the boy kept his face turned without uttering a reply. No doubt that angered Joshua enough to want to make a remark, but Louise’s presence barred him from it. He obediently walked back to their original spot.

Arcus shot Lecia a grateful glance, and she bowed her head before following her father.

“Was your father always like this?” the demon on her back pondered.

“Yes.”

This was far from the first time it had observed Joshua, but it had never seen him act like *this*. Naturally, it was curious about the Raythefts’ circumstances.

“That boy is your brother, isn’t he? But he isn’t living with you. Why not?”

“Mother and father disdain him for his lack of aether.”

“Oh, yes. Aetheric supremacists. I didn’t realize they were still kicking around. Although I suppose it makes sense. And that line of thinking is what makes your

family's relationship so complex, yes?"

"Yes," Lecia admitted.

"I see, I see." The demon chuckled. "It must make things all the more unpleasant when it's your own child you're trying to shun. Enough to make you forget their humanity."

"Is that not an exaggeration?"

"I wouldn't say so. Humans are prone to such things. Little is as close to them as their family; to harbor such unpleasant feelings for someone in that circle can drive them to despair—*because* they see them every day, whether they like it or not. That just makes the resentment build ever further."

"I wonder if that is how my parents feel about him."

"Probably. Take my advice and forget about the sentimental stuff, just because he's your brother. You're a noble. It's common for families like yours to be at each other's throats over money or power. The 'love' that *real* parents may hold for their children is nothing like what you'd read in fairy tales." At that, it burst into laughter.

Lecia was not nearly as amused. In fact, its words served only to frustrate her greatly. She wanted to dispute what it said, but deep down, she knew it was right. She knew that her parents would never lift a finger to reconcile with Arcus.

"Come on, don't sulk now. All I did was tell you the truth."

"You truly are a wicked creature."

"Thank you. I suggest you don't hope too hard that we might one day understand each other. The more you hope, the more you'll suffer if you end up betrayed. The pit of darkness you fall into will be ever deeper for it." On that note, the demon fell quiet.

Lecia had the sense that its words were more than hypothetical.

"Way to go, Arcus..." he muttered to the floor after Joshua had left. His heart was hammering, making his legs tremble like jelly. Apparently the viscount

could intimidate him more than he had expected. Even the battlefield hadn't overwhelmed him this much. He had barely batted an eyelid when surrounded by the Black Panther Cavalry. His encounter with the tremendous Bague Gruba may have been the exception, but even then he had managed to hide most of his fear response. He supposed it just went to show how deeply rooted his early memories of that man berating and beating him were.

"You're scared of your dad?" Louise asked.

"I didn't think I was. I *still* don't think I am. The way my body's reacting, though...is this fear?"

"You stood up to him well. Looks like you've really come into your own."

"I wonder..."

Arcus wasn't sure that he had been all that dauntless. If only he had been able to see himself from an outside perspective. As it was, he knew only of the weakness he had picked up on, not the part that stood out to third parties. At least that man's life afforded him a world of experience, as did his fruitful time in combat. But even after all of that, he still felt like he was far off from confronting Joshua.

He was grinding his teeth, frustrated at his own witlessness, when Louise made an exasperated noise.

"Do you ever stop to think about how *young* you are? I mean, standing up to an oppressive parent at your age... You've got to be pretty courageous for that."

Arcus didn't know how to respond. Her compliment didn't cheer him up enough to outweigh the wretchedness he felt.

"That's the guy who disowned you?" she asked.

"Yes."

"He looked decent enough to me. What about you?" Her question was addressed to her attendant, a rural lord standing behind her shoulder.

"Although I could not comment on his character, his prestige as head of one of the longest-serving eastern houses shone through, not least in his

intimidating air. While we have a powerful enemy in the Gillis Empire, I hear the Raytheft House wages constant battles with our tribal enemies. It was clear to me that the viscount is a man to be feared.”

“Yes, I agree. We’ve seen, too, how he acts when it comes to you, Arcus,” Louise said.

“No doubt that stems from the significance His Lordship places on aether,” her attendant offered.

“Is lacking aether something to be ashamed of? Not that I’m an expert, but most of these magic families all seem the same to me.”

“Magic technology is of vital importance to the kingdom, and so it follows that a high emphasis is placed on aether. Anyone lacking aether might as well not have any redeeming qualities whatsoever.”

The lord was correct. Although Arcus’s aether was pitiful compared to the members of other magic houses, it was closer to average when compared to your garden-variety magician. In fact, one might argue that magic nobles had *too much* of the stuff. It didn’t make much sense at all to the nonmagic houses, who had no knowledge of the arts.

“Lady Louise, thank you very much for your assistance.” Arcus bowed his head.

“Mm. It has been a while.”

“Yes, My Lady.”

“His Majesty asked me to come keep an eye on you.”

“His Majesty?!”

“That shouldn’t be any surprise to you. You’re always getting into mischief, aren’t you? Anyway, I’m supposed to be stepping in for Crucible whenever he’s tied up.”

Arcus hesitated, although he was genuinely grateful. Shinlu could say the most unnerving things and rarely cut people slack, but he definitely held some level of fondness for the boy. That much was clear from the recent meeting at the Magician’s Guild and the postwar awards ceremony.

“But why did His Majesty select you, My Lady?”

“Having another state magician do it’d cause suspicion, right? You and I fought Nadar together, so it makes sense that I’d want to talk to you.”

“Yes, that’s right. Again, I would like to thank you,” Arcus said. “Is Deet not in attendance today?” He looked around, but could see no sign of his friend.

“He’s holding down the fort. I gave him a little test before heading out here, but he didn’t pass.”

“A test?”

“He’ll be doing a stint at the Institute next year. That should tell you everything you need to know.”

“Oh, um... Are you saying his conduct didn’t meet the necessary standards?”

“That’s exactly what I’m saying. He really did his best—I was going to reward him with dessert, after all—but he still didn’t make the cut. There just wasn’t enough time to get him up to snuff. Though it’s mostly his fault for never bothering to straighten himself out to start with.”

Apparently all the motivation in the world hadn’t been enough for Deet to break his habits. Arcus could remember how he’d struggled just to grapple with paperwork. It was easy to imagine him looking just as soulless after a spell focusing on his manners and conduct.

I still think Deet could get away with being Deet here though, considering his age...

Perhaps the Rustinell family was especially strict when it came to etiquette, which was somewhat ironic, given the wild air its members gave off. Arcus decided not to point this out.

“What sort of dessert were you going to offer him?”

“Nothing in particular. The plan was to drop in on you. You would have been able to put something together, right?”

“Certainly. Although I presume you knew that I might not have been available.”

“Sure, but the point was to motivate him, and it worked. I had Rustinell’s interests at heart, you see.” Louise let out a hearty laugh, not looking the least bit ashamed. She then set her sights on the nearby table. “Is that what I think it is?”

“Soma wine? Yes. I’ve refined the recipe enough that I felt it was worthy of a field test with the guests.”

“Your plans for it have more or less taken shape then, I take it?”

“There are certain restrictions on its sale.”

“I’m not surprised. Regardless, you’d be doing me a big favor if you set some aside for me.”

“I’m sorry?”

“Nothing. Anyway, what were His Majesty’s impressions of it, then?”

“His Majesty expressed anger at me keeping such ‘tasty stuff’ to myself for this long.”

Craib had taken Arcus to bring the soma wine to Shinlu. The king had barely spared it a second glance as it was offered to him under his garden gazebo, but his attitude had changed completely upon taking a sip. He’d immediately pounced on Arcus with questions pertaining to whether there was any more to be had, and how much could be spared. Though Arcus had claimed the king was angry, perhaps *irritated* would have been a better term, for he complained to the young magician at length for keeping the wine’s existence from him. It had reminded Arcus of a child whining about being pushed out of a circle of friends; for the sake of Shinlu’s reputation, he dared not go into detail.

His description was nevertheless enough to make Louise double over with laughter. “Oh, I can hear him now!”

“Similar remarks were made to my uncle. Perhaps uncle bore the worst of it, for he had long known of the wine’s existence.”

“His Majesty and Crucible are close friends. How did you get out of there with your heads?”

“I name-dropped Gown. Once I informed His Majesty that it was a drink

traditionally offered to elves and spirits, he laid his complaints to rest.”

Louise snickered. “Nice one.”

While the aethometer may have been the star of tonight’s show, the soma wine had picked up a number of adoring fans. Guests were hounding the waitstaff for second helpings and information on the wine’s origin. It required the royal family’s permission to sell and, as such, the staff’s lips were tightly sealed.

The potential for soma wine’s production would remain limited until Arcus received a domain of his own. For starters, creating a soma grove would be indispensable. Craib would have to put up with Shinlu’s nasty remarks for a while longer, but hopefully the regular provision of wine would make up for it.

Speaking of Craib, his presentation on the aethometer—which had only just wrapped up—was quite something. The way he highlighted the device’s potential at every opportunity reminded Arcus of a businessman or television presenter. Arcus hadn’t expected it of someone who was usually so brazen. Perhaps he wasn’t being fair. After all, his uncle had helped keep the aethometer’s development on track with plans and reports. The only reason Arcus hadn’t expected it of him was because he’d never seen Craib present like this before.

He was staring at his uncle now, allowing Louise to pick up on his thoughts.

“That aethometer of yours is going to blow minds.”

“I’m afraid I don’t follow, Lady Louise.”

“Playing dumb, are we? It’s pretty obvious, you know.” She grinned at him. Considering he had gone to her territory seeking silver, she had more reason to suspect him than most, and she gave the impression that she already did so at this party.

“Please, My Lady. The inventor has yet to be formally named.”

She laughed. “Yes, I guess the walls have ears. Don’t worry; I won’t let anything slip. Have you spoken with the dukes yet?”

“With Dukes Romalius and Zeele, yes. His Grace, Duke Saifice, could not make

an appearance.”

“Yes, he’s getting on in years. I’m not surprised he couldn’t hack staying up this late.” Louise’s joke seemed to send the lord behind her into a panic.

“Duke Algucia appears to be absent as well.”

“The duke never comes to these things,” she replied simply.

“Oh?”

Seeing as he was close with Sue, Arcus had been eager to speak with her father at least once.

“I’ve never even seen him myself. That family’s a bit of a funny one.” Again, she roared with laughter.

It was beyond strange that even one of the ten monarchs hadn’t met him.

As Arcus frowned and muttered to himself, Louise leaned in with a sloppy grin. “You’re missing your little friend, huh?”

“That...that’s not it!”

“It’s all right! There’s nothing to be ashamed of. I already know how close you two are!”

He groaned. It *was* true that they were close, and he *had* been looking for her among the guests. It was impossible not to be nervous in a place like this, and he would have liked to talk to someone he was used to and could relax around. He had another look now, just to make sure he hadn’t missed her, but there was no sign of her.

Now that Craib was finished speaking, Arcus was able to catch sight of some of the more distinguished guests. Those of other nations and vassal states were approaching the royal family’s table one after another to greet the king. One of those guests was familiar to him: a woman in a military uniform whom Godwald had been showing around the Guild back around the time Arcus first met Gown.

“Meifa Darnénes,” Louise hummed.

“Of the Northern Confederation?”

Arcus recognized the name too. She was a talented woman, having become a

consul of the Confederation despite being just shy of twenty. It was said that she had solidified her position with a series of executions shortly after her inheritance. Presently, she was speaking with Shinlu.

She wore her military jacket over her black dress. She had wavy, dark-blond hair and smooth, snow-white skin with a healthy luster. Though one could glimpse the vestiges of childhood within her, she held herself with an intelligent dignity beyond her years.

“I didn’t realize Lainur was allied with the Northern Confederation,” Arcus said.

“It is, but only superficially.”

“Meaning what exactly?”

“The Confederation is an amalgamation of monarchs and lords that can’t all be painted with the same brush. Some of those leaders favor the Empire, some the kingdom, and some Ishtoria to the north.”

Louise’s description of the Confederation was nothing he hadn’t heard before. He had also heard that Meifa was vehemently against the Gillis Empire’s expansionist stance, and had strongly aligned herself with Lainur because of it.

“Meifa may *claim* she’s allied with the kingdom, but I’m sure she’d cut ties the moment she felt she didn’t need us anymore. Although, what with the aethometer in the picture, she’d be crazy to do so now.”

Arcus had to agree. If anything, Meifa would be deepening her alliance with the kingdom based on its anticipated future development. The consul had finished up her talk with Shinlu and was now excusing herself.

“She didn’t take long,” Louise remarked. “I bet the *real* conversation took place behind the scenes.”

True, the other guests had taken much more time in greeting the king—one of Arcus’s other acquaintances among them. His shoulders were as broad as two grown men, and he stood over two meters tall. His black hair was flecked with gray, he wore a long beard, and he was clad in a typical pirate captain’s uniform. It was Barbaros, the giant Arcus had once encountered in the capital.

“So, His Majesty even invited the king of Granciel...”

“Granciel... A maritime nation to the south ruled by Barbaros zan Grandon...”

“Huh. I’m surprised you know.”

“I ran into him in a tavern in the capital once.”

“A *tavern*? What was the old geezer doing hanging around *there*?” It was difficult to tell whether Louise was exasperated or anxious.

Arcus himself felt similarly. Granciel and Lainur were enemies, yet here was the former’s leader attending a royal function. It went beyond odd and into the realm of inexplicable.

“Does Your Ladyship have any idea why he would have been invited?”

“Granciel is a bit of a special case: Their Majesties get along rather well. Besides, ‘hostile nation’ can mean all sorts of things. It isn’t like the Gillis Empire, which is completely antagonistic. It could be that His Majesty just isn’t interested in fighting for the time being; perhaps he’s looking to form a more peaceful relationship. We definitely don’t want Granciel hooking up with the Empire to attack us, do we?”

Indeed, it would be a struggle to defend against both of them at once. Trying to maintain a friendly relationship with the maritime nation would be a diplomatic step toward avoiding that.

“I swear he looks exactly the same every time I see him,” Louise muttered.

“Does he?”

“I saw him when I was much younger too, but he hasn’t changed a bit. Really, he should have one foot in the grave by now.”

This world was filled with such oddities. Even Shinlu looked incredibly young. This was a world of magic and unknown forces, and Arcus had long decided to just accept that there were things he couldn’t understand.

He looked back at Shinlu, who was currently seeing a group whose dress seemed to be a chaotic blend of Chinese and Japanese styles.

“*Those would be* the scholar-bureaucrats of Bǎi Liánbāng.”

There had been guests from Bǎi Liánbāng at the awards ceremony as well. This group appeared to be particularly close to Shinlu, as, after greeting him, they spoke with him for longer than the other guests. There didn't appear to be any tension between them either; they were all smiles.

"Bǎi Liánbāng is a friendly nation," Arcus concluded.

"Maybe, but their motives are far from clear. There's no telling what scheme that amity might serve."

"A scheme to hijack our royal family?"

Louise raised her eyebrows. "How did you know? Ah, well, I guess this sort of thing *is* your forte..."

"I wouldn't go that far..."

She shot him an encouraging grin. Reluctantly, he started to voice his thoughts aloud.

"The Crosellode family came from the east; its roots are there. Should our royal lineage ever collapse, Bǎi Liánbāng would be able to usurp our kingdom by producing a suitable ruler to lay claim to the succession. That, or use the same claim to start a war. Of course, I'm only speculating."

"No, that's it. Their own throne is a playing piece in a power game drowned in blood, so it'd make sense that they're eyeing ours too. I'm sure Lainur's technology vastly sweetens the deal."

Just because a nation was friendly now didn't mean it had to stay that way. Lainur and Bǎi Liánbāng sat a good distance apart, separated by the Cross Mountain Range, but the latter was a superpower. If it wanted to send over hundreds of thousands of troops, it was more than capable. There was no way its representatives were offering up their smiles to Shinlu for free.

The scholar-bureaucrats greeted Ceylan before turning to two others nearby. One was an extravagantly dressed woman; the other, a child around Arcus's age. The imperial guard protected them as they did Shinlu and Ceylan. Odds were they were members of the royal family. The child's face wasn't hidden to the same extent as Ceylan's. Its silhouette would probably fall into relief up close.

“Who are those two, My Lady?” Arcus asked.

“His Royal Highness’s younger brother and His Majesty’s first wife.”

“I wasn’t aware that His Royal Highness had siblings.”

“That’s not surprising. His younger brother is not a legitimate successor to the throne. He is never brought out in public and does not participate in political affairs. Most of his time is spent hidden away with His Majesty’s wife. I doubt there are many people who have ever seen him. It’s certainly the first time I’ve seen him.”

“That sounds somewhat extreme.”

“Our kingdom’s tradition is for the royal children to be hidden from public view anyway, but in the younger brother’s case, he is treated entirely differently. But then, both Their Royal Highnesses’ fates were sealed before their births.”

“Before they were even born?”

“Yes. For the sake of the family’s authority.”

Louise’s words reminded Arcus of something Ceylan had once revealed to him.

“*Shén zǐ*’s birth...”

One of Louise’s eyes squinted, and she turned her sharp gaze on him. “How do you know about that?”

“His Royal Highness told me. He did not go into too much detail, but he shared with me that the purpose of his existence is to elevate the kingdom to a new level of power.”

“He must think incredibly highly of you. It is no wonder you are so loyal to him.”

“Might that be His Royal Highness’s mother also?”

“No, His Royal Highness was born to His Majesty’s second wife. Technically, that is his half brother.”

“Oh.” Arcus knew he sounded unintentionally taut.

Louise seemed to have figured out why. “It’s pretty disrespectful to pass judgment on the royal family.”

“Oh, um, that wasn’t my intention...”

“But I get it. There’s bound to be infighting over the succession in any royal family. It’s not for you to worry about, though; His Majesty has it all in hand.”

“I’m sure.”

Arcus let his gaze wander around the hall again, where it came to rest on a group in the corner. The lords had started mingling again, clearly, but even then it was a very large throng. And this time, none of the Rondiels were at its center.

“Which houses are gathered over there, My Lady?”

“Let’s see. They look like Lainur nobles, but I don’t recognize them. What about you?” She turned to her attendant.

“I believe the gentleman in the center is Lord Lazrael of the south.”

“Oh, *Lazrael*?”

“Do you know him, My Lady?”

“Yes, apparently his son is famous as a magician of extraordinary talent. He’s gotta be something if even I’ve heard of him. Do you see that brown-haired boy next to Lazrael about the same age as you?”

“Is that the son in question?”

Right in the center of the group was a brown-haired noble and a boy with locks the same shade. Like Arcus, the boy had foregone customary aristocratic dress and was in a jacket and long trousers. He looked quite approachable, like he just naturally knew how to get along with people. The smile he gave to those around him said as much.



“I’m pretty sure his name was Kane. They say he’s the Lionheart reborn.”

“You mean the warriors who fought the Demon Kings?”

“That’s it. Their battle was quite the epic tale, even for something described in the Chronicles. I can see where the urge to attribute the title to someone so talented comes from.”

“Yet he’s not compared to one of the three sages.”

“Their names are far too sacred, and there are still elves in our society who remember the time they walked the Earth. Using the three sages’ names is likely to cause offense.”

“I see...”

In this world, the spirits and elves that were spoken of in fairy tales were real beings, much like Chain. Few of these tales were more famous than those featured in *The Spiritual Age*. They spoke of the journeys of the Twin Phantoms, Wedge and Chain, as they sought salvation. Their adventures featured the aforementioned sages, as well as a number of supernatural beings. Gown was especially involved in the lives of humans, and so it would indeed be wise to watch what one said.

“That trinket you have there is a relic of that era, isn’t it?” Louise said.

“Yes. Gown entrusted me with it.”

“That’s really something. It’s the steel lantern that summons Tribe, right?” She looked down at it.

“Gown makes frequent use of it in the fairy tales,” her attendant explained. “I’ve heard that anyone who touches Tribe has his soul sucked out.”

“He isn’t *that* fearsome,” Arcus said. “If he ran into you, you would merely lose consciousness. I cannot say how much harm he would cause if he *really* wanted to, though.”

“Definitely a safe toy to give to a child,” Louise remarked.

“I hold the same reservations,” replied Arcus. “Gown insisted I have it as thanks, though I made an effort to turn him down... I must admit that it has

been a boon to me, however.”

The Rustinell leader laughed. “Well, they do say the Grave Sprite has excellent foresight!”

Meanwhile, the aristocrats were lining up to greet Lord Lazrael and his son without pause. It was a rather rare sight. When it came to these parties, such attention was usually reserved for the hosts or the higher-ranking nobles. The boy’s future must have been bright, what with his vast supply of aether and admirable talents. It was no wonder that the family was receiving interest from both ends of the noble spectrum.

“Very impressive,” Arcus said.

“You should really be in the same position.”

“I shall have to wait until my work on the aethometer is revealed. I don’t deal well with being the center of attention in any case.”

“Maybe not, but it’s your destiny at this point. You’ll have to think hard about who you want to surround yourself with when that time comes. You never know what sort of ulterior motives those who approach you might hold.”

“I shall bear that in mind.”

Just then, a small, middle-aged man in magnificent dress walked up to Kane. The appearance of this man elicited bows from the majority of the nobles around him, including Lazrael. The newcomer seemed to take no self-satisfaction in this, and simply smiled at them all. Arcus had met him earlier at the party.

“That is His Grace, Quorido Zeele, isn’t it?”

“You said you just spoke to him, didn’t you?”

“Yes. Although I was under the impression that he had come alone.”

Now, however, there was a girl with him. She seemed to be the same age as him and Kane, and she was dressed as extravagantly as a flower, like she was on her way to meet a potential suitor.

“She is probably his youngest daughter. It seems the duke wants to introduce her to Lazrael’s son,” the lord said.

This would indeed be a good opportunity to do so. But even then, the line of people looking to greet the family did not dissipate. If they were solely seeking Kane out for his talent, then Lecia deserved to be in a similar position. The Raythefts, however, prided themselves on their vigor and fortitude, and avoided socialization except where necessary. Joshua was no exception when it came to holding fast to such ideals. The differences were likely borne of Lazrael's fame and the way he spoke to others.

Suddenly, a commotion broke out in the hall. People were turning to look for the source of the noise, at once rendering Lazrael and his son practically invisible. Louise and Arcus were among them, their attention drawn by the gasps of surprise.

"Wow. I never expected *them* to be here."

"Who?"

"They're right in the middle of that group. It might be tough at your height, but see if you can get a look."

As Arcus hopped up and down to do just that, the crowd eventually parted, revealing a group of people in peculiar dress. One of them was a familiar face—specifically, the woman at the very front with long, indigo hair. It was Ursula.

"Who are they exactly, My Lady?" he asked, feigning ignorance.

"The Heoga Tribe. We don't have much to do with Westerners like them, but there's no mistaking those outfits." Louise grinned down at him. "Like the look of her, do you?"

"I'm curious."

"Well, there's no denying her beauty. And I guess you are at that age."

"That's not *why* I'm curious..." Arcus protested.

She laughed, ruffling his hair. "There's no shame in it! None of the other men look ashamed."

Louise was right though; Ursula drew the stares of countless men, Lainur nobility and foreign dignitaries alike.

"I think I heard somewhere that the tribe is supposed to be at war right

now..." he said.

Now that the Heoga Tribe had made contact with him, Arcus was naturally more aware of them than before. Having looked into them, he had discovered that they were embroiled in a skirmish with a foreign nation.

Louise's attendant confirmed this. "Yes, I think they are currently tied up with the Kingdom of Doneas, which lies to the northeast."

"Doneas?"

"A nation that excels in aetheric technology," Louise explained. "Though not to the same extent as Lainur. They don't have as much national power either. They like to throw their weight around with their neighbors, thanks to their 'long-standing history.' I heard they recently had the nerve to claim the tribe was settling on their land."

Her attendant nodded. "So often the main cause of any cross-national conflict."

"You're not wrong." Louise grinned. "It makes for an easy pretext when you wanna invade someone."

Said conflict must have been one of the struggles that Ursula had alluded to.

"Wait a moment. You said that Doneas focuses on aetherics, much as Lainur does, yes?" Arcus asked.

"Indeed. The events of tonight are likely to draw their hostility further," the lord replied.

"Is that perhaps one of the reasons why the tribe has a presence here?"

"It might be, yes. A closer relationship with Lainur might act as a deterrent. Doneas may decide to pick their fights elsewhere if they suspect the tribe has the kingdom's support."

"How shrewd of them."

"It is likely the very same shrewdness that has allowed them to survive this long."

Arcus suddenly sensed Ursula's eyes on him. He fretted about how he was

supposed to respond if she tried to talk to him, but she seemed to pick up on his discomfort.

Before the moment had passed, a sudden presence had Arcus standing up straight, goose bumps spreading over his skin. He had never experienced fretfulness like this before, and he certainly shouldn't have been experiencing it at what was supposed to be a celebration. And yet a cold sweat ran down his body with no end in sight. He felt like a small, helpless animal. When he turned his head slowly toward the source of the presence, he saw a single woman approaching him.

Meifa Darnénes.

She must have finished greeting the other guests. She had a sizable troupe of attendants in tow. Her eyes were ice-cold; Arcus could not meet them. Her very gaze on him seemed to lock his limbs in place. Tremors ran up his spine. Pins and needles numbed his fingertips. The tapping of her heels drew near, and then stopped right beside him. Then he heard Louise's voice.

"Hello, Ms. Darnénes."

It is unwise to lock gazes with a one-eyed snake.

"What an honor to meet the Lady of the National Razor."

He who is taken in by violet will only find it decays into darkness.

"You felt it worth your time to come speak to me, Iron Rose?"

Petrifying Gaze of Iron.

"I heard you left the Empire fleeing with its tail between its legs. It wouldn't do for me to shun my enemy's enemy."

Monster of Barloo.

"Well, I appreciate it. There's some excellent liquor here if you'd like a drink."

The massive spirit that will devour the world.

"Oh, I would never turn down a drink so graciously offered."

They seemed rather familiar with one another, the words they exchanged casual. Arcus's spine still felt like a rod of ice, and, regardless of the power

dynamic between their positions, he was surprised how easily Louise could speak with such a monster.

I don't get it...

He hadn't felt like this when he'd first met Meifa at the Magician's Guild. So why was he so utterly terrified? A string of unfamiliar words ran through his head, and his fear had him bound hand and foot.

Was it because they hadn't properly spoken at their first encounter? Was it because Chain had made contact with him now? It was all so sudden, like he had developed a sixth sense.

Meifa turned on her heel to face him, her voice raining down on him like icy hail. "Are you Arcus Raytheft?"

"I am." He kept his response short and made the appropriate bow. He refrained from raising his head too much, not wanting to look her in the eye.

It was strange that she knew his full name when he had never introduced himself. Where had she learned it, and *why*? His head was a bottomless well of questions. They were joined by a vague memory of Noah mentioning something about Meifa after Arcus and his friends eliminated the hex fiend.

The Iron Rose turned her attention back to Louise. "You two were speaking quite amicably."

"Arcus and my son are good friends. How do you know his name, anyway?"

"Is it that strange? I heard he gave the lion a lot of grief in Nadar. I was curious to see what he was like."

"I guess he *did* get an Order. That news would've spread to anyone in the north who was listening close enough. Wait, I seem to remember one of your messengers asking all sorts of questions about him. Had that anything to do with you?"

"I *might* have given an order to keep an ear to the ground. Anyway, this isn't the first time Arcus and I have met."

"It's not?"

"I recognize him from my inspection of the Magician's Guild."

“You ran into a random young boy and just so happened to remember his face, did you?”

“Yes.” Meifa gave a triumphant chuckle. “I’m rather proud of my powers of recall.”

She was trying to either clear the air with a joke, dispel her air of intimidation, or both. Unable to look at her face, Arcus had no way of knowing.

“Arcus Raytheft. How would you like to join me?” she said out of nowhere.

He almost leaped out of his skin. The offer wasn’t just sudden; it lacked coherence. What was a consul doing trying to poach a noble child from another nation?

The only way it made sense was if she knew what he had achieved.

Louise jumped in at once. “What are you playing at?”

“There’s nothing more to it than what it sounds like. I would very much like for Arcus Raytheft to join my nation.” Her toes turned back in his direction.

“Before I respond to Your Excellency’s request, might I be allowed to ask a question?”

“Certainly.”

“Thank you. I was wondering why you would consider me, a mere child, a suitable candidate for such an offer.”

“I am a politician. I seek to fill my ranks with talented people. Does that make sense?”

“I do not understand why you think me worthy of your consideration.”

“I heard you slaughtered the Empire’s arcane troops in the recent battle. The spell was a flurry of black pebbles, yes?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

News of his feat had spread thanks to the awards ceremony. However, the specific spell he had cast was *not* as widely known. Meifa must have had eyes and ears in unexpected places. She was cunning. And she wasn’t done.

“Not only that, you’re capable of the type of magic one only hears about in

fairy tales. Obviously I want you.”

Her words were like a vice around his heart. They were all too familiar.

“Your Excellency?”

“I *saw* it.”

His Ohr Ein Sof. She had been around to speak with Noah and Cazzy then, so it was quite possible that she had been around to witness it. Magic one only hears about in fairy tales, indeed.

Louise, however, had no reason to know what they were talking about.

“What’s this all about?”

“When I was in the capital, a near-fiend appeared.”

“Huh? Why did I never hear about this?”

“Because it was eradicated almost immediately. By Arcus Raytheft.”

Louise stared at him in disbelief, and he nodded quietly. “You’re unbelievable...”

“It might only have been a near-fiend, but to have cast a spell that downed it in one hit...” Meifa continued. “Your abilities are undeniable. You’re almost *too* talented.”

“I could never have defeated it without Gown’s assistance,” Arcus said.

“Your modesty is quite unnecessary. There are countless magicians out there who are overflowing with aether, but lack the ability to use it.”

“I doubt I could repeat what I did that day.”

“That may be true. Nevertheless, you possess a real talent for spellcraft.”

He didn’t know what to say to that. He could see why aether would matter less to her if it was balanced out by spellmaking. And, thanks to the aethometer’s accurate measurements, one magician’s spells could easily be taught to another. If his spells could be used by magicians possessing much more aether than himself, his lack of it shouldn’t matter.

“Aren’t you getting tired of staring at the floor? Raise your head,” Meifa said.

“I couldn’t, Your Excellency.”

“This is a celebration. You do not need to show such reverence.”

He reckoned she was trying to be considerate, but looking at her was the last thing he wanted to do. His body wouldn’t allow it, even though he knew, rationally, that there was nothing to be afraid of. He couldn’t understand it.

One of Meifa’s entourage lost patience at his disobedience. “Her Excellency has asked you to raise your head. You won’t do it?”

Arcus couldn’t respond, and he still couldn’t look up.

“Are you deaf?!”

He didn’t know what he was supposed to do. He felt like he had been driven into a corner. Luckily, Louise was there to lend a hand.

“He’s just a kid. Of course he’s going to be nervous meeting someone of such renown. It doesn’t seem all that mature to yell at him. Or what, are you looking to cause a ruckus or something?”

“Certainly not...” Meifa’s subordinate withdrew mously.

This was a party to celebrate Lainur’s new magic technology. It would be different if Arcus had been outright rude to the consul, but otherwise the blame for any trouble was sure to fall squarely on the shoulders of Meifa and her group. As such, she was quick to put an end to the matter.

“I apologize for my subordinate’s rudeness. He was not out to cause trouble.”

“I’d hope not,” Louise said. “You can’t treat Lainur’s palace like you do your own.”

“I’ll be careful. I’m just surprised that the boy who fought both the Empire and a hex fiend so bravely would be so timid. Are you feeling all right?” Meifa turned back to Arcus. Rather than disappointed, she sounded curious.

He opened his mouth, wanting to tell her that he wasn’t sure why his body felt so stiff either. Instead, he murmured the words that had popped into his head.

“Monster of Barloo. Darné hua Neut.”

Neither Louise, nor her attendant, nor Meifa's entourage seemed to hear him.

The Iron Rose herself, however, regarded him with wide eyes. "You know that name?"

"I do."

"I see. No wonder you do not wish to look at me."

"Your Excellency *does* have a connection to that name, then?"

"I do. But no one without a connection to the Twin Phantoms should know of it. So who are you? *What* are you?"

"I wish I knew."

Meifa hummed thoughtfully. "No matter. Such things may be left to the past. If you do not know, then neither can I. Though you may be curious, it will likely behoove you to remain ignorant. If you are meant to know the truth, it will be revealed to you eventually."

"Mm..."

"Now, about my offer..."

Arcus didn't need to think twice. "I am incredibly honored that you should grant me this opportunity; however, I am afraid I must decline."

"Even if I were to offer you a rank befitting your abilities? A barony, for example?"

"Even then. I already have a master I must serve."

"I see. You and the prince are rather close, aren't you?" With that, Meifa dropped the subject.

Still, it made very little sense for her to offer a barony to a *child*, not least one she had only just met. Even if he was a powerful magician, it seemed rather an inappropriate place for it.

Her chuckle roused him from his reverie. "At least I've achieved *something* this evening."

"What would that be?" Louise asked.

“You know, I’m very sensitive to the stares of others. A lot of important people have been observing us.”

Louise gritted her teeth. She hadn’t picked up on that fact, likely because she was too focused on talking to Meifa. The people around them had probably all heard the Iron Rose soliciting Arcus. At some point, the majority of attention had turned away from the Lazraels and onto them.

“What are you scheming?” Louise hissed.

“Not a thing. All I wanted was to have Arcus Raytheft join me. Of course people would be interested, even if they can’t hear the specifics of our conversation. It doesn’t surprise me that the state magicians look the most wary of all.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I doubt there’s any need for me to spell it out. I don’t want to risk the relationship between our territories.” Meifa dropped her gaze to Arcus again. “You don’t come by talent like this every day. I’ll be sure to have an even more enticing proposal for you next time.”

“I wouldn’t bother, personally.” A new face appeared in the midst of the tension—one whom Arcus hadn’t expected, and who was impossibly large.

“The King of Granciel...”

“Barbaros zan Grandon...”

His sheer size was mind-boggling. The bottle of soma wine in his hand looked like a phial compared to him. It was a wonder that none of them had noticed his approach. He joined in the conversation as though he had been there all along.

“Don’t be tryin’ to get the jump on me, Darnénes. Arcus is gonna be joinin’ my crew, you see!”

“What? But I never—” Arcus looked up only to find Barbaros grinning at him mischievously.

“Now you raise your head, Arcus! Advantage, Barbaros.”

Now that the pirate had drawn attention to it, Arcus realized the oppressive tension hindering his movements had vanished. For whatever reason, any

intimidation he had felt coming from Meifa had totally dissipated.

“But how?”

“Oh, I know.” Barbaros sounded a lot more jovial than Arcus felt. “Those in the north say my heart runs cleaner than the Cross Mountains. That’s gotta be it!”

“‘The north’ is not a single entity,” Meifa protested. “Only those who wish to deceive portray it as such.”

The king burst into hearty laughter, unfazed by her admonishment. “You’re makin’ me sound like a sneak!” He was too old and experienced to change his ways over a minor quibble like that.

“Are you interested in Arcus Raytheft as well?” the Iron Rose asked.

“You bet! He’s already helped me out a ton. Pretty sure you had a front-row seat at the time.”

“I’d almost forgotten you were there.”

“Good thing I reminded you, then!”

Barbaros had seen Arcus’s Ohr Ein Sof up close, after which he’d immediately asked the boy to join his crew. Apparently the passage of time hadn’t dampened his enthusiasm.

The captain took Arcus by the shoulders. “Let’s have a little chat, man to man. Y’know I’ve been pretty patient with you already, right?”

“I’m afraid I’m going to need to ask you to leave things there, Your Majesty,” Louise cut in.

Unsurprisingly, Barbaros merely smiled. “Ah, the Lady of the National Razor. Don’t worry, I’m not gonna eat him! Weren’t you enjoyin’ a chat with him yourself just now? Why can’t I do the same? What else are parties for, eh? C’mon, lemme talk to him, seein’ as I’m here anyway.”

“Your Majesty’s position as King of Granciel risks eliciting needless misunderstandings. And my position, as an adult, means I must protect our children.”

“I get that, but what’s so wrong about just *talkin’* to him? He’s just some viscount’s son, right?” Barbaros tried another line of attack. As far as outsiders were supposed to be concerned, he *was* just a nameless noble child. The captain’s logic was hard to refute.

Louise was looking at the king as though she considered him even more troublesome than Meifa. Even then, Barbaros made no move to let go of Arcus. The longest lever in the world probably wouldn’t shift him. After Louise shot Arcus a glance that promised she would deal with it, she withdrew.

“I’ll be borrowin’ him now.”

“Hmph.” With that, Meifa left them alone too.

Just as Arcus was starting to feel relaxed, Barbaros leaned down to look him in the eye. “You’re quite the ladies’ man, huh? Those young girls I saw you with last time not doin’ it for you anymore?”

“I would hope I don’t need to explain why your assumptions are incorrect.”

“But the Lady of the National Razor *and* that black leopardess?”

“Well, I can’t deny their beauty, but...”

While Arcus was struggling to finish his sentence, Barbaros tipped back his bottle of soma wine. He certainly seemed to be enjoying it.

“I’m just here to entertain you while you drink, am I?” Arcus asked.

“Yup. A good drink needs somethin’ to spice it up. Though this stuff’s pretty good on its own. You make it?”

“How did you know?”

“Craib told me.”

“Then I suppose I don’t need to hide it...”

Presumably his uncle hadn’t thought there would be much to lose by revealing that information. In fact, he may have been looking to force a sale or use the wine in some sort of negotiation.

“How come you never told me you got such fine stuff?”

“How was I supposed to contact you? Speaking of, everyone’s been asking me

that.”

“‘Everyone’ bein’ Shinlu and Craib, right? Sounds like them. And me.”
Barbaros grinned.

“I wish someone would spare a thought for me...” Arcus muttered. Perhaps heavy drinkers were incapable of picturing the logistical challenges behind his ability to share that information.

“Anyway,” Barbaros finally said. “It’s been a while.”

“Indeed it has, Your Majesty.” Arcus bowed, drawing a firm line beneath their earlier small talk.

“C’mon, you don’t gotta be like that. We’re pals, right?”

“Your Majesty is the king of a major nation, and I am but a viscount’s son. It wouldn’t do to neglect the formalities.”

“You got a rod up your spine, kid. Though I guess that’s not a bad thing.”
Barbaros patted Arcus’s tiny shoulder with a massive palm.

He couldn’t understand why the king of an enemy state had been invited this evening, but he supposed there was a lot he wasn’t privy to.

The way the boy’s body shook under his hand seemed to amuse Barbaros, who chuckled. “You get that treasure I sent you?”

Oh yeah...

Not long after the order ceremony, Barbaros had sent a great amount of gold and silver to Arcus’s home. It had been quite the ordeal, with one of the captain’s subordinates arriving outside the house and announcing himself in a loud voice. Arcus could only be grateful that his place wasn’t too close to any others. Who knew what sort of commotion or rumors would have taken root otherwise? Barbaros’s common sense was undoubtedly skewed.

“I am afraid to say that your actions inconvenienced me.”

“Oh yeah? I just wanted to celebrate your achievements. I mean, I heard you crushed the Black Panther Cavalry *and* showed up the lion.”

“It was His Royal Highness’s unparalleled power that dispatched the cavalry. I

simply accompanied him at the time. My achievements are nil.”

Barbaros gave an interested hum. “I guess they’d be no match for Shinlu’s kid either. If that’s what you wanna claim, I’ll play along.”

“Play along?”

“I’ve seen the crazy magic you’re capable of for myself. As far as I’m concerned, there’s nothing you can’t do.”

Arcus didn’t respond immediately. His destruction of the magic troops was common knowledge, but he hadn’t expected Barbaros to know about his encounter with the Black Panther Cavalry. Arcus could only assume he had quite the information network. Naturally, the cavalry’s defeat *was* mostly thanks to Ceylan’s work. Arcus would only attribute about a third of it to himself.

“It would have been more socially acceptable to give me some warning about that delivery beforehand,” Arcus said.

“My generosity wasn’t ‘socially acceptable’? There really wasn’t anythin’ else to it than me wantin’ to congratulate you.”

“Did Your Majesty not consider that it might have been better not to send me anything at all?”

Barbaros burst into laughter. “*Now* you’re overthinkin’ things!”

“Am I?”

“Listen, any guy who gets a taste of treasure never wants to let go of it.”

“Treasure?”

“Yep. It’s true.” The king gave a meaningful smirk.

Arcus put his mind to work trying to figure out what those words really meant. He couldn’t take them at face value; the fact that Barbaros had gifted some of his own treasure meant he was willing to let go of it. But if he wasn’t talking about himself, then whom? Arcus hadn’t the foggiest clue.

Just then, the seafarer crouched down so he and Arcus were at the same height. At least, that seemed to be the intention, but he was still several sizes

bigger than the boy.

“So, about this aethometer,” the giant whispered into his ear.

Arcus flinched.

“It’s yours, right? I gotta say, it’s pretty nifty.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Barbaros laughed. “Don’t play dumb. I know I ain’t wrong on this.”

“I’m a child; I don’t have the ability to create such a device. I would expect it to be the work of a state magician.”

“That so, huh? How come you got an invite to this shindig, then?”

“Uncle believed it would be an edifying experience for me. A rare opportunity to witness history in the making.”

“I guess that makes sense. So, do you *know* who made it?”

“Not exactly. I *do* believe my uncle would be capable, however.”

“How come he’s not come out and said he made it then? Shouldn’t be anythin’ stoppin’ him.”

Indeed, if a state magician had created the aethometer, there would be no need to conceal his or her identity.

“It’s really obvious, if you think about it,” Barbaros went on.

“What is?”

“Lainur’s got better magicians than most places. That’s ‘specially true on the individual level when these spellcasters rise up the ranks. But if they’re that talented, what would they *need* an aethometer for?”

“Sir?”

“Arcus. There ain’t many people crazy enough to invent somethin’ they’ve got no use for. But the aethometer’s *perfect* for a kid like you. What with your aether, you gotta save every drop you can in a fight, right?”

Arcus didn’t respond.

“So am I a genius or what? Maybe I oughta quit seafarin’ and become a

detective.”

He was bang on. While the development of the aethometer had come about mostly by coincidence, Arcus *had* needed some way to measure aether. Without that necessity, he would never have put in the work to complete it, nor to send it out into the world.

Barbaros’s eyes took on a reminiscent shine. “Remember those guys you were chasing down? It’d make sense if *you’re* the inventor.”

“Wait, you *heard* what they were talking about?!”

“Probably better than you did. Gotta have good eyes and ears to take on the seas.”

“So you’ve known all this time?”

“Nah, I’m not *that* good. I just thought you were hidin’ somethin’. I was just connectin’ the dots every time some new info came out.” Barbaros gestured toward the aethometers. “This is gonna be massive for the magicians out there. I guess you got to Shinlu’s dream before mine. I guess the guy really does know you.”

“Dream?”

“What Lainur wants right now, more than anythin’, is to make itself rich and to beef up its armies. You’ve come up with somethin’ that’ll do both. I bet Shinlu’s over the moon.”

Lainur *did* have a number of enemies, necessitating the development of its defenses. The aethometer would no doubt help in that regard, so perhaps it wasn’t an exaggeration to say Arcus had fulfilled Shinlu’s dream. But if there was anyone he didn’t want figuring all of this out, it was Barbaros. Arcus eyed him warily.

“Relax, kid. I’m not about to go spreadin’ it around. Nothin’ in it for me.”

“No?”

“I don’t wanna lose you as a pal. You’ve already done me a solid, right?”

“Are you talking about your capture of Zeilner?”

“That’s the one. Your strategy worked perfectly. We moved the boats, and the enemy couldn’t do *squat* to fight back when we popped up right where they weren’t expectin’ us! That treasure I sent you was somethin’ belongin’ to their king. It was your share of the spoils.”

“I am not your retainer.”

“What’s this now? Mariners are all about sharin’ the loot. ’Snot about retainers or servants or anythin’ else.” He barked a laugh, as though that would dispel Arcus’s reservations.

But Arcus didn’t want to be regarded as part of his in-group. It might invite suspicion.

“I passed the entirety of your gift to the royal family.”

“Fine. Shinlu’s gonna be joinin’ me eventually anyway. I guess he just got his share of the loot early.”

Not for the first time, Arcus was lost for words. He wondered whether they spoke of counting one’s chickens before they hatched in this world. Barbaros was certainly getting ahead of himself. But somehow Arcus had the sense that he was capable of bringing his ambitions to fruition.

A short while after his conversation with Barbaros, Arcus returned to an antechamber in the palace. The party’s main event, Craib’s presentation, was over; all that was left was for nobles and dignitaries to mingle—excellent conditions to slip away unnoticed.

The Sol Glasses in this room were a little too bright, so he covered them with a thin cloth. Once there was no direct lighting left, he flung himself down onto a couch, no longer caring whether he rumpled his clothing. He let himself sink into the fabric.

“Boy, am I *beat*.”

As expected of the palace furnishings, the couch was comfortably soft. It was enough to make him consider buying a fancy one for himself. It was a class of excessive luxury that the man from the other world would never even have considered—which was a shame.

Noah smiled thinly at his collapsed master. “You look as though you’ve been through the wars.”

“Wow, thanks for your sympathy. How come you weren’t out there with me?”

“My apologies. Craib requested that I wait in the back.”

“Yeah, I know...” It still didn’t make much sense to Arcus. Having Noah around would have made him feel much more at ease.

“I was under the impression that Lady Louise would be with you.”

“Yeah. She bailed me out when my shitbag ‘dad’ showed up.”

“Then it sounds to me like you had nothing to worry about.”

“I didn’t till Meifa Darnénes and Barbaros came over to talk to me. Even she couldn’t get rid of them.”

“Referring to a king by his first name? Well, I suppose Craib does the same...”

“Whoever put him in charge was playing some kinda joke. I mean, he’s definitely capable, but apart from that...”

“Again, Craib tells me the exact same thing.”

Then Arcus and his uncle were in agreement. Honestly, Barbaros’s more casual mindset impressed him. He was smart and knew how to weave hidden meaning into his words. Perhaps his heavy-handedness was also one of his charms. They said that some people were completely unreadable. Barbaros may well have been a perfect example.

“I wouldn’t mind growing up into someone like him. Not that he has the greatest personality.”

“You are already well on your way, particularly when it comes to your theatrics.”

“At least *try* and make it sound like a compliment.”

“I had no need to. It wasn’t one.”

Arcus glared at his servant, who still wore the same smile on his lips. He could only imagine the face he was making, but he was confident it was horrendous.

Just then, there came a knock at the door. Arcus straightened himself up as Noah turned to face it.

“Is Arcus Raytheft here?”

“He is.”

Arcus recognized the voice as Eulid Rain’s. At first, he wondered what the count could want of him, but then he realized that Eulid was likely here on someone else’s orders. The next voice he heard was decidedly androgynous.

“Arcus. It’s me.”

He jumped. “Y-Your Royal Highness!”

“I am coming in.”

The door started to open from the other side before Noah could get to it. Arcus may have been sitting up now, but he was still in no fit state to be seen by the prince. He hurried to do whatever he could in the short time before the door fully opened, all while making as little noise as possible. He straightened up and smoothed down his clothes. Then, he jumped to his feet and assumed a posture suitable for meeting royalty.

At last, the door opened, and Ceylan entered the room with Eulid behind him. The prince bore a small smile at Arcus’s exaggerated docility.

“You panicked,” he remarked.

“S-Sir. I was having a lie down...”

Ceylan chuckled. “I came to thank you for today. You have worked hard for this, Arcus.”

“Your words are too kind, sir.”

The prince then lowered his tone, as if to signal that this was his *true* reason for coming. “Incidentally, there is something I must ask you.”

“Of course, sir. I take it you saw whom I was talking to just now?”

“I was too far away to listen in on the details. What was their business with you?”

“Well... For the most part, they wanted to recruit me.”

The prince smiled. "Don't tell me you were tempted."

"By no means." Arcus smiled back at him.

They both had full confidence in Arcus's loyalty. And then, Ceylan pouted resentfully.

"It is said that thieves show no restraint. They have proven themselves just as impudent."

"Your Royal Highness is comparing them to thieves?"

"I am. They attempted to steal you. Only thieves steal."

"Yes, sir," Arcus replied, although he was uncertain. Apparently, Ceylan considered him a possession. Having said that, it wasn't all that far-fetched. He *was* the prince's subordinate, in a sense.

"Have I displeased you?" Ceylan asked.

"No, sir."

He chuckled. "That was in jest. I simply wanted to see your reaction."

It seemed Arcus's panic amused him. Unfortunately, most of his face was hidden behind a veil. And even if it weren't, the prince likely kept his expressions quite cryptic.

"Sir, I should share with you Her Excellency's final words to me."

"Yes, I heard them myself."

"I believe she has identified me as the aethometer's maker."

"I agree, and I believe there is no room for an alternative interpretation."

There was no way the information could have been leaked to the north, and Gown had mentioned altering the memories of those involved in the incident with the hex fiend. It wasn't clear how solid the evidence Meifa might have been, but either way they would have to remain vigilant around her going forward.

"As for King zan Grandon, he seemed absolutely certain that I was the inventor."

"Certain? Was that due to the events of your first meeting in the capital?"

“Your Royal Highness knows about that?”

“Yes. The King of Granciel paid me and my father a courtesy visit after the incident and spoke of meeting you. Crucible was present as well. To think such a short meeting would grant him such confidence.”

“Indeed. Though I tried to deny it, I utterly failed to dissuade him.”

“He is a highly perceptive man. Father has told me as much. We mustn’t underestimate him.”

Meifa and Barbaros. Two vastly significant names, and yet they knew that Arcus was the one behind the aethometer. He almost failed to see the point of hiding it anymore, although other nations weren’t their only concern; there were domestic considerations to keep in mind as well. In any case, just because these two leaders had this information didn’t mean that they were going to spread it. Doing so could sever the relationship between their countries and Lainur entirely. That probably wouldn’t be a problem for Granciel, but Barbaros had just voiced his disinclination to say anything, so there was likely nothing to worry about there.

“It seems we will never have a chance to relax,” Arcus lamented.

“Yes. I am overcome with the urge to set aside all concern for damages and simply, if I might indulge in some base vernacular, ‘pop off’ with every offensive spell I know.”

“But your magic is extremely powerful...” Arcus said, beginning to panic.

“It was a simple joke. You need not take me seriously,” Ceylan muttered.

It may have been a joke, but his tone had implied otherwise. The prince’s workload must have been wearing on him. For this, Arcus could only admire him.

“Sir.”

“What is it, Eulid? If you have something to say, you may do so.”

“I would like to point out that it may be considered unwise for someone in Your Royal Highness’s position to make such unscrupulous remarks.”

“So my father’s frequent threats of beheading do not fall into the category of

‘unscrupulous’?”

“I would like to refrain from commenting.”

“You would insult me, but not my father. That is not fair.”

The pair stared each other down in silence. Arcus turned to Noah, who, understandably, just gave an exaggerated shrug and shook his head. It seemed that Ceylan really did let His Majesty slip wherever magic was involved.

Part 2: To the Institute of Magic

At night, Lainur's Royal Institute of Magic was closed to everyone, and even students and lecturers couldn't enter freely. For the most part, this was to prevent trespassing. The Institute was one of the central pillars of the nation's magic industry, and housed a number of secrets that could not be allowed to leak. The gates were locked, and should an intruder be detected in the grounds anyway, an alarm would sound. Although the lecturers on duty would have finished their rounds by then, the guards on the perimeter of the Magician's Guild next door would step in to deal with the interloper.

There shouldn't have been a single soul left in the Institute. Nonetheless, young Claudia Saifice, heir to the dukedom, was walking the building. She had been summoned by her grandfather Egberd. Their meeting place was the courtyard, a popular location for students to refresh and relax. He was already waiting for her when she arrived, right in front of the seal-engraved water fountain in its center.

In every generation, the head of House Saifice had always taken up the role of Headmaster of the Institute; Egberd bore the legacy well. Though others at his age often invited descriptions with words like "withered," his posture showed no such frailty. His height gave him an air of heroism, and he overflowed with an abundance of aether. The way he gazed up at the night sky in his white vestments called to mind Megas, the revered great magician described in *Documenting the Stars*.

Claudia greeted her grandfather, a man she greatly admired, with an elegant curtsy.



“I apologize for keeping you waiting, grandfather.”

“Claudia. I’m sorry, I know it is late.”

“Not at all. I understand that it must be a rather important matter that you have summoned me to discuss. As a member of House Saifice and your granddaughter, I consider it a great honor.” She smiled softly at him. Only the quality of her education kept her flattery from veering from simply adoring to outright saccharine.

Egberd accepted it quite naturally and quickly moved on to the matter at hand. “I called you here because there is something I wish to show you.”

“Yes, grandfather.”

“I am old, and you are next to inherit the dukedom. The time will soon be upon us.”

“Please, grandfather, do not speak of such things. You are still in perfect health.”

“It is all right. There is no need to deny what is true for my sake.”

“That wasn’t my intention...”

Egberd looked down at his granddaughter fondly, proud of her grace. Slowly, he began to walk. He was a man of few words, and Claudia understood that she was meant to follow. They went from the courtyard to the cloister. It dawned on her, as they worked their way through its inner chambers, that she realized she did not recognize where they were anymore.

Claudia had been a student at the Institute for two years now. She had thought herself perfectly familiar with its layout, every last nook and cranny. Apparently that wasn’t the case.

The furnishings here were upside down; Claudia and her grandfather were walking along the ceiling and, outside, the stars studded the ground instead of the sky. It was as though they—and they alone—were trapped in an inverted world.

“Where are we, grandfather?”

“Remember this path well, Claudia. It is the only path to our destination.” As usual, Egberd kept his explanation brief and weighty.

Claudia chose not to pursue the matter and followed him obediently. Before long, they came to a stairwell leading up.

“Would these stairs lead to the basement, then? I never knew this was here.”

“Correct. This place is known only to those who lead House Saifice. Not even the royal family is aware of its existence.”

“Its secrecy certainly explains its location.”

That even the Crosellodes didn't know of this place surprised Claudia, but she supposed it wasn't outside the realm of possibility. The Saifice family had existed here since before Lainur's sudden prosperity, fighting off invading tribes and nations. It was written that they had refused to budge, even when the odds were stacked against them, until eventually the Crosellodes arrived to lend their support. With that, the invaders were routed once and for all. Whatever Egberd was about to show her had to be the reason their forefathers had so stubbornly stood their ground. Claudia's body tensed slightly with nerves; she felt just as proud as she was nervous.

When Egberd took a step inside, a crystalline installation on the wall lit up, revealing a spiral staircase. It was the least remarkable set of stairs Claudia had ever seen—plain and wholly without ornament. It was tempting to assume they were metal, but they didn't have the feel of it. Nor did they have the warmth of wood. And yet, with their perfectly smooth corners, it was impossible to imagine just how they had been made. Claudia suppressed a gasp as she realized it was likely a remnant of an ancient technology.

Lifting up her skirts, she followed Egberd. She walked carefully so as not to trip on her hem, but did not forget to keep her movements elegant. She took the stairs step by step, being sure to keep her footfall as soft as possible.

At first, the stairs never seemed to end. When they did reach the top, the lighting converged to illuminate their surroundings. The room was huge, big enough to fit the entire floor space of the Institute within it.

“To think this was concealed beneath the Institute...” Claudia said.

“It is said that our ancestors constructed this space during the time of *The Magician’s Elegy*.”

“It is that ancient? I find its architecture quite agreeable.”

“There are more surprises to come, Claudia. I have something even older to show you.”

She swallowed nervously. She had never seen the material that the floor was made of, nor encountered lights that reacted to movement, nor imagined a space this wide anywhere, let alone hidden beneath the building. And now Egberd was promising her something even more mind-boggling.

At the farthest end of the room was a glimmering lump of mineral some three meters square or more.

“Is this crystal?” Claudia asked.

“Indeed. It is said that this was crafted by the Saint himself.”

“The Saint? Of the three sages?”

“Yes. Behold what lies in its center.”

“I see a black...figure?”

“It is a djinn, a servant to the demons. You know of Groswell, don’t you?”

“Yes. He waged many a battle against the Saint.”

Several fairy tales had been spun from the original anecdotes of both figures.

“It is said that the djinn is sealed within this crystal.”

“I see only a shadow. I must confess that it is inconceivable to me that a figure of folklore should be confined in a place like this.”

“Your disbelief is most understandable. Nevertheless, it is true.” Egberd turned to his granddaughter. “Claudia. This is what I wished to convey to you. Long before the rise of Lainur, the founders of our house stood on the brink of destruction. It was then that the Saint tasked them with protecting this crystal. The djinn must remain sealed away till the day he returns to destroy it.”

Although she could accept the majority of what he said, there was one point she felt she must question.

“I understand that we are to protect this crystal, grandfather, but I do not understand how the Saint will destroy it.”

“Consider the following passage, said to come from *The Prophecy of Shadows*: ‘The indomitable spirit may only be destroyed by the Saint’s left arm.’”

“But has the Saint not passed on?”

“He has. *The Spiritual Age* contains the full span of his days.”

“Then I do not understand.”

Egberd did not elaborate. Keeping her grandfather’s face in the corner of her vision, Claudia reached out to touch the crystal before her. The mineral sent a gradual chill through her fingers, one she feared would freeze her very soul if she did not remove her hand.

“The indomitable spirit... Was the djinn’s invincibility not borne of a deal with the demons? The tales say he exchanged his soul for it.”

“That is exactly right. They say that, upon receiving such power from the demons, he became invulnerable to all wounds. That is why the Saint was forced to seal him away.”

“The djinn was as powerful as the stories say, then.”

“Yes. Therefore, the Saint will walk the Earth again and release this calamitous being in order to destroy it. Until then, we are to obey our master’s wishes and defend this crystal from all who might threaten it.”

“Our master... Is His Majesty not our master?”

“Indeed he is. However, House Saifice received a stipulation from Lainur’s first king: that we might serve two masters.”

“Did the king have no objections to such an arrangement?”

“No; he was well acquainted with our circumstances. We are to serve the royal family, but when the Saint returns, we will be permitted to serve him. This is a promise we were made by the first king; his descendants cannot overturn it.”

It was almost too absurd for Claudia to take in. Their family held great power

within the kingdom; how could they be allowed to serve two masters? It was as if they'd been given license to commit treason. No ruler of any nation would permit such a thing. On the other hand, the fact that it went unchallenged showed just how much importance was attributed to the events of *The Spiritual Age*.

"Claudia. The magic we possess was afforded to us by the Saint. He took pity on our forefathers, who lamented the misfortune brought about by their talents, and tasked them with a great duty. Certainly, we are to serve the Crosellodes, who granted us their protection during a time of warfare, but we are also greatly indebted to the Saint, and must work to repay that debt."

"I understand."

"It won't be long now until you are to inherit the crystal, and the Institute with it. Claudia. I expect from you the initiative and leadership required of the role."

"Yes, grandfather. I vow that I shall endeavor even harder in my duties to the Institute; I shan't bring shame to you, who left me something so sacred."

"Claudia."

"Grandfather. My heart trembles. Truly you have shown me that you approve of my inheritance of House Saifice." The eyes she laid on the crystal were filled with delight at his trust.

Though he had kept his expression stern thus far, Egberd's eyes now took on a tender light. He regarded Claudia now not as his successor, but as his granddaughter, with all the affection one would for the last surviving member of their line.

"There is such a thing as too much fervor, Claudia. This place is preceded by several mechanisms to ensure no one may reach it."

Claudia shook her head. "Even so, grandfather, I intend to double my efforts. I shall one day have to lead this Institute as you do. For that, I cannot allow the days to pass me by without making full use of them."

"You are still young. There is no need to push yourself beyond your limits. A leader must know when to delegate."

“I am to inherit the house. I intend to fulfill my role with more devotion than anyone before me, for mother and father are no longer here to offer their support.”

“It was a cruel twist of fate that took their lives.”

“Yes. All the more reason for me to give my utmost.”

“Claudia...”

Her determination shone too brightly to take in Egberd’s tender warnings. Learning that their family had the honor of serving the Saint and had done its duty for generations had made her all the more aware of her responsibilities. She needed to work harder for the sake of her name and for those who would come after her. And that meant she needed to display more discipline than ever. So too would she require it from others.

Although slightly concerned by his granddaughter’s quiet passion, Egberd continued. “The indomitable spirit may only be destroyed by the Saint’s left arm. When the wicked spirit descends to the world once more, the world will be consumed by a sea of flesh, once more tracing the path to devastation. The people will gasp in anguish, eventually depending upon tin soldiers. Know that the people’s gasps of anguish will be never-ending, till the entire world serves the crimson sunset.”

“Grandfather?”

“Much of the prophecy tells of a miserable future for our world. Those words, imparted to us, are equally as pessimistic.”

“It does not sound to me as though the Saint is prophesied to destroy the djinn at all,” she said, sounding flustered.

“Indeed, for what I have recited foretells the *world’s* destruction.”

“Then why were you speaking of the Saint’s return?” When her grandfather didn’t reply, Claudia grew even more panicked. “Grandfather?”

“It is my—our—*wish* that the Saint returns and puts an end to this djinn.”

Perhaps her grandfather held to such a hope because he was unwilling to accept the likely truth of things to come. It was difficult to blame him, for their

family had not been provided with a means to avert it. No wonder the Saifice lineage had worked so hard to defend this crystal. When he spoke of their wish, he must have wanted Claudia to realize the importance of her duty.

“No one may touch the seal, so that the prophecy will not come to pass.”

“I understand.”

A flame already flickered inside Claudia’s chest, but that truth roused her further. Whether that stimulus would prove positive or not remained to be seen.

The first hurdle to joining the Institute of Magic was the entrance exam. The process itself, however, wasn’t overly complicated. First, one needed to present a letter of recommendation, after which they simply needed to pass the written exam that was held at the Institute itself. The exam was passable with an appropriate amount of study. As long as the candidate was capable of deciphering artglyphs to a reasonable extent and had a passing knowledge of magic and the Ancient Chronicles, the questions should have posed no problems.

Arcus had already fulfilled the first requirement: Craib had written him a letter of recommendation. As for the exam, he had consulted some former graduates.

“I expect you will pass with flying colors, Master Arcus.”

“They’d probably let ya pass without ya even goin’, knowin’ how much they want ya!”

He was a confident magic user and had never once slacked off in his studies. The Chronicles were lodged firmly in his mind, both the parts he could and couldn’t read, and he was able to write them out on command. At some point during his studies, he had come to feel that failure was simply not on the table.

“And then there’s the practical exam,” Cazzy had said.

“Wait... There’s a practical section?”

“Correct,” said Noah. “It is optional, taken up by those seeking a challenge.

Many students' first experience with magic will come *after* enrollment, after all. However, should you impress on both parts of the exam, you will be treated as an exceptional student."

"Huh. Isn't that unfair, though? Not everyone's had the chance to study magic yet."

"It is a method by which the noble students are able to retain their prestige among those with common backgrounds."

"Think about it," Cazzy prompted. "There'd be nothin' special about the noble folk if the commoners were just as good."

"Oh, right. That's why you got picked on, Cazzy."

"Nothin' I couldn't handle! I picked plenty of fights myself. Everyone wanted me on their side and they didn't know when to quit! I got sick of the attention." He cackled.

Cazzy was the first with a commoner background to graduate as top student. And, according to Noah, he'd claimed that position by a sizable margin. Arcus could see how this would elicit both envy and admiration from his peers.

"Students attend the Institute for five years, and those from common backgrounds—no matter where in the world they come from—tend to stay in a dormitory. You, I daresay, won't have any need for a dormitory, given you have this house."

"Yeah. The commute shouldn't be too bad."

"Where did ya stay when ya were a student?" Cazzy asked Noah.

"In the dormitories, as you did. I hail from the countryside."

"You're a weirdo just like me. I can't tell if ya were born classy, or if ya worked your way up."

"I have a rather eventful past. Every man has his hardships."

Arcus was surprised to learn that Noah wasn't originally from the capital. Not all nobles lived there, however. Some lived in more rural areas for the sake of their duties; perhaps that had been the case for Noah too. That his family hadn't had a second home in the capital suggested he came from a barony, or

that his father's title had been newly granted rather than inherited. Arcus knew Noah came from the north, but that was where his knowledge ended. He decided he should probably save some of these questions for later.

"Speaking of exams, do not forget about the Guild's Certificate of Sorcery Education."

"Ah. I almost did."

As well as the aforementioned certificate, there was the National Diploma of Sorcery. The former proved one's magic proficiency and was a requirement for a number of vocations. The latter was taken to earn the title of state magician. The Certificate of Sorcery Education set one apart from unlicensed magicians and raised Lainur's standard for professional magic users. Anyone wishing to take the state magician exam would typically take the CSE first.

"My recommendation would be to take the CSE while you are still enrolled in the Institute."

"You passed it too, right Noah?"

"Indeed. I took it during my third year. Cazzy recently did a retake."

"Thought it'd be a good idea to do it again, seein' as I was gonna be workin' for a noble."

"You sure take things seriously."

"Did you fail to take the exam seriously the first time around?" Noah asked.

"Ya don't gotta to pass it. 'Slong as ya got the basics down pat, it's impossible to fail." Cazzy waved a dismissive hand. "You'll be fine, kid. It's a ton easier than goin' in to see His Majesty."

"I guess it would be. Plus I don't think anyone's gonna threaten me with a beheading at an exam..." Arcus said, laughing nervously and eliciting sympathetic looks from his servants.

"Sounds like ya got it rough after all," Cazzy said.

"And, since your aim is to improve your standing, things are only liable to get even rougher," Noah said. "Your best bet for seeing things through is to keep your head down. Although that might be difficult, given your nature."

“No raidin’ any marquesses or gettin’ pulled into any wars, y’hear?”

“It is a lot to go through, all before one is even close to becoming an adult. I am in awe of you, Master Arcus.”

Arcus glared at them. They always seemed to think they could say whatever they liked about him, despite his being their master.

“Okay. Well, I’m off then.”

With that, he set off for the Institute.

There were several dates set for the entrance exam. This lightened the burden on the proctors and allowed for candidates to see to obligations that could not be rescheduled. It also created flexibility in the case of unforeseen circumstances.

Because of its proximity to the Magician’s Guild, Arcus had often caught sight of the Institute’s student traffic. The way they wore their uniforms and carried their bags made them look no different from the pupils of the man’s world. In his country, the school uniform was something imported from the West. Here, of course, its origins differed.

The Institute’s uniform was said to be a remnant of its days as a small private school. It had been one of the greatest educational establishments since its founding, and the original headmaster had introduced the uniform as a prestigious way to set its students apart. Arcus could indeed understand the pride and dignity that would come about from wearing it, as well as its identifiability.

The kingdom’s fashion was in a period of transition, where traditional noble dress was just as common as, say, jackets. Families who valued convention would opt for the former, while those who were more fashion conscious and followed the trends would go for the latter. These attitudes tended to correlate with the age of the house.

The Institute went for the cutting-edge approach, recently favoring jackets and blazers over the vestment-like uniforms of yore. The outfit was mostly white, with slacks for boys and skirts for girls. Designwise, they weren’t too

different from the uniforms in the man's world.

I swear I'm gonna look like a snowman wearing that thing.

Arcus picked at his silver curls. Thanks to his hair color, he tended to fade into the background when he wore white.

He had traveled this route countless times to get to the Guild, but today he walked right past it—although he did greet the familiar guards as he went. Eventually, he arrived at the Institute of Magic. Its black lattice gates loomed over him. Their jaws gaped wide to usher in the examination candidates. Students stood to either side, calling those who would enter. Apparently they would be showing the examinees to the venue.

Arcus allowed himself to be led to the classrooms which would serve as the examination hall. There were lecturers in place already, prepared to act as proctors. Candidates would be divided among the rooms and receive a paper test. The format did not differ significantly from the other world's tests.

Once he was at his seat, the invigilator gave a quick rundown of the proceedings before the papers were handed out. Arcus scanned the exam—the questions were rudimentary, many of them focused on general magic knowledge. There was nothing that touched on complex phenomena or the origins of magic. The only questions that came close were extremely basic, and none of them were more difficult than a fill-in-the-blank exercise.

"Name the oldest known collection of books written in artglyphs."

The Ancient Chronicles.

"List each volume of the aforementioned collection in chronological order, beginning with the oldest."

The Birth of Heaven and Earth, The Spiritual Age, The Prophecy of Shadows, Documenting the Stars, The Magician's Elegy, Demons and Society's Collapse.

"What is the term used to describe a spell that has failed due to an imperfect incantation? Include in your answer a number of causes."

Mis-incantation. Can be caused by improperly supplied aether, chanting the wrong words or phrases, or biting one's tongue.

“What is the byproduct of spellcasting?”

Hex.

“What is the effect of said byproduct, and how can the risk be eliminated?”

The remnants of hex may be linked to the emergence of dark spirits. To eliminate the risk, a spell may be used to disperse the hex, or an area may be suitably prepared in advance to avoid its buildup. The complete removal of hex is thought to be impossible.

“Describe the dangers that may be posed by a hex fiend.”

...Additionally, a hex fiend may draw further hex toward itself, risking a spirit storm...

“Name the Demon Kings.”

Om, Kutastha, Ganjaldie, Samadiya.

“What is the famous saying attributed to the magician Radeon?”

“By words do all things begin and end.”

With those questions under his belt, Arcus at last came to what was said to be the most difficult set of questions.

These are from the Chronicles...

The task was to fill in the gaps in excerpts from the Chronicles. A candidate's success would depend entirely on how much of the Chronicles they had read and understood. While memory played an important role, anyone who had studied from shaky sources would also struggle. However, it was probably easier than the imperial examinations of ancient China, for which huge swathes of text had to be memorized.

Arcus, however, didn't find it too arduous, blessed as he was with an eidetic memory. The rest of the exam, too, didn't pose any particular problems. Meanwhile, there were troubled grunts and mutterings from the candidates around him—although they might not have been expressly caused by the exam's difficulty.

“I hate gap-fillers... I hate reading the Chronicles... It's such a pain...”

“It’s twitching... My left eye... It’s twitching!”

“If only they’d let me use my beef-up spells, these dumb questions wouldn’t be a problem!”

Arcus was starting to wonder just what kinds of people were taking this exam. The one with the eye probably needed to see a physician. The one with the “beef-up” magic seemed to think ripping his paper to shreds would help him pass.

As for Arcus himself, the exam hadn’t included any nasty surprises. Next, he had the practical exam to contend with. And so he followed the guide to the training grounds, where it was set to take place.

“This way to the practical exam,” a student in the Institute’s white uniform called out to the candidates. It seemed the pupils were on guidance duty for just a little longer. Including the ones at the main gate, there had been more than ten of them by Arcus’s count.

It may have seemed like a lot, but there had to be so many guides for good reason. The Institute had a fairly complicated layout, with pathways that seemed to tangle together. Without these guides, the new faces could become very lost, very fast. It was likely a deliberate design choice to defend against intruders and keep the students safe in case of attack. There were several doors that served no purpose, a turning every few paces, and a number of paths that led to intentional dead ends. Particularly notorious were the stairs. The number of steps made no sense when compared to the stairways’ heights, and one could lose their mind trying to work out how much progress had been made up or down.

Arcus couldn’t help feeling as though he’d wandered the labyrinth in a theme park. As a new student, it likely elicited tremendous excitement, but an intruder would find themselves at a complete loss. Losing one’s way was more or less guaranteed.

The hallways contained stands displaying replicas of Seal Tools, and they occasionally passed rope stanchions barring entrance to certain places. There was also a cloister, much like those in western castles, made up of arches and pillars.

It wasn't long until they reached the training grounds. They were located at one end of the site and a fair walk away from the classrooms where the written exams had taken place. The boys and girls standing here were marked by their finely tailored clothes. Every single one seemed to come from nobility. Cazzy was right: this part of the exam was a way to mark them apart from the lower classes.

Arcus couldn't see Lecia anywhere. Either she had already done her exam, or she was set to do it on another day.

Before long, the lecturer standing like a post in the center of the grounds looked over and addressed the candidates.

"I trust we have everyone who wishes to take the practical exam? Please wait a moment while I fetch the proctor." With that, he walked briskly away.

When he returned, he was joined by a young bespectacled man in a black robe. His deep purple curls were cut uniformly short, reminding Arcus of his own hair in a way that felt oddly comforting.

He recognized this man. He had been proctoring the National Diploma of Sorcery exam with Mercuria String and Frederick Benjamin when Arcus had visited the Guild. That meant he was likely a state magician himself. While he didn't exude an air of intense intimidation, he certainly possessed dignity.

The newcomer took a step toward the candidates. "My name is Cassim Lowry. I will be proctoring today's practical exam. While I do not have the pleasure of teaching at the Institute, I look forward to seeing your talents on display today."

His introduction elicited a number of gasps from the crowd. Indeed, he *was* a state magician: Blinding Flare. His specialism lay in hallucinogenic magic, and it was said that his spells had proved their worth on the battlefield in times of retreat. He was one of the magicians who had been absent from Arcus's recent meeting at the Guild. While he may have appeared meek and timid, the aura he gave off was anything but. Arcus recalled hearing on a few occasions that he had been Cazzy's junior.

Cazzy's got way too many impressive connections...

State magician Mercuria String had been one of his seniors and, putting aside

Cassim, his juniors had included Lisa Lauzei, sitting Chief Officer of the Surveillance Office. His generation had produced a number of world-class magicians, and Arcus wasn't sure whether to be impressed or terrified.

"We will now begin the exam. I won't be tougher on you just because I'm a state magician, so please don't be overly concerned." Cassim smiled at them amicably, but it wasn't enough to relax anyone. A candidate's prestige as a student was directly linked to their success in this exam. That naturally made them want to push to their limits, and Arcus could hear many of them begin to quicken in their breathing. The state magician's gaze remained amicable as he continued. "In this exam, I will ask each of you to cast a designated spell. You only have one chance, so please bear that in mind."

The candidates were handed the incantation on a sheet of paper. The designated spell was Ignited Soul. It was an offensive spell that created a flurry of pale-blue fireballs to attack a target. The incantation itself wasn't overly long, making it an easy spell to cast compared to other offensive magic. As far as Arcus was concerned, the output fell short of the aether it took to cast. In a real-life situation, he would pick a stronger spell, or improvise to come up with something more aether-efficient. However, it was his magic skills that were being put to the test, not his originality or ingenuity. He would be judged on whether he could cast the spell correctly. Naturally, this included whether he could imbue the words with the correct amount of aether and enunciate properly.

There were occasions when the same spell could produce different results. If the caster was slow in activating his aether, so too would the effect be delayed. Additionally, too vague a mental image could produce a spell that lacked form or power. Mix those mistakes together and they would result in the worst-case scenario: mis-incantation. Although there were exceptions (usually dependent on the caster rather than anything else), mis-incantation would never lead to an overpowering of the spell. In the majority of cases, it was easier to produce a weaker casting than a stronger one.

This phenomenon could be seen in the differences between Arcus's and Lecia's magic. When she tried to cast an original spell he had made, it often came out weaker. Meanwhile, she often had much more success with fire-

based spells than he did. Of course, the only real way to increase a spell's strength was to modify it.

Cassim began by casting the spell himself as an example, firing it into one of the targets. The fireballs descended on the hay bale and burned it to a crisp. The candidates gasped in amazement, after which they began to cast the spell themselves in turn.

"F-Flaming quintessence. Float by the ancestral tomb. Sway, sway...shake and shine bright... Call on Gown's lamp. Stray and rush. An ensemble of embers..."

Despite the blond candidate's incantation, nothing happened. His aether dispersed into the air, and the artglyphs splintered.

"Oh..."

"Your spell failed. I would suggest committing the spell to memory, and ensuring you are applying the correct amount of aether," Cassim advised.

The candidate stepped back again, shoulders slumping. He'd had the very first turn and he'd blown it. His frustration was clear.

Cassim called for the next candidate. The girl stepped forward, performing the spell after introducing herself.

"Flaming quintessence! Float by the ancestral tomb! Sway, sway! Shake and glimmer! Call on Gown's lamp! Stray and rush! A glittering ensemble of embers!"

Artglyphs spawned into the air and rushed around vigorously before coalescing into the typical blue fireballs, but those too ran riot. They only made it halfway to the hay bales before they struck the ground and set it alight.

"How was that?" The girl grinned and puffed out her chest.

"Not as impressive as you seem to think," Cassim said.

"Aw..."

"You added some extra words to the incantation, didn't you?"

"I *tried* not to. I just got a bit overexcited..."

"It's a bad habit to alter a perfected incantation on the spur of the moment.

The true strength of Ignited Soul is a subtle one; its incantation is to be enunciated without excess tension.”

“I thought I could make it a little more flashy...”

“You did, however, demonstrate perfect control over your aether. You just need to work on your restraint.”

The girl certainly had a...novel approach. The spell drew its strength from the image of a will-o'-the-wisp wandering a cemetery. Flashiness was far from a concern. Her delivery made a pop fly at the bottom of the ninth inning in the biggest baseball game of the season look measured and controlled.

The next candidate flubbed the incantation, likely out of nervousness. The spell failed. The next one managed to cast the spell, albeit with much less power than Cassim’s example. In fact, as Arcus waited for his turn, he was surprised to see just how many candidates mis-incanted. It was especially startling, given that the children of magic houses were supposed to have started their aetheric study and training early. Having said that, it wasn’t as though every candidate was expected to pass this exam. There would no doubt be those who failed the written part, so it was no wonder that there were a few bumblers when it came to the practical section.

Out of the ten candidates who had just performed, only three of them—including the overly enthusiastic girl—had successfully cast. The other two had created fireballs that were smaller and less powerful than they should have been, failing to burn the hay bales.

I didn’t think anyone would struggle like this...

To think that no one had performed the spell at its standard strength. Still, he supposed that even military magicians had been perfectly capable of mis-incanting before the aethometer’s introduction. And these candidates hadn’t even been to the Institute yet. The amount of failures shouldn’t have surprised him.

Magic *was* difficult. The fact that Arcus had forgotten just went to show how impressive the magicians around him were. The candidates who *did* manage to cast successfully let it be known.

“I did it!”

“Very impressive. Well done.” The spell had been a little weaker compared to the norm, but it seemed to have pleased Cassim, who congratulated the candidate with a smile. “Next.”

The time had come. Arcus stepped forward.

“My name is Arcus Raytheft.”

“Oh! It’s you!” Cassim’s face lit up, and he approached the boy. “We haven’t had the chance to meet, have we? I’ve been far too busy for any such meetings lately...”

“Your busy schedule is a testament to your extraordinary abilities, sir.”

“Yes, abilities that let them foist all the boring tasks onto me...” Cassim laughed weakly. It was enough to pluck at Arcus’s heartstrings. Clearly, he was a hard worker, and people knew it.

Considering the idiosyncratic bunch he rolled with, he was definitely at risk of developing wrinkles early. The overly assertive witch who had no business looking that young; the dubious magician for whom lifting a pinky finger seemed like too much work; and then there was the group’s problem child, a girl who had to be physically restrained: all in all, rough company for a straitlaced fellow like him.

“How is Cazzy doing?” the state magician asked.

“He is well. I have him working at my estate. Sometimes he puts on an apron and cleans.”

“Cazzy in an apron? That’s something I’d like to see.” Cassim gave a melodious laugh. He didn’t seem all that strict, and was pretty easy to talk to compared to the other state magicians. Arcus felt like he was talking to a nice, older boy who lived down the road.

“Um, Mr. Lowry?” the lecturer prompted.

“Oh! Of course. Please excuse me.” Cassim looked back to Arcus. “I know all about your skills, but seeing as this is an exam...”

“Yes, sir.” Arcus prepared himself. *“Flaming quintessence. Float by the*

ancestral tomb. Sway, sway. Shake and glimmer. Call on Gown's lamp. Stray and rush. An ensemble of embers."

Ignited Soul took effect at once. Artglyphs scattered and danced in the air before flickering into pale-blue flame, like pockets of gas set off with a simple cigarette lighter. They floated like wandering spirits in a graveyard for a split second before whooshing over to the targets. When they collided with the hay it caught, flaring up with blue fire like a puddle of oil.

It was just as powerful as Ignited Soul was supposed to be. It hadn't fizzled out like some of the other candidates' attempts either.

The effect on the onlookers was instantaneous.

"Did you see that?"

"That's got to be worth full marks, right?"

"I couldn't tell it apart from Blinding Flare's spell."

"He made it look so easy...like Psychokinesis."

What Arcus had done shouldn't have been all that impressive, but he supposed it was a matter of perspective.

Even the lecturer seemed amazed. "Such control..."

"I hope you won't find it patronizing of me to say that was remarkable?" Cassim said.

"Not at all. Thank you very much."

"I cannot criticize the power, nor the spell's speed. I think it's fair to say it was on par with my demonstration."

"My uncle would have lost his mind if I messed *that* up."

"Crucible? Yes, I wouldn't envy you." The wry smile on Cassim's lips was just what Arcus had expected.

If he had gone to Craib and reported his failure to execute a *fire* spell of all things, he would've found himself chewed out and starting his training over from the very beginning. Besides, if he couldn't cast a spell as basic as this, he could kiss his dreams of bringing Joshua down goodbye.

Although he heard that there had been successful candidates in other groups, Arcus was the only one to perform the spell perfectly on that day.

Arcus was muttering to himself as he studied his reflection in the mirror.

“It’s not *as* bad as it used to be...right? Though I still kinda look like a girl...”
He poked at his squishy cheeks.

His face had always been feminine, to the extent that he would often be mistaken for a girl. Since turning thirteen, however, the situation had been improved somewhat by his sharpening features. He was hopeful that this meant people would soon stop calling him “cute,” if nothing else. As long as that “cute” didn’t evolve into “pretty.”

Despite the improvement, there would doubtlessly still be those who mistook him for female at a distance. Perhaps, then, he shouldn’t have grown out his hair. He had thought that doing so might give off a different impression, but all it had really done was make him look even more feminine. Not that he had expected differently, but it was only human to commit to an aesthetic posture guaranteed to fail, just to be sure. There were several examples of masculine men with long hair, after all.

Arcus sighed, wrapping one of his flicked ends around his finger. He thought back to the comments made by those around him when his hair was starting to get longer.

“Have you decided to embrace your softer looks, Master Arcus?”

“No. I’m putting effort into fixing them.”

“I like it! You look great when you’re upping your cuteness, Arcus!”

“That’s not what’s happening, Sue. And let go of my hair.”

“If ya don’t like it, why not just lop it off? ‘S no point in sufferin’ it, right?”

“Yeah, I know I should...”

“Life is all about challenges, Arcus. No matter how much disappointment you bear, things will get better so long as you don’t give up.”

“Eido... I’m growing out my hair, not going on an epic journey...”

"Isn't your only option now to grin and bear it, brother? I feel as though any panic now may lead to a choice you will only regret."

"Yeah, you might be right, Lecia..."

"I quite agree. Why not keep it at that length for the time being? It still has room for growth, and you might find that it settles if only you give it the time to do so."

"Sorry, Lady Charlotte, I think I'd rather get a buzz cut then deal with it any longer..."

Apparently, that had been the wrong thing to say.

"Ew, Arcus! Don't!"

"Brother, you mustn't!"

"I shan't allow it!"

In his mind, a buzz cut would at least make him look like a boy, but the girls had assured him that it would look awful and that he would be in their bad books if he went through with it. And so, his plan B was shot down. For the time being, he had decided to stick with the long hair, if only to avoid their wrath.

Presently, he was attempting to style it suitably to keep it from looking strange. If that didn't work, perhaps he really ought to cut it, as Cazzy had suggested.

At least his hair could be easily changed. His physique was another matter. As much as he worked out, he was struggling to build any muscle, and his shoulders had still yet to broaden. It was far from the masculine body shape he would have liked. He was at the age where his body would be taking on the unique characteristics he would retain into adulthood. If nothing else, he wished he could start gaining some height already. While his physical training had led to an increase in his strength and prowess, his body had yet to catch up appearancewise. He was supposed to be growing more masculine, just like the man from his dream, but neither his face nor his body seemed to have gotten the memo yet. If only he could work out *what* exactly it was that was keeping him so soft.

Meanwhile, his left arm was making good progress. It wouldn't be long until it was back to normal.

Luckily I didn't do any permanent damage...

He had been worried there for a second. Now, though, he was able to use it for his daily tasks again without any problems. It was all thanks to the healers and the spells Sue had been casting on it. All that was left was to pray that it finished healing without any complications.

As for the Institute, Arcus had passed the exam without complaint and secured his admission.

"I would have expected nothing less," had been Noah's remark.

"Same," said Cazzy.

"There'd have been hell to pay if you failed. Not that you would've," said Craib.

None of them had doubted him. After all, they had all been witness to his years of magic study and training.

His first day at the Institute had arrived. His uniform fit perfectly—he had sent over his measurements in advance—and now he was threading his arms through the white sleeves. He put on his socks and garters, then matched them with shoes of a neutral color.



Swords were permitted for self-defense, so he wore his favorite rapier on his hip.

“Might I suggest you attach your Order to your uniform, Master Arcus?” Noah said.

“Nah, I’m good. It’d be kinda showy, and I’m only going to school.”

“I believe it would be a good idea.”

“Really, it’ll be fine. You’re overthinking it.”

With that, they set off. First, however, Arcus had some business to take care of. His destination was the biggest cemetery in the capital. Tombstones and the areas around them were kept perfectly tidy. The country in which the man had lived had a stigma around cemeteries—the majority of people thought them eerie. The one Arcus was visiting, however, was closer to the graveyards overseas, located in a park with an air of sanctity about it. With its beauty, it wouldn’t be a stretch to call it a memorial park.

The gravestones were ordered in a neat line, and the water basin and flower beds were well maintained.

At the entrance, Arcus turned to the cart that carried his luggage. “My barrels,” he announced proudly.

His servants exchanged a glance. Those barrels numbered three, none of them especially small.

Arcus looked around, eventually finding who he was looking for: Gown, who was carrying a watering can in his draping sleeves.

“Gown!”

The elf wore a hood over his face, enveloping it in darkness but for the bright yellow of his eyes. His sleeves and hem tended to drag along the ground as he walked.

On hearing Arcus’s voice, Gown removed one sleeve from the watering can and lifted it in a wave. “Arcus! Hello!”

“Hello!”

“Hello, Noah! Hello, Cazzy!”

His servants returned the sprite’s greeting. He was as cheerful as ever.

“What brings you here?”

“I’ve got some soma wine to offer up. It came out pretty well, so I’ve brought this year’s lot.”

“Really? Thanks!” Gown raised his arms and cheered. It was somewhat unnerving to see such a childish reaction to the provision of alcohol, but then he *had* been drinking it since time immemorial.

“You said barrels were fine, right? I got you three of them. There are some minor differences between them, like how they’ve been pressed. Is that all good?”

“All good!”

Arcus explained and marked what was in which barrel, and then Gown approached the cart. He then used some sort of power (that didn’t seem magical) to set the barrels down on the paving. It reminded Arcus of telekinesis—and made him a little jealous.

“I’m gonna share it with everyone, okay?”

“Thanks. I’m sorry I didn’t have the time to deliver it to them myself.”

“It’s okay! If I want more, can I come see you?”

“Of course. I’ll make sure I’m all stocked up.”

After seeing Gown off, it was time to head for the Institute. The campus was busier than usual, bustling with new students. Many seemed to be joined by their families to mark their first day, just like they would be in the man’s world. These families, however, were nobility—putting the scale of this event in another league. If only it were limited to immediate family. Some of these children seemed to have brought along their whole extended family. Naturally, this meant there were several carriages lining the street. One had stopped just in front of Arcus, allowing a young boy to alight on the pavement.

He had to be son to a count and countess at least if he was commuting by carriage. He was accompanied by a servant, and was evidently well educated.

Arcus was reminded of his own family.

I'd better watch out for them...

The Raythefts weren't as performative as some noble houses, and that went for Joshua too. He couldn't see the viscount and his wife being so elated over Lecia's acceptance that they would accompany her here, all smiles, but it never hurt to be cautious.

It was as he was making his way to the gate, keeping a constant lookout, that he heard the comments.

"Wait, did they send that girl the wrong uniform?"

"No, I think that's a guy."

"A guy?! He's so cute!"

"You know, I think he's *too* cute to be a girl."

"No, she's definitely a girl! She's just trying to confuse us!"

Ignore them, Arcus... Just ignore them...

He felt a headache coming on. Walking through the gate, he eventually came across a crowd that looked more promising. They seemed to be new students, and they were gathered around something.

"That 'Raytheft' at the top... He can't be *that* Raytheft, can he?"

"What? No way. I heard he sucked at magic."

"He got a perfect score on the written exam? With that impossible section on the Chronicles at the end?"

Although Arcus couldn't make out everything they said, he did catch his name and what sounded like the usual rumors. They must have caught sight of him and started gossiping, just like the students outside the gate. It was no wonder they recognized him; no family but the Raythefts had a combination of silver hair and red eyes—not in this country, anyway.

Only then did he realize that no one was actually looking his way. It seemed that the comments had come from the students who were gathered around a bulletin board. Arcus quickly worked out that they were studying the results of

the entrance exam. He weaved in between them to have a look at the rankings in more detail. Not every candidate was listed; only those who had scored the highest. If his name was here, he must have done pretty well.

Arcus Raytheft

Kane Lazrael

Lecia's name also appeared lower on the list.

"First!"

That made him top of the class. The practical exam wasn't graded with a numerical value, but he couldn't imagine he had done poorly considering how closely his spell had matched the example.

The rankings were gradually causing a stir among the other students.

"How is this possible?!"

"How is *he* top? Wasn't the Raytheft kid supposed to be useless?"

They had the exact same confused reaction as the nobles attending the awards ceremony. He could hear accusations of cheating, nepotism, and forgery. He could also hear those who came to his defense.

"I don't think there was any opportunity to cheat..."

"Wasn't he disinherited? He probably doesn't have any connections."

"I doubt he could have forged his results either."

Right on all counts.

There had been no way to cheat on the exam, nor did he know anyone who would be able to give him a free pass. Having said that, Craib probably counted as a connection, but that didn't mean Arcus could have used him to get into the Institute.

"Besides, if he sucked that much, wouldn't Lazrael be at the top?"

"Yeah, that's true. Kane would've been top for sure."

Arcus seemed to remember Kane being at the aethometer's launch party. He recalled the rumor he'd heard—that he was a Lionheart reborn. The viscount's

son must have been pretty famous if so many new students knew about him before school had even started.

The commotion was beginning to get louder, and Arcus was starting to feel rather awkward. Just then, he heard a voice call out from behind.

“You there. Are you Arcus Raytheft?”

“Hm?” He turned around to see a boy standing there. “Yeah, I am.”

Naturally, the boy wore the same white uniform. He was taller than Arcus, and his blond hair, blue eyes, and fair skin were common traits among the kingdom’s citizens. He stood with his back straight and his chest puffed out, evidently carrying a lot of pride. On his hip was a wide, largish sword, and his perfectly tailored shoes were hard to miss. There was a crease in his brow and, matched with his accusatory tone, it was obvious he was indignant.

“How do you explain these results? How did *you* get the top spot?”

“Because I got the most marks, I guess.”

“What a crock! Everyone knows you’re bad at magic—that’s why your prestigious family kicked you out! You shouldn’t even have passed a tough exam like this!”

“The results should speak for themselves; the rumors aren’t true.”

“Well, if you’re so good, how come you lost your inheritance?”

“Beats me. Seriously. But it is what it is.”

“Don’t blow me off; answer me! You’re obviously trying to wind me up with your nonanswers!” The boy had been pretty riled up before, but now his temper was reaching fever pitch.

“Don’t get so mad, okay? Think about it logically. There’s no way I could’ve cheated, right? Obviously my parents wouldn’t have helped, so what, did I bribe the proctor? But that wouldn’t be so easy either, would it?” Fortunately, Arcus’s response seemed to take some of the wind out of the boy’s sails.

“Uh... I guess not.” The boy frowned, cocking his head this way and that. It seemed he was taking the time to really consider the situation. Although, if he was smart enough to understand, he wouldn’t have had that outburst in the

first place.

Any student who couldn't pass the exam fairly would have had to cheat, but that was nigh on impossible. Therefore, Arcus's score was the result of his own efforts, which was precisely why people were getting so worked up. No one would be picking a fight with him if not for Joshua's nonsensical principles. It was just another reason Arcus was determined to get his revenge.

Now that things were calmer, he straightened up his collar and reverted to a more cordial manner. "Might I ask your name?"

"Orel Mark."

Mark... Mark... Right, his dad must be that count. Oh, and he came eighth in the rankings.

Coming within the top ten meant he had real potential.

"Orel. I think you would have more success making your inquiries to a lecturer rather than me. As for the practical exam, you may wish to speak with state magician Cassim Lowry, who oversaw it."

"Yeah..." Orel sounded much calmer. "No one's gonna be able to cheat on a state magician's watch. I guess it's the rumors that are wrong."

"I'm glad you understand."

"I think I just got carried away seeing the results. Sorry for making a big deal out of it." Orel dipped his head, a gesture which Arcus returned.

All he needed was to be set straight and he rightfully apologized. It was great when people took the time to listen. Thankfully, stubborn, pigheaded souls were in the minority.

Arcus's interaction with Orel inspired commentary from those around them.

"Yeah...those rumors don't make sense, when you think about it."

"Does that mean they're fake? But why would his dad disinherit him, then?"

"I'm sure we'll find out if they're fake or not soon enough. *And* it'll be obvious if he wasn't good enough to pass the test fairly."

It seemed the other students were coming around. In hindsight, it might be

said that Orel was responsible for calming the fires.

As Arcus passed beyond the gate, another student approached like he'd been waiting for him. This boy had light-brown hair. It was a little long at the back, where he had tied it up, and there were small studs in his ears. His big eyes gave off a gentle impression: a warmth that suggested he would accept a handshake from anybody who offered one. Arcus recognized him from somewhere.

"Are you Arcus Raytheft?"

"Yeah, that's me."

"Mm hmm. My name is—"

"Kane Lazrael?"

Kane looked somewhat taken aback. "Have we met somewhere before?"

"We haven't spoken, but I saw you at that party the other day. That's how I recognized you."

"Oh. Yeah, you *were* there, weren't you?" Kane nodded.

The party's guest list had been somewhat restricted. And even if there had been more attendants, Kane would still likely have remembered Arcus from the stir caused by Meifa and Barbaros.

The brown-haired boy glanced at the exam results. "You came first, right? I never thought anyone would pull off a perfect score on that written test. I think you're the only one."

"I'm the opposite. I thought there'd be a few perfect scores."

"Oh! That's how easy you found it, huh?"

"Um, well, not exactly..."

"Hmm... I think I get it now."

Arcus's objections didn't seem to deter Kane from reaching his conclusion. His eyes brimmed with curiosity.

"We might be spending a lot of time together from now on. I'm looking forward to it."

“Yeah, same here...” Arcus said, knowing he sounded a little perturbed.

Their interaction ended with a handshake to firm up their new acquaintance.

Besides meeting Kane, Arcus’s first day at the Institute was relatively uneventful. Lecia had come by herself, so it turned out there had been no need to worry about running into her parents. The moment they caught sight of each other, she had come scampering up to him. It was refreshing to see her in white—she normally wore blue. She retained this in the pale blue ribbon tied around her silver hair. The skirt was part of the female uniform, although Arcus wasn’t sure which culture had inspired it. On her hip was a dagger for self-defense, and on her face, a wondrous smile.

“Congratulations on your outstanding results, brother!”

“Thanks. You did pretty well yourself.”

“Yes, I came sixth. I still have much to improve upon.”

“That’s not true. Besides, I did have a bit of an advantage...”

“You have your miraculous recollection.”

“That’s it. So my written results don’t really prove anything. I bet the practical exam was a piece of cake for you, right?”

“Well, yes. I am no stranger to Ignited Soul. It is just that...”

“Yeah?”

“My cohort did not perform as well as I had expected. The practical exam requires confidence in at least Ignited Soul, Earth Fist, Wailing Wave, and Cutting Whirlwind, as standard spells of each attribute. It would be an understatement to say they were underprepared. I was disappointed.”

“Hm... Yeah...”

“It holds especially true for those from martial houses. What are your thoughts on the matter, brother?”

“Well, they’re coming to the Institute to *learn* magic, so it doesn’t really matter if they can’t pull it off right now. I think they should be admired for having the guts to try the practical exam in the first place.”

“You ought to have more conviction about such things! Now I am disappointed in you as well.”

“I guess. Uh, did something bad happen to you, Lecia?”

“No? Nothing.”



“You seem kinda wound up.”

“Do I really? I cannot think what the cause might be...” Lecia cocked her head to one side and then the other.

Perhaps her personality was developing. While she still had her gentle air, she seemed more confident in expressing what was and wasn't acceptable to her, which may have led to this lack of patience toward perceived time wasters. It would go a long way to explain how often she said she was “disappointed” lately.

Whatever it was that had spurred this change in her, that was where their conversation ended, and Arcus headed for his classroom. Contrary to his expectations, there had been no entrance ceremony, or anything of that sort. It would have been the perfect opportunity for the headmaster and teachers to emphasize the newcomers' identity as students. Nevertheless, its omission seemed to highlight the Institute's focus on practicalities over formalities. Personally, Arcus found the lack of stiff speeches something of a relief.

Once the new students had arrived, they were gathered in place and split up into classes. The Institute gave lectures rather than lessons, so these groups weren't like traditional classes. They were used when the entire school was hosting a lecture, or when the students were gathered to receive their schedules and the like. They seemed to be grouped based on their exam results, as Arcus ended up in the same class as Lecia and Kane.

After that, they were shown around the Institute. Its complicated structure meant there was a need to familiarize oneself with its interior as soon as possible. They were patrolled from end to end, and the tour took up the entire day.

The next day, Arcus's class was summoned to the training grounds. Their teacher was a tall, slender man close to his thirties. He wore glasses and the lecturers' uniform. Appearancewise, he reminded Arcus of Cazzy. His eyes had the same sharpness to them, and he seemed very proud.

The teacher looked them over. “Today, we will be measuring your aether.”

Ah, yes. The public execution.

It shouldn't have come as a surprise to Arcus, but he still felt slightly sick. While it shouldn't necessarily matter how much aether the students had, the aethometer was not yet accessible to everyone, and so this gave them a chance to find out. Being aware of one's exact aether level was useful knowledge that made it easier to apportion one's power appropriately.

After gathering the class in one corner of the grounds, the teacher produced an aethometer. It was larger than the standard model, as its purpose was to measure an individual's aether, rather than that of a single spell. The gradations were also set farther apart, making it unsuited to precise measurements.

The latest aethometers to be produced were already third-generation models. These smaller models had been distributed to the military and medical sectors, while the Institute received older versions that were bulkier and more breakable.

Naturally, there were many students who had never laid eyes on an aethometer before, though from the sounds of it, some of them had an inkling as to what it was. The teacher cleared his throat to quiet them down. He waited until he had their full attention before explaining.

"As some of you may be aware, this is a device, recently unveiled and implemented at the Institute, that can measure one's aether." He held out the aethometer to give them a good view.

He went on to summarize what it was capable of. The details of its mechanism, of course, were on a need-to-know basis, and so his explanation barely touched on that. The most he could divulge was that the red liquid in the glass tube reacted to aether.

"...mana being the units in which aether is measured!" The more he spoke, the more elated the teacher seemed, almost as if he were *proud* of the thing. It felt very strange to Arcus to have somebody lecture him on the very tool and theories he had developed himself. "In the past, aether would be measured by how brightly one could make a jewel shine, or how long one could spread ripples across a water's surface. With this, however, one can measure aether with endless ease and accuracy. It should be obvious by now that this is a truly

wonderful invention indeed! Its creator has shown an astounding level of ingenuity!” The teacher’s face sparkled as he raved.

Likewise, the students were endlessly curious about the device. It wasn’t all that long ago that aetheric management came down solely to intuition. To go from that to having precise units was doubtlessly a reason for great excitement.

“Now, when you do your measurements, it is important that you release every ounce of aether in your body. Do bear in mind that you will feel physically depleted and will be unable to cast any spells for a time. You will need to report your measurement, but a rough figure is acceptable. Round it up or down as appropriate.” The teacher pushed his glasses farther up the bridge of his nose. “First up: Kane Lazrael!”

“Sir!” Kane stepped forward.

“That’s him! Kane Lazrael...”

“I’ve never seen him in the flesh!”

Clearly, his name preceded him—at least when it came to a handful of the noble students. And, unlike Arcus’s, *his* reputation was positive.

Kane’s stride was full of confidence. His eyes, the same color as his hair, were alight with a fiery ambition that never seemed to go out. Taking the aethometer from the teacher, he let his body overflow with aether. As he released it, waves emanated from his body. Winds whipped up around him, pulling up and into them sand from the ground. It was already clear he had a lot of aether. He was like a container constantly spilling out its excess water.

His fellow students were impressed.

“Amazing...”

“I didn’t know it was possible to have so much...”

“*That’s* why they call him a Lionheart...”

The other students weren’t able to see the exact measurements on the aethometer, but it was obvious that the liquid would be rising by a fair amount. It wasn’t long before the results were in.

“Seventeen thousand,” Kane reported.

“Oh! Now that is *something!*”

Arcus’s intuition told him that Kane had purposely lowballed his amount; that his true value was likely closer to nineteen thousand, or even twenty thousand. That was more than the majority of state magicians, and tenfold the aether Arcus possessed. Extraordinary was an understatement. Arcus’s chest hurt.

“A Paragon of Courage indeed!” the instructor went on. “As a fellow Harveston alumnus, I couldn’t be more proud!”

“Oh, well...” Kane looked bashful with his forced smile.

The teacher continued to wax lyrical about his talent, which Kane responded to each time with an appropriately modest remark downplaying his own achievement.

At one point, Arcus caught a glimpse of hollowness in the boy’s eyes.

Huh?

It had probably just been his imagination. When he refocused, he saw the same gentle eyes as before.

Now that Kane was finished, it was time for the rest of the students to measure up. Those who came from noble magic houses averaged around five thousand mana, with none having less than four thousand. The commoners and nonmagic nobles mostly fell between two and four thousand.

“Next: Lecia Raytheft.”

“Yes, sir.”

Lecia accepted the aethometer from the teacher. Holding it to her chest, she closed her eyes...and then unleashed her aether. Like Kane, wind began to wrap around her, although this one burned with a heat that made it seem even more powerful. It too earned her the astonished whispers of her classmates.

“I have...over eleven thousand.”

She’s over the ten thousand mark too, huh?

Arcus’s instincts told him her aether exceeded twelve thousand. He had thought her aether to be approximately fourfold his own; in fact, it was sixfold.

The teacher praised her appropriately, while the other students whispered about the Raythefts and how Lecia's results were no surprise, considering their long standing in the kingdom.

She caught Arcus's eye apologetically. He didn't want her to feel guilty over it, so he gave her a smile in return.

"Next: Lady Amy Zeele."

The daughter of a duke, even the teacher wouldn't dare disrespect her. Arcus recalled her father, Quorido, with whom he had exchanged a few words at the aethometer's launch party. His affability, small frame, and smooth tongue reminded Arcus of Toyotomi Hideyoshi, a prominent figure in the man's cultural history.

Appearancewise, Amy was totally different. She had soft, golden hair that fell below her shoulders. She conducted herself with a grace that revealed a great attentiveness to each and every movement. The smile never seemed to leave her face, giving her a mild-mannered air.

Her aether, too, measured beyond ten thousand. A surprising amount, considering the House Zeele focused on administration. It was no wonder that she was set to marry Kane.

"What a cohort!" the instructor cried proudly. "We have so many talented students this year! We recently measured the aether of those already enrolled and we were lucky if we saw a *single* reading surpassing ten thousand in a class. Here we have three! Not to mention the rest of you, who are also pulling up the average."

Yippee...

Arcus couldn't have joined at a worse time. Every last one of these kids was showing impressive results. He genuinely wanted to be able to say that his power level was over nine thousand. At least then he could laugh about it.

"Arcus Raytheft."

The time had come.

"Have a go." The change in the teacher's attitude was immediately obvious.

No doubt he knew of the name and the rumors attached to it. There was even a flicker of scorn in his eyes. Arcus was being looked down on.

Taking up his position, Arcus released his aether. Naturally, he finished far sooner than Kane and Lecia. It was depressing, even when he had expected as much. Although he knew he would usually measure a little over nineteen hundred, he followed the example of the others and gave a lower reading.

“Fifteen hundred.”

“Ha!” The instructor snorted, as though Arcus’s answer was just what he had been waiting for. He followed up quickly, sounding incredibly smug. “So, you are as talentless as the rumors say! Your lack of aether boggles the mind, especially considering you were born to a martial house!”

He kept his volume deliberately high, as if he wanted to be overheard. Perhaps he wanted the students to pile on themselves. Some of them had similar aether levels to Arcus, but they were all common born. He was being derided solely because of his birth. Looking around, he saw that some of the other children were sneering at him. He sighed inwardly. He had expected this; he felt more exasperated than angry. What he hadn’t expected was for an instructor at the Institute to be just as simpleminded.

“You’re a *noble*. And yet you have the same aether levels as a commoner! Even the nonmagic children have more than you!”

Not that he was wrong, but Arcus couldn’t understand why he was still talking.

“You can dress it up all you like, but in the end, your shaky foundations will fail you! In fact, you’ve just proven it. You may have gotten first in the written exam—no doubt that was a fluke—but now look at you. It didn’t take long for your true colors to show through. You must be utterly shameless if you thought you could waltz in here with that little aether!”

The teacher seemed far from growing tired of berating him. His throat must have been hurting by now, the way he was shouting. Perhaps his everyday life was causing him a great deal of stress. Being a teacher must have been awfully difficult. Arcus felt he should take his hat off to the man.

“You might have gotten away with covering for your low levels in the past, but those days are over! We are in the age of the aethometer!”

Arcus sighed. The teacher was now thrusting the device in his direction like a senile old man demanding a refill for his medication. There was little Arcus could say, nor did he have the motivation to say it. If only he knew that the aethometer’s inventor—he of such “astounding ingenuity”—was the very boy he was insulting.

Arcus glanced at his sister. She was looking rather sullen. No doubt she was adding this teacher’s name to her growing list of disappointments.

He was still waiting for the storm to pass when a familiar voice called from the entrance to the training grounds: “Are you already finished evaluating these students?”

Arcus turned around. A small figure was making its way over to them.

“Miss String!”

Mercuria String, dubbed Peacemaker by Shinlu. Recently, she had been appointed head lecturer at the Institute, and it was her job to keep the teaching staff in check. Presumably she was here for that very reason. Along with her robe and tricorn hat, she was the spitting image of a fairy-tale witch. She looked young enough to be a student, but the truth was that she was older than Cazzy.

Just like Cassim Lowry, her arrival had everyone there tensing up. The state magicians stood at the peak of the kingdom’s magic users. Their appearance on the battlefield was enough to turn the course of the conflict. They were naturally majestic and intimidating, their might tightening the nerves of all in their presence. Compared to the other students, Arcus and Lecia had it easy; thanks to their uncle, they were used to the effect a state magician could have on a person.

The instructor dipped his head briefly to Mercuria before going on to report the results. “This cohort is truly exceptional! We have three students who have exceeded ten thousand mana, and five who have exceeded eight thousand.”

“Exceptional indeed.”

“Young Kane Lazrael here measured in at seventeen thousand! I am sure we

haven't seen a student like him since the Institute's founding."

"That would put him on par with some of the state magicians, if not above." Mercuria nodded.

A sneer appeared on the teacher's face. "That isn't to say we are without exceptions..." He directed said sneer at Arcus. "Including one who, as child to a martial family, really ought to have produced better results. It's a wonder he didn't feel embarrassed to enroll in our institution. I believe he must lack the capacity for shame."

There were titters from the surrounding students. Apparently valuing aether as the be-all and end-all was not restricted to the older generation. At least it didn't seem to be the majority.

Mercuria caught his eye then. The two of them had been discussing the aethometer for many years now, and those discussions had included the detailed negotiations around its introduction to the Institute. In fact, he'd had more dealings with her than almost any other state magician, barring only Godwald and Muller "Welcome Rain" Quint.

Mercuria sighed deeply. "I thought this might happen."

"Is something the matter?" asked the teacher.

"No, nothing. Is this the usual approach you take with your students?"

"If I may, ma'am, what exactly do you mean by the 'usual approach'?"

"I mean, is this how you usually speak about them? *To* them? Do you value those with high aether more than those without?"

"Is that wrong?"

"You've never questioned it?" Mercuria pinched her brow, even more disconcerted.

"It is my belief that there is nothing more valuable to a magician than his aether, ma'am. More aether allows one to fight for longer on the battlefield and use more powerful spells. That much is common sense, surely?"

The state magician suddenly looked thoughtful. "I don't know if I want to bother explaining from square one... Let us have a little bout."

“Ma’am?”

“I will use one spell. Just one. You may use as many as you wish.”

The educators took up their positions. The opportunity to witness a state magician in action sent excitement rippling through the students. They leaned forward, watching like hawks to make sure they didn’t miss a single moment.

The male teacher went first, shooting spell after spell at Mercuria, none of which hit their target. She seemed to stave them off before he even cast, eliminating the possibility of any close calls. Most likely, she was predicting them in advance from the parts of the incantations she heard and the patterns he was already forming. Realizing this, the teacher began to hide his mouth, but even then she had no problem dodging everything. It was as he was midway through a slightly longer incantation that Mercuria shot back with a spell that was quicker to chant. It overwhelmed his, despite its length, and its shock waves struck his body with full force and made him cry out.

Mercuria closed the distance between them at once, pointing her cane at the base of his neck. It was over.

“I still managed to defeat you, even limited to a single spell.”

“Yes... That was quite something.”

“So. Can you tell me why you lost?”

“You were able to swiftly predict my magic based on my incantations, and avoid it accordingly. I believe that your final spell must have used some rather powerful words and phrases.”

“Exactly. And did aether have anything to do with it?”

“Well...”

Mercuria’s spell hadn’t been especially aether-hungry. The power required was within the levels of every student here.

“Do you understand now? Of course there is a difference between those with lots of aether and those with less. But if you underestimate an opponent based solely on their lack of it, you inadvertently open yourself up to counterattacks. Even an aether-rich magician can be trounced by the application of knowledge.

And it is *knowledge*, rather than aether, that we ought to revere.”

She turned back to the students. “Remember this. Don’t think you are special just because you have a lot of aether. At the Institute, you will learn how to control your power precisely, and improve your knowledge and creativity. If you think you don’t need to work hard because you’ve measured in the ten thousands, you will quickly learn how wrong you are. If you were to take that attitude with you onto the battlefield, you’d be dead in a matter of seconds. All the aether in the world won’t mean a thing when you mis-incant or pick the wrong spell for your situation.”

Mercuria looked at the statue that stood in the training grounds. “See that statue? It is of Radeon, one of our kingdom’s greatest magicians. He tore away some of our western territories from the Empire and contributed much to our nation’s development. Do you know how much aether he had? It is said that two Beastly Flames would have pushed him to his limit. In modern terms, that’s equivalent to five Flamrunes.”

It really wasn’t a lot of aether at all—less than even Arcus possessed.

“And Radeon isn’t our only example of people who have left their mark, despite a lack of aether. Astia, of *The Spiritual Age*, made up for his weakness with knowledge and ingenuity to stand against demons and monsters alike.”

Astia’s story was a famous one. One of the three sages alongside the Mistletoe Knight, Floam, and Chime, also called Shion the Diviner, his ingenuity had allowed him to overcome many trials.

“Of course, the average size of a person’s aether reserves has gone up since then. Just as every other organism adjusts to suit its circumstances through the generations, human beings’ aetheric potential has grown to match our reliance on it. At some point, posterity will look back at our aether and think it low. So make sure you get it right. Aether is important, but knowledge and proper use is even more important.”

Mercuria turned once more to the perplexed male instructor. “You will be reevaluated.”

“Ma’am?!” The blood ran from his face. His despair was palpable. His lesson had flown right in the face of the head lecturer’s principles, and it was obvious

that that would have an effect on said evaluation.

But it seemed that Mercuria was in a charitable mood. “Ordinarily, what you have disclosed to me would result in a poor evaluation, but I think it’s quite likely that many of the other lecturers hold similar views. It wouldn’t be fair if you were the only one punished.”

“Thank you, ma’am.”

“So I think I’ll overlook this for now. Just be more careful about what you teach our students going forward.”

“Yes, ma’am!” A sliver of hope sparked in his eyes, but Mercuria’s glare quickly had him trembling; such was the might of a state magician.

As head lecturer, she couldn’t allow anyone to think themselves better than her. If she let him off without any sort of warning, he would only go on to repeat his mistakes.

Mercuria turned her gaze to Arcus and quickly raised her eyebrows. “Say, Arcus Raytheft. You still have your Order of the Silver Cross, don’t you?”

“Oh, um... Yes.”

“Why aren’t you wearing it, then?”

“While I do wear it with formal dress, I thought it would be a bit much to wear it at the Institute.”

“Listen. An Order is an honor bestowed upon you by His Majesty. You should always wear it in formal situations, including during your time at the Institute.”

“I’m sorry, ma’am.”

“I hope not to see you without it anymore. And the one place you *must* wear it is when you are invited to the palace by His Royal Highness.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

The other students began to murmur.

“An Order? What’s she talking about?”

“There’s no way you can get an Order at our age.”

“Actually, I did hear about a noble child getting one a while ago.”

Astonishment and doubt. But what else would he expect? Even Shinlu had said it was unprecedented to award an Order to someone so young.

“Arcus was given his Order for his service in Nadar’s recent uprising,” Mercuria explained. “As His Royal Highness’s retinue, he slew several enemies, including an entire magic troop, in service to our kingdom. It would only take two or three more achievements—no, not even that—for him to be welcomed into the peerage.”

A state magician’s claims had real weight to them. Personally, Arcus thought the part about the peerage was laying it on a little thick, but no one was questioning him now. They were staring at him, eyes rounded with fear. It was enough to make anyone self-conscious.

“That can’t be!” The instructor was first to react. “No one with aether as low as this boy could *ever* pull off such feats. There must be some mistake!”

It was an outburst that would only serve to worsen his situation, such was his utter disbelief.

Mercuria’s gaze grew sharp. “A mistake?”

“I’m sorry?”

“As a state magician, I cannot let that accusation remain unchallenged. You have just stated publicly that you distrust His Majesty’s judgment.”

The teacher let out a short shriek. The air around them seemed to creak, and the glass in the surrounding buildings screamed as if it were splintering. Mercuria was intensifying her aura, and she wasn’t even using any aether to do it. Even the student onlookers were turning pale. Arcus had seen this at the Guild meeting: the rigid loyalty to the king. When it came to him, a state magician couldn’t overlook even the smallest of slights.

“What have you to say for yourself?”

“Forgive me! Please! *Please!*”

“His Majesty would never bestow an award on one who did not deserve it.”

“I’m sorry!” The instructor was already on his knees.

What with the frightened students besides, it would be clear to anyone looking just how powerful a state magician was in both authority and raw strength.

Mercuria swept her gaze over the children. “Hear this. Arcus Raytheft is a perfect example of what can be achieved regardless of aether. During the uprising, he smashed through a new style of defensive magic with an original spell of his own. I saw the spell for myself and, though unrefined at the time, I can attest to its quality. Enough that I believe him a better candidate for the NDS than any of those who took the exam last year.”

Arcus’s face felt like it was on fire. Now she really was laying it on too thick. The instructor still looked like he wanted to voice his doubts, but a single glare from Mercuria shut him up.

I feel like this guy’s never gonna see another promotion in his life.

After all, who could endorse a man who put so little thought into what he said?

Lecia sidled up to Arcus. “I daresay this gentleman has reached the top of his career ladder.”

“That’s just what I was thinking. He blew it.”

“I feel a little sorry for him.”

“Yeah... Well, it’s his fault for not minding his words.”

He wasn’t clever enough; that was all there was to it. At a certain point in society, avoiding careless remarks became a matter of common sense. A single gaffe could lead to the ruin of one’s family in the same way that it could end a politician’s career in the man’s world. He was at fault for not properly considering the potential consequences of his words.

A fool’s tongue was long enough to hang himself with, as the proverb went. Although, when the teacher glowered at him, Arcus found it hard not to protest it as unwarranted.

All in all, the discrimination Arcus had faced hadn’t bothered him all too much, because he had foreseen it. He hadn’t spent years complaining about his

lot in life for nothing. Not that he had *enjoyed* it, of course, but he was resilient enough that he could put up with a lot worse. It wasn't as if such incidents were common at the Institute either. While the formation of friends and enemies was a given at any school, discrimination was rare here. That included the type that one saw a lot of in books, where noble children would pick on those from common families. While things may have been different in the past, these days noble parents encouraged their children to build good relationships with talented civilian kids and even lay "claim" to them.

As a general rule of thumb, any child with a common background who could get into the Institute was highly skilled. They would have had to earn an endorsement from someone who worked at the Magician's Guild and then passed the entrance exam on top of that. From their side, too, forming connections with noble houses would be advantageous for their future employment, and so they also worked to befriend the more privileged children. It was for that reason that there was rarely any trouble between the two groups, save for the appearance of a complete oddball.

I guess the lack of drama's a good thing...

Proper etiquette could sometimes prove a problem, but that could be solved with the right education. Manners were something you could learn, and the more time one spent with someone from a different background, the more one's way of thinking would change. That went for both sides.

High-ranking nobles sometimes had commoners among their attendants too. Rich people didn't pick fights; the only ones who looked down on the poor were the poor themselves. Even a certain villainous marquess didn't throw his weight around more than was necessary when it came to the chief mercenary he employed. He respected his opinion too.

A month before joining the Institute, common children apparently took a short course to learn the basics of etiquette required when dealing with nobility. The rest came down to practice: learning how much distance was appropriate through real-life interactions.

It was a wonder, then, why Cazzy still struggled with decorum after having been through the same system himself.

Apparently, any noble student who *did* look down on the commoners risked being labeled a “pampered snob who’s drowning in staff” behind their back.

It was for these reasons that Arcus had hoped no one would belittle him because of his lack of aether, but maybe that was being too hopeful—no such stigma existed to protect noble children from *other nobles*. Sometimes, the haves were treated more poorly than the have-nots. In the first place, nobility was expected to uphold a certain standard. Those who couldn’t weren’t truly part of the noble sphere. In which case, he was considered to be on the lowest rung of the haves, and as such a prime target for his teacher’s discrimination. It made sense on a psychological level too. It took much less effort to bully someone socially closer to you than one who practically lived in a different world.

In any case, once it became known that he had an Order, no one really sneered at him anymore. He had worn it the day after Mercuria had reprimanded him.

“He really does have an Order!”

“I know that one! I’ve seen it before!”

“Doesn’t that mean his achievements counted as third class *at least*?”

“Whoa...”

Instead, the other students stared at him in awe...or perhaps “wonder” better fit the situation. They seemed to keep their distance from him too, like they weren’t sure how to act around him. It wasn’t a simple matter of a difference in rank or skill, which most students were used to dealing with.

At least Kane would still speak to him, if no one else.

“That’s the Order of the Silver Cross, isn’t it?”

“Yeah. The war kinda went by in a blur, and when I came home, I got this.”

“Huh.”

“What?”

“Oh, nothing. I’m just impressed.”

Kane had left it there, with Arcus none the wiser about why he was acting so weird.

A few days had passed since then, and it was time for a practical lecture aimed at those who already knew magic: Basics of Incantation 1. It started with a talk on vocalization and the knack of infusing your incantation with aether. After that, the students would cast for themselves and receive advice from the lecturer. It was a good chance to learn and practice how to avoid biting one's tongue and, in Arcus's opinion, an opportunity to observe how other magicians incanted. Learning their habits would prove useful in any upcoming duels, and he was interested to see what advice the lecturer would give in each case.

I might get the chance to teach myself at some point.

Although the people around him joked that there was no point in his joining the Institute, he knew he still had a lot to learn. It took more than being able to use and create spells to become a master of magic.

Some of the children gathered at the training grounds fell into the category of nonmagical students. As their name suggested, these were students who weren't magicians and, for the most part, couldn't use magic. They enrolled in the Institute because they required knowledge of the arts for their future endeavors. Although they couldn't play an active part in lectures that centered around magic usage, these sessions were still a valuable learning opportunity for them, and they were expected to attend.

The lecturer had given his lesson on the basics of incantation, and it was now time for the practical part of the session.

"Please get yourselves into pairs of magical and nonmagical students."

Why pairs?

Arcus couldn't see the point, personally, but since it was an instruction from a teacher, he couldn't object. He looked around to see if anyone would be willing to join up with him.

Crap. I might actually end up alone.

He didn't have any friends yet, and word had already spread that he had been disinherited. The other students in his class tended to avoid him, and Lecia

wasn't in this lecture. Most of the noble children had friends—or at least people they knew—from before they joined. The common children naturally gravitated toward other common children.

Arcus couldn't just wait around for someone to call out to him. It would be like waiting at the bottom of a hill for something to come rolling down. He would wait and wait, and nothing would happen. But, even if he did ask someone to join him, they'd probably have already formed a pair by the time he got to them. Looking around, he couldn't see anyone who was both alone and approachable. Uneasiness was starting to sink in. At this rate, he really would end up by himself.

"You're Arcus, aren't you?"

"Huh?"

A girl had approached him. Her deep blue hair was cut in a long, fluffy bob, and she had a pin or two hidden in her bangs. Her big, round eyes complemented her adorable features.



Perhaps unnecessarily, Arcus couldn't help but note that she was rather well-endowed when it came to a certain set of assets. They were at the age where these sorts of features were just about starting to become noticeable, but seeing such development on a girl so short merited astonishment. It was hard not to step back as she approached. He had always thought the idea that they could be both soft *and* heavy to be a bit of a contradiction. Perhaps he was naive.

"How do you know my name?" he asked.

"I remember you from when we got our aether measured."

"Oh, yeah. I guess we are in the same class."

"Mm hmm. My name is Setsura. Would you like to pair up with me?"

"Really?"

"Yes."

He was surprised that anyone would be asking to join him, given both the rumors and what they would have witnessed the other day. It warmed his heart to learn he had such a kind classmate.

The smile Setsura showed him seemed to have a hidden meaning behind it. "It looked to me like no one else was about to ask you."

He felt like she had punched him in the gut.

"I'm just what a loner like you needs right now, aren't I? Well? What do you say?" She grinned, drawing ever closer and purposefully sticking her chest out.

What's her deal?

Arcus was kicking himself for jumping to conclusions. She didn't seem as generous now as he'd initially thought. Her features *were* cute, and she was certainly flirtatious—both things that made her all the more annoying. His only option was to go on the defensive.

"Nah. I think I'll go look for someone else."

"Oh, you're welcome! I bet you were getting pretty nervous when you realized no one was— Wait, what? What did you say?"

“Catch you later.”

“Hold it right there! You were supposed to say yes! You’re really giving me a flat-out no?! You don’t know how bargaining works, do you?”

“I just don’t wanna end up with someone who’s so... Who *seems* so annoying.”

“You hesitated! Whatever you were gonna say, what you *did* say wasn’t much better!”

“Sorry. I try to be honest where I can.”

“Oh, of course! Thank you *so much* for your honesty, O virtuous one! Look, I’m not exactly a bad pick for a partner, am I? It’s not like you’ve got a choice anyway! Besides, what if I could offer you something in return?”

“Like what?”

Did she mean for that to sound so suggestive?

“Ah! *Now* you’re interested! Well, I’m not surprised! I *knew* you’d bite when it meant getting something from a girl like *me*! You’re a bit of a perv, aren’t you?”

“Actually, never mind. I’d appreciate it if you didn’t talk to me in the future. Goodbye.”

“I’m sorry! I was just kidding! A little joke to break the ice, you get me?!”

“I mean it. I’m not interested. I think it’s best if we pair up with other people, for both our sakes.”

“Please, please, please! I don’t wanna be alone! Please be my partner!”
Setsura earnestly bowed her head.

At this point, he couldn’t really refuse her anymore.

“All right. Y’know, you could’ve just been honest from the start.”

Her attitude flipped again and she stretched backward, emphasizing her chest. She chuckled. “So you *do* need me. But since you refused me the first time, I don’t owe you anything anymore.”

Arcus briefly considered how her face might feel on his bare knuckles.

“It’s weird, though. Usually my ‘charms’ would have worked on you. Oh, unless you’re not into girls, but... I mean, you do kind of look like one, so...”

“Hey! What if someone hears you saying all this stuff?”

“Come on. I was just thinking aloud.”

“At my expense! Did no one teach you that if you don’t have anything nice to say, you shouldn’t say anything at all?”

At last it was time for the practical session to begin. First, those who could use magic would give a demonstration, for which they would receive advice from the lecturer. Afterward, they were to have a discussion with their partner.

“We’re supposed to discuss later? What do you think we should discuss?” Setsura asked.

“Good question.”

“Huh? You’re the magician. Can’t you think of something?”

“I wish I could, but the magic we’ve been doing is as basic as it gets.”

“Didn’t you get anything from the lecturer’s explanation?”

“The one he gave back in the classroom was super easy to understand. I wouldn’t have added anything, and he did a good job at simplifying the tougher parts. If I ever had to teach the same thing to someone else, I’d try and match what he did.”

“Got any examples?”

“Like when he was talking about how to use your tongue.”

“Now I *know* you’re a perv.”

“No, you’ve just got a dirty mind.”

“That’s not true. My mind’s as clear, clean, and pure as the snowmelt from the Cross Moun—”

“Gee, where have I heard that before? Oh yeah, from someone equally fishy.”

Arcus kept an eye on the other pairs as they bantered. The exercise had been to cast a total of ten various spells. The prescribed incantations were both short

and light on aether consumption. It kept the burden on the students light, meaning their raw technique could be easily observed. This made the task of giving advice simpler for the instructor, and gave the students themselves a chance to become aware of their own weaknesses.

“Moving wind, staying wind. Become a prancing breeze. Guided by that high-pitched call, slice and rend, o blade.”

One of the other students incanted, but nothing happened—a mis-incantation. The spell itself had been delivered perfectly and without hesitation, so the problem must have come from the aether. It was far from the first example of mis-incantation Arcus had witnessed since joining the Institute.

“I cast five perfectly!” one student announced.

“Wonderful!” the teacher cried, applauding.

The other children reacted with gasps.

Wait, what?

Five perfect spells wasn’t *bad*, but “wonderful” was a bit of a stretch, surely? Maybe this teacher was prone to give praise for the slightest achievement. It had been scientifically proven that success was likely to feed into improvement going forward. Denying the teacher’s methods meant picking a fight with science itself—something that flew in the face of Arcus’s principles.

“You need to learn to control your aether with more confidence, so you don’t get any blips. That’s what you’ll want to focus on in your practice.”

“Yes, sir!” With that, the student happily returned to his pair. The teacher’s praise must have worked, because he seemed suitably motivated.

The students continued to show their spells to the teacher, but not one managed to get through without mis-incanting. Arcus could understand biting your tongue and messing up; failing to apply the right amount of aether and destabilizing the spell was another matter. This class was supposed to be aimed at those who were already confident in magic, yet frequent failure seemed to be the norm.

“Everyone’s casting around six spells right on average,” Setsura muttered

beside him. “That’s impressive.”

“It’s not great, huh? I thought so at the practical exam as well.”

“Huh? Mis-incanting is normal, right? Or have you never made a mistake?”

“The only times I mis-incant are when I bite my tongue. And I only do that when the spell’s super long and complicated.”

“What?” Setsura was frowning at him intently for some reason. “I thought controlling aether was supposed to be really difficult.”

“Which is why magicians practice till they can handle it.”

“I know, but...”

Thanks to Craib’s instruction, the aethometer, and, most of all, his work with tempered aether, Arcus had a much better grip on his power than your average magician. Meanwhile, most of these other students were failing to control their aether reliably. But maybe that was why the lecturer was putting so much care into this lesson. As was to be expected of the Institute, he was a good teacher too; his advice was as easy to understand as his lecture had been.

Eventually, Arcus’s turn came around.

“If you will, Arcus.”

“Yes, sir.

Flaming quintessence. Float by the ancestral tomb. Sway, sway. Shake and glimmer. Call on Gown’s lamp. Stray and rush. An ensemble of embers.

Ignited Soul.”

“High waters of the hill. Flowing supply of water. Fill, pull, push, come near, let every place be submerged. O wave, open your upper jaw, feed, and swallow.

Wailing Wave.”

“Shriveled vortex, cause a gentle stir. Moving wind, staying wind. Become a prancing breeze. Guided by that high-pitched call, slice and rend, o blade.

Cutting Whirlwind.”

“Great arm of earth without sword or spear. Manifest your will by hands

alone. May he who first revolted now raise his fist.

Earth Fist.”

Easy as pie.

Arcus already knew how much aether had to go into each word or phrase. After all, he was the one who had done the necessary calculations. He even managed to cast the longer spells successfully, leaving the instructor wide-eyed.

“Well?” he asked, once he’d finished.

“Flawless... I can see why you made top of the year. Spectacular. I don’t think there’s much advice I can give you.”

This instructor wasn’t like the other one. Although, if they were *all* like that one guy, Arcus would have to start questioning the Institute’s educational policies. Not to mention he’d loathe his time here.

The instructor smiled awkwardly. “I suppose my instruction wasn’t of much use to you.”

“Actually, it was. Your lecture was really easy to understand, and I learned a lot about how to position the tongue when casting. That’s something I’ll start to focus on.”

“Oh? Yes, I see...”

If there was one thing Arcus had learned, it was that he still had a lot *left* to learn, and that he considered invaluable. He had been reminded that he couldn’t be content to exist in a vacuum.

When he got back to Setsura, Kane called out to him.

“Amazing. You cast all those spells perfectly.”

“Any magician should be capable of that.”

“Really? I guess. It’s a real shame about your aether, you know.”

For a moment, Arcus was on guard, till he realized Kane didn’t seem to mean anything by it. He had probably meant it compassionately. That would explain the tiny glimmer of pity in his eyes.

“Yeah. But how *much* aether you’ve got isn’t everything.”

“Mm. You’ve got incanting, and aether control... You could be right. Anyway, I’m not about to let you show me up!” Kane said, before getting ready for his own turn.

What with Arcus’s exam results and his performance just now, it seemed the boy saw him as something of a rival. Or perhaps that had been true before they had even met.

The instructor hesitated before opening his mouth. “Kane, yes? I think I’ll give you an extra little assignment.”

Arcus raised his eyebrows. His “rival” was apparently getting special treatment.

“I would like for you to pick your own ten spells to cast. Please select ones you consider to be particularly strong.”

“Yes, sir.” Kane nodded, then ignited the aether inside himself at once, like he had revved a hidden internal combustion engine. The energy that escaped created a short burst of wind that swept up the dust around him. Then, he began to incant.



As requested, he selected spells that were more difficult than those prescribed, but they were nonetheless standard fare from the textbooks. He made no alterations to the wording that might improve their efficiency. But then, he had enough aether that it wasn't exactly necessary.

When he was done, the instructor looked at him with undisguised awe. "Eight out of ten, even with more complex spells. That was just the level of performance I'd been expecting of you."

"I was hoping I wouldn't make any mistakes at all."

"The stronger the spell, the more difficult its incantation. Casting *eight* successfully is a wonderful result indeed. Naturally, my only advice is to keep it up."

"Thank you, sir."

Before long, it was time for the magicians to discuss with their nonmagical partners.

"Your thoughts, Setsura?"

"What do you want me to say? I just want to know how you cast all your spells perfectly. Is there some kind of trick to it?"

Arcus thought for a moment. "There's a *reason* behind it, but it's one I can't share with you."

"Wow, some discussion this is!"

"A magician doesn't share his secrets. Everyone knows that."

"I guess..." She didn't push it.

While Arcus had spent most of his life working on his aetheric control, he couldn't have *perfected* it without the aethometer. Witnessing what he had here, he again understood why the device had led to such a drastic decrease in mis-incanting in the military.

After the lesson, they had a bit of free time.

"Kane Lazrael!" called a rowdy voice. Whomever it belonged to was obviously not Kane's friend.

In fact, Arcus recognized it. It belonged to one Orel Mark, as he recalled. He turned to see Kane approaching the hostile boy.

“Lord Orel. What can I do for you?”

“Let’s fight!”

“Um... Again?” A troubled smile rose to Kane’s lips.

“Not this again...” muttered the noble student standing on Setsura’s other side. His face gave off a tired impression. His features made him look young for his age, but he had the aura of an overworked, middle-aged man.

Arcus asked him to explain.

“Lord Orel’s always trying to provoke Kane.”

“Really?”

“Their families both come from the south. That’s why Lord Orel, at least, doesn’t like Kane. That’s how it seems to me, anyway.”

Perhaps Orel saw the other boy as a rival.

“They always had these little contests at Harveston too.”

“Who won?”

“I shouldn’t have to tell you. Lord Orel got his butt kicked every single time. He might outrank Kane, but Kane’s got the superior skills.”

“Huh.”

While they spoke, a ring of students marked out a makeshift arena at one end of the training grounds. The contest seemed to take inspiration from the lecture, with the winner being whoever could cast the most successful spells. The pair began at once. It looked like the spells weren’t predetermined, but neither of them was going for anything too simple, probably out of stubbornness. Their chosen techniques were either tricky to pull off, or consumed a lot of aether. It wasn’t long until a sheen of sweat appeared on Orel’s brow. Kane, meanwhile, looked perfectly comfortable, even after all the aether he’d used up in the lesson. The spells he was casting one after the other were just as energy-hungry. He would mis-incant now and then, but that was

because he was using more sophisticated magic than Orel.

The skill difference was clear. Even with Orel using easier spells, he was making just as many mistakes as his opponent and getting evidently frustrated.

“Might I claim this victory, Lord Orel?”

“I’m having a bad day, okay?! You won’t get so lucky next time!”

His lines could have come straight from a phrasebook for sore losers.

The student next to Setsura shrugged. “This is how it always ends.”

While Orel seethed, Kane didn’t look the least bit bothered about what had happened. He showed no sign of the exhaustion that was common after expending aether against a worthy opponent.

“That’s what aether counts for...”

After seeing them cast so many demanding spells, Arcus finally understood how large the gap was between these students and himself. It was a reality that couldn’t be vanquished with cheap tricks. What if he had been standing in either of their places? He could not see how he would win when it came to a simple contest of aether. Having used all of his energy in the previous lesson, they wouldn’t even be able to compare their incanting skills.

And their magic skills were only set to improve. Arcus couldn’t help but wonder what that might mean if they ever tried to stand in his way.

Part 3: The Duel with Claudia

Another day at the Institute, and Arcus was presently accompanied by Charlotte Cremelia, daughter to a count. She was showing him around. The students had been paraded inside the buildings and around the grounds on a “tour” on their first day, but it’d skipped a lot of the details. Furthermore, students had their own etiquette when it came to using the facilities that needed to be learned. Charlotte, who had been at the Institute for a while, was giving him a rundown on these extra facets.

Arcus had been keeping an eye out for Sue, whom he hadn’t seen at all recently. It was like she had gone into hiding. He had also invited Lecia to come along, but she apparently had business with some other noble children.

Left as a twosome, he and Charlotte were currently walking the courtyard cloister. The noble girl wore her long caramel-colored hair in a half-up style. She held herself in a highly ladylike manner, like she was the Chronicles’ Jacqueline by the Windowside come to life. With her slender, well-proportioned frame, the Institute’s uniform complemented her perfectly. She came from a martial family, and so enjoyed rapier fencing. In contrast, her body was pleasingly abundant in feminine curves—particularly those related to motherhood—which had become more pronounced recently. She was still a little taller than Arcus. It would take a short while longer until they could walk shoulder to shoulder.

“You take part in the lectures too, Charlotte?”

“Yes. They are essential, even for nonmagical students.”

Her background meant it was highly likely she would be called to war at some point in the future. At that time, there could be magical troops within both her own army and that of the enemy. And so it was tacitly understood that she would have to learn how to combat magic, even though she was not a user herself. That was presumably why her family had enrolled her in the Institute. Although perhaps Arcus was reading too much into it, and it was simply a cultural thing. (In this world, women were sent to war just as men were. What

mattered was the soldier's quick-wittedness).

"There are classes on classical martial arts too, right?" he asked.

"Oh, yes. The lecturers who lead them are really quite skilled."

"Yeah?"

There was no doubting it if Charlotte said it was so. Arcus thought it might be a sound idea to take one of said classes, or maybe one in fencing. It would be a good alternative to magic if he ran out of aether in a fight.

As they were walking and she was telling him more about the Institute, they spotted a strange throng on the other side of the fountain. The group was a bit shy of ten people, and there seemed to be a leader in the form of a single well-dressed girl. Standing in their midst, she had shimmering blonde hair tied up in a chignon. She carried herself with as much grace as Charlotte and had a perfect calm about her that was typical of higher-ranking noble girls. She seemed to be at the height of her development, with curved and straight lines in all the right places. It seemed that her uniform had been subtly retailored to accommodate her growth. Her smile was amicable as she conversed with her followers.

Charlotte dropped her voice, urging caution from Arcus. "That is the empress; this whole Institute is under her thumb. You ought to commit her face to memory."

"Empress?"

"Yes. Lady Claudia Saifice, heiress to the dukedom."

Meaning she belonged to one of the Four Dukedoms, just as Sue did—one that hadn't been in attendance at the launch party. Despite her designation as an "empress," the generous way she smiled at those around her lacked the arrogance implied by the term.

"She looks rather charming," Arcus remarked.

"Yes, she *looks* it, doesn't she?"



“She’s like you, then?”

“I suppose... Wait a moment, what do you mean by that?”

“Uh, well, no...shing... Pleash let go of my cheeksh!”

“My, they’re rather soft. I can see why Lady Susia adores them so.” She let go once she’d had her fill. “Do you know of the responsibilities given to House Saifice, Arcus?”

“Hm? Yeah. The head of the house is expected to become headmaster of the Institute, right?”

“Correct. It is said that these grounds once belonged to a small private school that taught magic until, following a complex chain of events, it was transferred into the hands of the kingdom. However...”

“It still has a ton of influence.”

“That’s right. That is why, as the next headmistress, Lady Claudia is involved in the running of the Institute. You will also often see her making her rounds with her followers in tow.”

Arcus was reminded of a student council president. According to Charlotte, Claudia acted as an intermediary between the pupils and lecturers. Initially, he had thought it dubious for one student to have so much power, but it sounded like she wasn’t completely free to do whatever she liked.

“She is awfully kind to us nonmagical students too. I daresay she will remain at the Institute even after her graduation.”

“Sounds like she’s well respected.”

“By the majority of students, yes.”

“Not everyone?”

“She isn’t unreasonable by any means. However...”

“However?”

“If you defy her even once, you are made to become her follower and obey her every command.”

“Right. Wait, what?”

“She has a tendency to pick fights with other students, which can cause quite a stir. Lady Claudia’s duels have recently become something of a special event at the Institute.”

“And you just said she isn’t unreasonable. So basically, anyone who tries to turn against her gets held captive? I guess she’s every bit as political as nobility should be.”

“Do not forget that the same should apply to you, Arcus.”

“I got disinherited, though.”

“Even so, there are times when you say things that one would not expect from someone of a noble background. I wonder why.”

“Good question.” Though Arcus tried to brush it off, the suspicion in Charlotte’s gaze remained. All he could do was smile awkwardly; his very existence was made up of countless dubious points, after all. “Anyway, is that what happened to all those people tagging along with her?”

“It would appear so. Strange that none of them look the least bit resentful. In fact, they all seem rather willing.”

“Maybe because she’s a future duchess. As far as nobility is concerned, only good things could come of associating with her.”

The benefit to her followers, however, depended on her memory. And, since she was set to become headmistress of the Institute, her favor could translate into a cushy job.

“Are you considering joining them, Arcus?”

“Nah. I’ve got plenty of contacts in the noble world as it is.”

“You know, the further you go, the more those contacts will naturally increase.”

“That sounds like death.” Arcus sighed.

“Oh!” Charlotte suddenly said. “She’s coming this way.”

“What?! There’s no way I’m ready to face her after the bombshell you just

dropped on me!” he cried.

Claudia and her group were making a beeline straight for them.

She probably wants something with Charlotte...

Perhaps only a greeting. Their ranks may have differed, but they were both noble daughters. Students didn’t have to be as formal to each other as they would outside the school, and so neither Charlotte nor Arcus was required to kneel.

“Good afternoon, Charlotte. What lovely weather we’re having.”

“Good afternoon, Lady Claudia. Are you making your rounds of the Institute?”

“Yes. I thought it would make for a perfect opportunity to speak with some of the new students. It is my duty to know what goes on here, after all.”

Claudia gave off a remarkably cordial impression, given the savagery Arcus had just learned she was capable of. He was starting to question Charlotte’s account.

“And who is this adorable specimen?”

Ack!

Claudia’s innocent words sent a dagger straight through his heart. He could see now why they said that a tongue could cut deeper than the sharpest of blades. Even though she likely hadn’t meant to hurt him, Arcus had to stop himself from wobbling as he bowed and waited for Charlotte to introduce him.

“This is my...friend, Arcus Raytheft.”

“A pleasure to meet you,” he said.

“I am Claudia Saifice. The Raythefts hail from the east, yes?”

“Yes, My Lady,” Charlotte said. “I was showing him around.”

One of Claudia’s followers flicked through some documents, then read aloud: “Arcus Raytheft. A magical student. While achieving top marks in the entrance exam, his aether falls below two thousand mana.”

“Below two thousand? That is rather lacking for a noble.” Claudia furrowed her brow.

It seemed a bit sudden to have his aether pointed out on their very first meeting, but she came from one of the country's most powerful families. He couldn't exactly object.

"My aether may be lacking, but I intend to learn as much as I can here, that I may serve my country going forward."

"Arcus, wasn't it? People expect Institute students to be held to certain high standards. Wouldn't you agree?"

"Yes, My Lady."

"The Institute is the greatest educational establishment in all of Lainur. To allow just anybody to attend would ruin our prestige. Its reputation must be protected, so that its name continues to be revered, here and abroad."

Arcus could guess what was coming next. He didn't like it. "I completely agree, My Lady."

"Then you ought to return home. You belong to a magical house, yet your lack of aether makes you unworthy. You do not belong at this establishment."

His suspicions were proven right.

"My Lady!" Charlotte protested. "If I may—I believe your judgment is too extreme. While it is undeniable that Arcus's aether is low, I am of the opinion that his results in the entrance exam would heavily outweigh that."

"The results mean very little in the grand scheme of things, when students learn and develop. Please understand, Charlotte, that this is a consequence of his social standing. Those who stand at the top must be superior, lest only shame befall everyone. His aether falls below the standards set by the martial houses. Simply put, he is a bad example to others."

In this instance, it could be argued that the aethometer's creation had backfired, as it had made definitive the difference between Arcus and others.

Quite apart from anything else, he didn't appreciate his personal information being shared in the open like this, nor the lax procedures that had led to it being harvested in the first place. He wondered if he should bring it up as a concern next time he had a meeting with Mercuria. *If* he was able to remain at

the Institute, that was.

“However, while I daresay this will not make up for all your shortcomings, perhaps you would like to come under my wing? You passed the exam, so your skill must count for something; enough to be tasked with some rather difficult duties, even.”

Arcus stared at her.

“Yes... Perhaps we can have you take up some administrative duties, here or at a high-ranking public office. Of course, you would have to begin as a trainee. You could even work at the Saifice estate, if you so wished. Naturally, you would have to take another exam.”

The conversation was moving too fast. First she was kicking him out, and now she was offering to find him employment? Truth be told, her suggestions *would* afford him more stability going forward. In fact, it was such a good deal that Arcus had almost forgotten how she had insulted him.

All the while, Claudia’s followers were singing her praises and lauding her leadership. Charlotte seemed just as flabbergasted as he was. It may not have been that the duke’s daughter disliked him, but that she preferred to see people in posts that would realize their potential. It was an odd approach, to be sure, and it was one that didn’t work for Arcus.

“Thank you for your exceedingly generous offer, Miss Claudia, but I am afraid it is more than I could take on. Therefore, I must decline.”

“You would refuse me?”

“Forgive me, My Lady. There is much I still wish to learn at the Institute.”

There was no way Arcus could give up his spot here. Graduating from this establishment would give him a massive advantage in his bid to become a state magician. As long as his lack of aether hampered his chances, he would need all the help he could get.

“Arcus Raytheft. Did you perhaps misunderstand me when I stated that you do not belong here?”

“Not at all, My Lady; however, I believe that what I learn here will make up for

my lack of aether.”

Claudia made a frustrated face like she was dealing with a petulant child. Again, Arcus could see things going very wrong, very quickly.

“Lady Claudia,” Charlotte tried again. “As a fellow student of the Institute, is it not somewhat unmerited for Your Ladyship to recommend the removal of another?”

“I am to inherit the House Saifice. I have a duty to protect the reputations of both the Institute and the kingdom itself. In this, I carry out that duty.”

“I understand, My Lady...” Charlotte looked like she wanted to say more, but the girls’ respective ranks made it impossible.

Arcus would have liked to think that the opinion of a single person wouldn’t force him out of the school. However, given the Saifices’ inordinate influence, it wasn’t beyond the realm of possibility.

What now?

“Oh! Lady Claudia, is that you?”

The sudden words were spoken with a respectful tone equal to that of Charlotte and Claudia. Having said that, the voice itself sounded awfully familiar. Arcus turned around.

“Why, if it isn’t Lady Susia.”

Susia! I mean, Sue!

Her beautifully combed dark hair was tied up in twin buns and complemented with an ornament. It was a style Arcus would have expected to see in China back in the man’s world. Her skin had a healthy glow that told of the care she put into it. Her sapphire eyes gave off a lustrous sheen under her long eyelashes. They were on full display when she was her usual cheerful self, though sometimes they would narrow when the situation was more serious. Now, they were cast downward. Her body had as much feminine appeal to it as Charlotte’s. Arcus felt as though he had been surrounded by such temptations lately, to the extent he was only becoming more conscious of them. On her hip, she wore an elegant fan made of white sandalwood.

Somehow, something about her seemed wildly different. She was being very quiet; graceful, as if she were wearing not one mask but three. For a moment, Arcus wondered if he was hallucinating and had to rub his eyes to make sure someone hadn't cast an illusory spell on her. But even then, it was as if he could see the masks layering on top of each other. The difference in her character was making him hallucinate. He felt dizzy.

"Hello, I do hope I haven't interrupted anything. Oh, Lady Charlotte! I did not see you there."

"Good afternoon, Lady Susia."

"Good afternoon. Things seemed somewhat tense over here. I cannot help but wonder what you were discussing." Sue's smile was as gentle as any upper-class girl's.

Arcus realized that this might have been how she usually spoke to the other students at the Institute, and that her communication with *him* was the outlier.

"We were speaking about this student here, Arcus Raytheft," Claudia said.

"Oh, yes? What about him?"

"It would seem that his aether falls below the average for martial nobility. I therefore informed him that he does not belong at this institution."

"Am I to infer that you asked him to leave? Is that not a little extreme?"

"The Institute has its honor to maintain. All who learn here need to be held to the appropriate standard."

Sue looked at Claudia with a gaze that exuded concern. The young busybody seemed to sense she was being pitied; she raised an eyebrow.

"Is there something you wish to express, Lady Susia?"

"Yes, Lady Claudia. I believe that you may have been working yourself to exhaustion as of late. Even now, you appear quite tired."

"I am not tired in the least."

"Are you quite certain? Normally, not even the slightest detail passes you by, and yet today your wits seem to be failing you."

“Would you be so kind as to get to the point, Lady Susia?”

“It appears you have not properly observed Arcus. Specifically, you have not paid attention to what is affixed to his breast.”

“His breast? Oh!” Claudia’s eyes widened as she caught sight of his Order, its silver glistening in the sun.

When Sue spoke next, there was an edge to her tone. “Lady Claudia, as daughter to a house that has many dealings with military families, I expect you are familiar with the Orders and their various types. You ought to know what that silver represents, in which case... Yes, indeed, you must be tired.”

“The Order of the Silver Cross...”

“Arcus Raytheft here graciously attended His Royal Highness into his first battle, achieving great merits as his retinue. The boy was recognized by His Majesty himself for his efforts. You and I are servants to the royal family. You would disregard His Majesty’s judgment and brand Arcus unworthy? Not only that, but we are yet to inherit our full titles. Is this really a matter worth quibbling over?”



As Sue fired her shots one after another, Claudia's expression stiffened for a split second. But then she appeared fully composed once more.

"I am willing to accept the fact that he possesses a certain level of skill. However, the purpose of this establishment is to nurture its students' magic talents. Do you not think people would talk, were it discovered that some of our pupils lack aether?"

"As I understand it, Arcus was awarded this honor in part because of his impressive magical talent."

"I am specifically referring to his aether."

"I am of the opinion that a magician's merits may not be considered on aether alone. More important is his locivity."

"I understand your position, but mine is that true brilliance is borne of an abundance of aether."

Sue pulled the fan from her hip and snapped it open in front of her face, hiding what was obviously a sneer. "I am not surprised, Lady Claudia, considering you possess the second highest level of aether at the Institute."

Claudia narrowed her eyes. No doubt Sue boasted the highest aether levels at the Institute. Not only that, she had far and away the best grades among the second-years, and no one questioned her place at the top of her cohort. Ask anyone who the best student at the Institute was, and they would no doubt come back with "Susia Algucia."

"Which must a magician hold dearer, his aether or his locivity? You and I still have much to learn, so such a debate would be fruitless. As such... You, there." Sue looked to one of Claudia's followers.

"Oh, um... Me?"

"Yes. Would you call Professor String for us?"

"Professor *String*?!"

"This debate is not one that we can settle. Therefore, it would be more constructive to call upon the judgment of one who can. Lady Claudia, if you do not believe that person is Professor String, then I will accept calling upon the

headmaster instead. His Grace is your grandfather, after all, so I am sure his judgment will be sound.”

“Surely it is not *that* serious,” Claudia protested.

“I do not think so either. Nor, do I expect, will the headmaster.”

Claudia would struggle to get her grandfather on her side. For the Institute to accept a student on the basis of the exam, only to turn around and declare him unfit, would damage its reputation all on its own.

“Would you agree, Charlotte?”

“I would, Lady Susia. I can attest to Arcus’s magic, having benefited from it myself.”

“Quite right. As his friend, I am looking forward to when he receives his *next* Order.”

Arcus hadn’t been aware that Sue was expecting so much from him. Listening to the girls speak, it felt like there were insects crawling up his back. It. Was. *Painful*. Where was his Order for managing not to scream?

What he wouldn’t give to be able throw etiquette to the wind, turn tail, and run. Where was Lecia, anyway? He briefly considered calling out for her, just in case she could come to his rescue.

Claudia was grinding her teeth, out of arguments.

Sue smiled kindly at her. “I am not simply protecting Arcus, Lady Claudia. I am doing this out of concern for you as well.”

“It is a little late for that. Not to mention that it is rude to hold a private conversation right in front of me.”

“Oh, please accept my apologies. I shall be more careful going forward.” Her apology was genuine, leaving Arcus in awe at her verbal agility.

“I can see that it would be most prudent to withdraw at this stage,” Claudia said. “But you ought to understand that aether is absolute in the eyes of the noble magicians. Do not take my withdrawal to mean that I agree with you.”

“In that case, I eagerly await the opportunity to debate with you on that point

too.”

Claudia’s shoulders stiffened at Sue’s last-minute quip. No doubt she would have gone for the dark-haired girl’s throat, if only they weren’t equally ranked. Not that she would survive the endeavor.

Arcus caught Claudia’s eye; she was glaring at him. Unfortunately, it seemed she was fated to remember him.

With a quiet “good day,” she and her entourage left. As soon as she was out of earshot, Arcus let out a sigh of relief.

“Are you guys trying to give me a heart attack?”

Sue had been in complete control of the conversation from the moment she had appeared, cleverly weaving sarcasm with infallible logic. The tension in the air had been enough to send shivers down Arcus’s spine, as though he’d braved a blizzard only to be told the Earth was in for another ice age.

Sue was just as cheerful as ever as she replied, “That’s just how conversation goes between us future duchesses. You put on a smile and snipe at each other. There are tons of people out there who do it way better than us too.”

“That was a most enlightening performance, Lady Susia,” Charlotte said with a smile.

Sue returned the gesture. “It was nothing. Thanks for backing me up!”

Their exchange helped Arcus to feel a little calmer, but he still had one question that remained unanswered. “Why do you think Lady Claudia said all that stuff?”

Even if she was in line for the headmastership, surely recommending a student’s withdrawal was far too tyrannical? It wasn’t as though Arcus had gotten in unfairly, so he couldn’t understand her concern for the Institute’s reputation.

“I am not entirely sure,” Charlotte replied, “however, Lady Claudia has seemed a little fretful as of late.”

“Oh yeah?”

“At least, that is my perception. What are your thoughts, Lady Susia?”

“I dunno. I don’t see her all that much. I *do* think she’s been a little more...eager lately, though.”

“Huh,” Arcus mused.

“I kind of get it. Her parents are gone, and the headmaster himself is quite elderly. She’s set to inherit all of this—can you imagine the pressure? She’s probably pushing herself extra hard ’cause she doesn’t wanna disappoint anyone.” Sue paused. “At least she knew when to disengage though, right? Still, you can sort of tell she’s a bit of a perfectionist.”

“If she wasn’t, she probably wouldn’t have said anything in the first place,” said Arcus.

“Uh-huh. I don’t think you’ve seen the last of her.”

He gulped.

“You have my full sympathies, Arcus.”

Ugh... He couldn’t understand why he was such a magnet for trouble. Why couldn’t he be a magnet for good fortune, innovative ideas, and money?

“Anyway, thanks, Sue. I owe you one.”

“Nah, it’s fine. As long as you get me a pudding every day, we’ll call it even.” She grinned at him.

“You were born to be a businesswoman. Can’t believe you’re trying to profit off me after what just happened.” He sighed.

“A ‘pudding’? What might that be?” Charlotte asked.

“Hm? Oh, it’s a type of dessert I made recently.”

Sue puffed up her cheeks. “I can’t believe you just told her when you tried so hard to keep it a secret from *me*!”

“Huh? Um...” While he was busy trying to come up with an explanation, Charlotte smiled and wrapped her arms around his.

“I believe it is because of the immense trust he places in me, Lady Susia. Isn’t that right, Arcus?”

“Uh, no, I mean...I *do* trust you, but...” ...Why was she bringing it up now?

“Oh yeah? I see. I get it.” Sue’s expression crumpled into a glower. Only she wasn’t glaring at him, but at Charlotte.

And now Charlotte was glaring back. Arcus could practically see the storm clouds rolling in behind them. Honestly, he was more scared now than he had been when the girls had been arguing with Claudia. All over a pudding. It was time for drastic action.

“Oh! I *just* remembered I’ve got a *super* important lecture in like, ten minutes. Catch you guys later!”

“Arcus?!”

“Arcus?!”

“Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaargh!”

That they chased after him with bright smiles on their faces was the scariest thing of all.

Arcus was in the classroom killing time before the next lecture when he picked up on some classmates praising another: Kane Lazrael. He looked at the object of their admiration. The young prodigy only had to enter the room for people to start gathering around him. His aether and abilities fed into his confidence, which in turn sometimes fed into his bearing. To others, that behavior probably came off as charming. Not to mention that he was naturally friendly, and it was hard to find fault with him. This only attracted people all the more.

Kane’s fiancée played no small part in his popularity. Amy Zeele, youngest daughter to the duke, was presently linking arms with him. There was a wide gap between viscount and duke, and their matching would have been scandalous if not for the influential Quorido Zeele’s insistence upon it. The duke must have had incredibly high hopes for Kane’s future.

It wasn’t just flocks of students that he attracted either, but lecturers too. No small number of the teachers had attended Harveston themselves, after all.

Kane had great grades, abundant aether, and countless connections. All that, and he had to be good-looking too. One offhanded glance could tell you the boy

was on the express route to fame and fortune. The world was very much his oyster.

Of course, that wasn't to say he hadn't worked to get where he was, but it was undeniable that fate had blessed him. Arcus couldn't help but wonder if *he* would have garnered such positive attention (though perhaps not as much), if only he'd had more aether. He sighed, watching the goings-on from a distance, before quickly straightening up as Kane began to approach.

"Are you taking the practical class next period?" he asked.

"The second one? Yeah, I was going to."

"Nice. Hopefully it's not just a lecture, and we get to cast some spells." There was an earnest challenge in Kane's expression. It was a surprising change from the approachable smile he had been showing his admirers.

For a while now, he'd made comments like this now and again. Arcus supposed that Kane had found common ground in their both being sons to martial viscounts. He didn't mind it; he liked getting competitive, and their rivalry was free of malice. If anything, he considered it a chance to make friends with Kane.

When the boy returned to his seat, the clamor around him resumed. Some of his hangers-on were clearly looking to earn his favor, rather than genuinely admiring him, but he just smiled at them politely. He must have been used to that sort of thing. Amy, for her part, looked overjoyed. When she spoke, her voice oozed honey.

"Kane might become His Royal Highness's attendant!"

The classroom exploded. Now *everyone's* eyes, wide with astonishment, were centered on Kane.

"C-Come on, Lady Amy! It might not actually happen," he insisted, flustered.

"Really? Father said you were a shoo-in."

"Um, well..." Kane apparently didn't know how to react in the face of this new information.

It seemed that Amy had only wanted everyone to know just how impressive

her fiancé was. However, it was very difficult to justify spilling that kind of information to so many people.

When Kane received a curious question from one of the students, he responded bashfully, “My name was brought up to His Royal Highness a while ago...but just in passing.”

Now that Amy’s claim had been confirmed, the students erupted again. It was no wonder, given that it centered around the prince himself.

“An attendant to His Royal Highness!”

“I swear, Kane can do anything he puts his mind to!”

“You can’t tell me he’s *not* a Paragon of Courage at this point!”

Naturally, the news only drew more “admirers” out of the woodwork, and drew closer those who had been keeping their distance.

Speaking of...

Ceylan had implied that he was expecting more from Arcus in the future, but the last time they had met, he hadn’t given any indication as to what form that might take.

He might not have wanted to make me his attendant. He was probably thinking I could help out with other stuff.

Since he had fought alongside Ceylan, he had taken for granted that the prince meant to make him his attendant—or something along those lines. But now that he thought about it, it was far from the only possibility. Clerical work or magic consulting could both be in the cards, just for starters.

For Kane’s name to have been “brought up,” he would have needed the backing of someone with real pull, or the approval of other military houses. It took potent politicking. While Arcus had *some* connections that would help in that regard, they were few and far between. A future as Ceylan’s attendant probably wasn’t on the table. In all likelihood, Amy’s father would have been the one to suggest the prince appoint Kane. Arcus *did* get the impression that he was a shrewd man when they met at the launch party.

The student sitting next to Arcus was currently fawning over the viscount’s

son at a distance, and drawing agreement from one Rusiel Arcane. He was the student who had previously filled Arcus in on the relationship between Kane and Orel. His dark hair was streaked with blue, and his droopy eyes gave him a vague air of drowsiness. He reminded Arcus slightly of one of the man's friends, a listless bandsman.

Rusiel sat in the same part of the room as Arcus, and they took most of the same classes, so they had naturally started speaking more often. Rusiel's father was a baron, which, broadly speaking, wasn't too far removed from a viscount.

The languid boy leaned his chin on the desk. "What's a guy gotta do to have things so good?"

"Beats me," Arcus replied.

"Wish I had it that easy."

"I dunno if Kane has things *easy*. He draws a crowd and earns opportunities because he works hard."

"He's been popular since Harveston."

"Really?"

"Yep."

"Well, I guess some people *are* just effortlessly popular."

"Right? Kane's gotta be one of them."

"Like I said, I think it's because he works hard."

Kane aside, Arcus could remember seeing such people in the man's world: people who attracted endless attention and praise despite having done seemingly little to deserve it. In some cases, it was probably an illusion; they did say the grass was greener on the other side, after all. More than that, though, it probably had to do with a person's friendliness, adaptability, and positivity. Or, indeed, effort that most people couldn't detect.

"Anyway, he got in with a duke, got himself a fiancée, and now he might even be attending to the prince," Rusiel went on. "That last one'd be too much work for me, to be honest."

Arcus had to agree. Working at the palace would demand his constant attention. Rusiel, never one to keep his feelings of lassitude under wraps, probably wasn't a good fit.

"What made you join the Institute, anyway?" asked Arcus.

"Me? I'm the youngest child in a house of officials. I'm gonna have to earn my own way. Dad's connections got me into Harveston, which is where I learned how to use magic."

"So you're looking to pass the CSE?"

"Pretty much. Magic's a pretty decent moneymaker, especially if you're not that ambitious. Dad disagrees, though." Rusiel let out a deliberately heavy sigh.

Arcus had the sense that his classmate worried he would be pushed into a political marriage, although he didn't have any evidence to back it up. It was a rare noble who was able to choose their own marriage partner. That wasn't to say the partners in an arranged marriage were destined to hate each other, but when they did, things could get very frosty indeed. In rare, fortunate cases, it could thaw over time. In the majority, it would take a vast climatological shift to move it an inch. That was how it seemed to Arcus, anyway.

"What about you, Arcus?"

"I just wanna make something of myself."

"So you wanna be a state magician like Crucible?"

"Yeah, so first I just need to focus on the NDS. I've probably got a ton of hurdles to face before I can even get there."

"Got your sights set high, huh?" Rusiel looked at Kane again. "It's not like him, y'know, to come make a point about every little thing."

"No?"

"He gets along with pretty much everyone, so it's weird to see him...antagonize you? I've never seen him treat anyone like that. I guess he's frustrated that you stole the top spot from him."

"I might not've if they hadn't given us Ignited Soul for the practical exam. If it'd been Stone-Sharpener Sword, or even Fluttering Flame, I'm pretty sure he

would've beaten me."

"You sure about that?"

"Kane's better at southern magic than fire spells. Most of the magic they teach at Harveston is focused on rocks and manipulating matter, right?"

"Yeah, the teachers there seem to like those sorts of spells. They literally taught us that weight equals power. I wish I was joking. They're weirdly proud of their southern magic, saying it built the foundations of our kingdom and all that. So of course, some of the lecturers here are like that too. That teacher who gave you grief over your aether? He's from the south. You probably guessed, since he mentioned going to Harveston."

"You can stop depressing me now." With a sigh, Arcus slumped forward and leaned his chin on the desk just like Rusiel. Though he had come to the Institute with a no pain, no gain attitude, he really would have preferred to go without the weird political stuff weighing him down on top of that.

"The difference in spells shouldn't matter though, right? I mean, I bet you use Ignited Soul all the time," Rusiel said.

"Nope. I've tried it a couple times, but that's it. It's too weak to use on the battlefield, so I never really bothered with it."

"*That's* what makes a spell worth knowing to you?"

"My uncle could literally punch fireballs like that out of the air. Then he'd shout at me for using a 'weak-ass' spell."

"Wow. I get he's a state magician, but that's messed up."

"Oh, he's *super* messed up. He's practically invulnerable to fire magic. It's actually crazy."

"And you have mock battles with this guy?"

"I wish they were 'mock.' He basically wails on me and my attendants. It's closer to bullying than anything else."

Although, to be fair, Arcus asked for it—in the literal sense of the phrase. When Craib got serious, there was nothing he, Noah, or Cazzy could do but scatter like mice and try not to get hit.

“Y’know, I reckon Kane *wants* to be friends, but he also wants to compete with you,” Rusiel went on. “That’s probably why he comes off majorly awkward. He’s not usually like that.”

“No?”

“He’s great at making friends. He can talk to any stranger completely naturally, and he always reads the room perfectly. I’ve never seen him try to...*provoke* anyone like he does with you.”

“I’m special, huh?”

“Yeah. He’s never really had to deal with competition before, so he’ll probably be a bit funny like that till he gets used to you. Good luck dealing with him.”

“I’ll be fine as long as he doesn’t hate me.”

Kane didn’t seem the type to let resentment build up and fester. He was a reasonable sort, and that was enough for Arcus. However, there were times—and they were few and far between—when he would look at those around him with melancholy in his eyes. It gave him a hollowed-out look, like he was peering into a bottomless well. Arcus couldn’t help but wonder what it meant.

“Is Arcus Raytheft here?”

Arcus looked up to see someone he vaguely recognized as one of Claudia’s followers at the door. He stood up and approached the boy at once. “That’s me. What’s the matter?”

“This is from Lady Claudia.”

Arcus groaned internally as the boy passed him a letter. He had a bad feeling about this—particularly about the fact that it wasn’t something she’d wanted to express verbally. But ignoring it wouldn’t make it go away.

Claudia’s handwriting was prim and proper, and she expressed herself perfectly politely. Much of the letter was a dense mass of formalities, but the salient part was thus:

“You will pitch your magic skills against mine. Should I emerge the victor, you will withdraw from the Institute.”

Arcus looked at the messenger awkwardly. “What if I don’t want to accept?”

“You can try turning her down if you want, but there’s not much point.”

“I didn’t think so.”

If he refused, she would only use her influence to make it happen anyway, and perhaps let it be known that the boy with an Order would run away from a challenge. Her letter written and delivered, Arcus no longer had any choice in the matter.

“I accept,” he conceded, then returned to his seat next to Rusiel and showed him the letter.

“Sucks to be you, huh? I swear, it’s like there’s a target painted on your soul.”

“Fate has it in for me. That’s gotta be it...”

Going out to buy some silver had gotten him wrapped up in a war, after which he was approached by one of the Twin Phantoms and asked to avert a prophecy. And then there was that girl from the Heoga Tribe. If that wasn’t a ticking time bomb, he didn’t know what was. Didn’t these people realize his aether sucked? Was it too much to ask to be left in peace?

Even his heavy sigh came too soon.

“Hey, Arcus! What’s that? A love letter?”

“For a love letter, it’s a little *too* passionate. Take a look.”

“Yikes... She’s coming on way too strong. Tough break.” Setsura grimaced at the letter. It had to be bad if even *she* was put off.

Next, Lecia scampered over. “Has something happened, brother?”

“Something’s happened, all right. Here.”

“Thank you.” She took the letter from him. “Oh, my... How, um...”

“Tyrannical? It’s got real ‘how *dare* you question the judgment of your dictator-for-life’ vibes. You’d think she could let it go. You can’t tell me a girl like her’s got a lot of friends.”

Lecia laughed nervously.

“Y’know, you can be pretty scathing sometimes, Arcus.” Setsura’s remark didn’t bother him in the slightest.

“What’s the matter?” The clamor had attracted Kane’s attention.

“Could you pass that letter to Kane, Lecia?”

She did as he asked. Kane’s eyebrows lifted as he read it.

“Yup,” Arcus said.

“I don’t think you want to be dueling *her*. If it were me, I’d just apologize for whatever got you into this mess.”

“Apologize, huh?” If only that were an option. “I wouldn’t be able to stay at the Institute if I did.”

“You just need to show her you’re sincere,” Kane said. “I’m sure she’d listen to reason.”

“People who send out threatening letters like this aren’t usually the type to be reasoned with.”

“I guess not. But still, her grandfather is a duke, and she’s got so much aether. There’s no way you’re beating her if it comes to a battle of magic.”

“I won’t know unless I try. Though I admit I’m at a disadvantage...”

“You’re definitely a good match for her when it comes to technique and knowledge. But even then, her aether’ll be too much for you.” Kane was adamant. He might well have been one of those who valued aether above all else.

His followers agreed.

“You’re screwed.”

“There’s no way.”

“You’re just gonna embarrass yourself.”

Kane continued, “You should have a really good think about this. I’d hate it if she made you leave. Especially over something so dumb.”

“I appreciate the advice. I’ll see if I can come up with a way to get outta this mess,” Arcus replied, throwing his hands into the air. Regardless of Kane’s views on aether, the boy was sticking his nose in a little too far for Arcus’s liking. It really did sound like Arcus’s absence would be a disappointment to him, which

lined up with what Rusiel was saying earlier.

“Arcus! I heard something fun was coming your way!” Sue had entered the classroom and bounded up to them.

“Huh?! I only just got this letter. How do *you* know about it already?”

“I’ve got a lovely friend who tells me just about everything.”

“You ever think about giving Lady Lauzei a break sometimes? This is just the kinda petty thing you don’t need to bother her with.”

Amy stepped forward to greet Sue. She curtsied quietly; Arcus’s friend must have outranked her even among the dukedom heiresses, because Sue was more casual in her response. He really couldn’t make sense of the power balance between these girls.

Meanwhile, there he was, talking to Sue like they were equals. It wouldn’t look good to those around them, and other students were already making perplexed remarks about how casual he was being.

“Um, should I be watching how I speak?” he asked.

“You’re fine. It’s a little late now anyway,” she replied.

“Sure, but etiquette is kinda important.”

“Well, you speak formally when it’s required in every other case. No one’s gonna think you don’t know what you’re doing when I’m the only exception.”

“Uh...”

“Now, everyone, this is just how we communicate. Or are you looking to get on my bad side?”

Sue dropped her tone drastically for that last part, like she was daring all comers to commit social suicide. The classroom fell into a cold silence.

Is there anything more terrifying than a girl who can cause a blizzard without spending a drop of aether?

No one wanted to make an enemy of a dukedom, especially not the one that stood at the top of the four. It was just as bad as drawing the ire of the royal family, and that was no joke. It was no wonder everyone put their heads down

and shut up.

“Nobles sure are scary,” Arcus remarked.

“What are you talking about? You’re one of us.”

“Lady Susia.” He changed his tone. “You’re a powerful young lady. Can’t you do something about this?”

“I probably could...”

“I thought so! But?”

“I don’t think I *should*.”

“Why not?”

“Cause it’d be more fun to let it play out!”

“Are you kidding?! Help me out here!”

“You don’t need my help. I’d be happy to hold a little meeting with you if you wanted to brainstorm how you’re gonna tackle this, though. Come on.”

“I can’t now. I’ve got a lecture.”

“You can skip it! You’ll have more fun coming with me!”

“*You’re* the only one having fun, and it’s because I’m suffering.”

Sue grabbed his arm and began to lug him away. With that, his fate was sealed; for some mysterious reason, she was stronger than him.

“Come with us, Lecia!” the future duchess called.

“Oh! Certainly!”

It was a terrible example to set to the new students, and Sue was being far from covert. Regardless, Arcus ended up missing his next lecture.

Sue took him to a room that was smaller than most; it seemed to be a former reference room. In its center were wooden chairs and a table laden with a neat assortment of snacks. Having said that, the snacks were no fancier than salted crackers. There was a vase containing freshly arranged flowers by the window, and a shelf holding a familiar pot and a complete tea set. The whole place looked like a break room more than anything else.

"I hereby call to order the first strategy meeting regarding the duel between Arcus and Claudia!" Sue made the announcement once everyone had taken their seats.

As well as the Raytheft siblings, Charlotte and Rusiel had also come along.

"Are we really allowed to use this room?" Arcus asked.

"Sure. Professor String was more than happy to lemme use it for self-study."

"I hope that's what you're using it for then," he said dryly.

"Normally it is. But you're our priority today, Arcus."

"Again, this doesn't sound like self-study."

"*Again*, I'm telling you there are more important things today. Or are you content to bury your head in the sand, go about your lectures, and pretend this duel thing isn't happening?"

He paused. "Well, I'll grant you I don't have the faintest idea what I'm gonna do about it..."

Claudia had managed to get him absolutely baffled.

Rusiel was even more confused. "What am I doing here?"

"Don't question it. Just please stay," Arcus said.

"I don't wanna get involved in any trouble. Especially when it involves a dukedom and a martial county..." Rusiel's shoulders would twitch now and then as he trembled. He would never interact with girls as highly ranked as Sue and Charlotte under normal circumstances, so it was no wonder he was spooked. He probably felt like a total commoner. Arcus could sympathize.

"You're Arcus's friend, right? Nice to meet you," Sue said.

"Oh, um... Yes..."

"Mr. Rusiel Arcane, isn't it?" Charlotte asked. "A pleasure."

"Th-The pleasure's all mine..." Rusiel drew back and dipped his head at the same time, looking for all the world like he'd rather be anywhere else. He whispered to Arcus, "I swear my organs are about to explode."

“C’mon, stick with it. I’ll buy you lunch or something later.”

“I’m telling you I’m not gonna have anything to digest it with.”

“Hey, I’ve had an audience with His Royal Highness, and I’m eating just fine.”

“You’re kidding... How’d that happen?”

“Beats me. I promise I just wanna live a normal life.” He looked out of the window wistfully. He could feel the others glaring at him in disbelief.

Lecia was smiling uncomfortably. Rusiel turned to her.

“You don’t look so scared.”

“I have been friends with Charlotte for a long time, and Lady Susia is particularly easy to get along with.”

A graceful smile took to Charlotte’s lips. “Indeed, Lady Susia has a heart of gold.”

“You too, Charlotte,” Sue said. “You’re very easygoing.”

The girls giggled.

“Stop being weird,” Arcus muttered.

“Oh, I just remembered something suuuper important,” Rusiel said, getting to his feet.

Arcus grabbed his sleeve. “No you didn’t! Stay here!”

He needed his friend to stay to keep the balance of power from tipping against him. He couldn’t hold his own against Sue *and* Charlotte with just Lecia for backup. To his relief, Rusiel sat back down.

Just then, there was a knock at the door.

“Come in,” said Sue.

It was Setsura. “Pardon me. Oh, Arcus. There you are.”

“Go away please. Or at least let me find someone else for my team.”

“Huh?” Setsura peered at him like she could see into his frazzled mind. The next thing he knew, she was puffing up her cheeks indignantly. “What’s all this, Arcus? You leaving me out of something?”

“Who are you?” Sue asked. “Oh, right. You were with him earlier.”

“My name’s Setsura. Aren’t you Lady Susia Algucia in the year above?”

“That’s me.”

“And everyone’s here to help Arcus solve his little problem?”

“Yup. We’re having a strategy meeting. You want in?”

“I would, but I’m a nonmagical student. Though technically I can use a few spells.” Setsura smiled awkwardly.

So much for feeling left out...

“That doesn’t matter. Charlotte here’s a nonmagical student too. The more the merrier, especially if you’ve got *some* magic knowledge.”

“Sue—”

“Arcus, at least try and pretend you want me here!”

“Only when you stop being annoying.”

“Ooh, you’re always on about how ‘annoying’ I am, when we all know you like it!”

“Lecia, Rusiel, gimme a hand in getting her outta here.”

“All right, fine! I’ll be good! The only time I’ll open my trap is when I wanna eat some of these snacks!” Setsura said quickly, sliding into an empty seat. Without another word, she began stuffing her smiling face with the snacks in the basket.

She could be quite cute when she wasn’t talking. But then Arcus remembered he shouldn’t let his guard down around her. Her face was just as deceptive as her sly behavior.

“Seeing as my brother is our top priority, perhaps it is about time we set about our discussions,” Lecia suggested.

“Oh, yeah. We can’t let him get expelled, even if the chances are low,” said Sue.

Setsura cocked her head between crunches. “Low?”

“Low. And I mean way low.”

“Arcus is unlikely to lose,” Charlotte agreed, “but with Lady Claudia as his opponent, we cannot take any chances.”

“I believe in my brother’s abilities, but I have heard that Lady Claudia possesses a *lot* of aether,” Lecia said.

“Everyone believes in you, huh?” Setsura pointed at the Order on Arcus’s chest. “Is that why?”

“It’s probably part of it, but I’ve been through a lot of fights too.”

No doubt his experiences against Gaston and Nadar played a part in the girls’ faith.

Rusiel sipped at his tea. “That aether’s got to be a concern. If she uses it to cast a hugely destructive spell, how are you gonna counter it?”

“That’s a possibility, huh? And probably the biggest problem I’m gonna have to deal with. I dunno how I could fight back if she goes all in.”

In many of his previous battles, Arcus had used surprise attacks in the form of spells that would baffle his opponents. But since this was a duel between students, there would likely be rules in place. It was quite possible that those rules would bar him from his usual tricks.

“Lady Susia,” Lecia began. “What sort of combat style does Lady Claudia favor?”

“Magic all the way. She’ll probably use the spells unique to her house.”

“Do you think so?”

“Yeah. It’s a famous portfolio, and she’s used it tons of times to shut down her opponents.”

“Oh, yeah,” Rusiel said. “I heard she likes to pick a lot of fights.”

“Right.”

“Has she ever picked one with you, Sue?” Arcus asked.

“No, maybe because we’re equals. But if she did, I’d totally crush her!”

“Yikes...”

“That sounds most impressive, Lady Susia,” Charlotte remarked.

“Is Lady Susia more skilled than Lady Claudia?” Lecia asked.

“I sure am. I doubt she could beat me.”

In Sue’s case, all she’d have to do would be to tap into her huge supply of aether to cast an arsenal of destructive spells. Apply enough pressure, and Claudia would be helpless to fight back. Besides, Sue had an advantage that Arcus considered frightfully unfair.

“Sue’s magic comes out more powerful compared to a normal cast,” Arcus explained to Rusiel.

“Huh? Sometimes a spell can come out weaker, but I’ve never heard of it coming out *stronger*.”

“Right, which is why it’s unfair. There’s gotta be something wrong with the nobility in this country. They’ve all got these weird skills...”

“You’re not kidding...”

“Speaking of ‘weird skills,’ Arcus,” Charlotte said, turning to him. “Didn’t you say you had something of the sort yourself?”

“Uh... I might’ve done that.”

“Or are you trying to deny it again?”

“It’s not that, I just...”

Rusiel frowned at him. “Is that true?”

“Yes and no...”

“It’s your memory, right? How you remember everything you see?”

“Huh? Uh, yeah...” Arcus nodded quickly, grateful that Sue had misunderstood. He had never really seen his memory as an overpowered ability, but he supposed it made sense. It fit the bill more than a dream he’d had about another person’s life, at least.

“Huh?” Rusiel blinked at him.

“You remember *everything*?” Setsura asked.

“He does,” Lecia replied, a hint of pride in her tone. “I am confident that he remembers every utterance of our conversation thus far.”

It was because of his powers of recall that the grudge he held against Joshua and Celine had not faded the slightest bit—but this was not something he wanted to point out in front of his sister.

Setsura shot to her feet. “What the heck?! That is so unfair, Arcus! No wonder the written exam was a cakewalk for you! They shouldn’t have bothered giving it to you in the first place!”

“Stop shouting with your mouth full! It’s rude!” Arcus shoved another salty snack into her lips.

“Mmph!”

She started munching on it immediately, clearly more motivated to eat than to continue her point. It did the job and kept her quiet.

“That’ll be one of the reasons you came out on top, then,” Rusiel said.

“Convenient, right?” Sue said. “It means he’s just gotta learn a spell once and it’s in his head forever.”

“It does mean I don’t get stuff mixed up,” Arcus said.

“Now if only you had some more aether, you’d be set!”

“Yeah, I know...”

“You do not possess the same ability, do you Lecia?” Charlotte asked.

“Oh, yeah,” Arcus mused.

“I have my own ability,” Lecia said. “Passed down through the Raytheft bloodline.”

“Wait, you do?”

“I do. I am resistant to burns and I excel at handling fire. I believe the same holds true for uncle.”

“That *would* make sense,” Charlotte said. “Well, if I ever find myself at the site

of an unexpected fire, I know who to call on!”

“And call on me you may!”

“I guess you’re an exception then, Arcus?” Sue said.

“Guess so. I’m pretty sure the only thing I inherited was my hair and eye color.”

“Um...” Rusiel began. “I think we’re getting off topic again...”

“Oh, yes!” Charlotte agreed. “Where were we?”

“The magic of House Saifice,” said Arcus, “and how Lady Claudia uses it in a lot of these duels. But then, hasn’t anyone tried to copy it?”

“It’s *their* magic,” Sue replied. “Even if someone else copied the incantation and tried to cast it, they couldn’t.”

“Wait, that’s a thing?”

“It’s a pretty common thing. Especially among royalty from other countries.”

“Ah!”

Arcus recalled hearing that the imperial family could use magic unique to their bloodline. Likewise, the Crosellodes’ inherited lightning magic was difficult to control without the right genetics.

“Is it not that they have a unique way of imbuing their spells with aether?” Lecia asked.

“I thought it might be that, too, but it doesn’t look like it. Their magic isn’t offensive, but that doesn’t make it easy to counter,” Sue said.

“What’s it like, then?” Arcus asked.

“I’m a bit fuzzy on the details. What I can tell you is that it seems to lessen the power or effects of the opponent’s spells.”

“That sounds...kinda reactive? I mean, it relies on the opponent casting something first.”

“The trick is that it lasts a long time. Its effects will remain in place for a few volleys.”

“So this magic is cast over a certain area, rather than a single person?”

“That doesn’t seem to be the case either. Otherwise it’d have a negative effect on Claudia’s spells too.”

“Tell me again why this magic hasn’t been outlawed yet?”

“It would seem that our immediate course of action should be to think about what form Lady Claudia’s magic takes,” Lecia suggested.

“Right, and that’s our biggest problem. If we can figure that out, we can figure out how to counter it,” Sue said.

The girls fell into thought, and although Arcus joined them, he couldn’t come up with a satisfactory answer. They didn’t have enough information to go on right now.

“Also, you’re not allowed to use spells that could seriously injure your opponent in these duels,” Sue added.

“Which is a pain,” Arcus said, “since what I’d really like is to run through as much of what I’ve got as I can with Lady Claudia so I can get a proper picture of what the heck her magic actually *does*.”

“Do you have any spells that are duel-appropriate?”

“Sure I do. Why?”

“I feel like most of your magic is meant to make sure people die and stay dead.”

“Don’t go there, Sue. I don’t want people to think I’m some psycho.”

“Is Arcus’s magic really that dangerous, Lady Susia?” Setsura asked.

Sue’s expression turned as grave as if she were telling a ghost story. “You bet it is. The mechanism behind his murders is known only to him, and his magic leaves no traces.”

“If you’re planning to write a thriller novel about me, don’t.”

“This isn’t fiction. Unless you wanna tell me I’m wrong?”

“Well, you’re not...”

“Right?”

And now everyone thought he was a crazed murderer. As if he needed that on his plate as well.

“What’s this killer magic of yours like then, Arcus?” Setsura asked.

“I can make my opponent explode.”

“Uh-huh.”

“Or shoot stuff right through them.”

“Okay.”

“Or stop them breathing.”

“Right.”

“Or shoot out a beam of light that immediately pierces them.”

“Wait, Arcus, are you a professional hit man or something?”

“Nope. I’m just an ordinary, innocent kid.”

“No such child would possess an Order of the Silver Cross,” Charlotte pointed out.

He paused. “Quite so, My Lady.”

“I think I get it now,” Setsura murmured. “You used all these spells on the battlefield...”

“Huh? Hey, Setsura, what’s wrong?”

“Huh?! What?!”

“What’s wrong?”

“Oh, nothing! I was just thinking how great these snacks are!”

“Well, don’t eat them all. Lady Charlotte and Lady Susia’ll get mad at you.”

“Arcus!” Sue whined. “You make me sound so greedy!”

“You’ve made yourself *look* greedy. Look at all this stuff...”

Sue seemed to have brought the entire contents of her pantry, and then some. The man’s world had drying agents and oxygen absorbers; this one

didn't, and snack foods didn't last as long. She would never have set out so much food if she wasn't confident that none would be wasted.

"I just wish we had something sweeter," she said.

"Eh, I'm not a fan of candy myself," Arcus remarked.

"I'm not surprised! I've stopped liking it too, and it's all your fault! You've defiled my body, and—"

"Stop right there! Are you sure you want to put the entire noble world up in arms with your careless remarks? Never mind my reputation!"

"Then bring us some good snacks next time! And don't skimp on the puddings!"

"Oh, I would love to sample some pudding," Charlotte said.

"What is 'pudding'?" Lecia asked. "I've never heard of it."

"I'll make some later, and then you can all have some!" Arcus cried before the pair of them could resent him for leaving them out. And if he was making some for them, he'd eventually have to include Deet too...

A bright smile sprang to Sue's lips. "Oh! You should bring that refudgerator or whatever you've got at home too! Not just for the pudding, but so we can have some cold drinks too!"

"Sorry, was this your study room or your clubhouse?"

"You can't study if you're not comfortable. You know that, Arcus."

"I do..."

Charlotte looked at him. "Oh yes?"

"Huh? Well, I mean, yeah."

"We always studied together in cafés," Sue explained. "Or we'd grab something from one of the stalls downtown!"

"Oh. I see." Charlotte suddenly looked quite uncomfortable.

The duke's daughter grinned at her. "Wait, what's wrong? Don't tell me you and Arcus have never studied together!"

“Nothing is wrong. We shall surely have plenty of opportunities for study sessions going forward.”

The girls giggled.

“Stop being weird,” Arcus muttered again.

It wasn’t like they disliked each other, so maybe it was some strange inside joke. Whatever it was, it piqued Setsura’s curiosity enough to get her leaning forward.

“You know, at this rate I bet this pudding is gonna come out *really* tasty.”

“You stay outta this.”

“No fair!”

“I think I get why you wanted me to stay now, Arcus,” said Rusiel.

“Right? My organs are *this close* to their limit.”

“That doesn’t mean you can use mine as a shield though.”

“Guh...”

“Oh dear!” Lecia giggled.

“I guess you’re all I’ve got now, Lecia...”

What was once meant to be a strategy meeting had descended into a discussion about how the group would use the room from now on. On his way out, Arcus spotted Sue and Charlotte talking with each other.

“Lady Susia, why did you not object to Lady Claudia’s challenge?”

“I didn’t think I needed to. It’s not like Arcus is gonna lose.”

“Then what was the purpose of this meeting?”

“Because half the confidence I have in him is genuine, and the other half is just what I *want* to happen. I guess I don’t want this to drag him down too much either, ’cause I doubt it’s the last time he’ll face something like this. What it boils down to is that I didn’t object because I’m being selfish.”

“What if Arcus *does* lose?”

“I’ll pull some strings, get His Majesty involved.”

“Would His Majesty intervene?”

“Of course he would. Arcus *needs* to cement his social standing, and he has the support of the royal family, even if it is covert. Graduating from the Institute is part of that. To deny Arcus that would be to go against the crown, and it doesn’t matter if Claudia is aware of that or not.”

“I understand.”

“Mm hmm. That’s why I’m getting involved like this too. I need to be on hand to step in if things go too far.”

“Lady Susia...”

“I know we’re on the same side, Charlotte, but I’m ruthless when it comes to my enemies. It wouldn’t hurt to keep that in mind.”

The girls spoke too quietly for Arcus to make anything out.

It had been a few days since Arcus had received his letter of challenge, and his duel with Claudia was to take place today. They were to face off on the Institute’s training grounds; she had booked a slot between all the scheduled lectures. The stage was set.

It was a clear day. Clouds drifted across the sky, and the sun was keeping her light gentle. The training grounds were kept immaculately trim and even, without so much as a stray pebble. Presently, it was teeming with students that had come to watch the spectacle. Their ages spanned the Institute’s entire range, and there were even pupils standing at the windows of the nearby buildings.

It was as Charlotte had said: these duels were famous. No doubt many of the students saw them as some sort of custom. If someone had been making the rounds selling refreshments here, they could probably have made a decent buck.

At length, Claudia Saifice arrived with her followers in tow. The way the spring sun hit her chignon made it look like her blonde hair was spun from gold thread.

Her slender nose was accompanied by two eyes of sapphire. The lines of her face were drawn with perfect symmetry, complementing her already pretty features. She wore a well-tailored cardigan over her uniform, and spoke with just as much grace as one would expect. It was typical for these types of girls to come equipped with a loud, pretentious laugh, but Claudia's confidence was a much calmer affair. It kept her from becoming overbearing. She had earned her reputation as empress of the Institute on precisely these terms.

She came to stand in front of Arcus and smiled at him, fully confident in her success. "That you have decided to show your face is most commendable."

"Thank you, My Lady," he replied flatly.

"Why, you don't sound the least bit grateful. You ought to work on your inflection."

"I am being as sincere as I can. I apologize if that has displeased you." He maintained a smile as he lied to her face, scowling inwardly.

In all honesty, he was pretty pissed. He had passed the exam fairly, but now he had to overcome this extra trial so that he wouldn't be kicked out, all because of the whims of a single person. It was beyond absurd.

"I heard that Lady Amy asked around to see if I would be willing to negotiate," Claudia said suddenly.

"I beg your pardon?"

"Yes, I did think that you might have been unaware."

If Arcus *had* wanted to enter into peace talks, he would have gone about it a different way. He didn't know anyone close enough to Claudia to arrange such a thing.

Amy was currently clinging to Kane in the front row of spectators. Realizing both Claudia and Arcus were looking at her, she responded hesitantly, "Um, that's right. Kane asked me to."

"I thank you for your efforts," Arcus said, before turning to her fiancé. "Is that true, Kane?"

"I thought it might be worth a try." He shrugged, not looking Arcus in the eye.

The young magician was reminded of the “advice” Kane had given him shortly after the letter’s arrival. “Thanks. I owe you one.”

“It was a whim, really. Lady Amy was just kind enough to indulge me.”

So Kane hadn’t meant much by his actions—and no matter how many times Arcus pressed him on it later, he’d look embarrassed and get strangely defensive. He had been very straightforward in his warnings in the classroom, but had still gone out of his way to help when Arcus didn’t back down. He really was one of the good guys. Arcus might have recognized it sooner if Kane didn’t act so awkwardly around him. Rusiel was probably right. If Kane didn’t see Arcus as a rival, they could have had a more honest friendship. The thought almost annoyed him.

“Arcus.”

“Hi, Rusiel. Here to cheer me on?”

“Uh, not exactly...”

“It’s fine. Let’s pretend I didn’t ask.”

“Sorry.” Rusiel looked away awkwardly.

The youngest son to a viscount, his position was a vulnerable one. Being seen to support Arcus here could lead to unwanted attention.

I shouldn’t have said anything...

“I am praying for your victory, brother.”

“Thanks, Lecia.”

“Arcus.”

“Lady Charlotte.”

The two nodded at each other.

“Good luck, Arcus!”

“Yeah, yeah. Thanks.”

“Oh, jeez! You’re welcome!” Setsura snapped.

Suddenly, the crowd of onlookers parted. It quickly became apparent that Sue

had arrived. She stepped gracefully through the spectators, which was when Claudia caught sight of her.

“Are you here to observe, Lady Susia?”

“Indeed. I have been most looking forward to witnessing Your Ladyship’s defeat.”

There had already been a hint of their feud behind their smiles, but when Sue spoke, her words were explosive. The mounting murderous intent in her eyes rivaled that of a grenadier.

Arcus couldn’t stop himself from speaking out when he noticed the corner of Claudia’s lips twitching. “Stop raising the stakes!”

“What stakes? You’ll win easy!”

“Says who?!”

“Says our years of friendship! Just use the same spell that wiped out all those magic soldiers!”

“Sure, and why don’t I just murder all the spectators while I’m at it?”

Sue let out a refined giggle. He despaired. Wasn’t she the one who had insisted they hold that strategy meeting?

One of the students had been selected as the referee, and now he stepped forward. He was one of Claudia’s hangers-on, but since he believed she was going to win anyway, he should have no need to judge in her favor. And even if he tried it, Arcus had Sue on his side.

The best possible outcome was for him to snatch a decisive victory without the need for a second opinion. That way, Claudia could never speak out against him ever again.

“This marks your final opportunity to surrender,” his opponent said.

“Surrendering means being forced to leave the Institute.”

“I was being considerate. I simply didn’t want you to humiliate yourself in front of all these people.”

“Thank you. I can shed a heartfelt tear if you’d like?”

“To that, I will extend my compliments. I did not expect you to have the capacity for banter at this stage.” Another confident smile graced Claudia’s lips. “I shall now proceed to put you in your place.”

“I shan’t lose. I swear it on my Order of the Silver Cross.”

Their exchange finished, the referee took a step forward. “If you would take your positions...” He waited for them to do so. “Only magic is permitted in this duel; no physical attacks. Any offensive spells must *not* be lethal. The loser shall be the participant who first admits defeat or is otherwise unable to continue. Are these rules acceptable?”

Arcus and Claudia nodded.

There looked to be roughly thirty feet between them. Once they were ready, the referee called out: “Begin!”

Claudia covered her lips with her hand and immediately started to incant.

“...wind...gold...strike...”

From the words he could catch, Arcus surmised it was a wind-based spell. And, combined with the rhythm, he identified it as Aeolian Hammer beyond a shadow of a doubt. It was a popular spell straight from the textbooks, and it seemed Claudia had done nothing to alter the incantation. She had started with something basic to test the waters.

Arcus would have liked to counter it with a Highwind Wheel-Blade, but it was too violent a spell. He wasn’t willing to risk slicing the well-to-do girl into bloody rounds, nor could he guarantee that she would be the only victim.

What to do...

Claudia’s spell had already started whipping up wind, and the noise was getting gradually louder.

“O muddled wind, panic and bluster. Empyrean tornado. Surging seas of the mountains. Beware the journey of the sky from the center of overlapping clouds.”

“Aeolian Hammer.”

“Chaotic Air.”

Arcus's spell was designed to counter those which manipulated wind. The pressurized air from Claudia's magic raged and scattered like turbulence. By the time it reached him, it was no stronger than a refreshing spring breeze.

"Lady Claudia's spell *failed?!'*"

"No, Arcus's spell canceled it out!"

"But how?"

"Wait, that means he heard Lady Claudia's incantation, doesn't it?"

The girl's eyes were wide with surprise. "Was that *countermagic?*" she stuttered. She looked like *she* had been on the receiving end of Aeolian Hammer. For his part, Arcus was surprised she hadn't anticipated his spell. He took the chance to cast another.

"One clap. One drummer. Create your impact. Gently strike the enemy with your ringing supplication.

Applause."

"Tch! Show your concern for me. Take shape. Protect me, o protective shield.

Shield Guard."

Arcus clapped his palms together forcefully like he was preparing to pray. The action gave rise to a shock wave and a powerful wind. Claudia, meanwhile, held her hands out in front of her to create a translucent shield wrapped in pale light. She moved them at once to adjust the shield's position...and managed to block Arcus's spell perfectly. It was her focus on speed that saved her from the impact, rather than her aether or the strength of her magic. Still, if he wanted to break through her protection, he would need to pick something with a little more force behind it.

Claudia gave a flourish of her cardigan in a show of composure. "I can see now how your abilities allowed you to get your foot in the door."

"In that case, I fail to see why we must continue this duel any longer."

"Silence. Does the idea of being no more than adequate lift your spirits that much? It shouldn't; you are a son to nobility."

Arcus paused. “I understand, My Lady.”

“Then let us resume.” Claudia began to incant again.

Arcus couldn’t help but feel frustrated that they were limited to magic and combat at far quarters. If only he were allowed to move in closer, he could use his Focus and *kan’are* to beat her. How could he outpace her incantation? How could he break through her defenses? The answers to those questions would require him to consider how much aether he could spare, and how long his own incantation could be. Not only that, but his selected spell had to be appropriately weak. There was so much to think about when he was already under fire.

Both he and Claudia were moving, adjusting the distance between them, when he began to cast.

“Filthy water. Impure water. Gentle fragments. Clumps of mud. The flowing quagmire muddles downstream. Muddy stream, wash away.

Muddy Current.”

“Baton of the heavens. Break the flow, build a route. A trifling wonder. May the chalk staff divide the water’s surface.

Water-Parting Staff.”

A staff emerged from the ground, forcing Claudia’s muddy stream to part around it.

“The warbler sings. As one, a graceful song, as many, an earsplitting wail. Clad in the intense wind, hear the warbler’s twitter.

Warbler’s Riot.”

“Strike. Hit. Beat. May all that fills the sky become as five fingers to a hand and deal a severe blow. As the crushing arm moves forth, its power forces back. Your wind is thrashing and ceaseless even while calm.

Fist of the Wind.”

Their wind spells clashed. Arcus’s cloak fluttered and lifted behind him as both participants were showered by grains of sand. His incantation had come a fraction faster; the spells had collided just a bit closer to Claudia’s side of the

field. Arcus wondered whether she would dodge the aftershocks, but she stood in place and let them hit her. Without fixing her disheveled hair, she cast again.

“Invasion of flames. Reach not ferocious heights. Merely grovel and lick the ground. Color and threaten the enemy’s feet with brilliant red!

Crimson Wildfire.”

“The rain is short, the raindrops gentle, the shower swift. It is sharp, like a gleaming blade thrust into the ground. Fall like a downpour.

Evening Shower.”

Flames raged toward Arcus’s feet. They twisted like tongues as they ran along the ground, following an invisible path of spilled oil. He chose to use water rather than foam to extinguish them. As soon as his incantation was finished, the water sprayed out from above his head. But the flames were stronger than he’d thought, and it wasn’t enough to put them out completely. The low fire swept around him, its heat evaporating his counterspell into a steamy mist. Arcus felt like he was in a sauna—or rather, like he was a bun being steamed in a basket.

“Moisture, increase. Increase, increase, becoming unseen. More is far better than less.”

Arcus chanted his spell in the loudest, clearest voice he could, to make sure Claudia would hear each word.

“What...” Naturally, she was blindsided.

He hadn’t used more water to put out the fire; the spell’s effect was to increase the humidity around them. But it would seem a nonsensical choice considering that the water had already evaporated. From the incantation, Claudia realized that it was supporting magic—that Arcus was confident enough not to panic. And that realization made her lower her guard. What if she was misinterpreting the situation? For just a moment, she held back.

Ignoring her lack of reaction, Arcus threw himself to the ground. He would have to endure the heat for a little bit longer. Just then, there was a tiny explosion in front of him. Water sprayed outwards like a broken wave, then came together and surged forward. The image was like the water’s edge on a

stormy day; like the crests that formed on the waves after they battered against the shore. His spell rose up at once, eventually dissipating the mist.

Claudia was still standing. It should have been no mean feat to endure that spell, but then, she *was* a future duchess.

“What curious magic,” she said after a cough.

“I was hoping that would end this...”

To think that a mini phreatic eruption hadn’t been enough to knock her out. She should have taken a hard blow, but all it had done was leave her with a bit of a cough. The humans of this world were *tough*.

“Be noble. Be a prancing breeze. A high-minded wind must not be ignored.

Noble Wind.”

“Structural change. Structural amendment. A honeycomb, a turtle shell, a repeating pattern. Disperse your power. Turn your durable shell into a wall.

Tessellating Barrier.”

Claudia’s sonorous wind buffeted against Arcus’s honeycomb barrier. His spell was inspired by the defensive magic used by the Empire’s troops. As he recalled, Aluas, the woman in the white mask, had called it Three-Walled Altar. It was markedly efficient in its aether consumption.

But Claudia was incanting again.

“One point focus. One piercing thrust. Penetrate the wall, penetrate the length, penetrate the enemy, a single hole of black. If the enemy’s protection is sound, use but your own hand to open and break through. Use your honed body to pierce the shield.

Shield Piercer.”

Her first spell was still in effect; she was combining her spells.

“It will take more than a shield like that to defend against *my* magic!”

Arcus’s defensive spell might have been strong, but in the end all it was worth was the aether it had saved him. Claudia was unloading her own plentiful aether onto it, and sure enough, it was weakening. Arcus had misjudged his

spell and the power he was willing to sacrifice. His shield was cracking, and he was overcome by immense pressure. He quickly made to jump back before her Noble Wind hit, but he was just a little too late. It battered his body, making him grunt.

As he thought, he would have little chance of winning if he let their contest be one of pure strength. He needed to devise a way in which his paltry aether could defend him against Claudia's bountiful supply. His magic was never going to overwhelm hers, so his only option was to find an opening and catch her off guard with a short spell.

Arcus was confident in his spellcraft. Having said that, Claudia was in her third year at the Institute and set to inherit one of the most distinguished magic houses in the kingdom. The moment he underestimated her was the moment she tripped him up. The haughty smile had already returned to her face.

"I admit you caught me off guard before, but now you have shown that a lack of aether truly does put a magician at a disadvantage. I wouldn't want you to suffer any further, so I shall bring this duel to a swift end." Claudia prepared to cast another spell.

Right now, Arcus had no choice but to wait and see what would happen. If he had the aether to match hers, he could cast something in return. As it was, the risk of wasting his limited resources was too great. He would try and outmaneuver her spell, rather than counter it, and hoped it wouldn't run him afoul of the rules.

"My, how cunning.

An inconvenient truth. A midsummer heat haze. The moon on the water's surface. An afternoon campfire. Render the gold worthless and disintegrate it into fragments. May your glimmer diminish..."

The spell was unlike any other she'd cast so far. Its words and syntax were unusual, as was its relative length. There was something about it that made Arcus want to prevent its release. He started to incant before she had finished.

"An opera of gentle insects. The student's strongest enemy. An endless ring. Embedded Earworm."

“Throw a pebble. Throw and throw. Your stones are as grain; nevertheless, they hurt.

Goblin Rock.”

He cast the weaker spells one after the other, but they were too petty to deter Claudia. She ignored the music playing in her ears and covered her face with her arms to ward off the pebbles.

“Suppress.”

All of a sudden, Claudia’s gorgeous golden hair lost its shimmer.

“Arcus!” came Sue’s cry. “That’s Saifice magic!”

It couldn’t have been a spell that targeted the opponent’s, or she would have waited for him to cast first.

“With this, your fate is sealed,” Claudia said.

“I’m not going to just sit back and accept that,” Arcus said, casting flames in her direction. “Wh...”

His spell lacked its usual power. The flames were close to fizzling out by the time they reached her, and when they did, they bounced ineffectually off her aetheric aura.

Does that spell of hers have an area of effect, then? Or is it something more direct?

It was difficult to tell, and it didn’t help that they were in a fixed space. Any area of effect should have been marked out by a magic circle. If that wasn’t the case, and her magic hadn’t targeted a spell either, then...

What exactly has she cast it on?

The only thing he knew for certain was that it was a troublesome spell indeed.

Claudia cast again. Arcus reacted with a magical barrier, but it immediately began to fade visibly. Right before his shield broke, he kicked off the ground and took a huge leap backward.

It’s got to be interfering with my magic somehow. Unless...

It would make sense if it acted like a curse that rendered his counterspells

ineffectual, but that didn't seem to be the case. Plus, when he had used Chaotic Air, Claudia had acted surprised that he could target her spell directly. Assuming that wasn't an act, her spell just now had to work differently.

While he struggled to work it out, Claudia held herself with an air of fearlessness, like her victory was already assured. She didn't try to do anything, obviously feeling he wasn't worth her best efforts. Annoyed as he was, Arcus had to recognize that she had the upper hand in this fight.

"I think that's enough of a break." She cast again, her own spell not suffering any ill effects.

Somehow, Arcus managed to dodge it.

How come her spells still work fine?

It was more evidence that her earlier magic hadn't been an area-of-effect spell. But whatever it *was*, it felt grossly unfair.

Arcus cast another defensive spell to protect himself, this time choosing something longer that consumed more aether. The next moment, he grunted—the weakening effect on his magic was more intense than he'd realized, and Claudia's attack stronger. Its power fell within the rules, but it would probably have knocked him out if he'd taken its full brunt. She had tuned it well.

Scoring a hit seemed to have pleased her. "Oh dear, what's the matter? You know you'll have to attack if you want to beat me, don't you?"



“I know. I am preparing myself to do just that.”

“Are you now? I hope you aren’t lying, because that would be an *awful* insult to His Majesty after he selected you for an Order.”

Arcus scowled. He knew she wouldn’t be talking like that unless she had plenty of aether left. As much as he wanted to fight back, he couldn’t cast spells willy-nilly like she could.

She was off again, launching into another incantation that sounded like it required a hefty amount of aether. Her stores likely ran deeper than Lecia’s. She might even have been able to give Kane a run for his money.

Claudia’s aether grew in pressure and weighed heavily on him. It felt like he was on a rollercoaster and his organs were being pressed on by the g-force. Was this what he had agreed to when he took on the challenge of a Saifice? There was no end to her confidence. No end to her crushing aether. She was a being of pure strength.

She won’t shut up either! I’m just gonna blow her head off, dammit!

Launching his powerful Dwarf Star at her would most likely end the fight. The problem was that he didn’t know how much its strength would be reduced by. Would it have any effect at all, or was it powerful enough that it would come out with just the right amount of force? Miscalculating risked splattering the guts of the next headmistress all over the field.

Black Ammo: a spell that invoked weaponry.

Apollyon Tróvilos: a spell inspired by mythology.

Dwarf Star: a spell that caused an explosion on a designated target.

Evil Exasperation: a spell that rid its target of oxygen.

Sympathetic Cloning: a spell that exploited mirror images.

Zarach Ohr: a spell that combined fantasy and science, and was inspired by mythology.

These were Arcus’s trump cards. They were enough to instakill his opponent despite his lack of aether. Convenient as they were, their power meant he

couldn't just fire them off mindlessly—not in a duel against a fellow student. Not to mention that, without knowing how much weaker they'd be, he might just end up wasting aether. Then again, focusing purely on defending himself would also eat up his reserves without improving his position.

For now, he would have to dodge, all the while reading his opponent's spells and identifying a pattern. At some point, the beginnings of a strategy should present themselves.

After that came the problem of her Saifice magic. It wasn't defensive—there was no shield for him to break through—and without knowing *what* she had cast it on, it would be difficult to counter. It also seemed to affect every one of his spells.

That doesn't mean I can't win.

Claudia's aether may have granted her an overwhelming advantage, but she still needed to cast in order to defeat him. There had to be something there that he could exploit.

"I think it's about time I put an end to this."

Arcus had drastically opened up the distance between them when Claudia started to incant again. It seemed she was out of patience.

Her spell was powerful and sweeping; she likely intended it to be her last. At full strength, Arcus would have used the opportunity to cast something short, but right now there was a chance it wouldn't even reach her. He wouldn't be dodging this spell with any normal means. He set both his Focus and his *kan'are* into action.

His range of speed warped. Everything around him slowed very suddenly. Claudia noticed nothing. Arcus raced off at once and circled around behind her. He lamented that he could have struck her from this angle and won the duel, if only the rules allowed it. He couldn't use magic when these techniques were in effect either. He'd have to work on that later.

"Oh?" Claudia was looking around for him.

A moment later, one of her followers called to her.

“Lady Claudia! Behind you!”

“Behind...?” She turned around. Her eyes widened. “What did you do?!”

“That’s a secret.”

“Lady Claudia,” Sue called. “If this were a battlefield, that lapse of attentiveness would have cost you your life!”

“This is *not* a battlefield! This is a duel with rules!”

“Ah, of course. Pardon me for forgetting!”

Arcus had to commend Sue for her effective psychological warfare, and he appreciated the support. Maybe it was a *little* underhanded, but it was just inside the lines of what they could get away with. Sue responded to Arcus’s grateful glance with a cheerful grin.

The duel was beginning to drag. Irritation was weighing down Claudia’s chest. She had faced off against countless students before, but none had taken this long to defeat. Once the gap in aether had become clear and Suppress was in effect, her opponents tended to surrender after just a few spells. It was a hard truth to stomach, but she was struggling to take Arcus down. She hadn’t expected him to be quite this formidable.

He is rather skilled.

Secretly, she admired his talents despite how she taunted him. She had only managed to land a single hit on him so far. Until then, he had been exploiting the holes in her magic and even dealt a blow to her, albeit a small one. It was clear that he was packing spells to counter almost any situation.

His magic showed an accurate understanding of the mythos of the Ancient Chronicles. He used spells and alterations that couldn’t be found in any textbook. Some of them were even based on knowledge or theories that Claudia didn’t recognize, and that weren’t taught at the Institute.

Normally, the duelists would have prepared a selection of spells in advance, and the fight would become a competition of brute strength. A fighter’s biases would become clear in their repertoire, and if they *had* brought a defensive

spell with them, it would be at most one or two. Arcus, however, seemed to have come with more reactive spells than anything else.

Human imagination had its limits. If a magician had an affinity or preference for a certain attribute, that attribute would be where most of their time had been invested. It was therefore common for the majority of a magician's spells to fall under the same umbrella. The field was not the place to experiment, assuming the fighter even had the wherewithal to do so.

The fact that Arcus was capable of playing this contest by ear spoke to a deep understanding of the Elder Tongue. That was impressive enough in itself, but Claudia was more surprised by how skillfully he handled his aether. Though he had cast a wide variety of spells, he hadn't mis-incanted once. A lot of first-years arrived unable to use magic, and those who could tended to have poor aetheric control. Skill and experience were the only explanations for Arcus's performance. Inexperienced casters would become distracted by their opponent's incantations, weakening their grip on their own aether. Supposing they already struggled to control their power, it didn't take much to imagine the consequences. Arcus's control, however, bordered on perfect. How much practice must he have put in to show such capability at his age?

The spectators were exchanging hushed questions.

"I don't get it. First-years don't get to practice combat for ages."

"You stupid or something? Arcus has an Order. They say he thrashed an entire magic troop during Nadar's revolt."

"Isn't that just a rumor?"

"I dunno. Lady Claudia's never had a duel go on this long, has she?"

"I don't remember any of the spells he's using from the textbook either."

"How did he get behind her like that just now?"

"Good question. I didn't even see him move..."

The audience seemed just as impressed as she was. It was rare to see supporting magic used in duels, but he was mixing it in without hesitation. He had nullified her spells and even repelled them. Claudia had no idea how he had

turned her Crimson Wildfire into something so explosive. She *had* heard of top-level magicians creating violent reactions when pitting powerful fire magic against high-volume water spells, but this was different. Their spells should have been too weak to create such a phenomenon, yet Arcus had seemed confident it would happen.

Claudia had not expected their duel to be anything so sophisticated. This boy was displaying power comparable to a *graduate*. Still, she couldn't just throw her hands up and admit defeat. Her time analyzing him was done; she needed to end this now. She selected a spell that was powerful enough to do so without contravening the rules.

"This duel is over!

Valley winds. Mountain winds. Summit winds. Devour, coil, churn. Call for the billow that will contort the heavens and come down, cornerless crowbar. Shatter the stone wall. Crumble the mud wall. Overcome and flatten the armored helmet. Achieve perfection in one swing."

Claudia kept this spell as a last resort; it was stronger than Aeolian Hammer. It would have taken four extra lines for it to show off her true power, but a duel wasn't the time for that. Given Arcus's strength, something would have to go terribly wrong for it to deal a lethal blow.

Her opponent had started to chant before she was finished.

"Blow, o wind. Blowing wind, bind. Return. May Gown's grief urge you on. May his song be amplified to reach the skies from the dirt. Answer an eye with an eye, a tooth with a tooth, a billow with a billow."

"Anvil Drop."

"Tornado Vengeance."

Their artglyphs whipped through the air, forming magic circles. Both were green, one closer to the purest shade, and the other bluer in tone. Arcus held his hand up to the sky. The wind above the duelists' heads started to give off a stormy rumble. A powerful gust spread out, waves of pressure scattering in its wake. The spectating students were holding themselves low so they wouldn't be blown away. They clung tightly to their hats, shawls, skirts, and cloaks.

Nonetheless, they were pupils of the Institute, and they did not turn their eyes away from the duel.

Claudia's stormy winds twisted into a vortex and took on the shape of a hammer. Arcus's, meanwhile, were starting to carry a melody. It was one that was quite familiar, reminiscent of the tune that Gown sang in the cemeteries. The song seemed to shake the air around it as it flung dust into the sky.

It was Claudia's hammer against Arcus's whirlwind. The two finally clashed. It was clear to everyone watching that the hammer would come out on top.

"What?!"

Her Anvil Drop, the spell she had been saving as her trump card, was again canceled out by Arcus's spell. The students began to chatter again.

"No way that would've been enough to cancel out her spell!"

"What just happened?!"

"This doesn't make any sense! His spell barely used any aether, right?"

Though they questioned it, the truth was undeniable. Despite his weakened magic, Arcus had managed to counter her spell. It was not a question of aether, but of his command of the Elder Tongue and magical theory. That wasn't to say Claudia was happy leaving it at that.

"I do not understand. How is it that you can analyze your opponent's incantations so easily?"

"Of the nine spells you have cast so far, four have been aligned with the wind. I surmised that you have a penchant for wind magic, either in general or when it comes to dueling."

"You seemed to have a more detailed understanding of my spell than that."

"Wind magic doesn't lend itself to a wide variety of phenomena. It can blow something away, rip, draw something in, or transform the atmospheric pressure. Knowing all that, all I have to do is listen closely to the incantation. There's a lot that can be guessed, like the words that will be used or the spell's length. In this instance, it was relatively simple, because Your Ladyship used 'summit winds.'"

“You mean to say that you predicted the spell’s effects from its incantation?”

Claudia supposed it *was* possible to have a counterspell in place once you knew the attribute of your opponent’s magic. Hearing the first part of the incantation would help you to predict the rest if you were familiar enough with the compatibility between words and phrases. All you needed to do next was improvise appropriately, or cast a spell you had prepared to counter that specific magic.

She thought back to a lecture where she’d faced Mercuria in a practice battle. The professor had countered Claudia’s spells by reading the situation and her pattern of attack. In doing so, the magic available to her had been severely limited, putting her at a heavy disadvantage.

“No opponent is easier to read than one whose spells favor efficiency. Upping the humidity of your surroundings will prevent the use of fire spells, just as upping the heat will save you from ice-based attacks. High-powered magic battles are all about having command over your opponent’s behavior and leading them to choices that benefit you.”

Mercuria’s advice applied broadly to the way Arcus fought. There was no need for sour grapes.

“I see,” Claudia said. “It is clear to me now that you have great magical talent.”

“Glad to hear it.” He seemed relieved—prematurely so.

“Be that as it may,” she continued firmly, “this duel is not yet over.”

“Huh?”

“A duel is not over until it produces a winner and a loser.”

“Seriously?! I thought the point of this was for you to ascertain if I was good enough or not?”

“Yes, that is indeed the question that sits at the root of our contest.”

“Right, so—”

“So, nothing. This is a duel. Now, let me think... I shall remove the condition that your loss requires that you leave this place. However, should I win, you are

to become one of my followers.”

“Wh— You can’t just change the conditions in the middle of a duel!”

“I am doing you a favor. Besides, you should be honored to have this opportunity.”

Arcus looked unimpressed. “Could you explain why? I’m not sure I understand.”

“Do you not know who I am? I am—” Claudia cut herself off. She was getting ahead of herself. “Oh, I see. The House Raytheft has a history almost as long as our own. It has turned down several offers of promotion, remaining staunchly as the vanguard that protects the east. I can see why you would answer solely to His Majesty.”

“Erm...”

In fact, the Raythefts held an even longer history than their masters, the Cremelias. As a vassalage to the royal family, they had returned to the east once the kingdom had found its footing. This was not done out of contempt for the Crown, however. They had hastened to join in the wars since, sometimes serving at a great cost to their own fighting power.

This boy’s house was the very embodiment of loyalty, exemplified first and foremost by state magician Craib Abend. A former member of the house, he had now dedicated himself in service to the king.

House Saifice may have had royalty marry into it, but it meant little these days now that it counted as an entirely separate family. What reason would a Raytheft have to serve Claudia? Having said that, Arcus’s confusion was most baffling.

“It matters not. I will have you *begging* me to accept your loyalty soon enough.”

“Huh?”

“The more difficult something is to obtain, the more one longs for it.”

“Wait, I’m really confused. Where’s all this coming from?”

Claudia contemplated the prospect of Arcus as her follower, a suggestion she

had made somewhat impulsively. His adorable features meant she would only have to dress him up appropriately to make him look good by her side.

“Clothing... Yes, I can see that working... You know, you have such a sweet visage that I think anything could make it shine.”

“Ack!” Arcus’s cry was louder than any noise he’d uttered at the hands of her magic. “I don’t know what you’re talking about, but that hit me right in the heart!”

“You’d better not lose now, Arcus!” Susia called from the crowd. There was something different about her countenance. Given how she shouted, she was probably rather fond of him. Claudia hadn’t forgotten how insolent she’d been before either. It amused her to think that Arcus wouldn’t be the only one frustrated by his defeat.

“An inconvenient truth. A midsummer heat haze. The moon on the water’s surface. An afternoon campfire. Render the gold worthless and disintegrate it into fragments. May your glimmer diminish...”

She laid down another round of Suppress. Gray artglyphs and a magic circle extended out across the ground around her, and the hair of which she was so proud lost its shimmer.

“That’s a really troublesome spell.”

“It stems from my innate ability.”

“Innate...?” Arcus frowned as he spoke the word repeatedly. All of a sudden, his face lit up. “Wait! That’s it!” He clapped his hands together, and his delighted expression gradually transformed into a grin.

“Oh? Have you come to a realization?”

“I know how that spell works.”

Claudia faltered. “Ridiculous.”

“There are only so many ways you can weaken your opponent’s magic. You can interfere with their spells directly, or create an area of effect. But, if it’s part of your innate ability...”

“Arcus Raytheft. You will hold your tongue,” she said without thinking.

It sounded like he was missing the salient point. Still, it unnerved Claudia to think he was about to grasp something that no one else ever had.

Arcus said no more, and the time soon came for him to keep dodging spells. His realization did not change the fact that Suppress was still in effect. His only option was to wait for it to wear off before casting again. When that time came near, Claudia prepared to renew the spell. That was when Arcus began to overflow with more aether than she had seen from him so far.

“An inconvenient truth. A midsummer heat haze. The moon on the water’s surface. An afternoon campfire. Render the gold worthless and disintegrate it into fragments. May your glimmer diminish...”

He incanted too, but she missed the contents of his spell.

“Why bother? Your magic has already lost its potency.”

“That doesn’t render it completely ineffective. Though it did mean I used up more aether to make sure the effect was strong enough...”

He was right in that Suppress weakened spells, but did not cancel them out. Nevertheless, it also meant that the caster couldn’t bank on their magic having the intended effect. He seemed to have consumed a considerable amount of aether just now. Claudia guessed he only had enough left for one or two casts.

It was then that he began to incant one of the most basic spells from the textbook. Compared to the magic he had cast so far, it should have been utterly beneath him. Then, he released it effortlessly. Flames shot through the air. They looked to be at full strength.

“Yes! I knew it!”

“What?! How did you negate my Suppress?”

“With that spell I cast just now! It canceled out the weakening magic!”

“That shouldn’t be possible!”

Naturally, it took a full understanding of a spell’s effects to be able to cancel it out. Suppress was no exception.

“Does this mean you have seen through my family’s magic?”

“I knew you could do it, Arcus! Fill me in on the deets later!” Susia called.

“He will *not*!”

Before Claudia could unleash another Suppress, Arcus prepared to cast a spell of his own, one he hadn’t yet used. She didn’t recognize many of the words. She heard a “snore,” a “bugle,” and “musicians.” None of those would be much help in an offensive spell, but supposing it was supporting magic, she wasn’t sure what to expect. Regardless, she braced herself for something offensive.

“Bewildering Bubble.”

“*What?!*”

“This is one of my best spells!” He didn’t seem to be lying either; he was puffing out his chest. Never had he looked so smug. Though, he was probably bluffing.

He is proud of blowing bubbles? Ah, wait a moment...

If Arcus had the ability to put together such a spell, he wouldn’t waste it on creating soap bubbles. Susia was telling the onlookers around her to get back; this magic would have a wide-ranging effect.

A single offensive spell ought to dispatch those bubbles. And that may be precisely what he is counting on.

Bubbles were breakable—Arcus *wanted* them to break.

“A valiant effort, but not good enough!

Blow, o wind. The note of a mild flutter. Mist, haze, fog, and smoke, be dispelled and scattered. Gentle breeze, drive away the fog.

Fog Cutter.”

She had come up with it on the spot. If the bubbles mustn’t be popped, she would blow them away with wind. They started to drift back in Arcus’s direction, and he incanted again. Claudia caught only snippets of his spell. Some of the words were utterly unfamiliar; others seemed to call back to her own incantation.

Curses! He is taking advantage of the fact that I cannot cast anything

offensive!

Arcus would have known that he could take his time while Claudia grappled with the bubbles.

“Fog Cutter Mark 2.”

He had taken her spell and reworked it. The wind his magic released was more powerful than hers, but not powerful enough to break the bubbles. It also kept them traveling in a straight line. They curved between the streams of wind, like balloons being squeezed by a pair of hands.

Claudia decided it would be best to see the spell through with something defensive, rather than to introduce more wind into the equation. If she used something short with plenty of aether, she would be able to make it.

“Cover. Surround. May this tender warmth become a curtain to protect me. Envelop me, great palm.”

She’d pulled it off with time to spare. She felt confident until Arcus stuck his tongue out. He pulled a coin from his pocket and threw it—not at her, but at the bubbles drifting through the air.

“No!”

The moment it hit one of them, they popped one after the other. An explosive sound battered Claudia’s eardrums. She couldn’t even hear herself scream. The attack had left her temporarily deaf. She could feel her head shaking violently—right before her vision blackened.

A short time passed...and then Claudia heard a voice.

“...dia! Lady Claudia!”

She groaned. “What happened?”

Had she fainted? She shook her head, trying to get her bearings as she pulled herself up. Her followers must have used healing magic on her, because her ears didn’t hurt. However, that fact lent itself to an inescapable conclusion.

“What of the duel?!”

The boy who had called to her hesitated. “Arcus Raytheft won.”

“He did?”

Arcus stood a small distance away, and Susia beside him. Claudia couldn't have been unconscious for very long.

“I see. That noise made me faint.”

“That's right, My Lady. A magical shield will not block what is essential to the caster,” Arcus said. “I daresay that is a common weakness shared by all barrier spells.”

As he had implied, such magic did not repel sounds or smells; such an effect would require bespoke spellcraft.

“I cannot recall that ever being taught in class,” Claudia said.

“I'm not surprised. It probably never even crossed our professors' minds that a magician would be caught in such a situation.” He sounded confident in his assertion, but these were the Institute's honored instructors. If not for the skill he had displayed, Claudia would have thought his statement conceited. She had the sense he held knowledge that was beyond the reach of even their learned teachers.

If Arcus was to be believed, it meant he had read Claudia's movements down to the last. Perhaps Professor String's lecture had been right on the money: high-powered battles were about reading your opponent and forcing their hand. He'd had her dancing in his palm till the very last moment, and had *wanted* her to use that defensive spell.

“I am the heir to the dukedom...and yet, I lost...”

Claudia couldn't escape the truth that she had underestimated Arcus due to his lack of aether. It had been the entire starting point of this duel. Despite her preconceptions, most of her spells should have downed him in a single cast. She may have underestimated him, but she had given the fight her all. But she couldn't admit her carelessness; it would damage her reputation as a magician.

How could I have avoided this loss?

Could she have used Suppress again as her final spell? No, she wouldn't have made it. Suppress had a relatively long incantation, and the result would have

been the same. Arcus had had plenty of opportunity to break those bubbles. Her victory would have required separate measures.

“Mmh...”

“Mmh?”

“Don’t think for one second that this is over!” Claudia sniffed quietly before bursting into tears.



As far as the audience were concerned, all they had seen was Claudia crying and running away.

Out of nowhere, Arcus's opponent had rushed back into the school building. For a while, he could do little but stare after her, until Sue took a step away from him.

She thrust a finger in his direction and sighed. "I can't believe you'd make a girl cry, Arcus!"

"I— What?! How was it my fault?!"

"Lady Claudia wouldn't have run off crying like that if you hadn't won!"

"Are you saying I should've lost?"

"Of course not! No way would I ever let you end up as one of her lackeys!"

"Which one is it, then?!" Arcus wailed.

"Anyway, I told you it'd be easy, right?"

"You think *that* was easy? It was way too close!"

"You sure about that?"

"I won 'cause I was lucky."

"Lucky? Wasn't it all that strategizing of yours?"

"I mean, sure, I went in with a *plan*, but the whole thing was a massive long shot."

Kane approached the pair. "I never thought you'd be able to beat her."

"Yeah... One slipup, and she'd have had me, though."

"I can see why you got that Order. Though I'm guessing you've got way more up your sleeve than what you've shown here today."

"I did pretty well considering my aether situation, right?"

"Yeah. Doesn't mean you've got it easy. You should know that better than anyone."

“I’m used to dealing with my handicap, but I still get jealous of magicians who’ve got aether for days...especially after going through all that.” Arcus gave a heavy sigh.

He had been lucky that Claudia’s final spell did nothing to defend against noise. Though it was a weakness common to all barrier magic, she could very easily have resorted to an incantation that could at least *muffle* any sonic effects. Naturally, he’d been caught in his spell’s area of effect along with her. His earplugs had protected his eardrums, but the vibrations had racked his entire body and left him unsteady on his feet. Thanks to the spell he’d cast to regain his bearings, he’d already recovered. Ordinarily, he would have made use of tempered aether to launch the spell from farther away, but he didn’t want to risk drawing suspicion as he had in the fencing hall, resorting instead to breaking the bubbles with a piece of loose change.

Arcus was way more exhausted than he had expected. It was just another disadvantage of his paltry aether pool. He could go in with all the intricate strategies he liked, but a single mistake could easily have him cornered. And yet, there was no way he could have lost this fight. It would have been taken as proof that low aether made for a weak magician. Life just wasn’t fair.

He allowed himself another sigh of relief.

“Arcus!” Sue cried suddenly. “What about that Saifice magic?! You worked it out, right? Tell me! Tell me! Tell me right now!”

“I dunno if that’s a good idea. If the workings of their magic get out, the Saifice family is gonna hold a grudge against me, and that’s the last thing I need. I don’t really want an assassin paying me a visit in the middle of the night, thanks.”

“C’mon! It’s Lady Claudia’s fault for letting you figure it out!”

“I doubt that’s gonna make it any better. Nobles aren’t exactly the most reasonable people in the world. Trust me, I know.”

Once he had picked up on the secret behind Claudia’s magic, he’d realized it wasn’t all that complicated. The quickest way to figure out a spell was to analyze its incantation. But Claudia hadn’t *needed* to pick apart Arcus’s diction to use Suppress, so it couldn’t have targeted the opponent’s magic directly.

Once Arcus had realized that the spell was linked to Claudia's innate abilities, it hadn't taken long for him to see it for what it was. All it required was a little video game logic—although it was naturally a much more serious matter than a game. Now that he'd picked it apart, he'd unraveled the secrets of the *royal family's* magic as well. It had elated him to be able to counter Claudia's spell, but she wasn't the only one who might seek revenge if he let slip about the details.

The gathered crowd eyed him curiously. Some of their gazes even seemed to pity him. Some were glaring, as though they'd tracked down a fitting quarry. Among them appeared an older man with a fine physique. His face had been wrinkled by time, and a white beard sprouted from his chin. The hair on his head, too, was snow white. Beneath his robe, he wore traditional noble dress.

It was the headmaster, Egberd Saifice—Claudia's grandfather. He approached Arcus with a steady step that belied his age.

"Sue! Help! Help, what do I— Where did she go?!"

His friend seemed to have disappeared in a puff of smoke. He found himself doubting whether she had even been there in the first place. Left with no one to assist him, Arcus took to one knee when Egberd stopped in front of him.

"What is your name, young man?" a slightly hoarse voice asked from above him.

"Arcus Raytheft, Your Grace," he stuttered.

"Ah, so it is you... I see." Egberd left a pregnant pause before continuing gently. "Do your best."

"Huh?"

"Mm? Were you expecting some form of rebuke?"

"No... No, sir, it's just..."

"You shan't be expelled from the Institute. I would pay such worries no further mind."

"Thank you, sir."

"Claudia is a stubborn girl, and a hard worker. I would keep your guard up

around her.”

“Yes... Yes, sir.”

“Now, about the Saifice magic...”

“I shan’t tell a single soul.”

“Very good.” With that, Egberd turned on his heel and left. The whole thing had been far less stressful than Arcus had anticipated. He had expected there to be conditions, or that he might find himself involved in something beyond ridiculous, but it seemed he would be spared. He stayed on his knee for a while, dazed, until Egberd’s words returned to him.

“Claudia is a stubborn girl, and a hard worker.”

“Talk about a deadly combination.” He had to grimace.

Epilogue: A Curious Encounter

Until now, Arcus's magical knowledge had come from books and his various mentors. As his time in the Institute progressed, he found that the lectures could nevertheless still have much to offer him. To give just one example, he learned that spells were more than their words and contexts, and could just as easily be influenced by vocalization and pitch. Magic was a topic that seemed to run endlessly deep. Naturally, the content of some of his lectures left him scratching his head.

"Offensive spells each align with a certain attribute. These are fire, water, wind, and earth," the elderly lecturer began.

Though it took him a moment to make the connection, Arcus was reminded of the four classical alchemical elements. Unnerved, he listened closely as the lecturer continued.

"The efficacy of a spell can change depending on the tale upon which it is based. So long as the tale does not conflict with the incantation, it is generally safe to categorize spells based on attribute. Broadly speaking, water magic is strong against fire, earth against water, fire against wind, and wind against earth."

Is this guy for real? Arcus was practically screaming internally.

He dearly hoped that the lecturer was explaining the theory as the basis for something more empirically rigorous. Much more important was the scope and efficacy of a spell. Apply enough heat to water and it would evaporate, and a powerful enough jet of water could easily break through earth. Wind could be used to fan flames, and where the heck did he get the idea that wind was strong against earth? It only caused erosion under specific circumstances.

The lecture reminded him of his discussion with Noah and Cazzy when they were escaping the Holy Tower. Before Arcus had enlightened them about gravity, they'd spoken of a base attribute, and ascension and descent. Perhaps this theory of "attributes" still plagued the Institute's thaumaturgical model. It

was all just one more local oddity to throw on the pile, waiting to be mentally inventoried.

The man had come from a country that had embraced standardized education. At the Institute, however, the lectures were taught independently of each other and often relied heavily on the instructor's personal research, occasionally leading to the teaching of fringe viewpoints. This particular lecture, at least, wasn't as bad as the outright conspiracist interpretations of the Chronicles that certain other cranks peddled in their classes. *Those* were so ridiculous that Arcus couldn't even bring himself to laugh. How many times had he been on the brink of blurting out, "cool story—" before stopping himself? In a world without the internet, no one would get it anyway.

Regardless, it was a new day and he was in a new lecture for General Spellcraft. There were two lecturers this time: one an experienced man, the other a bespectacled woman who had joined only this year. Her long, brown hair was tied up, and she wore a robe—a favorite uniform among the teaching staff. While the way she spoke and conducted herself wasn't quite enough for Arcus to think less of her, she *did* give off a slightly clumsy impression. Even the awkward way she handled her paperwork couldn't be excused by her inexperience.

Presently, the experienced instructor was leading. After explaining how advantageous the act of incanting itself could be, he covered his mouth with his hands like he was warming them up on a cold day.

"This technique is known as Frozen Palms. It is especially popular with magicians from the north."

On top of hiding the movements of your lips, the trick was to incant quietly. Noah seemed to favor northern magic, but so too did he favor his rapier, and so Arcus rarely saw him put this technique to use. Besides, since Frozen Palms muffled the voice, it took away the advantage of hearing oneself clearly, and careless usage lent itself to mis-incanting.

"Even if one is to enunciate the incantation perfectly, this technique still runs the risk of mis-incantation, and so it requires a great deal of practice," the instructor continued, echoing Arcus's thoughts.

Wait a second.

Arcus had assumed that it was the muffling of one's voice—that was, the mild echo and resulting confusion—that would make the caster stumble. But according to the lecture, even a perfect pronunciation could cause problems. In essence, this meant the mis-incantation was caused by something external, which Arcus wasn't sure he could agree with. He'd never considered the risk of his incantation being drowned out by another sound, but perhaps that was because he always cast so carefully.

Food for thought...

Was enunciation all that mattered? Or was that just an assumption that someone had run with and had become the norm? If so, who exactly had decided that it was the case?

The lecturer interrupted Arcus's fruitless thought process. "Cat's Paw is another popular choice." He held his hand, facing outward, in front of his mouth. His arm was held at an angle, and his fingers curled up gently like a cat's paw. He could now incant clearly without fear of his lips being read.

Thinking back, Claudia had done something similar during the duel, preventing Arcus from hearing her spells completely. While he could see the merits of the technique in a fight between magicians, it would be harder to use when fists or weapons were involved.

Once the instructor had demonstrated a similar technique, Orans Hand, in which the palm was held flat, they came to a break in the lecture.

"We still have some time left. Would you take over, Joanna?" He turned to the new lecturer.

"What? Oh, of course!"

Arcus wondered whether it was her first time leading a lecture. He could feel his gaze softening automatically, like he wanted to cheer her on.

Joanna started to file fretfully through her paperwork. "I was supposed to be teaching...linked calling? Was that this one?"

The experienced lecturer hesitated. "No, it's not that one. You aren't meant

to be covering linked calling either. That's for second-years."

Joanna stuttered several times before managing an "I'm sorry!"

"Here, it's this one."

"Of course! Properties of hex!" She straightened up. "I'll be explaining what to look out for when and just after you cast a spell."

Interesting. She might be able to teach me something.

"Did you all know that hex is capable of more than just summoning dark spirits? There is a lot more research to be done on the subject, but recently it's been suggested that it is easier to use magic amid a dense hex concentration compared to in an area of low hex."

"Easier" had a very broad definition. *Easier how?*

Joanna went on to explain that one's aether flowed more smoothly, and that its control was less arduous when it was released from the body.

"May I ask a question, Professor?" Arcus said.

"Go ahead."

"Is this 'ease of use' something that can be immediately observed?"

"It's difficult to say for sure, since it's all very subjective. The most objective evidence we have is that aether seems to travel farther when released in areas that are rich in hex."

"Wait a moment. Does this mean the concentration of hex in an area can be measured in some way?"

"No, not yet. These experiments have been performed in places that have been manufactured to create the ideal conditions for hex buildup."

"I see."

Fascinating. So hex facilitates the passage of aether...

While it might prove difficult to make use of this information directly, it was certainly good to know. And it had been proven that hex birthed dark spirits, so it was something that needed to be handled with care.

“Might there be some tools in development that take advantage of these emerging properties?” Arcus asked.

“Um... Not that I’ve heard of.”

The experienced lecturer stepped in. “Hex is not something that a magician of integrity should think to use. He should instead avoid it as much as possible. I would advise against following your current line of thought.”

“Yes, sir,” Arcus muttered. Hex seemed to be viewed in a similar manner to *kegare*, or defilement, a concept in folklore from the man’s country. More specifically, it was “filth” that appeared to attract hex in this world. He had heard that Lainur, as a nation that forged ahead in all things magic, paid particular attention to keeping its streets clear of defilement and filth.

“Where did that question come from, Arcus?” Joanna cocked her head.

“Nowhere in particular. I just wondered whether hex could be of any use in general.”

“Always looking for an opportunity to deepen your knowledge of magic, I see. It is no wonder you were able to protect His Royal Highness.”

“Oh, well...”

“No need to be shy! You’re a hero!”

“Joanna.”

She shrieked. “I’m sorry!”

Clearly the experienced lecturer disapproved of her wasting lesson time on idle chitchat.

She’s the type to get wrapped up in her own little world, huh? Arcus thought as he watched her apologize profusely to her senior.

Once the lesson was over, Arcus and Rusiel exited into the corridor.

“What’ve you got next, Arcus?”

“Let’s see... Dueling.”

“Wait, we’re allowed to take dueling?! I thought that didn’t start till halfway

through second year.”

“You’re talking to a special case. Lady Claudia is mentoring me personally. She booked out the entire second training grounds just for me. Gee whiz, am I lucky or what? Ha! Ha ha... Ha.”

“Wow. D’you think you’ll make it to fifty duels by the end of the week?”

Since their first bout, Claudia had challenged Arcus three times. He hadn’t had a choice but to accept, and even had a loss under his belt at this point. Still, his two wins put him in the lead, which he supposed proved he was worth his Order. At some point he would *have* to put his foot down though, right?

“I don’t get it! I just don’t get it! Lady Amy isn’t like this, right? Or am I missing something? I mean, what the hell?!”

“Come on, chill a little.”

Far from chilling, Arcus gnashed his teeth for a bit before resigning himself. “All right. I’m gonna go get ready.”

“Catch you later. Good luck.”

As his friend saw him off, Arcus stepped foot into the courtyard. There, he caught sight of a pink-haired girl all by herself. Her frame was absolutely tiny, but she wore the student uniform. Her lids sat heavily over her eyes, like she was close to nodding off. There was something else that caught Arcus’s attention despite all these details.

“Are those ears? No, wait...”

She seemed to be wearing a strange pair of hair accessories. At first glance, they looked like animal ears. She staggered around the courtyard like she was looking for something, glancing this way and that. When Arcus continued to stare at her, their eyes met.

“Whaddya looking at? Wanna ask me something?”

“Huh? Oh, um, no...”

The girl folded her arms and looked at him side-on. Her sleepy eyes narrowed to a bewildering degree. “I guess you needed more time to come up with a good answer, huh? You’ve got all the tact of a walrus creeping up the shore to a

potential mate. I mean, come on!”

“That’s a lot of assumptions to make about someone you’ve only just met.”

“It’s your fault for not answering me properly! Did you wanna ask me something or not?”

“No. I was just wondering, to myself, why you were looking around all over the place.”

The girl pouted and turned her head away. “And you think that’s any of your business?”

“Not really.”

She clearly didn’t want him involved, so there was no point pushing it. Especially when she was being so short with him. Arcus turned to leave.

“Wait.”

“What?”

“Where am I?”

“In case it isn’t obvious, you’re at the Institute of Magic.”

“That’s *not* what I asked. Even parrots think before they speak. Are you stupid or what?”

“No, they don’t! They just repeat whatever you say to them! You *could* let me get a word in edgewise without insulting me, y’know!”

“Where am I, then? Tell me!”

“The courtyard! What, can’t you figure out that much?”

“The courtyard? Not the training grounds?”

“What part of this looks like a training ground? It’s way too small.”

“This *has* to be the training grounds! That’s where I was heading!” The girl looked genuinely astonished. She cast her gaze this way and that, like a baby penguin separated from its colony.

Arcus was taken aback too. The training grounds were on the opposite side of the Institute. She would have had to be walking in the completely wrong

direction to end up here.

“Wait, I’ve heard of people like you,” he said. “You’ve got zero sense of direction, don’t you?”

“That’s some assumption to make about someone you’ve only just met! Where are your manners? Maybe you could find a shoebill that’d be willing to teach you some!”

“Are you serious right now?! Plus, you oughta count yourself lucky I even know what a shoebill is!”

“Take me to the training grounds!”

“Why should I?”

“‘Cause I don’t wanna be late for my lecture and get in trouble! Duh!”

After a profoundly heavy sigh, Arcus gave in. “Fine.”

This girl obviously had issues with communication. Still, seeing as he was heading in that direction anyway, he didn’t lose much by bringing her along. Annoying as she was, there was no real reason to refuse her. When he beckoned to her, she reached out her hand.

“My hand,” she said.

“What about it?”

“Hold it.”

“What?”

“Oh, wake up! I don’t wanna get separated!”

Arcus bit back his doubts about her being able to cope in everyday life. She’d only insult him with an obtuse animal metaphor if he didn’t. His best bet was to take her to her destination without making any careless remarks.

She already looked exasperated the moment he took her hand. “What’s with the long face?! You look like an abandoned duckling!”

“Don’t worry about my face. Can’t you go one second without commenting on something?” It didn’t help that she had compared him to something undeniably cute this time around.

“My name’s Millia. What’s yours?”

“Arcus.”

“Okay.”

With that, he began to lead the way. He couldn’t help but wonder what made him such a magnet for oddballs.

Afterword

It's been a while. This is the author, Gamei Hitsuji.

Thank you so much for picking up a copy of the sixth volume of *The Magician Who Rose From Failure*! Thank you too for your patience in waiting for it to come out. I'm truly grateful to everyone who bought a copy.

This volume focused on the aethometer's unveiling and Arcus's entrance to the Institute. There's a lot that didn't go as he expected at the party, like the quarrel with Joshua, his run-ins with influential and eccentric people from beyond Lainur's borders, and the fact that some have already clocked him as the aethometer's inventor. He's going to have to keep his guard up for a while yet. I still want Barbaros and Meifa to play a role in the story going forward, so this probably isn't the last we've seen of them. Actually, it's definitely not the last. I'll work hard to put them to good use.

I can't deny that I focused less on the classes and more on other matters when it came to the Institute scenes. But you shouldn't take that to mean that Arcus's attendance there is pointless. I mean, there are things that can *only* take place in a school setting, so I hope you'll overlook the lack of academics...

Both Claudia and Kane (though he didn't get a lot of screen time) did a lot to change Arcus's environment. With this volume, their designs were also set in stone. Though his servants don't play much of a role while he's at school, there will be plenty of appearances for them going forward, so please sit tight.

Since the characters have aged, their designs have changed too. Arcus's hair has grown. The girls' bodies have developed and become more feminine. Unfortunately, Arcus has failed to become more masculine! A big thank-you to Fushimi-sensei, who took care of the character designs.

I'd now like to extend my heartfelt thanks to the following people: GC Novels, Saika Fushimi (illustrator and artist for the manga version), my editor K, manga editor H, my proofreading company Oraido, and my supportive readers.

Glossary

Institute of Magic

A school for magicians located in Lainur's capital, it offers the finest magical education in the kingdom. As it is adjacent to the Magician's Guild, security personnel frequently patrol its surroundings. The student body is a mix of noble and common children. The headmaster, Egberd Saifice, heads one of Lainur's four cornerstone dukedoms. Mercuria String, a state magician, is its head lecturer.

Three Sages

The Three Sages are said to have embarked on a journey of salvation with the Twin Phantoms and the elves. They reached every corner of the Earth, their mission to fight the demons that threatened it and to overthrow the monsters and tyrants that tormented mankind. Their adventure is recorded within *The Spiritual Age*, and continues to be passed down as a fairy tale. It is said that the sages were called Mistletoe, the Saint, and Chime.

The Heoga Tribe

A minority race that resides on the Lamacan Plateau, which runs from northeastern Lainur to the eastern edge of the Northern Confederation. They do not belong to any one power, maintain political neutrality, and have repelled numerous invasions from large nations, in part due to their people's physical and military prowess. The tribe can be identified by the hornlike protrusions that grow atop their heads. These can measure anywhere from less than half an inch to a few inches in length. The textiles the tribe creates are highly valued in foreign nations. The clans that make up the tribe are brought together under a Grand Patriarch or Matriarch. Ursula currently holds this title.

Ignited Soul

An offensive fire-based spell. It launches several pale-blue flames reminiscent of will-o'-the-wisps to consume the target. A basic spell, it is not as exclusive to the battlefield as it used to be; it is also used to measure a caster's skill. The incantation is: *"Flaming quintessence. Float by the ancestral tomb. Sway, sway. Shake and glimmer. Call on Gown's lamp. Stray and rush. An ensemble of embers."*

Wailing Wave

An offensive water-based spell that forms a miniature flash flood. A basic spell, it is not as exclusive to the battlefield as it used to be; it is also used to measure a caster's skill. The incantation is: *"High waters of the hill. Flowing supply of water. Fill, pull, push, come near, let every place be submerged. O wave, open your upper jaw, feed, and swallow."*

Cutting Whirlwind

An offensive wind-based spell that creates a whirlwind to cut through the target. A basic spell, it is not as exclusive to the battlefield as it used to be; it is also used to measure a caster's skill. The incantation is: *"Shriveled vortex, cause a gentle stir. Moving wind, staying wind. Become a prancing breeze. Guided by that high-pitched call, slice and rend, o blade."*

Earth Fist

An offensive earth-based spell that makes the ground swell and thrust upward underneath the target. The spell's appearance differs depending on its caster's intent, and it has been known to take on a wide range of shapes, from a formless mass of stone to a perfect simulacrum of a human hand. A basic spell, it is not as exclusive to the battlefield as it used to be; it is also used to measure a caster's skill. The incantation is: *"Great arm of earth without sword or spear. Manifest your will by hands alone. May he who first revolted now raise his fist."*

Bonus Short Story

The Secret Beneath the Capital

Arcus was strolling through Lainur's downtown. He was joined by the usual suspects, Noah and Cazzy, as well as Eido, his cook. While strolling with no destination in mind, Arcus was surprised when the most recent addition to his servants drew the fond attention of a number of acquaintances. Once things had calmed down, he browsed the stores and stalls for rare curios.

Upon picking one up, he remarked to Noah, "Checking out antiques like this is pretty fun."

"Indeed. There's often much to learn from any human creation that survives as long as these."

"Yeah. Like, some of it looks so useful, you wonder why it's gone outta fashion."

"The wisdom of our predecessors can never be dismissed out of hand."

"If only they had relics from previous eras as readily available."

Arcus often wandered downtown with Sue, and while they had been to antique shops before, he couldn't remember spotting anything beyond a certain age.

Cazzy agreed. "I've never seen nothin' like that."

"Yeah... What about you, Eido? You ever come across any ancient relics on your travels?"

"Not really. I don't think they would end up in stores like this, even if they were out there."

"Damn..."

"Most things that get excavated tend to be bought up there and then. Only the relatively modern items come to antique shops. You'd be better off

searching ruins than the capital.”

“Ruins?”

Eido nodded. “I’ve not actually visited many myself. The majority of them stand untouched, far from civilization. Anything else would have been excavated long ago—putting aside the capital’s undercity and the Holy Tower, of course.”

Noah reacted like he had heard such rumors before, and Cazzy clapped his hands together.

“Oh, yeah! There *was* somethin’ like that ’bout the Tower!”

“And what of the capital?” Noah asked.

“There are tracks underneath it. I’ve seen them.”

Arcus almost jumped out of his skin. *Tracks?!*

“Do you mean the variety that are used to move carts?” Noah inquired.

“That’s right. Not that anyone knows what they’re for; as far as anyone knows there’s never been any mineral wealth down there to speak of.”

“Tracks...” Arcus murmured to himself.

Eido looked down at him. “Something catch your attention?”

“I wanna ask you something, but I dunno how to phrase it... Do you know where those tracks end?”

“They stretch outside the capital to the north, south, east, and west. All the places that it’s thought they run to have been sealed up by now, though.”

Cazzy cackled. “They’d be loopy *not* to have sealed ’em up! Otherwise we’d be seein’ thugs sneakin’ into the capital every other day!”

Indeed, anyone who wished the capital harm would be silly *not* to make use of the tunnels leading out from under the walls. Burrows and saps had always been favorite strategies among trespassers. What pack of miscreants wouldn’t throw down their shovels and take the easy way forward if their own tunnel should cross paths with someone else’s? All of that said, Arcus was more interested in the fact that these passages extended *out* of the capital.

His thoughts must have been obvious from his expression.

“Have you come upon something, Master Arcus?”

“That’s some face you’re makin’! What’s up?”

“It’s just a possibility, but... Did these underground tracks have any ‘carts’ that were especially big or long, Eido? Or that were linked together? With glass windows, maybe?”

Eido considered the question for a moment. “I remember that we once came upon something like that half-buried in a collapsed tunnel. I’m sure it had wheels; I don’t know about windows, but there were shards of something like glass scattered all over the floor.”

Bingo. It sounded like Arcus’s instincts had been correct. As surprised as he was, he was more excited than anything else.

“I thought so. It’s not much, but there’s something there, huh?”

“Do you know something, Arcus?” Eido asked.

“He knows a lotta stuff. Most of it don’t make no sense to anyone but him,” Cazzy informed him.

“A number of people have expressed a wish to open up his head and examine what lies inside.”

As usual, his servants didn’t miss an opportunity to crack jokes at his expense.

“What you saw, Eido, was probably a subway. A railroad built underground, basically. The cars are used to transport large groups of people down the tracks.”

“Large groups of people, is it? No way’s a horse draggin’ somethin’ that heavy, and it’d be a stretch to pull it off with magic.”

“I don’t know how they would’ve done it, but it’s not impossible,” Arcus countered.

“It *is* a bit much to swallow all at once,” said Noah.

“I don’t think it’s that absurd, myself,” Eido said. “You hear a lot about large cities having a network of tracks. Why not use them to transport people?”

“I dunno...” Cazzy remained unconvinced.

“Think about *The Magician’s Elegy*,” Arcus said. “Remember that story about people riding on that giant steel snake? I bet it’s based on a railroad.”

“Ah, yes, I do recall.” Noah nodded. “They say the period depicted in the *Elegy* overflowed with such marvels.”

“There was that steel bird that went with it, right? Carried people through the skies and all...” Cazzy said.

“An airplane,” Arcus said at once. “Wait, that doesn’t make sense. They had airplanes when *people* couldn’t fly with magic?”

Though he didn’t know how true it was, it was said that humans couldn’t use magic to fly because the spirits didn’t allow it. But maybe it was possible *without* the use of magic.

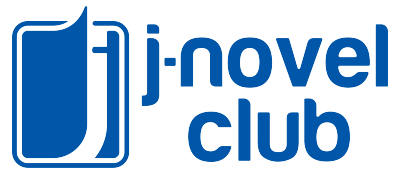
“You seem to recognize many of these things, Arcus,” said Eido.

“I guess.”

“Do you think you could recreate them if you knew how they were put together?”

“Not a plane, no. Maybe a railroad, if the tracks and the trains are still there... No, wait, not if I don’t know *how* they moved...”

Having said that, things would be much easier if railroads *did* exist here. Arcus was once again reminded of the conveniences he coveted from the man’s world.



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The Magician Who Rose From Failure: Volume 6

by Hitsuji Gamei

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