

## **Contents**

- 1. Cover
- 2. Insert
- 3. Title Page
- 4. Copyright
- 5. Contents
- 6. Prologue
- 7. Chapter 1. To Magic School
- 8. Chapter 2. From the Holy Kingdom to Dirashik
- 9. Chapter 3. Challenging the Entrance Exam
- .O. Chapter 4. Advanced Class Policies
- .1. Chapter 5. The Saint's Money Troubles
- .2. Chapter 6. Classmates
- .3. Chapter 7. The Four Factions
- .4. Chapter 8. The Fairy Escort
- .5. Chapter 9. Comparing Answers
- .6. Chapter 10. Concluding Negotiations
- .7. Epilogue. The Letter
- .8. Extra Story. The Path of a First-Year Student in the Knighthood Course from Spring to Summer
- .9. Afterword
- :0. Yen Newsletter

# Pagebreaks of the print version

i

ii







# Kunon Sorcerer Sees

Umikaze Minamino
Illustration by Laruha

SON YEN

## Copyright





#### **UMIKAZE MINAMINO**

#### Translation by Katelyn Smith

#### Cover art by Laruha

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

MAJUTSUSHI KUNON WA MIETEIRU Vol.2

©Umikaze Minamino, Laruha 2022

First published in Japan in 2022 by KADOKAWA CORPORATION, Tokyo.

English translation rights arranged with KADOKAWA CORPORATION, Tokyo, through TUTTLE-MORI AGENCY, INC., Tokyo.

English translation © 2024 by Yen Press, LLC

Yen Press, LLC supports the right to free expression and the value of copyright. The purpose of copyright is to encourage writers and artists to produce the creative works that enrich our culture.

The scanning, uploading, and distribution of this book without permission is a theft of the author's intellectual property. If you would like permission to use material from the book (other than for review purposes), please contact the publisher.

Thank you for your support of the author's rights.

Yen On

150 West 30th Street, 19th Floor New York, NY 10001

Visit us at yenpress.com ◆ facebook.com/yenpress ◆ twitter.com/yenpress

yenpress.tumblr.com ◆ instagram.com/yenpress

First Yen On Edition: January 2024

Edited by Yen On Editorial: Emma McClain Designed by Yen Press Design: Madelaine Norman Yen On is an imprint of Yen Press, LLC.

The Yen On name and logo are trademarks of Yen Press, LLC.

The publisher is not responsible for websites (or their content) that are not owned by the publisher.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data Names: Minamino, Umikaze, author. | Laruha, illustrator. | Smith, Katelyn, translator.

Title: Kunon the Sorcerer can see / Umikaze Minamino; illustration by Laruha; translation by Katelyn Smith.

Other titles: Majutsushi Kunon wa mieteiru. English Description: First Yen On edition. | New York : Yen On, 2023-Identifiers: LCCN 2023018636 | ISBN 9781975368227 (v. 1 ; trade paperback) | ISBN 9781975376581 (v. 2 ; trade paperback) Subjects: CYAC: Magic—Fiction. | Blind—Fiction. | LCGFT: Fantasy fiction. | Light novels.

Classification: LCC PZ7.1.M6314 Ku 2023 | DDC [Fic]—dc23

LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2023018636

ISBNs: 978-1-97537658-1 (paperback) 978-1-9753-7659-8 (ebook)

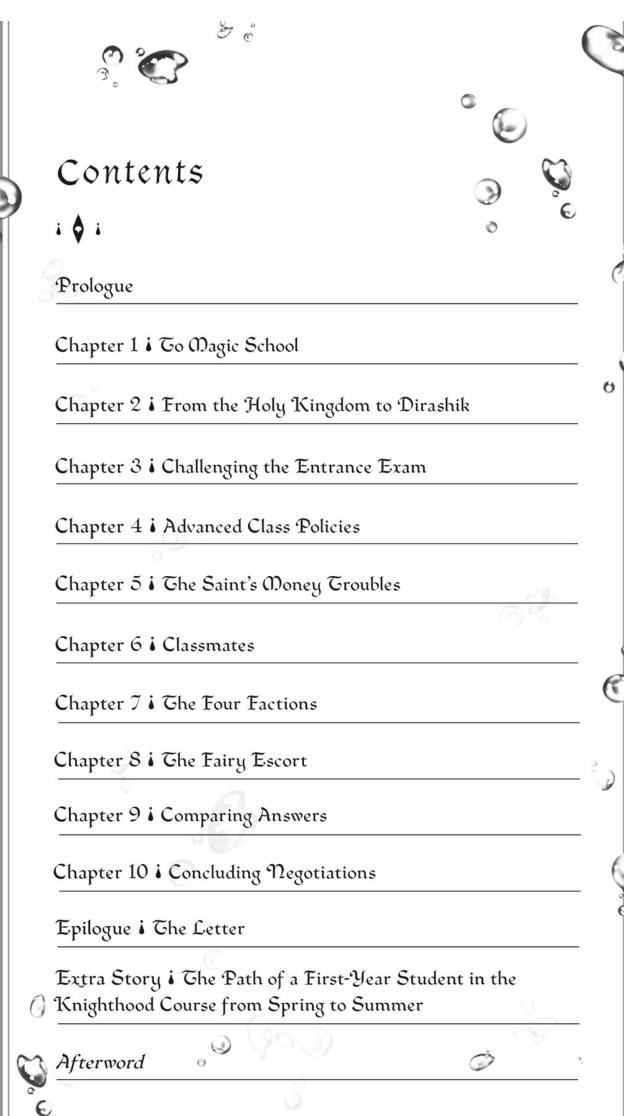
## **Contents**

Cover
Insert
Title Page
Copyright
Prologue
Chapter 1 To Magic School
Chapter 2 i From the Holy Kingdom to Dirashik
Chapter 3 Challenging the Entrance Exam
Chapter 4 Advanced Class Policies
Chapter 5 The Saint's Money Troubles
Chapter 6 Classmates
Chapter 7 The Four Factions
Chapter 8 The Fairy Escort
Chapter 9 & Comparing Answers
Chapter 10 & Concluding Negotiations
Epilogue. The Letter
Extra Story i The Path of a First-Year Student in the Knighthood

# **Afterword**

Yen Newsletter

**Course from Spring to Summer** 





## **Prologue**

The scratch of a pen moving across a page.

The faint scent of ink.

Those were the only signs of human life in the large, innermost chamber of the Black Tower—the office of the head of the Kingdom of Hughlia's Royal Sorcerers, Grand Master Londimonde.

The evening sun filtered in through the window, bathing the Grand Master in its light as he sat at his desk doing paperwork.

Every day, the top sorcerers in the Kingdom of Hughlia performed experiments and conducted research at their home base, the Black Tower. And the only person who knew about all of it was Grand Master Londimonde. Creating a simple record of what he saw and learned was a part of his duties. Proper records were kept by the researchers themselves. Londimonde merely summarized.

"Phew."

Suddenly, the Grand Master straightened up. He had been sitting for so long in one position that his spine cracked and popped in protest as he moved.

"Oof. It's no fun growing old."

Just as he murmured those words to himself, it happened.

"You in there, old man?!"

The window shattered as someone burst through it into the office.

*"…"* 

Londimonde didn't react. He just stared, exasperated, at the falling glass and the intruder's backlit form.

"Look at that. You are here. You could said something."

The intruder—a man who looked displeased for some reason—walked over to the low table set up for guests and made himself at home. It was Zeonly Finroll. He carried himself like he owned the place.

"I would have if you had given me the chance."

Forgoing any further response, Londimonde cast a spell. In an instant, the smashed glass and bits of frame sprang back together to once again find purpose as a window. It was like he had rewound time.

"I'll ask you only once," he said. "What magic experiment has prompted you to interrupt my work?"

In other words: You better not have shattered my window for no reason.

Londimonde looked at Zeonly's haughty face, demanding an answer.

"I was experimenting with reinforcing the body via earth magic. I lost control, and the momentum *just happened* to bring me here. I do have something to talk to you about, though."

"In that case, fine."

If Zeonly had charged in randomly, Londimonde would have had his hide. But if there was a reason for it, his behavior was acceptable.

Londimonde didn't look for things like common sense in sorcerers. He knew that playfulness and a reckless approach could yield unexpected results. In fact, the Black Tower didn't need "sensible" Royal Sorcerers. Nothing notable was achieved by letting oneself be bound by common sense.

Londimonde's presence at the helm was the very reason some of the current Royal Sorcerers had made their home in the Black Tower. Zeonly was one of those.

"So what did you want to talk about?" asked the Grand Master.

"Write Kunon a recommendation letter for me."



"Hmm? Ah... I see." Londimonde nodded.

Kunon—an apprentice sorcerer with a water crest—was the second son of the Marquess Gurion. He was currently studying under Zeonly as his disciple. Londimonde had met him only once two years prior, but he remembered the boy well. Or rather, there was no way he could forget Kunon.

Zeonly specialized in magic tool development, and Kunon was heavily involved in his most recent theories and hypotheses. Although they hadn't met in person in some time, Londimonde was quite familiar with Kunon's writings and investigations, to the degree that it was hard to believe they had only met once.

"He's turning twelve already, is he?"

The magic school in the magic city of Dirashik accepted students starting at age twelve, though there was no upper age limit to enroll. It seemed Kunon was finally old enough to go.

"But he's your disciple, isn't he? Why don't *you* write his recommendation letter?"

"I will. To the teachers I know anyway. But I want you to write the formal one. You know I was a troublemaker. It wouldn't be fair if the school was biased against him because of me."

"Wouldn't be fair, hmm? That doesn't sound like you."

Zeonly was always irreverent and arrogant, walking his own path in life. It was rare for him to worry over anyone else.

"I kinda overdid it back then."

Zeonly, now a graduate of magic school, understood that he'd gone too far. He hadn't been *just* a problem student. He'd gone above and beyond. There were bound to be one or two, perhaps three or four—if you included the little things, maybe even one hundred—anecdotes about Zeonly's antics still circulating. And he was sure they referred to him as *that* Zeonly with a scornful tone as they recounted them. That was how much of a troublemaker he had been.

"Kunon's my disciple, so you know he's gonna wind up causing trouble. But it wouldn't be right for him to get treated like a delinquent right out of the gate."

During his school years, Zeonly had been well-known for both his brilliance and his arrogance. He had made a lot of enemies—a *lot* of enemies. He could hardly think of anyone he might call his ally. Nevertheless, Zeonly had graduated from magic school in no time at all.

"He's cheekier than I was, but he's still a kid, and he's sensitive. Plus, he's totally sheltered. I'd like to give him the chance to gradually grow into being a troublemaker."

Londimonde wondered if Kunon was really destined to become a problem child. *How interesting*, he thought. If Zeonly was so certain, it was probably inevitable. And Londimonde loved troublemakers. Especially ones obsessed with magic.

"Very well. I'll write the letter of recommendation for you."

Here was a usually insensitive problem child clumsily expressing concern for his first-ever apprentice, and Londimonde could sympathize.

"However, I have one condition. If Kunon reports anything interesting to you, you have to pass the information along to me. Understand? I won't forgive you if you hog his reports all to yourself."

This was a boy Zeonly himself had acknowledged. He was sure to get into all kinds of antics at magic school. And even better, he had almost no connection to Londimonde. The Grand Master would get to know all about what Kunon was up to without taking the blame for any of it. This was guaranteed to be great fun.

"Now then, do you think Kunon's troublemaking will surpass yours?"

"I doubt it. But I hope he tries his best."

It should be noted that Zeonly had never once written a letter of recommendation before this, and he wasn't sure how to go about it at all. Ultimately, thanks to his letter, written with only the best intentions, Kunon was met with considerable bias at his entrance exam.





# Chapter 1 To Magic School

The magic school Kunon would attend was located in the magic city of Dirashik.

Despite being a city, Dirashik was more like its own country. Surrounded on three sides by major powers, the city remained unaffiliated with any of them. It was governed by the immortal witch Gray Rouva, who was said to have been alive since time immemorial.

A great many people and things had gathered around Gray Rouva—especially sorcerers. They arrived from all over the world, desperate to study under her. Those who sought to plumb the depths of magic, to experience its mysteries and wonders—and even a little of its hunger and darkness—came to the immortal witch in droves.

This resulted in the founding of the magic school, and it continued to operate to the present day.

And so resisting attempts at negotiation and invasion alike by its powerful neighbors, Dirashik had settled into a path of coexistence.

"In short, the city survived a war against the Empire, the Holy Kingdom, and

the New Kingdom through Gray Rouva's power alone."

"Wow. Gray Rouva sounds like an amazing person."

"Well, she *is* called the world's greatest witch. I don't think there's a sorcerer alive who doesn't know of her."

It had been several days since Kunon and Iko's departure from Hughlia's capital, and their journey to the magic city of Dirashik had only just begun. They would be spending a lot of time in the carriage, so to pass time, Iko had asked, "What sort of place is the magic school?" and Kunon had answered her with information gleaned from the materials his father had prepared for him.

He had read the documents two or three times already. He was so excited about what lay ahead, in fact, that he thought about looking them over two or three, or perhaps even four or five more times, though he'd long ago memorized their contents.

"Some call her the ultimate witch. They say she brings angels and demons to heel—things like that."

"I see. So she's attended by charming little angels and demons?"

"I feel like calling them charming brings a different picture to mind. I kind of like the sound of it, though."

"That's no good. You're a charming little angel yourself, Master Kunon. You'd better be careful."

"Really? You don't think I'm a demon?"

"If you were, we wouldn't get along so well."

The two of them laughed together. Their journey was going swimmingly.

As the carriage rolled along, the view from its window continued to look strange to Kunon.

Up above, he saw a purple sky filled with swirling clouds. Below, pure-white grasslands stretched on as far as the eye could see. Strong winds carried along a silvery powderlike substance. Only the water visible in the distance was a familiar color.

Nevertheless, for the first time, Kunon was getting a glimpse of the Marquess Gurion's territory that he had so longed to see.

Their journey was supposed to take from three weeks to one month. During that time, Kunon intended to practice using the Glass Eye through which he had gained his sight. He still wasn't accustomed to it, so he would need a lot of intensive training.

They were due to arrive in the magic city approximately one month before the school's entrance exam. The plan was to use that window to complete the enrollment process and make the necessary arrangements.

Proceeding at a reasonable, comfortable pace, the carriage had taken about five days to reach the Marquess Gurion's lands.

"It's been a while, hasn't it?" Kunon said.

Unable to see, Kunon had rarely ventured outside the grounds of his home. The only other place he had visited as a child was the estate on these lands. Though perhaps "visit" wasn't the correct term. It was, after all, the seat of the Gurion family. Their estate in the capital was a secondary residence—these lands had originally been their home.

"It really has," Iko agreed. "About four years, I think."

"Wow, has it really been that long?"

The last time Kunon had been here was four years ago. He had hardly ever left the family's estate in the capital since devoting himself to the study of magic. His father, mother, and elder brother had occasionally returned for work or to socialize with other families, but Kunon hadn't accompanied them.

"What brought me out here last time, I wonder?"

Four years ago, Kunon had been studying magic under Jenié. He couldn't think of a reason why he would have left his detached house back then. He had a faint but definite memory of coming back to the Gurion lands with his parents and brother, but he couldn't recall what he had done during his visit.

He must have spent all his time practicing magic, reading, and doing research. Since that was how he usually passed his days, it must not have stood out much

in his mind.

"Huh? You really don't remember?" asked Iko.

"Remember what? Did I forget something?"

"You don't remember coercing your father—who had work to attend to—your mother, and even Master Ixio into coming back here just because you heard the library at the family home was bigger and might contain books about magic?"

"I did that?"

"You kept doing a weird dance and told them 'I won't stop until you agree to take me!' You seriously don't remember? How could you forget such an original dance? It wasn't fit for the ballroom, and it wasn't provocative or sexy. It was like a totally new art form!"

"Oh, I do remember dancing nonstop. So that was why? I'd forgotten the reason."

"...Back then, you were always working yourself to the bone with research and magic and swordplay. But you were never satisfied. Your parents made the decision to take you here for your health. Master Ixio came along as well."

It seemed Kunon was always causing trouble for the people around him, even when he didn't remember it.

"By the way, about that dance...," Iko began.

"I don't remember it," Kunon said. "What was it like?"

Kunon had learned the basics of social dancing through illustrated textbooks, Baroness Flora Garden's etiquette classes, and some assistance from Mirika. He didn't think he was particularly skilled, but he expected he'd managed the basic steps.

"The dance itself was fine. I admire how you kept a straight face throughout."

"A straight face, huh?"

Kunon imagined it. He pictured himself, expression serious, endlessly going through the steps of his original dance—"like a totally new art form," as Iko had

said—in front of his family.

"So you're saying everyone was so moved by my serious face and sincere dance that they agreed to my request?"

"Yes, that's exactly right. I'm certain of it."

Kunon wasn't so sure. In the end, the dance had conveyed not his earnestness but his bone-deep exhaustion. Perhaps they thought he was so tired it'd finally affected his brain.

The carriage continued inexorably toward the Gurion family home. Kunon would be spending two nights there. It was also where he would part ways with Iko and meet a new servant who would accompany him to magic school.

Kunon and Iko arrived at the Gurion estate precisely as planned. As Kunon stepped out of the carriage, a familiar voice called his name.

"Kunon!"

It belonged to his beloved grandfather.

"Grandfather!"

The elderly gentleman spread his arms wide. His grandson's heart was racing, but he approached his grandfather at a calm, normal pace.

After an awkward but amicable pause, Kunon and the gentleman embraced each other, celebrating their reunion.

The man—Tinalisa's father—was named Edrew Belland, and he was currently managing the Gurion territory. Kunon's father, Arsan, was working at the royal palace, and he couldn't afford to leave his lands unattended. So he had asked Edrew, who had lots of free time, to live at the family estate in the role of caretaker.

Despite acting on Arsan's behalf, Edrew was from another noble household and didn't possess any real authority in the Gurion territory. He was quite simply house-sitting.

At the ripe age of fifty-eight, Edrew adored his grandchildren. Having lost his wife early on in their marriage, he spent his leisurely days as an unmarried older gentleman devoted to his hobbies.

"Goodness, how you've grown!" he exclaimed.

"We cannot retain the trappings of our past selves indefinitely," replied Kunon.

"Oh, is that so? I can't say I follow, but I'm sure you're right!"

They were meeting for the first time in about six months. Edrew traveled to the royal capital every so often, and so Kunon still saw him occasionally.

"Let's go into town after you've rested a little! I'll treat you to anything you'd like!"

"Hooray!"

"My Lord Regent, I have a letter from my lady," Iko called out.

"I've prepared snacks!" said Edrew, ignoring the interruption. "Come, let's go inside!"

"My Lord Regent! I have a letter from your esteemed daughter! If you do not accept it, she will be angry with me, so please take it without causing a fuss!"

Edrew, the picture of a model grandfather, smiled brightly as he invited his grandson into the house.

Meanwhile, he pretended not to see the letter from his daughter, which was sure to contain disappointing news. This elderly gentleman was practiced in the ways of the world and wasn't afraid to turn his back on anything unpleasant.

"Hmph." Edrew snorted brazenly from his spot reclining on the sofa. "No more than five hundred thousand necca? That's hardly a child's allowance."

After leading Kunon to the parlor, Edrew had opened the letter from Tinalisa in front of his grandson and glanced over its contents. Iko had followed the old man, insisting at least ten times that he take the letter. This old geezer hasn't changed a bit, she thought.

It seemed that, in her letter, Tinalisa had set a limit for how much money her father was allowed to gift to his grandson. If she hadn't, there was a real risk Edrew would buy Kunon a house or a plot of land. The possibility must have been considerable, too, if even Kunon's doting mother was making the effort to head him off.

Five hundred thousand necca was no small sum, in any case. Gurion family servants made just shy of that amount for two months' work.

"Grandfather."

The moment Kunon called out to him, Edrew's grumpy, calculating expression morphed into that of a congenial old man. *Shrewd as ever*, thought Iko.

"Oh, who cares. We'll just have to keep it a secret. Do you want to sneak out and buy a big ship or something? I have the money, you know."

What use did Kunon have for a ship? This old man had too much spending power for his own good.

"No, that's all right, Grandfather. Please call my new servant first. I'd like to have her discuss things with Iko so she can prepare to take over."

"O-oh... Right. You're on your way to magic school."

Indeed, Kunon wouldn't be staying at the estate for long. He was only using it as a rest stop on his journey to Dirashik and to pick up his new attendant who would be serving as Iko's replacement for the rest of the journey. This wasn't meant to be a playdate with Grandpa.

"I won't be able to see you for a few years," said Edrew. "I'll be lonely, you know."

"Grandfather, you promised not to do this."

Edrew couldn't remember making such a promise, but he nodded solemnly and said, "That's true..." Then he ordered a servant waiting by the wall to fetch lko's replacement, and she left the room. Not long after, they heard the sound of two pairs of footsteps approaching.

"Introduce yourself."

The new maid responded to Edrew's command.

"My name is Rinko Round, and I'm eighteen years old! I took this job because of the handsome salary! I'm hoping to save money to open a shop in the future and for marriage! Also, my elder sister told me to go for it!"

"Nice to meet you. You're Iko's younger sister, yes?"

Iko's younger sister had become a servant at the Gurion household through Iko's reference, just as Iko's urging had led her to apply for the task of accompanying Kunon to Dirashik. Iko had recommended her highly and *often*.

"Incidentally, I have a fiancé, so I refuse to become anyone's mistress! If Master Kunon's fiancée were to bear a grudge against me, I might even be killed, so it's out of the question!"

"You don't have to worry about that. My fiancée is more precious to me than eating three square meals a day. You should treasure your own fiancé just as much."

"Yes! But...more precious than eating three square meals a day...? Is that possible...?"

Perhaps Rinko's fiancé wasn't quite as precious to her.

Kunon had heard from Iko that she had a younger sister. However, as he hadn't been to the family estate in four years, this was his first time meeting Rinko. After talking with her for a short while, he got the feeling that Rinko's personality was just as cheerful as Iko's, and he took a liking to her immediately.

Kunon didn't think he could bear spending all his time with a servant he couldn't joke around with. Her being engaged was also a plus. There was no telling what could happen between a man and a woman, no matter their ages. Both parties being spoken for already was preferable.

She looked similar to Iko, too. Through his Glass Eye, Kunon could see that the sisters even sported matching, splendid black horns on their foreheads.

As for his grandfather, Edrew... The massive horns protruding from either side of his head near his temples were just as impressive as those of the powerful demons Kunon had seen in picture books.

Edrew's daughter—Kunon's mother, Tinalisa—looked like the hero of some epic tale with her mismatched eyes, while her father bore the appearance of a great demon. Kunon wondered if there was some kind of significance there, though it was probably a waste of time to fret over nonexistent things that only he could see.

Kunon spent much of his visit to the family estate passing the time with his grandfather. He let Edrew teach him a bit about horseback riding, listened as he flaunted his wealth ("Should I buy a casino in secret? It'll be for children, so don't worry"), and indulged the old man's little fits ("Old people die sooner when you neglect them, you know").

It was likely they wouldn't see each other for several years, so Kunon tried to spend as much time as he could with Edrew.

The man was in good health, but he was getting on in years, and anything could happen. With this in mind, Kunon strove to keep his grandfather company, but regardless, he still needed to sleep at night.

Edrew's energy failed to die down in the evening, and so Kunon had him lie on the Supersoft-Body A-ori. This put his grandfather to sleep in moments. The fragrant, enticing waterbed had a reputation—particularly with Zeonly—for being too comfortable to resist. Its effect was instantaneous.

And so Kunon's time at the estate flew by.



As Kunon was busy with his grandfather...

"So that's Master Kunon. He doesn't seem too difficult."

Iko and Rinko were in the estate kitchen. They had taken up a corner of the room—so as not to get in the way of the cooking staff—and were discussing the transfer of Iko's duties.

"Yes. I think you'll do fine, Rinko."

As she said that, Iko saw a smaller, younger Kunon in her mind's eye. That younger boy, perpetually depressed and withdrawn, had been quite a difficult charge to care for. But the Kunon of the present? He was a different story.

"Actually, won't this be harder on Master Kunon? I guess if he got on well with you, he'll be all right with me, but..."

The Round sisters and their family were well-known in the area for their cheer. As common folk, they paid little attention to complicated matters, going

through life joyfully.

It was that same bright disposition that had gotten Iko her job as a servant to the Gurion family. Thinking back on it, she had probably been hired to provide a kind of shock to Kunon's system—not that any of that mattered anymore.

"Rinko," she said.

"Hmm?"

"Master Kunon is still an earnest, impressionable child. So I'm telling you right now—I won't forgive you if you put any nonsense into his head. If you get him involved in any unsavory activities, you'll have to answer to me. Got it?"

"Unsavory activities? Like womanizing?"

"Stop! Don't even say it!"

Iko covered her ears. Kunon was her precious, adorable charge. The idea of him touching or being touched by any crafty, grubby little temptresses was too much to bear! The only girl she would allow to have that kind of contact with Kunon was Mirika. Iko was completely emotionally invested, and she hoped and prayed nothing would tarnish her rosy vision.

"I get it. I've heard Kunon is engaged to a member of the royal family, so I'll be keeping an eye on his dealings with women."

Regardless of her elder sister's feelings, that was most certainly the best course of action. Kunon's fiancée was a royal princess, after all. If something was to happen—well, the fallout would be nothing to sneeze at.

In any case, Rinko needed to be prepared. Her new charge was himself the son of a marquess. She had read many a children's story about villainous aristocrats and their heinous actions. It was always possible her master might saddle her with the blame for all his scandals...or worse!

Rinko would be with Kunon for several years, and she would prefer that time pass by problem-free. So when it came to Kunon's interactions with girls or with anyone else, Rinko intended to exercise the utmost caution.

"Anyway, tell me about Master Kunon," she said. "I need to know everything if I'm going to do a good job."

In order to exercise caution as she'd promised, Rinko first needed to understand her new charge. She'd already observed how overindulgent her sister was toward the boy, but she'd only just met him herself. She wasn't yet attached.

"Where to start..."

Collecting herself, Iko began to speak about Kunon. As Rinko listened and nodded along, her face gradually turned serious.

"...And that's about it."

As Iko wrapped up her lengthy description of the boy, the pride was clear in her expression.

Her younger sister, however, looked stricken.

"I see," she said. "So because Kunon is a gentleman, he's kind to ladies, almost always strikes up conversation with them, and lavishes them with praise. Basically, you're saying his personality is perfectly suited to appeal to women."

Iko seemed miffed by her sister's summary.

"Why are you saying it like that? Like it's a bad thing?"

"Because that's exactly how it sounded to me."

Men who were kind to women were certainly preferable. Rinko had no complaints on that front. But there remained the issue of what happened when a man was *too* kind to women. Men who were indiscriminately attentive to all women rather than directing their efforts toward a specific person, well—



"Is Master Kunon a playboy?" asked Rinko. That was the impression she'd gotten from her sister's description.

"Absolutely not! Master Kunon would never!"

"I'm not sure I'm convinced..."

Kunon had good social standing and a respectable upbringing. Plus, he was pretty cute. He would probably grow into a good-looking man in a few more years. He appeared capable of getting by just fine with his magic despite not being able to see. And on top of all that, he was a smooth talker and tended to dote on girls.

He seemed almost destined to become a womanizer.

"This isn't going to be so easy, after all..."

It appeared that Rinko had her work cut out for her. Though her sister's intentions had been good, she had instilled in Kunon a misguided view of gentlemanly behavior. Kunon's special circumstances were partly to blame, as well. But neither of those excuses would fly much longer.

To be specific, Kunon would only be able to get away with that kind of behavior while he was still a child. Once he grew up, it was certain to become a problem.

Well, I guess that settles it, Rinko thought. I'll simply have to correct my sister's mistakes little by little.

In terms of her own safety, she really had no other choice.



Kunon's two days at the Gurion family estate passed in the blink of an eye.

"Master Kunon, it's time."

After eating breakfast with his grumbling, reluctant grandfather, Kunon returned to his room to prepare for his departure. When he did so, Iko came to see him.

He hadn't spent any time with her at all during their stay. She had been busy

briefing her younger sister about her new role as Kunon's private maid. Only now were they able to meet—when it was already time to say good-bye.

"Thank you for everything, Iko."

"We'll see each other again when you come back, you know. I'm going to keep working at the estate in the capital even after I'm married."

"Yeah. We'll meet again in a few years. Until then."

Kunon and Iko fell into an easy hug.

Iko was the person who had supported Kunon for more than half of his life. She had taught him how to live. She had given him a goal to chase and urged him toward it. To Kunon, Iko had never been a mere servant. He didn't know how to classify how he felt toward her. "Grateful" alone didn't cut it, and "love" wasn't quite right, either.

But he didn't need to have a word for it—for his feelings or for Iko's. Kunon believed in his heart that they felt the same and that they understood each other, even without speaking.

"Well then, shall we?" she said.

"Yes."

There were no tears. It wouldn't have suited them.

Kunon most certainly did not hear Iko sniffling as she followed behind with his luggage. And he most certainly did not remove his eye covering—or the handkerchief he had stuffed inside it.

"You're really leaving? Do you have to go? You should stay and live here with me."

Smiling vaguely at his weeping grandfather as he waved good-bye, Kunon climbed into the carriage.

"Well, I'm off!"

Rinko, taking up Iko's mantle, got in after him.

"You're really going to go?! Even though I'm begging—"

"Ride on," Kunon called out to the driver. At his command, the carriage, its

wheels wrapped in A-ori, began to move smoothly forward.

"Are you sure?" asked Rinko. "The lord regent is still speaking..."

"If we take him seriously, he'll go on forever."

Their itinerary was largely settled, and since there was always a risk of the schedule being thrown off by weather, leaving on time was essential. Edrew was aiming to use all kinds of delay tactics to extend Kunon's stay, so ignoring him was for the best.

"Rinko, I'm in your care from now on," said Kunon.

"Yes! And I, yours! I'll work hard for my salary!"

Her statement was actually quite reassuring. They hadn't known each other long enough to grow attached yet, and since Kunon wasn't the head of his family, he couldn't count on the same loyalty from his servants.

To Kunon, a practical attitude was easy to understand. It was good. They were still strangers, after all. They needed to get to know each other properly, but there was no reason to rush.

"You were fully briefed, I assume?" he asked.

"Yes! I was told my most important task is to make sure that you rest if you seem tired! This is an ironclad rule!"

"I see..."

Kunon was sure that, just like her elder sister, Rinko would use various means to interrupt him and make him sleep whenever he became absorbed in magic or reading or paperwork. In this way, it seemed his new maid would be just as formidable as his last.

"Are you sure your fiancé is okay with this, Rinko? You won't be able to see each other for several years."

"We discussed it and decided to wait to marry until we get a big payout! Did you know, Master Kunon? In addition to my monthly salary, upon successful completion of my duties with you, I'll receive a bonus equal to the pay I earned up to that point."

A bonus. This was the first Kunon was hearing about anything like that.

"So when you're done, you'll be paid twice the amount you were offered?"

"Yes! It's a huge sum and just for looking after a child for a few years! I jumped at the offer as soon as I heard. Jobs like this don't come around twice!"

That kind of pay was certainly enough to lift one's spirit.

"I want to own a business in the future, so I need as much money as I can get! As soon as this job is done, I plan to open a shop and run it together with my fiancé!"

"Is that so? It's great to have a goal. What kind of shop will it be? A secret family operation that 'disappears' people?"

"That does have some appeal. But in the end, my fiancé and I both like to eat, so we decided to open a restaurant. The two aren't that different, so we figured we might as well go with the legal one."

"That's true. The only difference would be whether you're sustaining people with food or disposing of them in the dark."

Hellos and good-byes went hand in hand. Kunon's anxiety about losing Iko had yet to clear. But when starting a new chapter in life, partings were inevitable.

He had left his family behind, too. Not to mention his fiancée, Mirika; his sparring instructor, Ouro Tauro; and his magic teacher, Zeonly. He'd said goodbye to Baroness Flora and Jenié, too, though those farewells had happened long ago.

This time, it was Iko he was losing.

Kunon was sure there were many new acquaintances, like Rinko, in his future. He wouldn't be lonely for long.

As they rode on, Kunon made conversation with his new attendant about all sorts of subjects in an effort to get to know her better.

He was lonely, but he still managed to enjoy himself.





## Chapter 2 From the Holy Kingdom to Dirashik

Kunon was three weeks into his trip.

With no notable upsets to their schedule, he and Rinko had made it to the capital city of the Holy Kingdom. It would take another week to traverse the country and cross into neighboring Dirashik.

The Holy Kingdom—Saint Lance. As the name suggested, it was a deeply religious country, where all the citizens were said to be devotees of the Radiant Goddess, Kira Leila. That was mostly in the past, however, and its capital was now much like any other city.

Before, the people of the Holy Kingdom had worn robes and dedicated their lives to the Radiant Goddess, but the passage of time seemed to have eroded the old customs.

"...Hmm."

Kunon wasn't sure what to do. In his hand, he held a book of new theories from the world-famous water sorcerer Satori. As one might expect of a country bordering the magic city, a great many magic tools and books about magic found their way into the Holy Kingdom. At present, Kunon was in a large shop in

Saint Lance's capital specializing in magic.

He had arrived in the city the evening before and spent the night in a hotel. That day, Kunon had nothing in particular to do, and while exploring the city with Rinko, he had decided to check out this shop. The plan was to spend the day recovering from the fatigue of their journey, then board a carriage for Dirashik early the next morning.

"Rinko, how much do we have in the purse?"

"No matter how many times you ask, the answer isn't going to change. We can just barely afford the book—which means that if you buy it, we won't have the money to pay for the hotel or the carriage ride."

"Right. So can I buy it?"

"Absolutely not. We'll be destitute."

Books about magic were expensive. Only magic users needed them, after all. To the average person with no magical ability, they were no more than paperweights. Consequently, most books on magic were one of a kind. Since they weren't mass-produced, the cost of a single book was very high, and books written by well-known sorcerers were even pricier.

"It's a big purchase, so you should think it over carefully. That said, I don't think you should buy it, either."

Even the salesclerk, who would have made a profit if she sold the book, recommended putting it back.

"By the way, are you interested in magical engineering? I've got a secondhand copy of Zeonly's book. He's been popular lately. It's cheaper than that one by Satori, and I recommend it."

"Not interested, thank you."

Recently, the uncommonly brilliant magical engineer Zeonly Finroll was making waves in the industry and in the magical world at large. But Kunon, who was well acquainted with the contents of Zeonly's book even without reading it, took no interest. Besides, his teacher had given him a copy already.

"What is this used for?" Rinko asked the clerk.

"Oh, that? It's called a Trade Box, and it's part of a set of two. Basically, it's a magic tool that teleports whatever is put in one box into the second box."

As Rinko chatted with the clerk, Kunon continued to fret over the Satori book.

"Wow, that's incredible!" said the maid. "Could I put myself inside, you think?"

"You can put in anything that will fit. But the box is only about as big as one finger, so you might have some trouble."

"Hmm, that is a problem. But maybe with a little elbow grease..."

"You'd have to make yourself *really* small... Actually, let me be clear. You *definitely* can't fit in the box. So please don't try. You'll break it."

"That's a pity. Is there a magic tool that can shrink a person?"

"I don't think one exists yet, no."

"I see... I'd really like to try it, though... What do you think, Master Kunon? Do you want to try getting inside?"

"Sure."

Kunon put the Satori book back on the shelf. The water sorcerer was an instructor at the magic school he was headed for, so it would make more sense to try speaking with the author herself once he arrived instead of buying her book here. There was also a chance that the school library would have a copy.

He really wanted the book, but that just wasn't an option right now. Kunon's pocket money, generous as it was, was insufficient. They only had enough to cover travel, and a big purchase like this would be reckless. Kunon found himself wishing his grandfather had come along.

But all that aside...

"Excuse me, fair lady. May I test the box?"

...the conversation between Rinko and the clerk had caught his interest.

"Hmm? Huh? Lady...? Um, sure, but you're not going to try to get inside it, right?"

Despite his earlier answer to Rinko's question, Kunon had no intention of

trying to enter the box. He could tell he wouldn't fit.

"Rinko, the box, please."

His maid placed a small metal box into Kunon's outstretched hand.

"Here you go."

The clerk looked on, confused.

The tool was comprised of two boxes. Kunon held one, while the clerk held the other.

"Hmm..."

Using his magic, Kunon analyzed the structure of the box. It was made up of a number of diffuse, reflective magic circles laid one over the other. By passing it through all the magic circles at once, the space inside the box had been distorted with considerable force and connected to the other box.

Overall, the execution was rather slapdash. Kunon presumed the range of effect would be quite limited, and he questioned the device's integrity as well. It would probably last only about ten uses. Furthermore, the box was tiny, making it rather impractical. As a magic tool, it wasn't anything to write home about.

But when it came to such items, one had to consider more than their use alone. Invaluable tools might one day see the light of day precisely because of the breakthroughs accomplished by forerunners like this.

"How interesting," said Kunon. "...Oh, you can open yours now."

"Huh? Oh, okay - Wow!"

The object Kunon had transferred from his box to the clerk's was a tiny water cat, small enough to fit inside. While they were in the carriage, Kunon had passed the time by creating things Rinko requested, including this cat.

"It's so cute! And so teeny! How adorable!"

Kunon's water cats continued to be well received.

"So you are a sorcerer, then."

The clerk had suspected as much when she saw Kunon express interest in

books on magic, but she'd held her tongue so as not to bother her customer. Now that she had seen his magic, however, the cat was out of the box, so to speak.

"Are you heading for Dirashik, by any chance?"

"That's right. We're just stopping en route."

"I see. Around this time... Well, it's a little early yet, but every year, fledgling sorcerers like you come into our shop, dropping in on their way."

"Oh? Are you a sorcerer, too?"

"No. I like magic, but I have no ability. Regardless, I wanted to work in a place where I could interact with magic users, so I ended up here. I guess you could say I'm a bit of a sorcerer enthusiast. Oh, by the way..." At that point, the clerk somewhat pointedly changed the subject. "It seems our kingdom's Saint will be enrolling in magic school this year."

"Saint?"

Kunon had never heard of such a person. He knew about the concept of saints, but he hadn't realized they still existed in the present day.

"Last year," the clerk continued, "the Empire's Inferno Prince and the New Kingdom's Lightning Bolt enrolled as well. They're pretty much the cream of the crop. To think you'll be among them. Ooh, what fun!"

The clerk, letting the tiny cat perch on her index finger, was delighted to have met a boy who aligned with her interests.

"This is the first time I've run into a sorcerer who can produce an itty-bitty cat like this. I just know you'll be famous. One day, I'll get to brag about how I met you before you entered school."

The clerk was gushing over him, but Kunon's head was elsewhere.

"The Saint, the Inferno Prince, and the Lightning Bolt... Hmm."

What fun, the clerk had said. Kunon felt the same way.

With the exception of the Royal Sorcerers—who he had met only once—he had yet to spend a significant length of time with any magic users other than

Jenié and Zeonly. He was sure other sorcerers would have different approaches and skills than he did.

Would he be able to make practical use of knowledge from people with different magic crests? There would be no telling until he gave it a shot. But since Kunon had been able to make great use of what he'd learned from Zeonly, an earth sorcerer, he thought there was a good chance the answer was yes.

Kunon imagined the school friends he would make—people he had yet to even meet—and grew more excited than ever. He still hadn't experienced school life in earnest.

"By the way, sir," said the clerk.

"Yes?"

"What kind of magic do you do?"

Apparently, the clerk hadn't realized what the water cat was made of.

"I'll give you a hint. It evaporates when it gets close to fire. I hope that clears things up."

"Oh, it must be water, right?"

But no sooner had he provided the clue than Kunon had dashed out of the store with Rinko in tow, pretending not to hear the clerk's response.

After some leisurely wandering, Kunon and Rinko eventually stopped at another shop.

"Hmmm. Okay. Hmm... Oh? Ah..."

"Master Kunon, could you be a little quieter?"

"Wouldn't that just be creepier?"

"No, I find the talking slightly more off-putting."

"Iko always said it was weirder when I was quiet... But I get it. I'll stay silent instead."

I'd rather you didn't do either, thought the shopkeeper of the sewing supplies store.

"Excuse me," he said. "I'm sorry, but could you refrain from touching the products so much?"

As soon as the well-dressed boy had stepped into the shop with his maid, he'd started putting his hands all over everything. This was not polite behavior. What need could there be to touch all the store's wares like that?

"Oh, please don't mind us," said Rinko.

"I'm afraid I do mind," said the man.

The store wasn't very large, and there weren't any other customers at present. He simply couldn't ignore the boy's actions. Not to mention the product he was currently touching was the most expensive one they had. Of course the shopkeeper was worried.

This store was geared toward common people, and nobles rarely ever came inside. Plus, the boy was wearing an eye covering over both eyes and accompanied by a maid. He would've stood out no matter the circumstances, and with such a conspicuous person behaving so oddly, the shopkeeper couldn't help but take notice.

"What exactly is it you're doing? We're quite confident in the quality of our products, so you don't need to examine them so thoroughly... I assure you our goods are genuine."

"I'm just trying to commit the texture to memory. This is dark fox fur, correct? I love the way it feels."

"Um, thank you, I suppose..."

"Rinko."

The boy with the eye mask called out to his maid, who was trying on hats in front of a full-length mirror. She kept striking poses and occasionally whistling at her reflection or saying things like, "I'll have you know the punishment for stealing produce is death, buddy."

"Yes?" she replied, looking up. "Have you memorized it?"

"Yep-here."

The shopkeeper froze. All of a sudden, a black fox had appeared in the child's

hands. The animal's glossy coat was so dark it would have melted into the night or shone under the glow of the moon. It was—unmistakably—a dark fox.

"Ooh, it's so cute! Cats and dogs are fine, too, but I just love foxes!"

"Really? Then I'll add this to my repertoire."

"The tail should be a little longer. The fur is nice and fluffy, but it needs to be slightly thicker. Yes, like that. Oh, simply adorable! Can I have this one, please?"

"Sure. Now on to the next pelt—"

"What do you think you're doing with our products?!" the shopkeeper barked.

There were simply too many strange things happening all at once, and he couldn't stay quiet any longer. For some reason, he felt like something shady was taking place, as if the store's merchandise were being used in some kind of fraudulent way right before his eyes.

After leaving the magic shop, Kunon and Rinko had found a nearby sewing supplies store. They were hoping to find some unusual furs, considering the size of the city, so that Kunon could expand his range of water animals.

Rinko had said *You should learn to perfect animals other than cats*, and Kunon had agreed, thinking it would be fun. It would be good practice in any case, as there wasn't much else he could do during the journey.

Along the way, he had gotten the chance to touch actual cows, horses, dogs, and giant hairless rats. As a result, Kunon had been able to re-create those animals with some degree of success. And now, aiming to further his progress, they were looking for rarer pelts.

The object Kunon had just been rubbing his cheek against was a scarf made from the fur of a dark fox. Dark foxes, which were jet-black all over except for their white bellies and whiskers, were said to be extremely rare. Though to be honest, Kunon probably could have managed a decent re-creation of one just by changing the color palette of a regular fox.

"Oh... You're using magic...to make reproductions of animals...? I... I see..."

Kunon told the man that he was memorizing the fur's texture so he could

replicate it with magic, handing him a water dog as an example. The shopkeeper didn't seem to know much about magic, but somehow, as he petted a dog that he could hardly believe was made out of water, he was convinced.

"I apologize," said Kunon. "I should have explained myself properly and asked for your permission first."

When they'd initially come in, the shopkeeper had told them they were free to look over the wares, not that they could use the store's goods as references for magic experiments. Of course, store clerks didn't usually greet customers with lines like that. And this one *definitely* hadn't.

"Um, can you re-create anything?" he asked.

"I can only replicate something's shape and texture. The animals I create aren't living creatures."

"Then what about a woman?"

"What exactly do you think you're saying to a child, hmm?" Rinko cut in.

Kunon had never heard such a cold voice from his new maid, and both he and the shopkeeper trembled. She sounded even scarier than Iko did when she was mad.

"No, um... My apologies."

"Oh, you're sorry, are you? Imagine having the nerve to soil my precious Master Kunon's young ears."

"Rinko, I'm sorry. It was my fault."

"Why are you apologizing, Master Kunon?"

He was apologizing because she was angry, of course. Although it was true that Kunon had no reason to be sorry.

"... Humans are difficult to replicate," he said. "So I'm afraid that's impossible."

In the past, Kunon had made a water doll that looked just like a maid from a distance, but ever since he'd made the doll fly around the royal castle and

gotten in trouble, he hadn't tried again.

All the Royal Sorcerers he had been playing around with at the time had also been reprimanded. It was a fond memory. Kunon wondered how Londimonde was doing these days.

Even more than animals, humans were always in motion. No matter how hard one tried, there was no stopping the movement of one's heartbeat or pulse. The lack of this movement caused a sense of uneasiness when someone looked too closely at a water doll.

Actually, shouldn't animals be the same? Wouldn't a dog or a cat made of water inspire that same feeling of uncanniness, at least a little? No matter how similar their appearance, the water animals didn't move in the slightest.

"... A re-creation of a human, huh...?"

Now that Kunon thought of it again, the subject was quite fascinating. He had a feeling there might be some practical uses for such a creation. Besides, when it came to things like this, it was better to cultivate a wide range of abilities. It was deeply frustrating having to say "I can't do that" when the need for something arose.

"Master Kunon, let's go. This shop is run by a good-for-nothing adult."

"I really am sorry!" called out the shopkeeper. "I just said it on impulse! There's a woman I like, and I was simply tempted by the possibility of sleeping next to her!"

"Shut your mouth. You'll corrupt his heart as well as his ears." Grabbing Kunon's hand as he remained lost in thought, Rinko dragged the boy from the shop. "Good grief. This city is no place to raise a child."

It seemed Rinko was surprisingly passionate about the upbringing of children.

•

"Ugh..."

That was a disaster, the clerk thought, sighing.

He'd spoken without thinking, asking if that boy could create a woman... It

was a hidden desire that had only come out because of how blown away he was by the quality of the water dog still in his arms. But there was no doubt it had been inappropriate to say such a thing to so young a child. The shopkeeper was filled with regret.

As he was busy stewing...

"Sorry to trouble you."

...the shop's door opened, and two people in white hooded robes came inside. One was a tall woman, and the other, a girl. Aside from the child's gender, they were like a matching set to the pair of customers who had just left.

Spotting the gold embroidery adorning their white robes, the shopkeeper straightened up. Slightly flashy yet undeniably beautiful and pure—it was Lailai's ivy leaf embroidery. Anyone who saw it would know immediately that these two were high-ranking members of the Sacred Church.

Judging from their outfits, they were traveling incognito. Still, they were unmistakably important spiritual leaders.

"We heard you have a scarf made from dark fox fur," said the woman. "Could you show it to us?"

"Yes, it's on that shelf over there— Um, yes...?"

The shopkeeper pointed to the shelf in question, but the young girl ignored the gesture and approached him instead.

"That's magic, isn't it?"

The girl's attention was on the dog in the shopkeeper's arms.

"Magic?" asked the woman. "You mean that dog?"

The girl answered yes, then reached out to touch the animal with her fingertips. With a sudden *splash*, the dog reverted to a formless quantity of water.

"Whoa!"

There was no way to avoid the abrupt rush of liquid, and the shopkeeper's lower half was totally drenched. It was like he was facing the consequences of

his earlier rudeness.

"Oh, I'm sorry. I never thought it would be made of water."

Her presence had caused the dog to burst on contact. As it happened, the girl had a natural resistance to sorcery and magic, and her presence automatically dispelled any low-level spells.

She'd momentarily forgotten this when she reached out to touch the animal, though she could hardly have expected the spell to be sustained by such a small amount of power.

"Oh, it's okay... Ah-ha..."

Just great, thought the shopkeeper. First one child sorcerer and now another.

Magic users weren't common. He could hardly believe two of them had wandered into his shop one after the other. It seemed too strange to be mere coincidence, and yet what else could it be?

"...U-um, is there something you need...?"

The shopkeeper squirmed. The pair of high-ranking church officials were staring fixedly at a single spot on his wet pants. Had his crotch ever garnered this much scrutiny? He felt sure it had not. As that foolish thought ran through his head, the two customers' gazes remained glued to his pants.

"Was that dog really made of water?" the woman asked.

"As you can see," the girl replied, "there's no doubt about it. That's water."

"...I don't know of any such spells."

"Nor do I."

A water spell that could take the shape of an animal. There were indeed spells of a similar sort, but they were rather advanced. If one of those had been used to create the dog, the girl's touch shouldn't have dispelled it.

"Has it caught your interest?" asked the woman.

"No, not especially."

The girl, who had lacked strong emotion since birth, did not find herself particularly stirred. She simply logged the event in her memory and thought,

What unusual magic one can find out in the world.

"Is that so? Well, I'm extremely interested," said the woman. "Shopkeeper, what kind of person cast that spell? If you don't mind my asking, that is." She pointed at his crotch as she spoke.

What kind of torture is this? he thought as he stammered out a reply.

It would be a while longer before Kunon or the girl—Saint Reyes—realized how close they had come to meeting that day.

•

"Ugh, how annoying."

"What a pain."

Though Kunon and Rinko had encountered some minor hiccups during their journey, nothing had been major enough to disrupt their schedule. The trip went very smoothly, and after approximately a month of travel, the two of them arrived safely in Dirashik.

As was fitting for a place called the magic city, Dirashik was home to a large number of sorcerers, and there were stores related to magic everywhere. To Kunon, the city was like something out of his dreams. He wanted to explore it the moment he arrived, but there were more pressing matters to take care of.

On their first day, they checked into a hotel early to rest and spend the night. Then, the next morning, they headed for the magic school's administration office. After arriving at a building just outside the school grounds, they consulted with a receptionist behind the counter. Unfortunately...

"I'm sorry, but the dormitory is already full."

...when they asked her about enrollment and applying for a space in the dorm, she returned a rather disappointing answer. The biggest hiccup of the entire trip, it seemed, had come right at the end.

Kunon's father had taken care of the paperwork necessary for his enrollment, and after a quick confirmation, Kunon was granted permission to take the entrance exam. He accepted his registration ticket without incident. The exam

would take place in one month—all according to plan. The only problem was the dormitory.

Kunon would be living in Dirashik for a while, but because he had been undecided regarding magic school for so long, his father hadn't been able to complete the dormitory application. By the time his attendance was decided, the dorm's remaining spots had to be reserved on a first come, first served basis. Regrettably, that was just how things were.

Persistent, Rinko had said, "There must be something you can do," but the receptionist had answered flatly, "I'm afraid there isn't."

Rinko tried to slip the receptionist a bribe, but that only angered her. "I'm not lifting a finger for less than ten thousand necca," she'd said. "Certainly not for one hundred. Besides, I'm not a fan of bribery anyway." In the end, they'd been shooed from the building.

"Ugh, how annoying."

"What a pain."

Rinko and Kunon were at a loss.

"She didn't give my one hundred necca back, either."

"I don't really enjoy bribery myself, but did you really think that amount would get us anywhere?"

One hundred necca was the kind of sum a commoner might give his child as pocket money.

"Isn't it the first rule of negotiating that you start from somewhere unreasonable?"

So that was it. Rinko had been trying to bait the receptionist into making a deal with her. Kunon wasn't so sure a bribe was the kind of interaction one should draw out, and at the other party's place of business, no less. In any case, her attempt had ended in failure, so it was a little late to worry about it now. Besides, if Kunon started giving her tips, Rinko's next shot at bribery might actually succeed, so he decided to let the subject go.

As a noble child, Kunon had learned about the importance of bribery as a

method of negotiation, so as the servant of an aristocrat, Rinko's instinct wasn't wrong. But that applied only to dealings in Hughlia. Kunon was sure that, in Dirashik, things like bribes, dirty money, and collusion were viewed differently.

"We set aside a good sum of money in case I didn't get into the dorm, right?"

"Yes. Enough to stay in a hotel for one month."

In that case, there was still hope. In the meantime, Kunon could write to his family to ask for additional funds and seek their advice on what to do.

But to Kunon's thinking—

"I wonder if we could find a house to rent long-term, since I'll be here attending school for a few years."

—securing somewhere he could stay on a yearly basis was preferable to the high cost of a hotel.

He was bound to amass more possessions while he lived here. He would continue collecting documents and books on magic—and might even start developing magic tools. And naturally, he would be conducting plenty of experiments and research.

Living was expensive. Plus, he would probably blow some money here and there on various magic-related goods. But those expenses wouldn't be a waste. A hotel, on the other hand, while pleasant, was money that could be better spent, and Kunon needed to save where he could.

"Rinko, you can cook, right?"

"Yes. In the future, I plan to open a law-abiding restaurant with my fiancé."

Rinko had also learned from her sister about Kunon's favorite foods—and which ones were easiest for him to eat. Iko had told her that whenever she wanted to butter up Kunon, she should cut him thick slices of bacon.

"What about housework?"

"Yes. I'm prepared to become a housewife at any moment."

Whatever one might assume from her personality, Rinko was still a servant for the Gurion estate. She excelled at such tasks.

"Then why don't we rent a small house and live there together?"

"Um, is that a proposal...?"

"If neither of us was engaged, I wouldn't mind if you took it that way. If we were both unattached, we could get married, and I'd cherish you for the rest of our lives."

"Yes, gladly! If neither of us were engaged!"

The two of them burst into giggles.

"Excuse me."

The receptionist was standing nearby, wearing a slightly sour expression. She'd just witnessed Kunon and Rinko's shenanigans and rather wished she hadn't.

"For the time being," she continued. "I've been giving this to enrollment candidates who didn't get into the dormitory... In addition, here's your one hundred necca back. I'd rather not get yelled at by my superiors for taking bribes over such a paltry sum."

Apparently, the receptionist had some additional information and had followed them out of the building. But finding it difficult to interrupt their strange back-and-forth, she had wound up waiting for some time, all the while watching them and thinking, I suppose they get along well, at least.

"A piece of paper?" asked Kunon.

Rinko accepted the document in Kunon's place, since he couldn't see, and proceeded to scan over its contents.

"Yes. It has information about realtors. Are there students every year who don't make it into the dorms?"

"It varies quite dramatically," said the receptionist. "Since there aren't that many sorcerers in the world, we have years with no applicants at all. Plus, there are some students who struggle to graduate, so the number of openings in the dormitory is by no means consistent. As it happens, we haven't had many graduates in the last two years."

I see, Kunon thought. It wasn't that there was an overabundance of applicants

this year, but rather that students who had yet to finish school were filling up the dorm.

"Any realtor on that list should be able to show you some sorcerer-friendly properties."

"Thank you very much for your help," said Rinko. "I apologize for my discourteous attempt to bribe you."

"...Bribes start at ten thousand necca. If you give someone that little, they'll assume it's a tip."

"I'll keep that in mind."

After letting out an exasperated sigh, the receptionist went back into the building.

"Now then, Master Kunon," said Rinko. "Shall we go find a home that could have been our love nest?"

"Yes. It's time we started our new life together, I think."

All joking aside, Kunon was right.

The entrance exam for magic school would be held in one month. In the meantime, Kunon needed to prepare.

Even if he failed, Kunon was still a sorcerer, and there were paths he could take outside of magic school. But all Kunon could think about was passing the entrance exam.

Starting with the immortal witch Gray Rouva, he had a long list of sorcerers he was interested in, and a good number of them were teachers at the magic school. It was said that even the instructors who weren't famous had world-class knowledge and experience in their respective fields, not to mention unparalleled magical talent. There was no chance Kunon was going to walk away without meeting such people, not after coming this far. And so he intended to pass the exam no matter what.

He had been late in applying to the dormitory, but he was able to find a house in no time through a realtor from the receptionist's list.

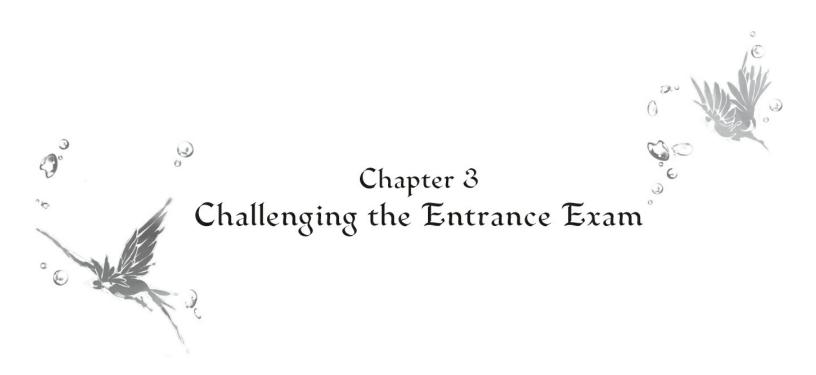
Every year, the number of applicants increased about two weeks before the

entrance exam. Kunon had arrived a month early, so while he had missed out on the dorm, he had his pick of properties. In the end, he rented a house that was somewhat large for two people and moved in with Rinko.

It took him one week to get accustomed to their new living situation. After two weeks, he had acclimated to the cuisine. In three weeks and five days, Kunon could find his way to the different magic shops around town.

Then, for the two days remaining, he decided to apply himself at last and started cramming for the entrance exam.

Finally, it was time for Kunon, now thoroughly prepared, to face the test that would determine his future path...



The day of the entrance examination had arrived.

At the appointed time, Kunon returned to the administrative building along with Rinko. They were met by the same receptionist from one month prior, and she remembered them.

"O-only applicants are allowed beyond this point..."

The receptionist stammered a little while looking at Kunon. His stylish eye mask and fancy cane were probably to blame. She was taking his blindness into careful consideration.

"Oh, I can manage fine on my own. I'll be quite lonely without Rinko, however."

"What a coincidence, Master Kunon. I feel the same. Perhaps we can arrange something with the help of a little bribe?"

"Don't try to give me another hundred necca, because it won't work. I told you, the minimum is ten thousand. If you're all right by yourself, your attendant will need to spend her time elsewhere." She turned to Rinko. "The exam will end before noon, so why not have a cup of tea at a café somewhere?"

"In that case, I'll go get myself something sweet! Good luck, Master Kunon!" Rinko left without batting an eye.

"...What on earth is your relationship with that maid?" wondered the receptionist aloud.

Rinko puzzled her. The woman seemed worried about her master, then took off without a care. And yet they seemed to get along so well.

"Who can say?" said Kunon. "She's always like this, so I can't be sure. But attractive women always have a mysterious side, so I think it's fine."

"Oh... Is that so?"

"I'm sure you have a mysterious side, too. Perhaps you don't have a name, for example."

"What do you mean? My name is Loubella... Oh."

The receptionist gasped. She'd been so taken aback, she'd given her name without meaning to. She felt as though she'd just been bamboozled by a master flirt.

"Loubella. What a lovely name. I especially like the way it sounds—like a combination of Lou and Bella."

The boy had just tricked her into revealing her name, and now he was talking nonsense. The maid might be strange, but this child was a total enigma.

Loubella the receptionist had a feeling entertaining the boy's antics would tire her out, so she decided it was well past time to lead him to the examination site.

Loubella and Kunon left the administrative building through the back door.

"Beyond this point, you're on school premises," the receptionist explained.

As they walked, she described the rough layout of the grounds, noting the schoolhouse and other special-use buildings in the distance.

"Wow..."

Kunon was already thrilled. They were still far away, but even so, he could feel them—the presence of several powerful sorcerers within the school

grounds. They had to be the teachers he'd heard so much about.

Kunon was eager to meet the many esteemed instructors, speak with fellow students, and conduct all kinds of experiments. He was going to have so much fun.

"Are you familiar with the nature of the exam?"

"After the applicants' magical ability is assessed through a practical skills test, they are separated by magical attribute to complete a written portion and interview. Ultimately, however, decisions are made almost entirely based on the practical portion."

"By and large correct. If your magic skills are solid enough, the examiners assume you're versed in magical theory, so they consider the written exam passed. Supposing you aren't, they figure you'll learn afterward, so it's fine."

Kunon tried to imagine what kind of person would possess undeniable magical ability without any familiarity with the theory behind it. Someone like that would have to be a genius. He felt such cases must be exceedingly rare.

"The interview is important, as well. People who aren't suited for magic school... Those who take pleasure in hurting others, those who plagiarize the results of others' experiments or research... The interview is conducted to prevent dangerous types like those from entering the school."

Magic was power, and power could be wielded like a weapon. Weapons, in turn, could be used to protect, but they could also be used to do harm.

The school's minimum age requirement had been established with the aim of ensuring that students had reached a sufficient level of maturity.

However, power was corrupting. It could change people. Sorcerers with flawed characters weren't common, but they did exist.

"The world is filled with all sorts, isn't it? How scary. You should be careful, too, Ms. Loubella. You wouldn't want to be lured into marriage fraud or something like that."

"...Just so you know, I'm a very cautious woman, all right? I'll admit that I let my name slip earlier, but that's because you're a child. I'm not an easy mark."

"If you're too cautious, it can actually end up making you more susceptible. For example, once you let your guard down around a man, you might become overly dependent and obsessed with him, only to be dumped in the end for being too clingy. I think flexibility is key, no matter the circumstances."

"…"

Loubella was at a loss for words. This was a mere child, and yet he'd begun prodding precisely at her most bitter experiences as if he knew all about them. What a frightening boy.

"Well, if it were me," he continued. "I would never throw away a woman as charming as you are, Ms. Loubella."

"Huh? ...Wha—?"

Her heart gave a small, unconscious flutter.

This boy was just a child. *How terrifying*, she thought.

If only Loubella knew that Kunon was simply parroting things he'd heard his former maid say. The boy himself hardly knew the first thing about love.



At last, the two of them made it to the venue where the practical skills test was to be held.

It was an empty, open space not unlike a schoolyard. And it seemed that three others had already arrived ahead of him—two boys and one girl.

"Please wait here."

The receptionist, who had grown to fear Kunon in more ways than one, quickly withdrew. Meanwhile, the three people already there looked over the newcomer. They seemed puzzled—even suspicious—of the child with an eye mask who had just joined them.

*"…"* 

Toward them, however, Kunon felt awe.

"I see..."

Awe and satisfaction.

He decided to use the Glass Eye to get a glimpse of the other people and the surrounding area, but as soon as he activated it and took a look around, everything he had theorized until that point was thrown into disarray.

Kunon had seen many strange things on his journey, and he had started to formulate a set of rules based on those observations, but— No, it wasn't that his previous findings were wrong, he'd simply discovered a new rule.

The three people were most likely other applicants.

The one who caught his eye first was a silver-haired girl clad in a white robe. She seemed to be around Kunon's age. At her back was a massive hoop that emitted a faint, golden light. Kunon had seen such a thing in picture books illustrating various myths—it was a halo. A halolike object was floating behind her.

The other two people were similar. One was an adult man who looked about twenty years old, and the other was a boy the same age as Kunon and the girl.

The man had wound a bright-red lizard around his body—or perhaps it was the lizard who had wound itself around the man.

Something that looked like confetti swirled through the air around the boy. Kunon had occasionally seen something similar dancing on the wind out in nature.

This defied the rules he'd begun to establish regarding how he saw people through the Glass Eye. So far, he had been able to identify three patterns: people with things protruding from inside their bodies, people with things growing out of their bodies, and people whose bodies were affected by something.



In addition, there was Kunon, the only person whose "something"—the giant crab that followed him around—was outside of his body instead of within it. He had wondered if he was some kind of exception to the rules, or if there were, in fact, no rules, and the apparitions were nonsensical.

But that wasn't the case at all. In truth, it must have simply been a difference between sorcerers and non-sorcerers. For average people, the manifestations came from within their bodies, while sorcerers' manifestations appeared on the outside. It was all just hypothesis at this point, but Kunon thought he was probably right.

The exact nature of the apparitions was still a mystery, but they seemed consistent once he applied this new rule.

That meant Zeonly, who had appeared so dazzlingly bright that Kunon couldn't even look at him, could be recategorized. Most likely, *something* on the outside of him was so radiant that it hid his actual body from view. It had nothing to do with the brilliance of his unshakable self-confidence or anything like that.

"I see...," Kunon muttered again.

He didn't know what he was seeing. But he felt he understood one thing for sure: It all had something to do with magic. If the things he saw were more than mere illusions, they could be researched.

Kunon very much wanted to solve this puzzle.

For the time being, however, he decided to put his theories about and investigations into the Glass Eye on the back burner.

"Are you the Saint from the Holy Kingdom?" Kunon called out to the haloed, silver-haired girl.

He had heard such a person would be enrolling in the school. After confirming it was indeed her, he was hoping they could talk.

If the girl really was a saint, that meant her magical attribute was light. Sorcerers were already a rare breed. Among them, people who used light, dark, or foul magic were even rarer. And to be a saint on top of that? Saints were so

uncommon that there were perhaps only one or two alive.

"What if I am? If you're looking for a date, you're out of luck."

"You're her?! Really?! That's amazing!" The girl's tone was distinctly unwelcoming, but Kunon was nevertheless excited. "You have a light crest, don't you?! Only sorcerers with that attribute can use healing magic, right?! That's incredible!"

"...Do you mind? You're being quite presumptuous."

The girl's reply was icy, but Kunon took no notice.

"Please! Pretty please! Tell me about light magic! After the exam... We can talk over dessert! I'll pay! Please! I recommend the Dirashik specialty, a magic parfait! Have you had it? I have! Twice!"

"...Haah." The girl sighed, clearly unmoved. "I believe I said I wasn't interested in going on a date."

"This wouldn't be a date! I want to talk to you about magic! That's all! Just talking! I won't touch a single hair on your head! I promise!"

"You don't use light magic, correct? What do you intend to do once you've heard about it? What will you gain from such a conversation?"

"I won't know unless I ask! There might be things I could learn from you; that's why I want to talk to you!"

"...I see." The girl sighed again, her gaze cold. "But you must understand, light is superior to other magical attributes. What could someone with an inferior attribute hope to learn from it?"

"What?"

Kunon was confused. The other two applicants, who had been forced to witness this ill-fated flirtation, were clearly irritated by the exchange.

She'd just said that light magic was superior to other kinds of magic, hadn't she? But that simply wasn't true. Light, dark, and foul magic were rare, but there was no clear hierarchy among attributes.

...However, if the girl was truly a saint, he was hesitant to say she was wrong.

Possessing a light crest did not make one a saint, and there were light magic users without sainthood. If the girl had said that saints were superior sorcerers, she would have a point. Saints could use special spells other sorcerers couldn't, after all. But that didn't apply to light magic in general.

"Don't waste my time with your tedious excuses. Just admit that you were trying to flirt with me."

"Huh?" Kunon's confusion deepened—but he decided to correct her misconceptions one by one. "I think my attribute—water—is the best. No other attribute can top it."

"Excuse me?"

Now it was the girl's turn to be taken aback. Water sorcerers were, to be rude, a necca a dozen. How could someone think water magic was superior or that it would win out over other attributes? She could hardly believe her ears.

"Also, I'm really not trying to flirt with you. Even I would never be so impudent as to ask a girl I've just met on a date."

*Plus*, Kunon thought, *I hate the color of your hair*. He wasn't very fond of the color silver, since it reminded him of his own eyes.

"Inviting someone on a date should come after the second or third meeting, not when we don't even know each other's names yet. A true gentleman would never do that. I apologize for getting your hopes up."

*"…."* 

The girl was baffled as to how things had come to this. Now she was being rejected based on some incomprehensible pretext? She was utterly bewildered.

"You didn't get my hopes up," she said.

"That's good. In that case, can we talk after the exam?"

"What do you mean, 'in that case'? I'm not going to talk to you."

"Hello there!" A new voice addressed the group. "Let's save the flirting for later, okay?"

Kunon wanted to plead his case with the girl further—and to impress upon

her that he genuinely had no intention of hitting on her, but he lost his chance when a young man interrupted them.

The newcomer, who was accompanied by a woman, emitted stronger magical energy than anyone else in their little gathering. Apparently, they had both joined the group while Kunon and the girl were bickering.

Yes—the teachers who would be administering their exam had finally arrived.

"My name is Soff Cricket, and I'm a teacher here at the Dirashik School of Magic. This is my assistant, Ms. Sayfie."

"Hello, I'm Sayfie. My position isn't official, but I'm working as an associate instructor."

As the proctors introduced themselves, the atmosphere—which had started to relax because of Kunon—tensed back up in a flash. Finally, it was time for the entrance exam.

Through the Glass Eye, Kunon saw four spheres of green light floating around Soff—and about ten moles scampering about Sayfie's feet. His new rule was holding strong.

"Now, then. First, you four, congratulations on your enrollment."

As Soff spoke, he and the other teacher clapped their hands without enthusiasm.

"Even if your magic isn't very good at the moment or you lack knowledge, you can simply work to improve. In fact, this is the best place for you to do just that. We won't turn away valuable sorcerers that easily."

What? What kind of trick was this?

"I'll bet none of you knew that, right? Surprisingly, no one associated with the school talks about it. I bet you all heard that the exam is really tough. That's just a prank our alumni like to play... Well, it's not entirely untrue, I suppose."

Kunon had been totally hoodwinked. In the month since he had arrived in Dirashik—well, the final two days, at least—he had put everything he had into studying for the exam. Apparently, it had all been a waste of time.

"Pardon, but then what is this exam?" asked the older applicant. "What's the purpose of it?"

"It's to help us assess how you'll spend your time here. I'll explain now, so please listen carefully."

Soff told the new students that the exam would decide which program of study they would attend. Everyone had different things they wished to learn, as well as unique attributes and strengths, so it was inefficient to have every student receive the same program of education.

Some students were like Kunon—they had prepared well in advance and trained in magic. But there were also those who were practically the same as ordinary people; they came to the school because their crest had appeared, but they didn't know the first thing about magic. It didn't make sense to try to teach both kinds of students together.

And so when new students first arrived at the school, they were divided up based on their future program of education, or in other words, according to their ability.

There were three classes: First Level, Second Level, and Advanced.

"The Advanced class is also called Independent Research," Soff continued. "Students in that group are free to choose their own course of study and pursue it by themselves. Second Level is the Teacher-Assisted group. It's the most similar to a standard school. Most people test into this group. First Level is Fundamentals. As the name suggests, it's for students who are starting with the basics... Though I don't think that will be relevant for today's group."

Kunon, then, would be aiming for the Advanced class. If successful, he could conduct his own research freely. That would be ideal.

The entrance exam's reputation for being difficult was probably due to the difficulty of making it into the Advanced class. After all, most sorcerers were the type to want to experiment and research on their own.

"I'll warn you now, graduation won't be easy, no matter which class you end up in. The Advanced class, in particular, is aimed at producing first-rate sorcerers. Don't underestimate the difficulty of testing into it—or of successfully graduating."

A class for training up the best of the best. Kunon had no intention of trying for anything less.

"And that about covers it. Shall we start the exam?"

With that, the practical portion began.

"Hank Beat."

"Yes."

The first applicant Soff called on was the oldest one.

"So you've moved on from being Professor Rhett's assistant?"

"Yes. I decided the time was right... I didn't take the exam before because I wasn't confident I could pass."

It seemed that Soff and this applicant knew each other. Hank also appeared to be the one most taken aback by the revelation that no one had failed the exam. He had probably been laboring away at the school in some low-level position for a while, and yet no one had told him about the exam. This made Kunon wonder if there was some rule behind the tradition. It seemed to be more than just an unspoken agreement among alumni.

"I pretty much already know the answers, but asking is part of the procedure, so... Please tell me your crest attribute and rank, as well as how many spells you can use. Oh, and the class you'd like to try for."

"Two-star, fire crest. I can perform seven spells. I would like to enter the Advanced class."

"Did you get all that, Ms. Sayfie?"

"Yes, I got it."

Sayfie, the assistant, was filling in some documents.

At the same time, Kunon was storing away information about this man with the red lizard. Everything he saw was a subject for study. Not that he was actually seeing it, of course.

"Then let's have a demonstration. Show me the spell you most excel at."

When he heard Soff's instructions, Hank sent his magic streaking across the ground.

```
"Ka-ryu!"
```

A blaze of fire shot out, burning rapidly along the path of the preceding magic as if chasing a fuse.

```
"Whoa...!"
```

Kunon was impressed. He had read about the spell in books, but this was his first time seeing it. In a sense anyway.

Ka-ryu, an early spell for fire sorcerers, wasn't particularly difficult. Fire followed a line of magic that the sorcerer had already laid down. That was how it worked.

It seemed that, more than the fire itself, what was important was the fuel—in this case, magic power—determining the route of the flames. That was where a person's ingenuity came in. Considering the speed at which it burned and spread, it could probably be used to set fires on a much larger scale.

Because its structure was so simple, the spell would have countless applications. Kunon expected it could prove useful for his own studies.

The flames burned along a swirling, circular path from the outside, extinguishing when they reached the center of the vortex. White smoke began rising from the lightly scorched ground as the fire went out.

"Mm, not bad. Your control, in particular, is excellent."

Indeed. This was a spell where control of one's magic was essential. What's more, it spoke to Hank's sensibility that he chose to demonstrate a spell that required great finesse, rather than something that merely displayed power.

I think we might get along, Kunon thought.

```
"Riyah Houghs."
```

```
"Y-yes."
```

After Hank's practical exam was over, the boy surrounded by confetti was called upon. Kunon guessed Riyah was one or two years older than he was.

"Attribute, rank, number of spells, and desired class, please."

"Um, my attribute is wind, two-star rank. I can use eight spells. I would like to be in the Second Level class."

"Eight spells at your age? That's great. Don't you think, Ms. Sayfie?"

"Indeed."

Amazing, thought Kunon. He could still only use the same two spells. Anxiety started to creep up on him. It seemed he knew fewer spells than anyone else here.

Once more, as Sayfie jotted down Riyah's answers, Kunon took note of them in his head.

"I have a wind crest as well, actually," said Soff. "It kinda makes me want to root for you."

The instructor seemed to be showing a bit of bias, but since they were all guaranteed to pass from the start, it probably didn't matter much.

"Now then, please show us the spell you're most confident in."

"Yes— Fu-garu!"

At Riyah's command, magic power accumulated in the air above and was subsequently released as a powerful blast of wind. This was the more advanced version of the spell called Fu-ga.

An enormous projectile of air slammed into the ground from above, gouging out a large portion of earth. Its force was tremendous. Anyone hit by such a spell was sure to be literally blown away.

"Very nice," said Soff. "I'm impressed you're using intermediate spells at your age."

The spell had used a *lot* of magic. Kunon, with only two basic spells in his toolbox, was surprised at how much power it had required.

So that was intermediate magic? As one might expect, it was totally different from beginner spells. *Fascinating*, thought Kunon.

"Reves Saint-Lance."

"Yes."

It was the Saint's turn.

Apart from Kunon, the other applicants appeared to be a tad hostile toward her, probably due to her earlier comment about light being "superior to other magical attributes." Even so, she was undoubtedly garnering the most interest out of those present at the exam.

Light sorcerers were extremely rare. Seeing light magic—as well as someone who could use it—must have been a new experience for everyone there, except perhaps the teachers.

"Attribute, rank, number of spells, and desired class?"

"My attribute is light. Three-star. I can use five spells. My aim is the Advanced class."

A three-star rank on top of being a light sorcerer? Kunon's interest only deepened.

"I'd also like to say beforehand that I'm a saint."

"So I see. But your special magic doesn't count toward your practical assessment, so your status as a saint is moot for now."

"Is that so? Then may I say one more thing?"

"Hmm? Go ahead."

"It's not something I'm particularly cognizant of, but I've been told that I'm largely lacking in emotions because I have a Hero's Scar. My demeanor might make you uncomfortable, but that's not my intention."

A Hero's Scar. So she was born with the Demon Lord's curse, just like Kunon. He had never met anyone else like him before. A light sorcerer, a saint, and the bearer of a Hero's Scar. Kunon could feel his interest increase tenfold.

"Oh? That sounds rough. I'm not feeling uncomfortable at the moment. Ms. Sayfie?"

"I'm fine."

With that settled, the exam continued.

```
"—Ra-sera."
```

Though Reyes had stated that her specialty was healing magic, she was at a loss to demonstrate it without an injured person on hand. And so she went with the only nonhealing spell in her arsenal.

It was a basic light spell that sent a high-speed heat ray shooting out from her raised hand.

The spell's force was difficult to determine since it hadn't hit anything, but its speed was of particular note. The beam was frighteningly fast. Unless a person reacted before it was even released, there would be no way to avoid it.

Kunon was enthralled at this point. He felt sure that if he could see, he would do nothing but observe Reyes from as close a distance as possible.

"Kunon Gurion."

"Yes."

Kunon's turn came at last.

"So, uh. I was asked to give you some 'special' treatment. Do you know what I mean?"

"...Pardon?"

Kunon had no clue what Soff was talking about. The teacher hadn't said anything like that to the other three applicants.

"Oh, you don't know anything about it, do you? ...Don't you kind of feel bad for him, Ms. Sayfie?"

"Be that as it may."

Though he wasn't quite sure what was going on, Kunon sensed a twinge of hostility in the associate instructor's words: *Be that as it may.* Should matters as important as school entrance exams be treated so flippantly?

"Basically, your teacher asked us to make your exam difficult. We got a letter about it."

Teacher? Kunon's teacher?

"Miss Jenié?"

"No, not her. Zeonly."

Zeonly had been gaining notoriety as a magical engineer of late. When his name was mentioned, the other three applicants took notice. Fledgling sorcerers admired anyone who had achieved success as a magic user. And that feeling only intensified when the person in question was being talked about throughout the magic community.

"Zeonly wrote that you would 'crush any exam' you were given and to make sure that we go 'extra hard' on you," said Soff. "He said, and I quote, 'You fools are gonna be amazed at the power of *my* disciple."

"Tch!"

Sayfie clicked her tongue with malice, and Kunon felt like he understood why, just a little. She probably had some kind of history with Zeonly; she wasn't responding that way because of Kunon. Now that he thought of it, both Soff and Sayfie looked about Zeonly's age.

"Is that so? Well, if that's what my master said, I suppose I'll just have to accept it."

Kunon didn't want to go along with Zeonly's boasting. Still, he had no choice but to heed his words. His master's orders were absolute. That was part of being a disciple.

"You're okay with it? Well, all right. Should've expected *Zeonly's* student to have more self-confidence than everyone else. Eh, Ms. Sayfie?"

"Let's fail this kid and send him back to that braggart."

She was clearly taking out her dislike for Zeonly on his pupil. Kunon hadn't expected to be caught in the cross fire like this.

"You know you shouldn't say that even if you think it," said Soff.

Then, shrugging, he posed the standard questions to Kunon. Crest attribute and rank. Number of spells. Desired class. Kunon answered confidently.

"I have a two-star water crest, and I can use two spells. Please put me in the Advanced class."

"Huh?"

```
"What?"
```

"Wha-?"

Everyone—apart from Reyes—was caught off guard, their surprise manifested out loud.

"...You can use...two spells?" Soff asked carefully.

"Yes," Kunon replied, unashamed. "Two. The basics, A-ori and A-rubu."

A-ori, the water-producing spell, and A-rubu, the one that made cleansing water bubbles. Those were the spells Kunon could perform.

"...You're going to use just those for the practical exam?"

Once more, Kunon's reply was unreserved.

"Yes!"

The atmosphere was suffocating—practically unbearable. It was as though everyone's expectations, inflated by the realization that Kunon was Zeonly's disciple, had been smashed to bits by the disappointing reality.

No one knew what to say to Kunon, who, for reasons beyond comprehension, remained completely confident despite the circumstances. At least one of those present wished to slap Zeonly silly for his arrogant endorsement of such a student.

With all the unvoiced feelings mingling in the air, the tension threatened to burst at any moment.

Soff really was starting to pity Kunon, though not for the same reason as before.

"Mmm... What should I do ...?"

An awkward uneasiness fell over the group. And over it all—"I'll do my best!"

—loomed Kunon's grim determination.

Could he not see the reality of the situation...? Well, he quite literally couldn't, but that was neither here nor there.

Kunon's optimism was admirable, but it only added to the awkwardness.

There was a stark contrast between his enthusiasm and the feelings of those around him, all of whom were certain Kunon was utterly oblivious to his own circumstances. The disparity was striking.

"What are you saying?" Sayfie whispered to Soff. "—You realize this kid came highly recommended by *him*, right? The guy who almost never speaks well of or acknowledges anyone else, who claims there's no one better than him in the whole world. This is *his* student."

"...Yeah, I guess that's true."

Soff didn't have as much of an issue with Zeonly. But because Sayfie's and Zeonly's crests were of the same attribute, during their school days, they had been compared to each other at every opportunity, repeatedly butting heads and ending with Zeonly walking all over Sayfie.

Though personally, she'd rather forget all about him, Sayfie's knowledge of Zeonly Finroll's abilities and personality was much more plentiful than Soff's. It was difficult enough to believe the man had taken on a student, let alone that he had sent that student out into magical society as if to show him off. Thinking about it, there was really only one explanation.

"This kid himself must be one of his productions, don't you think?"

It made sense from that point of view. Zeonly loved to brag about himself and his magic tools, in particular. In that regard, it made sense he would brag about a student he'd personally trained.

"I guess I'll find out if I try him, won't I?" said Soff.

"Be careful not to let your guard down," Sayfie warned.

"I know. He's Zeon's disciple, after all. I don't want to embarrass myself in front of the examinees."

Soff stepped forward.

"Now then, let's start your practical exam, Kunon Gurion."

"Yes! Thank you! I'll do my best! Hey—," Kunon turned to Reyes, who was pointedly ignoring him. "Hey, you're gonna watch, right? I'll give it my all. So if I try really hard, will you go somewhere with me after?"

"Okay, okay, that's enough flirting," interrupted Soff.

At that, Kunon stepped forward.

Was he nervous or not? He didn't look it. The boy appeared totally calm and composed. Everyone else was practically wincing, and yet Kunon alone seemed entirely unbothered.

"Your task is...to hit me with magic." A gust of wind burst forth, surrounding Soff. "See if you can get past my Fu-ruguru."

Fu-ruguru was an intermediate spell that wrapped a wall of wind around the user. Its strength depended on the caster, but Soff's was powerful enough to offer total protection against weak, lower-level magic.

Water couldn't penetrate strong winds. There was no way someone who could only use two basic water spells, let alone someone who didn't know any offensive magic, would be able to break through Soff's defense. And he wasn't about to let his guard down, either.

Soff was confident the task would be difficult even for a moderately skilled sorcerer. And yet— "Huh? That's it? Really?"

—Kunon was disappointed. He'd figured out the weak point in Soff's assignment the moment he saw it. It was a total letdown. He had been preparing for—and looking forward to—a more difficult challenge.

"Oh?" Soff felt a twinge of annoyance at Kunon's visible loss of interest. "Why don't you save your dissatisfaction until after you've proven yourself? Girls don't like sorcerers who are all talk, you know."

"Well, I can't have that."

Kunon, who seemed to want to impress the Saint girl no matter what, stopped grumbling and unleashed his magic power without another word.

He let it spread, thinner and thinner. His power stretched out farther and farther until it was covering the entire area around Soff and his wall of wind.

"Okay, here I go."

Kunon raised the cane in his right hand slightly, then pounded it against the ground with a *thump*.

All at once, more than a hundred small A-ori took shape in the area around Soff.

A-ori was an extremely basic spell used to produce water. Creating so *much* water at once was unusual but only unusual... It was still within the expected range of the spell.

"Oh, come now. You can't get through my wind barrier with that."

Though an extreme example, even rain couldn't permeate Soff's spell. The A-ori, which were bigger than raindrops, stood even less of a chance.

```
"Multiply."
```

Kunon hit his cane against the ground again, and every single A-ori split into two smaller, equal spheres.

```
"Multiply."
```

And again.

"Multiply."

Once more.

*"…"* 

Soff, along with everyone watching, was dumbfounded. Increasing exponentially in quantity, Kunon's A-ori now looked more like a fine mist than a bunch of water spheres.

```
"Color."
```

With this, the mist turned red, making it easier to see. That's when it became obvious.

While Soff had been preoccupied with the multiplying A-ori, a red pool had formed, creeping closer and closer toward his feet. It stopped just outside the Fu-ruguru... The resulting scene—as if blood magic was being used to erode the very landscape—was a bit grotesque.

A creeping pool of blood. A madly swirling crimson fog. Soff was besieged by both, and there was nowhere to run. However...

"...What's wrong? Are you giving up?"

...That's all it was. No matter how bizarre the sight, Kunon's water hadn't reached Soff. *Not yet* anyway.

"Huh? It's over, isn't it?" Kunon replied. "I can maintain this state for two days. How about you, Professor? I imagine you can sustain a spell consuming magic at that rate for about half a day, right? There was no time limit for completion of the task. So that settles it."

It was exactly as Kunon said. Regardless of whatever odd characteristics it was given or how its shape changed, Kunon was only using A-ori, beginner-level magic. It may have looked like something else entirely, but that's all it was.

Casting it required only a small amount of power, making it easy for a novice. Maintaining it was simple, too. Kunon was employing it in a highly unusual way, but the spell was nevertheless an introductory one.

Essentially, the task had become a contest of endurance. If Soff relaxed for even an instant, the mist and the water at his feet would rush in. With the attack coming from every possible direction, he couldn't even attempt to preserve his stores of magic by reducing the wind wall to a single front-facing section.

Turning the tap of his power on and off to counter a scattered series of assaults was doable, but there was no chance for that when the barrage was this constant.

And besides—Soff got the feeling that even if he managed to trip up Kunon, the boy would find a way to push him into an even worse position.

Truthfully, he was curious to find out what would happen... But expecting more would be a deviation from the task he'd given. Regrettably, this was merely an assignment for the boy's entrance exam. Soff wasn't allowed to make the examinees repeat tasks—or give them new ones.

"...Fine. I lose."

That was checkmate.

It was true that Soff had yet to be struck with water, but he felt sure things would pan out just as Kunon had described.

From that incident onward, Kunon's reputation started to spread—as the disciple of Zeonly Finroll and as the capable student who had passed Soff's extra-difficult exam without breaking a sweat.

"Hey, did you see that? You did, right? I want to try shooting out some crazy-fast water, like you did with your light beam... Okay, how about, since it would be a collaboration between us, I'll add your name to the report when it's finished? How does that sound...? What if I throw in two parfaits? No good? Three, then! How about three?!"

Though it seemed Kunon himself was more concerned with picking up girls.

"All right, no more of that. Stop flirting." Soff turned to face Kunon, who didn't appear the least bit discouraged by the Saint's stonewalling. "That's it for the practical portion. We'll be giving you the written test next, so do your best to earn a place in the classes you're aiming for. Also, Kunon, you really do need to stop. Reyes looks uncomfortable, so—"

But Soff was interrupted by Kunon's own dismayed cry.

"Professor! The Saint won't accept my invitation at all! Even though I promised to buy her three parfaits! Please do something!"

"...I've heard my fair share of students tattling on one another, but this is the first time I've had one complain to me about someone ignoring their come-ons. Right, Ms. Sayfie?"

When Soff turned to speak to his assistant, she hissed back at him, "What the hell was that practical? You should have given it everything you had. Ugh!"

"Right... Sorry."

He wondered if there was any field in any world where proctors gave everything they had during a trainee entrance exam. But there was no way for a man to win against a whining child or an angry woman, so Soff decided it was best to simply keep the conversation moving along.

"Anyway. Flirting is forbidden until after the exam. We're still in the middle of it, for all intents and purposes. You need to take this seriously, so I want you all to respect one another and avoid stirring anyone up. You can flirt to your heart's content once we're done."

"Oh, I see... Understood. I'm sorry."

Soff's words seemed to get across to Kunon, who apologized to Reyes.

"A woman's heart is bound to start pounding when a dashing gentleman makes such a tempting invitation," said Kunon. "I can see how it would throw you all out of sorts. I'm sorry for asking you so many times."

What kind of overly positive spin on the situation was that? Not to mention the nerve it took to confidently describe oneself as a "dashing gentleman." Kunon was something else, that much was for sure.

"Shouldn't you have failed him?" Sayfie muttered. "That kid is definitely the type to cause trouble. He's already been nothing but a headache."

"Mmm..."

Soff didn't have an answer to that.

After Soff and Sayfie led them to the school building, the examinees took their written tests.

"This year's applicants are all brilliant," Soff mumbled as he looked over the students' collected answer sheets, just before Sayfie snatched them away.

None of the four examinees had any particular problems with the test, and all finished with more than enough time to spare.

Their sole concern had been Kunon. With both eyes wrapped up behind an eye mask, would he be able to take the written portion? But their worry had been unfounded. He had flown through it as if his vision was perfect.

How was that possible? From the magic he'd demonstrated during his practical test to his status as Zeonly's disciple to the nerve he'd displayed asking Reyes out the very day they'd met—Kunon was full of mysteries, including his personality.

Finally, all that remained of the entrance exam was the interview.

"The interviews will now be conducted one at a time. Starting with Hank Beat."

"Coming!"

Sayfie called for Hank, and he left the classroom with her. It seemed that the room where they'd taken their written tests would now function as a waiting area.

"Professor," Kunon called out to Soff, who had stayed behind. "What is the interview about, and who conducts it?"

"You'll find out once you get there. The topic is different for each examinee."

"Huh...? What do I do if they ask me what kind of girls I like or how many girls I've been interested in so far...?"

Who on earth would ask about that? Soff wondered. And why did Kunon look reluctant to answer such questions? Did this kid—who had just barely turned twelve—have experiences with women he didn't want to talk about? The more Soff thought about it, the scarier Kunon's statement became.

"Riyah Houghs. This way, please."

Despite the rough start to their conversation, Soff was answering Kunon's questions about magic when Sayfie came to collect the next interviewee.

"Oh yes...," Riyah replied.

Since he shared Soff's attribute, Riyah had actually been listening quite attentively to Kunon's exchange with the teacher. It was only with considerable reluctance that he followed Sayfie out of the room.

"Huh? Are we sent home immediately after the interview?" asked Kunon.

Though Sayfie had reappeared to call on Riyah, Hank had not returned.

"Who knows. Depends on the interviewer, I think."

Soff's answer was deliberately vague. If Kunon realized the truth now, he would probably start hitting on Reyes again. Just as he had posited, the examinees were allowed to leave as soon as their interview was over. Once Reyes left for her turn, Kunon probably wouldn't get another chance to ask her out for a while.

"You know," he said. "I haven't had much chance to see any magic types besides water and earth. Well, not that I've *seen* any of them. But I'm very interested in the other attributes as well."

"You're blind, right? But you took the written test. How did you do it?"

"Do you want to know?"

Soff had posed the question, but when Kunon replied, he was facing the Saint.

*"…"* 

She ignored him.

As a magic user, she would have been lying if she said she wasn't curious—but it seemed like it would take a while to explain, and Reyes guessed that if she showed any sign of interest, Kunon would start flirting with her again.

Someday, if the chance presented itself, she might consider chatting with Kunon. Based on the questions he was asking Soff about magic, she realized his earlier attempts to talk with her had been more than just flirting. Not that she was ruling flirting out as a motive altogether.

"Reyes Saint-Lance. Please come with me."

"Of course."

Reyes's turn arrived, and she left, leaving only Kunon and Soff in the classroom.

"Looks like it's just us," Kunon said.

"Yep."

"If I'm going to be alone with someone else, I'd rather it was a woman."

"What a coincidence. I feel the same."

Although, in a sense, this was exactly what Soff had been waiting for.

"Say, Kunon. About the practical test earlier."

"Yes?"

"What other methods of breaking through were you considering?"

*"…."* 

"The reason you turned the water red was so it would be obvious if it touched me, right? I can't think of any other explanation."

Kunon had altered the color of his A-ori. Why? Because when it came into contact with Soff's body, it would leave evidence.

"You were thinking about how that kind of protracted battle could develop. That's why you made sure there would be clear proof of your magic touching me, isn't it?"

Calmly, Kunon replied in the affirmative.

"I considered a frontal breakthrough. Something using infiltration, adhesion, and appropriation."

"...Oh?"

Soff was a professor of magic. Even without a thorough explanation, he could get the picture with only a few key words.

"So you were thinking of assaulting my barrier with that 'mist' and fusing it with my wind, which would have interfered with my power. Then you could steal the barrier away, right?"

"Something along those lines."

"Did you think you could do it?"

"I got the feeling I could pull it off, yes. It's easier to steal an opponent's magic from within rather than wrapping around it. I mean, magic power is usually linked to its caster. So if I got some water in... Actually, just using it to interfere with your power would have been enough. Water can permeate most things, after all."

"...I see."

"Professor." Kunon stood up and started walking. "I think water is the best attribute. I'd really like to claim that it's the most powerful, too. But I couldn't win against my master, so for now I'll settle for just 'best.' I'll study hard while I'm here and learn as much as I can. Then, one day, I'll finally surpass him."

Now at the door, Kunon opened it to reveal Sayfie standing just on the other side reaching for the knob.

"Oh, you startled me," she said. "What are you doing?"

Despite looking like she was eavesdropping, Sayfie had actually been about to open the door herself. That was why she was so surprised.

"I had a feeling you were about to come get me."

Kunon could sense people's presences. Even these days, with the Glass Eye and his ability to "see" colors, Kunon had a keen sense of perception.

"It's my turn, right? Let's go."

"Oh yes..."

"Could I ask you to be my escort? I like having a charming woman to escort me."

"You're Zeon's apprentice, so I'm afraid that's not going to happen. Besides, I can't give any of the applicants special treatment. The main reason is your master, though."

"Understood. In other words, you'd rather be escorted yourself. Right, Professor Sayfie?"

Soff watched Kunon exit the room, spouting nonsense as he went.

I don't think that's what she meant at all, he thought.

With all the applicants gone, Soff was left by himself in the classroom.

He gazed at the door Kunon had just shut and shook his head, musing over the boy's parting words.

"...So that's Zeon's disciple, huh? I feel like a storm is brewing, in more ways than one."

When he'd heard Kunon could use only two spells, Soff couldn't help but worry. But now that he'd gotten a good look at Kunon's abilities, he wasn't concerned at all. The boy was smart enough to grasp the characteristics of an assignment right away, and his instincts were excellent.

Kunon had the bearing of someone who had not only studied magic but had also conducted a wealth of experiments and research. Instead of making reckless attempts, he started by figuring out all the facts of the situation. It was proof that he approached challenges with an eye for efficiency right from the

start.

Receiving a letter from Zeonly had taken Soff completely by surprise. Both Soff and Sayfie knew Zeonly from their days at school. They weren't exactly friends—perhaps he might call them old pals. They hadn't heard from him since graduation, but word of his recent activities had reached them.

And then, out of nowhere, he had sent Soff a letter. The contents were even more shocking. Weaving boasts about himself and his apprentice throughout, Zeonly had written: "I took on a disciple, and I'm proud as hell of him. His talent is off the charts. Give it a few years, and he'll be teaching *you*. He won't catch up to me, though."

The rest of the letter could be summarized as "You can go hard on him, but no unreasonable bullying, please. Thanks." At least, that was what Soff had gotten from it. As for Sayfie... Well, her interpretation might have been a little different.

In any case, it was clear that Zeonly cared about his apprentice. That was what made Soff want to put Kunon to the test. He couldn't help wondering what the man's disciple was capable of.

The letter had also said that Kunon was gifted enough to become a Cerulean Sorcerer, and Soff had felt a need to ascertain just how much faith he could put in those words. Zeonly had written "test him out," too, so Soff *did* have his permission...

And now that he had challenged Kunon, he understood. If this was his state of mind at age twelve, Zeonly's expectations made perfect sense. Above all else, Kunon was an honest, humble kid with a great capacity for learning. It was hard to believe Zeonly had been the one to train him.

Soff was a little concerned that the boy had the makings of a philanderer, but that was out of his hands.

"I bet he'd be a lot of fun to teach..."

Though since their attributes were different, Soff might not have that much contact with him in the future.

The water sorcerers at the school were bound to take a keen interest in

Kunon. If he showed an eagerness to learn, they'd drill everything they could into him. The school was crawling with magic users that even a teacher like Soff thought were wildly powerful.

What would Kunon be like by the time he graduated?

At any rate, this year's Advanced class was shaping up to be quite interesting.



"Excuse us! ...Go on in."

Sayfie led Kunon through the school building to another classroom. She then opened the door and prompted Kunon to step inside.

*""* 

Kunon didn't move. He couldn't move.

"Professor Sayfie."

"Yes?"

"Where am I about to go? What's beyond the door?"

"...You really can't see, huh?"

He couldn't. This time, he couldn't see *at all*. Kunon could sense there was nothing before him, and that was all he knew. Even through the Glass Eye, all that appeared beyond the door was darkness. What's more, he felt a breeze.

"Does this door lead outside?"

"I'd rather you asked that sort of thing once you've gone through, but... In a nutshell, it leads to *night*."

"Night?"

Kunon was pretty sure it was still morning.

"Yes. A starry sky in the middle of the night. You could say it's both inside and outside, but I don't know the details myself."

"Is there ground?"

"There is."

"...Is it a room containing an artificial environment? Or maybe someone cut out a part of the night sky and closed it up in there? I must admit: I'm beyond fascinated."

It had been a long time since Kunon had been utterly without sight. He couldn't sense anything through his magic, and even the Glass Eye revealed nothing. No strange objects or colors. Just total blackness.

Still, Kunon strode through the door with his cane, unhesitating. After all, he was no longer that child who cowered in the dark. He'd long since moved on.

He could feel something like soil underfoot.

Then he heard the door closing behind him.

The air inside was moving. He could feel the wind. A faint smell of earth and grass wafted into his nose.

He couldn't see it, but he was sure the sky overhead was full of stars. There probably wasn't a moon, though. He couldn't see anything that looked like one.

"So you're the problem child."

Suddenly, a presence materialized somewhere ahead of him. Its hoarse voice sounded like an old woman's.

And the presence wasn't just in front of him. Kunon could feel something behind him, to his left and to his right. He could feel as many as five—no, six—people surrounding him. He had his other senses, heightened by his lack of sight, to thank for that—not magic.

Though he still couldn't see anything through his Glass Eye, Kunon was certain the people he felt were the magic school's most renowned teachers.

"My name is Kunon Gurion. I would like to enroll here," he said, addressing the woman he thought was standing in front of him.

"I've heard about you. You're Zeonly's disciple, aren't you?" He could hear the faint sound of footsteps scraping across the ground toward him. "That boy was a remarkable talent. Even I acknowledge that. So! What about you?"

"Excuse me, but please don't get too close."

```
"What?"
```

"I have a fiancée. I need to keep a certain distance from other women."

Though Kunon was blind to begin with, even his magical sight was useless in this place. Cut off from sight entirely, Kunon couldn't quite gauge the distance between himself and the other people present, so he had to make sure they were aware of his situation. It was better to say something in advance. That way, they could avoid any kind of indiscretion.

```
"Pfft."
```

"Heh-heh."

Some of the people surrounding him broke into laughter.

"Hmm..."

The woman in front of him breathed an exasperated sigh.



"...I heard you were awfully persistent trying to make a pass at another applicant. Why would such a precocious little brat care about being close to a woman?"

"I wasn't trying to flirt with her. I just wanted to talk about magic together, just the two of us."

If the boy's intentions were pure, why did it need to be just the two of them? But he would probably only make excuses if pressed, so the woman decided to try another tactic.

"How about this: I'm an old woman, considerably older than you. Surely there's no need to worry."

Kunon's reply was definitive.

"Of course there is. You're not a hag; you're an older woman, experienced in the ways of the world. Not to mention, a much more accomplished sorcerer than myself. I suspect you're even more powerful and experienced than my master. I'm already buzzing with curiosity about you. What if we make a mistake? There's no telling what could happen between a man and a woman, no matter their ages."

"...Indeed. I see. You certainly are a problem child." The woman sighed again, but it sounded slightly farther away than before. "Now then, Kunon Gurion. Let me ask you something."

```
"Yes."
```

"Did you learn anything today?"

"Of course."

"What was it?"

"I learned a lot, but what I found most interesting was the spell called Ka-ryu that another applicant demonstrated. I know how to give directionality to magic power, but that's the first time I've seen it extended to such a length. It was intriguing."

"Oh? And how would you use this knowledge?"

"Practically speaking, I think it would be possible—by forming a circular conducting shape with magic power—to construct a spell that rotates continuously in one spot until the magic runs out. Depending on how it's used, a single person could make it appear as though they're using several people's worth of magic."

Kunon was already itching to try it out. After the exam ended and he was home, he intended to go straight into the garden and start testing.

He would begin by making a Supersoft-Body A-ori that spun in circles over connected lines of magic. Then he would luxuriate the day away, burying himself in the spinning A-ori, getting lost in thought and napping when sleepiness overcame him. With some milk tea in hand throughout, of course.

Kunon had exhausted himself studying for the entrance exam for no reason, so he felt like indulging, at least until Rinko came to scold him.

"Hmm... And what of the Saint girl you were so eager to talk with that you couldn't stop flirting with her? What interested you about her magic?"

"I wasn't flirting, but yes—the speed of her light beam really caught my eye. With that much momentum, I suspect even water could be used to cut or pierce. I absolutely *have* to learn how to do that."

Kunon felt he could go on forever regarding this subject, but he deliberately cut himself off. They were in the middle of an interview. Once it was over, he could run various experiments. More importantly, he wanted to write down all the ideas that were popping into his head so he wouldn't forget them. This place was profoundly interesting, but if Kunon was being honest, all he wanted to do was go home right away.

"Right, that's enough. We're finished here."

Kunon had no idea what kind of impression he had made during their conversation. But the second he heard those words, his self-restraint evaporated.

"We're done? Can I leave, then?"

Ever since the practical portion, he had been desperate to try out new spells and theories. If the interview was finished, that meant the entrance exam was over, too.

"Yes, go home. I'll put you in the Advanced class, as you wished. Prove yourself. If you do—"

"Hooray! Please excuse me!"

Once Kunon had received both a promise to place him in his desired class and permission to leave, he had no further reason to hang around. He spun on his heel, took about ten steps toward the door he had entered through, and flung it open.

And just like that, Kunon left the baffling, incomprehensible space and returned to the familiar world on the other side of the door.

Without glancing back even once, he started for home. He didn't spare a single thought as to the identity of his interviewer.

"...How rude."

Kunon had disappeared from the room before anyone could stop him.

Prove yourself.

If you do—I, Gray Rouva, will impart my knowledge to you.

At least, that was what she had intended to say.

Countless sorcerers had come to her over an unfathomable number of years, but this was the first time one of them hadn't let her finish. She said those words without fail to every single student, and she meant them—they were by no means an empty promise.

Once upon a time, even Zeonly—or rather, the arrogant yet naive boy he used to be—had positively beamed at the words of the world's most famous witch.

"Oh well. That's it, you all." The witch called out to her disciples, who were blanketed in darkness under the starry sky. "This year's students... Make sure you teach them well."

The disciples vanished. The interview was over, so they all returned to their usual places.

"Heh-heh-heh... Those greenhorns..."

The only sound was the faint snickering of the world's greatest witch.

*That boy...he* looked.

It had been nothing more than a flicker—the magic power incredibly weak. So minuscule that even Gray Rouva might have missed it.

Her disciples hadn't noticed, but she was certain. That youngster with the eye mask had used some kind of spell, and he had *looked*. Or at least, he had tried to look.

He had used a spell that Gray Rouva, who had plumbed the depths of magic for more than a millennium, didn't recognize.

What had he seen? What could he see?

Where would such a vision lead?

Judging from the power she had felt, whatever he had used was still imperfect. She expected she would have understood its characteristics better if it was complete.

Since he was a sorcerer, the boy was sure to pursue such a riddle. The witch could say that with confidence, as a fellow magic user. No sorcerer could remain unmoved in the face of magic's puzzles and questions.

"And that's what makes magic so interesting."

Even after living for over a thousand years, Gray Rouva could still encounter brand-new magic.

It seemed the depths of magic stretched ever further. She was still nowhere near the bottom.

The witch's laughter dissolved into the night air of the little room full of stars.





## Chapter 4 Advanced Class Policies

"Master Kunon. You've got a letter from the magic sch— *Ah*, that looks so *comfortable*!"

Rinko, on her way to deliver a letter to Kunon, cried out when she saw how pleasantly relaxed he looked.

It was the middle of summer; the sun's rays were strong, and temperatures soared. Even doing nothing at all could make one break out in a sweat. But under the shade of a parasol, curled up in the temperature-controlled Supersoft-Body A-ori, it was exceptionally relaxing.

"It's *incredibly* comfortable. I hope you don't have too much more work to do."

Kunon was enjoying a little leisurely break. He read some books, got lost in thought, jotted down notes, and napped when he felt like it.

Once school started, this life would be a thing of the past. So he was getting in some relaxation while he still had the chance.

Plus, his magical waterbed was slowly rotating. Right now, it was moving clockwise. He could make it move in either direction at will, depending on his

mood.

There wasn't a reason for the A-ori to be rotating, mind you. Kunon had succeeded in applying the technique he'd observed the other day, in Hank's Karyu. He liked the waterbed better when it was spinning, so he'd made it happen. That was it.

This, too, was all according to his mood.

Rinko and Kunon were in the garden of their rental house.

The property was small for a noble, but as a living space for two, it was perfect. The garden was on the cozy side, as well. There was just enough room for Kunon to conduct his experiments and for Rinko to dabble in her hobbies. And with school relatively close by, the house's location was excellent.

Kunon had completed his enrollment using this new address, and he'd informed his family back in Hughlia of his living arrangements via his Letter Box.

Kunon's Letter Box was a magic tool he'd created, consisting of a box linked to a magic circle. If a letter written in a special kind of ink was put into the box, the words of the message—and nothing else—were transmitted to the magic circle's location. Due to its limitations and the magic elixirs it required, the box was reserved for urgent business only.

Unless something extraordinary happened, Kunon expected that Rinko and he would stay in this house until he graduated.

"So the school sent a letter?" Kunon asked.

Without lifting her face from where it was pressed against the cool waterbed, Rinko said yes and held out the envelope.

"It's probably an admissions guide," said Kunon. "Or maybe someone is inviting me on a date?"

"I'll be jealous if it's the latter."

"Don't worry. Whenever I'm here with you, you're the only one on my mind."

"But what about when you leave? How cruel, Master Kunon. You're a menace to womankind."

The two of them burst into laughter.

Through his giggles, Kunon opened the letter. It sported a magical wax seal that he melted away with some of his own magic. Meanwhile, Rinko stuffed her face back into the waterbed.

Since he had already passed the exam, Kunon expected school would be starting any day now. That must be what the letter was about. Perhaps it contained a list of school supplies he would need to buy ahead of time. Or perhaps someone really had invited him on a date.

"...Aha."

The letter was indeed related to admissions. Enclosed along with it were two certificates of permission to attend magic school, one of which was presumably meant to be kept safe at home.

"So I'm supposed to carry one with me, then?"

The first certificate was made of paper. The second was a small metal plaque, easily portable, engraved with his name and a few other bits of information identifying Kunon as a student at the magic school.

In other words, it was a student ID card. The metal plaque would likely double as Kunon's personal identification from that point on.

"...Hmm? Huh...? What?!"

The contents of the letter, however, were unexpected. Kunon had been scanning over it lazily, but the further he read, the wider his unseeing eyes became.

"What's wrong?"

At Kunon's reaction, Rinko looked up from the cooling A-ori.

"...Pfft. Ah-ha-ha. I see!" Kunon was laughing. "So this is how the magic school does things? What a wonderful surprise!"

The time for relaxation had come to an end. School life, Kunon realized, was starting right now.

"Rinko, how much do you receive as salary from the Gurion estate?"

"About as much as your allowance, Master Kunon."

"Huh? One hundred and sixty thousand necca? That can't be. It's that little?"

As the child of nobility, Kunon's pocket money was nothing to sneeze at. The son of a marquess, he had spent extravagant amounts on his magic studies since he was small. But his first servant, Iko, had instilled a commoner's sense for money in him. She often told him: "Money is precious. Don't waste it. It's the only thing you can always depend on. Not your family, not your friends —money." For that reason, Kunon had a fairly good idea of how much money was worth, though he exercised little self-control and was prone to making expensive impulse purchases.

"I'm joking," said Rinko. "I couldn't help but make something up when you asked me about my income out of the blue like that... Master Kunon, you know it's rude for employers to pry into the state of their servants' purses, don't you?"

Not knowing why Kunon had posed the question, Rinko had lied. Her caution was absolutely justified. No matter how close the employer-employee relationship, money was a private, sensitive topic.

"I normally wouldn't ask," said Kunon. "I do have some degree of common sense."

Another thing Iko had taught him. She might have introduced a few flaws into Kunon's personality, but she had done right by him otherwise.

"I'm asking because I can no longer afford not to know."

"Pardon?"

"About two hundred thousand, would you say? I believe that's around what Iko received, not counting additional compensation."

"Um... I'm not really following, but my salary is approximately four hundred and fifty thousand per month, plus a travel allowance. It's quite high for a servant."

"I see. That much, huh?"

Kunon's mind raced. A month's hard work for a servant translated to 450,000

necca, and that was the high end of the range. That meant— "A normal job isn't going to cut it..."

Muttering to himself, Kunon smiled like he was having fun.

"Master Kunon, please explain. If you don't, I'll be forced to grab all the money in this house and run. This is making me very uncomfortable. You are absolutely not allowed to touch a necca of my pay."

"Hmm? Oh yes. It seems that..." Kunon held the letter out to her as he spoke. "...unfortunately, the Advanced class I'll be attending has a rule: I have to earn my own living expenses."

"What? But that would mean..."

"In short, it means my allowance will have to be cut off."

Scanning over the letter herself, Rinko confirmed what was written there.

"Evidently, the school will pay our rent," Kunon continued. "But we need more than that to live, right? I suppose I'll have to work to earn money for food and other necessities, plus any extra funds I want to spend on magic. And it says that I am required to pay my servant's salary myself."

## Consequently—

"It looks like I need to find a job. One with a monthly salary of about five hundred thousand... No, make that six hundred to seven hundred thousand."

Kunon's circumstances had taken a sudden, unanticipated turn.

The conditions for Advanced class students could be summed up in the following main points:

- Accepting money and/or presents from family (immediate or extended), friends, or anyone else is prohibited.
- The school will pay the cost of rent for students' current places of residence. Otherwise, students' living expenses will come from the wages they earn through work. Students with servants must pay their servants' salaries themselves.
- Students are generally free to make use of all school facilities except for restricted areas.

- Wearing robes is recommended—but not required—so that students can be easily identified as pupils of the school.
- Students are required to carry their student identification cards whenever they leave their residences. Losing one's ID card will result in a severe penalty.
- Students are permitted to consult with teachers if they need help, but this should not be considered a blanket solution to all problems.

"Not permitting you to receive an allowance is... A bit unreasonable, no?"

When Kunon finished reading the conditions aloud, Rinko looked skeptical.

"A bit," he agreed. "But I'm sure it will work out fine."

"Really? I don't understand why they're making you work when you came here to attend magic school. Won't that cut down on your study time?"

"I think the point is to manage my time well enough to do both."

Kunon put everything back into the envelope except the metal ID card.

"My master used to tell me, 'Think about what you're going to use that spell for.' It's fine to start by doing something just because it strikes your fancy, but after that you need to consider what you can do with it."

The ability to use magic wasn't worth anything on its own. One had to know what it could do, how to make it useful.

"In this case, I think he would tell me to come up with a way of using magic to make money."

If their living expenses were relatively low, a normal job might have sufficed. But since Kunon also had to earn enough to pay Rinko's salary, ordinary labor wasn't an option. Of course, a typical job that didn't involve magic would have been difficult to begin with, since Kunon couldn't see.

"...There are only a few more days until school starts. I have some thinking to do."

Then and there, Kunon's life of leisure came to an unforeseen end. If he didn't find a way to make money, he wouldn't be able to support his lifestyle, and he wouldn't be able to keep employing Rinko.

Suddenly, Kunon found himself in quite the predicament. And yet, compared to when he'd been indulging in leisure mere moments ago, he now seemed to be having much more fun.

•

Several days had passed since Kunon's school papers arrived.

"I'm off," he called out to Rinko.

"Enjoy your day!"

Rinko watched as he left the house.

The weather was excellent. Wind blew through the city, carrying away the lingering summer heat to some far-off destination. Kunon was grateful it wasn't raining. It was a good thing that on an important day such as this—Kunon's first day of magic school—the weather was nice and unremarkable.

From now on, Kunon would be going to the school almost every day. He had thoroughly memorized the route there so he could navigate it alone, even without sight. The school wasn't that far away, so he had decided to commute on foot.

Kunon could hear his surroundings clearly. The sounds of people going about their daily lives reached him unhampered by any unusual noise.

On rainy days, the terrain was difficult, and Kunon struggled to hear anything over the din. That alone could make it a challenge for him to get around.

He was really glad it was sunny.

"G'morning, Kunon."

"Good morning, Mr. Kunon!"

"Ha-ha! Ah-ha-ha!"

"Woof! Woof!"

"Ha-ha-ha!"

Kunon had been renting a house in Dirashik for one month, and in that time, he had established a friendly relationship with his neighbors. He was already a

regular at the nearby bakery and general store, and he adored the massive dog that the man next door, Mr. Dio, owned. There were other cute dogs he saw sometimes, too, but he didn't know who they belonged to. Though he assumed they were pets since they had collars.

By now, everyone in the area knew about Kunon's blindness, so they made sure to say hello whenever they saw him. The dogs were always running up to him as well.

They were all nice—both the people and the canines.

"Good morning," Kunon returned. "Your voice is lovely as always. It's like I can hear the sound of your beautiful heart. *Oof*—my, my, such lovely drool! Quite befitting of such a gorgeous animal."

Kunon greeted his neighbors and their dogs before continuing on his way.

Then, very casually, he stopped walking and activated the Glass Eye.

"Hello."

It was still there. And it still wasn't responding.

Along the road, in the narrow space between two buildings, there was a back alley wide enough for just one person to fit through.

When Kunon looked at the alley with the Eye, he could see a huge figure—so large he had to crane his neck to take it in properly—smooshed into the gap. The figure had red skin, long white hair, and an exposed, muscular body. Its bulging veins looked quite manly. Kunon had done some research and discovered the figure was a creature known as an ogre. Apart from a loincloth, the ogre was entirely naked and semitransparent.

The first time Kunon had seen it, he had thought it was a person. But now he assumed the ogre was like the crab that always followed behind him. It was possible he was wrong, however. After all, the ogre didn't appear on the back of some burdened sorcerer, and it stayed stuck in the little alley, never stirring.

Approximately two weeks had gone by since Kunon had found it, but the ogre hadn't moved an inch. Even an eccentric with a love of squeezing into tight spaces would struggle to stay in one spot for so long.

In any case, the ogre wasn't really there, so it didn't pose a threat. Kunon had been taken aback to see a dog walk right through it once. Incidentally, he had also been somewhat surprised by the high percentage of pet dogs in the neighborhood.

Was the ogre another apparition that broke all his heretofore established rules, or was it just an exception?

"...I wonder if it's something I can figure out through research."

Kunon continued to see all sorts of strange things. Looking into the distance was still too taxing, so everything he saw was up close. Moving visuals also remained difficult with the Glass Eye. In the time it took to blink, a scene could change dramatically. His brain struggled to process that amount of optical input. Instead, Kunon would look through the Eye for a moment before deactivating it. Then he would take some time to interpret what he had seen.

Currently, repeating that process was Kunon's only method of looking at things. He had largely gotten used to it... But he still had a long way to go before he would be able to see around the clock like an average person.

If he reached that point, Kunon was sure he would come across countless mysterious beings like the ogre. Not that he particularly wanted that. He didn't enjoy looking at large, mostly naked men.

In truth, he had grown used to these strange beings. As expected in a city brimming with sorcerers, if he kept an eye out, he was bound to discover quite a few. Even so, their existence was constantly weighing on his mind, and Kunon hoped that someday he would find the answers he was looking for.

Kunon arrived safely at school despite all the neighborly exchanges and frolicking dogs.

"Mr. Kunon. Good morning."

"Is that you, Ms. Loubella?"

Though he had sensed someone standing near the school gate, he hadn't been sure of who it was at first. It turned out to be Loubella, the receptionist he had met when he visited the administrative office.

"I'll be leading you into the school from here, so please come with me."

"Very well... Wait. Just me?"

"The other three new students are already inside. Do you remember the room where you took the written portion of the entrance exam? That's where I'll be taking you."

"A special escort, just for me? Thank you so much. You're very kind, Ms. Loubella."

"I'm only doing this because I was asked to."

"You don't mind if I fall in love with you, do you? I mean, it's already too late."

"Right. Sure. You probably say that to every woman you meet."

"I'm not so fickle as all that. I only say it about ninety-eight percent of the time."

"At that rate, it seems to me you may as well go bold and make it a hundred percent."

Loubella led him through the gate, preoccupied with thoughts of the 2 percent of women Kunon *didn't* say such things to.

"This is it."

"Thank you for your assistance. Please let me buy you lunch as a token of my gratitude."

Deftly sidestepping Kunon's advances, the receptionist walked away, leaving him at the classroom door. Perhaps she was indeed as guarded as she'd said. Kunon watched her go, then opened the door to head into the room...

"This is unacceptable."

...only to find that some sort of quarrel was taking place on the other side.

"Okay, but what am I supposed to do about it...?"

Three people were already in the classroom. The one declaring something to be "unacceptable" was Reyes Saint-Lance, who Kunon had failed to win over during the entrance exam. Hank Beat, the oldest applicant, appeared flustered as she closed in on him. Watching their argument with no small discomfort was

Riyah Houghs.

These were, as far as Kunon was concerned, his classmates, since they had all taken the entrance exam together.

"Good morning. It's lovely to see you all again. Oh? How lovely, you ask? As lovely as when my thick-cut bacon at breakfast has been cut even thicker than usual."

*"…"* 

The Saint ignored him as usual.

"...Oh, hey. Good morning."

"Good...morning?"

Hank and Riyah managed to return his greeting, though they sounded a little bewildered. Their faces seemed to say "It's too early for you to be spouting nonsense."

"Were you fighting about something? I'm happy to weigh in, if you'd like."

"We're not fighting, per se...," Hank answered hesitantly as he turned to look at Reyes.

"We were discussing the Advanced class policies," she said. "I hadn't heard about allowances being prohibited or the need to earn my own living expenses before enrolling."

"Oh, I see."

So that was what the Saint found unacceptable.

Kunon recalled that Hank had worked for a long time as a low-level assistant to one of the school's teachers. Reyes must have brought up the subject with him, assuming he would have some knowledge regarding the school's internal affairs.

"That shouldn't be a problem for you, right?" said Kunon.

"Excuse me? What exactly makes you think so? To be clear, based on some simple calculations, I'll have to earn one and a half million necca per month to get by."

One and a half million per month? That was almost twice Kunon's estimate. Just what kind of life was the Saint living?

"That's quite a sum," he remarked. "I suppose it must be true that good women need money for grooming."

Reyes ignored Kunon's statement and kept talking.

"When I went looking, I was told there were no jobs paying that much, and that if I needed that kind of money, I'd have to become some noble's mistress. The disrespect."

Though she had claimed to be lacking in emotions, Kunon could feel a hint of indignation emanating from the Saint. In truth, she was probably incensed. What looked like minor irritation on Reyes likely translated to absolute fury on the average person.

"That really is a lot of money. But I'm sure you'll be fine. It'll be tough on all of us."

Kunon addressed Hank, who had also asked to be in the Advanced class. Kunon was done trying to flirt with Reyes. He had remembered a piece of advice Iko had once given him: When pushing didn't work, one should try pulling away.

In addition, when he mentioned the Saint while telling Rinko about his entrance exam, she'd told him, "Don't pester her, and never be alone with her. *Never.* Don't court needless misunderstandings by inviting her anywhere. Good men aren't obstinate. A gentleman should always value a woman's will."

Kunon couldn't dismiss such a valuable lesson about gentlemanly behavior. He was still very interested in speaking to Reyes, however. He was dying to ask her about light magic.

"Huh? Oh... Actually, it'll be easy for me. I'm a commoner. I just need to earn enough for food. But you're nobility, aren't you? You must have various other expenses."

"You're right. I think I could manage fine if it were only my cost of living, but my servant's salary... That's a lot of pressure." There were probably students who sent their servants home to lessen the burden. But for Kunon, that wouldn't be an easy decision. He could do things himself to a certain extent, but the barriers to living on his own were still too high.

Kunon had blossomed in numerous ways, but in the end, he still hated being alone. Plus, he didn't know the first thing about housework, and he hated tidying up. Having a maid who could take care of the chores and attend to Kunon on occasion was, in his mind, an absolute necessity.

"Oh good, you're all here."

As the students were talking, their teachers arrived—Soff Cricket and his assistant Associate Professor Sayfie.

"This is unacceptable." Reyes started hounding the teachers the moment they appeared. "I came here to study magic. I don't have time to come up with my own living expenses."

"Right, first off, congratulations on your admission. It's orientation time. I'm going to go over all that starting now, okay?"

Soff and Sayfie remained unbothered by Reyes's objections, as if they were par for the course.

"Now's as good a time as any," said Soff, "so let me begin with an explanation. I believe I told you at the entrance exam that 'the Advanced class is aimed at producing first-rate sorcerers.' An essential part of being in that first-rate tier is earning money. Let me put it simply: Sorcerers who can't earn money can't be considered first-rate, as far as the school's standards are concerned. Right, Ms. Sayfie?"

"I'm not a first-rate magic user, but I still need money to get by. The more advanced the magic you're involved with, the more money you will need."

Kunon understood this very well. After all, he'd seen the hits to his allowance from the cost of his study and research into magic.

It was all about materials. Everything cost money, including the elixirs and medicinal herbs required for spells and the objects needed to serve as mediums. Each component of a magic tool was made-to-order and designed to

react to and operate on magic. Putting together something like that was inevitably expensive.

"They say there's no rose without a thorn," Soff pointed out. "True or not, sorcerers unable to make money tend to wind up in trouble, stealing or killing to fund their research. And even without money, sorcerers can still use powerful magic, which only aggravates the situation. Some time ago, you used to hear stories about sorcerers who were tricked or threatened—or even lured into wrongdoing by the promise of a reward. Naive magic users who know nothing outside of spells are easy targets for professional con artists. Whether they're after your strength or your authority, there are people everywhere who will try to take advantage of you for their own benefit. Learning to make an honest living is about keeping your distance from those kinds of shady characters."

"Besides," Soff continued, "you're here to learn advanced magic—but Reyes, have you ever considered what you'll do after achieving that goal?"

"No. My future is already decided."

As a saint of the Holy Kingdom, Reyes was expected to become a high-ranking symbol of faith for the people. In other words, this was simply a period of transition for her.

"That's all the more reason for you to experience working life. Find out what all you can achieve with your magic. Your future position might be decided, but there are plenty of things that aren't set in stone yet, right? Find something you want to do. Whether it's something you find interesting or simply enjoy, pursuing it will improve your magic and help it grow. Look—even if you don't believe me now, just humor me and try some stuff out. Right, Ms. Sayfie?"

"Some things can only be achieved while you're young."

Kunon found himself agreeing with their teachers once again. His master, Zeonly, had told him about how he began making magic tools as a way to earn money. He had gone into the field with a casual attitude, but before long, he was obsessed.

Now Kunon understood. His master had come across magic tool-making in his quest to earn a living at school, not realizing he was stumbling upon his future

occupation. He had discovered his calling as a sorcerer, and now Zeonly Finroll was a star magical engineer.

To find one's lifelong career like that must have been an incredible stroke of good luck. After all, Zeonly's personality meant he wasn't likely to get along in most sensible magical professions.

"I need to earn one and a half million necca per month to get by. Does such a job exist?"

This time, Soff looked startled at Reyes's words.

"What?! One and a half million?! No way... What do you need that much for? Food?"

"I have two servants who act as my guards. I have to pay them, don't I? In addition to my living expenses."

"Oh, I see... That is a bit of a problem, isn't it, Ms. Sayfie?"

"It makes my stomach hurt just thinking about paying that kind of money..."

If her servants were also her guards, they couldn't be dismissed easily. But the rules of the Advanced class said that Reyes had a duty to work to pay their salaries. Kunon now understood why she took issue with the policy.

"There is a quick solution, if you want one."

"Is there? A way I can earn the money?"

"No, not exactly. However, you could transfer to the Second Level class. There's no rule against allowances there... But if you drop down a level, you won't be allowed back into this one."

"...What is the difference in course content?"

"It depends on your motivation. Advanced students are free to study whatever they'd like. They can learn or slack off to their hearts' content. In Second Level, the scope of things students may study on their own is narrower. That's the main difference."

"…"

<sup>&</sup>quot;You can take some time to think about it. There's a grace period, so it might

be a good idea to consult with your teachers. Right, Ms. Sayfie?"

"Yes," his assistant replied. "I am also available for advice, though I may not be of much help. Don't give up hope yet."

"...Thank you. I'll consider my options."

Though their school lives had only just begun, it seemed the Saint was already facing a big challenge on the financial front.

Though they'd gotten a bit ahead of themselves, Soff and Sayfie eventually returned to their original subject.

"We call it orientation, but since Advanced students don't have many restrictions, there's not a lot to say."

"Um!" Riyah interjected. "I w-was aiming for the Second Level class, so I'm wondering why I'm here in the Advanced orientation!"

Apparently, another of their number had gotten a big surprise.

"It was concluded that your ability was sufficient to get by in the Advanced class. Are you unhappy with that decision?"

"Not unhappy, but... I was planning on using my free time to work so I could send some money back home..."

"That so? But well, class transfers are processed right away, so why not stay in the Advanced class for now and see how it goes? From the sound of things, as far as I can tell, there shouldn't be much of a conflict for you."

Soff had a point. Wouldn't finding time to work to send money home be easier in the class where one was allowed to do anything they pleased?

"...I see," said Riyah. "I suppose I'll give it a try..."

Good, Kunon thought. Riyah was one of his precious, long-awaited classmates; there was so much he wanted to ask him.

"I'd like to add that students in the Advanced class are already considered qualified sorcerers in their own right," said Soff. "You won't be called apprentices or anything like that. Consequently, teachers will sometimes ask you to participate in experiments and research, and you can earn a certain

amount of money that way, too. That's one reason I suggested you consult with them. If your instructors think you've got what they're looking for, they'll offer you chances to make money whether you want them or not. You may have to negotiate a little, though."

In effect, Soff said, the Advanced students were like freelance research assistants.

"You all are essentially at liberty to do what you please. You don't have scheduled class times like the First and Second Levels, and outside of individual commitments, the school will hardly ever force you to do something. You have free rein to use school facilities, and I want you to take advantage of that. Immerse yourself in magic, work, or whatever else you want."

The Advanced class truly did enjoy freedom in their studies, it seemed.

"However," he continued, "you are required to earn at least ten credits per year. You have to establish a record of achievement, whether you do that through research, experimentation, or working with teachers. If you fall short by even one credit, you'll be put in Second Level for the next school year. I said before that you can slack off as much as you'd like, and that was true. But if you fail to earn your credits, the privileges that come with being in the Advanced class will be taken away from you."

In other words, they could do as they pleased so long as they managed their own schedules and figured out how they would earn their credits.

The Advanced class asked a lot of its students. They would have to draw on their abilities as well as their ambitions. It was expected that, even when left on their own, they would do what was required of them.

"I think that's about it. Just remember that you need to earn ten credits per year. There are numerous ways to achieve that, so you'd do well to ask various teachers for advice."

With that, the main explanation was finished.

There were no particular restrictions for their class, so from then on, they would simply have to get used to their new lives.

"That's it for the explanation. Any questions?"

The other students asked Soff about several things, but none of it was of particular interest.

"Yes, Kunon?"

Assuming his question might take some time to answer, Kunon waited until it looked like the other three students were done before raising his hand.

"Are we allowed to do business with teachers?"

"Yep, whatever you want. Sell your services as an assistant, sell things that you've obtained or created—anything. However, you could be expelled for angering a teacher, so make sure to use common sense and operate within the bounds of the law."

Kunon was relieved. He had been brainstorming ways of making money since he'd first received that letter from the school. His current idea was something he was confident he could do—and which was both safe and effective. Plus, he already had a track record of success. It would also provide him with the chance to meet many of the school's teachers, and if that included Satori, the water sorcerer he so admired, Kunon would be thrilled.



"What kind of business are you considering? If you don't mind my asking, that is."

"I want to offer sleep. For women, I can also offer to heal their hearts with my words."

"Sleep?"

"The only magic I can do that my master has given his seal of approval. He said, 'Your other spells aren't much different from what the average water sorcerer can do, but this I like.' I was also thinking of offering my heart and soul up to any women who may be interested."

If Kunon's master—Zeonly—had given his approval, that alone was proof that Kunon's idea was worthwhile. For a man who seldom praised others to recognize the value of someone else's creation—now that sounded promising. It was almost guaranteed to sell like hotcakes.

Soff didn't have any idea what kind of product Kunon was talking about based on what he had said so far. But that only piqued his curiosity.

"What do you mean by 'offering sleep'?"

"Well, once a sorcerer starts putting his all into experiments and research, his schedule becomes irregular, right? It's common for sorcerers to stay up all night working for two, maybe three days in a row. And what's more, there are some who have trouble getting started on work until the deadline is almost upon them."

People who got so caught up in work that they forgot to rest or eat and who had no motivation to work until they were backed into a corner. Soff couldn't deny that such people existed. At the magic school, people who put off everything until the last minute were especially common.

On project after project, they'd scramble to finish their work all the while thinking, If I'd just made a little progress every day, I wouldn't have ended up with my back to the wall like this.

The school was practically crawling with such troublesome characters—the kind who would, for example, neglect an assignment meant to be completed

over a long break, only to work through all of it on the last day, practically in tears.

These were the people Kunon was referring to.

"What sorcerers in their situation need is a little nap, don't you think? And I believe I could provide an environment in which they could get better, deeper, more restful sleep... I thought I might be able to sell that as a service. Good quality sleep is extremely important, after all. It's just that I have no idea how much I might earn from such an enterprise, so I don't know if it's a viable option."

He wasn't in as much of a pinch as Reyes, but Kunon also needed to bring in a significant amount of money to get by. If this idea didn't prove as profitable as he was hoping, he needed to start coming up with other options.

"That's what I want to consult with someone about," he said. "A woman, preferably."

"I think you should go for it," Soff declared. "I just know it'll turn out well."

He was already picturing various colleagues who he knew were at their wit's end. Every one of them looked like they could keel over at any moment. He wished he could force them to rest that very second.

Providing people with what they needed, be that a product or a service, was the very foundation of a good business.

"Also, for women, I could offer sweet nothings to soothe their souls."

"I was purposely avoiding touching on that subject, but since you keep bringing it up: I don't think that will be necessary."

"Understood. If you insist, I will also push myself to offer the service to men who ask for it."

"That's not what I meant at all. Right, Ms. Sayfie?"

What Soff was trying to say was that Kunon's idea was ridiculous, especially considering he was twelve years old.

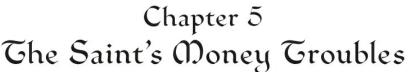
But when he turned to his assistant for backup, he heard her emphatically muttering something that sounded like, "This kid has a promising future... If

only I were five years younger..."

The boy was obviously a troublemaker, but Sayfie could probably see his talent just as clearly.

"Right. Orientation is officially over. I wish you all a fruitful school life." In the end, Soff pretended he hadn't heard her.





Ten days had passed since orientation.

"Problems? None so far, I think," said Kunon.

"Really? No one's said anything rude?" asked Soff.

"I think they want to, but they fall asleep before they can."

"Oh, I see... Everyone sure is worn out..."

Plainly put, Kunon's idea was a success.

He had started by offering people a chance to test the service once for free, and now, by day ten, four to five customers were showing up per day.

"With just a short nap, you too can feel as refreshed as though you've slept for half a day!"

"Pulled an all-nighter? Or two? Or three? No problem!"

"So comfortable you'll come back again and again!"

"Realistic stuffed animal options available! Try the giant hairless rat—it's our most popular add-on!"

With repeat customers so common, word of Kunon's business, the Sleep Sanctuary, spread in no time. And when people heard it was *Zeonly's* disciple running the service, they only talked about it more.

A significant number of people came just to take a look and see how business was going; even that was a sign of Kunon's success. The Sleep Sanctuary was proving a popular new trend at the magic school, and this was only ten days into the new term.

"I think things have more or less settled. Thank you for all your help, Professor Soff."

Soff had served as Kunon's adviser right from the start, providing lectures on business fundamentals and helping him to secure a location, attract customers, and develop publicity. Kunon owed him a lot.

He had also helped establish the pricing. At the current rate, Kunon could probably earn his monthly living expenses in two weeks. His only worry now was that someone would re-create the Supersoft-Body A-ori and start a competing business.

This was a magic school, after all. There were tons of people more brilliant than Kunon here. He was sure that many of them could replicate his work if they wanted to.

"I didn't expect you to develop a system for earning money this quickly, but... A place to rest, huh? It's one of the things outside of food, clothing, and shelter that humans will always need. You're practically guaranteed a steady stream of customers."

Kunon felt like "a place to rest" fell under the "shelter" category, but there was no need to split hairs.

His business was already on track. Starting with Soff, Kunon had collected signatures from teachers and students who'd tried out his service. After submitting the list to the school, he was able to reserve three empty classrooms.

These were available for reservation by Advanced students on an individual basis to use as temporary research facilities. Anyone could rent a room, as long

as their application explaining its intended use was accepted.

Kunon, whose application had been furnished with the names of current teachers and students, was granted permission for all three rooms without issue. He even managed to get space on the second floor. Apparently, the building's higher floors saw less foot traffic, so the bottom two floors, which were the easiest to access, were thus more desirable.

"Things really are speeding right along, huh?"

Soff had just dropped by Kunon's place of business that day to check in and see how things were going. Business was favorable, and it seemed customers were using the facilities even now.

What used to be nothing more than an empty classroom was fast becoming Kunon's niche at the school. Stacks of library books waited to be thoroughly devoured and have their most interesting passages transcribed. In fact, piles of such notes were already forming.

Kunon was still just a boy of twelve. Yet the state of his desk brought to mind a full-fledged sorcerer. If someone was to happen upon this room when Kunon was out, they would never guess it was being used by a child.

Soff was long past having doubts, but if he'd harbored any lingering suspicions about Kunon truly being Zeonly's apprentice, this room would have banished them. While it was true that Kunon was a bit strange and frivolous, his feelings about and approach toward magic were genuine.

This classroom was his home base—his research lab—and the other two were used for his business. One room was for men, the other for women, and each was further partitioned into spaces where customers would sleep. Or rather, where customers were already sleeping.

The people who needed this service the most were the ones who had to return to work immediately after waking up. So rather than napping here, they slept in their own dedicated research labs. The customers who came to Kunon's rooms still had some time to spare.

Even Kunon, unable to see, could tell that the teachers and students who slept in their labs were run considerably ragged. Soff's eagerness to help him

get his business off the ground made a lot of sense in that context.

Kunon knew what it was like to get so invested in something that he forgot to eat or sleep, and the people at the school were no different. If anything, they seemed even more likely to push themselves to their limits.

In Kunon's case, at least, Iko or Rinko was always there to stop him before he went too far. Without them, he would probably be in a similar state.

"Business aside," said Soff, "you've devised quite an interesting bit of magic there. To think encapsulating water in a highly elastic and pliable membrane would result in something like that."

"That" referred to the waterbed, also known as the Supersoft-Body A-ori.

Soff had tested it out, and it was absolutely wonderful. It was softer than the nicest of beds and made the user feel weightless. The waterbeds were so intensely comfortable that Soff bitterly regretted that, as a product of magic, they could last for only a day or two. He wished he could switch out his own bed for one. It seemed a lot of others felt similarly, ensuring a dedicated base of repeat customers.

"There's a little more to it than that. But I'm keeping the rest secret."

While his attribute wasn't water, Soff was still a skilled sorcerer. He could tell there were various mechanisms at play in the A-ori.

"Oh? Even from me?"

He also knew that those mechanisms were fairly intricate. He had no doubts as to why *Zeonly* had approved of it.

"Hmm. I suppose it's safe to tell you, Professor Soff."

"Sure is."

"My secret is the giant hairless rat. It's the most popular option."

As he spoke, Kunon held up a giant hairless rat made of water in both hands.

"...Is that thing really the most popular?"

"Yep. It works on everyone, even customers who seem a bit displeased with the bed itself. Once they cuddle up with one of these, they're out like a light... I wonder if it's the size? Or the weight? The texture? I don't really know, but somehow it seems to be exactly what people need."

Kunon held out the rat to Soff, who refused to take it.

"I have this feeling... Like if I touch it even once, I won't be able to let it go, and something awful will happen. So I think I'll pass."

Despite not fully understanding Soff's concerns, Kunon said "I see," and dispelled the rat.

"At any rate," said Soff, "I can see things are going well. I doubt you need any more help from me. I'll come by occasionally to check in, but you may do as you please from here on out."

"Understood. Thank you very much."

For now, at least, it looked like Kunon had found a way to cover his living expenses.

"So have you found anything you want to do?" Soff asked.

Ten days had passed since orientation, and Kunon had spent all of them making the arrangements for the Sleep Sanctuary and reading books to feed his insatiable intellectual curiosity.

But he couldn't just keep doing that forever. He had to earn credits. If he failed to earn even one of the necessary ten, he would lose his comfortable, unrestricted learning environment.

The safest course of action would be to earn the credits as soon as possible. And yet...

"I did receive a few invitations, but I feel like I'm okay for right now."

Just as Soff and Sayfie had said would happen, both teachers and students had begun requesting Kunon's assistance with their research. But he had turned them all down.

The good thing about his business was that it was peaceful. While his customers were asleep, Kunon had time to read. The school library carried an astounding number of books about magic, and he would have been happy to spend his whole school career doing nothing but reading through their entire

catalog. Kunon's current circumstances were perfect—almost too perfect.

"For now, I just want to keep reading books. I didn't realize Professor Satori had published so many. Papers, too."

Kunon still hadn't met the professor he so looked up to, but he had found her books, and he was obsessed.

He had also come across handwritten reports that hadn't been collected into books. He had practically drooled all over them. At present, he was focused on reading anything and everything of Satori's that he could get his hands on.

"I see. Well, the term has only just started, so there's no need to rush. Just make sure you don't forget about your credits."

"Understood."

There were other things on Kunon's mind aside from credits, however.

"By the way, Professor, what happened with Miss Reyes?"

"Hmm? Are you worried about her?"

"Of course. I still haven't gotten to talk with her."

Kunon expected he would get the chance to speak with Reyes at some point. But for the time being, since they both had things they needed to tend to, he hadn't gone to see her at all.

He was busy with his business and his books. And Reyes had probably been working on the money problem she'd encountered at the start of the term. They were both preoccupied with their own tasks at the moment.

"She's been brainstorming ideas with Ms. Sayfie, but it doesn't seem to be going well."

"...Does that mean the simplest option is out of the question?"

"Yeah. She said treating the sick and injured is the duty of those in sacred professions, so she can't accept even a single coin for it on her own behalf."

"That is troublesome."

Kunon's belief that Reyes would be fine was based primarily on her healing abilities. He'd figured she could simply walk into some hospital or treatment

center somewhere and offer to heal everyone inside for a million necca. But it seemed that wasn't on the table. Healing magic was the specialty of light sorcerers, so not being able to make money off it was no doubt a serious complication for Reyes.

"Kunon, why don't you help her out?"

"Of course. I was already contemplating it. I'm an ally to women, after all."

His answer was immediate and confident, as if it should have been obvious. Soff had expected as much. However...

"...Well, I mean, that's what I'd like to say, but..." Kunon's head drooped sadly. "Advanced students are considered qualified sorcerers, right? Offering unsolicited assistance to a full-fledged magic user could damage their pride. We're just friends. If we were a little closer—on the cusp of dating, perhaps—that would be one thing, but as it is, I can't reach out of my own volition. And since she hasn't asked for my help..."

"...That's a bit of a surprising answer from you."

Incidentally, Soff was skeptical that the Saint would even consider Kunon a friend. He was pretty sure they were just classmates. Pointing that out, however, would probably only bog down the conversation.

"Really? I may not look it, but I'm still a gentleman. I always act with utmost politeness."

Hold on one minute, thought Soff. That isn't true. In fact, it's not even mostly true!

"If you can, please try to persuade Miss Reyes to consult with me. I don't know if I can help her, but as they say, two heads are better than one."

"Do you have a good idea for a business?"

"No. I don't really know what light magic is capable of, so I'm not at the ideas stage yet. I'm not sure how else you can earn money with light magic if not through healing. They're basically synonymous."

Soff nodded. A regular job that paid as much as Reyes needed in a month just didn't exist. And without knowing what light magic was capable of, there was

no way for Kunon to come up with suggestions.

"I asked her to teach me about light magic so many times, but she never did..."

Soff shook his head. He couldn't blame her. Why would she have accepted Kunon's invitation, when it had just seemed like he was hitting on her?

After that, Soff and Kunon spent a little while talking about giant hairless rats and discussing what Kunon's other classmates, Hank and Riyah, were up to. At last, Soff concluded his visit to the empty classroom turned Kunon's laboratory.



Five days after that, the Saint visited Kunon's rooms.

"If I had to put a name to the emotion I'm experiencing right now, I would probably call it humiliation."

Riyah had heard Reyes lacked emotion, and he imagined that was why she could say such things. The average person wouldn't dream of blurting out a remark like that. And since she'd led with that statement, Riyah imagined Reyes was in a pretty stormy state of mind, despite her blank expression.

"Th-there, there..."

Overhearing her lament, the boy tried to comfort Reyes, but her expression remained unchanged.

"This is your first time, right, young miss? Are you nervous? It'll be okay, just lie down and close your eyes. It'll be over in no time... Trust me. The effect on your body will be worth far more than what you paid."

Right in front of them stood Kunon Gurion, giving a needlessly sugary explanation of his sleep service to a woman—a teacher at the school—who was clearly around ten years his senior.

Backed into a corner, with no options left available to her except to ask this shockingly frivolous person for advice, Reyes felt her own powerlessness keenly. The disgrace of it all. Really, if she'd had any other choice, she wouldn't be here. She'd never imagined that only two weeks after the start of school,

she'd be opening the door to Kunon's reserved classrooms.

"Oh, sorry. You can come on in, but do you mind waiting a minute?"

Kunon had been expecting her—Associate Professor Sayfie had dropped by the day before to warn him that they'd be showing up. However, it seemed their timing was a bit inconvenient. Kunon was just about to brief a first-time customer on the Sleep Sanctuary, and he asked them to sit tight until he was finished.

And so Reyes and the others waited, watching Kunon's demeanor all the while.

"That's it for the explanation. And your package of choice? That'll be a full morning session, with the giant hairless rat add-on? Very well. I'll need you to sign here... Yes, thank you. Now please follow me. I'll be showing you to a secret garden just for us two—and several other people."

Kunon led the new customer to one of the neighboring rooms before returning almost immediately.

"Sorry for making you wait. I wasn't expecting so many of you."

Reyes hadn't come alone, after all. First, there was Associate Professor Sayfie, who had been helping the Saint with her problem for some time. Soff had assisted Kunon extensively, so Sayfie's presence wasn't a surprise. The problem, from Kunon's point of view, was that Hank and Riyah were there, too.

"You asked our other classmates for help first, didn't you? I'm hurt. I wish you would have relied on me sooner."

In short, Reyes had come to Kunon only after she'd exhausted every other option.

"Personally, I would rather not be here at all," she said. "I didn't know what you would demand as compensation."

"Ah-ha-ha. A gentleman would never take advantage of a lady like that—you'll owe me a favor, though, of course."

"…"

This was exactly what Reyes had feared—she didn't want to be in Kunon's

debt. It was hard to tell if he'd gotten the message.

"...I believe you have a general understanding of my situation," she said. "So do you have any ideas?"

Reyes *really* didn't trust Kunon. Her initial impression of him had been bad, and after witnessing his superficial behavior earlier, how could she be expected to believe in him now?

Nevertheless, rather than regretting her decision to come see Kunon, she was, surprisingly, feeling rather hopeful. They had only been at school for two weeks, and yet Kunon's business was thriving, and his classroom...

Reyes knew the room had been left empty before. And now it had transformed into a private research space. There were books everywhere. Stacks of documents, too. Catalytic agents, solvents, instruments made of metal and glass, and other items of unknown purpose filled the space. In every respect, the cluttered room looked like the research lab of an avid sorcerer. This was not the work of someone who had until recently been a mere apprentice.

Kunon might be frivolous and something of a troublemaker, but this room proved that he was already a proper sorcerer in his own right. It made him appear as competent as some of the school's teachers.

So against her better judgment, Reyes was optimistic. And it wasn't just the Saint; their classmates felt the same way.

Sure enough, this Kunon Gurion is no ordinary person.

All three of Kunon's peers shared that thought. They also agreed that he was frivolous, but that was beside the point.

"As for your situation...," Kunon began. "Is it accurate to say that you still haven't found a reliable way to make money?"

"Yes. I found several jobs, but none where I could earn one and a half million necca per month."

Reyes had made some calculations and found that even if she worked multiple positions, her goal would be difficult, so she had given up on that course of action.

"And you can't accept payment for healing magic, correct?"

"Precisely. My healing magic is a sacred gift bestowed upon me by my ancestors and the divine. It cannot be used for the vulgar purpose of making money."

Donations to the Holy Kingdom could be accepted in exchange for healing, but personal compensation was not allowed.

"So it's a religious prohibition?"

"It is. It's fine if you don't understand it."

So it wasn't Reyes's hang-up—it was her country's.

"Can saints get married? Or will you live the rest of your life celibate as part of your ministry?"

"That has nothing to do with what I'm here for, so I will not answer."

Reyes *could* get married. But the obstacles were numerous and tricky. Anyone she married was required to be a believer in the Radiant Goddess, Kira Leila, and would have to accept being adopted into Reyes's family.

"Are you going to get married, Professor Sayfie?"

"Huh? Uh, what? Married?"

Sayfie, who had been casually skimming over some nearby documents, was surprised to suddenly be dragged into the conversation.

"I'd like to get married, yes. But I need to find a partner first... And before that, I need to pass my teacher's exam... Wait, why are we talking about me?"

"Gentlemen naturally take an interest in the futures of attractive women. Right, Hank?"

"Hmm? Oh, uh, yep."

Preoccupied by the same documents as Sayfie, Hank gave only a vague reply. Riyah was looking similarly restless, and it seemed like there was no point in talking to anyone other than the Saint, at the moment.

"Feel free to take a look at any of those papers."

The important ones were already tidied up and put away. The only things left out were what Kunon had copied from books and reference materials. More importantly, it was all information he had already memorized.

Recognizing that the other three weren't in the mood for a conversation, Kunon decided to let them be and focus on Reyes.

"Incidentally," said Kunon, "documents like these are another good way to earn money as a sorcerer."

"...They're reports on magic experiments and research, yes?" said Reyes.

"Yep. People buy them based on their importance and potential influence on the magic world going forward... Though I guess that's a little difficult for new students like us..."

Kunon and Reyes were barely more than apprentice sorcerers, and their knowledge and experience were nothing compared to their elders. They had a long way to go before they could even dream of competing in the realm of ideas and ability.

Most of what they came up with would be something someone else had already thought of and tested. There probably wasn't anyone who would pay for that, no matter how many experiments they performed or papers they summarized.

If successful, they could expect a decent sum for their work, but at present... That particular avenue wasn't looking very hopeful.

"You need one and a half million per month, right? That's way too high for a regular salary... Which means instead of working for someone else, you'll probably have to do some sort of business on your own."

"I considered that as well. But what would I do? Sorcerers sell magic, but my magic can't be used to make money. Even if I tried, I have no capital and no business expertise. And it would take too much time for me to start learning now."

"That's true. If you try your hand with some half-baked idea, it'll likely fail and land you in debt."

"You seem to have done quite well in that respect, though."

"The Sleep Sanctuary? That's just the result of my making the best of my abilities."

Due to religious reasons, however, Reyes was limited in what abilities she could make the best of.

To think the day would come when a saint—said to be one of the world's greatest treasures—would be in such dire financial straits. Saints used to be the primary adversaries of the Demon Lord and his legions. No one else could compare. In theory, she could easily use her ability to make a fortune. And yet here she was, helpless. It was a difficult era to be a saint. Things were not going as she would have liked.

"I only looked into it briefly," said Kunon. "But is it true that light magic's two specializations are healing and purification?"

"Yes. Broadly speaking, the magic I can do falls into those two categories."

"And healing magic is out of the question."

"Correct."

"Right, no healing... Are you allowed to use purification magic for profit?"

"Yes, that is permitted."

"By the way, is there anything specific you want to study here, Miss Reyes? Or are your goals still loosely defined, like 'mastering magic'?"

"I want to study anything I can. That's what schools are for, yes?"

Indeed, Kunon thought, nodding.

"Then why not try making magic tools with me? I have a few concepts I haven't started work on yet. I can't say whether we'll accomplish anything for sure, but when magic tools are successful, they're a big deal."

"Wait a minute!" Sayfie cut in. "You're talking about the rights to a new magic tool, right? Trying to share something like that would be..."

When a magic tool took off, the rights to it were worth an astronomical amount. Even if it wasn't a big hit, as long as it was decently valued, there was

still a reasonable chunk of change to be had.

Kunon was still only twelve years old. This wasn't the kind of proposal that a child who didn't understand the value of money should be making. That was why Sayfie had interrupted.

"It's okay."

But her fears were unwarranted. Kunon knew what he was doing. He had a good grasp on the value of money, and he understood how much was at stake.

"These are just some ideas I was thinking of trying out after a lot of experimentation. I thought light magic might speed up the process is all. I don't intend to give over full rights or anything, but Miss Reyes would be the star here —I would just be the ideas guy."

"Just" the ideas guy.

Even during such an important conversation, Kunon's attitude was as lighthearted as ever.

"Above all, I am an ally to women. I'm devoted to being a gentleman even if it isn't to my advantage."

His tone was so unconcerned, Sayfie began to worry that he didn't fully understand what he was saying. But since Kunon himself had claimed to be okay with it, there wasn't much more the associate professor could say.

"So? How about it?" asked Kunon. "This is the only proposal I have for you right now."

"May I give my answer after hearing the particulars?"

"I'm afraid not. Once I tell you about the idea, I'll have to get into the plans and the figures. If you were to walk off with that information, I would be at a disadvantage."

"I see... What is the probability of success?"

"That depends on you. Like I said before, you'll be taking the lead role in manufacturing the tool. Once I turn the project over to you, there'll be nothing for me to do except sit back and watch. Though I intend to be your enthusiastic companion until the end, of course."

"...And I'll be able to earn one and a half million necca?"

"And then some, I think. I believe this could lead to massive profits in the long run. Though that also depends on you. Or I suppose, since this would be our first collaboration, it will depend on *both* of—"

"Fine. I accept your offer."

"...Oh, okay."

The Saint had been thinking hard for two weeks. She had consulted her classmates and Sayfie and spent a lot of time considering her options. But ultimately, she hadn't been able to come up with anything. Kunon's proposal, however, might just provide a solution.

She still didn't know what she would be doing, but by coming here, she had finally discovered a potential way to make the money she needed. She had no choice but to give it a try.

Prepared to transfer to the Second Level class if all else failed, Reyes made her decision. Perhaps she'd even get Kunon to stop prattling for once.

"Really? Really? Hooray! A light magic experiment! I'll have to take notes on everything! Oh, you'll let me ask you questions this time, right?! You'll teach me about light magic, right?!"

*"…"* 

Reyes would be lying if she said she wasn't anxious. But at the moment, this was her only hope.

**•** 

Once the Saint made her choice, Kunon wanted to get right down to business.

"...I really hadn't expected...," said Reyes.

"Hmm? What?"

"No, it's nothing."

Kunon had started by asking Sayfie and their classmates to leave the room, leaving him alone with Reyes. She had wanted to avoid such a situation at all

costs, but now she had no choice.

Reyes braced herself physically and mentally, but—contrary to her expectations, Kunon immediately started talking about his plans for the magic tool. It was as if he felt there was no time to waste. Like he wanted to start experimenting right away.

"...Something along those lines. What do you think? Have you fallen for me all over again?"

"I was never in love with you to begin with."

If only it weren't for his injecting nonsense into the conversation at every opportunity, Reyes thought. If it weren't for that, she could have accepted him openly as an outstanding classmate.

Her guard was as tight as it could be. And yet Kunon's talk about this new magic tool had quickly drawn her in. He really was an amazing boy—even more than Reyes had thought. She realized instantly that what she'd heard about Kunon being the disciple of the famous Zeonly Finroll was neither a lie nor an exaggeration.

"Shi-shilla... I see."

Taking notes with a borrowed pen and paper, Reyes asked Kunon questions to deepen her understanding of the idea.

"That's the outline in full," he said. "Did it all make sense?"

"Yes. You're talking about using my purification magic to synthesize an environment in which to cultivate the sacred herb shi-shilla, which only grows on holy land."

"Exactly. Some time ago, I wanted to understand the principle behind the various sacred lands and consecrated grounds found around the world, so I did some research. The soil in such places is said to be rich in potent spiritual magic and purifying power, and so I was wondering if someone like you could cultivate plants that required that kind of environment."

"I understand the theory behind what you're saying, but as to whether it's possible..."

"That's why this all depends on you. There's not much I can contribute here. If it *is* possible, I think the research and results will be worth a decent sum. And of course, shi-shilla itself commands a high price. Once the systems needed for cultivation and mass production are in place..."

"A monthly income of one and a half million necca won't be out of reach."

"Precisely."

"And you're going to use the shi-shilla to make a medicinal potion, right? That would be a totally new product... And an extremely valuable magic tool."

"That's right. Are you falling for me again?"

"I was never in love with you."

Kunon's idea was to produce a potion in which the sacred herb would be the primary ingredient. With the shi-shilla as his raw material, any resulting product would be a so-called miracle drug—a magic potion. Magic potions served various purposes, and one made from shi-shilla would result in an especially fast-acting healing salve. That was what he wanted to create.

The potion would be the magic tool. Details were still confidential, however.

Reyes could probably have gotten Kunon to share everything with her by saying something like, "I think I really have fallen for you." But her pride as a saint would never allow her to do so.

"I think the processed material will be easier to produce in higher quantities and ultimately more valuable than the shi-shilla alone. That being said, even if we don't turn it into a potion, you could probably make enough money simply by growing about five shi-shilla plants per month. Just based on my calculations anyway."

This had surpassed Reyes's wildest dreams. If she could earn one and a half million necca or more in a month just from cultivating five plants, she had a real chance for success.

The nature of her work had seen her make many pilgrimages to holy lands and consecrated grounds. Such places were very familiar to her. Their conditions and atmosphere, their soil, purified by holy magic—she knew it all

well.

If that was all it would take—replicating that soil and air—she was sure she could do it.

Something permanent would be difficult, but as for establishing a temporary growing environment, Reyes didn't think she would have any problems.

Most importantly, it would be done with the noble goal of creating a medicinal potion—of serving people. She didn't think that would go against the church's doctrine.

"I'll get to work right away."

"Oh, wait." As the Saint made to leave the room, Kunon stopped her. "If possible, could you reserve a classroom nearby and grow the herb there? I want to watch and take notes on its progress. I also want to document your hard work, of course."

"I would rather not."

"Don't say that. If you submit an application to the school, I'm certain you can earn credits for it. Apart from making money, growing shi-shilla is a fine experiment and would be considered an achievement for a sorcerer. Let's call it a joint research project. All you have to do is the growing; I'll take care of the documentation. And if we have free time, we could eat lunch together."

He's right, Reyes thought. Aside from the lunch thing.

She hadn't had any time to spare thinking about credits in the last two weeks. All her efforts had been focused on figuring out her money problem. How the credit system worked still wasn't totally clear, but she knew if she didn't earn ten of them in a year, she would be forced to transfer from the Advanced class to Second Level.

Though the result would be the same, transferring as a last resort and being forced to transfer were two very different things.

Ten credits per year would mean earning one credit approximately every month. Thinking about it that way, there wasn't a lot of time to spare.

"Are joint research projects allowed?"

"Yep. I've already checked."

"...I suppose I have no choice."

"Hooray! We're going to have lunch together!"

"I wasn't talking about lunch."

When it came to credits, Reyes found it hard to refuse on personal grounds. The whole plan had been Kunon's idea. And once the shi-shilla was grown, Reyes would need to consult with him about manufacturing the magic tool.

In short, she still needed Kunon's help; it was too early to stop associating with him.

...That said, she was getting the feeling that as long as she could endure his pointless chatter, she wouldn't necessarily need to cut him off at all. Personality aside, Kunon's abilities, knowledge, and ideas were extraordinary. There were sure to be a lot of benefits to partnering with him. Even if he *was* frivolous.

"Let's get started right away," she said.

"Yeah. I'll procure the shi-shilla seeds, so you start preparing the application for reserving a room. To apply—"

Kunon stood and opened the room's main door.

Sayfie, Hank, and Riyah were all outside. Despite being made to leave, they had found it quite difficult to simply walk away and were waiting for the conversation to be over. Plus, they still didn't know what kind of person Kunon was, so they thought it unwise to leave Reyes alone with him.

Kunon ignored their groundless fears.

"Professor Sayfie," he said. "Miss Reyes will be applying to reserve a classroom, so please help her. Hank and Riyah, too, if you have the time."

This had all started with the Saint's money troubles. But the one most motivated and enthusiastic about the project was undoubtedly Kunon.

•

"So this is...!"

They were witnessing a spell unique to saints: Sanctum. All five of the potted plants Hank and Riyah had prepared were encapsulated inside it. Though the barrier was transparent, its domed shape became visible when light bounced off it. There was an indescribable holy energy coming from the dome, and it was extremely intense. Even with such a small range, its power was obvious and overwhelming.

The Sanctum spell was said to be the most powerful defensive magic, capable of blocking out evil beings, and was the exclusive purview of saints. In fact, the ability to cast this spell was what earned saints their title.

*"…"* 

Not many people got the chance to see a Sanctum spell. Taking little notice of their noisy classmates and Sayfie, who was looking on calmly despite her inner amazement, Kunon was single-mindedly taking notes.

Naturally, he felt the same way they did. He was astonished and excited. However, he decided to prioritize writing down everything he was seeing and feeling, so as not to forget. Not that he could actually see anything. Once his notes were finished, he planned to marvel over the spell to his heart's content.

"What do you think? I've done my best to replicate holy ground...," Reyes addressed Kunon's quietly scribbling form.

"It's incredible!" he replied excitedly, his pen never pausing. "Seeing it made me think of a bunch of things I want to test out! Can I ask you for another favor?! I can, right?! I'll buy you a parfait! Or three! Please, pleasepleaseplease!"

"….."

This mood was familiar—it was the same Kunon from the entrance exam.

Ah. I see, Reyes thought, finally able to believe him. Kunon was asking her out but not on a date. He had meant what he said back then. This was just what happened when he got excited about magic.

"Don't you think three parfaits is a bit cheap?" said Reyes.

"What? I have to be careful about my expenses, too, you know."

"Aren't you raking it in at the moment?"

"Don't you know? Sorcerers require a lot of money."

This was the type of person Kunon Gurion was. Now that Reyes understood, she had no more reason to be on guard.

The next day, the seeds of the sacred shi-shilla herb sprouted successfully and began to rapidly grow within the Sanctum.





"Is it necessary to take notes more than ten times in a day?"

"Hmmm. Who knows? I guess that's why I'm taking notes."

Did that response even address the question?

With the prospect of earning money finally in sight, the Saint's school life had started to calm down. She had reserved an empty classroom, giving her a space to relax. With that, she should have secured the foundation necessary to begin her studies in earnest.

What prevented her from fully settling down was that Kunon kept showing up to see how the shi-shilla herbs were growing. He had been by multiple times the day before and started dropping in again early that morning. This was his second visit already.

Reyes hadn't expected his presence to be so *incessant*. It was true that he was in charge of all the recordkeeping, but he was showing up way, way too often.

He didn't seem to be trying to hit on her, though—he'd headed straight for the growing pots upon his arrival. Almost like he was ignoring Reyes entirely.

If she hadn't realized Kunon's true character, she would have been at her wit's end by now.

"There hasn't been much change, huh?"

It was Hank who spoke up. At the moment, Riyah, Sayfie, and he were all in the Saint's room. Kunon wasn't paying much attention to them, either.

"No change since I first saw them this morning, no," he said. "But I want to monitor them carefully until they're mature—and take plenty of notes. I mean, the fact that they sprouted in a day seems to indicate that sacred herbs grow faster than other plants. Plus, while I've seen them in dehydrated powder form, I've never seen the herbs themselves. They're quite uncommon. I want to get a good look."

The herbs were certainly rare. Without a saint, growing the plants this smoothly wouldn't have been possible. No one yet had achieved the cultivation and mass production of shi-shilla.

"I've seen pictures," he continued. "But the real thing has something of a...presence. Like a spiritual presence. I guess that's why it's called a sacred herb, huh?"

Reyes thought Kunon was probably just feeling the effects of the Sanctum spell. To begin with, Kunon shouldn't have been able to see the shi-shilla at all.

"Oh, and I don't want to hear anyone saying something like, 'I thought you were blind.'"

It was surprising even to hear Kunon say such a thing. No one could bring themselves to comment on such a sensitive issue.

"Kunon, what is the truth about your eyes?"

...Except Reyes, apparently. She dove in without the slightest hesitation. Her face as blank as always, she'd cut straight to the heart of the mystery surrounding Kunon's vision.

Perhaps this was proof of her "lacking emotion." And yet it was clear that everyone in the room had been wondering the same thing.

Kunon was always wearing an eye mask and carrying a cane. By all

appearances, he shouldn't have been able to use his eyes to perceive his surroundings. And yet despite that, he had taken the written portion of the entrance exam, he tore through books at great speed, and he was currently in the process of taking notes based on his own observations. But what had he observed? It was a mystery how Kunon managed to do so many things that should require sight.



"Heh-heh. Are you curious about me?" he asked.

"I am," replied Reyes. "I certainly wasn't before, though."

"How about I tell just you? About my secret, that is."

"No, I want everyone here to hear it."

"Oh, what a demanding little kitty cat you are. But as a gentleman, I must oblige."

Somehow, Reyes seemed to be getting better at handling Kunon. Now, if he would only stop hovering over the plants and turn to face everyone else instead. If he was going to keep saying those nonsense lines, the least he could do would be to look at Reyes while he said them.

"You can use your magic to discern colors?"

The first person to show further interest was Riyah.

"Not at a distance," said Kunon, "but from up close, yes. I can get a more accurate picture if I'm close enough to touch something. Because I can distinguish between colors, I can make out the shape of letters and pictures."

Riyah didn't know about the magical world as a whole, but to his knowledge at least, the idea of "discerning color through magic" was a new one. If it was true, then the mystery of Kunon's sight was solved.

When he was touching a book, he could see the words inside by distinguishing their color from the color of the page. That was probably how he "saw" pictures —and also how he'd taken the written test.

"My master said he believed I gained this ability because I craved it. That is to say, through the transmutation of magic power."

That was a concept Riyah understood.

"The more you use magic, the more the inherent qualities of your power transform to meet your intentions and the mental picture you have of them. Right?"

The current understanding was that, once a person became proficient in magic, their power gradually changed into the form most suitable for their

attribute and the types of spells they specialized in. This was also said to be the reason why an initially challenging spell would become easier to use over time as long as the caster kept trying it.

"Yes. It's the same as how you adapt to using magic with practice. The rest of you have always been able to see, so you wouldn't need something like this, right? I think that might be why no one else's power has transformed like mine."

There was also the fact that Kunon had the Glass Eye—which, at this stage, he could only use for a second at a time. But since it was still undergoing trials, he didn't mention it. He would unveil it to the world in some form someday, but it certainly wasn't going to happen now. After all, there was still the whole "seeing things that aren't actually there" issue to deal with, and that required discretion.

"Are your eyes affected by a Hero's Scar?" asked Reyes.

"Hmm? Oh, did I not say?"

He hadn't. And neither had anyone else, since it was a sensitive topic. If not for Reyes stepping in, the mystery of Kunon's vision might have persisted for some time.

"Yes, that's right," he said. "The same as your emotions, Miss Reyes."

"But they're not the same, are they? I think you have it much harder than I do. I don't see anything wrong with my own emotions."

It was the people around her who were bothered by Reyes's affliction; she had never given it much thought herself.

"You're from Hughlia, yes? It's a Hero's Scar there, too?"

"Yes, it is... Oh, I see. The term for it and how it's viewed varies by country, right?"

For a moment, Kunon hadn't understood the question, but then it quickly dawned on him. In some places, the Hero's Scar was called the Curse of the Demon Lord and was considered an abomination.

It seemed that in the Saint's Holy Kingdom, the name and reputation were the

same as in Hughlia. The New Kingdom, however, was apparently quite harsh on those afflicted.

Though he hadn't spent much time thinking about it before, Kunon was suddenly flooded with gratitude for being born into a household and country that had accepted him. He could feel memories of his family, fiancée, and acquaintances back in his native land start to well up in his heart, but he shook them off. If he was going to burst into tears from homesickness, he wanted to do it when he was alone.

A change of subject was clearly in order.

"By the way, Riyah and Hank, why are you two here? Did you come to interfere in the love triangle between Miss Reyes, Professor Sayfie, and me?"

"Oh, he included me, too...," Sayfie muttered quietly to herself.

"I have no idea where I should start," admitted Hank. "I came to ask Reyes and Professor Sayfie for advice."

"Same here," Riyah chimed in. "Just like Mr. Hank, I don't know what to do."

"They're here because they both helped me with my financial problem," said Reyes. "Now it's my turn to help them."

It seemed like, apart from Kunon, everyone in this year's Advanced class had started coming together early on.

"I see," said Kunon. "If you guys were women, I might have given you my all, too. What a shame."

Neither Hank nor Riyah were expecting anything of Kunon in particular, of course, so that was fine.

"But maybe we should collaborate a little, since we're classmates."

Just make up your mind, they thought.

But in the end, they need only have been thankful. Regardless of what anyone said, Kunon was brilliant, and anyway, trying to take him seriously seemed exhausting.

"Magic experiments can be broadly divided into three categories," Kunon

began. "First, ones that use magic as their power supply. Second, ones that involve working on magic itself. And third, ones where the application of magic is used to analyze a problem. There are lots of compound experiments, too, but...if we stick to these three types, what Miss Reyes is currently doing would be type three."

Worded to fit the example, Reyes was "analyzing cultivation methods of the sacred herb shi-shilla."

"Hank, you use fire, and Riyah, you use wind, right? Is there anything you want to try out?"

"I can't think of anything specific," said Hank. "I've been a teacher's assistant here for years, so I've pretty much tried everything I could think of."

"I wasn't aiming for the Advanced class in the first place," Riyah pointed out. "So when they started talking about credits and experiments, I was a little overwhelmed..."

"Then help me out with my ideas," said Kunon. "If inspiration strikes in the meantime, you can do your own experiments then. I'll compensate you. Personally, I think that's better than wasting time doing nothing."

Helping Kunon was a somewhat scary proposition, but both Hank and Riyah agreed that it was preferable to doing nothing. Plus, compensation would be nice.

"What do you want me to do?" asked Hank.

"I want you to make bacon for me," replied Kunon.

"Bacon?!"

With a valuable sorcerer at his disposal, Kunon had requested, of all things, help with meat processing.

"And, Riyah, I'd like you to achieve flight."

"F-flight?"

"That's right. There are spells that can make you float, but no flying spells have been made public, right? I tried before and failed—and haven't attempted it since. I'd like you to help me dispel my lingering regrets."

There were sorcerers who could fly, but their methods were not public knowledge.

If Kunon's idea was brought to fruition, it would definitely be an achievement worthy of credits. With the added promise of compensation, it wasn't a bad deal for Riyah.

"Miss Reyes, have lunch with me today."

"I will if everyone else comes, too."

"Oh, great! That's a promise. You come, too, Professor Sayfie."

"Yes, yes."

As she replied, Sayfie wondered, *Is there really any reason for me to be here anymore?* 

This year's Advanced students were superb. They didn't seem like they needed any more help from a teacher.

Especially Kunon Gurion, the one she had been most worried about. She couldn't help being anxious over his vision and personality. But now, with no doubt in her mind that he was *that man's* disciple, any further worry was probably unnecessary.

Yes, Kunon was his disciple. He reminded her of him, too—Zeonly.

But while she had a few nitpicks regarding his personality, that didn't change the fact that Kunon was talented. He would almost certainly become the driving force behind this year's Advanced class.

Soon, it would be one month since the beginning of the term. That meant it was about time for the factions to make their moves. Privately, Sayfie was quite curious to see which one Kunon would choose.

"Oh."

"Oh."

"Oh."

The three of them had a chance encounter. It wasn't exactly a surprise, though.

*"…"* 

"…"

"…"

They were all acquaintances in the Advanced class. That was precisely why, the moment they all came face-to-face, they instantly understood what had led to their meeting here. Indeed, the location of their encounter was key.

Since they had run into one another, they would have liked to exchange a few barbs. Something like: "Oh, 'Ability,' what are you doing in a place like this?"

"I could ask you the same thing, 'Harmony.' Nothing better to do?"

"And you, 'Rationality.' Why don't you go home if you need a nap?"

Anywhere else, they might have had such a conversation. But here, they couldn't say anything.

They were surrounded by sleeping students. Just as the three of them had been doing a short while before, the students around them were napping, giant hairless rats clutched in their arms.

In the utterly quiet classroom, the only sound allowed was even, peaceful breathing. Sleep talking was just barely considered acceptable.

This room was a haven—one of the few places where sorcerers exhausted from experiments and research could find comfort. There was no need to think, just to sleep. That was all this place provided, and yet what a rare, precious space it was. Once someone experienced it, they understood in both body and mind. They knew why this business was so popular and why people sought it out time and again.

```
uuu nnn
```

In the end, the three of them walked away from their unexpected rendezvous without saying anything. It wasn't *that* unexpected, though—every faction had its eyes on Kunon Gurion, after all. Gathering information about the boy and mingling with him—well, they couldn't extend invitations yet, but even

familiarizing him with their faces and names was useful.

The assassins from the three factions had never expected to bump into one another while cuddling giant hairless rats. It seemed that the acquisition of Kunon Gurion would be an intense match, indeed.

"Reyes, I'm so worn out already..."

"Work will do that to you."

"But his demands aren't normal..."

"You knew that from the beginning, didn't you? He's never been normal."

"...I was tricked."

"Riyah said that, too."

Replying as she read over some reference materials, Reyes didn't even spare Hank a glance.

She was used to this now. For the past few days, her pitiful classmates—lured in by sweet words and promised rewards—had been dragging their exhausted bodies to her classroom.

Honestly, she wasn't sure why they came *here* of all places. Perhaps they simply found it the least stressful.

"Oh, there you are."

At the sound of that voice, Hank, lying face down on the table, started to tremble. Kunon had arrived.

"Break's just about over, Hank," he continued. "Shall we go soon? Time to make some bacon that will satisfy me."

Right now, to Hank, Kunon was an employer forcing him to do hard labor. Kunon, meanwhile, headed straight over to check on the sacred herbs—as if the plants had called out to him in a woman's voice.

Reyes expected the shi-shilla would be ready for harvest soon. Apparently, Kunon needed to confirm that their growth was progressing well. This would be

his sixth time checking in the same day. Naturally, nothing had changed since his last visit.

Incidentally, the Saint had given her classmates permission to come and go from the classroom as they pleased. Answering the door every time someone showed up had grown bothersome quickly, and Reyes locked the door when she didn't want anyone to come in and when she was gone, so there were no issues.

"Let me rest a bit longer... I've been using my magic all day, every day, and I'm still exhausted from yesterday..."

"That's fine. Even if your body is tired, as long as you have some power remaining, you can use magic."

"...Reyes, save me."

"If you're done talking, please leave the room immediately."

Big Boss Kunon's demands were one thing, but the Saint's indifference was not to be underestimated.

"That aloof attitude is cute, Miss Reyes," said Kunon. "Can I come back for lunch? Let's eat together."

"Sure. If you bring me a sandwich."

Kunon's little quips had already stopped getting to her. It was ever clearer to Reyes that, compared to other people, her emotions fluctuated very little. Rather than feelings, she was driven by logic and reason, and the more aware she became of this fact, the more obvious it was.

"That's great, isn't it, Hank? Even if you fail, Miss Reyes says she'll eat it for you, so it won't go to waste. Now, shall we get back to making bacon? Or do you not want the completion bonus? It's fine if you don't."

"Ugh... It's rude to take advantage of people's weaknesses like this, you know...!"

Kunon had promised to give Hank a completion bonus if and when he managed to make bacon to Kunon's standards.

"If you ask me," he said, "the bigger problem is you, Hank. Do you really think

I should pay you for a job half done?"

"Hey, enough with the airtight reasoning. It's not cute."

"If even men start thinking I'm cute, I won't be able to stand it."

What unbelievable confidence. He was talking like women were already fawning all over him.

Kunon left with a grumbling Hank in tow, and the room settled back into silence, broken only by the occasional sound of a page being turned.

"Looks like lunch is free today, too," Reyes mumbled to herself.

Lately, thanks to Hank's bacon-making failures, she had been receiving lunches made with the rejected bacon. She didn't think it tasted especially different from regular bacon—at least not the pieces she ate. And yet apparently it wasn't enough to satisfy Kunon's demands.

Exactly what Kunon was looking for wasn't clear, but his pickiness was a huge help for the Saint. She was on the verge of her goal of turning a profit, but the money itself was still out of reach. Even now, Reyes's finances were in a distressing state.

Kunon and Hank went back out of the school building.

The sun was unrelenting. Though autumn should have been upon them, the last remnants of summer were refusing to fade.

"I'll leave it to you, okay?" said Kunon.

"Yeah, yeah..."

Hank took his position in front of the small smoker. They had set up the device a short distance from the school because of the smoke it emitted. Meat of a different kind than before was already arranged inside it.

Though they were calling it bacon for convenience, pork wasn't the only kind of meat they'd used. They had also tried wild boar, cow, horse, and chicken. In some even more unusual experiments, they'd used meat from bears, lizards, snakes, demons, and monsters.

"Haah..."

With a sigh, Hank lit the smoker.

Making flames was the most basic move for a fire sorcerer. But maintaining the smoker's fire for an extended period of time was a different story. Unlike other attributes, spells that used fire risked spreading, and accidents could be dreadful. Hank had been taught to never, ever walk away from a spell when using fire, and to make the bacon, he had to sustain constant flames. Extreme caution was necessary to avoid letting the heat get too high or too low.

Hank's honest opinion was that this job was both more difficult and more tedious than he had thought it would be. It was time-consuming. He couldn't relax, it was exhausting, and on top of that, he had to work long hours. Hank was even starting to think he would be justified in asking for a bit more compensation.

"Hey, Hank. Would you say you're ineffective?"

"Huh?"

Usually, Kunon would say something like "I'll leave you to it," and wander off. But that day, he remained right at Hank's side. Though Hank couldn't make out the other boy's eyes beneath his eye mask, he could tell that both Kunon's gaze and his focus were directed at him.

"I...wouldn't not say that."

Hank was eighteen years old. He'd come to Dirashik at the age of thirteen and had been working a low-level job for five years to make sure he would pass the magic school's entrance exam— *Five years*.

He didn't think his hard work had been in vain, but... He never imagined passing the exam was a given. When he had found out, his shock had been so great he almost fell to his knees. He had wanted to cry at his own foolishness. From that perspective, how could Hank *not* see himself as ineffective?

"I think magic is useful," said Kunon.

"I do, too," Hank agreed.

Magic was power, and power was useful. Power could hurt people, but it could also protect them. It had the ability to either destroy or enrich people's

lives. Power itself was neither good nor bad. It all depended on how one wielded it.

"Then it's about time we move to the next step," said Kunon. "I've been waiting this whole time. Why haven't you used any kind of innovation? I thought for sure you'd be able to."

"...Huh?"

"I'm talking about turning your useful power into something even more useful. You have great magical handling and control, but you lack originality. I think magic is better when it's more uninhibited."

Uninhibited magic—it was a strange term. It didn't immediately ring a bell for Hank, but he felt he understood it on some level.

"For example, I think it would be nice if the fire had a scent."

"A scent...?"

"Different-colored fires would be cool, too. Maybe one that burns with a set, constant strength—or that will only burn a designated item. Personally, I'd like a fire with physical substance that I could touch. I don't know much about fire magic, though, so I'm not sure if that's possible."

The meaning of Kunon's words still wasn't clear to Hank, but he had a feeling he knew why Kunon was saying them.

Making bacon. What was Kunon really after with this simple task?

"Maybe if I cook the bacon with an altered fla—"

Hank was midway through his sentence when a girl in a blue robe stuck her face out of a second-floor window in the school building and called, "Heeey! Kunon!"

"I'll leave the rest to you!" Kunon said.

And with that, he was gone.

"H-hey...!"

Hank had no time to stop him. Though they had just been in the middle of an important conversation, Kunon's reaction was immediate. Tossing aside

everything he was discussing with Hank, Kunon turned on his heel and dashed off into the air.

He was ascending his A-ori staircase. This was a trick of Kunon's, where A-ori made into thin, icelike sheets were cast into the air to act as steps. The spell had caught Hank off guard the first time, but now he was used to seeing it.

"Thank you for calling out to me, my sleeping beauties. Your Kunon has arrived."

"Ah-ha-ha! You're always so funny, Kunon!"

It seemed like the girl and Kunon had met before. Offering his flirtatious remarks in place of a greeting, Kunon hurried into the building through the window and disappeared from Hank's sight.

Hank thought the Sleep Sanctuary rooms were somewhere around there. The girl who called out was probably a customer. Adding that to Kunon's "sleeping beauties" comment, Hank was almost positive.

"...Uninhibited magic, huh?"

Hank had simply stood there as a younger sorcerer made all sorts of bold, self-absorbed statements, then immediately turned around and walked away as he pleased.

Words were swirling around in Hank's mind without rhyme or reason: a fire with a scent. Different-colored fires. Fire that burned at a constant rate. Fire that would only burn a specified object. None of those ideas had ever occurred to him before. Hank scratched his head.

"... Was I an assistant for too long?"

He had worked under a teacher for years. The whole time, he had operated according to someone else's instructions. He had also helped with tons of miscellaneous tasks, such as looking things up and making clean copies of notes.

His knowledge of magic had increased, and his magical foundations had grown. However, Hank knew that when it came to his thought process, he never strayed from the standard. That was why he hadn't been able to come up with any ideas of his own, even basic ones.

As for the bacon-making task, there was no reason why he needed to keep a fire burning the whole time. Essentially, all that was necessary to cook the meat was the heat and smoke from wood chips and fragrant grasses. Hank didn't even need to stick to conventional bacon-making methods at all if he didn't want to. As long as the result was what Kunon wanted, the method didn't matter.

The moment that thought occurred to him, Hank's imagination was flooded with ideas he wanted to test out.

"Oh... I see. So this is what they call an experiment."

Hank wasn't an assistant anymore. He could keep waiting all he wanted; no one was going to give him instructions. From here on, he had to think, learn, and try things out for himself.

He felt like he was finally standing at the starting line. His thoughts—thrown into disarray by the Advanced class's requirements and his lack of direction—had slowly come back together.

Now Hank had but one goal in mind.

"I gotta hurry up and get that completion bonus."

Though it was still vague, he was starting to develop a vision of what he wanted to do. That smart-mouthed younger sorcerer had spun the old, rusty needle of Hank's compass, pointing him in the right direction.

Hank didn't want to waste any more time on making bacon. Besides—exactly one month had passed since the first day of school, and soon the factions would start making their moves. It was probably a good thing he'd gotten his thoughts in order beforehand.

•

"It's gotten pretty stable."

"Yeah, I think so, too."

It was shortly after noon, and Kunon, having just finished attending to the "sleeping beauties" from before, was outside the school building with Riyah,

not too far from the smoker.

Riyah was floating in the air using wind magic while Kunon looked up at him. He wasn't very high off the ground. Riyah's belly was about level with Kunon's head.

The scariest part of training with flying magic was the possibility of accidents due to inappropriate heights and speeds. If Riyah slipped up handling his magic and crashed into the ground or a tree or a rock, injuries were guaranteed. That was why practicing at a low altitude was preferable.

"You started in the morning again, right? Do you think you can keep going until sunset?" Kunon asked.

"Yeah... I think so."

It was time to practice flight.

All morning, Riyah had worked on maintaining his floating state. The afternoons were when the real training began.

Kunon had instructed Riyah to start by achieving stability with Fu-ra, a spell that suspended something in midair, over an extended period of time.

Unlike Hank, the young Riyah was still clumsy with handling and controlling his power. He was lacking in experience using magic, the foundation of any sorcerer's skill. The sustained floating practice was aimed at making up for that lack.

Kunon had specifically encouraged Riyah to try this type of exercise because the other boy didn't have much practice maintaining spells for extended periods of time.

Kunon wanted Riyah to fly, and shaky magic handling and control posed a huge risk in flight.

Kunon had experienced such an accident himself at the Hughlian royal palace. He had managed to escape without injury thanks to his quick wits, but the memory of Sir Dario scolding him afterward still stung.

Kunon knew that the best training one could do to improve these two crucial skills was to maintain spells for extended periods of time.

Though he hadn't been practicing for very long, Riyah was already showing improvement. At the start, he had struggled to stabilize his magic at all. Now he could keep his spell going steady from morning till noon with energy to spare. This indicated significant growth.

"All right, let's get started for today. Are you ready, flyboy?"



"Um, yeah..."

Riyah's voice sounded a bit glum, but Kunon paid it no mind. It wasn't like the boy was going to get hurt... Though Kunon could empathize with his fear and reluctance.

Magic manifested from crests, and sorcerers cast spells by using magic power to draw the shape of the crest that had appeared somewhere on their bodies.

Oddly, once their crests emerged, sorcerers could draw them intuitively. First, they generated crests automatically by saying specific terms that served as the names of spells—like "A-ori" and "A-rubu." Once familiar with the shape, they could draw it themselves and no longer needed to say the terms out loud.

Such was basic magic. The really interesting stuff was what followed.

By deliberately breaking, shifting, moving, overlapping, and distorting a complete crest, a spell could be altered. That was how magic was given originality and character. The main method for increasing the unique traits of a spell was called compounding. In this way, a single spell could be formed by double-and triple-layering crests.

Those were the foundations of magical alteration.

A skilled sorcerer would have a wide range of applications for the same spell—some might be so altered that they looked nothing like their original form. However, sorcerers often considered such spells to be their secret weapons and never revealed them to the public.

Flying, as Riyah had been tasked with, was like that. It was a quintessential example of magic that was well-known to exist but for which the method of execution was kept secret.

Pretty much everyone theorized that flight was most likely achieved through the alteration of the Fu-ra spell. But there was a big difference between understanding that in theory and actually getting it to work in practice.

"Okay, let's get started."

As Kunon spoke, he used his magic to wrap Riyah up inside a flexible sphere of water.

Riyah Houghs was the second son of a baron from a small country that most people would have called quaint. Despite being born into nobility, his povertystricken family lived less comfortably than that of a moderately successful tradesman and were aristocrats in name only.

It was into this noble family on the verge of ruin that a promising young sorcerer was born. That was Riyah, of course. His penniless father had worked hard to scrape together the funds for Riyah's magical education. It wasn't just about having high hopes for his son—it was an investment in the future. If Riyah could become a successful magic user, he could earn a large income. Then his family might at least escape poverty.

And if Riyah became an *outstanding* magic user, there was a chance he could marry into a higher-ranking family. A duke's family was probably out of the question, but tying himself to an earldom seemed plausible.

...Or at least, that was probably what his relatives were planning.

There were benefits for Riyah himself, too. His elder brother, heir to the baron's title, had received a good education; but the younger Houghs siblings, including Riyah, had not. He didn't want his younger siblings to lack for anything. If it was their wish to attend a school in the city, he wanted to be able to send them there. Of course, he wanted to support his parents, too. And more than anything, Riyah wanted to become a splendid sorcerer for the sake of his own future.

He had been given magic lessons and had devoted himself to his studies. As a result, his abilities had developed rapidly. Riyah's growth had been remarkable, in part because of his earnest disposition and natural eagerness to learn. At some point, his skill as a novice sorcerer was so highly regarded that people in his country said he was "a talent destined to join the Royal Sorcerers" someday.

Carrying the hopes of not just his parents but also his country's royalty and most influential nobles, Riyah had finally been sent to the magic city of Dirashik. And now— "...Hmm? What's wrong? Quitting already?"

"No, it's nothing. I'm fine..."

Now Riyah felt crushed. And it wasn't just now. He had felt this way ever since the entrance exam.

In his home country, people had called him a genius and a child prodigy, and that had given him a certain amount of confidence. But after seeing Kunon's magic, that confidence had shattered. It was in pieces, no more than dust.

For starters, the A-ori currently surrounding him was on an entirely different level. Evidently, Kunon could only perform two spells. But what did that matter? Counting the number of practical applications he had for them, the total would easily surpass twenty or thirty.

"Okay, here I go," said Riyah.

"Yep. And don't worry. I'll be recording every single flight and fall."

"Please don't make a note of when I fall..."

"No? Mistakes also make for excellent sample data, you know... Okay, got it. When you fall, I'll write 'started talking to a girl' instead."

"In that case, please just say I fell."

The thought of the notes saying that Riyah was calling out to a girl every time he messed up was unbearable. He couldn't allow something that would only lead to misunderstandings. He had already failed well over a hundred times, after all. And he expected that trend to continue.

The A-ori surrounding Riyah was there to cushion his fall and prevent injuries even if his flight practice went badly. It had spared him from a hundred accidents so far. The hefty water membrane allowed him to walk away with nothing but a bit of dizziness and fear when he crashed or went tumbling to the ground, no matter how fast he had been traveling.

The opportunity to practice flying with his safety ensured was truly fortunate. And yet Riyah felt torn. He couldn't help but think that if Kunon bore a wind crest, he would have achieved flight himself ages ago.

I was just a big fish in a small pond, he thought.

Riyah had been confident, but he knew full well there were people more talented than him in the world. He had never forgotten to approach his studies with a humble spirit. And yet he'd still held on to the desire to be the best of his same-age peers.

Now that ambition was shattered. It was dust.

"This is hard."

Kunon had to excuse himself often to tend to his business, but just as often, he returned to check on Riyah. Probably because he had a personal interest in the flight spell.

It had been another day of failures. So far, out of over one hundred total trial runs, Riyah had yet to fly successfully even once.

Fu-ra was a floating spell. It was capable of some slow movement, but at that speed, it was more like drifting than flying. The idea was to add a swiftness characteristic to the floating spell... But in general, the result was either a slightly increased but still sluggish pace or a crash caused by a magic control error.

"Hmmm. All the failed attempts have been of a similar nature...," said Kunon. "If that's the case, maybe we're starting from the wrong foundation."

"Foundation?"

"Yeah. Trials runs are useful because you can figure out what needs correcting based on changes in the results. But we've done a lot of trials and seen no significant change, so it's possible the magic we're using as our starting point is wrong. It might be good to start thinking of other options."

Kunon was suggesting a different base spell.

Riyah's vision was spinning and his stomach churning from the depletion of his magic power and physical stamina, the dread born from almost slamming into the ground countless times—and a little bit of motion sickness. Even so, he desperately turned this new idea over in his head.

"What I'm about to suggest is something I really can't help with," said Kunon. "So you'll just have to do your best, okay?"

"Yeah, I understand."

"So what do you think about trying something like this next time?"

Kunon possessed a different crest type, and so he knew only as much about wind magic as one could find in a textbook. Despite this, he could smoothly

carry on a conversation about it with Riyah, a testament to the depth of his magical insight and knowledge. Over and over again, Riyah was reminded that Kunon was much more than just a weird kid.

The two of them went back and forth, eliminating possibilities one by one. This was new to Riyah as well, but he found it surprisingly enjoyable to engage in problem-solving with a friend. If Kunon weren't so fickle, he would have no complaints at all.

"Heeey! Kunon!"

"Sorry, I have to run for a bit! Feel free to fly without me!"

When a girl called his name, Kunon took off in a hurry. He hadn't even hesitated.

"...Okay. Let's do this."

But right now, Riyah was more concerned with himself than with Kunon. Considering all the spells in his arsenal, he searched frantically for a way to achieve flight instead of simply focusing on Fu-ra.

The next day, Riyah managed to succeed.

Kunon wasn't there to witness it, however. Instead, the one to see Riyah fly was a member of the Rationality Faction.





## Chapter 7 The Four Factions

It was lunchtime, and the four Advanced class students were once again gathered in the Saint's classroom eating sandwiches made with failed bacon and discussing an unfamiliar subject.

The conversation was about factions.

In a rare occurrence, Reyes had been the one to raise the topic, saying, "I got invited this morning. What about you all?"

"Factions, huh...?"

Kunon had heard the word mentioned before. Customers he had become close with—his seniors, he supposed—had been talking about large groups of some sort. More than once, Kunon had seen these customers bickering among themselves, throwing around words like *faction* and *Inferno*. Well, he hadn't actually *seen* these exchanges, but nevertheless. This was the first time he was hearing about the so-called factions properly.

"I was told they remain neutral for the first month," said Reyes. "Even though we're Advanced students, we're still new, so all contact and solicitation is prohibited at the beginning to let us get used to our lives here. But yesterday marked one month since we enrolled, so invitations have started, evidently."

So it seemed. Unfortunately— "All three of you got invites? That means I'm the only one who didn't."

—this had led to the discovery that Kunon alone had not been solicited by a faction.

That morning, Reyes, Hank, and Riyah had all been approached by recruiters. As each of them, starting with the Saint, confirmed that they had been approached, they naturally expected that Kunon must have also gotten an invitation. No one would have guessed that he would be the odd duck out.

Or perhaps—

"I get the feeling that they're competing, actually."

"I think so, too."

"I agree."

—it wasn't that none of the factions wanted to invite Kunon. Rather, they were all vying for him and had yet to reach a settlement.

Beginning with Riyah and followed shortly by Hank and Reyes, all three of Kunon's classmates came to the same conclusion.

"Competing...? You mean, there are girls fighting over me...?"

Whether the competing parties were girls wasn't certain, but Kunon had the right idea, more or less.

"But I don't want them to quarrel on my account..."

"Anyway, which one are you joining, Reyes? And you, Riyah?" asked Hank. "I was set on the Harmony Faction from the beginning."

With Kunon spouting gibberish, they decided to ignore him.

Hank, familiar with the workings of magic school, had long since decided which faction he wanted to be in.

"I'm interested in the Rationality Faction...," said Riyah. He was still waffling, but his heart was leaning pretty strongly in one direction.

In fact, during that morning's floating practice, an older student from the Rationality Faction had shown up to speak with him. The student had taken a moment out of headhunting to give Riyah some advice on flying. And when he had casually decided to test out the suggestion—the flying spell had worked.

Kunon hadn't been present at the time, since he'd assumed Riyah would just be practicing his Fu-ra spell as instructed. Riyah had only tried it on a whim and had never considered for a moment that he would succeed. Afterward, he felt like he had messed up somehow.

Though it was still morning, Kunon had come to check on Riyah once, and Riyah had explained the whole situation, then apologized.

But Kunon didn't get upset with him; he just celebrated the spell's success. He said he didn't really care, because flight spells were merely privileged information, not unknown territory. Riyah was extremely relieved. Starting that afternoon, they were going to take even more detailed, accurate records.

In any case, that was the reason for Riyah's inclination toward the Rationality Faction.

"I'm unsure."

The Saint, however, had yet to make up her mind.

Truthfully, she didn't feel that there was a compelling reason for her to join a faction. Even at the magic school, which attracted students from all over the world, light sorcerers were few and far between. There probably wouldn't be many chances for her to use her magic collaboratively, even as part of a group. Consequently, Reyes felt that it would be more beneficial to simply rely on her own abilities to research and experiment.

"So what are factions anyway?"

Still without an invite, Kunon couldn't hold back his curiosity. His classmates' conversation sounded so fascinating.

"You could say they're ideological groupings. Although it's not that serious these days." Hank, ever knowledgeable about the school's inner workings, began to explain. "Advanced students are considered full-fledged sorcerers. Teachers don't interact with them more than necessary, and even when there

are disputes, they hardly ever intervene. In other words, we have to take care of things by ourselves as much as possible."

That was the price they paid for their educational freedom. They set their own schedules, used the school facilities at will, and were required to find resolutions for whatever problems arose as a result. Those were the rules.

"Factions are mutual aid societies, so to speak. Regardless of what anyone says, there's power in numbers, and power impacts all kinds of things. For example, when you want to test out some magic, but you can't find an unoccupied space, or you want to borrow a book from the library, but it's taking forever. If you have the numbers, you can steer all kinds of things in your favor. In the worst cases, personal disagreements might turn into brawls, or you could have your research results forcibly seized by a mob. Factions were established to prevent that kind of violence. Apparently, over the years, each faction gradually developed its own ideology. Nowadays, there are four major factions, and almost everyone in the Advanced class belongs to one of them."

They had all been given simple explanations along with their invites, but both Riyah and Reyes felt their understanding was more complete now.

"Also, there's research you can't do by yourself, right? Faction members help one another out with that kind of stuff. With collaborative research and joint experimentation, there's always the risk of being betrayed and having all your hard work stolen. Unless it's an especially outrageous situation, even the teachers won't help you. But if that happens, and you're part of a faction, you might be able to get your research back with their help."

Given that many sorcerers were selfish—or at least, cared only for their own work—interpersonal problems were quite common. And when those problems turned into professional disputes, they got ugly. There were also those who resorted to force simply because they had the power to do so. Most of the time, the results were too awful to imagine.

"I see. So what's the deal with the 'Harmony' thing you've decided on, Hank? Or the 'Rationality' one Riyah mentioned?"

"They're names of factions. The four major ones are Ability, Rationality, Harmony, and Freedom. Since there aren't that many Advanced students, I

would guess each one has about thirty members."

The factions were divided by ideology. In the past, those beliefs were considered the absolute law of each faction. Now they were more like broad principles.

The Ability Faction was based around its members' strengths. People tended to assume that it was a meritocracy, but in reality its main purpose was to improve the power, or quality, of each member's magic. In other words, it was a group for polishing one's individual skills.

The Rationality Faction held reason to be of utmost importance. Their purpose was to strive to uncover magic's deepest mysteries through the exchange of information between like-minded people. They formed small groups of two to three and honed their magic within those limited circles. The Rationality Faction, incidentally, also had a high rate of male-female couples formed between members.

For the Harmony Faction, agreement was key. Since members always offered assistance to comrades in need, it was common for a big chunk of the group to be conducting large-scale research projects together. Everyone in the Harmony Faction got along well because they all valued the power of the group's combined efforts.

Though technically a faction, the Freedom Faction didn't have any particular ideology. Each member did as they pleased, and help was offered only when needed and only by those who wanted to help. Whether the group had any kind of leadership wasn't clear. And yet, year after year, things went surprisingly well for the mysterious Freedom Faction.

There were also several people who never joined a faction.

As the factions' original purpose was mutual aid, there were hardly ever group confrontations or open hostility. Though, apparently, things had gotten quite intense long ago.

"...And that's a rough summary of each faction. But unlike in the past, there aren't many restrictions now. You should be fine, no matter which one you choose."

Hank had picked the Harmony Faction. Riyah would probably go with Rationality. Reyes was still unsure. And as for Kunon...

"I think Freedom sounds good. I don't see the need to tie myself to a group—even a loose one. Especially not in an environment where I'm allowed to experiment and research anything I want."

It was an extremely Kunon-like answer. His classmates, however, felt certain that, in the end, he would end up joining whichever faction sent a girl to recruit him.

•

That afternoon, as Kunon was taking notes on Riyah's flight magic, a girl came to speak to him.

"Kunon. Are you interested in the Ability Faction? You should join if you'd like."

This was Elia Hesson, said to be the most beautiful girl in her faction. She looked like she was around fourteen or fifteen years old. Her appearance was striking—she had hair as orange as the setting sun and eyes reminiscent of the finest peridot. Once one noticed how attractive she was, it was hard to look away. Elia was dazzling, as if she radiated her own light.

Riyah, a country boy, had never seen such a cute, lovely girl. Even though she wasn't looking at or speaking to him, his heart raced as he floated in midair.

"I'm more interested in you than the faction. Would it be improper of me to join for such a reason?"

Kunon, on the other hand, behaved as he always did. Face-to-face with such a pretty girl, he was so unaffected it was almost disgusting. As soon as she received Kunon's favorable response, Elia Hesson walked away looking pleased.

"Kunon Gurion."

A second girl arrived.

"I'm Elva Daglight of the Harmony Faction."

Elva had long, glossy black hair and almond-shaped purple eyes. She gleamed

like polished obsidian, drawing the gazes of everyone around, no matter how they might try to resist.

```
"Hff...hff..."
```

Slightly out of breath from Kunon's unsparing flight experiments, Riyah couldn't take his eyes off her. Though he was pretty sure she was still a teenager, she had a dizzying allure about her. Riyah's heart raced as he floated in midair.

"Kunon. Will you join the Harmony Faction?"

Elva raked a hand through her black hair. She was already considerably attractive, and the action only increased her already excessive charm. Even though she wasn't looking at or speaking to him, Riyah's heart was hammering away in his chest.

"Why ask such a foolish question? Princess of the Night, I'll do anything you ask of me."

"Eh?"

Riyah reacted without thinking to Kunon's response. Then, without sparing the floating sorcerer a glance, Elva left with a satisfied expression.

"Um, Kunon," said Riyah. "Isn't that called two—?"

"Let's continue the experiment... Oh, what? Did you say something just now?"

"...No, nothing."

The reply he'd given Elia earlier had made it sound like he intended to join the Ability Faction. And the one he gave Elva just now seemed to imply he would join the Harmony Faction. But since Kunon could make his own decisions, it wasn't an onlooker's place to raise concerns. Even if Riyah did want to point out that Kunon was two-timing.

With no small effort, he swallowed his comment.

"Kunon! Hello!"

As expected, a third person stopped by. Also as expected, she was a remarkably beautiful girl on par with the other two who had come. Her silky,

radiant blond hair swayed with her every movement, while her clear-blue eyes were alive with emotion.

```
"Hff... Hff... Hff... H—"
```

Riyah's breathing, along with his heart, stopped short for a moment. The girl's gaze had flicked over him with a clear look of disgust. It seemed his harsh breathing was offending her.

It's not like I can help it.

He had been doing flying drills over and over, and his magic had nearly run out; Riyah was exhausted. Not in a position to explain himself, floating as he was, he kept a short distance away from the beautiful girl.

"Hello. May I help you?"

Kunon kept taking notes as he greeted the girl. Inwardly, Riyah was surprised. It was rare for Kunon to not give a girl his full attention.

"I'm Cassis, from the Rationality Faction! Won't you consider joining us?"

As if the disdainful look from before had been only a momentary lapse, Cassis addressed Kunon with a glittering smile. Riyah was sure the glare had been real. This smile was just a sales pitch. He knew he was being played. And yet her smile was so exceptionally cute that Riyah felt like he was going to combust. If she asked him to do something with that expression, he would never be able to resist. No boy his age would be immune to it, he was certain. As proof, Kunon replied— "Huh? No way."

```
"Eh?"
```

"Wha-?"

Cassis seemed taken aback, but Riyah was shocked, too.

He'd said no. Kunon had said no. To a girl.

"We're in the middle of something, so could you leave us alone?" he said. "Oh, whatever. Riyah, let's call it for now."

```
"Huh? Uh. Oh... Okay."
```

It was all Riyah could do to process his surprise at Kunon's cuttingly cold

demeanor.

Later, he was even more astonished when Kunon told him, "That was a boy. Why would I be happy about a boy recruiting me?" In truth, Riyah had thought Cassis was the cutest of all the scouts.

A boy—even though he was that pretty. A boy.

Riyah trembled. Cities were full of surprises.



The magic school's grounds were vast, and rumor had it that they had been magically distorted to be wider. It didn't help that every time someone tried to measure the grounds' total area, they came up with a different number. No one knew for sure how extensive they really were—or why getting an accurate measure seemed impossible. This was just one of the many mysteries of the Dirashik School of Magic.

"Cheers!"

""Cheers!""

In a certain room in a certain building on those sprawling school grounds, a group of young people raised their voices merrily.

The room—the home base of the Ability Faction—was located in a large mansion, though it was really more of a fortress than a mansion. A bit timeworn, the building was big enough to be the estate of some minor noble.

Past members had constructed it as part of their research and experiments. Referencing historical blueprints from a country that had long since fallen, the students had erected an actual castle. Because it took up so much space, the original plan had been to demolish it soon after it was built. But recognizing the splendid fruits of their labor, the students who built it decided to leave the structure standing for future faction members.

In one of the rooms of this historic building, the Ability Faction celebrated. About thirty young people filled the room. There was food and alcohol laid out on a table, enhancing the party-like atmosphere.

"You did it, Elia! As expected of the most popular girl in the faction! You're so pretty even the goddess of beauty would do a double take!"

"P-please, you're embarrassing me..."

Bael Kirkington, the current representative of the Ability Faction, finished the group toast with lavish praise for his junior, Elia Hesson.

"Pretty girls are great! If only their hearts were pure, too!"

"Go out with me! I'll make you regret it!"

"No, go out with *me*! You can curse me out and dump me on our first date! Actually, shout at me now! Call me a pig!"

"I want to propose to you, but I'm five hundred million necca in debt! Let's pay it back together!"

Some other boys chimed in—their humor in very poor taste—but Elia didn't pay them any mind.

She was being praised for the same reason they were holding this banquet: Earlier that day, Elia had completed the important task of securing Kunon Gurion—the much-anticipated, promising new student—as a member for their faction.

The Ability Faction had bided its time while the one-month, no-interaction rule was in play, but their attention had naturally been drawn to the infamous Zeonly's disciple. In fact, Kunon stood out so much on his own that it overshadowed even his master's fame.

The first hurdle Advanced students had to overcome was the ability to earn their own living expenses. The better the circumstances of someone's birth and upbringing, the higher that hurdle became. For the children of aristocrats, unused to city life, job hunting was difficult. Some nobles didn't even know how to communicate with common folk. Plus, their sense of money was skewed. They were unused to working, and even with a job, they might still struggle to earn enough money to pay the servants they'd brought to the city.

For those from blessed environments, it was most likely their first stumbling block. The children of royalty and nobility—a high percentage of whom were

sorcerers—were often unable to overcome this initial challenge and resigned themselves to joining the Second Level.

Kunon Gurion had cleared that hurdle in only a few days. His achievement was a testament to his strength, adaptability, and talent as a magic user. Further proof came in the form of the business he'd started, a novel concept with no equal in all of the school's long history.

It was uncommon for inexperienced new students to have the ability to calmly determine both how to use a spell and what best to use it for. Precisely because Kunon was one of those rare few, his business had been a success. The more the senior students went to see his unique water magic, the more they understood the depth of his ability.

Quite a few members of the Ability Faction wanted Kunon's magic skills and creativity on their side, even though he had been at the school for less than a month.

Furthermore, they had learned that he also had enough flexibility and cooperative spirit to help out his classmates. That was a major point in his favor. Many sorcerers were self-centered by nature. The more talented they were, the bigger their egos tended to be. That meant that a sorcerer open to collaboration was very valuable.

Kunon was a rare find, so people in the other factions had their eyes on him as well. The fact that Ability had managed to outmaneuver both Rationality and Harmony was no small feat. (Freedom was a different story.) In fact, the three groups had been at odds over the new kid. They had fought and fought, and even by the end of the first month, none of the factions would yield. Ultimately, their only choice had been to play a game of cards to determine the order in which they would approach him.

That order had turned out to be critical.

Kunon was rumored to be quite fond of women. According to Elia, he had given a near immediate reply to her invitation, indicating that he would join the Ability Faction. Since both Rationality and Harmony had girls just as pretty as Elia in their numbers, it really had come down to a matter of who crossed the finish line first.

Moreover... Though Bael had only ordered Elia to do so, several other girls in the faction had voluntarily gone to extend invitations to Kunon, and they all reported receiving favorable responses.

There had been some *unsettling* rumors, but...with so many members having confirmed his answer, surely the issue was settled. It *had* to be.

Incidentally, Bael also wanted to get his hands on the three other talented new students—Hank Beat, Riyah Houghs, and Reyes Saint-Lance. Reyes was even a saint.

The invitations had already been offered, and now there was nothing to do except wait for the invitees to make their choices.

As Bael struggled to shake off the uneasy feeling brought on by those aforementioned *unsettling* rumors, something happened.

"Hey, you Ability losers!"

The party was interrupted by some uninvited guests.

"Dear me, if it isn't some of our *friends* from Rationality. Oh-ho. You really shouldn't barge in without permission now. Heh-heh. Did you need something? Oh-ho-ho."

Indeed, the intruders were five of Rationality's big guns, including their representative, Lulomet. The slimy voice that called out to them belonged to Genevis, who just happened to be in their vicinity as they entered the room.

Genevis was actually a rather nice guy, but his peculiar, unpalatable way of speaking tended to lead to misunderstandings. The way he talked was irritating, and he always sprinkled his idiosyncratic laughter throughout. He tended to laugh at uncomfortable times, as if he was doing it on purpose. He insisted that instigation was never his goal, though.

"Your voice is pissin' me off as usual! Don't make me knock you out!"

The first member of Rationality to call out after entering the room—and the same person who was shouting at Genevis now—was Sandra. She was as assertive as ever.

"Oh-ho. How scary. Miss Sandra, pfft, you're looking spirited again today,

hmm? Have you been eating well?"

"Scuse me?! You lookin' to get your ass kicked?!"

"Oh-ho-ho... Pff... You're so scary, Miss Sandra. Heh-heh."

Even though Bael knew Genevis was a nice guy, the way he talked was really annoying. Even his cadence was grating. Members of the same faction, even when they got along well, could still get on one another's nerves.

"Something up, Lulu?"

Hoping to avoid Genevis and Sandra coming to blows, Bael stepped out in front of the students from Rationality.

Lulomet, their representative, was eighteen years old, just like Bael. As fellow faction leaders, Bael and Lulomet had known each other for a long time. Though they'd started school separately, they had been through a lot together over the years.

These days, there was peace. There had been no conflict or hostility between the three factions for decades, and they would interact from time to time. Although if Bael was asked if they were on good terms with one another, he would probably say "We each keep to our own."

"What do you mean, 'something up'?!"

This angry reply came from the pretty girl—or rather, the pretty boy, Cassis. He looked genuinely very cute in his short white skirt.

"We came to figure out why that ugly hag is going around lying about Kunon accepting her invitation!"

Cassis pointed to the "ugly hag" in question. It was Elia, the very reason for their banquet.

"Wha...? Excuse me?! I'm not ugly! And I'm not lying!"

Shocked by the sudden accusation, Elia took a step forward.

"Shut up, hag! Anyone who isn't as pretty as me is ugly! You need to learn some humility to match your face!"

Cassis's logic needed some work. He really was pretty, though.

"Shut up, Cassis. Let me speak."

Clicking his tongue in response to Lulomet's order, Cassis backed down.

"I'm sorry, Elia. He likes to speak his mind," said Lulomet.

"…"

Elia felt Cassis owed her some kind of apology, at least. But carrying on this way would only cause trouble for Lulomet—and Bael, by extension—so she withdrew, glaring at Cassis the whole time. Whatever the case, as a woman, she had a hard time forgiving such a brazen insult.

"Seems like you have a lot on your plate as usual, Lulu," said Bael.

"You're right," she replied. "I'm drowning in big personalities over here. I'm beginning to regret becoming a representative."

"Yeah, I feel you."

In Bael's opinion, Cassis had the bulk of the personality, but that was beside the point.

"Bael. I came to compare answers."

"Compare answers?"

"I put out a call. Harmony should be here soon. Let's wait for them."

As Lulomet had said, several members of the Harmony Faction arrived shortly thereafter, accompanied by their representative, Shilto.

"Which faction did Kunon Gurion choose, in the end?"

Not a big talker, that was all Shilto said.

Shilto Lockson was the representative for the Harmony Faction. Also known as the Lightning Bolt, she was a talented girl elected to lead her faction despite being only in her second year.

"Oh, that," said Bael. He hadn't quite understood what was going on before, but the reason for Lulomet's and Shilto's presence had finally become clear to him. "Seems like those *rumors* were true, huh?"

The abuse Cassis had hurled shortly after his arrival had been setting off alarm

bells in Bael's mind from the second he'd heard it, though he hadn't responded in the moment.

Just then, Lulomet spoke up.

"About five girls from our faction claim they succeeded in recruiting Kunon Gurion. That's why I called Shilto and came here."

That explained why Elia was being accused of lying about her accomplishment.

"Seven girls from mine," added Shilto.

Apparently, her Harmony Faction was in a similar circumstance. When Lulomet had mentioned "comparing answers," he'd meant confirming how Kunon Gurion had responded to each faction's solicitation attempts.

That meant Bael's answer had to be:

"Six from ours, including Elia."

So in short... Kunon Gurion had given each of the three factions the impression that he was planning to join their ranks.

"Why only me...?!"

Realizing then and there that his invitation was the *only one* Kunon had refused, Cassis let out a wail.

It was clear to everyone present that if *he* had been a *she*, his efforts would have succeeded. Cassis's appearance could only be described as that of a stunningly pretty girl. And yet Kunon had sensed his biological sex with one glance. Of course, he likely couldn't see what Cassis looked like, since he seemed to be blind.

"I don't know what to say... That kid is something else."

Bael sighed. Based on the facts, almost twenty girls had extended invitations to Kunon, and he had accepted every one of them.

Kunon was a marvel in more ways than one. Had he not thought about the problems this would cause? Once the dust was settled, Bael really wanted to ask him what the hell he was thinking.

Well, that settled it. Given the situation, even if one of the factions was lying, there was only one possible solution now.

"Guess we have no choice but to ask him."

From his responses alone, it didn't seem like Kunon was leaning toward any particular faction, which meant he probably didn't care which one he joined. And yet, despite this debacle, none of the representatives' feelings had changed; they all wanted Kunon as a member. Many excellent sorcerers ended up being a handful, and an issue of this size was well within acceptable levels. It would be a pity to give up on him just because of this.

None of the three was ready to concede. With that established, all that remained was to ask Kunon directly: Which—no, who is your favorite?

Once they had his answer, they would know for certain which faction Kunon Gurion belonged to.





## Chapter 8 The Fairy Escort

Once again, smoke was rising up from a particular part of the schoolyard.

"Recently, I feel like I'm starting to understand. How should I put it...? I've started wondering what would happen if I did this—or that. I'm having more ideas."

"I see. Personally, I'd like you to work on improving your failure rate. Or at least on making your failures edible."

"I'm...sorry, I guess."

Making changes to the fire had become very enjoyable. But because Hank was trying out a lot of different alterations, he was also seeing a marked increase in failures. Specifically, there had been a number of incidents resulting from an inconsistent heat level.

"Even the inside was burned," said Kunon. "Miss Reyes was gagging while she ate."

"I know. I was there."

"She said it would be wasteful to throw it out... I guess because she's short on

money."

The sight of the Saint, blank-faced and teary-eyed, chewing on the charred bacon had been difficult to watch.

The sacred herb she was growing was probably almost ready to harvest, but it needed a little more time. In other words, she still had no income. How she was managing to get by right now weighed on his mind, but that was a topic for another time.

Every morning, Hank worked hard at making bacon, and Kunon looked over the other boy's notes on his experiments.

"It seems like you're close to the end," said Kunon.

"Really?"

Comparing the notes to the meats Hank had finished so far that morning, Kunon nodded in approval. When the bacon received a passing grade from Kunon, the experiment would be over—a welcome prospect for Hank. He was looking forward to it, but...

"...But now I feel like I'm more particular about it than you are," said Hank.

To Hank, making bacon he himself was satisfied with was now more important than earning Kunon's approval. A useless fixation had begun to take root in his mind.

"I knew you had talent, Hank."

It seemed that Hank's state of mind had finally bloomed into that of a true sorcerer. After all, it wasn't the experiments or research that a magic user performed at someone else's request, but those they carried out of their own volition that allowed them to pursue the knowledge they most desired.

When someone could handle their magic power with as much dexterity as Hank could, it seemed inevitable they'd become obsessed with using it. Kunon had just known things would turn out like this, because he'd seen a kindred spirit in Hank: someone else who enjoyed very fine, precise handling when it came to magic.

"That's fine," said Kunon. "Why don't you keep making bacon until you're

pleased with it. Call it a hobby. I'll buy what you make."

"Hmmm... I really don't know what to do."

"You figured out how to make scented fire, right? How about a fire that tastes salty next?"

"Salty fire?! Why would I do that?! How would you even go about confirming the flavor?!"

"Bacon and smoked meats are soaked in salty liquids for seasoning. I think it's also done as a preservative technique. But that aside, I meant that you could try achieving that flavor effect with the fire."

"R-right... I was surprised by the idea of adding a scent to the fire at first, too... And now flavor... Is that even possible?"

"Don't worry. There are no limits or impossibilities in magic."

"...That sounds sinister when you say it, Kunon..."

Kunon snickered at that, sounding delighted, and Hank couldn't help but see the other boy as a bit sinister, too.

In a very literal sense, Hank felt that the two of them saw magic in totally different ways. Compared to Hank, Kunon's view was, quite possibly, much, much deeper and broader.

...Well, in any case, it seemed Hank was close to realizing his bacon-making goals.

The morning session with the smoker had ended.

Every day, Kunon and Hank brought the results to the cafeteria and had them made into sandwiches they would have for lunch. Though they hadn't established any kind of fixed schedule, the four new Advanced class students had lately been eating lunches together in the Saint's classroom. That daily routine was probably at the end of its shelf life, though...

```
"Hello, Kunon."

"Hello."

"Hey."
```

"We've come to pick you up, Kunon."

...because the factions had come to collect.

The other day, Kunon had given them careless responses, and now it was time for him to face the consequences.

A total of ten girls showed up at Reyes's room in a mixed group including all factions. They stood in front of Kunon, a nervous tension hidden as much as possible behind their bright smiles. They had been sent by the three factions that had previously invited Kunon to join.

"Hello, lovely fairies," he said. "As you can see, I'm eating lunch. As a gentleman, I don't stand up needlessly during meals, so would you allow me to finish first?"

No, go now.

Get out of here already.

Everyone else in the room was united in wanting Kunon to get up and go immediately, and the boy himself was the odd one out. He sat calmly, a half-eaten sandwich in hand, making the girls wait for him.

How could he stay so composed with ten girls looming over him, all with menacing smiles? Even if he couldn't see them, he should at least have been able to sense their unusually intimidating auras.

"Today's failed bacon isn't bad," said Reyes. "It doesn't make me nauseous, and my body isn't refusing to swallow it. The saltiness is nice, too, though I prefer smoked fish. Would you be willing to try smoking fish a little more often?"

Apparently, she was also unperturbed. Perhaps it was due to her lack of emotion.

"Fish, huh?" said Kunon. "Fish is tasty, too. I can find fish meat for sale sometimes but not often. It seems it's hard to get fresh fish here, since we're not close to the ocean. Sometimes sorcerers who have traveled that far bring back frozen seafood to sell for extra money, but you really can't get it otherwise."

"Is that so? What a pity."

How could the two of them be so calm in this situation?

"Is it possible to farm freshwater fish in this part of the world?" Reyes asked.

"I don't know. But I'm sure some of this school's sorcerers have at least tried it. Why not look for a report on the subject in the library?"

"Kunon. If I locate a report and it seems doable, would you help me?"

"Of course. For you, Miss Reyes, gladly."

Were they really going to have *this* conversation *this* calmly in *this* situation? Why not just talk about it later? More importantly, why wouldn't Kunon just leave?

As sorcerers themselves, it wasn't like Hank and Riyah were uninterested in the topic at hand. But they were *really* uncomfortable, and it was all they could do to keep their heads down and awkwardly chew their sandwiches.

"I'm so lucky to have this many fairies here to escort me," remarked Kunon.

The lunch from hell was ending at last. The girls he had brazenly kept waiting surrounded Kunon on all sides, and he looked quite happy as they marched him out of the room. The girls' expressions, however, were closer to "quietly seething with rage" than "fairylike," at least in Hank's estimation.

"Guess I'll get back to making bacon."

"I'm going to practice flying some more."

Hank and Riyah decided to put the whole thing out of their minds. Imagining Kunon's fate terrified them, but in the end, he'd done this to himself. They had no intention of defending him or coming to his rescue. Especially because it didn't seem like the other boy wanted them to.

"I think I'll go look for that report. I'm feeling a bit excited."

Reyes alone looked like she truly wasn't worried about a thing. The boys felt a twinge of envy at her stone-faced cheerfulness.

•

"Wow... This is amazing," Kunon said, sighing in admiration.

The ten girls had led him to a majestic, imposing old castle. That was astonishing on its own, but Kunon's heart pounded even harder when he was escorted inside to a room filled with sorcerers.

Including the girls surrounding him, there were about fifty magic users present. Since many of them were young, he felt sure they were students at the school. And not just any students—they were all members of the Advanced class. Most intriguing of all, however, were the things *possessing* each and every one of them.

Kunon's crab.

Hank's lizard and Riyah's confetti.

Reyes's halo and Zeonly's light.

Through his business at the school, Kunon had seen tons of sorcerers and noticed a number of patterns. And yet here, in this room, were people who did not fit into any of the patterns he had established based on his previous sample set.

The first person who caught his eye was a boy. His mouth was covered by the hands of a floating, demonic-looking woman with long black hair obscuring her face.

That didn't fit Kunon's rules at all. It was the first time he'd seen someone with a truly humanoid apparition.

Perhaps noticing Kunon's interest, the boy approached.

"Oh-ho-ho. It's nice to meet you, Kunon Gurion. Oh-ho, my name is Genevis. Ah-ha, heh-heh, feel free to call me Geneve. I insist."

"It's nice to meet you, Geneve... Is there something funny about me?"

"Oh no. I'm sorry. My laugh just, pff, sort of leaks out. It's a quirk of mine."

"A quirk..."

By some chance, was the woman behind him the cause? If Genevis somehow had the feeling that his mouth was being smothered, perhaps he— "I'll show

you the way, oh-ho, from here..."

Genevis started walking farther into the room, and Kunon followed. The crowd of almost fifty sorcerers parted to let them through, watching Kunon as he passed.

At the center of the group, three magic users were waiting. One of them had to be the master of this castle.

*"…"* 

Kunon's rules continued to be broken. Coming here had been well worth his time just for the sake of increasing his sample size. Smiling, Kunon bowed and introduced himself.

"Hello. I'm Kunon Gurion. It is my great privilege to join you here today."

One month had passed since Kunon started magic school.

In his daily life with his family, he hadn't been able to observe a sufficient range of the *things* that he was seeing. That was because, of course, there hadn't been many sorcerers around.

Since coming to school, however, a number of clear rules had been established.

One such rule allowed Kunon to determine if someone was magical based on what he could see. He could sort the things he saw—and thus, the people "possessed" by them—into sorcerer and non-sorcerer categories.

If someone's *something* was only partially emerging from their body, they were a non-sorcerer. If their *something* was wholly outside of their body, that person was a sorcerer.

Starting with the non-sorcerers, he had seen horns, feathers, mismatched eyes, the jet-black wings of a fallen angel, and so on.

There was no uniformity in what protruded from people's bodies, just that they appeared to follow a pattern of being "only partially emerging."

Kunon's father, Arsan Gurion, who looked blurry from head to toe, seemed to be the only exception. But if Kunon considered the possibility that Arsan's *something* was emerging across the surface of his body and giving off the effect

of frosted glass, then that would adhere to the rule as well.



Ultimately, it all came down to a process of elimination. On the journey to Dirashik, Kunon had encountered a number of people who, like his father, looked indistinct and blurry. Neither his father nor any of those people were magic users, so he put them into the non-sorcerer category.

Sorcerers, on the other hand, Kunon included, had something more complex than an "only partially emerging" apparition. Theirs were fully visible.

Plainly speaking, sorcerers' somethings were so clear, distinct, and complete that they were easily spotted with only a quick glance. They were out in the open.

So far, Kunon felt pretty sure of his first rule. Partial, protruding apparitions meant non-sorcerers; whole, separate apparitions indicated magic users.

And since coming to this school and seeing many more sorcerers, another new rule was taking shape...

"My name is Bael Kirkington. I'm the representative of the Ability Faction, and this castle is our base of operations. First off, I'm sorry. I apologize for summoning you here when you still don't belong to any group."

The centermost person of the three standing before Kunon introduced himself.

Something like a smooth mass of metal sat behind him. It was massive, somewhat round, and looked just like a lump of dark-gray iron. Kunon had no idea what it was, since he had never seen anything like it in his illustrated reference books.

But, Kunon thought, if it followed the rules, it had to be some sort of living organism. If it wasn't alive, it might mean another upset to his established patterns...

If Kunon's new rule held, then based on what he could see, it was possible for him to discern a sorcerer's attribute.

From the appearance and tendencies of the *something* possessing a magic user, it seemed Kunon could predict their attribute to some extent.

Aquatic life signified a water sorcerer.

Terrestrial creatures were for fire and earth.

For wind, there were incarnations of magic power that hung in the air.

Still lacking in examples of light magic users, Kunon couldn't say much with certainty, but—for light, perhaps some kind of white matter.

And as he had yet to meet anyone with a dark or foul crest, he had no samples from which to draw a hypothesis. It was possible that Genevis, possessed by an entire humanoid form, belonged to one of those two attributes, but the likelihood that he didn't was just as high.

There were some exceptions, too... Like crabs, for example. Crabs weren't strictly aquatic. Terrestrial and subterranean crabs existed, too.

As he collected more samples, perhaps Kunon would be able to gain more detailed information from them. It was still too soon for him to start categorizing definitively, since even one of the three people facing him seemed to defy such organization.

What was possessing magic users remained, as yet, a mystery. But the idea that they were just illusions Kunon happened to see was seeming less and less plausible as he identified more patterns. Or at least, that was how he felt...

He would have time to think it over more later.

"Though you do know why you were summoned, I assume? I'm Lulomet, the Rationality Faction representative."

The boy on the right introduced himself next.

Behind him stood a black tree. The tree—a sapling, really—loomed at his back as if it were his shadow, so dark that it looked like a shape cut from a starless night sky.

Yes—he was the one who defied categorization. Could plants be considered living organisms like the rest of the *somethings*? In any case, Kunon had never seen anyone else with a plant apparition. He wasn't sure which attribute it indicated.

"Representative Shilto. Harmony Faction."

The girl on the left was last.

She was surrounded by storm clouds—several of them the hazy color of blurred ink. At random intervals, Kunon perceived flashes of something like lightning inside the clouds. This kind of apparition indicated a wind attribute.

Furthermore, Kunon was convinced the girl's right arm, covered by her clothes and a glove, didn't actually exist. It certainly *looked* like it was there, but he could feel a strong magic power emitting from the space where it would have been. Instinctively, he knew the arm was not physically present. Whether she used to have it and had lost it or if it was absent from the time she was born, he had no idea. But— "How do you do? It's my pleasure to make your acquaintance. In fact, I feel I've always wanted to meet you. I would love for you to make some time for us to spend together."

—she and Kunon were the same. She, too, was using magic to make up for a part of her body that didn't exist. If, like Kunon, she was also born into the world with a Hero's Scar, missing that part of her...

No, even if she wasn't. The parts they were supplementing were different, but if she was using magic to compensate for something she lacked, then Kunon couldn't help but take a strong interest in her as a kindred spirit.

Kunon's words, however, left quite a number of people stunned.

*"…"* 

The room of more than fifty young sorcerers fell completely silent. Everyone was astonished. Truly, genuinely too shocked to speak. No one had expected Kunon to flirt with a girl in *this* situation. Even Shilto, on the receiving end of the comment, was surprised.

To be clear—Kunon's soft spot for ladies was already widely known.

At first, the chatter among current students who hadn't witnessed the entrance exam for themselves was that Kunon was a mere novice sorcerer. He'd arrived at the school just another two-star magic user without anything of note to his name, like a royal lineage or special magic like Reyes had. The fact that his teacher was *Zeonly*, of recent fame, had garnered him a certain amount of attention. But even that had only meant the barest of extra consideration.

Kunon becoming a well-known name within his first month of school was entirely thanks to his own excellence. No one in the Advanced class placed any importance on designations unrelated to magic. It didn't matter whose apprentice you were, how noble your blood, what royal family you belonged to. They valued ability, results, and achievements alone. It was in those categories that Kunon had proven himself. His talent was undeniable.

And as his name spread, so did his reputation for being a massive flirt with girls. It was such a conspicuous part of his personality that it would inevitably come up whenever someone talked about him. Thus, it was already common knowledge that Kunon was partial to women, and if anyone wanted him to do something, getting a woman to ask him was their best bet.

And yet—even with such prior knowledge, everyone in the room was surprised. What nerve it must have taken to put his womanizing tendencies boldly on display now, amid this swirl of antipathy and contemptuous gazes. How did he have the courage to whisper sweet nothings to Shilto here of all places?

The resulting silence was so complete it felt as though everyone had stopped breathing.

A child who would dare utter such a sentence now was truly the epitome of shocking, and some onlookers even felt a kind of admiration for him. They had all heard rumors about Kunon—but there was a big difference between that and seeing the reason for the rumors in person.

In many ways, he was truly an extraordinary boy.

"Ugh! Just what is up with you?!"

The bold voice that tore through this quiet belonged to Sandra, of the Rationality Faction. She was as spirited as ever. She must have eaten a good lunch.

"You brat! You get what's goin' on here, don'cha?! We're all here because of you!" Sandra walked up to Kunon. "The three factions are practically about to duke it out, and it's all your fault! How do you plan to make up for it?! Even if the reps and these guys go easy on you, I won't! Got it?!"

"Of course." Kunon nodded. "Thank you so much for gathering here for my sake, everyone. But please, don't fight over me."

That was an unbelievable statement as well. The boy had a terrifying amount of pluck.

"It's not *over* you, it's *because* of you!" Sandra went on. "Enough already, smart-ass! We're here because you just kept sayin' yes!"

"It's nice to meet you. I'm Kunon, and your name is?"

"Does that matter right now?!"

"I just think we have a lot in common. I bet you know some wonderful spells. Are you free after this? Would you like to talk about magic with me?"

Kunon, who would come to know Sandra's name later on, had looked at her through the Glass Eye and seen a massive fish swimming around her. *No, wait,* Kunon thought. Looking closer, he realized it was actually a school of smaller fish. They were forming an illusion—a method of mimesis employed as protection against predators. The small fish were schooling in such a way that they appeared as a single large fish.

Whether or not Sandra and Kunon had a lot in common, Kunon was sure she was a fellow water sorcerer. Even if they didn't get along, they would probably have a lot to talk about.

"... What the hell...? This kid is too much... He's kinda freakin' me out..."

Kunon's boldness had Sandra staggering backward.

"Calm down, Sandra. It's not like he's refusing to answer or being hostile. He's just a little weird... Right? You *are* going to answer our questions, aren't you? Hey—could you ask him that for me?"

Bael's last request was directed at Shilto. With the difference in Kunon's behavior toward men and women so blatant, Bael decided his words would be more effective coming from a girl.

"'Calm down, Sandra. It's not like he's refusing to answer or being hostile. He's just a little weird... Right? You are going to answer our questions, aren't you?"

Shilto conveyed Bael's words faithfully starting with "Calm down, Sandra," though she felt it was a lot of effort to say the whole thing a second time.

"Of course, Miss Shilto. If you're the one asking, I might tell you all sorts of things. I'm not sure I can stop myself."

Kunon wasn't even trying to hide his bias.

"Then let's do this quickly," said Lulomet. Perhaps he was in a hurry because he had something to attend to after the meeting. "Kunon, which faction do you actually plan on joining? Shilto—if you don't mind."

Entrusted with Lulomet's question, Shilto once again repeated everything dutifully, starting with "Then let's do this quickly." She felt it was a lot of effort this time, too.

"Naturally, I would love to say your faction," said Kunon. "But...I received invitations from quite a few ladies. I can't choose one, so I was thinking of joining them all."

"…"

"As a gentleman, it would be inexcusable for me to embarrass a woman by not honoring the courage she displayed extending an invitation to me. And I always strive to behave like a gentleman."

*"…"* 

Another silence fell.

Kunon did not appear to be joking, which could only mean he was serious. Everyone looking at him shared the same thought: *This kid's idea of being a gentleman is totally skewed.* 

"I see. You aspire to joint membership."

The one who broke this second silence was Lulomet. All nonsense talk of gentlemen aside, he understood Kunon's intent. There were things he wanted to say on the matter, but they could wait.

In any case, it seemed the truth was consistent with Kunon's reported answers to the girls. He had indeed replied in the affirmative to every faction. There were no contradictions in his story—and no lies. Whether he was sincere

was another matter, but he wasn't lying, at least. That much seemed fair to conclude.

"There is precedent for joint membership between factions. I don't believe anyone would contradict me on that point."

At Lulomet's words, Bael, Shilto, and the surrounding sorcerers all nodded. It was not uncommon for factions to share members. Highly valued three-and four-star sorcerers, for example, were often shared. The same was true of those with light, dark, and foul attributes, since they were rare even in places with a high concentration of magic users.

In experimentation, research, or when testing hypotheses, there were times when people with rare attributes were absolutely necessary. Consequently, requests for joint membership would sometimes come *from the factions themselves*.

Though perhaps an unpalatable way to phrase it, the practice was essentially resource sharing. Hogging people with uncommon abilities wasn't wise—it could be a detriment not just to the other factions but to the entire school. In fact, the Saint—Reyes Saint-Lance—would no doubt receive such a request someday.

Right now, though, there was another issue at hand.

"That said, it is exceptionally rare for a student to ask for joint membership of their own accord."

Kunon Gurion was a two-star water sorcerer.

That said, his brilliance was a matter of public record. The present situation, too, was proof that he was highly thought of. Three faction representatives were arguing precisely because none of them were willing to give him up. And yet, when asked to consider whether they wanted him enough to share him, they all hesitated.

When someone became involved with a faction, they could potentially find out that faction's secrets. Furthermore, they would have plenty of chances to learn about their experiments and research data. When someone possessed that kind of sensitive information, it was natural to be anxious about them working with other factions. Quite frankly, shared members were like officially recognized spies.

Of course, this was all hypothetical. No one knew if Kunon was the type to leak secrets left and right. But the possibility was difficult to ignore.

When factions asked to share members, it was because they felt it would be valuable. When joint membership was the *student's* idea, it was never well received. Usually, at least.

"Tell me, Kunon," said Lulomet. "Are you really worth the risk of joint membership?"

"Who knows? I don't believe that's up to me."

The boy noticed Kunon's reply was a bit curt, and he immediately whispered to the nearby Shilto, "Could you ask him the same question, please?"

"'Are you really worth the risk of joint membership?'" she repeated.

"I cannot say. But I will devote myself completely to being the person you wish me to be."

There was his undisguised hot-and-cold attitude again. Despite not knowing him for long, everyone got the feeling that was a very Kunon-like answer.

"For you, Miss Shilto, I'll even disobey my maid's orders and stay up four nights in a row."

No one had asked him to do that. Besides, pulling more than three consecutive all-nighters was life-threatening.

"Well, then," said Bael, rejoining the conversation. "I guess that means it's our call to make, doesn't it?"

Both Lulomet and Shilto nodded. He was right. With things as they were, it all boiled down to what really mattered: the ability and strength of the magic user in question.

"Then how about this, Kunon? We all want you, but we don't want to share. We'd rather have you for ourselves. If you asked us whether we're desperate enough to put up with all the anxiety and trouble of joint membership, I'd say we're a bit reluctant."

"I have no desire to hear a man say he wants me."

"Just forget about that for now, okay? Magic is about what you can do. It's a harsh world out there. Some young sorcerers succeed, but many more grow old without accomplishing anything. In other words, I want you to show us what you're capable of—a level of skill that would make us want you enough to share."

If he couldn't prove he had that level of ability, they didn't need him. If he could, they would take him no matter what. Basically, they wanted to see if he measured up.

"I see." Kunon nodded. "You're saying you want to give me a test to determine whether to allow me joint membership?"

"Exactly."

Kunon accepted the challenge.

He'd been invited, of course, but it was Kunon himself who had decided to join the factions. He had no plans to make a fuss and refuse to align with any of them if they wouldn't grant him joint membership or other special treatment.

But if he wasn't allowed to join all of them, the promises he had made to the girls would become lies. It would embarrass them. A gentleman like Kunon would never renege on a promise made to a woman.

"But really, when a guy says it..."

His one hang-up was that hearing Bael say "I want you" didn't motivate him in the slightest.

"Help me out here, Shilto! This kid reacts like a different person to men than he does to women!"

At least they were quickly learning how to deal with him.

Later that evening—

"Kunon, what happened after that?"

Finished with the day's flying practice and his notes on the same, Riyah returned to the Saint's classroom.

Once he'd managed a successful flight, he grew used to the process surprisingly quickly. His experiment, it seemed, was nearing its final stage. Likely within the next two days, he would have a report that both Kunon and he were satisfied with.

But none of that mattered right now.

When Riyah returned to the classroom, he found Kunon already there and began to press him for details on what had happened after lunch. What in the world had transpired after he was taken away by those angry fairies? On the surface, Kunon looked as cool as a cucumber, but what was the truth of the situation?

Riyah was overflowing with curiosity about all of it, including which faction Kunon had ended up joining. He mused idly that it would be nice if they were both in Rationality.

Even though Kunon was weird around girls, he was surprisingly serious, calm, and easy to get along with. No matter how many times Riyah failed during flying practice, Kunon never got upset. He kept offering encouragement, saying, Failure is an essential part of magic. He was genuinely kind even to people who weren't girls, though he could often be blunt.

"Oh, hold on a sec, okay?" said Kunon.

The shi-shilla plants were almost at full maturity. Once they were ready, the next step was to create the desired magic tool—the healing potion—and Kunon and Reyes were currently holding a meeting on that very subject. Their plans were top secret, however, so Kunon hurriedly put his notes and documents out of Riyah's line of sight.

"This is why I asked you to lock the door," said Reyes.

"I can't be alone with a woman in a locked room," Kunon protested. "You should be more cautious, Miss Reyes. It's inevitably the woman who takes the brunt of the backlash over such misunderstandings."

He was right. Yes, what he'd said was true. But at this point, it was more

disquieting when Kunon said something sensible to a girl.

"Oh, sorry. Am I interrupting?" asked Riyah.

"We were just reviewing next steps, so don't worry about it," said Kunon. "So? What did you need?"

"I asked what happened after lunch."

"Oh, that? Nothing really. I just talked with the faction representatives."

That couldn't be all there was to it. Riyah couldn't believe that intimidating pack of fairies came to collect Kunon just for a little chat.

But there was a more important question to be asked here.

"So which faction did you end up deciding on?"

"Riyah, you're joining the Rationality Faction, right?"

"Huh? Oh yeah. Probably."

As Riyah's vague answer tumbled out, he remembered Cassis—the upper-level student who was almost too dazzling for a country boy like Riyah to look at —and felt strange.

According to Kunon, Cassis was a boy, but Riyah still couldn't believe it. However, he didn't think Kunon would make up a meaningless lie to deceive him or that he would fail to guess a person's gender. Riyah had no evidence for this latter claim, but he felt sure nonetheless.

If Riyah joined the Rationality Faction, it would connect him to Cassis, if only slightly. Still unable to settle his feelings about the dazzling upperclassman, Riyah decided to simply remind himself that cities were filled with surprises. Once again, he trembled.

"In that case," Kunon said. "I think you should ask your faction seniors once you've joined. If I tell you, it's— Well. You know."

```
"It's what?"
```

"It's like that."

"Like what?"

Riyah didn't understand what Kunon meant, but it seemed like he didn't want to talk about it.

"Something must have happened with a woman," Reyes suggested.

"Must be."

Riyah agreed completely. She had to be right. After all, when they thought about what kind of situation would make Kunon reluctant to speak, that was the only thing they could come up with.

It wasn't until the next day that they learned what had really happened and that it was a much bigger deal than any of them could have guessed.





## Chapter 9 Comparing Answers

The following day, many things happened.

It was almost as if everything had been arranged beforehand. Like someone—or something—had been patiently waiting for that exact day to arrive.

It was probably just coincidence... No, that wasn't true. At least half of it must have been intentional, even inevitable.



The first incident happened early that morning, when a teacher came to Reyes's classroom.

"Oh! Oh my! This is fantastic!"

The teacher was Professor Sureyya Gaulin. She was almost thirty-two years old, and her attribute was light. At present, she was standing in front of the five pots containing completely mature shi-shilla plants, trembling with excitement.

Reyes, though surprised, was expressionless. She had never met Sureyya and was totally bewildered by the energetic teacher's appearance.

"I bought the shi-shilla seeds from Professor Sureyya," said Kunon, who had brought the woman in question to the classroom.

In that case, this all made a lot more sense. If Kunon had been associating with her unbeknownst to Reyes, there was a reason for her to be here now.

As Reyes had been cultivating the sacred herbs over the past two or three weeks, she had indeed wondered about the origin of the seeds. Kunon had said he would procure them, and he had returned with them very quickly. It was hard to imagine that any general store, even in the magic city, would stock the seeds of such a rare, hard-to-grow, expensive plant. They were probably the kind of thing one had to special order from the place where they were grown.

The reason Kunon had managed to come up with them in less than a day was — "Professor Sureyya provided them for us."

—in that case understandable.

Reyes also had an idea why Sureyya was so impressed. Cultivating shi-shilla must have been something she was also researching. That was why she'd already had some seeds and how Kunon—who had known that—had been able to obtain them from her so quickly.

"How much did they cost, out of curiosity? I can't imagine they were free."

Sacred herbs were expensive and so were their seeds. The Saint had been avoiding the topic, because she was afraid she would be asked to cover the bill.

"Two hundred thousand necca per seed."

In other words, it had cost one million necca for all five.

That was a lot of money. Reyes had never had to think about finances in her home country. But ever since enrolling in magic school and frantically trying to earn her living expenses, she had developed a sensible understanding of money.

The price of each seed—two hundred thousand necca—was about as much as a common person would make in a month. Altogether, they cost five times that.

The potted plants Reyes had calmly raised to maturity seemed to grow large in her mind, rapidly becoming a heavy weight that settled in her gut. Reyes felt a little sick. As she realized belatedly just how critical it had been that she succeed, the pressure she would have been under hit her all at once.

"But she and I agreed that the seeds would be free if we grew them successfully and submitted a report," said Kunon. "I'm glad it turned out well. Having to pay that million necca would have been hard on me."

On top of that, Sureyya was a teacher. She would probably award credits for the experiment, so it really was a win-win situation, in the end. At least in theory.

But Reyes, realizing she had unknowingly taken on a million-necca risk, was not so easily appeared. She only had herself to blame, though, for refusing to ask how much the seeds had cost.

What's more, she had let Kunon shoulder some of that risk, too, all so she could make money. Judging from his tone, if the cultivation had failed, he would have eaten the seeds' cost himself. Thinking about that possibility made emotions she wasn't supposed to have start welling up inside.

"Kunon. I've caused trouble for you. I'm sorry."

Reyes had only been thinking of herself. She was ashamed.

Yes—ashamed. Even the Saint, despite her missing emotions, understood something of this feeling. It was mortification, gratitude, and regret for getting Kunon involved, all wrapped up together.

Reyes bowed her head, but Kunon replied, "I'd rather a woman tell me 'thank you' than 'I'm sorry.'"

Hank and Riyah, with nothing better to do, had been watching the scene unfold since Professor Sureyya's arrival. The fact that Kunon was still very much himself, even in this situation, filled them with both exasperation and admiration. Though perhaps just this once, admiration was winning out. Because this time, they thought, Kunon's words were exactly what was needed.

It was a happy day, because the shi-shilla was ready to be harvested. That was why Kunon had called on Professor Sureyya.

Soon, the professor and Reyes began discussing matters in their shared field

of expertise, light magic. Sureyya already had Kunon's report—complete with his frankly excessive notes—clutched in her hands.

The boys, realizing they were only in the way at this point, promptly exited the Saint's classroom. It was almost as if they'd been driven out, but as they each had things to attend to, they couldn't complain.

"Here's today's meat, Hank," said Kunon.

"Got it."

Hank was going to make bacon again. The leather bag Kunon handed him was full of small cuts of meat, enough for quite a lot of trial and error.

"Riyah, I think we can stop after morning practice today. We've got plenty of results already."

"Really?"

Riyah had been continuing the flight drills even after his initial success. It wouldn't be long before Kunon had his hands on a satisfying report.

Just like Hank, Riyah had been promised a completion bonus in addition to his daily wages. Once he got it, he would have enough money saved up for basic living expenses until the following month. And that wasn't all.

When he flew, he could travel at high speeds. Heavier objects would be out of the question, but he could use his new skill to deliver information and simple parcels. In other words, Riyah had a job he could do as a wind sorcerer.

Sorcery work paid well. Acquiring this skill had been quite difficult, but it looked like it would come in handy in the near future.



The sun rose higher and higher as noon approached.

"Riyah Houghs."

Two girls came over while Kunon was taking notes on Riyah's final flight practice. One of them was the girl who had happened upon Riyah during an earlier training session and had given him the advice that led to his success. The other was the breathtakingly beautiful Cassis...who was actually a boy.

"We're here to extend an invitation to you on behalf of the Rationality Faction's representative. He wants to know if you'll come meet him and have lunch with us."

Cassis's tone was sullen as he spoke to Riyah, who could hardly return his gaze. He was too busy trying to come to terms with the idea that the older girl in front of him was actually a boy. Cassis, however, was clearly in a bad mood. It wasn't just his voice; his expression showed clear annoyance.

"Hello, mermaids frolicking on the shore," said Kunon. "Riyah, they said they're here for you."

"Y-yeah... Um, mermaids...?"

It was a waste of time to get hung up on every single thing Kunon said, but sometimes, Riyah just couldn't help it.

But more importantly... After floating back down to earth, Riyah leaned over to Kunon and whispered, "...Maids? Um, is Cassis...really a boy, then?"

"She told me she has 'the heart of a girl," Kunon replied.

Though they were hidden behind his eye mask, Kunon's eyes as he answered seemed haunted.

"She also told me, 'Guys are all the same. They only care about a woman's body.' It really shook me. I can't see what people look like, so someone's outer appearance means practically nothing to me. But it was like she was telling me I couldn't see people for who they are at heart, and that stung a little."

Riyah didn't quite get it, but it was clearly a very serious matter to Kunon.

"So I've decided to accept that she is a girl," he concluded. "It's what my inner gentleman says is right."

So in other words... Cassis had a boy's body, but she was a girl on the inside, and Kunon was choosing to acknowledge that. It seemed she was, well, yet another mysterious aspect of city life. Or at least that's how it seemed to Riyah.

But what could possibly have transpired to lead to such a serious conversation between the two of them? Riyah was quite curious.

"Cassis," said Kunon. "Um, how can I put this? Yesterday, you know—"

"Shut up. Just don't talk to me for a while. I'm the type who holds grudges."

"Ah, understood..."

So Kunon was the cause of Cassis's foul mood after all. And quite unusually, he was looking a little down about it. The reason he hadn't wanted to explain what happened with the factions the day before must have been related to the person standing in front of them—the beautiful boy who was so much like a beautiful girl.

Kunon looked depressed—and Cassis, sullen. Judging from the state of things between the two of them, something had definitely happened.

"I guess the two of you had a rough day yesterday."

Since talking about the incident seemed impossible, Riyah simply offered a vague comment and didn't push any further.

"Riyah, we can stop here. You should go with them. It would be cruel to keep these mermaids waiting after they've come all the way from the sea."

Kunon was one to talk, since he'd made ten girls wait for him at lunch only the day before. But Riyah, who felt bad making people wait in any situation, decided to take that as his cue to leave.

"Welcome to the Rationality Faction."

After being led to an underground facility that served as the Rationality Faction's base of operations, Riyah was introduced to the group's main members, starting with its representative, Lulomet.

He was told that the facility was a remnant of past students' efforts to construct an artificial dungeon. Riyah figured it must have been part of some kind of experiment.

The faction had less than thirty students total, so everyone was quite kind to newcomers. Riyah still hadn't made a formal decision, but he got the feeling he would get along well in Rationality if he joined.

"Um. So Kunon was called out yesterday, and I was wondering which faction he chose..."

Well, he'd thought he would get along well. Right up until he said that

anyway.

""…""

The change was sudden. Every member of the Rationality Faction gathered in the large dining room went from amicably sharing a meal to sitting grave-faced and silent.

What? What kind of reaction was this?

"Kunon didn't tell you?" asked Lulomet, the only person who seemed unaffected.

Riyah realized he'd just poked a hornet's nest but nevertheless shook his head. He was treading on dangerous ground. But unless he understood where the faults in the path were, he would have a really difficult time moving forward.

Riyah thought of Kunon as a friend. He wanted to know what his friend had done—and what this faction's opinion of Kunon was. Depending on the answers, Riyah might need to reconsider joining the group.

"Hmmm. So he didn't talk about it. I see..." Lulomet nodded several times, then abruptly continued. "Yesterday, there was a match. A magic competition. A number of prominent members from three factions all together versus Kunon by himself."

A match. A group of upper-level Advanced students had gone head-to-head with Kunon. A chill ran down Riyah's spine. He was terrified to hear what came next.

"The result... You can guess from our reaction, can't you?"

So it was as Riyah had feared. Kunon had won.

The type of match was a matter of interest, but the fact remained that no matter the nature of the competition and despite being stacked with first-rate sorcerers, the group of seniors had lost.

To Kunon—a team of one.

And this had all happened just the day before.

Apparently, a lot more had gone down than Riyah had imagined.



"Things have gotten a bit busy."

"...?"

"Riyah just got a similar invitation," Kunon explained succinctly in response to Hank's questioning look.

After Riyah left with members of the Rationality Faction, Kunon had gone to check on Hank. And just like Riyah, Hank had been approached by someone from a faction with an offer for lunch.

"Why don't you go?" Kunon suggested. "You've been looking forward to it."

The person who came to pick up Hank was from the Harmony Faction. It seemed he had already officially declared his affiliation. After spending years working as an assistant at the school, Hank was acquainted with a lot of the current students. And more to the point, the Harmony member who had come to get him was his friend. The boy's name was Osdie, and he was a fire sorcerer just like Hank.

"You sure? Well, if you say so."

With that, Hank wrapped up his bacon making early and walked off with his friend.

"Now, then," Kunon said to himself.

After seeing Hank off—though he couldn't see, of course—he gathered up the smoked meats and headed for the cafeteria.

Reyes was probably still in the middle of talking to Professor Sureyya. And Riyah and Hank had both been snatched away from under Kunon's nose. That meant, for the first time in a while, Kunon would be having lunch by himself.

He could put together reports while he ate and read—or even go to the library to see if the books he was waiting on had been returned. Pondering all the things he wanted to do and ought to do had Kunon walking with a spring in his step. But then he stopped.

"Oh yeah..."

Something came to mind that Kunon wished he hadn't remembered: He needed to create a ledger for his sleep business.

His maid had told him, very firmly, many times, "I want to include it in the household expense accounts."

"I need to know your exact income and expenditures from last month," she had said.

Money was essential to living. It was important to have a little savings set aside for emergencies. Precise business management was key. Kunon already knew very well everything Rinko wanted to get across to him.

The thing was—it was a pain. All of it. Such a pain.

Keeping track of their house's finances himself was such an odious idea that Kunon intended to let Rinko take care of it. But before she could, he needed to make a business ledger, because one did not currently exist.

In Kunon's mind, there could be no task more troublesome.

He had sales records. Any cash he accepted from a customer was immediately stuffed into his desk drawer. If someone didn't have payment on hand at the time, he made an invoice for their outstanding balance. He needed to collect on those accounts, but... Well, surely he could ask someone else to take care of that for him.

Kunon only took what he needed, when he needed it, out of his money drawer, including the amounts for his daily meat purchases and Hank's and Riyah's wages.

He'd paid Rinko her salary the other day, bought various little necessities that he couldn't be bothered to remember, and made a few impulse purchases on magic-related items. He'd also bought mixing equipment for preparing the shishilla.

He had records for all of it. More or less. The issue was that although the money was all stored in one place, the records were scattered throughout the room.

He always put them down briefly, thinking he would consolidate them and put them away later on. But that was where it ended every time. At this point, the financial records were mixed in among tons of other documents. He needed to find them and do the math for his expenses.

Just the math alone was no problem. Collecting all the records was the loathsome part. To start with, Kunon's reserved classroom had turned into a pigsty in just one month. The space, which had once seemed enormous, was now teeming with notes, documents, books, equipment for experiments, and many other things besides.

Kunon had succeeded in transforming the space into a den of chaos, truly fitting of a sorcerer waist-deep in their own research. The metamorphosis was so complete that he hated even thinking about it.

"...Guess I have no choice."

If Rinko were here, she would have kept it all tidy for him, and Kunon would at least know where everything was. But he had no maid to rely on at school.

And so Kunon resolved himself to his fate. He would spend his afternoon at the dreaded task of organization and, while he was at it, do a little light cleaning.

That afternoon, Kunon passed the time pretty much as he always did, flipping through books he intended to read someday and delving into reports he could not remember writing.

He did not make a ledger.

He did not tidy, and he did not clean.



Mysteriously, at almost the same time that Riyah was having a similar conversation— "They lost?! What happened?!"

—Hank heard a startling story from his friend Osdie. They were in the dining room of the squat little tower where the Harmony Faction was based—a place Hank had visited many times during his years as a lowly underling. The story was about what had happened the day before, after Kunon was escorted away

by the fairies.

In the middle of his lunch with the members of Harmony, many of whom were already familiar faces, someone asked Hank, "What kind of guy is Kunon?" and suddenly he remembered.

Kunon had seemed so normal that day that Hank had completely forgotten about him being marched out of Reyes's room. Plus, he was sure the people he knew from the three factions involved would never do anything really violent. So he simply hadn't worried too much about it.

As it turned out, something very worrying indeed had taken place.

Hank said casually, "Speaking of yesterday, Kunon got called away for some business with the representatives," and soon he had heard the whole story.

"I was there, too. To be honest, it was unreal." Osdie's expression was serious as he spoke.

When Hank heard that Kunon had been so bold as to ask for joint membership in all the factions, he was shocked. But that was nothing compared to what followed.

"When they told him they wanted to have a match, he said, 'If we'll be dueling with magic, I'm confident I can beat any opponent I've never fought before.' Then he said, 'The result will be the same no matter how many of you participate, so by all means, anyone who is interested, feel free to join.'"

Hank could not believe his ears. The fact that Kunon had said those words was incredible, as was the fact that he had made good on them.

Hank was aware of Kunon's talent. The Advanced class, however, was made up entirely of talented people. Everyone had their areas of expertise, but there were more than a few students who were said to be on par with even the teachers in terms of knowledge and magic. That was the nature of the class.

In fact, it was the very reason Hank had worked as hard as he had preparing to join it. He was here now because he'd put time and effort into making up for the gap between his own skill level and that of those in the Advanced class.

"Reactions varied," said Osdie. "Some people thought he was being a cocky

brat. Others believed that if he had the nerve to say something so bold, he must be able to back it up, and they wanted to see him do it."

Both responses were understandable, but Hank agreed with the latter. As a fellow sorcerer, he couldn't help wanting to know how things would play out.

"So then a few people agreed to the challenge and decided to participate. Atma and Shri from our group. Sandra, Cassis, and Unity from Rationality. And Elia, Nizhu, and Garege from Ability. Sandra and Cassis, in particular, were feeling a lot of animosity, I think. They looked like they wanted to make him pay for something."

That was no surprise from the hot-blooded Sandra, but it was unusual for Cassis to get angry. In general, Cassis was shy around new people and tended to keep them at arm's length for a while. Was it possible that Kunon's preferential treatment of women had hurt Cassis's feelings in some way? Hank could easily picture it.

"So then?" he asked. "What happened?"

"It was decided in a second. Totally one-sided. Over before you could blink."

"No way. You have to be kidding. You're joking, right?"

Hank was stupefied. He knew Kunon was talented, but this was unbelievable.

The students Osdie had named as his opponents were considered high-ranking even among the Advanced class.

Sandra, in particular, wasn't great at fine control but her magic power was immense. She'd even made a name for herself as an adventurer. If the fearsome Tidal Wave Sandra made full use of her tremendous water magic, anything caught up in the sheer volume and force of her waves would be washed away. In some cases, even her allies.

According to Osdie, several Advanced class sorcerers, including Sandra, had lost in an instant, without so much as lifting a finger.

"That's just not—"

"Are you talking about yesterday? Good timing. I'll explain."

Those words came from Harmony representative Shilto, who had just walked

in from the cafeteria. Hank was quite good friends with her.

"Actually, I was just discussing the matter with Bael and Lulu," she continued. "We had planned to talk about what to do with Kunon Gurion going forward, but the main topic ended up being an investigation into yesterday's match. We came up with a working idea of what happened."

Overhearing her, other members of the faction who hadn't been eating with Hank's group came over to join them.

The fact was that even the people who had seen the match for themselves could hardly believe what had happened. Or rather, they didn't *understand* what had happened. And they really, really wanted to understand.

"It was the standard match format."

Long ago, sorcerers had developed a dueling magic circle for use in *serious* disagreements.

They couldn't afford to actually kill one another, so during a match, opponents would stand inside the boundaries of their own quasi-barriers, made of defensive magic. The circle's magic would negate up to a set amount of damage caused by the opponent's offensive magic.

The rules were simple: Cast offensive spells at your opponent's circle. If their circle was destroyed, you won. If yours was destroyed, you lost.

Considering the format, it seemed less and less conceivable that Kunon had managed a win. It wasn't an advantageous format for a single person taking on multiple foes. And anyway, Kunon still knew how to use only two spells, and neither was offensive magic. From what Hank had heard so far, Kunon's chances of winning should have been nonexistent.

"Hank. Do you know that Crimson Rain spell that Kunon uses?"

"...Yeah. I know it."

Hank had seen it during the entrance exam. Kunon had used the move to defeat Soff's defensive barrier, although the win had been entirely theoretical.

"As soon as the match started, that Crimson Rain came down over the entire dueling area. Everyone was dyed bright red. Then it was over."

"...What?"

The match ended because of some rain? Over everyone being dyed red?

"What I really don't understand," said Shilto, "is how the Crimson Rain passed through the magic circles without destroying them and why every single one of Kunon's opponents voluntarily surrendered after being drenched."

"...What?"

Hank was even more bewildered. Sandra was the type to *die* before admitting defeat.

"We talked to the people who participated. Everything they said about it was so disconnected that we couldn't figure out how any of their testimony was relevant. They said the water wouldn't come off, that their bodies felt heavy, that they lost all chance of turning things around. The one thing everyone seemed certain of was that it would have been dangerous to continue to fight."

It certainly sounded that way.

Hank knew perfectly well that Kunon wouldn't have made the rain come down for no reason. He was sure that the sorcerers who'd given up the match had intuitively sensed the danger they were in precisely because of their exceptional talent.

"So we've been looking into what happened. I want to ask you guys, too—tell me what you think about it. Once we come to a conclusion, I plan to verify the truth with Kunon Gurion."

No one knew the truth behind the Crimson Rain. Even the people on the receiving end of it had just somehow *felt* that it was bad news. They couldn't even say *what* the danger was or *why* it was dangerous.

This, of course, only made the subject more fascinating. There was no student in the Advanced class who could resist the thrill of new magic, and Hank was no exception. His head was filled with nothing but curiosity and amazement.



"Huh? The truth behind the Crimson Rain?"

It was almost evening. After a while spent talking about various possibilities, Hank and Shilto went to Kunon's classroom to find out how their theories compared to the truth.

To the meticulous Shilto, Kunon's room was beyond messy. She was worried that if she let her mind wander, her body would start tidying up on its own.

But there were bigger matters at hand.

"Riyah and some others just came to ask me the same thing. If you were all so interested, you could have asked yesterday."

In the middle of the wild, chaotic room was Kunon, reclining on a waterbed and reading a book. He didn't seem to have a care in the world. It was almost as though he simply hadn't noticed the clutter surrounding him on all sides.

"But that Crimson Rain is your secret weapon, isn't it? Wouldn't it be rude to ask how it works without at least formulating a hypothesis first?"

Normally, when someone developed a unique spell, it became their secret weapon. And normally, they didn't explain their secret weapon to anyone, even when asked. Normally, that is. But Hank felt that no word suited Kunon less than *normal*.

"Not at all," he said. "It's just something I came up with the first time I dueled with my master. There's no reason to hide it. It's not really that big a deal."

Yes, Hank felt increasingly sure that Kunon was anything but normal.

"After all, my master dealt with it easily the second time around. In the end, after that initial lucky break, I never won another match against him."

While Kunon's stories about the infamous Zeonly were another topic of interest, they were not the reason Hank and Shilto had come to see him.

Without realizing it, Shilto had begun picking up what was probably once a tower of documents that had toppled over at some point. With a start, she came to her senses and turned back to Kunon.

"Then if you don't mind, I would like you to tell me about it."

"Of course. You came all the way here to my humble little mess of a room just to ask me. How could I deny you?"

So Kunon *did* realize the state of his room. The phrase "little mess" didn't quite cover it, though.

"The Crimson Rain is sticky water," he explained. "It's highly viscous... It's kind of like a slime rain, I suppose. Oh, and the color is irrelevant. It's just there to make it easier to see."

Slime rain.

It was hard to tell exactly what that meant without experiencing it, but it sounded considerably different from regular water.

"And actually, it's not really 'rain,' per se."

Rain was something that fell from the sky to the ground. But Kunon controlled the sticky water's movement, so it was more like fog than rain.

"I was impressed with the seniors for surrendering so quickly. Even if they didn't know what it really was, they figured out right away that they weren't just wet with normal water. If they had continued, the slime would have clung to their entire bodies, sticking more and more until, ultimately, it would have swallowed them up entirely."

So that was it. Normal water seeped, splashed, and dripped down. The sticky water did not. Once it stuck to something, it stayed there. And as the drops came into contact with one another, they glommed together, gradually increasing in size.

Somehow, the spell was even more sinister than anyone had guessed.

"But that's not its main purpose," said Kunon.

"It's not?"

"It's a dual-purpose spell, for both offense and defense. It was also meant to protect against anything the seniors fired off."

Of course. The slime rain could also stick to opposing spells.

For example, if someone cast a burst of flames that would erupt when touched, the blaze would explode the second it materialized and made contact with the sticky water. Or if someone tried to construct a golem from scratch, the slime would interfere with the building process.

Faces were at risk, too—the eyes and the mouth, in particular. If the slime got in either of those places, it could cause temporary blindness or make it difficult to breathe.

That was simply how highly viscous water behaved.

The strategy was quite malicious, and the magic users forfeiting the match had apparently given up on attacking the moment they sensed that malice. And so even though a number of people had participated, the duel had ended after only one spell—Kunon's Crimson Rain—and nothing else.

But another element of the attack was even more frightening.

"And as for the quasi-barriers... The rain passed through the dueling circles because you used a low-powered spell, right?"

"Yes. I still can't use any spells that consume a lot of power. That one was just A-ori, beginner's magic."

In short, the dueling circles weren't able to recognize Kunon's magic as offensive. That was how the rain passed through the quasi-barriers as if they weren't even there.

"So you already knew how the magic circles worked?"

"Yes. I'd come up against them countless times in matches with my master."

Naturally, Zeonly would have known about such things. He had been a student of this school himself once—and a member of the Advanced class just like them. And though he had caused all kinds of trouble along the way, he had successfully graduated.

"I see. Thank you for telling us."

Shilto was grateful. Because Kunon had generously explained his own magic to them, the mystery of the duel had been solved.

It was just as he had said. The Crimson Rain was more likely to destroy an opponent the less they knew about it. Unless someone could predict his move and was ready to counter it, they would be helpless. That was why even *Zeonly* had lost his first match to Kunon.

If Kunon deployed his magic while the opponent was still defenseless, they

would lose. If some of the Crimson Rain stuck to an opponent, they would lose. If the opponent was unlucky and the slime stuck to a part of their body in a way that prevented them from taking action, it would mean instant defeat.

In other words, if someone chose a "wait and see" approach in a match against Kunon, they would lose. Unless they went into the duel with the intention of ending it in a single move, it would be over for them.

Zeonly, too, must have chosen to "wait and see" in his first match with Kunon. As a teacher wanting to draw out the true potential of his young disciple, he had likely decided to let Kunon make the first move as a training exercise. And as a result, he had given up his only chance to fight back.

Once someone knew about the slime, a few countermeasures would come to mind. In Shilto's case, her specialty—Lightning Strike—was faster than Kunon's Crimson Rain. For a fire sorcerer such as Hank, it would be possible to create a fire wall that would at least partially evaporate the sticky water.

On that note, Shilto thought a match between Kunon and Inferno would be really interesting...

But in any case, the truly terrifying thing wasn't the Crimson Rain itself; it was Kunon's ingenuity and adaptability. If an opponent tried some half-hearted countermeasure, Kunon would probably turn the whole playing field on its head in an instant.

In Kunon's eyes, the Crimson Rain was no more than a first-move diversionary tactic. He had no need to keep it secret from anyone. It was, in a way, his own wait and see move.

Obviously, his secret weapon was something else.

Despite everything, Kunon was still only twelve years old.

Well, Shilto thought. We have quite the new student on our hands this year.

And with that taken care of...

"By the way, Kunon. Shouldn't you do a little cleaning?"

Now that her most pressing concern had been addressed, Shilto was ready to move to the next item on her mental list—the unbelievably messy classroom.

"Shilto..."

Knowing her love for keeping things tidy, Hank had figured she would eventually say something.

"You're right," said Kunon. "It was starting to get to me, too. I'm in the process of cleaning it up now."

"Oh... Huh?"

Shilto stopped mid-nod. Something was off about what Kunon had just said. Next to her, Hank voiced what Shilto was thinking.

"From what I can see, all you're doing is lazing around."

Yes. That was what was bothering her.

At present, Kunon was sprawled out across a waterbed with an open book, receiving visitors. He didn't look like he was cleaning anything. He just seemed to be luxuriating.

"I'm taking a break," he said.

"How long have you been taking a break?"

"Ummm... Since lunch, I think?"

It was nearly dark. If he was telling the truth, this was one lengthy break. In fact, how could he be "in the middle" of cleaning up if he hadn't even started?

"Alas!" Kunon rolled from side to side in his bed. "If only I were a wind sorcerer, then I could use my power to clean up this mess!"

"You mean by blowing everything out of the room?"

"If that's what it would take, then yes. I've had enough."



What an unreasonable thing to say. Some of the documents scattered across the room were probably worth money, but Kunon hated cleaning so much that he was willing to just throw them all away. Was it really that much trouble?

"Get up." Shilto looked impatient. "There's no better time than the present. I'll help you tidy, so let's do it together. Luckily, it's just disorganized, not actually dirty, so we can be done in no time if we put our minds to it."

Just like I thought she would say, thought Hank. He shrugged.

"Guess it was inevitable. I'll help, too. Come on, Kunon. Get up."

"No, no way! I can't let you help me! It's annoying, but I'm going to do it myself, so just forget about it! It's true that I hate it, but seriously, don't! It's very kind of you to offer, but I simply must refuse!"

Kunon was fussing. It seemed he *really* hated cleaning. Hank and Shilto felt like they were seeing him act like a regular child for the first time.

"Just get up already."

"Come on, up."

Nevertheless, they had no time to indulge a willful child.

Just as Shilto had predicted, all that was needed was to organize the things tossed about the room, and the job was finished before they knew it. Having three people there to do it was a big plus. They were able to wrap up quickly, before Kunon got too frustrated.

The classroom was no longer a barely walkable pigsty and had been restored to its prior spacious state. All the notes and documents Kunon no longer needed were designated as trash, and Hank took them away for incineration with his fire magic.

"So it seems your attribute is wind, Miss Shilto."

After everything was acceptably tidy, Shilto generated a breeze to blow the lightly accumulated dust outside.

Kunon had guessed as much from the mysterious weather, in the form of storm clouds, he could see floating around her, but he didn't plan on letting that slip.

"Yeah, as you can see. Just out of curiosity, do you not have any spells you can use for cleaning?"

"No, I do." Kunon's reply was matter-of-fact, another sign he was no ordinary kid. "But it's no match for wind. Above all, there's a big difference in speed."

As he spoke, a small A-ori appeared in Kunon's hand.

"It's almost exactly the same as the slime spell from yesterday. If you roll it around—like this—dust sticks to the surface."

"Whoa..."

The A-ori fell from Kunon's hand to the floor and started rolling around the room. Once it was done, the floor looked a bit cleaner. The effect would probably have been more obvious before Shilto blew the dust away.

It seemed the Crimson Rain had practical applications even outside of battle. In fact, the conception was probably the other way around. Perhaps this cleaning spell was what inspired the Crimson Rain.

"But all I can get with it is dust. It doesn't tidy up. Books won't go back to their shelves. Papers aren't consolidated. And sometimes I find documents I have no memory of making. Then I get curious and end up reading them instead. You see? How am I supposed to clean under such conditions?"

What do you mean, "You see?" Shilto thought. Am I supposed to agree with you?

What else could she say but "That's no excuse"?

Be that as it may, there were a lot of sorcerers who were bad at cleaning, so it wasn't like Kunon was a special case.

"...Um. By the way, Miss Shilto."

"Yeah?"

"Is Cassis okay?"

"Hmm? Oh, you mean since the crying incident yesterday?"

The day before, one of Kunon's opponents had been Cassis, the boy who was

like a girl.

Swallowed up by the Crimson Rain in an instant, with no hope to defend or counter, the senior students had lost in seconds. The defeat was probably especially bitter for Cassis, who had been eager to join the match. She ended up bursting into tears.

Seeing that, Kunon had let slip something like "A boy crying isn't very moving," and Cassis had fired back at him: "Guys are all the same. They only care about a woman's body."

And—

"I have the heart of a girl. Does not having a girl's body mean I'm not a girl?"

And—

"It must be all about boobs for you."

Kunon had been shocked. He'd never heard of a boy with the heart of a girl before. Even though he had a special physical condition himself—his blindness. And on top of everything else, he had made a girl cry. Kunon was ashamed of himself as a gentleman.

But Shilto replied, "Don't worry about it. I don't care if someone cries over losing a match, but crying in front of one's opponent is weak whether you're a man or a woman. You should do whatever you can to hide your tears in that situation."

Her opinion on the matter was quite harsh.

"They say tears are a woman's weapon, though," said Kunon.

"Personally, I don't like the idea, but if someone wants to use tears as a weapon, then fine. As long as it's intentional."

I see, Kunon thought, nodding.

"I have a lot to learn about women. I'm still inexperienced as a gentleman."

The type of gentleman Kunon wanted to become was still a long way off.

"If you're a gentleman," said Shilto, "you should at least keep your surroundings tidy at all times."

Kunon pretended not to hear that last comment.





## Chapter 10 Concluding Negotiations

Magic is something in its most complete state. However, that is not to say we have discovered all such complete states.

Spells are invoked through language. Language spurs magic to action. Such is the traditional way of magic.

In the records of civilizations past—in their books, in the provincial remnants of their frescoes and buildings. In fairy tales, in legends, in folk songs. Magic was everywhere.

But much of it has faded with time. We have many magical fragments, but mere fragments they remain. Even now, these scraps serve as no more than signposts, leading us toward the deepest reaches of magic.

Humans were impatient.

Rather than seeking complete magic, they chose to walk the nearby path of creating incomplete magic. The result was a distinct method in which crests are deliberately altered.

This was the birth of the "new magical system." I suspect that in the coming eras, this "distorted" magic will itself become the norm.

"Humans were impatient, huh?"

Foundational Magic: Starting from Scratch was a must-read for sorcerers. It had been written over two hundred years ago by the immortal witch, Gray Rouva. It was also known as the very first specialist text most sorcerers encountered.

Thin, written in clear language, and with explanatory diagrams throughout, it was extremely approachable.

Kunon had read it over and over again. Possibly more than one hundred times. Even now that he had grown reasonably accustomed to magic, he still found it an enjoyable and utterly fascinating book.

It was the very first textbook written with the aim of approaching the gates that led toward magic's unfathomable depths.

The foreword at the very front of the book contained the following phrase: *Humans were impatient.* 

They didn't want to take the time to uncover all the missing pieces of traditional magic. That was why they concentrated on "creating" instead. They felt it was infinitely simpler to create something rather than search fruitlessly for what remained hidden. And as new methods of using magic were devised from the old ways, it become common practice to devote oneself to such pursuits.

This was how a new form of magic came into being. From the large, single trunk of traditional magic sprouted many new limbs and leaves. One of those branches was— "Kunon. Did you find the books you were looking for?"

"Oh, sorry."

Kunon was pulled from his musings by the sound of his name. He found himself in the library at the Dirashik School of Magic.

"Whenever I pick up this book, I end up getting lost in it, whether I mean to or not."

He closed the volume and showed the cover to his companion, who nodded.

"Foundational Magic? I've read it, too," said Reyes. "It was my first book on the subject."

"Same here."

"But it isn't relevant to our needs now, is it?"

"You're right. But don't you find yourself wanting to read it anyway?"

"No. I'm more concerned with money."

The preeminent text, often referred to as just *Foundational Magic*, was still an essential read for modern sorcerers despite being around two centuries old. But even such an illustrious tome couldn't compete with the pressing needs of tomorrow, like money.

"That's a sad sentiment, don't you think?"

Kunon put Foundational Magic: Starting from Scratch back on the shelf.

Shortly thereafter, Kunon's search came to an end.

"Thank you, everyone. These materials should be plenty."

With the help of his classmates, Hank Beat and Riyah Houghs, Kunon was able to get his hands on the books he'd been hoping to find.

A Field Guide to Wildflowers of the Yureiyu Region.

The Art of Preparing Medicines, Volume 4.

And Conceptualizing Temporal Boundaries.

He had found almost ten other related books, but for now, only these three were necessary. That said, since he'd managed to find the others, Kunon intended to read all of them anyway.

"I am very grateful for your assistance."

Reyes Saint-Lance expressed her appreciation as well. She sounded a little conceited, but her classmates knew she meant what she'd said sincerely.

"Are you sure those are the only reference materials you need?" asked Riyah. "You're making a new magic tool, right?"

"Yep. We already have our concept, after all," said Kunon. "The biggest

challenge was securing the sacred herb. With that out of the way, completing the process should be simple."

Procuring shi-shilla through established channels was prohibitively expensive. Even for the son of a noble, the cost was too high to justify its use in a child's experiment. That was why Kunon had never put his idea to the test, even though he'd made plans for it.

In theory, it was a guaranteed success. Theoretically, at least.

"Miss Reyes, I'll finish these books by the end of the day, and we'll start production tomorrow."

"Understood. I'll leave these with you, then."

Reyes's shi-shilla plants were growing splendidly. Finally, the time had come for the herbs to serve as the raw materials for their magic tool. Then they could promote the finished product and put it on the market with a price tag of at least one and a half million necca.

With that, the Saint's money problems would be solved at last.

The critical moment was upon them.

**♦** 

"Oh, you're home early."

It was just past midday.

Rinko had planned on fixing herself an elaborate afternoon snack before making dinner. She was busy setting out all the ingredients when she was surprised by Kunon walking through the door. Normally, he didn't come home until evening.

"I'm back. Could I have a milk tea, please? Hold the tea."

"Coming right up."

Kunon had gotten his books from the library that morning, then spent a little while in his classrooms tending to his business. After closing things up at a suitable time, he headed home.

Once there, he asked his maid for a cup of warm milk, spread out on a waterbed in the garden, and immersed himself in a book.

"Master Kunon, you should come inside," Rinko called out to him. "It's getting cold."

"Hmm? Oh... Okay." The sky had turned dark without his realizing it. "Nighttime already? I feel like I just got home."

This phenomenon was nothing new, and Kunon had long wondered about it. When he was absorbed in something, time seemed to vanish. Since he didn't operate through sight, light and dark didn't mean much to him. He didn't even notice his surroundings growing dimmer and dimmer. Perhaps for that reason, Kunon had grown somewhat indifferent to the passage of time.

"I'll heat up your milk."

"No, it's okay."

The warm drink Rinko had prepared for him had cooled without his taking a single sip. That happened a lot, too.

"I'll drink it with dinner, so please bring it in as is."

"Very well."

"I'm sorry. Even though you made it with love..."

"It's true. My love has gone totally cold."

"What happens to love once it's cold? Does it linger? Or does it disappear?"

"Good question. I'm sure it would be easier if it simply disappeared."

"Really?"

"If your emotions stir when you think of an old lover, that means your love still remains."

So that's how it is, Kunon thought, nodding.

"Do your emotions stir when you think of your old lovers, Rinko?"

"Yes. The urge to kill wells up within me. Like a tidal wave."

Kunon decided not to pry any further. Rinko's answer had him a bit scared.

He decided to carry Rinko's cold love inside himself, as well. He didn't want to stir up any of her urges.

•

Kunon had stayed up all night reading, and the next day had dawned.

"It's easy to make, so watch closely."

With his plan solidified, Kunon had gathered the mixing equipment from his classroom and carried it to the Saint's, determined to begin production on the magic tool right away.

"First, we prepare the sacred herb."

"Agh!"

Delicate, faintly glowing blossoms reminiscent of glasswork were growing straight up out of their pots, as if reaching for the heavens. Aside from their shape, they looked a bit like skeleton flowers.

But when Kunon reached for one, Sureyya Gaulin let out an anguished cry. The light sorcerer had requested to be present for the shi-shilla picking. She had a strong emotional attachment to the plants, since she knew how hard they were to grow. But that was of no consequence now.

Taking one of the herbs in hand, Kunon pulled it mercilessly out from the soil, roots and all.

"Every single part of the shi-shilla—from petals to roots—can be used," said Kunon. "At present, we will use only the petals, so everything else will be set aside."

"Let's save three—no, two! Two plants! For the seeds!"

"Please discuss that with Miss Reyes."

Shi-shilla seeds could only be harvested once the plant's flowers withered. In their current state, no seeds could be obtained from Reyes's plants. But Kunon had no say in that matter—it was up to the Saint and Professor Sureyya to decide.

"Now we pulverize the petals. Once they've been roughly ground, we add the

dehydrated iyo grass and mix. We then add the secondary solution. The iyo grass becomes tacky when the secondary solution is added, so we must continue stirring until the mixture is even. At this point, it's pretty much complete."

The phlegmy substance in the mortar was a finished product. It was an unrecognizable, green, gelatinous...something. There was no trace of the sacred shi-shilla herb to be seen. This was it. The meager glow it gave off felt melancholy somehow, like the herb was saying its farewells.

"Aha. I have no doubt this will sell."

Sureyya, who had been gently weeping in sorrow over the plants, was looking more like a scholar again. Having used medicinal herbs and drugs before, she must have recognized the substance immediately.

"Professor, what kind of medicine would you say this is?" asked Kunon.

"It's a salve utilizing shi-shilla's excellent wound-healing properties. Iyo grass is another medicinal herb with similar properties, so there's no doubt about it. With this degree of viscosity, I suspect it would work on deep cuts that would normally require stitching."

"So it's nothing special."

"Yes, this kind of salve is pretty common."

Indeed, such a medicine already existed. This was shi-shilla's main use, after all. In its present state, the substance could only be sold as a regular salve. It would be extremely commonplace as a magic tool.

"Of course. This is where things get interesting. We just do this—"

A number of small bubbles appeared in the mortar. Kunon had used A-rubu.

"—seal the substance in the bubbles, extract the liquid, dehydrate it, and—Yes. It's done."

A handful of tiny, faintly glowing spheres had formed.

"This...is the finished product?"

Reyes picked up one of the little spheres—it wasn't even half as wide as her

fingertip.

"This is the magic tool?"

"Yep. You see, if you dissolve it in hot water, it turns back into the salve."

"Uh...?"

Next to Reyes, who was racking her brain trying to figure out why that was important or how the spheres were different from what they had just made—



"Oh, I see!"

—Professor Sureyya was thrilled.

"Shi-shilla doesn't have a long shelf life as a compound. Even if you store it in a cold place, it stays usable for only about ten to twelve days. But I suspect this will last even longer!"

"According to my calculations, it should last from three to six months."

"Really?! If you're right, this is a game changer!"

"I have some ideas for improvement as well. The salve will—"

"Then if you changed this part here, you could push its life span even more—"

Kunon and Sureyya dove into a technical conversation that Reyes wasn't able to follow.

"One and a half million...for this?"

A teensy orb that she could balance on her fingertip.

It shone the same green as the iyo grass.

Could she really earn the money she needed each month with such a measly sphere? Reyes couldn't imagine it fetching that kind of price at all.

She could not have been more wrong.



It was afternoon, the same day Kunon completed the magic tool.

While Kunon and Sureyya had excitedly exchanged ideas for further refinements, they had a schedule to stick to. They jotted everything down and made a plan to continue the discussion later. At present, it was finally time to go pitch their product.

For Reyes, it was the moment of truth.

"I'm Philea."

"I'm Jirni."

These were Reyes's servants who doubled as her guards. They would be

serving as escorts for the forthcoming task, and Kunon and Reyes had gone to meet up with them.

Philea was a woman in her thirties and a skilled sorcerer. Through the Glass Eye, Kunon could see several round things that resembled A-ori floating around her, which meant she was probably a wind user. If she was using a spell, he would have assumed she had a water crest. But since that wasn't the case, and since the spheres weren't some kind of living thing, wind was most likely.

Jirni was an athletic-looking woman in her twenties, and Kunon could see tack-like thorns protruding from the right shoulder of her uniform. Something partially visible sticking out of her body meant she was most likely not a magic user.

"Nice to meet you. I'm Kunon, a good friend of Miss Reyes. I'm so pleased to make your acquaintance. My, oh my, how fortunate Miss Reyes is to have two such lovely servants. I envy her. By the way, have you had lunch yet? If I could take three charming ladies to lunch, I'd be the luckiest man in the world. Would you do me the honor of making me the luckiest man in the world today?"

Kunon hit the ground running even when greeting someone. But the two women responded only vaguely and in unison: ""Yes, thank you.""

Reyes had given them advanced warning regarding Kunon's personality.

"Either accept or ignore anything Kunon says," she had told them. "Don't try to argue with him."

Philea and Jirni were taken aback. With hardly any emotional variation, the Saint's mannerisms, speech patterns, and opinions were entirely parroted. Very few of her thoughts were original; she mostly just did things because she was told to or because they were things she was taught and had always done. She had a very rigid personality.

Her servants were shocked to hear Reyes—whose humanity seemed like only a thin veneer some days—talk about how to socialize with a specific person.

She was showing flexibility in her reactions, a way of preserving the peace in her relationships with others. For most people, that was a matter of course; but it was a change for Reyes. There was no telling yet if it was a good or bad thing, but it was definitely growth.

With Kunon's introduction out of the way, the four of them made for their first prospective buyer.

Lunch would come afterward, they'd decided. Since Reyes was still struggling with food expenses, and Philea's and Jirni's salaries were slightly overdue, they didn't mind waiting if it meant being treated to a meal. They wanted to indulge themselves in some delicious, high-quality food. And perhaps some drinks as well.

The foursome started by heading for the Adventurers Guild.

"I don't mean to interfere with your plan, Miss Reyes," said Kunon. "But I would like to ask why you're choosing to sell here before we go inside."

Kunon had been thinking of doing business with the Herbalist, Alchemy, and Trade Guilds. He expected those three organizations would accurately assess the value of their prototype, and as long as the product's value came across, he felt negotiations would go smoothly.

And yet Reyes had brought them to the Adventurers Guild of all places. It wasn't totally foreign territory for a sorcerer, but it was not a place he would have expected as their first stop.

"Jirni," said Reyes. "Explain."

"Of course."

Jirni turned to Kunon.

"If the new magic tool is a treatment for wounds, demand for it will likely be highest here."

Shi-shilla was known for its ability to heal wounds, so that was a fair prediction.

"I am a former adventurer myself and am well acquainted with the value of a potent, fast-acting salve. Plus, I have a few contacts here, so we thought that would assist in our dealings."

Apparently, Philea and Jirni hadn't heard about the product in detail. If it wasn't for treating wounds, they would have planned on going to the Herbalist

or Alchemy Guild instead.

"To be honest, going through any of those other guilds would inevitably entail giving them a portion of the profits and paying brokerage fees...," said Jirni. "Speaking from a former adventurer's perspective, nothing beats an affordable price when it comes to life-saving medicine. That's why we'd like to make a private, direct transaction with the Adventurers Guild."

"I see. You have a lovely voice."

Kunon understood her point. It would certainly be easier on the Adventurers Guild if they could make a deal directly rather than doing business through a third party. Getting something "fresh from the farm" helped to keep prices down, after all.

"Are you okay with that, Miss Reyes? You might turn a bigger profit by going through another guild."

"If we consider guild registration fees, handling fees, and sales tax, a large chunk of profit will go elsewhere even if we sell it at a high price. So a private trade may actually be more lucrative. Also, I don't think the Adventurers Guild would try to avoid paying."

"That's a good point. Well, if you've put this much thought into it, I have no objections. Your voice is beautiful, too, by the way."

And with that, the group stepped inside the Adventurers Guild.

The magic city of Dirashik was full of sorcerers.

Despite being surrounded by major powers like the Empire, the Holy Kingdom, and the New Kingdom, Dirashik maintained its independence, refusing discussions of unification and annexation and resisting acts of aggression.

It was, for all intents and purposes, its own country.

Dirashik might not look like a nation, but it had its own system of governance, laws, and regulations. Thanks to that, these days, it even participated in cultural exchange among other relations with its neighbors.

But in any case, because it was a city full of sorcerers— "So this is the

Adventurers Guild. It's my first time here. What about you, Miss Reyes?"

"It's mine as well."

—the adventurers inside the guild eyed Kunon and Reyes, who stuck out like sore thumbs, with keen interest.

In this city, children wearing robes were usually magic users, and no one in town was stupid or reckless enough to carelessly get on the wrong side of a sorcerer. In addition, they might well be a future client or adventuring companion.

There was no need to fawn over them, but it wouldn't do to leave a bad impression. Because, as previously stated, Dirashik was crawling with magic users. The world's most famous witch—Gray Rouva—lived here. It was practically her backyard. Earning a bad reputation among the sorcerers would make getting along in Dirashik quite a challenge. Consequently, no one in the Adventurers Guild was about to hassle two young magic users, even if they did seem to be in the wrong place.

"Miss Jirni, please follow me."

Apparently, word had been sent ahead of time about their arrival. As soon as Kunon and the others walked inside, the receptionist led them to an inner room.

For a short while, they simply sat and waited.

"I'm sorry for the delay."

But before Kunon could start foisting compliments upon the Saint and her guards, a tall, lanky man joined them.

"My name is Asand Smithee, and I'm the accounting manager for the Dirashik branch of the Adventurers Guild. The guild master is not here at the moment, so I will be hearing you out today."

Kunon and the ladies introduced themselves, starting with Reyes, then they immediately got down to business.

"...I see." After closely examining the prototype capsules, Asand nodded slowly. "I was sure this would be worthwhile, since Miss Jirni was bringing it to

us. And I'm not disappointed."

It seemed, for the moment, that Asand was interested in their product. Seeing his reaction, Reyes dove into her sales pitch.

"A single shi-shilla plant can be used to produce ten or eleven of those spheres. If the price of one shi-shilla plant is between five hundred thousand to one million necca, plus the cost of shipping and processing—"

"Then the price for all the capsules together would be around one and a half to two million or thereabouts?"

It was happening. It was happening! Well and truly!

The Saint's expression didn't change, but she felt as though a ray of sunshine had flooded into her heart. Finally, at last. It was time to put an end to her financial troubles.

```
"Oh, pardon me."
```

"Yes?"

From the side, Kunon, who had been watching Reyes up until then, started to talk.

"That medicine is still a prototype. It's only just been made. The three-to six-month shelf life is only a projection; I've yet to test it. It may not actually last that long."

"...Oh? Well, that changes things."

Indeed. Salves made from shi-shilla had a similar effect on wounds as healing magic. They were fast acting and could even be used to treat grave injuries. But the problem with shi-shilla was that it didn't keep for very long after being processed.

These capsules seemed to solve that issue, and Asand had assigned them value based on that premise. If that assumption proved wrong, their price would drop.

"If that's the case," he said, "we have no reason to make a purchase."

If they were wrong, Asand would no longer have an urgent need for the

capsules. In a few days, the expiration date would have drawn near, and the medicine would lose its value.

"...Kunon...?"

Reyes, once more lost in the miasma of impending financial ruin, called out to him. Kunon smiled gently at her and nodded, as if to reassure her.

"I believe the key here is exclusivity," he said.

"...Exclusivity?"

"Yes. If Mr. Asand doesn't wish to do business with us, we'll simply go to the next potential customer. And we'll take our potentially long-lasting wound treatment prototype with us."

In short, they didn't need to make a deal with the Adventurers Guild.

There was a chance the product was defective. But there was also a chance it wasn't.

"You see, don't you? A possibly imperfect product isn't what's at stake. It's whether the Adventurers Guild will have priority access to selling a product that could solve a long-standing problem. In other words, it's a matter of deciding here and now whether you want to secure a distributor agreement with us."

From Asand's perspective, he was being asked to gamble. But it was a gamble that, if successful, would end in a huge payout. Even if the medicine was defective, there would still be some benefit gained in that Reyes, who bore the name of the Holy Kingdom Saint Lance, would be indebted to the guild. As would Jirni. And Kunon, the boy standing next to the Saint.

Even Asand had heard the rumors that he was the infamous Zeonly's apprentice. It was hard to tell if the boy was brilliant, but— No. He probably was. At this point, it felt safe to make such a judgment.

"Very well." Asand had made his decision. "I would like to purchase at least one shi-shilla plant's worth of product once a month, for a period of three months. I will decide at the end of that time whether to renew the contract. I will pay two million necca for every one plant's worth."

Two million.

This contract would provide Reyes with two million necca every month for the next three months. And if the guild decided they wanted more, that meant an additional two million for every order...!

Without realizing it, Reyes's fists had clenched up tight. She was going to get paid. The issue that had been plaguing her for over a month was going to be resolved. She would get to eat lavishly the next day, too. The Saint couldn't help but tremble in anticipation.

"Miss Reyes, are those terms acceptable?" asked Kunon.

"Yes, of course. Let's sign the contract now, right away."

The Saint was extremely excited. No one could tell by looking at her, but she was positively thrilled.

"Oh, by the way, Mr. Asand."

"Yes?"

Signatures had been put to paper, hands had been shaken, and it was time to leave. Kunon, however, appeared to have more to say.

"The prototype will dissolve in hot water. But it's possible to lower its melting point."

"...Yes?"

What was Kunon talking about? Everyone else in the room looked at him in bewilderment, not sure why he had brought up this random topic.

"Say, for example, that I was to process a sphere with a lowered melting point into a thin paperlike sheet. Now, say I get injured, and I affix the medicinal sheet to the wound. Then—"

"...!"

Asand's eyes opened wide, and he shot to his feet so fast that his chair toppled over.

"You mean it could even dissolve in blood?! You wouldn't need to take the time to add water for it to work?!"

The idea was groundbreaking. Extending the shelf life of processed shi-shilla

was already an improvement one would hardly dare to hope for. But this...! This would open up the possibility of receiving treatment easily even in the midst of battle. It would mean an increased likelihood of survival even for the fatally wounded. In fact, it meant that even if someone sustained a terrible injury, they could recover on the spot and even go back to fighting. It was an idea so tremendous it might even affect the cost of the sacred herb itself.

"The sheets would be more difficult to store, but it is possible in theory. Rather, it would be quite simple."

"Kunon!" cried Asand. "That idea! That prototype! I'll buy it for three... No! For five million! Once it's ready, please bring it straight to the Adventurers Guild!"

"Oh, is that so? Then let's make it official... Oh, Miss Reyes, ladies, go on ahead. I'll catch up once I'm done here. Why don't you pick where to go for lunch?"

*"…"* 

Of course, Reyes thought. This is Kunon.

She had been wondering why he was devoting so much of his talent and time for her sake, but that hadn't been the case at all. He had been thinking of ways he could benefit himself at the same time.

The Saint wasn't surprised. Kunon was brilliant. He could handle that much at once without breaking a sweat.

He wasn't just some weird kid.

Philea and Jirni had amended their perceptions of the young sorcerer as well.

**•** 

""Thank you for the meal.""

"Yes, thank you for the meal."

"...Oh yeah."

Coming out of the restaurant, Kunon felt a twinge of remorse. Lunch alone had cost 220,000 necca. Rinko was going to be angry for sure.

With their business dealings at the Adventurers Guild completed, Kunon, Reyes, and the Saint's guards had gone for "the happiest lunch in the world" and had only just finished.

They had ended up going to a fancy restaurant. The food had been all right, and the prices were only on the "slightly expensive" side, but...

...there had been wine. And the wine was expensive. Kunon didn't know if it had been some kind of special vintage, but it had cost two hundred thousand necca. He couldn't believe the ladies had ordered something so pricey. Sure, he had said they could get whatever they wanted, but were there no limits?

The meal had become a good lesson in not throwing around the words *my* treat so carelessly. But a gentleman didn't fall to pieces over a mistake. He simply learned, with grace, not to repeat the blunder. Especially when the women in question were still in front of him.

Kunon swallowed back his tears as he repeated this to himself.

"Oh, right. Miss Reyes, I wanted to discuss with you about what comes next."

Hoping to get his mind off his mistakes, Kunon decided to cut any talk of lunch short.

"After this?" Reyes asked. "Oh, you mean going for a parfait? You have invited me countless times, haven't you? Let's go today, then."

The Saint's servants squealed with delight. It seemed they still had room in their stomachs after everything they'd just eaten and drank. Had no one ever taught these adults some restraint?

Thoughts of Princess Mirika and her remarkable appetite for sweets bubbled up in Kunon's mind as he replied.

"From now on, the main focus will be inspecting and evaluating the prototype. I expect we'll need to keep at it for at least three months, but it could be less. We'll need to observe the deterioration time based on the product's condition, and I imagine some ideas for improvement will spring from

that. I think it's okay to take a break for now, but there's a mountain of work still to be done. It could take another year or two to reach true completion."

"I suppose...you're right..."

Reyes was calm as she thought this over. Her immediate money problems were settled, but she still didn't have a long-term solution in place.

The capsules were just prototypes. For the next three months, Reyes was guaranteed an income. But after that, all bets were off. Still, the fact that she'd manage to buy some time was huge. Her finances had become quite dire.

"So, Miss Reyes, I was thinking I would leave things up to you from now on."

"Huh?"

"I'll still assist you with processing, of course. It's not like I'll be totally uninvolved."

"But—... No, I mean. I see."

Instinctively, Reyes started to protest, but she bit back her words. Kunon had already helped her through so much.

More than one month had passed since she had gone to him for advice about her income. In so many ways, Kunon had been looking after her—even in terms of her daily lunch. The idea to use the shi-shilla herb for Reyes's business had been his idea. He had come to her classroom every day to check on the plants and record their progress. He had also been the one to procure the shi-shilla seeds to begin with.

Naturally, Kunon couldn't be expected to keep helping Reyes with her problems forever. There was the matter of earning credits to consider, as well. The two of them couldn't simply continue working on and researching the same things indefinitely.

Besides, it wasn't like they were saying farewell. Kunon was involved in the shi-shilla business, so they would still have plenty of chances to see each other. And he probably wouldn't mind if she came to consult with him when she felt stuck.

Reyes couldn't keep letting Kunon carry her. The Advanced class—which she

was trying so hard to stay in—wasn't the place for that.

Maybe not now, Reyes thought, but someday, she wanted to be able to help Kunon when *he* needed it. For that to be realistic, she needed to be more dependable.

"I'll have Professor Sureyya, too," she said. "So I'm sure it'll be fine."

"I agree. The two of you seem to work well together."

They certainly had a lot to talk about, since they were both light users.

"And now, Miss Reyes, I'd like to make a few requests of my own. These are just my own wishes, of course." With that as his preface, Kunon elaborated. "I'd like you to succeed in cultivating the sacred herb through methods besides your Sanctum spell. And if possible, I'd like to see you lower the cost of the medicine."

"...The cost?"

"You're having money troubles now, but there are other ways to earn an income, and if you expand the scale of your cultivation, don't you think it'll work out in the end? It's like Miss Jirni said: If the medicine doesn't get to those who need it, it's pointless. And if no one can afford the completed product, then nothing has changed, no matter how useful it is. Now that you're doing business with the Adventurers Guild, I think it's critical to be responsive to their needs and demands rather than just trying to sell them something. Who knows how long the relationship will last if nothing changes?"

The phrase "small profits and quick returns" floated around in Reyes's head as Kunon spoke. The Saint shook her head, dispelling the words from her mind.

"So you're saying produce a lot and sell it cheaply to help the injured? Make it as accessible to as many people as possible?"

All that Reyes had been thinking about lately was money. But for the first time in a while, she recalled that her role as a saint wasn't to be raking in cash. It had been ages since that thought occurred to her. Hunger made one forget the teachings of the divine. Even though Reyes was lacking in emotions, she had been on the brink of being lured in by the siren call of moneymaking.

"I'm sure it won't be easy. Professor Sureyya has been conducting her research for years now and has still not seen any results. I'm certain your power will be of greatest use in cultivating the sacred herb."

Kunon himself was fascinated by shi-shilla cultivation. However, since he was sadly lacking in light magic, there was no way for him to help. One might say he wasn't even qualified to do the research. Such things were the exclusive purview of sorcerers with light crests. More specifically, cultivating shi-shilla was currently something only a saint could do.

If Kunon had his way, rather than maintaining the status quo, the Saint would set her sights on further progress.

"...Hmmm."

Unbeknownst to Kunon, Jirni's estimation of him was improving. He was a weird kid, but he was also earnest and thoughtful. The advice he had given Reyes just now was precisely what Jirni had been hoping for.

Unfortunately, because she had ordered that bottle of vintage wine, Kunon's opinion of Jirni was on something of a downswing.

•

Once the big business deals and expensive lunches were done, the young sorcerers returned to school.

"Welcome back," greeted Sureyya. "How did it go?"

She was waiting for them in Reyes's classroom, and they promptly relayed the results of their transactions to her.

"I see. That's great news."

Advanced students had to earn their own living expenses, and having seen the stress Reyes was under, Sureyya was glad to hear the girl's money issues were done with.

"We're thinking of ending our joint research project here."

Kunon also took the opportunity to tell her that he would be stepping away from the shi-shilla research.

"I hate to part with you, Professor, but..."

"It's inevitable since you have a different attribute."

"Woe is me! How will I bear it knowing there may be days when I won't see your face? Ah, I don't think I can stand it!"

"Pfft. You shouldn't tease a married woman."

In any case, Kunon would be distancing himself from the cultivation project for the time being. He had presented his research results and growth records to Professor Sureyya. Now it was up to the teachers to review them carefully and decide whether his and Reyes's efforts merited any credit.

Of course, successfully growing shi-shilla was such a momentous achievement that it could make someone famous. The odds of the teachers not awarding credit seemed slim.

"...Now, then."

Kunon walked out into the corridor, leaving Reyes and Sureyya behind in the classroom.

That was another task down.

Hank had already finished his bacon making, and Riyah's flight experiments had paid off, too. He'd also managed to resolve the Saint's money issues.

Reyes had probably figured out the basics of moneymaking, so Kunon wouldn't need to play much of a role in assisting her in the future.

Finally, Kunon's time was his own again.

Despite launching his sleep business and getting caught up reading library books, he had yet to start down his own path as a magic user. It was about time to change that. He needed to begin some kind of research so he could earn credits.

"Maybe I'll start by going to see Bael."

The first thing to pop into Kunon's head was a person—Bael Kirkington, the Ability Faction representative.

There was something he wanted Bael's advice on, so he decided to pay the

older boy a visit. The fact that he wasn't on his way to meet with a girl was unfortunate, but nevertheless, Kunon strode forward with a spring in his step.





## Epilogue The Letter

To my beloved fiancée,

How have you been these past days, as you feel the autumn wind caressing your cheeks? Is there any news from Hughlia?

The private bacon vault I constructed is full, so I've been tossing around the idea of making a second one.

It's been a little over a month since I arrived here in the magic city of Dirashik.

I'm finally getting used to school life.

I've made some acquaintances, and I've become friends with dozens of girls. As I get to know all kinds of women and acquire all sorts of new experiences, I continue to devote myself every day to becoming a gentleman worthy of your favor.

From here on out, my study of magic will begin in earnest.

It seems I won't be able to take a long enough vacation to return to Hughlia, so I fear it will be several years until I can see you again.

I'll write to you. Over and over again.

Please don't forget about me. I will never forget you, not even for a day.

I hear that you have transferred to the knighthood program at the senior school. Is that right, Your Highness?

I should congratulate you. But instead, I am filled with worry.

I'm sure you will train to sharpen your mind and body each day.

You may get hurt.

I want to cheer for your hard work, but I do not wish to see you suffer. Not that I can actually see.

Please, endeavor not to push yourself too hard, for my sake.

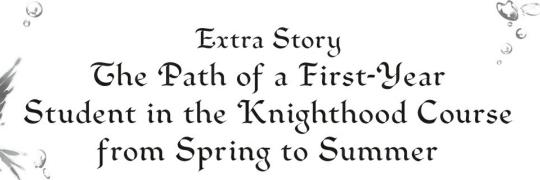
The cold will set in soon. Please take care of yourself.

With eternal love,

Your Kunon Gurion

## **PS**

People at school often tell me I have a mistaken understanding of what it means to be a gentleman. What do you think, Your Highness?



"A lot has happened, huh...?" Mirika muttered, voice heavy.

Though she was finished getting ready for school, for once, Mirika was finding it hard to walk out of her rooms. Specifically, she was finding it hard to get up from her chair.

The cause was a single letter, sitting on the table in front of her. It was from Kunon, who had left for magic school in the spring.

It was almost the end of summer. More than three months had passed since his departure from the Kingdom of Hughlia, and now finally, Mirika had received a letter from him.

How long had she awaited this particular piece of correspondence?

Kunon had said he would write to her once he was settled. Actually, it was Mirika who had persuaded him to wait.

"Until you've gotten used to your new environment, just worry about yourself," she had said, all calm and collected like a mature older girl. She regretted it the moment Kunon was gone. Why hadn't she insisted that he write to her as soon as he arrived? She could only blame herself.

But finally, she had received it—a letter from her fiancé.

Just now, however, she couldn't open it, because she was on a schedule. Instead, she simply gazed at it. And for some reason, images of the life she had been living after Kunon left popped into her mind.

Starting in the spring, Mirika had become a first-year in the knighthood course at the senior school for nobles. It was going... Well, it was hard to say it was going smoothly, though it wasn't going badly, either. It was difficult to try to sum up her daily life in a single word.

All she could say for certain was that it had been flying by. Every day came and went in such a rush that she didn't even bother to reflect on them... Or perhaps, to distract from the unease and worry of not hearing from Kunon, she had been throwing herself into everything so hard that she didn't have time to think.

"Yes, a lot has happened."

Standing at Mirika's side was her personal maid, Laura. She, too, sounded a bit emotional.

Many things had occurred in Ninth Princess Mirika Hughlia's life since the spring. In truth, they had started even earlier.

Two years prior, she hadn't made it in time to apply for the knighthood course. Then, one year ago, due to certain circumstances, she had once again been unable to transfer. At last, when the current school year started, she took the transfer exam and secured her spot in the knighthood course.

Amid all that, life had been quite hectic.

"Is Her Highness Lydalia still trying to interfere?" asked Laura.

"It's not so much interference as it is frequent harassment."

Fifth Princess Lydalia, who would be turning seventeen on her next birthday, was Mirika's elder half sister. She was engaged to the son of a certain marquess. But Lydalia was a troublemaker, and behind closed doors, she complained about not liking her fiancé's face or his social status.

"...That hag."

Just hearing Lydalia's name brought her face to Mirika's mind.

"I can hear the bloodlust in your voice, you know," Laura said.

Well, of course. How could she hide it?

The beautiful Princess Lydalia with her ephemeral smile, said to be such a shrinking violet that she couldn't even harm a fly—Mirika couldn't help but loathe her.

This was the same hateful elder sister who, upon hearing from *somewhere* that Kunon Gurion had gained the recognition of the Royal Sorcerers, had planned to do her utmost to steal him away.

It was due to Lydalia's interference that Mirika had been unable to submit her transfer application... Though it had ended up being a valuable year for training herself up, at least.

"Princess Lydalia really knows how to play the game, doesn't she?"

While maintaining the image of a delicate, fragile, beautiful girl, she contained a certain amount of poison within. Though she wasn't kind or obedient, she was clever. Laura thought that kind of disposition was probably necessary for the wife of a high-ranking aristocrat living in the capital.

Lydalia was too late, however. If she had started making moves two years ago instead of one, she might actually have succeeded in stealing Kunon.

"What's this, Laura? Are you taking her side?"

"It's like comparing apples and oranges. What's the point in taking sides?"

On the verge of being married, Lydalia would probably be joining her husband's household and living in the capital as a member of high society.

Mirika, meanwhile, would be retiring to a plot of land somewhere with Kunon and devoting herself to that territory. At least for a few years.

Lydalia was politically savvy... She knew how to wage toxic information wars for her own benefit. Mirika's skill in politics was more modest, but she had strength and grit, as well.

The two girls were fighting battles on completely different fronts. And yet the

outcome had already been decided. Lydalia had missed her chance.

"More importantly, Your Highness, isn't it about time to leave?"

"You're right."

Mirika stood up.

As for Kunon's letter... She would wait to read it until the evening, once everything was over.

"Good morning, Your Highness."

"Good morning. Thank you as always."

Greeting the driver, Mirika climbed into the carriage— "You're late."

—and was met with the complaints of someone already sitting inside.

"I thought you might be here today, Brother."

Waiting in the coach was Sixth Prince Lyle Hughlia, Mirika's elder half brother.

One year her senior at fifteen years old, Lyle had always been something of a big big brother. But in the past few years, he had grown even larger and more robust. His face was a little boyish, but his body already seemed like that of a grown man.

Bad Boy Lyle. Despite being a member of the royal family, he was vulgar, violent, and reckless... A real problem child.

On the surface anyway.

Thinking about it, ever since she started hanging around him, Mirika had—...

*No,* she thought. She didn't regret her choices. She didn't regret anything, but... She *did* have some thoughts about the situation. Things were a little complicated.

"Are you prepared? You are, right?"

As soon as the carriage started moving, Lyle grinned, excited and eager.

"Completely," she said. "Skill aside, no one is more prepared for this than me."

It was the final day of the knighthood course summer exams, and a test would

be held to measure the trainees' ability.

Essentially, it was match day.

There were etiquette tests and written exams, too. But when it came to knights, physical strength was key.

"Well said. That's why you're the vice captain of the Wild Bears of the Crescent Moon."

"Right..."

Even now that he had opened up to her, Mirika still wasn't sure if she'd truly accepted her brother's real identity.

The true Lyle Hughlia was no bad boy—he was an adventurer. Well, during his days at the school for nobles, when he was making a show of being a bad boy, he was still only dreaming of becoming an adventurer. But since then, Lyle had been training as hard as possible to achieve his dream.

The reason he'd cultivated a rotten reputation was because he got more time to himself when people thought he was bad news. If he acted like he didn't want anything to do with anyone, it was easier for him to go without being noticed.

Night after night, with that earned freedom, he would go to the taverns in the low-lying parts of town, listen to the adventurers' stories, and ask them to train him. In that way, at least, he was much like a normal problem child.

Lyle had figured that his position of sixth prince wasn't particularly important, so it didn't matter if he wasn't around. Since arriving at that conclusion when he was small, Lyle had determined to do exactly what he wanted... And that was to become an adventurer and travel freely across different regions and countries.

And about one year ago, he had officially become a real adventurer.

Despite enrolling in the senior school, Lyle's bad boy persona was alive and well, and he frequently skipped classes and went off to who knows where.

It happened one year ago.

Shortly after Mirika failed to transfer into the knighthood course because of her sister's meddling, she received an invitation from her "mean" elder brother.

"If you're going to be training anyway, why not get some experience in an actual fight?"

Lyle was strong. His years spent working toward his dream had made him a master of wild, rough fighting styles. Mirika, who knew nothing except the well-mannered swordplay practiced by knights, had been truly astonished. Her swordplay instructor, Sir Dario Sanz, had also been taken aback by such unconventional fighting methods.

And so Mirika became a member of the Wild Bears of the Crescent Moon, an adventuring troupe that Lyle had formed, so she could learn how to hold her own in a real fight. She never expected that, in no time at all, she would be named vice captain.

Incidentally, some of Lyle's cronies from school were also members of the group.

For a year after that, in the stretches of free time she had between her second-year obligations, Mirika joined Lyle and the others for all kinds of adventurer outings.

As a result, she had gained a rather silly nickname... She was Mirika the Delinquent Princess, who hung around with Bad Boy Lyle and his crew. By the time she realized how her reputation had changed, it was already too late to do anything about it. The notoriety failed to fade even after she transferred into the knighthood course, and it was still going strong.

Mirika had discontinued her adventuring activities since the transfer, partially because she needed her strength and stamina for school. But from Lyle's perspective, at least, Mirika was still one of his comrades. His vice captain, no less.

"The knighthood course seems pretty interesting, actually."

"It would be nice if you joined it, too, Brother."

"No, thanks. That refined kind of swordplay doesn't appeal to me at all."

There were a lot of differences between the fighting styles of knights and adventurers. Though she had only lived the life of an adventurer for one year, Mirika understood well what Lyle meant.

Adventurers risked their lives with every battle. That was precisely why they fought so desperately. To put it bluntly, they fought "dirty." But that was exactly why Lyle and adventurers in general were so strong.

"Listen. You're aiming to win, right? Go show them what the Wild Bears are made of, Vice Captain."

"Yes, yes. I'll do my best."

Mirika had received a letter from Kunon. On match day. It felt, somehow, like a good omen. She was feeling lucky. In any case, it was the motivation she needed.

After proving herself in the exam, when her spirits were high, she would open Kunon's letter. It wasn't until that evening that Mirika discovered her decision not to read it right away had been the right choice.

"Red, Mirika Hughlia!"

"Yes!"

When the teacher acting as duel arbiter called her name, Mirika stepped forward.

The final summer exam was being held on the grounds of the senior school's knighthood department, on a day so fine there was hardly a cloud in sight.

The very last exam on the very last day of the season was a sword fight. Students were sorted according to their grades. Mirika, having earned top marks in the written exam, was going to be pitted against a similarly high-scoring opponent.

"White, Kears Freshim!"

"Yes!"

So, Mirika thought. It's Kears after all.

The Freshim family had produced generation after generation of knights; among the current first-year knighthood students, Kears was easily the strongest. Blessed with a powerful physique, he had honed his exceptionally keen ability from a very young age.

If she was being honest, Mirika knew she didn't stand a chance against him. She had realized that as soon as she saw him in a match. She couldn't remember when that had been, but the stark contrast in skill had been palpable.

If she stuck to an orthodox fighting style, she would never win. So what was she to do?

"Best of luck."

Whether Kears was aware of her status or not, he didn't appear interested in his royal opponent. To him, Mirika was probably just his exam matchup. Mirika had gotten quite strong in her own right, but likely not enough for Kears to take notice.

"To you as well."

They exchanged small pleasantries.

With the rest of the knighthood first-years as their audience, Mirika and Kears readied their wooden practice swords.

To the onlookers, the outcome of their match must have seemed apparent. The participants were the same.

And that, Mirika mused, is exactly why I can win this.

This match was where all the adventuring experience she had acquired with Lyle would come in handy. Demons and magical beasts were almost always stronger than humans. Taking one on required sense, intelligence, and strategy.

Mirika had been thinking—how would she fight an opponent stronger than herself?

"Begin!"

At the arbiter's signal, the two duelists sprang into motion.

Mirika had only one chance—one instant—to win. If she didn't seize it, the imbalance in their ability would undoubtedly lead to her defeat.

"Hng...!"

Kears lunged forward, putting his weight into the movement. It was all Mirika

could do to not buckle beneath the force.

In both size and simple power, Kears was superior. And *that*...was exactly why Mirika would win.

"Wha-?!"

Aware of how much stronger he was than his opponent, Kears had driven in hard...and completely lost his balance.

In anticipation of the summer exams, Mirika had been quietly gathering information about her opponent: his fighting style, his tendencies, his modes of attack, and so on and so forth. She had been watching very closely. If she hadn't, she might never have been able to face off with him in the first place.

If one saw their match as between fellow knights in training, the outcome was clear. But when viewed as a bout between an adventurer and a knight—no one could predict how it would end.

"...Match!"

Pitched forward, Kears landed shamefully on his hands and knees. As he turned around, he was shocked to find the tip of a wooden sword pointing at his face and to hear himself declared the loser.

The moment Kears had lunged, Mirika had shot out, throwing herself at Kears's outstretched leg.

The difference in their size was undeniable, and she had no hope of competing with the full force of his strength. But if it was a competition against just one of her opponent's legs... Then even Mirika stood a chance.

And Kears, his leg swept out from under him, was sent toppling to the ground.

In short, Mirika tackled his leg, and Kears collapsed. It was an imprecise surprise attack unworthy of a knight, and he had charged right into it.

"...Yes!"

Mirika had won, as she'd expected.

It would probably be called a miracle and a massive upset, but as far as Mirika was concerned, everything had gone exactly to plan.

The striking difference in their size and ability made it a victory worthy of applause. But the crowd's reaction to Mirika was shouting and jeering.

...That was also just as expected.

After all, Mirika was the roundly hated and shunned Delinquent Princess, and she had defeated Kears Freshim—who was considered the exemplar of that year's knighthood trainees. And she'd used tactics unbefitting of a knight to do it. Students with serious aspirations of knighthood were bound to have a hard time accepting such a result.

Mirika exchanged bows with a dazed Kears—likely still processing his loss—and strode cheerfully from the grounds.

Delinquent Princess—recently, Mirika had started to feel like it wasn't such a bad nickname. Especially not if it meant she could choose to be a victorious knight over a conventional one.

Riding the high of defeating a superior opponent, Mirika returned to her rooms at the castle in a great mood.

"Well done! As expected, Vice Captain!"

Lyle, who had been watching the match from somewhere, praised her in the carriage home.

"Congratulations, Your Highness."

Hearing her swordplay teacher Dario's praise boosted Mirika's spirits even more.

Well, there was no harm in indulging that celebratory feeling. She had won, after all. Plus, there was a letter from her fiancé waiting for her.

Mirika completed her training, took a bath, and ate dinner with a lightness in her chest. And once her daily rituals were all finished, finally, at long last, the wait was over.

She was ready to open Kunon's letter.

"'To my beloved fiancée,' it says."

Open letter in hand, Mirika giggled.

The fourteen-year-old girl had matured so much lately, but right then, her innocent smile was the same one she had worn when she was younger.

Laura, who had ever so gradually been changing her own behavior to handle her growing charge, was warmed by the sight of her lady's childlike face, which she hadn't seen in some time.

"Kunon is just as fond of bacon as ever..."

It was his favorite food. Laura could remember traveling incognito into town with Mirika to order the highest-quality bacon they could find in time for Kunon's birthday.

"Kunon left on his journey, got settled, and started his life at school... Three months have gone by already..."

It had all passed in the blink of an eye.

But, Laura thought, these three months without Kunon had turned Mirika into an adult, even though she had hated it. If she had remained a child, she would have found his absence unbearable.

"He says he made some acquaintances. You know he told me before that he doesn't have any friends."

Kunon had been very withdrawn as a young boy, so that was unavoidable.

"'I've also become friends with...' Huh?"

That was when Laura's time peacefully listening along came to an end.

"'And I've become...friends with...d-dozens...? Of girls...?"

Was that anger? Jealousy? Something else?

Whatever it was, Mirika was trembling with it as Laura peered over her shoulder to get a look at the letter.

Ah. I see.

Laura nodded. The words Mirika had uttered were indeed written on the page.

And I've become friends with dozens of girls. There it was, plain as day.

Considering Kunon's personality, it didn't seem unlikely.

"It's all right, Your Highness."

"'All right'?! How could this be 'all right'?!"

To Mirika, a girl desperately devoting herself to the path of knighthood in order to marry Kunon...anything less than absolute faithfulness would be unacceptable.

But even if that wasn't the case, if Kunon were to make Mirika sad, Laura, too, would never forgive him.

"It *is* all right," she said. "If he's comfortable with writing to you about such relationships, it means he doesn't have a guilty conscience about them."

"Are you sure?!"

"Yes. It's a bad sign when a man starts acting affectionate out of nowhere, but this letter is nothing but Master Kunon being himself."

Though Mirika was held captive by the one sentence that had caused her alarm, Laura had read on ahead.

Everything was fine. It was a letter overflowing with love for Mirika.

"...Dozens...of female friends, huh...?"

When she was finished reading the letter, Mirika sat muttering to herself, sullen. Her expression was back to being all grown-up, with not a trace of childishness left behind.

Dozens of female friends.

How could such a statement not make her anxious?

"...I'm glad I didn't read it this morning."

If she had faced the summer exam in this mental state, she probably couldn't have given it her all.

Maybe she could *casually* write something in her reply like, "So what kind of people are these female friends of yours?"

Then again, no. She was too afraid of the answer. It was a topic she would

simply have to avoid.

Mirika wrote her response to Kunon in a haze of distress. As her pen moved over the paper, she took great care not to let the bitter aftertaste from Kunon's letter seep into any of her words.



Hello, nice to meet you! And simply hello to those I've met before. My name is Umikaze Minamino.

This is Volume 2. Some of you may doubt that and wonder if this is Volume 3, or perhaps even Volume 1.5, but fear not. This is definitely Volume 2. Feel free to bring it to the cash register.

Because of the number of pages in the main story this time, there isn't room for me to write a lot here. Well, it's not like anyone wants to read the author's idle chatter anyway, so I thought it was probably fine, but then I felt like it was kinda lonely that way, so I decided to try to cram as much pointless blathering into this section as I could, only I don't have the space for pointless blathering and if I try to force it my lack of skill as a writer will be exposed, so it seems like it's for the best to keep this part short after all.

Thank you once again to Laruha, the illustrator, for the beautiful artwork.

The manga version of this story, by La-na, has started appearing in *Monthly Comic Alive*. It's a different kind of fun than the novel, and I'm sure it'll grab your attention! Please check it out!

To O, who dealt with missed deadlines caused by my mistakes, I'm sorry for being a bother.

And to all the readers who have supported me, thank you so much.

Well then, everyone! I hope we meet again in Volume 3!

## Thank you for buying this ebook, published by Yen On.

To get news about the latest manga, graphic novels, and light novels from Yen Press, along with special offers and exclusive content, sign up for the Yen Press newsletter.

Sign Up

Or visit us at www.yenpress.com/booklink