

# Kunon Sorcerer Sorcerer See

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Illustration by Laruha



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#### **UMIKAZE MINAMINO**

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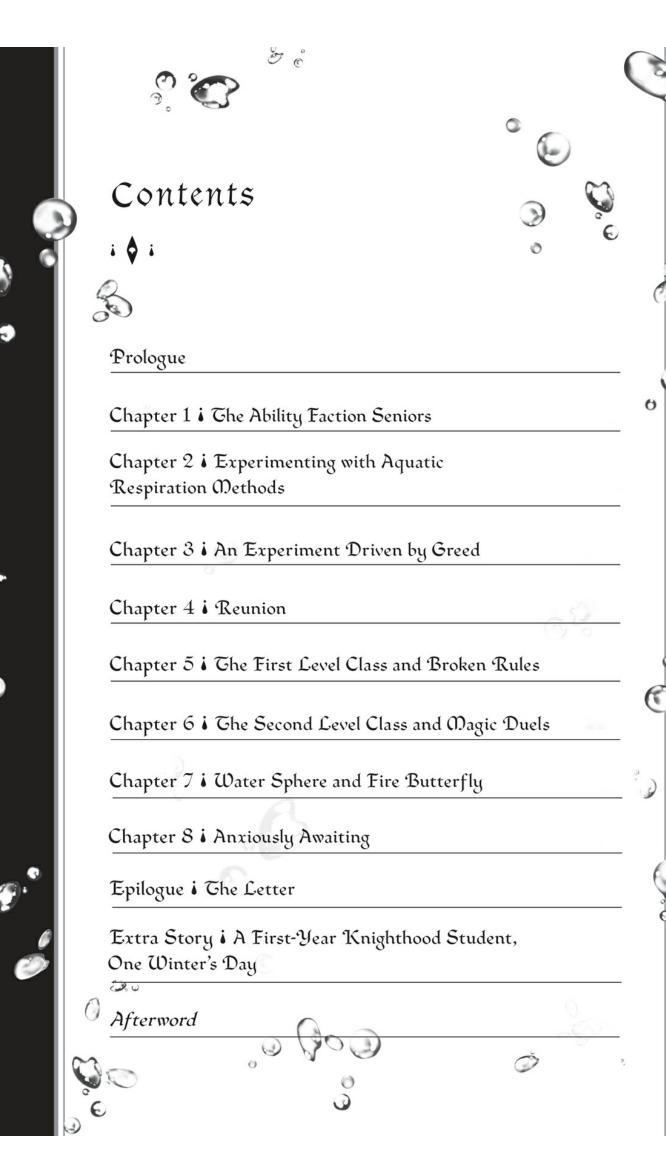
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### **Prologue**

Receiving a summons from a teacher had set his nerves on edge.

He was in a tidy room. A nearby shelf held various documents and books with spines that revealed nothing about their contents. He could see some unfamiliar equipment for experiments as well. He wondered if it had anything to do with magic.

"Sorry for calling you here," said the teacher.

"It's no problem."

The teacher sat at his desk, regarding the student standing in front of him.

It was an uncomfortable position for a student, especially considering the teacher in question was someone he didn't really know.

"You're Gioelion F'louvain Arcion, yes?" asked Professor Soff Cricket.

Gioelion had come to Soff's office after receiving the unexpected summons. He didn't know a lot about the professor. He had only seen him around school a few times, and they had never spoken before.

"Oh, I hope you don't mind me dropping the formalities," Soff continued.

"Not at all. I'm just another student here."

That was why Gioelion, too, could speak casually. He would never have gotten away with using a vulgar contraction like "I'm" if he were on official business.

"I see. To be honest, we have a surprising number of students who come from royalty, and I try to be careful the first time I speak with them."

"Is that so?"

At magic school, social status and political power were supposed to be left at the door. It was a kind of unspoken agreement, though some students tended to forget that—something Gioelion knew all too well. "What did you need from me, Professor Soff?"

Gioelion was busy. He was done with classes for the day, but he had to get home quickly to tackle the next item on his itinerary.

"There are a few things I want to ask you. Though you seem like you're in a rush, so I won't keep you long. Oh, by the way, I have Professor Shika's approval for this. She knows I called you here."

"Is that so?"

Shika Shultron was in charge of Second Level students with the fire attribute —in other words, she was Gioelion's teacher.

"What do you think of the current Second Level class?"

"What do you mean?"

"Don't play innocent. Someone in your position must have done at least *some* reconnaissance, right?"

Soff's tone and expression were both amicable, but it was clear he wasn't going to tolerate denial. Essentially, he was saying "Let's not waste each other's time here."

"...I don't know the particulars, but it seems the Empire's people are throwing their weight around quite a bit."

Gioelion was referring to students from the Arcion Empire. Tactless as it was, they were wielding their status and power within the school, exactly where they shouldn't. Evidently, they were even engaging in unseemly behavior, such as intimidating and bullying other students. There hadn't been any big incidents so far, but that didn't mean there were no victims.

It was true, however, that Gioelion didn't know the details. He never participated, and nothing had ever happened while he was around.

"I see. It appears the presence of their imperial prince has emboldened them."

"It has nothing to do with me."

That was true, even if Gioelion had unwittingly become the poster boy for

their cause. People might blame him for their behavior, but he wasn't involved, so there was nothing he could do about it. Even on his best days, his schedule was packed; the time he had to study magic was already limited. He had no desire to get caught up in other people's affairs.

"Professor, I haven't done anything. I'm here as a regular student, and that's how I've conducted myself ever since I arrived. I haven't caused any trouble or gotten into any fights. Are you going to pin the blame on me for something I didn't do? I think that's unreasonable and undeserved."

What if Soff were to respond, "You're the imperial prince of the Arcion Empire, so I'm afraid this is your problem"? Then what? In effect, he would be acknowledging that social status and political power did matter at the Dirashik School of Magic.

Please, Gioelion thought. Don't disappoint me like that.

The last thing he wanted was for one of the magic school's teachers to express such a sentiment. He truly hoped this was a place where anyone who wished to learn could do so, regardless of their position in society. Wasn't this land the home of the world's greatest witch—a place with no kings or nobles?

"Well, that's true. I agree with you. You haven't done anything wrong. People are just using your name to do as they please. Incidentally, I assume you don't care about your reputation, right?"

If things continued like this, Gioelion's name would be tarnished. Whether he liked it or not, it was being used as a symbol by those boorish bullies, after all.

"No, I don't. At least as long as I'm attending this school, I'm just a normal student, not the Arcion Empire's prince."

"Got it. Thanks for coming to see me."

Soff gave Gioelion permission to take his leave, though it was unclear whether he'd accepted what the boy had said.

Still, continuing the conversation wasn't going to change anything. That much, at least, was obvious.

"Are you done here?"

Outside Soff's office, Gioelion's guards—Ilhi Bolyle and Garthries Gadanthus—were waiting for him. The question had come from Ilhi.

"Did you do something wrong, Master Gio?" asked Garthries.

"No," responded Gioelion curtly. "He asked me what I knew about the situation, but I had no answers for him."

Gioelion set off, his two guards close behind him.

"It feels like things are starting to get serious," Ilhi grumbled.

Garthries nodded, adding, "And now you've been called out by a teacher."

"Master Gio, should you have put a stop to all this sooner?"

"Don't ask me to do the impossible."

The cocky students in question were members of Arcion's elite. It would be a simple matter for Gioelion to use his position to caution the troublemakers, and that might be enough to settle the matter for a little while.

But the very act of wielding his authority could lead to greater trouble down the road. Once he graduated, he would return to the Empire. Thinking about what would happen then was positively exhausting. He had no desire to make political enemies in a place like this.

And more than that, what would it mean for him to rely on his position here at school?

If he did it, other royals and nobles might start openly using *their* authority. They might start thinking it was fine, since the second imperial prince of the Arcion Empire had done it first. He would become their justification.

Solving this problem was likely to cause even bigger problems down the line. Gioelion felt certain that acting rashly was not the answer. He couldn't afford to start something like that, even if it cost him his reputation. With this sort of thing, if he botched his first move, the problem would only become intractable.

"...Haah."

Gioelion let a small sigh escape.

He was supposed to be here to study magic—and yet it seemed like he was

still spending all his time mixed up in politics.

When he first enrolled, he'd thought he would be able to spend several years devoting himself to his beloved magic without any distractions. But even at magic school, he couldn't escape the specter of social status and political power.

How utterly tiresome it all was.

"Oh, by the way, Master Gio."

Sensing his sullen mood, Ilhi spoke with as much cheerfulness as she could muster. "I've got something new to report about that Advanced class student, Kunon."

"Really?"

Lately, Gioelion was especially fond of hearing about a certain underclassman he still hadn't had the chance to meet—a first-year student in the Advanced class named Kunon Gurion.

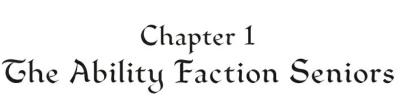
Gioelion couldn't remember when he had first learned of the boy, but he thought Kunon sounded like something of a kindred spirit. He'd been curious about him ever since.

If only he hadn't been born a prince of the Arcion Empire. If only he could have joined the Advanced class and spent every day absorbed in magic, free to act as he pleased, like Kunon.

He saw all those impossible dreams in a junior he hadn't even spoken to.

The Inferno Prince Gioelion's meeting with Kunon would have to wait a little while longer, however.







Kunon looked up—not that he could see what he was looking at.

"Incredible."

He had thought as much on his first visit, but it truly was a splendid sight.

The old castle that served as the Ability Faction's base was as majestic as ever. It was large, with a stonework exterior, and though on the smaller side for a castle, it was still quite impressive. Rustic and without affectation, it had the look of a border fortress from some war-torn era.

Kunon hadn't been able to adequately take in the castle last time, as he had been escorted there by ten fairies (in reality, furious women).

Of course, Kunon had been to the royal palace of his homeland, Hughlia, once before. But unfortunately, as he had yet to acquire the Glass Eye, he hadn't been able to see it.

A castle—what a truly thrilling thing to behold.

Kunon was on his way to visit the Ability Faction's representative, Bael Kirkington. Now that he'd completed the first stage of his money-making plan

with the Saint, he finally had some room in his schedule. He figured it was about time he found a project that would earn him credits and had come to discuss the matter.

"Boys sure do love castles, don't they?"

Kunon heard footsteps approaching not too far behind him.

"Is that what the statistics say? Well, I wouldn't be able to see them regardless." Kunon looked over his shoulder. "Is that you, Miss Elia?"

"Yep. The same Elia you soaked to the skin in the blink of an eye during our duel."

She was also the girl who had come to recruit Kunon into the Ability Faction.

When the factions were fighting over who would get Kunon, Elia had been among the people he dueled with. Incidentally, the Crimson Rain he'd used during that battle was designed to disappear once the spell was called off. That was why Elia and the other seniors had struggled to investigate the magic used —the sticky water had vanished without a trace.

"You were so cute all soaking wet like that, Miss Elia."

"Even though you couldn't see me?"

"Some things are obvious even when we can't see them. Of course, you're lovely dry, too, like now. So lovely, I want to drench you all over again."

"Ah-ha-ha. Don't even think about it."

Kunon could make a person soaking wet or bone-dry at will. But people didn't typically want to get wet without a reason, and Elia was no exception.

With Elia acting as his guide after their chance encounter, Kunon entered the old castle.

"You were granted permission to join multiple factions," she said, "so feel free to come and go as you please."

"I'll do so next time," Kunon replied, though he hadn't exactly been standing motionless outside the castle waiting for permission to enter.

"So what brings you here today? Some kind of errand?"

"I came to see you, Miss Elia, naturally. Have you had lunch already? I have, though I would love to spend my post-meal teatime with you."

"What a gracious invitation. Now what's the real reason?"

"Is Representative Bael here?"

"Ahhh... I'm not sure. Maybe."

Elia led Kunon to the same large dining hall he had been escorted to on his previous visit. At the time, the hall had been filled with people from various factions, but on this occasion, the scenery was a little more normal. A number of Ability Faction sorcerers sat together, engaging in friendly conversation over their food.

"Ah!"

Upon catching sight of Kunon, one of the sorcerers stopped mid-conversation and made a noise of surprise. It was Cassis.

"Good afternoon, Miss Cassis," Kunon greeted her.

He hadn't expected to run into Cassis here, as he was fairly certain she was a member of the Rationality Faction. Encountering someone he had accidentally made cry was a bit awkward, but it wasn't as though Kunon could pretend she wasn't there.

"Hmph! Would you mind leaving me alone?!"

Cassis didn't like him. She had told him herself that she held grudges, and it seemed her grudge against Kunon was very firmly rooted.

"Wasn't Miss Cassis in a different faction?" Kunon asked, directing the question at Elia.

"Anyone is allowed up to this point," she replied.

The hall was considered a public space that anybody could use.

"Hey, has anyone seen Ability's representative?" Elia asked the people in the hall. Someone replied that Bael had been present until a short while ago, when he returned to his room. "What do you want to do, Kunon? Call him out here or go to his room?"

She was indirectly asking Kunon about the nature of his visit. Was it something he could talk about with other people around? Or did he need to speak to Bael privately?

"May I go to his room?" Kunon replied, understanding the unspoken inquiry.

Showing him the way once more, Elia led Kunon even farther into the castle's depths.

"It seems a sorcerer's laboratory always winds up like this, huh?" Kunon said.

When he arrived at Bael's room in the old castle, he was welcomed warmly inside.

The space was in total disarray, just like Kunon's had been until recently, prompting his comment. Books and documents were piled high on the floor and tables. There was also some lab equipment Kunon had never seen before collecting dust in one corner of the room. Bael appeared to be growing plants, too; several pots sat lined up along one wall. From one pot bloomed a bright-red, poisonous-looking flower that was quite striking.

"Ugh. Could you please clean up a bit in here?" said Elia.

"Ha-ha... Sorry."

Bael abandoned his book at Elia's scolding and stood from his desk with a wry smile. She had already begun to tidy up whatever was within reach.

"Kunon," he said. "Thanks for stopping by. Glad to see you."

"Thank you very much. I'm sorry for showing up without notice. Would it have been better to contact you first?"

"Probably. I don't need a formal announcement or anything, but there will be times when I'm not here. If you want to be sure not to miss me, send a message beforehand. I don't think either of us has a lot of free time."

Quite right, thought Kunon.

"So, what's up? Was there something you wanted to talk about?"

"Yes. Since I'm lucky enough to be a member of the factions, I thought I should take advantage of having my seniors at my disposal."

"I see. Well, take a seat."

Kunon wondered where, exactly, he was supposed to sit. A table and chairs had, at some point, been set up for visitors, but they were so subsumed in stacks of books and papers that he hadn't noticed them at first.

Moving books off one of the chairs, Kunon sat across from Bael, who had already taken a seat.

"Being at your disposal is a bit frightening. What do you plan to ask of me?"
"....."

At that point, Kunon's attention shifted to Elia, who was still in the room. But Bael assured him there was no need to worry.

"The people I let in here won't go blabbing that easily," he said. "Though if it bothers you, I can ask her to step outside."

"No. If that's the case, I don't mind."

Kunon wasn't particularly concerned that Elia would leak any secret information. For one thing, there wasn't much to leak yet at this stage. Rather, he was worried that Elia might take an interest in the idea and ask to help, even if she wouldn't be compensated.

Kunon's master had told him that many sorcerers acted out of their own interest, curiosity, and self-satisfaction, and Kunon felt he was right. He was himself a rather typical sorcerer in that respect. And so he was hesitant to speak, partly because he didn't want to drag Elia in and end up wasting her time.

*"…"* 

But Elia was looking at the two boys expectantly, as if to say, "I'm super interested in this conversation," so Kunon decided to simply get on with it.

"Would you like to develop magic tools with me?" he asked.

"Oh, does this involve magical engineering knowledge you acquired from Zeonly? I'm interested, but my magic isn't as good as your teacher's."

"That's fine. I'll give you detailed instructions. At the moment, I just need a

talented earth sorcerer to collaborate with."

Kunon had heard from some of his Sleep Sanctuary customers that Bael was a three-star earth magic user. There was no way to conceal one's attribute at magic school, and many people knew Bael's. Nevertheless, the identity of the metal lump that followed Bael around remained a mystery.

"What do you want to build? I can't give you an answer until I know."

In response to the perfectly reasonable question, Kunon held up three fingers.

"I have three magic tools in mind. Two of them would be similar in nature, so I'm thinking they could be developed simultaneously. The first is a small box that removes moisture from any objects put inside. The second is another small box that hermetically seals objects put inside. The reason is—"

Kunon told him about the business deal for shi-shilla capsules that he had recently concluded. He wasn't sworn to secrecy on the matter, so it was fine for him to talk about it.

"Oh-ho, I see. Simply put, you want to make a container to transport salve made from shi-shilla plants."

Salve made from the shi-shilla herb was delicate, and one had to be very careful when carrying it. Its shelf life would quickly shorten if it was exposed to moisture or excessive temperature fluctuation.

Kunon planned to put his medicine on the market soon. He was sure it would start selling like hotcakes in no time. After all, it could be the difference between life and death for an adventurer. Whether or not they had any with them was bound to have a big effect on their state of mind.

And if adventurers were going to be carrying the medicine, a container for transporting it would also fly off the shelves. That was what Kunon thought, at least.

"Adventurers travel to all kinds of places and find themselves in a variety of circumstances. Sudden rain, attacks from monsters and magical beasts, et cetera. Under those conditions, even regular medicine might be rendered useless. That's why I thought it would be nice if there was a magic tool that could preserve it, no matter what the situation."

Kunon was laying the groundwork for the development of a dual-function box—one that both dehydrated and hermetically sealed what was put in it.

The paper form of the salve, which Kunon intended to start work on, would likely be difficult to store. If it could be dissolved by blood, the same thing would happen with sweat.

Sweaty palms, then, would be a problem. Rain was likely a danger as well. High humidity, too.

There was no point in creating a paper form of the salve if it wasn't portable. It would be meaningless if adventurers had to leave it behind in a safe storage area. In that case, the product would have no advantage over the shi-shilla capsules.

"Not bad," said Bael. "Someone would probably develop it eventually, so we might as well beat them to the punch, right?"

*Exactly.* Just as one would expect of a representative of one of the three factions, Bael was quick on the uptake.

"And?"

"Pardon?"

"What about the third one?" asked Bael. "You've only mentioned the first two so far. What's the last thing you want to make?"

Kunon smiled. He had intended to keep quiet about it unless asked. The third item was still only a vague idea, after all.

"To be honest, I don't know if it will even be possible. The other two should be fairly simple in comparison."

After all, an object with similar properties already existed—a food storage box. Kunon had even made his own vault to keep bacon in.

By adapting the same technique, he estimated that creating a sealed storage container for this purpose, and then modifying it to be smaller, would be relatively simple.

"That's the way it goes with magic tools. Why not tell me anyway? It's the one you want to build the most, isn't it?"

Bael was spot-on. As far as Kunon was concerned, attempting to do something he wasn't sure could be done was a more worthwhile challenge than doing something he knew he could accomplish with a bit of effort. If he managed it, he could even brag to his master. The only problem was that he truly couldn't say if it was possible or not.

"The third tool is a box that can hold magic."

"...What?"

"A box that can store just one spell. It would let you retrieve the spell and use it whenever you want."

Such a box would change the world of magic. If it could be done, of course.

Bael thought about this third idea of Kunon's.

"...I see," he said. "I don't fully understand, but I'm very interested."

Bael also realized now why Kunon hadn't been as forthcoming about it.

The idea itself was difficult to understand. It couldn't be explained succinctly and was likely to lose the listener.

Nevertheless...

"Taking your words at face value, I'm incredibly intrigued."

Boxes contained things. Kunon, then, had conceived of *magic* being just another "thing" a box might contain. It was unconventional and extraordinary, the kind of idea that would have been scorned or ignored in years past. "Avantgarde" was a good way to describe it; or perhaps "eccentric in the extreme." But these days, such a notion couldn't simply be dismissed.

The magical world was constantly evolving. No one knew what sort of technology would be invented next, nor who would be responsible for its creation. It could be anything—maybe even this wild idea from the young student now sitting across from him.

How fascinating. It had been far too long since Bael felt his heart race with excitement over magic.

"So how would that work in practice?" he asked. "Do you have any plans?"

"I have some vague ideas. But I haven't tested anything yet, so I can't really say."

Some vague ideas. The fact that Kunon had *any* ideas at all was amazing. Bael certainly had none. He couldn't even imagine such a thing.

"I see. That sounds rather thrilling, doesn't it?"

"Yes. When it comes to magic and magic tools, brushing up against the unknown always excites me. Even when the magical attribute is different than my own. I find it so interesting."

Bael had thought Kunon was something of a problem child—but perhaps their core values were more in line than he'd realized. It was common for sorcerers to be a bit difficult. Two sorcerers might work together as colleagues but get along terribly, for instance. In that moment, for the first time, Bael felt he might be able to get along with Kunon Gurion. As long as they agreed on the fundamentals, they probably wouldn't run into any major disagreements.

"I feel the same," said Bael. "Don't you, Elia?"

"I'd rather we get back to talking about this magic tool. A box that contains magic? I want to hear all the details, please."

It seemed Elia's thoughts were still stuck on the previous topic. Bael could empathize. What sorcerer wouldn't be interested? And yet...

"That subject is off-limits now. We shouldn't ask any more about it."

"What?! What are you talking about, Bael?!"

Elia's voice was full of reproach, but Bael shook his head.

"I don't like it, either. If I weren't the representative, I might even abandon the faction to join such a project. As far as the first and second magic tools are concerned, I'm in. Please allow me to help. I think we can make them work. But I'm afraid the Ability Faction isn't a good fit for developing the third tool."

Bael truly wished that wasn't the case.

A box one could fill with magic.

A box that could store magic.

A box that could save that magic up for later.

Of course he was interested. Just hearing the concept had gotten his imagination whirring. But as the representative of the Ability Faction, he couldn't take on such a project.

"Too many of us are incapable of cooperating in large numbers. We form weak partnerships by nature. That's why we were founded on the idea of developing our skills individually and of only occasionally helping one another out along the way. That's our internal dynamic. I'm sure you recall, Elia, how countless times in the past, collaborative experiments and group development projects have nearly resulted in our faction imploding. There's ample documentation attesting to it. We each have impressive abilities, but precisely because of those abilities, we also have a lot of pride. Many of us won't be satisfied unless we get to do things exactly the way we want."

Sounds familiar, Kunon thought emphatically.

His master was exactly the same way. Zeonly had supposedly been so brilliant, others simply couldn't keep up with him. Kunon had taken such talk with a grain of salt at first, but the more he experienced Zeonly's abilities firsthand, the more he came to believe it was true.

It was all right if you had a small group, where members could complain directly to one another. They could meet halfway, even if they disagreed.

That was how things went with Kunon and Zeonly. They had clashed—and even fought—more times than he could count. Each time, they had reconciled their points of view and arrived at a solution together.

But it became impossible to stay on the same page when too many people got involved. Egos and idiosyncrasies got in the way. As a result, disagreements turned personal.

"Would you suggest I bring this idea to the Harmony Faction?"

If Kunon remembered correctly, the Harmony Faction was known for conducting large group experiments.

He didn't know how many people or how much time he would need, but he expected it would drag on too long with an inadequate number of

collaborators. A team of five, at least, would be good. That was a safe number to start with, he thought, even if they had to bring more people in later.

There was a lot to do—gathering the necessary equipment and materials, and conducting the actual experiment, for starters. While it was running, they would also need to perform minute checks and investigate all manner of things.

Progress would be slow if they lacked manpower, and time was a limited resource. That was especially true for Kunon, who couldn't stay at the school indefinitely. Someday, he would graduate and have to return to his own country to fulfill his familial duties.

"Yes, I think that would be wise," said Bael. "Shilto will be able to organize everyone, and the members of Harmony like doing things in groups."

Shilto, the Harmony Faction representative, was a very dependable young woman.

"That said, Kunon... This is just my personal recommendation, but would you mind waiting on that project for half a year?"

"Half a year? Why?"

Developing the magic-containing box was what Kunon wanted to do most at present. He would begin immediately if he could. Time was precious. What was the point in putting things off? He had no idea why Bael was asking him to wait, but that changed with what Bael said next.

"Because that project will throw off the credits of anyone who helps you. It will throw yours off, too. You haven't forgotten about credits, right? An endeavor like that is going to take up a ton of time."

Kunon made an inarticulate noise in reply. Bael was right—he needed credits.

"In other words, I should earn all the credits I need in those six months, then start development afterward."

"Exactly. I went through the same thing my first year at magic school. I got so caught up in magic and experiments that I almost got dropped down to Second Level for insufficient credits."

Kunon considered this.

It seemed likely he would repeat his senior's mistake. Because he couldn't see the world around him, Kunon had a poor sense of time. It wasn't uncommon for an entire day or two to pass without his realizing it.

He loved running experiments and tests and building new magic tools. If he let himself get caught up in such things, a year could fly by in no time at all.

"Do you understand? You have this much freedom—complete access to the library and other facilities, the right to conduct any experiment you want—because you're in the Advanced class. Even the teachers are more flexible and accommodating. That all goes away if you get put in Second Level. And that idea of yours is likely to bring in a bunch of other people. Even I want to help out... In fact, if you get into a tough spot, let me know. I can't help being interested. You see? Anyway, a bunch of people are bound to end up short on credits and run into trouble. A lot of us have one-track minds, after all."

Kunon had overlooked the question of credits. Or rather, he was well aware he needed them, but since he had only been a student for two months so far, credits were still low on his list of priorities, and he had yet to get a good grasp on how they worked.

He hadn't yet gotten in trouble for having too few or had to face being dropped from the Advanced class, so he only vaguely understood credits as something he would eventually need at some point in the future.

But now someone with more experience was telling him that it was imperative to focus on credits first.

"Is half a year enough time? We need ten credits to progress, right?"

According to Kunon's calculations, he expected to earn about one credit per month. He would probably be able to earn one for his work with the sacred herb, but that still left nine more to go.

"Definitely. I mean, the school's current record holder for shortest time taken to earn all ten credits is *your teacher*."

"Master Zeonly?"

"Yep, Zeonly. I believe he was in his third year. He somehow managed to earn ten credits in a month and a half."

A month and a half.

At a point when Kunon had hardly even earned one credit, a young Zeonly had already secured his Advanced class status for the following year.

"My master sure is amazing."

"There are tons of stories like that about him. It's been some years since he graduated, so I doubt any of the students from that time are left, but he's still a big name around here."

Putting Zeonly aside for now, Kunon continued. "Understood. I'll get to work on the project after I earn my credits, as you recommended." He would have to deviate a bit from his plans, but there was nothing he could do about it. He had to adhere to school policy. "I think it'll take me about three months."

Half a year was far too long. He'd already made up his mind. He would get all the credits he needed for the year in two to three months.

"You don't sound like you're joking," Bael said.

Naturally, Kunon thought. Because I'm not.

"Fine, then. I'll get mine quickly, too, so you have to let me help. Reserve a spot for me, okay?"

An earth sorcerer would be essential to the plan, so Kunon saw no reason to refuse.

With Representative Bael participating, things looked promising.

"Ugh, I'm so curious! What would a box containing magic even be like?! Come on!"

Elia was in agony. It was just as Kunon had thought—she should have stayed out of it from the beginning.

"Well, I suppose we should start right away," said Bael, getting the ball rolling.

Kunon nodded. They had discussed everything that needed to be addressed and determined the matter at hand was their current priority.

The box that could store magic would have to wait until after they'd earned their credits. Right now, they would focus on developing the small box that

removed moisture from any objects put inside, and the one that hermetically sealed them.

"Where should we set up our workspace?" asked Kunon.

"I'd like to say we can do it here," said Bael, "but there just isn't enough room."

The clutter did seem to present a problem.

"There are some vacant rooms in the castle, though, so I'm sure we can find a spot. But what about your business? Is it okay for you to be away from it for a while?"

"Yes. When I'm not there, customers can use the facility as they like for a reduced price."

Besides, the main source of income from Kunon's sleep business wasn't what he earned in the rented-out classroom.

Kunon was a traveling salesman who provided sleep for wealthy teachers and a few students, when called upon. There were sorcerers who couldn't afford to take time away from their research...and others who were being closely watched so they wouldn't dodge a deadline. Some were practically kept under house arrest due to their habit of shirking responsibility.

When such people were in dire straits, needing to sleep then and there to avoid collapse—or worse, death—they called Kunon. After a short rest, they could get right back to business—or else be put right back to work like draft horses. Quality sleep was essential for such sorcerers, even if it cost a hefty sum.

As long as Kunon left an obvious note regarding his whereabouts in his laboratory, those customers' errand runners would come to find him.

"Good," Bael replied. "Oh right, is it okay if I ask Geneve to join us? Making magic tools is his specialty. He'll be a huge help."

Genevis was a senior in the Ability Faction.

"That's fine. Time is precious, so let's work quickly."

There'd be less individual profit with more people involved, but Kunon was

more concerned with speed. The faster they completed their work, the sooner he could move on to his next project.

Incidentally, Genevis's magical attribute seemed to be of the rare "foul" variety. He was the only person Kunon had met whose accompanying thing seen through the Glass Eye was humanoid, which made him quite an unusual case.

"Me too! I want to help, too!" Elia raised her hand. Kunon had expected she would.

"You're a wind user, though...," said Bael. "I don't think we'll need wind magic for these tools."

"Huh?"

The accepted opinion among sorcerers was that wind and fire were not suitable attributes when it came to manufacturing something. Incidentally, there was no consensus on the usefulness of light, dark, and foul magic, as there wasn't enough data about them to analyze.

"What do you think, Kunon?! You don't mind if I help, do you?!"

"That's playing dirty, Elia," said Bael.

With only the three of them present, Elia was trying to use Kunon's partiality toward women to win his approval. As far as Kunon was concerned, there was no other option but to agree with a woman's proposal.

"I would love to welcome you into the fold, but Bael says no, so..."

"What?"

Kunon's reply, however, was not what Elia expected. Why wasn't he inviting her into the team with open arms?

I know why, Bael thought.

Though every other word out of Kunon's mouth was about girls, he was a true sorcerer at his core. If forced to choose between magic and women, Kunon would opt for the former. People might be fooled by his usual behavior, but if you delved deeper, you would run into his real values.

That was another thing Kunon had in common with Bael.

"But I'm so curious! You want me to wait for months without knowing anything?! Come on, I wanna hear!"

Elia was usually calm and acted like any other girl—but she was a sorcerer, too, after all. Her demeanor was bound to change when there was interesting magic involved.

"Hey, don't put your junior on the spot like that." Bael smiled wryly, but Elia snapped back at him with something rather unexpected.

"I've been waiting on *you* this whole time, too, Bael! I don't need any more things to wait on!"

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"...Huh?"
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"...Idiot!"

Elia strode out of the room.

*"…"* 

*""* 

An indescribable quiet was left in her wake.

Elia's statement had made her feelings quite clear. Sitting there in the silence, Kunon felt his heart beat a little faster.

Was this the power of femininity that Iko always used to talk about? No matter how much she told him, Kunon had never fully understood. But just now, he had gotten a potent dose of the opposite sex—that special kind of violence that moved the hearts of men. A woman's strength, the power of femininity. That had to be what it was.

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"...What's with her? She called me an idiot. Kunon, am I an idiot?"
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"I'm not sure, but I think you probably are."

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"Hey..."
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If Bael was aware of Elia's feelings but ignored them, he was an idiot. If he seriously didn't understand, he was utterly stupid. And if Bael could remain unaffected despite that blast of feminine power that even Kunon had felt, the

very fact of his manhood was in question.

The incident with Elia made things a little awkward, but Kunon's maid had always told him not to stick his nose into other people's love affairs. For the time being, he decided to put the matter out of his mind.

After that, Kunon, Bael, and Genevis began developing containers—"Medicine Boxes," as they called them—to preserve and transport the shi-shilla salve.

They temporarily took over a room in the old castle and got to work.

"Pff, Elia and our representative?" asked Genevis. "As far as I know, they've been like that for two years, and it's rather, pfft, ah-ha-ha... It's rather amusing, isn't it?"

"Are you trying to provoke me?" Kunon shot back.

"Hey, I brought food," said Bael. "Let's eat."

Genevis's quirky laughter remained unchanged, but his knowledge and skills were solid where magic tools were concerned, just as Bael had said.

Genevis and Kunon discussed the matter and settled on a plan of action, then gave detailed instructions to Bael, who was still a novice in magical engineering.

"Wonderful! Kunon, this is really good! Ah-ha, that's what you came up with? What a great idea! It's so novel, ha-ha-ha! What a thought!"

"Are you trying to provoke me?"

"Oh, it's rare for you to be in such a good mood, Geneve," said Bael. "I brought snacks, so let's take a break."

Several days after they began work, the end of the project was already in sight.

Genevis had brought his prior experience with magic tools to the table. And there was Bael, brilliant and rich in magical knowledge, who could understand involved concepts after being introduced to only the basics. With their ample contributions, the group made steady progress toward completion. They were truly the ideal team to develop the Medicine Boxes.

"Your magical attribute is fascinating," Kunon said, addressing Genevis. "This

is the first time I've seen magic that can temporarily alter the structure and properties of a substance."

"It's a rare attribute, so not much is known about it, you see. Heh-heh. I don't feel as though I've mastered it at all. I can only use four spells. If only I could be as free, ah-ha, as you are with magic, Kunon. Ah-ha-ha!"

"Are you trying to provoke me?"

"Elia and the others baked apple tarts," said Bael. "I brought some, so let's rest for a bit."

Thus, the box that removed moisture from its contents and the box that hermetically sealed them were created. Incredibly, it only took five days from start to finish.

Even faster than I expected, Kunon thought.

No matter how many storage compartment templates were already in existence, their pace had been impressive. Bael's and Genevis's help had been instrumental. There was no denying the ability of Kunon's seniors.

In general, magic tools came in two types. The first consisted of single-use items that possessed their own magical properties, like the sacred herb salve. The other type consisted of mechanisms powered by magical energy.

Though the term was usually used to refer to the latter variety, things like the shi-shilla salve were also considered magic tools.

The Medicine Boxes they had developed on this occasion were examples of the latter type. By nature, the boxes wouldn't work unless they were filled with magic power, but as they were small items, the amount of power required was correspondingly slight. They would likely be able to function for one month on a single charge.

Though the raw materials for the boxes were a bit expensive—and likely to result in a high selling price—they provided a sturdily constructed compartment to protect the medicine inside. If one considered them long-term investments, the price probably wouldn't seem all that exorbitant.

In size, the Medicine Boxes were comparable to a cigar case, small enough to

slip into the inside pocket of a jacket. This was a feature they had paid special attention to. They intended for the Medicine Boxes to be completely portable not just for adventurers but also for wealthy people such as aristocrats and royals.

Quite cleverly, while in the process of completing the two magic tools, Kunon had worked independently to create a single container that possessed the traits of both: the Paper-Form Shi-shilla Medicine Box. Though when the three boys got together to celebrate their work, it became clear that his seniors were well aware of what he had done.

While Kunon was spending time in the Ability Faction castle, a letter arrived for him from Professor Sureyya Gaulin. It concerned the number of credits to be awarded for cultivating the shi-shilla herb.

The letter said, "Two credits shall be given."

Policy-wise, a single student report could receive a maximum of three credits, and the sacred herb's cultivation was definitely worth that much. But given that the effort had been collaborative, the number of credits dropped from three to two. Apparently, two was the maximum that could be earned for experiments or research conducted by multiple people, with no exceptions allowed.

Kunon had thought he would receive one credit for that project, but he had actually earned two. And according to Bael, the Medicine Boxes would be worth some credits as well. That meant Kunon now had a total of three or four credits.

"What shall I do next? Ah—I think it's about time to fly, hmm?"

Kunon had already set his sights on his next credit-earning endeavor.



"It's been a while. I keep hearing chatter about you."

Kunon was paying a visit to Soff Cricket, the teacher who had overseen his entrance exam. Soff was sitting at his desk, pen in hand, seemingly in the middle of some paperwork.

Though he didn't know what teachers here usually got up to, Kunon expected they didn't have much free time. They appeared to have a lot on their plates.

"Nice to see you again, Professor Soff. Sorry for the sudden question, but what's your secret to keeping your room so clean?"

Kunon's query was indeed abrupt, but he couldn't help envying the professor's well-organized space. Perhaps his meticulous nature was the reason Soff served as an entrance exam proctor. Kunon had seen Bael's lab firsthand and heard that Genevis's was in a similar state. Quite a few sorcerers—Kunon included—were bad at tidying up.

But Soff's office was different. Not a single document had been left on the floor, nor was the room littered with scraps of paper. There were no strange smells of unknown origin. If anything, there was a faintly pleasant scent in the air.

Kunon really wanted to know how he did it.

"That is quite unexpected... I think it's just in my personality, you know?"

If that was the case, Kunon's question was in vain.

"Don't tell me you came here just to ask that. Oh, are you collecting data for some kind of research?"

"No, I was just curious. My laboratory never stays clean for long."

"You should try to keep it tidy. Sorcerer's labs are full of catalytic agents, potent ingredients, and magic power. You never know what might happen. There could even be some brand-new life-form proliferating unseen in the corners."

"That sounds fascinating."

"Don't even think about it. In the past, a student destroyed an entire school building that way. I guess they accidentally summoned a sea monster or something... It was a slimy, foul-smelling thing no one could identify, and they had their work cut out for them in both dealing with and disposing of it. Don't make the same mistake, okay? Or at least save it for when I'm not around."

Kunon's interest was piqued again, but it was time to get down to business. At this rate, they would do nothing but waste time without even touching on the reason Kunon had come. Truthfully, he would've liked to carry on with the chitchat, but they were both busy people, so he let the matter drop.

"I'd like to earn credit for a practical skill. Could I show it to you?"

Their first conversation in ages had gotten quite offtrack, but Kunon was finally able to get to the point.

"Oh, sure. What's the skill?"

"This room is a bit too cramped for it, so could we go outside? I'm going to fly."

"Oh? Using water magic?"

"Yes."

"Why not? Let's go now."

After agreeing instantly, Soff abandoned his paperwork and stood. He, too, was a sorcerer. There was no way he would pass up the chance to witness a rare bit of magic.

Flying was a wind magic specialty. If Kunon had achieved flight via some other means, it would be a considerable feat.

"Is this why you had Riyah practicing flight, by any chance?" Soff asked as they made their way outside.

"Of course," Kunon replied.

His classmate Riyah Houghs may have thought otherwise, but Kunon hadn't been paying him to collect flight data just to pass the time. Nor had he merely taken a personal interest in helping Riyah acclimate to magic school. That may have been one aspect of Kunon's motivation, but it wasn't the sole reason.

"I simply had Riyah do something that I was planning on doing myself someday," Kunon continued. "He learned how to fly, and I acquired thorough experimental data for a small sum. On top of that, he can earn credits for it. And now so can I. I think it was something of a masterstroke, if I do say so myself."

It sounded efficient on paper, at least.

"And what about the bacon you had Hank make?" Soff asked.

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"That was just for my enjoyment."
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"Yes, Hank's bacon is delicious. I was thinking of offering him some aid and encouraging him to start up a processed meat business. In my opinion, his bacon could easily become world-famous."

"Were you thinking of practical uses for fire magic?"

"Well, that too."

Since coming to magic school, Kunon had learned that fire and wind sorcerers struggled to find employment because their attributes were not suited to production.

What could be achieved in human society through fire or wind? After calmly and thoroughly considering the matter, Kunon realized neither attribute was particularly essential to everyday life. Many others had surely reached the same conclusion.

A majority of fire and wind sorcerers became adventurers, using their particular skills to exterminate monsters. Fire magic worked well in combat, where it quite literally translated into firepower. Wind was versatile, too. It came in handy in many situations, becoming a wind in the sails of its user or a headwind blocking their enemy.

But were such things necessary in a person's day-to-day life? After thinking about it, one of the ideas Kunon came up with was meat processing, which had the added benefit of aligning with his own interests.

"First-rate bacon that only fire sorcerers can make," he said. "It's good, don't you think?"

"I approve. Though I don't know how popular it will be as a line of work, since magic users tend to have a lot of pride. But it sounds like a good choice for one-star fire sorcerers with low magical aptitude, or those who don't like to fight. It would be nice to see them succeed."

<sup>&</sup>quot;Ah, I see."

<sup>&</sup>quot;Oh? Would something like that be worth credits, too?"

<sup>&</sup>quot;That might be difficult... Did it turn out well?"

One-star sorcerers with low magical aptitude were limited to magic that was merely a little handy. Frankly, some were essentially no different from regular people. In Soff's opinion, meat processing was a great employment option for sorcerers like that, who languished in obscurity because they hadn't found ways to apply their skills. Though whether they chose to pursue it was up to them.

Kunon's dream and his number one goal regarding Hank's bacon was for it to become available worldwide. Whatever other fire sorcerers did was secondary. They could work if they wanted to, and if they didn't, that was fine, too.

Luckily, Hank was developing a strong passion for and interest in bacon-making. Kunon wanted him to become even more obsessed with it, start his own business, and eventually become the president of the world's finest bacon company. Kunon was playing a deliberate—at times painful—yet audacious game of chess. He had to make each move slowly and carefully so as to avoid spooking Hank.

"You're scheming, aren't you?" said Soff.

"Yes? Um, I mean no?"

Surprisingly, Kunon was the type whose face hid nothing, though he wasn't aware of that himself.

In any case, as Kunon and Soff conversed eagerly, the two of them stepped outside.

The weather was beautiful and the breeze gentle. A perfect day for flying.

"Can you fly, Professor?" Kunon asked.

"Well, I am a wind user."

The teachers at the Dirashik School of Magic were excellent sorcerers, and the majority of them had graduated from the Advanced class. Any wind sorcerers among them would have learned to fly, at the very least.

"Let me say right now that this idea of yours—flying with water—is quite something," said Soff.

"Is there any precedent for it?"

"There is. I haven't seen it myself, though. I've only heard about it."

"So it's been done."

It would be a bit of a letdown if it hadn't, Kunon thought. He was still only a novice at best. The school's teachers and those who came before him were far, far ahead of him. And that meant there was a wealth of magical skills and knowledge Kunon had yet to learn about.

The thought was thrilling.

"Shall I get started, then?" he asked.

"Please do."

Kunon produced a Supersoft-Body A-ori and lay down on it. Actually, since his upper body was slightly raised, he appeared to be reclining on a deep, squishy sofa. It made him look especially arrogant.

"I was operating under a bit of a misconception," Kunon said. With his body splayed out on it, the A-ori rose gently to float above the ground. "Wind users can fly, but water users can only float and drift. Or at least, that's all I can do at my current stage."

"Hmm. And so? What was your result?"

Whoosh!

Soff stared in amazement.

The A-ori flew off—along with its rider—at a tremendous speed.

After maintaining its low altitude for a while, the sphere suddenly made a steep climb. Just when Soff thought it would disappear into the sky, it dived into a tailspin before once again shooting back into the air.

Kunon was flying around the sky at will—pompously reclining all the while.

"...No way..."

Soff was stunned. He could hardly believe what he was seeing.

The speed was one thing—wind magic could achieve that much. What it couldn't do was produce such a complex, gravity-and inertia-defying flight pattern. Nor could it achieve those sudden stops. Attempting something like that would cause a loss of control and lead to a crash.

In the first place, flight spells were dreadfully difficult to operate. What's more, they were so dangerous, failure could mean death.

That was why sorcerers were left to work out flight on their own once they were decently skilled, instead of being taught by someone else. And yet...

"Touchdown." Still lounging proudly, Kunon returned to the ground. He came to an abrupt stop in front of Soff—a feat impossible for a wind user. "What do you think?"

"...Naturally, I'm fascinated, but..." There were many things Soff could have said, but at the moment, there was only one thing he *wanted* to say. "Do you have to look so arrogant the whole time?"

It was hard to put into words, but the sight of a snobbish little kid reclining on a sofa was quite irritating. If you were going to fly, Soff thought, it was better to do it properly.

Kunon might have been able to perform more complicated feats than could be managed with wind magic, but the way he looked while doing it—like a spoiled prince on his throne, flying around in his spare time—was offensive.

"Huh...? What do you mean?"

But Kunon didn't understand. He had never seen anyone sitting around arrogantly, after all.

"Do you want to try it? I'll take care of the handling."

"...Yeah, okay. If you don't mind."

Professor Soff, as a wind sorcerer, could fly on his own. But the mysterious and complicated flight patterns Kunon had just demonstrated were beyond his capabilities. He was dying to give it a go.

"Oh, but don't make it go upside down. That's terrifying."

Soff hesitated slightly, imagining himself in the tailspin he'd seen Kunon perform. The idea genuinely horrified him. He knew doing a maneuver like that with wind magic would result in a fall. It was one of Soff's less pleasant memories.

"Understood," said Kunon. "I'll cut out the fancy stuff."

Soff switched places with Kunon and lowered himself into the A-ori.

"Oh, lean back a little farther," Kunon warned. "The wind pressure is quite strong when flying. Trying to sit up puts a lot of strain on your lower back and spine."

After adjusting his position as instructed, Soff found himself naturally splayed back in that same arrogant manner.

"I see."

The posture appeared conceited to an onlooker, but it was quite logical when one actually tried it. The entire back side of Soff's body was pressed into the A-ori, which clung to him and ensured he was held in place. If the rider wasn't securely seated, he realized, a sudden stop would send them flying forward. This seating position was a safety measure against that possibility. Not only did it provide ample contact between the water sphere and the body, it was *really comfortable*, too.

It all made sense once Soff experienced it for himself. This exquisite softness was probably the reason Kunon's business was booming.

"Get ready," Kunon announced. "Here we go!"

Whoosh!

Soff soared into the air—pompously reclining all the while.

"It made a lot more sense than I expected," Soff remarked—the first words out of his mouth once he'd returned to the ground.

Just as Kunon had said, the wind exerted a lot of force when you were flying. Sitting up, as it turned out, was more difficult than leaning back in that conceited pose. One's body was naturally forced back by the buffeting wind.

It was an entirely different beast from flying with wind magic. Soff even wondered if it would be easier to lie totally flat. Someone could soar through the air while taking a nap—sleep flying.

Well... He had a feeling the arrogant posture was still preferable, though only just. What was the point of flying if you were asleep?

"I don't quite understand," said Kunon, "but is there something unpleasant

about the way it looks?"

While Soff was flying, Kunon had been thinking about what "looking arrogant" meant. Surely, he thought, his shirt must have come partially undone, exposing his chest during the flight without his knowing and lending him a devilish air. He was now quite anxious over the state of his appearance.



Fortunately, none of his clothes were out of place. This greatly relieved Kunon. He felt he was still too young to be both sexy *and* a gentleman.

"Just a bit," said Soff. "Sitting like that makes you look like a bossy jerk."

"The sitting position... I see. So that's it," Kunon replied, though it still wasn't quite clicking in his mind. He didn't think Soff had any reason to lie about the matter, though, so he decided to simply commit the sentiment to memory. "If the visual is an issue, perhaps it would be better to encase the rider's whole body. That would reduce the force of the wind, too."

"Is that possible?"

"Yes. The problem is a matter of outward appearance, right? All you'd have to do is add color to the water and cover the rider. It could even be made to look like a carriage... Oh, but if it's going to fly, it should be aerodynamic, I suppose. Like a bird's torso or a fish. I imagine that would lessen the wind resistance."

"...Oh-ho."

Soff came to the realization as soon as he heard Kunon's statement—that was the same shape used in wind magic flight. Adopting it came so naturally that he hadn't consciously thought about it.

When one used wind magic to fly, the user went headfirst. This made for a wider field of view. And with wind circulating over the entire body from head to toe, there was no frontal onslaught of air. This created a sort of triangular pyramid with the head as its apex, or perhaps a more streamlined form. Undoubtedly, this shape was excellent for cutting through air or water.

"No need to rush," said Soff. "You can work on improving it bit by bit. So are you going to announce this officially?"

"Ah, that has some impact on the credits, doesn't it?"

Soff was talking about publication. In short, an achievement's evaluation differed depending on whether it was shared or kept private.

Publicizing a report on the magic's mechanism and the related experimental data meant making it available for anyone to read. In a sense, it meant making one's mark on history. The report would be added to libraries and such so

everyone had access to it.

Conversely, one could monopolize the spell and the fruits of one's labor, keeping it all private. No records would be kept, and the technique would be shown only for the purpose of earning credits.

Naturally, the former tended to earn more credits than the latter, because it benefited the entire community of magic users.

"But wouldn't an official announcement be impossible?" said Kunon.

No matter how much a student wanted to publicize their work, the school imposed restrictions in certain cases, such as flight practice by an incompetent sorcerer, or fire spells with a wide area of effect. Kunon had heard that those in charge often kept the results of such work—the sort dangerous even to attempt—under wraps.

"Good point," Soff replied. "It isn't up to me, but I think you're probably right."

Such decisions were made by the school's administration, and a lowly professor like Soff had no authority over the matter. But both Kunon and he felt this project was likely to be kept from the public on the same basis as wind magic flight.

If someone trying the technique failed and crashed, they were at serious risk for injury, so encouraging others to attempt it was out of the question. They would simply have to arrive at it on their own once they had the requisite skill level. If the administration viewed things that way, they would treat flight using water magic the same way as that using wind magic.

The main basis for Kunon's flight was the elementary A-ori spell, and it was possible that even a beginner water sorcerer could get that far. Flight was made achievable, however, only by Kunon's thoroughly honed skill when it came to manipulating A-ori. It wasn't likely a novice magic user could do the same. That disparity was where the danger lay.

"Then I'd like to keep this work private, please."

There was no point in applying for publication if he was only going to be turned down. Besides, Kunon himself had decided that it was best not to publicize the technique, considering the risks associated with its acquisition.

"That works for me. By the way, what's the principle behind your style of flight?"

"Oh, you want to know? Just curious?"

Kunon was a bit surprised. He hadn't expected to be grilled on the mechanics mere moments after declaring the technique private.

"Well, you said that suggestive line about how wind sorcerers can fly but water sorcerers can only float, right? How could I not be curious?"

"Ah, I see. Well, it's quite straightforward, so there's no reason to hide it from you. The solution is simple: It came from Ka-ryu. I took inspiration from the fire spell and made some adjustments."

"Ka-ryu...?"

Ka-ryu was a fire spell that sent flames streaking across the ground. Lines of magic power were drawn, and then fire blazed along them.

"Oh!" Soff exclaimed. "So you're not 'flying,' you're just 'moving'!"

That explained the speed, the sudden stops, and the tailspin.

Such stunts didn't result in accidents, because the spell was merely following the path of the magic that preceded it. The mechanism was indeed identical to Ka-ryu, the spell Hank had demonstrated during the entrance exam. This was simply an application of the same technique.

"Exactly," Kunon replied. He was impressed. Soff had hit upon the truth even quicker than he'd expected. "Oh, and just so you know, wind magic flight doesn't appear to be compatible with this technique. Riyah wasn't able to use it."

"I'm not surprised. Flying alone takes all a wind sorcerer's effort. We wouldn't have time to do something like shoot out magic power ahead of ourselves. We'd probably just lose control if we tried."

Perhaps it would be possible if one was simply floating. But in that case, the user would be subject to a huge amount of wind pressure. Either way, wind sorcerers would no doubt have trouble with it, thought Soff.

"On the other hand, the wind method allows a person to change course at whim. Mine can't do that."

Kunon's method could only move in a designated direction, simply following a predetermined route. Once the spell was activated, not even minor adjustments could be made to it. He felt that wind magic must allow one to take to the skies more intuitively and with more freedom.

"Well, in any case," said Soff. "I think this is a great discovery and a fascinating new skill. Not to mention a good experience for me. Thanks, Kunon. This was quite interesting."

Soff let Kunon know the letter regarding credits would come later, and the two of them parted ways.



"Now I have four or five credits. What should I do next?"

Kunon considered his game plan on the way to his rented classroom. He had a variety of ideas—some of them he could even get started on right away.

The sacred herb and the Medicine Box would still take some time. He'd have to wait one to three months to see how they progressed. So now, at last— "...I guess it's time I went to see her."

—Kunon could finally meet with Professor Satori, whom he had admired for so long.

Starting with Reyes's money troubles, Kunon had been busy with all sorts of things and hadn't been able to introduce himself. If he didn't take this opportunity, his schedule would fill up again and he'd lose his chance.

"Right."

He made his decision; it was time. Kunon was going to meet his idol. And just as he was about to act— "Ah, Kunonnnn!"

—he heard a girl calling to him from a window, and his thoughts came to an abrupt halt. He couldn't remember the girl's name, but he recognized her as a member of the Rationality Faction.

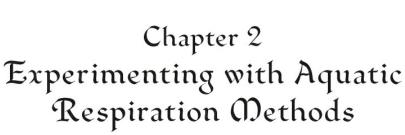
"Any interest in an experiment on breathing underwaaaterrr?!"

"I have an interest in youuu!"

As a gentleman, he *had* to respond whenever a girl spoke to him. And that was how he found himself caught up for a short while in an experiment on breathing underwater.



## Chapter 2 Respiration Methods



"Hey! What are you doing here?!"

Kunon had been greeted with some hostility, but before too long, his ideas were being lauded with praise.

"Hold up, wait a minute! This is freakin' amazing!"

Connecting with someone was easier when your goals aligned. Or at least, that was the case for Kunon's second encounter with Sandra.

Kunon accepted the invitation to participate in the underwater breathing experiment without hesitation, and work on the project began right away.

Eushida, a water user in the Rationality Faction, had been the one to ask for his help. She was in charge of the experiment, and Kunon followed her to the underground facility that served as the Rationality Faction's base.

He'd heard that this facility was originally an artificial dungeon. It was said that Advanced class students had created it many, many years ago as a way to explore the mechanism of similar, naturally occurring structures. Once their experiment ended, it was decided that the dungeon would be repurposed partly at the request of sorcerers who liked dark and damp places. Regardless of its long history as a *dungeon*, of all things, it was currently serving as the Rationality Faction's home base.

Four additional points of entry had been added, and the walls of former passages had been demolished to create a number of spacious rooms. Renovations of that sort had made the first, second, and third basement levels much more suitable for carrying out faction activities.

The walls and ceiling were moderately bright, and there was a working air conditioning system. It felt so unlike a subterranean facility, in fact, that one could easily forget they were underground.

The faction made use of only the first three levels, however. Past that, the cavern was largely a mystery. No detailed documentation remained for any levels deeper than the thirteenth, and no one knew how many there were in total.

Snippets of material pertaining all the way down to the forty-first level supposedly still survived, but their authenticity was dubious. Information regarding any levels beyond that was nonexistent.

From time to time, a sound that might have been groaning or growling was heard coming from below, but...everyone pretty much just ignored it. The Rationality Faction had been headquartered in the facility for ages and had come to accept that it was "just that sort of place."

All in all, they seemed a fairly intrepid bunch.

"Hey!"

The route was a bit of a maze—a remnant of the cavern's former days—but in the end, Kunon was led into a spacious room. Eushida explained that the facility's vacant chambers, like the school's empty classrooms, could be rented out once research projects were arranged. This room had been booked for their current endeavor.

As soon as Kunon stepped inside, however, a certain girl called out to him—Sandra.

"What are you doing here?!" she shouted. It was a rather abrupt greeting.

"We decided yesterday with a majority vote!" someone shouted.

"What's the point in complaining at this stage?!" said someone else.

"Credits! Think of the credits!" chimed in a third.

No sooner had Sandra lashed out at Kunon than the people surrounding her snapped back in reproach.

"Give it a rest, Sandra! If you make me pick between the two of you, I'll choose Kunon in a heartbeat! If you scare him off, you are out of here, got it?!" Even Eushida, the one who had invited Kunon and brought him here, had some harsh words for Sandra. "Who was it that clung to me and begged to be included in this project because they hadn't earned a single credit yet, huh?!"

"...I-it was me."

"And you promised to follow our instructions and keep your complaints to yourself, didn't you?!"

"I...I did..."

"Then don't you have something to say right now?!"

"...Should I go buy us some pastries?"

"Not that! You're supposed to apologize to Kunon! He came all this way to help us!"

"...I'm sorry," Sandra said.

So being a project leader gave one enough power to make even the ill-tempered Sandra apologize, Kunon observed. *Well, that aside.* 

"I want to earn credits, too," he said, "so would you mind putting up with me for just a little bit? Though you're really quite cute, even with that sullen expression. Just like a baby-blue-eyes blossom. Are you familiar with the language of flowers? I do hope you'll look that flower up. It represents my true feelings. Well, not that I can see it."

Incidentally, in floriography, baby-blue-eyes flowers symbolized "cuteness."

"...This guy is as freaky as ever...," Sandra muttered.

Kunon's frivolous chatter sent shivers down her spine. It was in Sandra's

nature to broadly categorize other people as either "friend" or "foe," and she didn't like being around people she had a hard time classifying.

Once the greetings and introductions were out of the way, the group got straight to work on the experiment.

The single, large room would serve as their laboratory.

Nothing besides the necessary equipment—arranged each time, depending on the experiment—was set up in the space.

For the current project, a massive water tank had been placed in the center of the room. Kunon expected they would be testing underwater breathing methods using that tank.

The team was originally made up of four people, including Sandra and Eushida. With the addition of Kunon, their group came to two boys and three girls, for a total of five members.

Upon learning everyone involved was a water sorcerer, Kunon felt a little thrill of excitement. Despite having started school relatively recently, Kunon had already completed a handful of projects and experiments. As of yet, however, not a single one of those undertakings had been a water-based effort with other water sorcerers. Thinking back, the last time he'd worked alongside someone who shared his attribute was when he'd studied under his first teacher, Jenié.

"We're still in the early stages, and everyone is just throwing out ideas. So, Kunon, what do you think would be a good way for people to breathe underwater? Even a rough, random thought is fine. Just give it a go."

Kunon crossed his arms and considered Eushida's question.

"Well... Just off the top of my head, I have four ideas."

"Huh? Did you say 'four'?"

Evidently, the remaining members of the team had collectively amassed three possibilities.

"I suppose that means at least one of them is something new, right?" said Kunon.

"That would be interesting."

Kunon nodded. It certainly would.

"Whatever, you're full of crap anyway," said Sandra.

"I thought I told you to knock it off."

Even after all the scolding, Sandra was still bothered by Kunon's participation.

"Why would I lie now, Miss Baby Blue Eyes?" asked Kunon. "You'd only find me out right away."

*"…"* 

After silencing Sandra, Kunon started to count off his ideas on his fingers.

His first thought was to enclose the subject in an A-ori. In other words, to have them enter the water with an air supply. They could envelop their entire body—even just the head might be enough—in an A-ori filled with air.

The second idea was to maintain a connection between the water's surface and the mouth and nose. This would require using a long, narrow tube to link the air above with the submerged subject.

His third idea was to create a magic tool that generated air and was held in the mouth.

"That's just something that popped into my head, though. Even if we started developing it right now, I think it would take too much time."

The others nodded. "We also thought of making some sort of tool."

"Is that so? And what was the verdict?"

"That it probably wouldn't be feasible. To tell you the truth, I'm only doing this experiment because I want credits, so I'd like to avoid dragging it out or putting in too much effort. Something simple would be ideal."

Eushida's feelings on the matter were often felt but rarely shared. Kunon could empathize, however. There was nothing better than earning credits easily and in a short period of time.

"You're an honest person," he said. "It seems I've found yet another charming side of you."

"Ha-ha... Thanks."

Kunon's words sounded sarcastic to her, but what could she expect, after what she'd just said?

"Then shall we try the easiest one?" Kunon suggested. "With this many water sorcerers, a more aggressive method might be possible."

"More aggressive, huh...? I assume that's your fourth idea, the one you haven't mentioned yet. What is it?"

"Making land underwater."

"Uh... land...?"

The other four team members looked dubious.

"Shall I give it a go?" With that, Kunon stepped forward to stand in front of the water tank. "If we trap air in some bubbles, like this, and gradually submerge them..." Using A-rubu, he produced a slew of bubbles that sank steadily into the water. "Then we combine them..." The sunken bubbles started to stick together to form one large air pocket that only continued to grow as smaller bubbles joined it. "...And you get something like this."

"Oh...!"

Air rose in water. That was common knowledge. And yet, in defiance of that, Kunon's bubbles sank, creating a layer of air at the bottom of the tank. That layer of air—that was the "land." An expanse of waterless terrain within the water itself.

This method departed somewhat from the idea of breathing underwater, but in a broader sense, surely, it counted.

"We should be able to test it out right away, don't you think? There are five of us, and it doesn't require any tools. It's simple."

"It definitely seems doable...," Eushida murmured. "But I wonder whether it's creditworthy."

The other Rationality Faction members responded with "probably not." They doubted the teachers would appreciate such a simplistic approach.

Creating bubbles that sank in water was actually a rather sophisticated technique, though it appeared no one had realized this. But then...

"Hold up, wait a minute! This is freakin' amazing!" Sandra exclaimed, sounding quite enthusiastic. "Being able to walk around at the bottom of the sea is way more impressive than breathing underwater! You could get an upclose look at stuff in the water and on the seafloor! How are you guys not getting this?! Hey, junior playboy—ain't that right?!"

"Junior playboy...?"

The label, which was quite far removed from "gentleman," rattled Kunon.

"You're the one who came up with it! How come you aren't more excited?!"

How could Kunon focus on that after being called such a horrible name?

Not only was no one else fired up, they were all staring in puzzlement at Sandra, as if to say, "What's gotten into her? Is she just agitated because she's hungry?"

Sandra found their expressions really irritating.

"All right, listen up!" she said. "How about I say it a little more romantic-like?!" Sandra, who had the face of an adventurer, began to speak like one, too. "For example! What do you think of collectin' treasure from a shipwreck at the bottom of the sea?!"

That was when it happened. With that statement, the experiment changed course dramatically. What started as a simple effort to earn some credits soon expanded into a massive project with a ton of people involved.

"...Junior playboy...?"

Kunon, however, was still nursing his ego.

"Please, let's not get carried away."

With great effort, Kunon put aside his pain over being addressed as "junior playboy" and brought the team, now abuzz with excitement over the idea of plundering sunken ships, back to the present.

It seemed Sandra's talk of underwater adventure and treasure had brought

everyone over.

"If it were that simple," Kunon broke in, "I'm sure someone would have thought of it already, which means it's likely impossible."

Forced to pause for a moment, the others considered the matter calmly and came to the same conclusion.

"Huh? You don't think it'll work?" Only Sandra clung to hope.

"Considering it more thoroughly, I don't think it will," Eushida replied, trying to get Sandra to see reason. "It can't be that straightforward. To begin with, a few issues come to mind."

But then...

"It may be impossible right now," said Kunon, unwilling to shut down Sandra's optimism entirely. "However, I think we have a good chance of making it happen. Just as Miss Eushida said, there are a lot of problems that would have to be resolved. I've never been to the sea, for one thing, so I don't know if this spell will hold up in saltwater. There's also the depth and currents to consider, plus we would probably be limited to some extent by water pressure. We have to keep in mind the threat of sea monsters, too. They say the deeper you go in the ocean, the bigger the monsters are."

At that moment, the idea was still out of reach. But if the various hurdles could be overcome, perhaps Sandra's adventurous spirit could yet be sated.

"Why don't we try it in shallow water?" Kunon suggested. "Let's give it a go, clarify the issues, and eliminate them. Isn't that what experiments are all about?"

Indeed, such was the nature of trial and error.

"Haah... I just wanted an easy way to get some credits...," Eushida muttered. The team had formed with the goal of netting some quick credits with minimal effort, and yet... "Guess we have no choice. Let's do it!"

""Yeah!""

At Eushida's words, the group officially embarked on a full-fledged experiment.

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"You want treasure?!"

"Yeah!""

"You wanna get rich?!"

"Yeaaah!""

"Do you wanna get rich and party hard?!"

"Yeah!""

"Y-yeah...," Kunon muttered.
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The senior students' enthusiasm was tremendous, and so was their lust for money. It was so intense that Kunon felt a bit like a fifth wheel.

That said, since Advanced class students were required to earn their own living expenses, Kunon wasn't entirely immune to the lure of a little extra cash.

When it came to developing a method of breathing underwater, Kunon's idea alone might not be enough to merit credits. However, if it was submitted along with verification data, it had a much higher chance of meeting the requirements. There was no reason to abandon their original plan, and this would be a great way to test their ideas.

Of course, their ultimate goal was now to find some shipwrecked treasure. They had their sights set on wealth, and everyone had been blinded by the promise of money.

"I was thinking, and the idea of using a tube to connect to the surface sounds pretty doable."

"Air would have to be constantly flowing."

"Depending on how deep you're diving, it might be necessary to have something that pumps the air."

"Ideally, you'd want to have separate air holes for inflow and outflow."

"I bought us some pastries!"

"If we're going really deep, do you think we'd need a wind user? You know, to keep the air moving."

"Hmm. How about something shaped like a stomach? The part that pumps air would be like the esophagus."

The older students tossed various ideas back and forth with excitement. The laid-back atmosphere Kunon had found when he arrived had vanished, and the room had begun to heat up.

Kunon participated in the brainstorming session, too, and the team discussed which ideas were most practical and what would be needed to implement them.

"That more or less covers it, I think," said Eushida. "We might need a wind user at some point, but for now let's try what we can on our own."

All that remained was to put their plan to the test. Sandra, who also worked as an adventurer, knew of a lake outside of town, and it was decided that they would head there the following morning.

*"…"* 

It would be Kunon's first time in a minimally maintained environment—somewhere mostly wild. However, saying so would only cause trouble and worry everyone, so he kept it to himself. He was just as worked up as the others, though for a slightly different reason.

Kunon Gurion was about to do fieldwork for the first time ever.



When the next day arrived, it looked at first like the trip would be rained out. But the weather cleared up, and things proceeded as planned.

"Whoa, hold on! Eushida, you didn't tell me he would be coming!"

Kunon, who had been anxious all morning, arrived at the designated meeting spot—the school gate—to find Eushida was already there. The person with her, however, flipped her lid the moment she laid eyes on him.

"Huh? Oh, what?" said Eushida. "Cassis, you know Kunon?"

What on earth was happening? Why was Cassis here? Cassis was a boy, no—a girl that Kunon had some complicated feelings about.

"I hate him!" she exclaimed.

"What?" asked Eushida.

"I don't hate you," Kunon declared.

"Again, what?"

"Come on! The only thing you're interested in is women's boobs, right?! Men are all the same! So what if I'm flat-chested?!"

"Uhh, Cassis?!" Eushida exclaimed. "You know how early it is, don't you?! And we're right in front of the school! Listen to yourself!"

"Shut up! I'm just a flat-chested beauty! You might not be that pretty, but you do have some meager cleavage, so you wouldn't understand how I feel!"

"Excuse me? Do you think I won't hit you? Do you want a punch to the face?"

Once Eushida got Cassis to calm down, she heaved a sigh. "...Kunon, do you have some sort of history with Cassis? I'm sorry, I didn't realize."

The story of Kunon's clash with Cassis during the former's attempt to secure affiliation with three of the school's factions was infamous. Unfortunately, it seemed that no one had thought to tell Eushida about it. She probably just hadn't been interested.

"You should be apologizing to me, not to him," said Cassis.

"This is a *job* for you, Cassis. You're getting paid, so just do what you're supposed to."

Evidently, Cassis was a wind sorcerer and skilled at flight. Even with a few extra people and some amount of weight, she could still fly.

In other words, she was their transportation. The plan was to have Cassis bring the group to the lake where they would conduct their experiment. On foot or by carriage, the trip would have eaten up a lot of their time. So Eushida, at her own expense, had asked Cassis to ferry them there and back.

"I apologize for making the decision on my own. It's just that, when I asked Sandra for details, she told me the lake was pretty far away."

"I don't mind at all," Kunon replied. "Rather, I hate to see your expression

darkened over such a small matter. It's a waste of your precious charms."

"Hah... Ha-ha..."

"Tch!"

Like she had the day before, Eushida forced a smile at Kunon's frivolous chatter, while Cassis clicked her tongue in distaste.

Once everyone had gathered, Cassis flew the group of five to the lake so they could test their underwater breathing methods.

The trip went smoothly, since Cassis was extremely shy and got significantly quieter as the number of people increased.

"This is nice."

The lake was located in a wooded area northwest of Dirashik. It wasn't a large body of water, but it was the perfect size for an experiment conducted by a small group. The weather was pleasant, and the water's surface was calm.

"Right? I love eatin' meals out here."

Sandra seemed to be in the mood for a picnic. The others understood how she felt, but now was not the time.

"Okay, shall we get started?"

At Eushida's words, everyone began to explore the water, trying out their own methods. With five water sorcerers on hand, both the experiment and the verification would be over in no time.

"...You really are clever, aren't you?"

Seated at a desk and chair made from A-ori, Kunon was hard at work documenting everything. Cassis, who had nothing to do until the verification was complete, watched him from the gently swaying hammock she had set up.

It was too dangerous for Kunon to walk around on uneven ground, so he was assigned the role of record keeper. The group didn't want to risk him suffering a fall.

"You look rather bored, Miss Cassis," Kunon said as he continued taking notes.

"I am, actually. Why are you guys so interested in going underwater?"

"Aren't you curious what's down there? At the bottom of the lake, or in the sea?"

"Not one bit. What, besides human and animal bones, do you think you're gonna find down there?"

"Those would be interesting enough on their own, if you ask me."

"Sure. Whatever."

Cassis seemed truly uninterested...

"Hey! I found a coin purse at the bottom of the lake! I think this will work after all!"

...until Sandra came across a small treasure, that is.

"What, seriously?!" Cassis yelped, jumping to her feet.

"It's a silver coin from the Old Empire!" Cassis exclaimed with joy.

The contents of the coin purse were intact, it seemed. There were about a dozen coins in the leather pouch Sandra had recovered from the lake bed.

After sitting in the water for such a long time, the pouch itself was ready to crumble at the slightest touch. Sandra had scooped it up with both hands and brought it carefully to the shore.

"Wow, money from a bygone era, huh?"

"I wonder if someone lost it during one of the wars."

"...Maybe. Someone could have dropped it, or it could have fallen when they were killed."

"Oh, good point."

Starting with Eushida, the team gathered around the object and began voicing their opinions.

Kunon had been thinking the same thing. Most likely, the coin purse dated back to the Empire's attempted invasion of the magic city of Dirashik. Something happened, causing the pouch to sink to the bottom of the lake, and

it had remained submerged there ever since. Perhaps it had even been thrown into the water *along with its owner*.

Now the scars from those war-torn days had faded, leaving nothing but a picturesque lake behind. But a lot of people had probably lost their lives in this area back then.

"There's gotta be more down there, right?! Like gold coins! Old Imperial ones!"

"Yeah! Since we found this, there must be other stuff, too!"

Cassis and Sandra didn't appear overly concerned with the pouch's historical background or how it had come to be in the lake. For now, it seemed they were more focused on their own greed.

"You're probably right, but let's change course for a bit," team leader Eushida declared, after listening to the pair's thoughts. "Don't touch anything else at the bottom of the lake."

"What?"

"Huh?"

"It seems like all we're going to find around here is small change. Divided between all of us, we'd probably end up with one to five hundred thousand necca each, at best. The lake isn't that big, either."

She was right. The coins in the lake were no longer legal currency, and even if they were made of precious metals, it wasn't likely to add up to a large sum, since the people who had died there would have been no more than common foot soldiers.

"Their historical value is probably higher than their actual value. So why don't we sell our data to a historian or something? We could jack the price way up."

Eushida's phrasing wasn't very attractive, but her point was well taken.

The coin purse had become so fragile that it fell apart on contact. Anything else at the bottom of the lake was almost certainly in a similar condition. Consequently, Eushida deemed it more profitable to sell the information to a scholar who would find it all valuable, rather than to take the effort to hunt

down treasures only to damage them.

"One hundred thousand sounds pretty good to me!" Cassis hollered, her greed on full display.

"If it's free money, even five hundred would make me happy!" Sandra joined in.

Her feelings were understandable. No matter how wealthy one was, coming across five hundred necca was a nice surprise. There was a mysterious appeal in that particular denomination. It was somehow more instinctively pleasing even than finding a thousand necca.

"That's why I'm saying we should take advantage of some academics. And this has nothing to do with you, Cassis."

Cassis was more worked up than any of them, but she was not actually part of their group. Suddenly, Cassis noted how cold the others' gazes were as they looked at her.

"No way! Come on! You have to include me!" The moment this dawned on her, she started throwing a fit. "You're gonna use your results to find stuff like sunken pirate ships and the *Lisa Florin*, right?! And I bet you'll recover the lost Nieve jewels from the Old Empire and fine artworks and accessories from Eclat Zatrant's early period! I want in! Oh, even just a gold bar would be enough! A big, hefty one!"

Her greed and materialism were now thoroughly exposed. Only a little while ago, Cassis had been bored and uninterested. But as soon as something of value was found, all pretenses were dropped.

The group's icy gazes shifted from Cassis's shamelessness to focus on Eushida, as if to ask her what should be done about the money-hungry interloper in their midst.

"...Well, we did want an excellent wind sorcerer."

They had come to the lake purely for verification purposes. Ultimately, they were aiming for the sea.

Researching underwater respiration methods was still genuinely on the

docket, but treasure hunting had increasingly become their main objective. Even as the project leader, Eushida couldn't stop the tides from turning in that direction. Instead, she planned to ride the waves. After all, she wanted money and credits.

Their next destination would be the ocean.

That would require a lot more travel time, and they'd need help locating shipwrecks and transporting any recovered cargo. Eushida doubted that their present team would be able to carry out that kind of large-scale ocean expedition alone. Considering that, adding Cassis to the project didn't seem like a bad idea. And with such intense materialism driving her, she probably wouldn't pull a fast one on them or leak project information. That would only lessen her own share of the spoils, after all.

And besides...

"If I'm not mistaken, you have an eye for precious stones, right?"

"Naturally! Works of art, too! I adore antiques! I love gems even more! Oh, and gold ingots!"

All this made Cassis an excellent choice.

"Well, that works for us. We're in the same faction, so it's not like you're a stranger."

Some of the team's members had never spoken to Cassis, but they at least recognized her as a comrade. A few of them were surprised at learning of her true nature, but that was beside the point.

"As for Kunon, though...," Eushida continued.

"Me?"

"I suppose you wouldn't want a senior who openly dislikes you joining the team, would you?"

Eushida's words came from a place of concern. If she had known about the connection between Kunon and Cassis, she wouldn't have asked Cassis to help them. The experiment had started out as a way to earn easy credits. They didn't need bothersome things like personal disputes on their hands.

"I like him!" Cassis declared. "I love him! I love Kunon!" But in that moment, for the sake of money, Cassis decided to sacrifice her stubbornness and pride. "Hey, Kunon! You like me, too, right? You do, don't you...?! Say you like me!"

At Cassis's insistence, Kunon nodded without hesitation.

"Of course I like you. A man who would spurn so spirited a demand from a woman is no gentleman."

Kunon had made the decision to acknowledge Cassis as a woman, and that meant there was only one answer he could give.

"...K-Kunon..... Hmph. Don't get cocky. I'm only being nice to you this once."

Kunon's unexpectedly open acceptance threw Cassis off. What's more, Cassis had yet to show a shred of kindness during the whole exchange. But if Kunon didn't mind, that settled things.

"Then if you're okay with it, Kunon, we'll add Cassis to the group. I mean, either way, I doubt that five or six people will be enough to accomplish our goals. If we're going into the ocean, I expect we'll need even more help. This lake already seems a bit big for us."

That was Eushida's conclusion after a little hands-on experimenting. She did not feel that five water sorcerers would be sufficient. If they were really going to search for shipwrecks at sea, they were better off bringing in as many people as they could in anticipation of any possible issues.

"I'd like to bring the representative with us as well."

Those words got Kunon's attention very quickly.

"You mean Lulomet?" he asked.

When Eushida said "the representative," she was most likely referring to the leader of the Rationality Faction—Lulomet, the boy who was followed everywhere by a shadowy tree.



"Yeah. I'd feel a lot safer with him around."

Safety.

The others seemed to understand what Eushida meant.

There were three magical attributes that were much less common than the others—light, dark, and foul. And the Rationality Faction representative, Lulomet, was one of the rare sorcerers who could perform dark magic.

But what could a user of dark magic do? Since they were few and far between, not much was known about them, and Kunon had no idea what such magic entailed. That fact alone was enough to fascinate him.

This project had quickly and steadily progressed in unforeseen directions.

And honestly, the idea that Lulomet might join their team got Kunon more fired up than any talk of treasure.

All that aside...

"Wow. So this is what it's like underwater."

After all the data collection was complete, Kunon became the last of the group to go into the lake. He had come up with a method for getting around without falling on the uneven lake bed, and firsthand experience was an important part of experimenting.

The lake wasn't very deep, and air from the shore was being sent to the bottom to form a "floor" tall enough for one person to walk through.

Looking up, Kunon saw a fish. It was a large freshwater specimen—one he had seen pictures of in field guides. It swam overhead, its body wriggling gracefully.

"Can you see any of this?" asked Cassis, who was accompanying him.

Walking carefully while observing his surroundings, Kunon offered a noncommittal "No, I can't." Then he said, "A friend of mine wants to build a fish pond. I thought this might be informative."

"Hmm. Are they gonna build it inside the school?"

"Yes."

"You know that's crazy, right?"

"Huh? Why?"

"There used to be one, apparently. A pond for raising freshwater fish, that is. I hear it was pretty successful."

"Are you saying something went wrong with it?"

"Yep. Some idiot couldn't be bothered to properly dispose of their expired potions, leftover solvents, half-used solutions, and so on, and dumped them in the pond. Then, I'm not sure what did it, but some kind of monstrous fish creatures started breeding like crazy. Apparently, it was quite a chore cleaning up the mess."

"Oh? What an interesting story."

"You find everything interesting, don't you?"

"And your interest lies in gemstones, right? The *Lisa Florin* was a large vessel for aristocrats, typical of the Old Empire, I believe. If I'm not mistaken, quite a few individuals of significance were on board when it sank.

"That's right! When the ship went under, they were holding a coronation ceremony for the future emperor, so higher-ups from a bunch of neighboring countries were there, too! There *must* have been treasure on the ship!"

"I hope we can find it."

Kunon enjoyed a surprisingly amicable underwater stroll with Cassis.



Their fieldwork concluded without incident. After testing out various methods around the lake, they were back at school by noon.

"From a practical standpoint, there are two ways we can go about searching for sunken ships."

The group was back in the Rationality Faction's underground base, standing around the big water tank and talking as they had the day before. The only difference was the presence of Cassis, who was now part of the team.

"We can create a layer of air underwater, or we can create a cylindrical wall and open up a hole in the sea. I think those two are our best bets."

Eushida's observation was based on the data they'd gathered, and no one objected.

If they were visiting a shallow lake, like the one from that morning, or staying near the shore, other methods may have been suitable, but going under alone in the deep didn't seem feasible.

Anything could be lurking in the ocean. There were massive monsters, poisonous creatures, and even fish that were known to eat people. Maintaining an air-filled space in which to conduct their activities would also create a protective sphere shielding them from the surrounding ocean. The larger the area cleared of water, the safer they would be. And one could never be too safe.

While their original theme had been "aquatic respiration methods," and their solution—creating a breathable space by repelling large quantities of water—might be seen as breaking the rules, if they added "exploration of the seafloor" to their goals, there shouldn't be an issue.

Of course, since their goal had shifted over time, such inconsistencies were probably inevitable.

"So, any other concerns?" asked Eushida.

At her words, the team members began airing their thoughts.

"The lake bottom was super muddy. I don't see any reason to force ourselves to walk on the seafloor."

"Oh, I agree. It would be easier to walk on a surface that's slightly elevated from the bottom."

When Kunon had explored the lake, an A-ori membrane had served this purpose.

"Okay, I'm gonna go buy us some food!"

"I'll have a sandwich bagel."

"One for me, too."

"Same here."

"I'd like a bacon-and-egg sandwich."

"Surprise me, Sandra. But get two, please."

"Kunon has it down already, but I think the rest of us should practice forming a layer of air."

"Yeah. Now that we've decided on our approach, we should master it."

"Then I'll go look for a shallow area we can experiment in!"

"Good idea. Starting tomorrow, let's take this project to the sea."

The discussion continued for a while. Though they were young and inexperienced, they were all members of the Advanced class. Once something had their interest, they devoted considerable passion to it.

The next day, the team moved their experiment to the ocean.

With the height of autumn approaching, the breeze off the water was positively frigid. And even though the group was staying in the shallows, the conditions were totally different from those of the lake. They had to deal with divergent water and air pressure, as well as currents, the presence of ocean life, and so on. Spells deployed into the sea were subject to many more outside forces than those cast in the lake.

Anytime there was a difficulty, they recorded the issue and made adjustments, repeatedly fine-tuning the process.

Though they were both bodies of water, a lake and an ocean were very different places, and failure could be a matter of life and death. It would be safer to conduct numerous field tests before proceeding with the actual experiment.

"Everyone! Lunch is ready!"

They had left Dirashik and crossed the border, arriving at a coastal area on the edge of the Holy Kingdom of Saint Lance.

For lunch, Kunon's maid put her skills on display. The group gathered ingredients, and then, sheltered from the wind by some rock formations, she

started a fire and set to work.

There was grilled fish and grilled sea snail, grilled abalone and grilled sea urchin, grilled seaweed, and even a soup filled with grilled seafood.

Cassis, who had chosen the location, assured them it was just close enough that they could make the trip there and back in a day.

But after assessing how much time they would need for the experiment, Eushida had decided upon an itinerary lasting several days, suggesting they find somewhere to stay overnight instead.

Kunon, still just twelve years of age, was the only person to bring along a guardian. No one knew his circumstances, but one glance was enough to see that he came from a good family. Everyone understood that a kid like him couldn't simply go on a trip without someone from the household to keep an eye on him.

"Wow! This is so good!"

"Mmm, what delicious shellfish!"

"Ahhh... Hot food really warms you up..."

"What do you think of those flavors, everyone?" asked Rinko. "Indeed, I added no seasoning at all. You're enjoying the flavor of the sea itself—the taste of Mother Ocean... A mother's love needs no seasoning."

The maid's boasting was a bit distracting, but her cooking skills were solid. The grilled fish had been gutted properly, and she had even neatly split open the spiny sea urchins. Despite having the look of simple food that was merely grilled or stewed, each dish clearly showed the care put into it.

"So? Which one is your girlfriend, Master Kunon?" Rinko whispered to her young master as he slurped his soup.

"Huh? All of them, I suppose," Kunon declared, as if it were obvious. "Look at them, Rinko. They're all lovely, aren't they? All of them are my friends."

While his companions wished to contradict parts of Kunon's answer, they were happy to let other parts stand. Thus, the group of girls simply ignored it, their expressions complicated. The only boy besides Kunon on the team

pretended to be too absorbed in his food to hear anything. He knew it was a good idea to follow the girls' lead in any situation where they outnumbered him.

"My! You're such a playboy, Master Kunon."

"And with that, I'm one step closer to becoming a true gentleman."

As the two of them laughed, the others got the feeling they'd finally learned the source of Kunon's misguided chivalry, though all of them kept quiet about it in the end.

Ultimately, they spent five days experimenting in the shoals.

They ran tests in shallow water, in deeper water, in various weather conditions and at various hours, at high tide and low tide, in the rain and when it was overcast.

Once their large-scale expedition began, delaying the schedule would be difficult. To prepare, they wanted to gather data under rougher conditions as well, which caused their experiment to take a little extra time.

"Ooh-hoo-hoo. Hee-hee. Ee-hee-hee."

That extra time proved worth it when they found something: a small shipwreck just off the coast.

Treading through a part of the wreck that had become a fish habitat—shoes on and all—they searched for anything of value. In the end, they came up with some small gems, handmade wares, and a decent number of coins.

Cassis grinned as she picked up the recovered items one by one, assessing them and mentally converting their value to necca.

The metals used in the handicrafts were beyond saving, but the gems and coins were fine. Divided among the participants, the payout probably wouldn't be that high, but...

"I think we can do this."

It was just as Eushida had said. More important than the items themselves was the fact that they had successfully recovered them from a real sunken ship.

"I think it's time to start preparing for the real deal."

The treasure hunt was finally on.



"Investigating a shipwreck? The treasure of the *Lisa Florin*? You know they found that ages ago, right?"

"What?"

The group had finally begun preparing for their true mission. A week later, after reaching the stage where plans would be finalized, Eushida returned to the school and brought the matter to Lulomet, the Rationality Faction representative. She intended to ask for his help, but when she arrived in his tidy lab and stated her business...

"Like I said, it's already been done," he declared.

"I-it's been...done?"

"I don't know if they got everything, but I expect all the important stuff has been recovered. A famous ship like the *Lisa Florin* would have had its voyage planned before departure. That means it probably wasn't too difficult to find out where it sank, you know? And if it was known to be carrying treasure, people would want to find it by any means necessary. I heard some influential person somewhere hired a sorcerer to make it happen."

According to Lulomet, teachers at their own school had even been solicited for the job. Eushida froze in shock at this casual declaration.

"I heard it was a sorcerer who specializes in finding sunken ships," Lulomet continued. "Someone who also works as an adventurer, if memory serves."

"I...I see..."

Eushida reeled. Admittedly, she had started the experiment just to get some credits. But the project had grown into something surprisingly grand, and so she had gotten more serious about it.

With Cassis constantly yammering on about treasure, before she realized it, Eushida had gotten caught up in the spirit of the undertaking. In her mind, it was like the treasure was already theirs.

But all of it had come to nothing. Their ambitions and dreams of wealth lay in pieces at her feet.

"...Haah... Please excuse me..."

"Oh? You're leaving already?"

Nodding weakly, Eushida turned and left Lulomet's office, her shoulders slumped. She had come in brimming with confidence, and she seemed a different person as she walked out.

Watching her crestfallen figure retreat, the Rationality Faction representative mulled things over. "...An ocean expedition, hmm? Sounds interesting."

Between experiments and research, Lulomet had been to all sorts of places, but he had never ventured to the sea.

He thought of it—hunting for shipwrecks, recovering valuables from beneath the waves.

"Hmm."

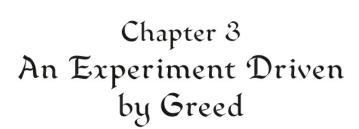
Lulomet stood. His interest piqued, he decided to follow after his junior.

He didn't know where the team was planning to go—their destination could very well be a wreck that had already been explored. But even if they came up empty-handed, what did it matter? Making some money was nice, but there were times when the experience itself was more valuable. That went for both Lulomet and for the younger students. They might not find anything, but the experience would hardly be in vain.

Besides, he had an idea of some underwater valuables that were still out there.

All told, it was guaranteed to be a worthwhile undertaking.







Three days had passed since the experiment in the shoals.

The team took some time to fully rest and restore their bodies, and to thoroughly prepare. And now, at last, they were ready.

"And so the fifteen of us are going to explore the seafloor."

It was early morning, and the sky was still dark. Fifteen sorcerers had gathered in front of the magic school's front gate.

Fifteen people—a steep increase from their original group of five. Some of the new participants had apparently been recruited from the Harmony Faction. Not that Kunon was interested, since all of the additional team members were male.

Even with the bigger group, Eushida remained in charge.

They had finally reached the stage of the project where they would investigate a proper shipwreck, and the number of participants was a show of Eushida's and the others' dedication. They would need to handle issues that came up in the field, transport cargo, and respond to potential complications, and the additional members were brought in with those tasks in mind.

In Kunon's opinion, they still didn't have enough people for a large-scale operation. If they wanted to take the matter seriously, they would be better off using all their resources.

Though upon further consideration, he realized that they were still in the testing stages of the experiment. They had tried various things and gathered data, but they still hadn't run a trial of the actual thing. If today ended up being a success, Kunon expected the others would be even more serious about their next attempt. After all, it wasn't as though things had to end here. Though Kunon wasn't sure if he would be participating in further expeditions.

*"…"* 

At the moment, Kunon's thoughts weren't on Eushida, who was explaining the day's plan, but on another boy also facing the team leader.

The boy was Lulomet, the Rationality Faction representative and a sorcerer who possessed the rare dark attribute.

Kunon wanted to talk to him, and if possible, he wanted to see some dark magic. He was *desperate* to see it, in fact. Not that he could see, of course. How could he be interested in sea exploration when faced with a valuable chance to see a rare type of magic...?

"...Well, I suppose that's not quite right."

In the end, Kunon wasn't entirely uninterested. Quite the contrary, actually. When he took a closer look at his feelings, he realized he found both things of equal interest.

Running experiments and tests and doing fieldwork on a team made up entirely of sorcerers was *fun*. And they'd enjoyed delicious seafood on the beach together, too. It was especially enjoyable talking with other water sorcerers about water magic.

Kunon wasn't about to let anyone tell him those days had been a waste of time or that they had nothing to show for their effort. He wasn't particularly passionate about shipwrecks or treasure, but Kunon was quite invested in the results of their experiment.

Plus, there were credits at stake.

As soon as Eushida finished talking, the group sprang into action.

Starting with Cassis, the wind sorcerers in their group—now numbering three—transported the team to their destination.

Incidentally, Kunon was part of the day party. They had formed a day party and an overnight party, and Kunon had chosen the former. Thus, his maid did not need to accompany him.

They flew through the air for a short while, traveling much faster than they could have by carriage or anything similar. And then, as the sky lightened, the ocean came into view off in the distance.

When they arrived at their destination, a small fishing village, the wind sorcerers were able to rest while the others set to work.

Thorough preparations were made. Kunon had wanted to help, too, but he was told "there's nothing for a first-year student to do" and was forced to sit back and watch. His seniors made quick work of their tasks, proving their assessment correct.

A midsize ship had been procured from somewhere. It was a wooden sailing vessel, out of place in the small fishing village, and sturdy enough to make a long-distance voyage at sea. As long as they had no accidents, it seemed likely to stay afloat.

Meanwhile, Cassis, with her extraordinary passion for treasure, had searched high and low, finally discovering what appeared to be a shipwreck in their vicinity.

She had really found one.

Talking to the locals, she learned that people didn't come to the area often—especially not in big ships. That meant there was a high possibility that the wreck was untouched.

On top of that, she had checked the regional laws. Apparently, here by the sea at the edge of the Holy Kingdom of Saint Lance, rights to recovered property were conferred to the finder if the owner couldn't be determined. Normally, in larger cities, the local lord would put in place additional regulations. But because this was a rural town with a small population, things

worked in their favor.

"Okay, all aboard! Let's go!"

After greeting the mayor, Eushida urged the rest of the team to board the ship. They did so one by one as the villagers looked on curiously.

"Would you like some help?" Lulomet asked Kunon when he saw him standing to the side.

Kunon planned to board last and was waiting for the others to cross the gangplank.

"Ah, thank you very much, but please don't trouble yourself," he replied.

"Really? Are you sure you'll be okay?"

"Yes. If you were a girl, I'd absolutely take you up on the offer. But as a gentleman, I cannot ask a man to escort me."

"Pff, I see. Then I'll go on ahead."

Naturally, the gangplank connecting the ship to the pier had no handrails.

And due to the waves, of course, it moved. If Kunon tripped, he'd go tumbling into the water.

"Ah, Miss Cassis. Would you mind escorting me?"

"Excuse me? No way. I don't need it getting around that I'm friends with someone like you. Anyway, you're fine on your own, aren't you?" Cassis turned away with a *huff* and boarded the ship.

Kunon had been shot down. But he had expected that might happen, so he wasn't too upset about it. He had merely thought it would be nice if she agreed.

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"....."

"....."

"....."

"....After you, Miss Sandra."

"Why aren't you askin' me for help?"

"I don't want to burden my seniors."
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"...Hmm... Tch. I was hoping you'd say some stupid crap so I could shove you into the ocean," Sandra muttered alarmingly before she, too, went aboard. It seemed Kunon had lucked out by reading the situation correctly.

Places with unstable footing were not Kunon's friend. If he tried to walk across the gangplank normally, he would most likely fall.

Eushida had been the first one onto the ship, so there were no other girls left for him to ask. With little choice, Kunon decided he would simply fly.

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Everyone looked on, dumbfounded at the sight of the youngest member of the crew and the last to board, soaring through the air in an absurdly pompous manner.

At last, they were ready.

"Is everyone aboard?! Raise the anchor—let's go!" The ship lurched forward at Eushida's command. "Wind team, we're in your hands! Do your best!"

This was where the wind sorcerers truly came in handy. The sails swelled with air, and the boat started picking up speed.

"Thank you for earlier, Lulomet."

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"...Yes... Of course..."
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Kunon had gently floated over in his reclined, arrogant position. Lulomet could not describe how it made him feel, though he understood why Kunon might need to fly in this situation.

"Do you get seasick?" he asked. "Or is it because of the unstable footing?"

"The latter. I'm not good with slopes and ground that isn't level. I don't think I'll be able to stand up on the ship."

Lulomet figured that Kunon's lack of sight made it more difficult for him to maintain his balance.

"Oh, and I'm sorry for the posture," Kunon continued. "I've been told sitting like this makes me look arrogant, but I'm not sure how to fix the problem..."

So he knows the way he's sitting is problematic, Lulomet thought. But that aside...

"It's an interesting spell. I never would have imagined someone with the water attribute could fly."

Lulomet was quite astonished by it, as were the others. The water sorcerers among them were particularly shocked. Kunon was indeed the infamous Zeonly's disciple, that much was clear. They could all see he was a talented sorcerer, even if he *did* look pointlessly conceited.

"I'll show you how it works if it interests you. In return, I'd like to see some dark magic."

"Oh-ho. You're curious about my magic?"

"Yes. I don't know the first thing about dark magic, and there seem to be very few books on the subject."

"Indeed."

As a sorcerer, Kunon was interested in magic. It was a very healthy pursuit for someone in his position.

Though things were calmer now, when Lulomet had first entered school, people had questioned him all the time. What exactly was dark magic? they would ask.

"Well... Look up, Kunon, if you would. Do you see those seabirds following the ship? ...Oh, right, you can't see them, can you?"

"It's fine. Though you're right, I can't."

Still sitting in his snobbish posture and floating beside Lulomet, Kunon joined his senior in turning his face up toward the sky. They watched the birds...six of them, soaring in the air. Lulomet activated his magic, and the six birds started tottering... Then they fell out of the sky and crashed onto the deck of the ship.

"Whoa, what?!"

"Huh?! They're dead?! Wh-what happened?!"

Those near Lulomet and Kunon had witnessed the whole series of events, but

for those who weren't aware, it was as though the birds had suddenly dropped out of the sky for no reason. It was no wonder they were startled.

"It was my doing. Let's have them for lunch."

At Lulomet's words, everyone calmed down. They knew about his dark magic, so his statement was explanation enough.

"...An instant killing spell? How in the world...?"

Kunon was also startled. But *his* surprise was due to the abnormal and mysterious nature of the magic Lulomet had just unleashed.

Indeed, those who were knowledgeable about magic found the dark attribute most surprising. There was no spell that could end a life directly. Such a thing was impossible. The spell would have to bring about some phenomenon first, which would then cause the desired result. Kunon was well aware of that fact, and that was precisely why he was so shocked.

"Kunon Gurion—whenever I'm asked about my dark attribute, I always give the same answer." As Lulomet spoke, Kunon's mind quickly sunk into a sea of thought. "Try to guess the true nature of my magic. If you can, we'll talk."

"Instant death, darkness, instant death, instant death..."

Kunon reclined pompously, his thoughts already leagues under the ocean.

If his maid had been present, she might have said something like, "I'm not impressed that you've managed to fall into the water without breaching the surface." Or perhaps not.

"We're coming up on the site! Decrease speed!" Eushida shouted.

The wind sorcerers changed their sail-filling gusts to soft breezes, adjusting the ship's velocity and direction. Meanwhile, Cassis flew ahead to confirm the location.

"Hup!"

She placed the wooden plank she was carrying—about the size of a small raft—on the surface of the water and touched down onto it. From the side, it looked like she was standing on the sea itself. It might have seemed simple, but the maneuver was only possible because Cassis was skilled at flight.

She then gave the signal to stop the ship. Apparently, she was certain they had reached the site of the shipwreck. Seeing the gesture, Eushida ordered the team to lower their speed further and drop anchor. Rocked by the resulting waves, the ship gave a great lurch. And as it did...

"Watch this!"

...the group on board followed Cassis's voice with their eyes. Kunon alone was too absorbed in thought to do so, but since he couldn't see anyway, it probably didn't matter.

"Fu-arari!"

This spell emitted a noise and let the user hear the resulting reverberations. It was typically a localized spell used to get a feel for one's surroundings at night or in places with poor visibility. Usually, only the caster would be able to hear the echoes, but— "Whoa!"

"Wow!"

—when the user was as skilled as Cassis, the sounds could be *seen*. Or, to be more precise, they could be made visible to others.

A huge, glowing, dark-green ring came into existence and spread out over the water with Cassis at its center. Then, maintaining its circular shape, the ring sank into the sea. Its green light was visible even as it descended into the murky depths.

As it sank further, the light began to take on a shape. At the top were bent poles, then a whalelike head protruding from the seafloor. The hull was fractured approximately in half, and the stern rested on the ocean bottom.

The dark-green light quickly disappeared, but everyone had gotten a clear look. They had seen the shape of the large ship, split in half down the middle. Its bow—likely wedged against an ocean rock—was pointed upward, while its aft lay sideways in the sand.

"Right, lemme handle this!"

Now it was Sandra, her eyes ablaze, whose voice rang out.

It wasn't that she didn't trust Cassis's intel on the shipwreck. It was just that

seeing the thing for herself made her excitement skyrocket. How could she not be raring to go with treasure right in front of her? That was her reasoning anyway.

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"Ah, wait a sec—"
"A-ryukuru!"

Fwoosh, fwoooooosh, fwoooOOOOOSH!
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It started with a small eddy appearing in the water's surface. Then, little by little, the vortex grew. Feeding on the seawater it swallowed up, it became a maelstrom. This was A-ryukuru—a spell that made water form a whirlpool.

Fine, delicate spell casting wasn't Sandra's strong suit, but high-powered magic was a different story. When Sandra used this spell, she could open up a massive hole in the ocean itself, albeit only for a short period. By the time a panicked Cassis had left the wooden plank and flown back to the boat, the vortex had grown to a considerable size.

"Seriously?! Are you trying to kill me?!"

Cassis had a right to complain. No one would stand a chance if they got caught up in a vortex that big.

"Whatever, just look!" Sandra shouted back.

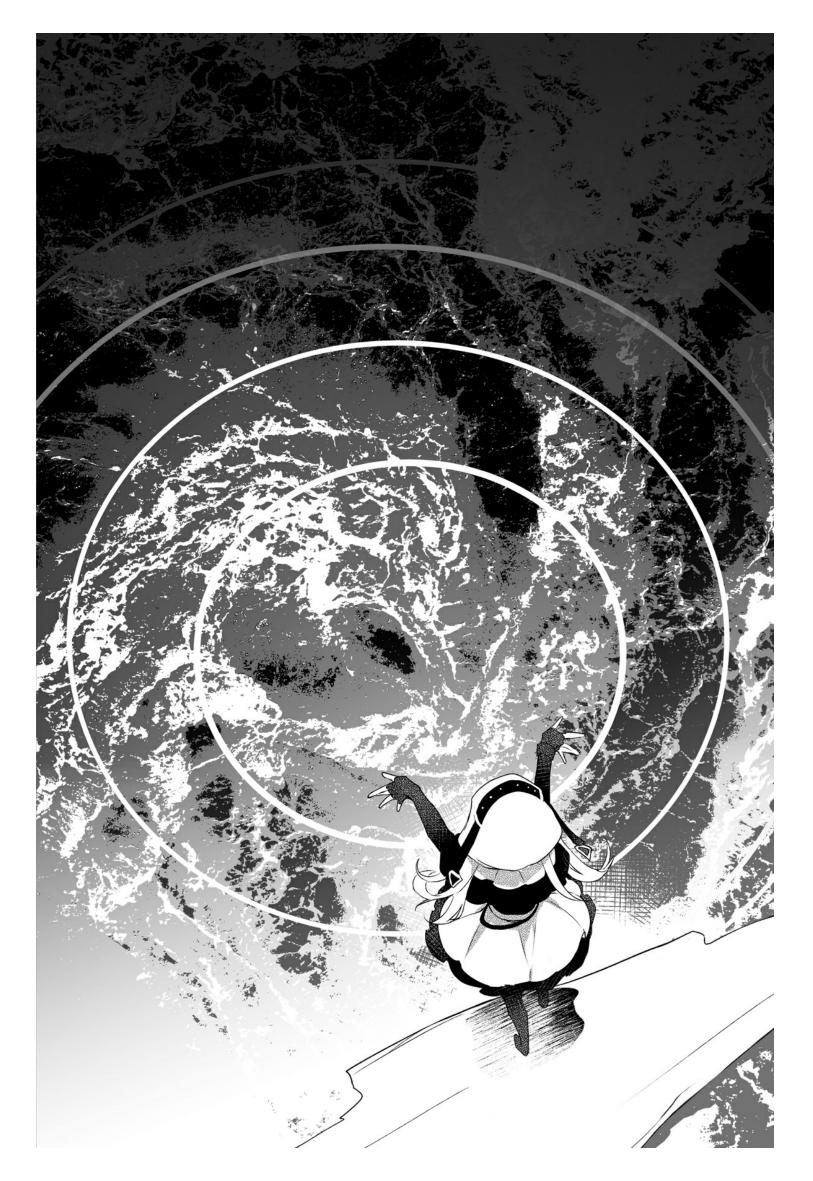
"If I tell you to wait a second, you wait!"

"And I said 'look'! There! I've almost got it!"

No one, let alone Sandra, paid any attention to Cassis as she raised a fuss, despite the fact that her complaint this time was valid.

Everyone was frozen to the spot, staring at the whirlpool. There, at the bottom of the hole bored out of the water, was indeed a rotting wooden vessel.

The mast was broken. The hull was split in two. It was riddled with holes all over, and fish that hadn't been quick enough to escape the whirlpool's sudden appearance flopped about, exposed to the air.



At that point, the vortex, shaped like an inverted cone, started to shrink and close up.

All of them had seen it. The ship was definitely there—a real shipwreck.

The swirl of water closed up completely, and the sea's surface went back to normal, as though nothing had happened. While everyone else was still enthralled by the sight of the wreck, Eushida, completely alert, barked another order.

"Start preparing to explore! We'll just have to pray no one else got to it first!"

It was like she had woken from a dream. And indeed, what she had just seen was no dream—it was *real*.

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""YEAH!""
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The group snapped to attention and began moving excitedly, their minds stuffed full with thoughts of wealth.

At the same time, a totally unconcerned Kunon was still deep in the sea of contemplation.

"Kunon. You can think about it later."

Kunon had been sitting in silence, still slumped in his snobbish pose. The one who finally brought him back to reality was the very person who had set him adrift: Lulomet.

"...Pardon? Huh? Yes? What is it?"

"We've arrived. We found the sunken ship."

"What, that fast?!"

"Some people are already on their way there."

Kunon couldn't believe his ears. From his point of view, they'd only just set sail, and he had only been lost in thought for a little while. In reality, it seemed a fair amount of time had passed.

Come to think of it, things had gotten quite noisy. Was it because the others were excited? Restless? Driven to distraction by the idea of riches?

He could hear Sandra yelling from somewhere, "Whoo-hoo! Let's gooo! Adventure!" Though he could probably safely ignore all that.

"This is a rare opportunity," said Lulomet. "We should join them."

"I would love to, but I'm afraid I would only get in the way."

All Kunon could think about at the moment was dark magic. It was far more pressing than the sea or any shipwrecks. In fact, he wanted to get back to his pondering right away.

"Are you sure?" Lulomet said. "I'm going fishing, and I'll be using my magic."

Why hadn't he led with that?

"Although I am but a novice, would you allow me to accompany you, Lulomet?"

"Of course. I'd welcome your assistance."

At Lulomet's request, Kunon produced a box-shaped A-ori the two of them could ride down into the water.

"Are you sure this doesn't make us look conceited?" Kunon asked.

"I don't think so. From anyone else's perspective, we'll simply look like we're standing. It should be fine."

The box came to approximately waist-level and had an open top. They stood inside it with their hands resting on the edge.

I see, Kunon thought. So this posture doesn't look arrogant.

They couldn't fly quickly in such a position, but there shouldn't be a problem, as long as they maintained a low rate of speed.

Kunon decided to use this method from then on whenever he wasn't in a hurry.

The group had managed to open a large hole in the sea. It reached all the way to the ocean floor, as if a thin membrane in the shape of a large cylinder was keeping all the seawater at bay. Given the effort involved in cycling air in and out, the group had reached the conclusion that this was the simplest setup, if somewhat crude and inelegant.

They were using magic on a very large scale, but that was why they had brought on more sorcerers to assist. Maintaining the hole for an extended period would likely be difficult, but if they explored in shifts with breaks in between, they should have plenty of time.

A sunken ship rested at the bottom of the hole as wind sorcerers circled it, up in the air.

"Shall we leave the inside of the ship to the others?" Lulomet asked.

"Ah, yes," Kunon replied.

Lulomet intended to go fishing, and Kunon planned to accompany him. Meanwhile, the group investigating the ship was producing a lot of excited chatter.

"Whoa, I've never seen a fish like this before!"

"Wow, neither have I... What is it?! A sea pig?!"

"There are no pigs in the sea!"

"You're so stupid. A Sandra-level idiot."

"Oh, there are human bones. Wow... I guess that makes sense, huh...?"

"I wonder how many years this ship has been down here?"

"Shut up and start looking for treasure! I have debts to pay!"

Kunon certainly didn't want to try walking around in the middle of all that noise. And in any case, searching for things probably wasn't his strong suit, given that he was blind.

"Please bring us up to the wall of water."

"Right away."

Following Lulomet's instructions, Kunon brought the box-shaped A-ori up to the membrane and had it hover there.

The seawater and the air were perfectly separated. It was quite enchanting to see the ocean up close as it towered above them.

"Kunon, can you tell there's a large fish over there?"

"Yes. It seems to be observing us."

On the other side of the wall, a large sea creature was swimming about. It moved restlessly, as if concerned by the group's activities.

"Something that big could probably eat us, huh?"

"It would eat us. It's a type of monster. I'll bring it down, so I'd like you to collect it, if you—"

Kunon interrupted before Lulomet could finish asking if he was up to the task. "Of course, yes. Please go ahead."

*I'll bring it down.* In other words, Lulomet was going to use dark magic again. Of course Kunon would volunteer to help.

"Well, then. There—if you wouldn't mind."

"...Instant death, again..."

Lulomet had made quick work of the creature.

This time, Kunon had concentrated as hard as he could on observing the spell through his Glass Eye. And yet he couldn't make out anything besides the fact that Lulomet had activated his magic.

Nothing had happened. And yet the large fish had ceased moving, and, no longer able to swim against the current, it was now drifting away.

"Kunon? Please save the thinking for later."

"Huh? Oh, yes. Of course. I've got to collect it."

Once again, he'd gotten lost in thought. But now was not the time. If Lulomet continued fishing, Kunon would have more chances to witness his magic. In that case, there was only one thing for him to do.

Reaching out a hand, Kunon touched the water membrane with his fingertip.

Aligning his own magic with that making up the membrane so as not to interfere with its upkeep, he released a minute quantity of power across the barrier.

Blub. Blub blub blub blub.

Small bubbles formed in the water. One by one, they appeared and linked up in sequence, growing in size and stretching out like a tentacle.

Eventually, the end of the bubble chain—which had formed a kind of rope made of air—came into contact with the fish Lulomet had felled. As it did, one particularly large bubble encased the creature, securing it.

After that, the fish's body started to move toward them, as if Kunon was hauling it in with his air rope.

"...I see. That's A-rubu, isn't it?"

The spell was originally meant for cleaning and worked by trapping dirt inside its bubbles. But for its present application, Kunon had filled the bubbles with air and extended them outward. The spell was by no means difficult, but few could use it so deftly.

Lulomet, at least, had never seen it applied in such a way. He had witnessed a wealth of different spells—of all attributes—and these days, he rarely came across anything new.

"I think your magic is even more interesting than dark magic, you know? It's truly fascinating."

"Ah-ha-ha. You're too kind."

Lulomet was being completely earnest, but Kunon dismissed the comment as empty courtesy.

"Heh-heh. Quite the haul, hmm?"

Big fish earned good money. Knowing this, Lulomet was counting on making a nice sum from fishing so that the expedition would prove worthwhile even if there was no treasure on the shipwreck.

""YEAH!""

Though judging by the occasional roars he heard from the wreck, it seemed things were going well down there, too. That was the rest of the team's concern, however. He and Kunon were focused on the fish.

With the smaller ones fleeing from the strange happenings around the wreck, the only creatures that came near were giants in search of prey. Those fish, in turn, became Lulomet's prey. While unexpected, this course of events proved fortuitous.

"I'm almost at my limit, Lulomet."

The faction representative had taken down approximately twenty large fish. Kunon collected each kill and stored it in the extra-large, low-temperature A-ori he kept floating close by. But it appeared the water sphere was close to exceeding its weight limit and had no more room inside.

Looking at it now, it was plain they'd had an unusually successful day, catching nothing but massive fish the whole time. Also evident was the extent of Kunon's skill. He'd managed to secure a hefty haul, in both mass and weight, and with a beginner's spell, no less. It was easy to forget that Kunon was a new student who had only just entered the school.

"Understood," Lulomet replied. "Let's wrap it up here, then."

This may be the perfect time, he thought.

The small fish had all fled, and only bigger ones were approaching. In other words, there was a good chance something *troublingly large* was headed their way.

That possibility had occurred to Lulomet the moment they began fishing. But, like the investigation of the shipwreck below, there was limited time available to fish, and so he had kept quiet, prioritizing the task at hand.

"Oh," Kunon said. "Something's here."

Lulomet sensed it as well. That troublingly large *something* was coming toward them through the depths. Apparently, they had dallied a bit too long.

"Retreat! A huge monster is coming!"

As Lulomet's shout rang through the air, Kunon raised the box-shaped A-ori they were standing on.

"He said a monster is coming!" someone else called out.

"Someone go ahead and tell them to dispel the wall once we're out!"

"Tell Sandra to get ready to attack!"

Their group was made up of Advanced class students who had racked up all kinds of experiences trying to make money. Even a sudden warning was met with quick action.

The choice to withdraw was made immediately, bringing the expedition to an abrupt end.

In the worst-case scenario, they might not be able to retrieve anything this time. But they could easily come back for it later. Their current priority was to avoid imminent peril.

If the barrier holding the water back was destroyed while they were still in the hole, that would be it—they would either drown or be crushed under the pressure. If that happened, the monster would be the least of their worries.

"Do you need help?!" Cassis asked.

While everyone was busy evacuating, she went to check on Kunon and Lulomet.

"How wonderful," said Kunon.

"What?!"

"I think you're a wonderful woman, Miss Cassis. You might say otherwise, but when it comes down to it, you still worry about me."

"Who cares about that?! This is not the time!"

Cassis's words were sensible—she was on a roll today. Indeed, they had no time to talk. Still, it was a very Kunon-like thing to say.

"I'm fine, so please take Lulomet and go. I can move a little faster with less weight."

At present, Kunon was ascending in the box-shaped A-ori while also maintaining the sphere with their catch.

Unsurprisingly, with such a massive payload, he was gaining altitude a lot slower than a wind sorcerer would during flight.

"Got it! Representative, please grab on to me!"

"All right. Kunon, I'll be going ahead."

Then, the moment Cassis took Lulomet's hand— Boom!

—the membrane separating air and water shook violently. Cracks splintered across the wall at the same time as the sound. The monster had arrived, and it was ramming its body into the membrane.

The fissures in the barrier grew rapidly. Forced to open wider, the small cracks ultimately gave way to a hole. Then water came rushing through in vast quantities, forming a waterfall.

The membrane was highly durable. It was flexible, despite being solid, allowing it to withstand the surrounding water pressure. And yet, with one powerful blow, the monster had opened a small hole in it.

"It's huge! What is that thing?!"

Cassis was panicking. She could tell they were in trouble.

"Incredible," Kunon said in amazement, apparently oblivious to the danger. "A simple external impact shouldn't be enough to break the wall, and yet..."

The barrier was quite sturdy, as expected of something constructed by a team of so many sorcerers. *How interesting*, he thought.

"Oh? It's a massive rockhead," Lulomet said, calmly observing the creature.

A rockhead was a fish monster with a huge, boulder-like growth on its head, and this one was truly enormous. From head to tail, it was approximately as big as the midsize sailing ship Kunon and the others had taken there.

Rockheads were large in general, but this one was an extraordinary specimen even among its own kind. It was so big, the Adventurers Guild might even have a bounty on it. Rockhead fish were known for ramming into passing ships, and this one was bound to have sunk a few.

"Can you use your instant kill spell on that thing?" Kunon asked Lulomet, who was still holding tight to Cassis's arm.

"Haven't you figured out how it works yet?"

"No, but after seeing it so many times, I do have a few theories."

"Then do you think I can do it?"

"Maybe, if you try really hard."

"Hmmm. I don't think so. That thing is too big."

If he had enough time, Lulomet thought he might be able to subdue the rockhead, but an instant kill was impossible.

"Okay, then let's fly!"

The situation had gotten quite serious. Cassis had waited to hear whether Lulomet thought he could kill the creature, but now she decided it was time to flee.

Instantly, Kunon's hand shot out.

"Ah, wait a moment."

Just as Cassis was about to fly off, Kunon grabbed hold of her flashy miniskirt, stopping her.

"Whoa, hey! Watch where you're grabbing, y-you pervert!"

"Pervert..."

Kunon's heart throbbed. He had just experienced the magnificent violence of feminine power.

Moments later, the giant rockhead rammed the membrane again, breaking through. It soared through the air as if it were flying, passing right over their heads.

"Seriously?!"

It had been a close call. If they'd made a rapid ascent just then, the monster might have plowed right into them from the side.

The giant fish, having shot through the wall into the air, plummeted down to the water. But with the amount currently pouring in, it was still right in front of them.

They were in a dangerous spot. If the fish leaped out of the sea, they would be within striking distance.

"Kunon, let go!" cried Cassis. "I'll go first!"

Everyone else had already made their escape. That was why Cassis had grown concerned and flown down to them. In other words, the three of them were the only ones still in the hole. If the rockhead had come looking for food, there was no doubt that it would target them. After all, they were the only people left.

"It's all right," Kunon declared. "I think I can handle that thing."

"What?! Even though you can't see it?!"

"Yes." Kunon nodded, his expression composed. "In fact, it might be more dangerous to act hastily. Please leave it to me, for I am a gentleman."

Cassis didn't think being a gentleman had anything to do with the current situation, but she kept that to herself. There was no time for comebacks.

"Don't worry," said Kunon. "The water is my domain."

"What?! They didn't get out in time?!"

Upon receiving the news back on the ship, Eushida was deeply shaken. Kunon, Lulomet, and Cassis had fallen behind. The team member who had witnessed the monster bursting through the membrane hadn't been the last one out, after all.

There were still three people in the hole. But the sorcerers who had been maintaining the membrane, not to mention Eushida herself, had reached their limits. They had been trying their best to keep up the barrier even as the first cracks began to appear, but the task only got harder as external pressure increased.

Ultimately, the membrane completely disappeared, and seawater poured in from all sides. They didn't even have the chance to call out for a rescue team. The massive hole in the middle of the ocean was no more, and the sea had returned to its previous state. It was as if nothing had happened there at all.

But they had found treasure. They'd already hauled up all the notable finds, and Eushida had just been thinking they should take a break for safety's sake, go back in one more time to investigate, then be done.

Everyone had thought this would be a simple way to earn money. But then a

monster appeared, and everything was ruined. To make matters worse, the disaster had even claimed lives.

For the group aboard the ship, now floating in calm water, the celebratory mood suddenly took a nosedive. Even Sandra, who had been dancing happily, clad in their scavenged jewels, froze as the smile slipped from her face.

They all stood in silence, staring at the spot where the hole had been just moments before...

Then something burst up from the depths with tremendous force.

It was a huge A-ori—a giant water sphere containing twenty-four enormous fish and three people.

The sphere came to a halt in midair, and its top half disappeared. From inside the bowl-shaped A-ori, its three passengers poked their heads above the water's surface, while the fish remained submerged. For Eushida and the others, it was like they were looking up at a tiny patch of ocean.

"All right," Kunon announced. "Escape successful."

"Ack! Koff! Ugh, seriously! I swallowed seawater, and I'm totally soaked!"

"Your magic really is fascinating," said Lulomet.

The last three evacuees—Kunon, Cassis, and Lulomet—had made it out safely.

It was quite a simple feat, really. All Kunon had to do was enclose everyone in a flexible A-ori and make some adjustments to allow the rockhead to ram it. He made sure the fish slammed into the sphere from the bottom, sending it shooting upward.

And...at the exact moment of impact, another A-ori—also flexible, and filled with some of their air—enveloped the rockhead's upper body and stuck there. Even if the fish struggled, it wouldn't be able to dislodge the sphere or burst it by slamming into things.

Kunon expected the rockhead would be floating to the surface any minute now, as if it had been beached in the middle of the ocean.

•

After a short rest, they decided to go back into the water.

The experiment was going well so far, if you ignored the whole "giant rockhead attack" anyway.

"Okay, one more time! Let's go!"

Everyone got moving again at Eushida's command. The monster might have interrupted their work, but that didn't mean they had to stop entirely.

And so the shipwreck investigation promptly resumed.

They kept up their exploration until the sky began to turn red, then finally called it quits.

After the first spot of trouble, there were no other issues, and their underwater breathing experiment proved a success.

The project had gotten a little offtrack, but in the end, they completed their experiment. All that remained was to put together and submit their report. Then they would see if they had earned any credits.

The experimental results alone might not have been sufficient. But if they also submitted a record of their practical findings, the project would surely be valued more highly. After all, real results were worth more than theoretical ones.

The team had been blinded by the promise of wealth, but "underwater exploration" had a variety of applications, such as studying marine ecology or ocean currents. Searching for underwater shipwrecks was by no means the only way to put their data to good use.

Only the six original members of the team, including Cassis, were eligible for credits. The others brought on to assist were not. Naturally, this had been discussed beforehand. The items they had recovered would be divided equally among everyone, but that was merely compensation for their efforts. No one else was officially included on the team.

"Heh-heh. Eh-heh-heh. Hee-hee-hee. Heh-heh."

Cassis couldn't stop cackling as she gazed at the precious metals and jewels lined up to dry on the ship's deck.

The treasures were stunning as they gleamed in the setting sun.

Likely of historical value as well, the trinkets had crossed the stormy seas of time to reemerge in the light of day. Artlessly arranged on the deck, they looked just like the ocean's own glimmering surface.

Cassis, who had an eye for such things, quickly appraised the items and found that they were worth roughly fifty million in total.

Fifty million necca. Even when divided among fifteen people, they would each earn approximately three million. It was a considerable sum. Those who participated as helpers in the project would be earning three million for a single day's work. A job so convenient was practically unheard-of.

And yet...

"...Tch. I don't like it, but I'm impressed."

Clicking her tongue in annoyance, Sandra gazed out past their haul of treasure at the water beyond.

Floating alongside the boat, and comparable to the vessel in size, was a massive rockhead—the one Kunon had taken down.

Sandra would have liked to kill the creature herself, but she hadn't gotten the chance.

They didn't know whether the fish had a bounty attached to it. But even if it didn't, it would likely fetch a healthy price, due to its size alone.

Its flesh was more or less edible, but it wasn't very appetizing and wouldn't sell for much. Its bones, teeth, power stone, and head boulder all had various uses, however, and those were what would drive up its value.

The other thing bothering Sandra was how Kunon had quite generously said, "We worked as a team today, so let's divide up everything we earn, to avoid any issues." If she had been in his shoes, Sandra would have insisted on taking all the profit for herself. Kunon, however, was simply too preoccupied with Lulomet's dark magic and whether his theories would be proved right or wrong to care about anything else.

The recovered treasures would be left with a trusted merchant for appraisal

and sold once a price was agreed upon, while the fish Lulomet had killed would make the journey back to Dirashik with them, to be sold to another reliable trader. The giant rockhead, however, was bound for the Adventurers Guild in the nearest seaside town. All these tasks would be left to sorcerers like Sandra, who also worked as adventurers.

Such matters were discussed on deck as they made their way back to port.

"Thank you for showing me something spectacular today, Lulomet. Well, not that I could see it."

Meanwhile, Kunon and Lulomet were at the stern, seemingly unconcerned with matters of money. Truthfully, they were interested in that as well. They just had different priorities.

"Did you figure it out?" Lulomet asked. "Have you discovered my magic's true form?"

"I think so. It's debilitation, isn't it?"

Lulomet laughed. "How did you come to that conclusion?"

"Under closer scrutiny, I realized that your prey's movements slowed in stages. Not that I could see any of it, of course."

Indeed—after watching Lulomet take down so many fish, Kunon had figured out the mechanism behind his powers.

"Instant death" was actually "death by enervation," or perhaps "death by fatigue."

Although the deaths had appeared instantaneous, in reality, the creatures had died from being rapidly sapped of their strength. Or at least, that was Kunon's opinion.

The rapid enervation didn't happen in a single moment, either. There was no sudden stoppage of the heart or injury inflicted. The weakening was methodical, though it happened with shocking speed.

That was why it went unnoticed. The spell's target kept going, unaware, before it eventually stopped moving and died. The speedy and successive nature of the change was the reason neither the birds nor the fish had reacted

with any kind of alarm. They had no idea that they had been attacked.	



"You truly are brilliant. Many people have yet to notice that."

"So I'm right?"

"Yes. Or perhaps I should say that's one part of it."

One part of it. So there were other factors, too.

"Dark magic's particular trait is the weakening of something through debilitation, decay, aging, fatigue, and so on. It's quite plain when you hear it laid out like that, don't you think?"

"How fascinating! I'm thrilled!"

He really is an incredible kid, Lulomet thought.

Boring. Useless.

Those were Lulomet's impressions of dark magic when he first learned about it.

How was he meant to weaken something? And what was he supposed to do with magic that made people fatigued? It wasn't even that effective on things with a lot of vitality.

His mind had been filled with such thoughts. At the time, Lulomet had been totally unaware of the potential of darkness.

"They say light and dark are two sides of the same coin. Light magic is about protection, preservation, healing, growth—those sorts of things, yes? Darkness conjures the opposite image. Erosion, the promotion of injury and exhaustion, the degeneration of life and matter... Well, you get the idea."

As he explained, Lulomet realized how macabre his attribute sounded. But the true value of darkness lay beyond all that.

Until he had reached that understanding himself, Lulomet hadn't liked his attribute at all. He had even tried to distance himself from it. Despite being a rare kind of magic, like light and foul, dark magic, he felt, was utterly useless compared to the others. He had even considered it the most worthless attribute of the seven.

"You still think it sounds interesting?"

"What do you mean? I'm completely fascinated!"

But Kunon, it seemed, had already realized the attribute's possibilities—the ones Lulomet had only noticed after months and years of study.

The potential of darkness. What would be the result of intensifying the process of weakening and decay? For Lulomet, it was that line of thought that had truly brought home his magic's worth. It was in that concept that he saw its potential.

Darkness was completely unlike the other magical attributes. Its properties were unique. Realizing its value had taken some time, but once he did, Lulomet was hooked.

"So, so then! If you compressed the weakening, you know—if you condensed it—it could become a tremendous spell that instantly dissolves and swallows up everything it touches!"

"Kunon. You're quite loud."

What Kunon had just described was Lulomet's secret weapon—the ultimate goal of dark magic, which he had arrived at after years of deep thought.

Kunon, however, had gotten there instantly, from only their current conversation. And that was despite the fact that darkness wasn't his attribute, and he probably still didn't fully understand its properties.

"That's amazing!" Kunon exclaimed. "I bet it could weaken and erase all my magic! Dark magic is incredible!"

Lulomet was astounded. Then he laughed.

Which of us is really the incredible one? he thought.



"Welcome back, Master Kunon."

By the time Kunon returned to his home in Dirashik, it was completely dark outside.

"Thank you, Rinko. I apologize for my lateness."

"You gave me prior warning, so there's no problem."

Rinko took Kunon's coat. It smelled like the ocean.

Kunon had told his maid ahead of time that he was going to the sea that day to explore a sunken ship. The plan was for him to be home the same day, but he had warned her that there was a chance he would be late.

If he hadn't returned, Rinko would have had to report it to the Gurion household, but since he had returned home safely, there was no need.

"How was it investigating the bottom of the sea?" she asked.

"Actually, I have something much more interesting to tell you, Rinko!"

"Huh?! Don't tell me you saw a ghost ship or something?! I love those kinds of stories!"

"I did see a ghost ship, but that can wait!"

"What, you really saw one?! Tell me, tell me!"

"Okay, but first—!"

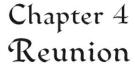
"No! I want to hear about the ghost ship!"

For a while, the conversation went in circles.

Incidentally, Kunon had seen a ghost ship. He'd spotted it with his Glass Eye while he and Lulomet were fishing. Kunon couldn't imagine what else the tattered vessel he'd seen sailing underwater might have been, if not a ghost ship.

As no one else seemed to notice it, and as it didn't appear to be doing any harm, he simply hadn't mentioned it to anyone.







"...But in the end, it came out to only around twenty million."

Twenty million necca was still a considerable sum, of course. But it was less than half of Cassis's rough estimate of fifty million.

"Were you satisfied with that?" the Saint asked.

Kunon was reading through some documents on the sacred herb, and he nodded without looking up.

"I was totally fine with it. Though it was the team leader's call and not mine. I only heard about it after the fact."

The shipwreck had been located in the waters off the shore of the Holy Kingdom. From that alone, it was clear which country it had come from. Legally speaking, recovered items became the property of whoever found them. But the Holy Kingdom had issued a call for the treasure to be handed over, claiming they had rights to everything the team had found. Even the magic school's teachers had spoken up in the Holy Kingdom's favor, saying, "Consider the future. Give up this fight."

Ultimately, Eushida made the decision to comply with the order. From what

Kunon had heard, the twenty million necca hadn't come from the sale of the precious stones and metals, but rather from a reward for recovering and returning them.

Reasoning that opinions on the matter would be divided and that complaints would arise no matter what they did, Eushida had exercised her authority as team leader and made the decision alone. Given the teachers' stance, she'd probably had little choice when it came down to it.

A refusal also seemed likely to worsen relations between the Holy Kingdom and the school. If such a move led the kingdom to distrust all sorcerers, no profit would be worth the price paid. Kunon was happy to hear that international relations had won out over the lure of a quick profit and that the situation had come to a peaceful end.

That said, it sounded like Cassis had been in quite a stormy mood of late. She'd probably already been thinking about what to buy with her earnings. She'd been clear about her monetary motives right from the beginning, after all.

"I apologize on behalf of my country," said the Saint.

As usual, although her words were apologetic, she didn't seem all that bothered.

Several days had passed since the experiment in the ocean had come to a close.

Kunon was paying a visit to the Saint's classroom for the first time in a while in order to wrap up some minor business regarding the shi-shilla herb.

"Nice to see you again, Miss Reyes— Oh! You have more potted plants." How very like Kunon to stop mid-greeting and go over to see the new additions. "Are these carrot leaves? And these, turnips? You're growing vegetables?"

Closing the book she was reading, Reyes directed her answer to the part of Kunon currently facing her—his back.

"Yes. I thought I would try growing something other than the sacred herb, since I have the space."

Cultivation of the shi-shilla herb had succeeded, thanks to the power of the Sanctum spell. But how would the same conditions affect regular vegetables and herbs?

Saints were said to have the ability to produce bumper crops. Such tales were only legends, however, and neither the specifics of how to use such a power nor its exact effects were known. Reyes had started her own experiment partly to figure that out.

"What about the fish pond? Will it be built anytime soon?"

"No, permission wasn't granted, unfortunately. It seems there used to be a fish pond at the school, but some sort of accident occurred."

Kunon had heard a similar story, but he merely hummed in response, sounding uninterested.

"What about you?" Reyes asked. "I heard you went to investigate a shipwreck."

"Oh, that's true. Actually—"

He hadn't been able to tell anyone outside the project about the subject of their experiment until it was over. But now that it had ended, he could talk all he wanted.

Turning away from the potted plants, Kunon relayed the details of the experiment he had carried out with the rest of the "Underwater Breathing Methods" team.

As he spoke, he got to work on the business with the shi-shilla herb.

"...What a shame," the Saint said at last.

Their compensation had shrunk from fifty million down to twenty million. Having only recently struggled from a lack of funds, Reyes felt discouraged just hearing such a story, almost as if the money were her own. Thirty million was a massive loss.

"It seems one of the pieces of jewelry had the Holy Kingdom's coat of arms on it," said Kunon. "Isn't that something only high-ranking people in your country are allowed to have?"

"Oh, yes. Jewels bearing the Goddess Kira Leila's emblem cannot be manufactured without the High Priest's permission, in part to prevent the craft from being leaked. Such ornaments are special items bestowed by the High Priest himself... If that's the case, it was probably inevitable that he gave the order."

If the Holy Kingdom's coat of arms was truly on one of the items, its owner was clear. It made sense that they wished to have their property back, if only to prevent its misuse somewhere down the line. The logic was easy to understand, especially for a saint from the kingdom in question.

"I see," said Kunon. "Well, I really have no problem with it."

The rockhead and the rest of their fishing haul had come to about ten million, and they had been allowed to keep anything that wasn't a precious gem or metal, such as gold coins. After deducting various expenses, they were left with approximately thirty million necca.

That thirty million in joint earnings was then divided between the fifteen of them. That was ample reward, from Kunon's point of view. Frankly, he was more concerned with getting credits.

"The Medicine Boxes seem to be coming along nicely, too."

Kunon scanned over Reyes's records, checking to see where they stood.

The sacred herb situation was moving in the right direction. The magic tools they had created to store the shi-shilla salve were exhibiting the desired effects, and while they were still in the trial stages, at the current rate, they might soon be ready for actual use.

"Incidentally, Kunon, are you working on any experiments at the moment?"

"None at all. Though I have a few ideas I'd like to try. But if you're asking me on a date, I'm free anytime."

Over the past few days, Kunon had been obsessing over the dark magic Lulomet had shown him. All he could think about was how he might possibly outmaneuver that darkness.

Kunon could only use two spells: A-ori, which produced water, and A-rubu,

which made a cleansing foam.

Both of them were considered the most elementary spells a water sorcerer could learn. Consequently, neither used a lot of magic power, and when Kunon used them, he was able to sustain them at high volume while performing complex and intricate operations. That sort of thing was his specialty, and he knew it.

But the advantage of using so little magic power became a disadvantage in the face of darkness. A low-power spell didn't stand much chance against decaying magic. It would be wiped out in no time precisely because of its small power supply. That meant, at present, Kunon had no way to hold his own against dark magic.

Though he wasn't sure exactly why, Kunon felt that light, dark, and foul magic were fundamentally different from the other types. Compared to the common attributes of fire, water, earth, and wind, the three rarer types seemed to possess different basic abilities.

It was hard to put into words, but...they just weren't the same as natural phenomena like fire and water. He felt they were a cut above, somehow—like they transcended the ideas of compatibility and conflict found throughout nature.

It was a truly fascinating concept.

If Kunon could elevate water magic to that same superior tier—even if it wasn't possible quite yet—he might be able to give the rarer attributes a run for their money.

Perhaps there was a realm past even that—one beyond the limits of current magic.

No, there had to be. And Kunon was determined to reach it.

As he had yet to perfect his vision, the idea that there were still unknown heights to which he could aspire was cause for celebration. There was still so much depth to magic for Kunon to explore and experiment with. He was certain that somewhere out there existed a means by which he might truly gain his sight. And if it didn't, he would simply have to find one on his own. After all,

many aspects of magic and magic power were still unknown.

...But for now he set all that aside.

"Ideas you'd like to try?" repeated Reyes.

"Yep. I was thinking it's about time I learned some new spells."

If possible, Kunon also wanted to learn some intermediate spells that would require a bit more power. Doing so might give him a clue about how to defeat Lulomet's darkness. And more importantly, Kunon simply thought he would enjoy learning some new magic.

Kunon had made thorough use of A-ori and A-rubu, the only two spells he could perform. He had already adapted them in every way he could think of, and he had probably reached the limit of what he could accomplish with those spells alone. For that reason, he figured it was probably a good time to learn something new.

"I see. Then before you do that, would you like to go on a little date with me?"

"Of course I would!" It was an unexpected proposal for the Saint to make, but Kunon didn't hesitate for a moment. "As if I could refuse an invitation from you, Miss Reyes!"

"Wonderful. Then let us head to the Adventurers Guild."

"Of course. Anywhere you wish to go!" Kunon replied.

Ah, he thought, she probably wants me to help out with something regarding the Trade Guild.

But whether or not that was true, his answer remained the same.

"It's been a while, Master Kunon."

The moment he heard that voice, Kunon took an involuntary step back.

"Oh, Jirni," he said. "Your beauty shines even on a cloudy day, like some kind of gem." He sounded exactly like himself despite his hesitation.

"Well, thank you. The sky is clear today, however."

"Is it...? Perhaps there's a cloud in my heart instead..."

That was when it dawned on Kunon. *Of course*. If Reyes was traveling outside the school, her bodyguards would be joining her.

Even for Kunon, whose bookkeeping was sloppy at best, having to foot a lunch bill of nearly a quarter million necca still haunted him. And it was Jirni, the combination maid-bodyguard, who ordered the staggeringly expensive bottle of wine that had cost two hundred and twenty thousand necca alone.

The Saint planned to leave school before noon to attend to her errand at the Adventurers Guild and had asked one of her bodyguards to come pick her up. Her other attendant, Philea, had stayed behind to hold down the fort.

Kunon and Reyes met up with Jirni near the school gate without incident and made their way toward the Adventurers Guild.

"Let's go somewhere after we finish up," Reyes suggested.

"Sure."

"Where should we go?"

"Wherever you wish. I'll follow you anywhere, even to a ladies' underclothes shop."

Kunon and Reyes exchanged idle chat on the way to their destination, walking side by side, with Jirni right behind.

"Come to think of it, I believe you promised me a parfait. Why don't we do that today?"

"Good idea."

"But at this hour, shouldn't lunch come first?"

Lunch. There it was—the word Kunon dreaded. He felt himself begin to falter...

"Of course, let's have lunch as well."

Still, he persisted, despite the way his heart clenched painfully in his chest and screamed at him to refuse. The image of his maid scolding him was still fresh in his mind. But regardless of his inner feelings, he wanted to be a gentleman—

even if he was only acting the part.

"Is there a particular restaurant you'd like to try? I would be d-delighted to accompany you two lovely ladies, n-naturally."

Kunon's voice wavered, and he stumbled over his words. But he didn't let that stop him. If he backed out now, he thought, he would never again be able to call himself a gentleman.

In the end, men were pitiful creatures who simply wished to show off in front of women.

"Really? Isn't that nice, Jirni? Kunon is going to treat us to another delicious meal."

"You're very kind, Master Kunon."

"Ah-ha. Ha-ha-ha. Don't mention it. I'm benefiting here, too. There's no problem. Yeah. Everything is fine. There's no reason to be afraid."

That was a lie. His maid's harsh rebuke was not so easily forgotten. She had been so angry, Kunon would rather not think about it.

He laughed and put on a brave face, but he couldn't help silently praying: *Please. Please don't ask for wine.* 

But back to the matter at hand.

"So?"

Kunon decided to change the subject, dropping the discussion of lunch. If he didn't, he had a feeling his emotions would get the better of him, stop him in his tracks, and make him turn tail and run. He thought of the two hundred and twenty thousand necca, and then of his maid. Rinko was terrifying.

"Was there something you wanted me to do, Miss Reyes?" he asked.

"You could tell?"

"I am a gentleman, after all."

Though she didn't quite follow his logic, Reyes thought perhaps that was simply part of a gentleman's skill set.

"I received a request from the Adventurers Guild this morning. They asked me

to bring them a skilled water sorcerer, if I knew any. I would have disregarded it if you hadn't come by. It seems they need a little help with something. Would you mind?"

"Oh, it involves the Adventurers Guild?"

Kunon had expected it would be about the shi-shilla business, but evidently this was a separate matter.

"Yes. And from what we spoke about earlier, it would seem it has something to do with you."

"Something to do with me? You're sure?"

"Yes. You will be compensated, naturally."

Kunon had no clue what the request could be. Other than the sacred herb and the Medicine Boxes, he couldn't think of any business he had with the Adventurers Guild. And they probably would have contacted him directly if it was about either of those.

"Actually—," she began.

"Oh, it's fine. I'd rather be surprised. Instead, let's talk about the fun lunch we're going to have." Kunon interrupted Reyes's explanation, to bring the topic back to lunch. The short break from the subject had allowed him to calm himself a bit.

Nowhere expensive, he thought. Try to sway them toward an ordinary establishment.

It wasn't too late. Nothing had been decided yet. Now was the time to act!

"Nice to see you again, Kunon."

Once they arrived at the Adventurers Guild, Kunon and the ladies temporarily parted ways.

Reyes was off to a previously scheduled business meeting, and Kunon was left to deal with the other matter, as they had discussed.

The guild's accounting manager, Asand Smithee, whom he had met before, led Kunon into a storehouse-like building next to the guild. The space was

empty of people, and contained little in the way of goods. There was, however, a noticeable variety of smells.

"This is a short-term storage area for game and other loot before it's sold or otherwise dealt with. We mostly use it for the carcasses of monsters and animals. Though we don't disassemble them here, the smell of blood is still rather pervasive."

"So that's what it is... Hmm?" Amid the bevy of odors, Kunon's nose picked up a vague yet familiar scent. It reminded him of the ocean. "Fish?"

He had smelled something exactly like this the other day while at sea.

"Yes. Several days ago, a large quantity of high-grade fish was brought to Dirashik. It's being stored with us until a buyer is found."

A large quantity of fish. So that was what Reyes had meant when she said it had something to do with Kunon.

"And now," Asand continued, "a buyer has asked us to transport two of them out of town. Oh, I'm speaking of those over there."

Asand pointed out a cart laden with two massive fish. Considering the timing and size, they must have been some of the creatures brought down by Lulomet. And it seemed the fish were about to travel.

Though he hadn't yet been told why his help was needed, Kunon could more or less see the reason, even if he couldn't see the fish.

"You want them frozen?" he asked.

"Huh? Oh, yes, that's correct! They're half-frozen at the moment, but I was thinking we should have it redone properly before they're moved."

It had been several days since Kunon and the others explored the shipwreck. Because it was winter, a thoroughly frozen and properly stored fish could be kept for some time. But since these fish needed to be transported out of the city, it was definitely a good idea to have them frozen again before their journey.

"Um... Please excuse me, but are you up for the task?" asked Asand.

<sup>&</sup>quot;Pardon?"

"It's just, I've heard ice magic is difficult... That's why we had a hard time finding adventurers to turn to."

"I see... Oh, but what about Miss Sandra?"

Sandra was a water sorcerer with an impressive amount of power. She had earned some fame in adventurer spheres, and Kunon had thought her capabilities were well established, but...

"I'm afraid she isn't capable of freezing *just* the fish. She'd probably freeze about half the storehouse along with them..."

In part, that was due to Sandra's lack of fine magic control. However, manipulating ice magic was no easy feat for anyone. Specifically, the challenge was in limiting the scope of the magic to a designated section or area. Plenty of people could manage it within a certain rough range. But the narrower the target, the harder it became.

"Ah, I understand. It is a bit difficult, isn't it?"

Feeling nostalgic, Kunon stepped up to the slightly thawed fish on the cart.

Partial, limited freezing was no mean feat. Kunon remembered having his fair share of struggles while learning the skill.

"May I freeze them, then?"

"Yes. Please do."

Plink-plink. Plink.

The exterior of each fish frosted over, crackling audibly as it hardened. This was, after all, the same Kunon who had once glided around the royal palace on A-ori he'd fashioned into little ice sleds.

"I'm done."

It had taken only a moment. White mist rose from the massive fish carcasses.

"...Ice, huh?" Kunon could make ice, as he'd just demonstrated, by altering Aori. But he still didn't know the spell that produced ice itself. "...I suppose that can be my next task."

A form of water that wasn't water. It was definitely worth studying.

Kunon had decided—he knew what his third spell was going to be.

Once the fish were frozen, Kunon's work was done.

Just as Reyes had said, all the guild needed was a little help. But since the Saint was still in her meeting, it seemed Kunon would have to wait around for a while.

"Will you be waiting for Miss Reyes? How would you like to have some tea back at the guild, then?"

"Ah, yes... If you don't mind the intrusion."

Under Asand's mindful guidance, Kunon was brought to the guild's reception room.

"By the way, Kunon! How's that new salve coming along?!"

"P-pardon? New salve?"

No sooner had they stepped into the room than Asand suddenly raised his voice, catching Kunon off guard.

"You know, the one from before! The new shi-shilla salve formed into thin strips of paper!"

"O-oh, that one?"

So that was what the man was referring to—the salve they had signed a contract for during Kunon's last visit to the guild.

"... Wait, what? I wrote a letter to the guild about it."

Indeed, as far as Kunon was concerned, the ball was out of his court. And even if there had been some mistake, he didn't think the situation called for this kind of aggressive questioning.

"Well, you see, all matters relating to the sacred herb are currently under the guild master's purview. I handled our original correspondence because the guild master was absent, but..."

That meant Kunon's letter had probably been given to the guild master.

"Is that who Miss Reyes is meeting with right now?"

"That's correct. The guild master considered the matter quite important and decided to handle it personally."

*I see,* Kunon thought, nodding.

"Well," he said, "to summarize my letter, we're currently waiting on the Medicine Boxes. Without a box designed specifically to store the salve in its paper form, it won't be as portable. Otherwise, sweat could dissolve it."

Asand was familiar with the particulars of the shi-shilla salve, since he had been the first person they negotiated with. Kunon was therefore confident he would understand without further explanation.

"...Ah, that's right. If it melts at the temperature of blood, then even the sweat on one's palm would..."

The only thing the product had going for it was convenience. And that was precisely why its specifications were so precise. Extreme care was required in its handling.

"Yes, and so it will need a container for transport. If we don't make the proper preparations, we'll just be wasting the salve."

The Medicine Boxes were currently being tested for performance. They would need at least another month or two of monitoring. Kunon, however, was hoping to try out the boxes under various conditions, which would require another six months to a year.

The salve would be useless unless the Medicine Boxes were perfect. Kunon's letter had conveyed all this, but it seemed the guild master hadn't shared anything with Asand.

"Is there some reason we need to rush production?"

"Oh, no... It's just that there's an urgent need for it. Adventurers risk their lives daily, and I'm certain some would be spared if we had your product at our disposal. But perhaps I have been a bit too impatient. Just hearing about the idea was like a dream come true."

Asand's words made Kunon restless, but he managed to keep his composure.

If all he needed was the salve, he could produce it right away. But that

wouldn't be very useful. The shi-shilla salve wasn't convenient unless one had a specialized container to store it in. No matter how effective it was, it wouldn't fulfill its purpose, with such a negligible shelf life. It would be awful if someone attempted to use it during a critical moment and couldn't.

The guild master probably understood all this and was purposely keeping the matter under wraps. Rushing now would only lead to half-baked results. And in that case, they should wait to announce the salve until it was ready, instead of getting people's hopes up in vain.

Asand seemed to get it, so Kunon decided to change the subject.

"Regarding the salve, all we can do is wait. More importantly, Mr. Asand, I have a question for you. Time is of the essence, so I really hope you can help me."

"What is it?"

"Well then, Kunon, good-bye for now," said Reyes.

"Thank you for the meal," Jirni added.

After leaving the café, the group went their separate ways.

"Farewell, kittens shivering in the darkness."

As they walked away, Reyes and Jirni tilted their heads in confusion —"kittens?"

Though he couldn't see them, Kunon grinned at the ladies' retreating forms.

"...Hah. I did it!"

Kunon had come out on top. That day's lunch had completely made up for the last one.

Kunon had asked Asand for advice and been recommended a restaurant that looked fancy but was reasonably priced. One with delicious food, a trendy atmosphere, and crucially, no expensive wine list.

Kunon should have known he could count on a local. He had worried his request was too tall an order, but Asand had answered with aplomb.

Kunon was able to relax all the way through ordering the parfaits. And with

the pressure gone, he was able to have a great time. He'd managed to go on a date with *two* beautiful women, though Jirni had seemed a bit bored, as Kunon and Reyes spent the whole time discussing magic.

Light magic was fascinating, too, and Kunon hoped Reyes would continue experimenting until she succeeded in cultivating the sacred herb without using her saint powers.

But back to the matter at hand...

Though lunch was over, it was only a little past midday. There was still time before it got dark, so Kunon decided to return to school. He had decided on what spell to learn next, and he needed to find someone to teach it to him.

Finally, the time had come. That day, Kunon would meet his idol, Professor Satori.

•

Kunon was very nervous. The very strength of his admiration caused him to hesitate, and he started to get cold feet.

He knew where he could find Professor Satori. He had wanted to meet her right after entering school, but he had ended up with various things to do, and had been forced to put it off. Or rather, he had purposely delayed it.

What if meeting her discouraged him? What if he wasn't skilled enough to merit her attention? Such adolescent worries had caused him to keep his distance.

Kunon was now walking through the fourth school building, where Professor Satori's office was located.

"…"

He stopped in front of one particular door and swallowed hard.

Here it was. At the western end of the fourth floor of School Building 4 was a room with SATORI GLÜCKE engraved into its nameplate.

Finally, he had arrived. Beyond this door was the water sorcerer Kunon admired.

"Here we go."

The sudden urge to turn and run reared up inside him, but Kunon shoved it down. Steeling his resolve, he knocked on the door.

Knock, knock.

It was done. There was no going back now.

After a few seconds that felt like an eternity, the door opened. At last, he would meet his idol...

"It's been quite a while, Master Kunon."

An old, familiar voice greeted him. At the sound of it, his brain came to a brief, screeching halt. This was too sudden, too unexpected. He would never forget that voice.

"...Miss Jenié?"

There was no mistaking it. The person standing in front of Kunon was his first teacher, Jenié Kors.

"Miss Jenié? ... Miss Jenié?! Is it really you?!"

"It's really me."

"You're sure?! You're not an impostor?!"

"Yes, I'm real."

Why would someone go to the trouble of making a fake Miss Jenié, anyway? What would be the point?

Kunon was astonished. He had come to meet someone he looked up to, and his former mentor had appeared instead.

Jenié Kors. By now, Kunon understood Jenié's true abilities quite well. He understood that what she had said when she left the Gurion household was nothing but the pure and simple truth.

I have nothing more to teach you.

With those words, Jenié had resigned from her position as Kunon's private tutor. And yet even now, as far as Kunon was concerned, she was still the best

teacher he'd ever had.

Without a doubt, she had laid the groundwork that had allowed him to come this far. She was the one who had rescued him from the depths of despair. Even if it hadn't been her intention, her words had given Kunon the strength to take his first step in a new direction.

No matter what anyone said, Kunon's greatest teacher had been Jenié Kors. Even if he surpassed her, he was certain that fact would never change.

And now she was right in front of him. Of course he was astonished.

"Look at how you've grown."

Jenié was surprised, too. Emotion washed over her. She couldn't believe that the Kunon she had known had decided to enroll in magic school and come all this way.

Well, by the time she ended her employment at the Gurion estate, she'd had the feeling he would probably come to magic school. But Jenié had known Kunon as an apathetic child mired in hopelessness. Because of that, she couldn't help but marvel at how far the young boy had come.

He was twelve years old now, and he had grown significantly since the last time she saw him—both physically and magically.

"Miss Jenié! I've missed you so much! How I mourned the days I had to spend without your beauty, your lovely voice, your bewitching magic! Without your magic, I simply cannot go on!"

"I think you're mistaken. I know you can make it. After all, you've managed just fine so far."

It seemed Kunon had matured in some unnecessary ways as well. Back when she was his teacher, Jenié had been concerned about how he might turn out in this respect, and it seemed her fears had been justified.

She had been hearing rumors about Kunon around the school, and now that she had seen him again for herself, she was sure of it: This was undoubtedly the work of that maid.

It was a good thing that Kunon had become bright and cheerful, but why in

the world had she taught him to act so frivolously when it came to women? "I'm currently working as Professor Satori's assistant."



Once their moving (?) reunion was over, Jenié explained what she was doing there.

After parting with the Gurion household, she had revisited her alma mater—the Dirashik School of Magic—intending to begin her studies again from the ground up.

Satori Glücke had been a mentor and a great help to Jenié during her school days. Jenié had graduated with average grades from the Second Level class, but she had also worked part-time helping Satori out with her experiments, and she had used that fact to reconnect with the woman. She was now working as Satori's assistant and was treated as an associate professor.

She had thought she would probably run into Kunon at school someday. He hadn't heard any talk of her, but Jenié had certainly heard talk of Kunon.

Though she had been Kunon's teacher in name only, she was well aware of his abilities. She had thought that if Kunon did come to magic school, he was sure to make a name for himself right away, and that's exactly what had happened.

He had entered the Advanced class, quickly gained a reputation with his sleep business, facilitated the successful cultivation of the shi-shilla herb, and caused a dispute between three factions over his membership.

It was truly just as she had expected.

Kunon was exactly as talented as she'd imagined. In fact, he had become such a capable child that Jenié couldn't possibly tell anyone she'd taught him when he was little. If she tried saying that to someone who knew her, even as a joke, they would probably reply, "Yeah, right! As if someone of your level could have trained a kid that brilliant!"

And Jenié couldn't even be angry about it. Why bother, when she herself felt the same way?

"So you're Professor Satori's pupil... That makes Professor Satori my teacher's teacher, doesn't it?"

"Master Kunon, I'm not your teacher anymore..."

Jenié felt her abilities had significantly improved over the past two years.

Nevertheless, she had yet to catch up to Kunon. In the meantime, he had become the disciple of the infamous *Zeonly*, of all people, and improved much more than she had.

To Jenié, the idea that Kunon continued to consider her his teacher just because she happened to tutor him briefly when he was a beginner was unbearable.

"Please don't address me as 'Master' anymore," Kunon said. "You're no longer an employee of the Gurion estate. And I'm just a student here, not the child of a marquess."

"...You're right. Very well, Kunon."

"I like that better. It has a sense of intimacy, like we're old friends. What do you think, Miss?"

"I think I'd prefer to maintain an appropriate distance."

"'A hedge between keeps friendships green,' eh?"

She'd seen the signs of it two years ago, but Jenié was beginning to think Kunon had gotten a little *too* cheerful.

Either way, it was their first meeting in years, and they could probably keep chatting like this forever. But there were more important things to consider.

"So what brings you to Professor Satori's office, Kunon?"

"I came to see you, of course!"

The audacity, Jenié thought. He hadn't even known she was here. How had he become such a flirt? What was that maid aiming for, raising him this way?

"And the real reason?" she pressed.

"I wanted to ask Professor Satori to mentor me, but now that I've run into you, Miss Jenié, I think I'd prefer your guidance."

"You're here about magic, right? In that case, you'd better ask Professor Satori."

If she didn't do something, this conversation would never end, so Jenié decided to show Kunon into Satori's office.

The inside of the office was fairly tidy. Nevertheless, due to the sheer volume of things in it, it felt a little cluttered and cramped. That said, it was still a hundred times better than Kunon's office.

"Professor, Professor,"

And among it all, in an armchair by the window, a woman sat relaxing in the sunlight. She looked around fifty to sixty years old, her black hair sprinkled with strands of white.

This was Satori Glücke, the water sorcerer Kunon held in such high esteem.

"...Don't bother me," she said, her voice faint and hoarse. "I haven't slept in four days, and at my age, even one all-nighter takes its toll."

Regardless, Jenié continued. "A student has come to ask for your counsel."

"You take care of it. I'm tired."

"He's an Advanced class student more skilled at magic than me."

"Advanced class? How could some fledgling who can't even perform a thirty-section compound spell understand what I have to teach, hmm?"

A thirty-section compound spell was among the contents of the exam one had to take to become a teacher at the school. Sometimes, when Jenié was in peak form, she could manage it with a bit of luck. Such a feat should be quite difficult for a student, but this was Kunon. Jenié never once doubted him.

"Oh, I can do fifty-five sections," said Kunon.

He had lived up to Jenié's expectations so well, it was almost aggravating.

"I've also read all of your books, Professor! Your theory on the three-body hydraulic structure is particularly amazing! If one could incorporate that into their magic, I think the result would be eight or nine times more powerful than conventional water magic!"

"...Oh, is that so?"

"I also like your theory of pneumatic osmotic pressure reduction! It's so fascinating!"

"...Oh, is that so?"

"I do have some issues with your theory regarding hollow water, however."

"Yes, very well, I get it. Good grief. What better wake-up call than a child's voice?"

Slowly, Satori got to her feet.

Since she had been the one to bring up thirty-section compound spells, she had to make good on her words.

Forcing her aching back to obey, Satori turned to face Kunon.

"What is it you want me to teach you, boy?"

"Oh, about that. I would hate to trouble you, Professor, so I thought I would ask Miss Jenié instead."

"Pardon?" she asked.

"What?" Jenié said at the same time.

Neither Satori, who had finally gathered the energy to get up, nor Jenié, who regarded being chosen at this juncture as an insult to the other woman, had anticipated that reply.

"What are you saying? You'd rather have my apprentice over me?"

"Yes! Because in my opinion, Miss Jenié is the best teacher!"

Jenié covered her face with both hands. Why did he have to say that right now, of all times?

Satori, having frozen for a moment, broke into a grin.

"That reminds me, Jenié. You said you worked as a private tutor for a little while, didn't you? Is this the child?"

"...Yes."

"So this boy is the one who surpassed you, made you feel pathetic, and sent you crying back to me?"

"...Yes."

"I see, I see. Then I'll leave him to you. After all, that seems to be what he wants. Do your best, Professor Jenié."

"Aren't you being a bit cruel?"

"Oh, lighten up. Don't act so self-important and go have some fun with this young man. Stay out until morning if you wish."

Professor Satori returned to the chair she had only just heaved herself out of.

"What in the world are you talking about, Professor...?"

She did realize the boy in question was twelve, didn't she?

"This time, I intend to have Miss Jenié teach me a new spell, but perhaps you would humor me next time, Professor Satori?"

Satori had already closed her eyes, and she answered Kunon without opening them.

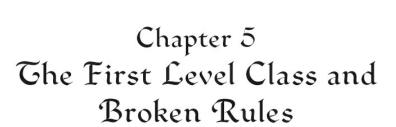
"Of course. If you were telling the truth about fifty-five section compound spells, that is. I'll run you ragged, so come see me when you're ready. If I'm satisfied with you, I might even remember your name."

"I see. So the first step to pleasing a spectacular woman is working oneself to the bone for her."

"Quite right. You may be young, but it seems you understand the ways of the world."

Satori's shoulders shook with laughter.







"Quiet down, everyone. Please be seated."

Kunon had missed this. He felt so nostalgic for it, he almost shed a tear.

He was in Jenié Kors's class.

Though it had been only a few years since she had last taught him, the time when she was his teacher was extremely dear to him. To Kunon, it was his beginning.

Once he learned about magic, Kunon changed. By putting his faith in the possibilities of magic, he was reborn. And it all started with Jenié's lessons.

Jenié muttered something to Kunon, who was standing next to her, gazing at her in admiration.

"Kunon, don't look at me. Face forward."

"This really takes me back. Don't you feel the same, Miss Jenié?"

"Never mind that right now. Look over there. If you embarrass me in front of my class, it'll make my job a lot harder."

At her whispered words of caution, Kunon turned to face the rest of the

students.

While it reminded him of old times, this wasn't truly the same. There were about ten people around Kunon's age sitting before him.

"For the next few days, Kunon here will be joining our class," said Jenié. "So everyone, please treat him kindly."

They were in the First Level classroom, where brand-new water sorcerers—those not even experienced enough to be called novices—came to learn.

The students stared at Kunon with undisguised curiosity, which he answered with an easygoing "Pleased to meet you."

"Take a seat in the back, Kunon... Now, let's begin today's lesson."

It had been several days since his visit to Satori Glücke's office.

"Ice magic?"

After Satori went back to sleep, Kunon and Jenié sat at a table in her office and did a great deal of catching up over tea.

Then, when he sensed a lull in the conversation, Kunon got down to business and explained that he had come to ask about learning ice magic.

"You don't know any yet? Not even one spell?"

"No. Even now, the only spells I can use are the two that you taught me, Miss Jenié."

Just two. Jenié could no longer be shocked, however.

It was unheard-of for a student to successfully enter the Advanced class with only those two spells. But it wasn't so hard to imagine when that student was Kunon.

"Just those two spells, filled with your love," Kunon said with emphasis.

The feat is impressive, but I could do without the commentary, Jenié thought.

"Ice can easily be made into a lethal weapon, you see," he continued. "So I sort of shied away from it."

Ice could be used to hit. It could make someone fall. It could freeze. Even

running into it hurt, since it was so solid. It seemed clear to Kunon that ice was far more dangerous than water.

The first scolding he'd received at the Hughlian royal palace had come after the Great Corridor Gliding Incident.

The cause of that debacle was a technique Kunon used that involved gliding on frozen A-ori attached to the soles of his shoes. While practicing the technique at home, he'd taken a heavy fall, and that was how Kunon had learned: Ah. Ice is dangerous. If I incorporate ice into my movement, I'll get hurt. It was the first time in a long while that he'd fallen and injured himself, and it made a deep impression.

Kunon was aware that he was still just a child. And so he had obediently abided by the Gurion family policy that children should not be allowed to wield offensive magic...which was essentially a lethal weapon.

Ice was dangerous. It was one thing to cause himself injury, but what if he hurt someone else? With that thought in mind, Kunon had begun to pay very careful attention to how he handled ice.

"That's also why you didn't teach it to me, right?"

"I mean, that's true..."

That was exactly why Jenié hadn't taught Kunon ice magic back then. Though it would be more accurate to say that she *couldn't* teach it to him, due to his family's wishes.

With Kunon's talent, he could probably master one or two ice spells with ease. In all likelihood, he could have done so even several years before Jenié quit being his teacher.

In fact, despite her having never taught it to him, Kunon was able to use ice magic. To be precise, he was using an advanced form of the most basic water spell, A-ori. But in the end, it was still ice.

Jenié hadn't even realized that Kunon was distancing himself from ice magic. He'd been using it without issue, after all.

"There is beginner-level ice magic. Have you not learned that yet, either?"

"No. I didn't get the chance to meet any other water sorcerers before I came to school, and I've been busy with things like earning money and credits since I got here."

"I see... Well, I don't mind teaching you, but are you really all right with that? You came to learn from Professor Satori, right?"

"If you can't teach me, I'll ask her. But I think you're well-suited for guiding beginners, Miss. I mean it. You should have some faith in yourself. You are a fantastic, enchanting, exemplary teacher."

He wouldn't say it again, since he knew Jenié didn't like it, but... Even now, Kunon held her underhanded tricks in high esteem. Without them, he might not have made it this far.

He had been able to adapt to so many different situations precisely because of how thoroughly he had honed the basics and their applications.

And then there was his Glass Eye.

Kunon could not have achieved that cherished wish without Jenié's teachings. He couldn't talk about gaining his vision, since he had made a promise to Zeonly. But once again, it was Jenié who had laid the groundwork that allowed Kunon to seek Zeonly's tutelage.

"'Well-suited,' huh...?" Jenié smiled bitterly.

Kunon had no idea, but Satori had said that exact same thing to her. She had asked Jenié why she returned to school, and Jenié had told her, without any pretense, about becoming Kunon's private tutor, and about what she had taught him.

Naturally, she also explained how her student had surpassed her. Watching Kunon fail over and over but continue to try his hardest to improve—it had made Jenié want to give things another shot. When she was a student, she had given up at some point and never truly put in her best effort. That was why she wanted to redo her education, she told Satori.

After hearing all that, the old professor had said: "Good job. You're well-suited to teaching beginners."

Jenié was being commended for over-teaching the basics. There wasn't anything else she could do, so she'd simply repeated the same lesson until she had wrung every last drop of use from it. How was that deserving of praise?

And that was why she had taken on work as an associate professor.

"Kunon, I teach a First Level class at the moment. We're actually just about to start learning ice magic. If you'd like, why don't you join my class?"

The Dirashik School of Magic afforded its Advanced class students quite a lot of freedom. That meant they were even allowed to join a First or Second Level class. Such requests were surprisingly common, although they were typically requests to observe and came from students hoping to become teachers.

"What, really?! I'd love to!"

It was quite uncommon to find an Advanced class student like Kunon, who intended to fully participate.

First Level classes were intended for complete beginners who had yet to learn even the basics of being a sorcerer.

There were as many reasons for that as there were people. Family circumstances, timing issues, one's surroundings, one's personality, money matters—the list was never-ending.

In short, the class was full of students who, for one reason or another, had not been able to take the time to learn the foundations of magic.

"Nice to meet you. Do you like magic? I do, and I like bacon."

"R-right..."

Kunon sat in an empty chair at the back of the room and greeted the girl next to him.

The girl was bewildered. After all, both of Kunon's eyes were hidden beneath an eye mask, and he was using a cane. All of this made her nervous. Should she worry about him? Would she have to be careful around him? And, most importantly...

"Last time, we learned the A-oruvi spell. You've all memorized it, I assume? This spell—"

...was this Kunon with the eye mask whom the teacher had brought to class the same Kunon from the Advanced class they'd been hearing all kinds of rumors about? The girl was so curious, she was about to burst.

Jenié had started class, but few of the students were truly listening.

Just being in the Advanced class made one a kind of "elite." Advanced students who could do magic just as well as their professors were common, and it was no exaggeration to say they were in the exact opposite position to the First Level kids.

It was generally accepted by everyone—including the First Level students themselves—that their class was for total novices. So why had an Advanced class student come to one of their lessons?

"Miss!" He was raising his hand. "I want you to teach me the A-oruvi spell!" He was even making requests of the teacher.

"Well, okay. But we're learning a different spell today, so I'll teach you that one after class."

"Privately?"

"Yes, yes. Privately. But you'll have to wait."

What's more, their teacher was casually brushing him off.

"Oh, yes? It was fun? I'm glad to hear it."

Class was over.

Kunon had grabbed lunch from the cafeteria, together with Jenié, and had taken it back to Satori Glücke's office.

There, Satori asked him what he'd thought of Jenié's class.

"Fun and very interesting," Kunon answered. "I had missed Miss Jenié's lessons, of course, but the First Level students were also quite intriguing. It was a fascinating experience."

Unlike Advanced students, First and Second Level students had to attend classes. However, classes were held in the morning, and students had free time in the afternoon. They could study alone, work, or perform experiments.

Leisure activities were also allowed, in moderation.

"What did you find most interesting?" Satori asked.

"The variation in magic, I think. Or perhaps I should say the variation from person to person. I didn't know a standard spell could look so different depending on the user."

Spells were activated by specific terms. When those terms were recited, one's magic power formed a crest, and the spell began to operate. That constituted a standard spell—the foundation of magic.

"Right from the beginning, when I used A-ori, I created a sphere of water about the size of an *eyeball*." Talking about the past made Kunon feel nostalgic. He went on, his words laced with sentiment. "But some of the First Level students created A-ori that weren't spherical at all. For some, the shapes were unstable and kept shifting. I never imagined there could be such a difference when using the same standard spell."

Perhaps this phenomenon could be chalked up to the fact that his classmates were novices. To take archery as an example, an experienced archer would draw their bow and hit their target as expected, but a novice would draw their bow only to have their arrows shoot off in strange, unpredictable directions. Was that it?

When something that was supposed to happen didn't happen, it was called failure. But Kunon took a keen interest in this phenomenon.

Putting aside magic imbued with the user's character, it didn't make sense for a standard spell to differ from the expected outcome. But that was exactly why it was so compelling.

"Hmm. And what do you think is the cause?"

"I wonder... Does it have to do with the manipulation of magic? No, perhaps the magic power used is irregular? If the source of the power forming the crest is unstable, it might become arbitrarily stronger or weaker. That way, even a standard spell would come out in novel, unpredictable ways."

Kunon concluded that the cause must be instability in the magic power used to create the spell's crest.

Satori grinned. "You really are brilliant, aren't you? Definitely better than a certain associate professor I could name."

Apparently, Kunon's answer was correct.

"The apple fell pretty far from the tree, hmm? Don't you agree, Jenié?"

"Kunon may have been my student, but he also learned from *Zeonly*. That's who he takes after," Jenié said glumly.

She brought over a teapot and started pouring herbal tea into cups. Soon, they would have lunch.

"Personally, I think I take after Miss Jenié! All that guy did was force me to do paperwork!"

Despite what Kunon said, Jenié wasn't so sure. After all, there were as many methods of teaching as there were teachers.

Up until several years ago, Satori Glücke had been immersed in experiments, research, and independent training, living as any first-rate sorcerer would.

She devoted herself entirely to her own projects, a teacher in name only. Not that such teachers were rare at the school.

But then she came down with a rather serious illness. By the time she had fully recovered—about a year later—Satori's values had changed completely. Was it really okay, she wondered, not to leave behind her knowledge, theories, and discoveries for future generations?

Her illness had made her keenly aware of her own mortality, and that had led to her shift in perception. It was around that time when she started writing books. That was also when she started focusing her efforts on training the youth, finally speaking to those who came to ask her questions.

Even if she died, she would leave behind a lasting mark. She was determined to bequeath the knowledge she'd gained from her beloved experiments and research to future generations. She didn't want to spend the rest of her days doing whatever she pleased, only to say "Ah, that was fun," on her deathbed and have nothing to show for it.

That kind of life might make her very happy indeed. But as a researcher, it

wasn't enough. How could that ever repay the debt she owed to those who had lived and died before her, whose lasting knowledge had been the stepping stones beneath her feet? Knowledge gained had to be handed down.

With that in mind, Satori embroiled herself in the world of teaching. And her ideology—it should be noted—had a rather significant influence on her pupil, Jenié.

"Here's the problem, Kunon," Satori said, in the middle of eating her cafeteria sandwich. "What's to be done about this magic that you call 'interesting'? Teach the students how to form proper spheres? Or just let them carry on as is? Which do you think is better?"

"...I don't know."

Kunon thought about this for a long while, but couldn't come up with an answer.

Essentially, the question was whether or not to suppress the students' present idiosyncrasies. Such things could certainly be corrected, and the students could be taught to produce traditional, spherical A-ori. But *should* it be done? Was there a "correct" way to do magic? *That* question had a simple answer: No, there wasn't.

But what did that mean for the problem at hand? Should standard magic that wasn't "standard" be disavowed simply because it differed from the conventional?

Kunon couldn't say.

"I guess what I mean is," he said at last, "I believe that's a question without an answer."

"Right? I agree."

"Indeed."

"Interesting, isn't it? Magic. Even at my age, there are still so many things I don't know."

"Isn't it wonderful that there's still so much to discover? How exciting."

Satori and Kunon shared a laugh as Jenié watched, noting how well the two of

them got along.

After lunch came the promised one-on-one lesson.

Jenié and Kunon went outside, and Satori joined them, saying she was only going to watch.

"Okay, Miss," said Kunon. "Please teach me 'A-oruvi."

"Right... Well, you say 'teach,' but..." It probably wasn't going to be that much of a process with Kunon. "You likely already know this, but I'll say it anyway: Aoruvi is more or less a water discharge spell. It sprays water in a specified direction."

At that point, Jenié paused and cast the spell. A horizontal stream of water burst into existence with a decent amount of force, soaking a fair bit of ground.

"As for the spell's characteristics, the water is discharged—continuously—in a straight line, and you can extend its range at will. Kunon, this spell is highly offensive in nature. When someone like me casts it, the force will only blow someone back a bit, but when you use it... Well, there's a strong possibility it could get out of hand. Be very cautious."

The spell itself did not pose a very high risk. It wasn't terribly lethal, since it only hit with a moderate amount of force. But what kind of alterations would Kunon make to it? Jenié could not even imagine. He was sure to add on some terrifying characteristic, since the spell alone was so straightforward. Jenié couldn't picture any other outcome.

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"Okay, give it a try."
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"All right. A-oruvi."

The spell burst forth. Kunon was using the standard version, so it looked much the same as Jenié's had.

"Oh, wow... So that's how it works..."

After shooting out two or three more jets of water, Kunon nodded and said, "Got it."

Apparently, he was satisfied with his understanding of the spell. It had taken very little time, just as Jenié had expected, considering how solid his starting

foundation was.

"Incidentally," Jenié said, her voice casual, "what kind of alterations might you make to this spell?"

Kunon crossed his arms in thought. "I'd like to see if I could make the stream bend at a right angle in several places. And if I compressed it into a thinner jet, maybe I could use it to cut things. Oh, but that might be possible with the regular version if I mixed some ice into the water. I get the feeling it could also be used for propulsion, though I have no need for that right now. And oh, adding a remote control function would definitely be interesting. I think it would be fun if the stream of water came from somewhere other than my body... Hmm... I feel like there's more I could do... The normal version isn't very fun by itself..."

There he was—the same utterly incomprehensible kid Jenié knew so well. He'd *just* learned the spell, and already he could come up with that many different applications. It was chilling.

But that was Kunon. He really hadn't changed... In fact, his Kunon-ness had only intensified.

"Pff. Ah-ha-ha." Satori, who had been silently observing, walked up to them. "Kunon, is this what you want to do?"

Satori cast A-oruvi.

A beam of water shot straight out—then sharply changed direction. It traveled in an angular spiral shape, as if connecting dots along a path, and ended by veering straight up overhead, only to fall down like rain.

As expected of Satori. That kind of bold yet delicate handling was not easily achieved.

She's truly amazing, Jenié thought.

"Oh, wow!" Kunon exclaimed. "Again, again!"

"Watch."

"Oh, okay. I see. Like this? ... Wow, it's easier than I thought."

After seeing it only twice, Kunon replicated the spell.

"Now watch this. Looks just like a water dragon, doesn't it?! Think you could copy that?!"

"I can't see it, but you're on! I'll counter with a giant water worm!"

"A giant water worm?!"

"…"

Jenié's expression grew distant. If this was how things were going to go, wouldn't it have been better for Satori to teach him in the first place? What was the point in Jenié doing it?

Her mind elsewhere, all Jenié could do was watch them: the pupil who had surpassed her in a heartbeat and the professor who looked like a grandmother playing with her grandchild.

"How interesting..."

Produce water, then freeze it.

Produce water, then freeze it.

As he repeated the process over and over, rows of animal ice sculptures filled the house's garden.

Kunon had learned two new spells that day. In class, he had learned A-eura, and then, in a private lesson, he had learned A-oruvi.

Satori had drilled him on using A-oruvi quite intensely. In hindsight, Kunon realized she had been teaching him by showing examples of new ways to perform and use the spell. She had encouraged his growth by making it into a game. That must have been what she was like as an educator.

And so, once home, Kunon practiced the other spell—A-eura.

This was an elementary spell that made water freeze. The spell itself produced neither water nor ice, so Kunon's training consisted of creating A-ori in various shapes and then immediately freezing them.

Ice magic was of great interest, just as he had expected.

Though it was possible to turn water spheres into ice by manipulating the Aori spell, A-eura used a fundamentally different process. Frankly, it was easier, though perhaps that was only natural.

Kunon's A-ori was highly advanced... Or, to be more precise, he had elevated it to a form barely resembling the original spell through the addition of unnecessarily complex alterations.

It took nearly twenty alterations to make ice with the A-ori spell. But ice magic rendered that kind of effort completely unnecessary, and that freed up a lot of room to play around with it. He could afford to make more than twenty additional alterations to an ice spell.

When it came to water, Kunon had his immense experience with A-ori to draw from. But he was practically brand-new to dealing with ice. What uses would he find for it?

Starting that day, he would explore every last possibility. He was thrilled.

"Master Kunon, it's about time to eat dinner."

"Oh. Right."

Kunon's maid called to him, bringing him out of his excited train of thought. He looked back at her.

Apparently, the sun was already setting. With so many ice sculptures surrounding him, he hadn't registered the drop in temperature. Though when he was preoccupied with magic, he tended not to notice a lot of things, much less how cold it was.

"These are ice, aren't they?" Rinko said, taking a look at the sculptures.

"They are. I finally learned ice magic."

"Oh, really? I thought ice was a valuable resource that could only be procured in winter, but I'm starting to think that might not be true."

Most people relied on the power of nature to produce ice. It could be made now, in the middle of winter, but who needed ice when it was already so cold? Since there wasn't much use for it, no one wanted it, despite its value. It was much more popular in the summertime.

"What comes to mind when you think of ice, Rinko?"

"Hmm? Give me a minute... Oh, it reminds me of how I used to go to the lake with my sister when we were children."

"The lake?"

"Yes. The lake's surface freezes over in winter, so you can slide around on it. We had so much fun."

"Wow..."

Kunon had tried gliding around on the soles of his shoes, but he had never thought of making a large-scale area for skating.

I'll try it tomorrow, he thought.

"But one day, the ice got pretty thin. It broke, and my childhood friend, Huc, fell in."

"That sounds dangerous."

Being plunged into water so cold that it had frozen over could be a matter of life and death.

"Oh, absolutely. My sister and I and some other kids tried desperately to pull Huc out, but..." Rinko tutted quietly. "He was disoriented and thrashed about, clutching at us. Ultimately, we were all dragged into the water. Isn't that awful?"

Kunon nodded. "You got engaged to him later on, right?"

Kunon was pretty sure Huc was the name of his maid's fiancé.

"Oh, I'm so sorry, Master Kunon. Rambling on about how much I love my fiancé..."

"Ah, no need to apologize. It didn't come off that way at all."

Besides, even if it had, Kunon would have simply let it go in one ear and out the other.

"...I wonder why it is that your fiancée writes back to you, but mine doesn't?"

"Let's start dinner, shall we?"

Kunon had a bad feeling about where this topic was headed. Acutely aware of

the sudden shift in mood, he tried to cut the conversation short.

"What do you think, Master Kunon? Is he cheating on me? Do you think he won't answer my letters because he's too busy having an affair?"

Alas, escape was futile. Kunon ate his dinner while Rinko went on about her fiancé, complaining and gushing in turns.

Huc, you dolt. You could at least write her a letter, Kunon thought, silently cursing a man whose face he couldn't even picture.



The following morning, Kunon joined the First Level class again.

"Fascinating..."

He had arranged to keep attending their lessons for the next few days.

One by one, the First Level students filtered in as well. He hadn't had much opportunity to speak with them the day before, but Kunon was particularly interested in two among them: a boy named Griffs Kiva, and a girl named Lim Lace.

"What is?" asked Lim.

Lim Lace happened to be the girl seated next to Kunon. They'd exchanged enough words the previous day that they could now have a casual conversation.

"Your unstable A-ori."

"That again? Like I said, it's nothing to get excited over."

Lim didn't seem too enthused, but Kunon couldn't help taking an interest. After all, it was a nonstandard result being produced from a standard spell. He was dying to know more.

But Kunon was also learning from his mistakes. With the Saint, he had come on too strong in his excitement and ended up getting the cold shoulder for a while because of it. Not to mention, she had gotten the mistaken impression that he was trying to flirt with her. An outrageous idea, of course. Kunon was a gentleman, and devoted to his fiancée.

In any case, he knew now that it was best to be reserved with his enthusiasm. He was practicing self-restraint.

"Are you busy today?" he asked. "Want to go get a parfait after class?"

At present, he was limiting himself to a casual invitation.

"Huh? Hmmm, well, I dunno..."

Lim seemed slightly pleased. That probably meant it wasn't the invitation itself that was objectionable. Reyes had ignored him outright. It seemed the gentle approach made for a better first impression, after all.

Well then, Kunon thought. Let's take things slow.

He really was fascinated. Both Lim and Griffs were probably one-star sorcerers. That meant they were of the lowest rank, with the least powerful crests.

He hadn't asked them about their ranks or anything like that. But Kunon could see.

Lim Lace had something resembling a withered white shrub coiled around her left hand.

At first, Kunon hadn't known what it was. Soon, though, he realized the likely answer—coral. Just as he was constantly shadowed by a crab, she was haunted by coral. That wasn't the problem, however. The *problem* was something else. Yes—Kunon had encountered another major exception to his rules.

Up until that point, Kunon had thought that if someone's *something* appeared entirely outside their body, that meant they were a sorcerer. But Lim's coral wasn't completely exposed. Rather, it looked like it was growing out of her left hand.

Didn't that make it the same as the black wings emerging from Kunon's brother, Ixio? Why was Lim a sorcerer but Ixio wasn't? What was the difference? The questions were endless.

In more ways than one, Lim was a subject of great interest for Kunon.

And Griffs, another one-star—Kunon had no clue what his *something* was. He had looked all around the boy but saw nothing of note. Was it under his

clothes? Or was this yet another violation of Kunon's rules?

Griffs, too, was truly fascinating.

Once again, class ended without incident.

At present, their main focus was A-eura. They conducted ongoing experiments, which also served as practice. They tested liquids to find out which froze easily and which didn't, and which catalysts were difficult to freeze or wouldn't freeze at all.

Jenié taught the class about each of these things thoroughly, then the students, along with Kunon, would perform experiments on each topic.

Ice magic was very interesting. Kunon found his time spent in the First Level class extremely fulfilling. But then— "What?! You're quitting school?!" Kunon had stopped Lim Lace, who was on the verge of heading home, to chat with her a little. Then, all of a sudden, the conversation took a turn Kunon had not expected. "Really?! You're sure you're not joking?!"

Evidently, that summer, one year after she had matriculated, Lim intended to quit the Dirashik School of Magic.

Everyone's circumstances were different. There was probably something or other preventing Lim from continuing. Kunon understood that, but he couldn't help being shocked. Nor could he help feeling it was a waste.

The school paid for First Level students' tuition and living expenses. All in all, they provided accommodations for about half of the various circumstances students faced, resulting in a low barrier to entry. Even if family matters had kept Lim from studying magic, she had a chance to do so right here and now.

"It's not like it's rare for First Level students," a friend of Lim's cut in. She was waiting nearby to go home with her.

Since she was a female friend of a female friend, Kunon had already made friends with her as well.

"Huh?! Does that mean you're going to quit, too?!" Kunon asked.

"I'm...not sure. But as a one-star..."

The girl hesitated, as if the words were difficult to get out, and Lim took over

answering for her.

"We one-stars are the least talented among sorcerers, right? So instead of spending years at school, working hard to do magic we'll never be good at, a lot of us figure, 'Why not just learn the basics and get a regular job?'"

Kunon understood her point. He threw in the towel early sometimes, depending on the issue at hand.

"I can't even cast a decent A-ori, the most basic beginner spell," Lim continued. "So wouldn't it be better if I just gave up now?"

Magic was a different matter, however. When it came to magic, Kunon didn't give up without a fight. And he couldn't believe that there were aspiring sorcerers who would choose to quit.

"What does your rank have to do with how talented you are? My understanding was that ranks only indicate a difference in the total amount of one's magic power."

And speaking from Kunon's own experience, the amount of magic power one possessed didn't seem like such a big deal. In everyday life, there weren't many occasions to use the kind of major spells that would require a lot of power. It was much more beneficial to be able to adapt one's spells to a wide variety of uses.

Precisely for those reasons, Kunon believed success as a sorcerer was directly linked to the development and acquisition of original magic that was uniquely one's own. The amount of magic power a sorcerer possessed was by no means the be-all and end-all of their potential.

Perhaps, if they lived in more turbulent times, it would be a different story. But that simply wasn't the case.

"Well, then I guess I'm just naturally lacking in talent. Anyway, see you tomorrow!"

With that, Lim left the classroom with her friend in tow. There had been neither spirit nor frustration in her words. Her tone had been utterly level, as if she were merely stating a fact.

"...Oh. I see."

Though he was slightly dumbfounded, Kunon realized something—Lim had no emotional attachment to magic. She had already given up. In that way, she was fundamentally different from Kunon, who had no choice but to cling to and rely on magic.

Suddenly, it was clear—almost too clear. Here, he felt a disparity in passion he had never experienced in the Advanced class. It made Kunon feel unmoored and a little lonesome.

In the end, for better or worse, Advanced students were obsessed with magic. Because he had always been surrounded by people like that, Kunon felt the difference in motivation all the more keenly. He had never imagined that there were sorcerers like Lim, who didn't particularly care about magic.

But there were all sorts of people in the world. It was only natural that some of them would give up on being sorcerers despite their magical ability.

Still, Kunon couldn't help thinking it was an unfortunate decision.

"Kunon, do you have a minute?"

Kunon, who was feeling helpless without really knowing why, heard a First Level student still in the room call his name.

"Hmm? Oh. Griffs."

He soon realized it was the other fledgling sorcerer who had intrigued him—Griffs Kiva.

"Uh, yeah... I can't believe you remembered my name."

Kunon was an Advanced class student. He had acknowledged as much himself, since it wasn't something he needed to hide. By now, everyone in class was aware.

At first, he'd gotten a lot of attention. The other students would stare at him, as if to say, "What the hell is *he* doing here?" But Kunon approached their lessons and practical exercises seriously, and when the timing seemed right, he would strike up friendly conversations with the other students. These efforts had borne fruit, and he was quickly becoming an accepted member of their

group. Kunon's attitude made it abundantly clear that he wasn't there to make fun of them or to look down on them.

"That's because you caught my eye. Your A-ori isn't a sphere, either. That's so interesting."

Indeed, Kunon was just as interested in Griffs as he was in Lim. Kunon simply preferred talking to girls, and besides, Lim conveniently sat right next to him. So as a gentleman, he had focused his attention on her.

But his interest in Griffs was genuine, too, and he had intended to speak with him eventually.

"Yeah. For some reason, my A-ori just won't turn into a sphere."

Lim's A-ori remained amorphous, constantly changing shape. Such a strange phenomenon had instantly drawn Kunon's interest. But Griffs's A-ori didn't change shape. Instead, what interested Kunon was that the shapes he produced weren't spherical. Instead, they appeared in a variety of forms. Sometimes they were ovular, or paper-thin, or angular—like a set of cookies made by a child. How could Kunon *not* be intrigued?

"Are you free right now?" asked Griffs. "Could you maybe help me with my Aori?"

"Of course— No, hold on."

The request was unexpected. To think that someone Kunon had his eye on would approach *him!* Now was his chance! ...Or so he thought at first, but Kunon stayed himself.

"Did you ask Miss Jenié? I think she might be the better choice."

Kunon wished to always remain a sincere gentleman when it came to magic and women. Entrusting the matter to someone who actually knew how to teach was definitely better than trying to take on such a task himself. It would be awful if he did a poor job of teaching and Griffs ended up with some unsavory quirk to his magic.

"I asked her," he replied, "and we talked about it. But she just told me to give it the best shot I could on my own."

Aha, Kunon thought. He had a feeling he knew why Jenié had said that. It was the answer to the question Satori had posed to him the day before. Should individuality be quashed to allow for the acquisition of standard magic, or should it be allowed to grow?

Although he hadn't been able to give a reply at the time, Kunon had found an answer in his own way. And Jenié—no, Jenié's mentor, Satori—would surely choose "both."

Kunon's conclusion was the same. By first developing one's unique magic and then learning the standard methods, one could become proficient in both. Why should someone have to discard one or the other? There was no need to make that choice.

"Listen, Griffs," Kunon said.

"Yeah?"

"The first thing you need to do is master your own A-ori—the one you can use now."

"...But I just told you, I'm asking for help because I can't do that. The teacher won't help me, either..."

Griffs was dissatisfied and frustrated. He had already been at school for several months, and it seemed like he was failing at the basics. He was probably feeling impatient.

Unlike Lim, however, he seemed to have no intention of giving up. He was probably aiming to advance to the Second Level the following year.

One student had decided to quit, and the other was trying to get back on his feet. Kunon couldn't say if either of them was making the right choice. But he was happy to see someone excited about magic.

"To get to the point," Kunon said, casting A-ori. "There's no fixed rule about the spell's shape. So there's nothing particularly wrong with the way you use it now. All I can say with certainty is that you haven't mastered the spell yet."

Kunon's A-ori seamlessly shifted into different shapes.

The sphere became a rat. Next, a bird. A butterfly. Cheese. An apple. A dog. A

gold coin. A vial of that Le Prime perfume all the girls liked. The head of a cow.

"See? Once you've figured it out, you can change the shape as much as you'd like. You can even add colors and scents."

"…"

Speechless, Griffs watched the A-ori shape-shift right before his eyes. Could such magic even be called "A-ori" anymore?

The animals, imbued with color, looked just like their flesh and blood counterparts. Even the way light reflected off their surfaces looked realistic.

He stared at the cow's head, which Kunon had set down atop a desk with a *thunk*.

The accuracy of the texture. The size.

Griffs couldn't make sense of it anymore. He didn't even know why Kunon had chosen to make a cow's head in the first place.

"That's why Miss Jenié told you to try it on your own first. The problem with your A-ori isn't its form or anything like that—it's that you haven't mastered it yet. Once you do, she'll help you."

"R-right... Okay..."

Griffs felt ashamed. Was this what it looked like when someone fully understood magic? Could there be such a large difference even in basic spells, depending on who cast them?

Deep down, he had been thinking of A-ori as nothing more than a worthless, basic spell. He could cast other spells just fine and figured he would get the hang of it one day, so he hadn't really put his heart into practicing.

Kunon's A-ori was on an entirely different level. It was now clear to Griffs that, just as Kunon had said, he was far from mastering it.

But with this, his way of thinking had shifted. Because of this one small interaction, Griffs's feelings toward magic had changed.

The timing of his conversation with Kunon, however, was extremely bad.

Griffs was at a point in his life when his heart was most easily moved, and that

was a problem.

"Once you've mastered the spell, you'll be able to do stuff like this easily. So work hard, okay?"

Kunon's words were untrue. To be precise, they were mistaken, due to a misunderstanding on Kunon's part.

Kunon did not truly appreciate the difference in ability between himself and others. He knew he had some amount of skill, at least when it came to the spells he could use. But he had no clue just how far from the norm his A-ori was.

And that was the root of his misunderstanding. Kunon genuinely believed anyone could reach his level if they put in the same amount of effort. That was how it had gone for him, after all. Plus, he knew there were tons of sorcerers in the Advanced class who were better than he was.

Kunon was not cognizant of his own ability beyond the thought that he "tended to do well." But he was comparing himself to other Advanced class students, who themselves were far from typical.

"...Got it! Thank you! I'll do my best!"

But Griffs took Kunon at his word and felt renewed. He stared at the cow's big, round eyes, his determination restored.

He believed what Kunon had said. He thought—incorrectly—that if he simply mastered A-ori, he, too, could produce such results with ease.

This would be the beginning of Griffs Kiva's long, *long* battle to master basic magic.

After accompanying Griffs in his magic training for a little while, Kunon left the First Level classroom.

First, he headed for the cafeteria to get a sandwich, then made his way toward Satori's office, just like he had the day before.

Jenié wouldn't be joining them that day, as she had some research to do in the library. Ever the gentleman, Kunon had asked if he could assist her, but Jenié had refused, saying, "It's for class, so I can't discuss it with a student." As it happened, she was preparing testing materials for the First Level class, so even though Kunon wasn't actually her student, she couldn't risk getting help from an outsider. Oblivious to all that, Kunon arrived at his destination.

"Good afternoon, my lady."

"Ah, come in. Good to see you."

After knocking, Kunon entered the office to find Satori in the middle of writing something. She returned his greeting but kept her pen moving and her gaze on her paper.

"Is there something I can help you with?" Kunon asked.

"Can you summarize those documents there? It's fine if you eat while you work."

Satori wasted no time assigning him a task. She was a lady of little self-restraint.

Kunon went to the indicated table and picked up a stack of papers. "These are...reports on A-oruvi and A-eura?"

"Just some old scribbles. Clean them up for me, if you would."

"Yes, ma'am."

Zeonly had Kunon make a *lot* of clean copies of his notes, scribbles, and memos. But all the documents his master had given him to work on were related to magic tools. These, on the other hand, concerned water magic. If he were to say which he found more interesting...Kunon would choose both. With his current appreciation for magic tools, he found the two topics equally engaging.

"...Hmm. Interesting."

Sandwich in hand, Kunon began looking through the documents. Some of the contents he had heard in class, and some he had not.

These were new spells—ones that Kunon could still further alter. To be honest, he felt he had exhausted every possible avenue with A-ori and A-rubu. But he was only just beginning his experiments and research on these.

He was still learning basic, elementary magic. Perhaps his growth as a sorcerer had been slow, but Kunon didn't care. It was still only his first year at magic school. He didn't feel there was any need to rush.

"Professor Satori."

"What is it? It better not be some complicated question I'll have to use my brain for. I want to finish this report today."

She sounded grumpy, but it seemed she was willing to answer.

Satori may be blunt, but overall, she's nicer than Zeonly, Kunon thought.

"One of the First Level students told me she's quitting school after her first year. I asked her why, and she said she had no talent, so there was no reason to continue. But I think it's still too soon for her to give up."

Kunon's brief summary brought Satori's writing to a sudden stop. She cast a scowl in his direction, but the subtle action was lost on the boy's unseeing eyes.

"...Didn't I tell you not to make me use my brain?"

Supposing it was time for a break, Satori tossed her pen down and joined Kunon at his table.

"I know how you feel," she began. "The ability to use magic is a gift. If everyone could do it, I wouldn't be bothered by someone giving up. But that's not the case—so I understand. It feels wrong that someone is throwing away such a precious gift, doesn't it?"

A gift. To Kunon, the *somethings* he saw around people seemed like manifestations of those gifts.

Satori's were jellyfish. Two of them, each about the size of a human adult, drifted through the air around her. They were beautiful, translucent creatures that idly glowed and darkened in turn, almost as though they were taking deep, slow breaths.

Incidentally, Jenié was shadowed by a bird made of water.

"So here's the question," Satori continued. "What do you think causes people to abandon magic?"

"...Um, I've never once considered it, so I really don't know."

"I see. Well, the answer is disappointment. Even though you have the talent, you can only do so much—you can only achieve a certain level of proficiency. There are many others better than you, and even if you continue, how much can you really learn?

"Magic requires self-improvement. It's a battle against yourself, which is quite difficult. And because it's so hard, you look for reasons to give up. The easiest one comes from simply looking at those around you. You compare yourself with others and get fed up right away. You put in all this effort, but other people pass you by with ease. You're just a second-or third-rate talent, so why try achieving anything more? Why keep improving yourself? People without clear goals often end up in such a mindset."

Satori didn't say it, but she thought Kunon might have an easier time in that regard, since he couldn't see those around him and had no choice but to continue confronting himself. It would be far too insensitive to imply that his lack of sight might be a good thing.

"Goals, huh...?" Kunon mused. "When you put it like that, I feel like I understand."

When he first started learning magic, Kunon hadn't had any particular attachment to it. But all that changed once he found something to aim for. It had all started there—with a goal.



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A goal, huh? I see.

"Professor."

"Hmm?"

"Do you know of a good technique one could use to change a girl's feelings?"

"...Oh-ho. You're asking me? This old hag?"

"What? But you were a girl once, right?"

"Well, I suppose I didn't grow old in a day."

"Exactly. In fact, aren't you still a girl?"

"Me? A girl?"

"Yes."

"You really think so?"

"Absolutely. You're a girl that anyone would be proud to show off. You're just
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"Absolutely. You're a girl that anyone would be proud to show off. You're just a little older."

"...Uh-huh. I see. Would you introduce me to your parents someday? I'm dying to know what they're like."

"Of course. I'll tell Mother and Father."

"I was being sarcastic."

"Huh? Why? Did I say something wrong?"

This kid is unbeatable, Satori thought.

She hadn't taken much notice at first, but after talking with him a while, she couldn't believe what an undeniably striking character Kunon was. Jenié truly had created a monster, both as a sorcerer and as a child.

Of course, Jenié wasn't *actually* responsible for Kunon's personality—that was someone else. She was simply taking the blame because she was the closest person at hand.

The day after his talk with Satori, Kunon once again attended the First Level class.

"Good morning, Lim."

"Good morning, Kunon," Lim replied, taking a seat next to him. "Here again, huh?"

As a member of the Advanced class, Kunon stuck out like a sore thumb.

"The plan was to join you all for a few days. Tomorrow or the day after will be my last. I'm in your care until then."

Kunon had already learned the new spells he was after, and there wasn't much reason for him to keep coming to class. But he hardly ever had the chance to encounter beginner sorcerers in training, and he wanted to observe them a little while longer. Not to mention, he'd been lucky enough to find *two* students of interest. Nevertheless, he couldn't linger. He wasn't done earning credits yet.

"Hey, Lim."

"Hmm? Whoa—!"

The moment he got her attention, Kunon brought out a shi-shilla plant right in front of her eyes. Its transparent flowers cast a faint glow. The plant was beautiful, ephemeral—its mystic, delicate nature obvious even at a glance. If seen under the moonlight, it would surely look like something out of a fairy tale.

"...It's so pretty... What is it? A flower?"

The sacred herb was so rare that no one in the First Level class even knew what it was. Still, they could tell that Kunon was putting the moves on a girl, and that he had just pulled a flower no one recognized out of thin air—one that looked quite expensive.

Some of them were only watching idly. Some nudged those beside them, saying, "Oh my gosh, look! Look!" Still others had been harboring feelings for Lim Lace themselves. Though their reasons might differ, every other student in the classroom was watching Kunon and Lim.

"Yes, it's a flower," said Kunon. "The one that suits you best out of all the flowers in the world. Please, take it."

Kunon held out the unfamiliar plant. He did so elegantly, his fine upbringing obvious in every movement. Lim blushed. From the side, she appeared in that

moment more a woman than a girl.

"Huh? Uh, what? Oh? Um, th-thank y—! Oh! Wh-what?!"

That all ended in a flash, however.

Bewildered, Lim accepted the flower. But in an instant, the fantastical bloom vanished from her grasp, leaving only moisture in her hand.

"That was my A-ori just now!" Kunon exclaimed. "How was it?! Are you any more interested in magic?! Aren't you so curious, you can barely stand it?!" He was delighted.

The previous day, Satori had told him people found it easy to abandon magic because they didn't understand its appeal. In that case, he needed to convey it to them. He had to show them what magic could do.

And so Kunon made a shi-shilla plant. Women loved flowers, so he would show Lim one made of magic. He was certain it would draw her in.

But Lim clicked her tongue at him. "Don't talk to me for the rest of the day!" "Huh?! Why?!"

Apparently, Kunon had angered her.

He didn't understand why she was mad. In fact, he was the only one in the classroom who didn't get it.



"Oh, Kunon won't be coming to class anymore," Jenié announced. "I know his presence made some of you anxious, but you can relax now."

Every one of her First Level students accepted this readily. No one seemed distraught or alarmed.

As far as most of them were concerned, Kunon had simply shown up one day without any of them really knowing why. And before they knew it, he was gone again. An Advanced student was there among them, and then he wasn't.

Just as Kunon had said, his time with them only lasted a few days. Quite frankly, he had left before anyone really got to know him, and few people

thought anything of his time there at all.

Except for a small handful of students, that is.

"That Kunon is really something, you know?"

They were having a break, and Jenié had left the classroom. In the meantime, one of the students started talking—a boy with a lot of connections around the school. It seemed he had been gathering information about Kunon.

He had been with them for only a few days, and it might seem a bit late for such talk. But many of the students were still curious about him.

The difference in skill level between the Advanced class and First Level was considerable. So why had one of those students come to their class? Kunon had said he was simply there "to learn magic." But what was there for an Advanced student to learn in a First Level class? Had Kunon been lying? And if so, what was his real reason? More than a few of them wanted to know the answer.

Ultimately, given their limited intel, they concluded that it was very odd indeed for Kunon to have joined their class.

Kunon was the blind proprietor of a recent business venture—the Sleep Sanctuary—that had become famous throughout the school. That was the initial reason his name had spread.

It seemed he also had something to do with a saint's project to cultivate some sacred herb. Though the details were being kept under wraps, it was apparently an achievement that would go down in history—and Kunon might have had a hand in it.

It was also said he was a member of three factions, had fifty female friends, and had paid several hundred thousand necca for meals while dining out with women.

Throw in various unverified rumors, and it was hard to believe a boy like Kunon would have any reason at all for coming to a First Level class.

And it didn't end there...

"Was that flower a sacred herb?"

"How should I know?"

Lim Lace, despite having been the recipient of the gift, still couldn't make heads nor tails of what had happened. What was that beautiful plant Kunon had held out to her the previous morning—the mysterious thing he told her was made of magic?

The day before, Lim had been angry. How dare he make her heart flutter?

It was only natural to get excited when someone handed you a lovely flower and fed you what sounded like a pickup line, wasn't it? Had she simply misunderstood? She wanted Kunon to take responsibility for disappointing her like that. And yet...

"...I mean, obviously I'm curious about it, but..."

Lim was interested in the flower, and in how it was created. When Kunon presented it to her, he had asked, "Are you any more interested in magic?"

In the end, things had turned out exactly as he had hoped: A number of the students, Lim included, were intrigued by the spell he had used to make the flower.

Lim, however, was suffering on an emotional level as well. How could she remain unbothered after he'd toyed with her feelings like that?

"Okay, yeah...!" came a voice from across the room. "Let's do it...!"

While the rest of the class was preoccupied with gossiping about Kunon, one student—Griffs Kiva—remained off in his own world.

He had practiced and practiced the spell Kunon had briefly helped him with over the past two days. And at last, the night before, Griffs had managed to produce a single sphere-shaped A-ori. It had been no bigger than a raindrop, lacking in size, volume, and duration. But nevertheless, it had been a perfect sphere. Not one of his usual oddly shaped A-ori—an actual sphere.

Griffs really wanted to show Kunon what he had achieved. But the boy was gone, so that wasn't possible. Instead, Griffs decided on a new goal.

In a year, or maybe two or three, or perhaps even more, he was going to progress all the way to the Advanced class and show Kunon what he could do.

In the end, Kunon arrived in their class, sowed a few modest seeds of

curiosity, and after only a few days, left again.

Meanwhile, around the same time...

"This is Kunon. He'll be joining our class for two or three days, so be nice to him, okay?"

"Hi, I'm Kunon. It's a pleasure to meet you."

...Kunon, having only just attended a First Level class the day before, was now standing in a Second Level classroom.

He was there on the invitation of Soff Cricket, the teacher in charge of the Second Level class for first-year water magic students.





## Chapter 6 The Second Level Class and Magic Duels

Kunon noticed the other man's presence as soon as he set foot in Satori's office.

"Huh? Professor Soff?"

He could sense Satori, the owner of the office, and one other—someone whose magic power Kunon recognized.

"Hey, Kunon. It's been a while."

It was the wind sorcerer who had served as proctor at Kunon's entrance exam: Soff Cricket.

Kunon hadn't seen Soff since he'd shown off his flight magic. The fact that they didn't share a crest was no doubt a big factor.

Now that Kunon was better acquainted with the realities of magic school, something had become clear to him: Every single one of the teachers there was extremely talented—Satori and Soff included.

"It has been a while. How is Professor Sayfie?" Kunon asked.

Whenever he thought of Soff, he thought of Sayfie, the associate professor

who had joined Soff at Kunon's entrance exam. It had been some time since he had encountered her. Though he had fond memories of her, he had the vague impression that not seeing her too often might be for the best. She seemed to bear some sort of grudge against Zeonly, and had consequently formed a less than positive opinion of Kunon. Though Kunon, for his part, was eager to spend time with any woman, no matter what she thought of him.

"Oh, she's well," Soff replied. "We just went out drinking together yesterday."

"Really? How nice. Wait, are you and Professor Sayfie dating, perhaps? ...Oh dear, am I interrupting?"

Just as the conversation began to get interesting, Kunon paused. He'd been granted permission to enter the office, but perhaps he was intruding on a conversation between the two professors.

Satori and Soff were colleagues. Their crests were different, but they were both high-level sorcerers. They probably had a lot to talk about. Perhaps they were discussing teaching, or having a debate, or consulting each other as experienced magic users.

Kunon considered the possibilities.

He was happy to listen to the two of them discuss pretty much any topic, but if he was in the way, then he would have to excuse himself.

If Soff were a woman, Kunon might have skipped the greeting and gone straight for the kill—something like, "This must be fate. Would you treat me to a private lesson to celebrate our encounter?" But Soff was a man, so he refrained.

As it happened, Jenié was out of the office again that day, busy preparing test materials.

"No, you're fine," Soff replied. "I was actually just about to send for you."

"For me?" Kunon wasn't sure what he meant. "By chance...did you decide to treat me to a private lesson to celebrate our fateful encounter?"

"...I can if you want, though I won't go easy on an Advanced class student."

Kunon hadn't expected anything, and Soff's reply was beyond what he could

have hoped for.

"Yay! Thank you so much!"

One of the school's shockingly busy teachers was going to go out of his way to make time for Kunon. That was cause for joy, regardless of the teacher's gender. Kunon was certain he could learn a lot from Soff, despite their differing crests.

"Hold on a minute. Could you do me a favor first? Let's call the private lesson your reward for helping me out."

A favor.

When a woman asked him for something, Kunon agreed in a heartbeat. But now he hesitated.

"I still need to earn credits, so I can't afford to be preoccupied for too long..."

He had learned his new spells, and starting that day, his time in the First Level class was over. Kunon was planning on using what he'd learned to conduct research and experiments. After he'd spoken with Satori and helped to put her documents in order, all kinds of interesting theories had popped into his head. He had hoped to spend a while immersed in his own work.

"I don't think it'll take very long. I just have something a bit troublesome on my hands. I'd like the assistance of a skilled new student."

"Is that so?"

"Kunon, why don't you take a seat?" Satori said.

She had been watching his and Soff's exchange in silence up until then, and at her command, Kunon joined the teachers at their table.

He was sure Satori already knew what Soff wanted of him. Maybe that was what they had been discussing. Furthermore, she was trying to advance the conversation.

If Satori was in favor of Soff's request, Kunon had to comply. This was his mentor's mentor. If she thought it was a good idea, there was no other option.

With that thought in mind, Kunon sat down.

The very next day, Kunon found himself in the Second Level class.

"This is Kunon," Soff said, introducing him. "He'll be joining our class for two or three days, so be nice to him, okay?"

The room was full of first-year water sorcerers who were temporarily under Soff's care.

"Hi, I'm Kunon. It's a pleasure to meet you."

He greeted them with a smile, but the twelve other students shot back cold stares, as if to say, "Who the hell is this kid?" Their gazes were prickly and suspicious. It was enough to make Kunon's hair stand on end, despite his not being able to see them.

This was nothing like his experience in the First Level class. It wasn't just that they were in a different school building, either. The atmosphere was completely different. He felt the students' enthusiasm for magic must be different, too.

This is going to be fun, Kunon thought.

"Okay, Kunon, please sit at that empty desk in the back."

As Kunon followed Soff's instructions, the other students' eyes followed him. Then Kunon turned, and, loud enough for his voice to carry, he greeted the beautiful, curly-haired girl sitting next to him.

"Hello! Do you like magic? Yesterday, a girl I gave flowers to got mad at me. I still don't really understand why."

*""* 

The girl stared back at him with contempt.

"That's it for my announcements. Today, we're doing combat exercises in Laboratory Six, so get a move on."

After a brief overview of the day's lesson plan, Soff urged the class to head for the lab.

Incidentally, the announcements weren't relevant to Advanced class students, who didn't have set class days or time off. They came and went as they pleased, and the school did not set their schedules.

All the same, Kunon had enjoyed his time in First Level and thought it might be nice to join classes once in a while. At the moment, however, he really *did* want to prioritize earning credits. Nevertheless, he found himself in class once again.

"Who are you?"

When Soff left the room, twelve sets of eyes turned to focus on Kunon. One of the other students got up to stand in front of his desk, while Kunon remained seated.

"You're Azel, right?" Kunon asked. "Are you the leader of this class?"

The effect was immediate. No one spoke, but a wave of unrest passed through the room.

"...Didn't you hear my question?"

Kunon was being menaced, though he wasn't especially impressed by the effort. After all, he'd managed to work side by side with Zeonly, who was selfish, domineering, and possessed overwhelming magic power. He'd put up with plenty of unfairness and intimidation. Compared to that, being threatened by a boy his own age was nothing to be afraid of.

"Say, is it true that Second Level students worry about boring stuff like one's social status?" Even if the boy was a member of some country's royal family, Kunon wasn't the least bit scared of him. "You know we're in magic school, right? Shouldn't magic be the only thing that matters? I mean, as a sorcerer, should you really be concerned about anything else?"

Learning magic cost money. At least before one entered magic school, anyway. It was the same for Kunon. Despite his being the son of a marquess—or perhaps precisely *because* of his parentage—a disproportionate sum of money had been spent on his education. Because of his position as a member of the Gurion family, he had been able to study to his heart's content.

Hiring private tutors and amassing books and materials on magic was expensive. The Dirashik School of Magic allowed students to enroll starting at the age of twelve. Anyone admitted to the Advanced or Second Level classes upon enrollment had undoubtedly been privileged with the opportunity to

learn magic beforehand, like Kunon. In other words, many of the Second Level students were from wealthy families.

Inevitably, royals and aristocrats—and even just run-of-the-mill rich people—from around the world wound up together at school, because their circumstances had allowed them to invest in early education. And when highborn people were thrown together in one place, cliques formed. That, in turn, led to students using their authority and influence at school, despite the institution's unspoken law that political affairs and social standing be left at the gate.

"I am a gentleman. So while I do my best to answer any question a woman asks me, I won't respond to a man if I don't wish to."

Was that what it meant to be a gentleman? The others had their doubts, but that aside...

The boy standing in front of Kunon—Azel O'vig Aselviga—seemed to have a number of problems with Kunon's attitude.

"You think you're better at magic than I am?"

"Hmm. Who knows? I think it'd be a good match."

Judging by what he could sense of the boy's magic power, Kunon felt Azel was a cut above his classmates. Just as Soff had said, this kid was definitely the leader of the class. Based on impression alone, Kunon truly believed he would put up an excellent fight.

"...You have some nerve, talking to me like that when you know who I am. Meet me in the lab." With those words, Azel turned on his heel to leave, but Kunon called out to him.

"Oh, sorry. As a gentleman, I don't respond immediately to invitations from men. Please understand."

*"…"* 

Without saying another word to Kunon, Azel glared over his shoulder at him, then exited the classroom. To no one in particular, he whispered, "Who the hell does that guy think he is?" as two hangers-on followed him out.

Kunon heard this, but since the question wasn't addressed to him directly, he decided not to mind it.

"Oh, do you know where Laboratory Six is?" he asked the pretty, curly-haired girl to his side.

"What?"

"I would love it if you could escort me there."

"…"

Despite her unpleasant expression, she didn't refuse his request.

The favor Soff Cricket had asked of Kunon was very simple and straightforward. He had said: "I want you to do some magic that will snap these status-obsessed brats out of their foolish games."

To be honest, Kunon wasn't really sure what he should do. But Soff had told him to "just be yourself," and now here he was.

"Wow, really?" Kunon replied. "This is the first I'm hearing about it."

Guided by the pretty girl with the curly hair—whose name was Radia F'le Rhodia—Kunon headed toward Laboratory 6.

Radia seemed kind at heart and was answering all of Kunon's questions, though she didn't look very happy about it. Of course, this meant nothing to Kunon, who couldn't see her.

"So levels are partially determined by recommendation?"

"Yes. Magic teachers and influential people from one's country write letters of recommendation to the school. It seems that based on those, students are roughly divided up into their levels before the entrance exam. Most of those who come without a recommendation are put in First Level."

When Kunon took the entrance exam that year, he was one of only four students. He had been under the impression that was because there had been only four applicants. In fact, he had been told that directly, so he was beginning to wonder what was going on.

The First Level class he had attended up until the day before had also

consisted of first-year students, and the same was true of this Second Level class.

What in the world did that mean? Had there been new students besides those who entered the Advanced class?

Curious, he had asked the girl about it, prefacing his question with, "I'm in the Advanced class, but—" It turned out the Second Level first-years—Radia included—had enrolled in school at the same time as Kunon.

Inquiring further, he discovered that placement was decided prior to the entrance exam by recommendation letters and such.

"So you all took an entrance exam geared toward Second Level?" he asked.

"I suppose so. Of course, if someone is lacking in ability, they won't be able to enter their desired level."

At that moment, Kunon realized that he must have been recommended for the Advanced class. Indeed—he had received two recommendations. One came from his master, Zeonly, and the other from Londimonde, the Grand Master of the Kingdom of Hughlia's Royal Sorcerers. Both had requested that he be put in the Advanced class, and neither had asked Kunon what his preference was. Kunon would have agreed with them if asked, however, so he wasn't complaining.

"I think you should know something, Kunon."

"Hmm?"

"It's not that we weren't able to get into the Advanced class. We're in Second Level because we want to be. If you think your merit as a sorcerer is determined only by your class level, you're in for a rude awakening."

Now it was Radia's turn to menace him. Meanwhile, the other Second Level students challenged Kunon with their eyes, all the while maintaining a reasonable distance as they made their way to the lab.

"Good. I'm looking forward to it." Kunon was smiling.

If Radia was right, there were Second Level students with just as much talent as those in the Advanced class.

"I've had almost no chance to spend time around water users my age who weren't novices," he said. "Oh, I'm so excited. I bet I'll get to see a bunch of new spells. I want to know all about you guys."

Later, Radia would recount that the moment she saw Kunon's smile, she got a very, very bad feeling in the pit of her stomach.

The new boy wore an eye mask, and his name was Kunon.

"It must be him. The description matches perfectly."

Azel, arriving at Laboratory 6 ahead of most of the class, was discussing the newcomer with the two students who had accompanied him. He was sure it was the boy from the Advanced class.

Information was a weapon, and there was word of a student who stood out from the rest going around. Information warfare was the province of nobility, and no one was exempt.

Azel didn't like this. He didn't like it one bit.

Being in a class called "Second Level" was bad enough, but to have a class called "Advanced" was even worse. It gave the impression that the latter was superior to the former, and he couldn't stand it.

Dirashik was a place without royalty or aristocracy, governed by the world's greatest witch. The laws of this land were decided by her alone, and could not be superseded by any other nation or authority.

That was, in theory, the way things worked here—but reality did not align. If the family members and associates of influential people gathered somewhere, a miniature social and political hierarchy was bound to emerge.

And that was especially true now that the Empire's Inferno Prince had arrived. Thanks to *him*, the imperial nobility had a great deal of influence. The equilibrium had collapsed, and the Empire was now the dominant player. Naturally, those from other countries were not amused. The whole Second Level was in utter disarray because of it.

"Are you going to be all right, Master Azel?"

Azel and his entourage had left first, and the three of them were still alone.

That was the only reason his two companions looked so anxious. Showing weakness was permissible among one's own people. In front of anyone else, they didn't dare display a shred of vulnerability. They couldn't afford to.

"It's long been said the Advanced class is full of monsters..."

Azel's skill as a sorcerer was indisputable. He was a three-star magic user who had mastered several intermediate level spells before enrolling in school.

He was obviously gifted. When it came to magic, he had never lost to anyone his age, and he'd even beaten some adults.

But how did he compare to the infamous Kunon? Less than a year had passed since the other boy had arrived at school, and he had already earned achievement after achievement and was making quite the name for himself. How would Azel stack up against someone who merited that kind of gossip?

The Advanced class was full of monsters—any Second Level student of decent skill had heard those words at least once. Sometimes, they were said to remind those who appeared to be succeeding that there was always room for improvement. Other times, they were a provocation meant to rile someone up.

"Hmph. If he had a rare attribute, it would be one thing, but I have no intention of losing to another water user. He's a two-star, from what I've heard. Even if he *is* in the Advanced class, to me he's just a kid my age of lesser rank."

Just as Azel was snorting and making bold assertions, Kunon and the rest of the class arrived. Kunon was smiling.

*"…"* 

Later, Azel would recount that the moment he saw Kunon's smile, he got a very, very bad feeling in the pit of his stomach.

Laboratory 6 was basically empty.

It was a large space without desks or chairs, and its walls, ceiling, and floor were white.

"Ah, I see..."

At that point, something occurred to Kunon. He recalled the "night" room where the interview at the end of his entrance exam was conducted. This room,

he thought, was probably similar to that one. It must have been magically protected or reinforced, or fitted with some kind of spatial safety measure so that no magic would be able to escape, no matter what kind of spells were used.

In Laboratory 6, it was okay to use offensive magic.

Kunon still had no clue how such a room worked. He found it completely fascinating.

"Will you be participating in today's festivities as well, Miss Radia?" Kunon asked, making idle chitchat with the girl who had escorted him.

The whole class had arrived at the lab, but they were still without the crucial presence of Soff. The atmosphere was calm as they waited for him, aside from the fact that Azel was glaring at Kunon and the other students were circling him at a distance, that is.

Kunon paid them no mind.

"Of course I will," Radia replied. "It's a Second Level activity, after all."

Kind at heart—but grimacing, as always—Radia politely answered Kunon's question.

Soff had briefed Kunon on the day's events that morning. The second semester was about to end, and right before, there would be a magic exam.

The exam would consist of a written portion and an inter-attribute matchup. Because of that, during the short time between now and then, practical combat exercises were being held in place of classes. Under their teacher's supervision, students were able to acquaint themselves with something akin to real duels.

That was precisely why Soff was allowed to take *temporary* charge of the class despite having a crest that differed from the students'.

Inter-attribute contests meant that students would be facing off against others in their year who did not share their magic type. It sounded like a lot of fun, but the Advanced class was not involved. Advanced students were not permitted to participate and were—ostensibly—prohibited from observing. That said, matches between Advanced students weren't against the rules, so

they could hold their own contests if they really wanted to. That was just another aspect of their class's freedom.

"Can you use intermediate magic, too?" Kunon asked.

"Of course. This year, everyone in our class knows at least one intermediate spell."

Intermediate magic was totally unlike beginner spell casting. It was dramatically more difficult both to control and to operate. Anyone who could use an intermediate spell by the age of twelve or thirteen had reason to be proud.

"Wow, that's amazing. I can only use four beginner spells."

"...What?"

Radia was sure she had misheard. Was it possible Kunon had just said he only knew four basic spells?

The Advanced class is full of monsters. Radia had heard those words, too. She even knew a few of that outrageous bunch.

Plus, there were the crazy rumors. That was how she had heard of Kunon—through gossip. Outrageous gossip, of course.

And yet he only knew four beginner spells? Maybe he'd meant intermediate.

"Kunon, did you—?"

Just as Radia was about to ask him to repeat himself, Soff Cricket arrived.

"Okay, let's start today off right, shall we?"

Radia had missed her chance to question Kunon.

"Did you say something just now? Oh, your hair? Did you ask if it was curled nicely? Well, of course. It's in stunning ringlets. They're set so well, you could probably place a cup into one of the coils."

Kunon whispered to her so that Soff wouldn't hear, clearly suffering from some sort of misunderstanding. Radia hadn't asked about any of that nonsense.

And putting a cup in her hair...? Even if it could hold one, why would she ever do such a thing?

Soff turned to the gathered students.

"So, has it been settled already?" he asked without preamble. "None of us has a lot of free time, so let's cut to the chase. Who's going to duel Kunon?"

I bet you guys already started picking fights with him. One of you challenged him, right? That seemed to be the implication behind his words.

"I am."

Azel, who had done just that, stepped forward. He seemed glad they wouldn't be wasting any time.

"I see. Then Azel it is." Soff smiled calmly. Without pausing, he continued, "By the way, you should all note that Kunon only knows four beginner-level spells."

As expected, everyone looked dumbfounded.

"Only four," he repeated. "And all beginner magic. He only knew two when he enrolled. He got into the Advanced class with just that. I want you all to think carefully about what that means."

Timing and mood were key—if either of those things had been different, or perhaps if Soff hadn't included the baffling statement that Kunon "got into the Advanced class with just that," this declaration might have been met with scornful laughter. Kunon had learned a piddling number of spells and couldn't use any intermediate magic.

But no one so much as chuckled, because despite all that, Kunon had earned a spot in the Advanced class.

On one side stood Azel, tense and scowling. And opposite him was Kunon, smiling as if he was having the time of his life.

The Advanced class is full of monsters. That statement flitted through the minds of every person watching Azel and Kunon face off—including Azel himself.

"Okay, begin," Soff said, signaling the start of the duel.

Eager to make the first move, Azel lifted his right hand, aiming it at Kunon.

This was an intermediate magic stance. Unlike beginner spells, intermediate

magic was difficult to control and manipulate. Movements and words that were often abridged for basic spell casting were absolutely essential. At least until one was more experienced.

"A-ryubia!"

A massive magic circle took shape directly behind Azel.

Ffwwwssssshhhhhhh!

And then, all at once, an enormous wall of water surged out of it. It was practically a tsunami.

The water crested over Azel's head before crashing to the floor in front of him. Swelling and roiling, the massive wave rushed toward the one standing in its path—Kunon.

The stark contrast between all that water and its tiny target made for a terrifying sight. The wave was aimed at a single person, yet it looked big enough to wipe out a small seaside town.

Azel was serious. He had to be.

Kunon could use only four beginner spells. Even so, Azel was certain he would lose. He couldn't even imagine coming out on top.

I knew it, Azel thought.

The massive wall of water was fast approaching its target. But Kunon didn't move or react. Instead, he just stood there, smiling.

Azel was the first to realize that his intuition had been correct.

His cry of "A-ryubia!" sent the Second Level class into an uproar.

"Seriously?!"

Radia was shocked. She would never have guessed that Azel would cut straight to playing the most powerful card in his hand.

But the real problem was something else. If that wave hit someone head-on, they would die. They might be crushed by the water pressure or drowned, but either way, they wouldn't survive.

The kind of defensive magic circles employed in duels were not allowed in the

upcoming school contest. Consequently, they weren't used, even during practice.

Naturally, the inter-attribute duels wouldn't be death matches. They were meant to teach students to appreciate the lethality of magic and learn how to regulate it. Since that was the point of the lesson, they would not be using defensive magic circles, even when training.

What that meant was, at present, both Kunon's and Azel's lives could be at stake, depending on the spells they used. And the one Azel had just cast was extremely deadly. It was far too risky.

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"Professor—"
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"You have to stop this—"

Radia and the other students started to call out in the hope of averting disaster.

"Watch carefully!" Soff said, raising his voice. He was smiling pleasantly... No, there was something a bit odd about his grin. His gaze stayed locked on the two dueling boys. "This is a rare chance to see something of great value! If you call yourselves magic users, you ought to burn this into your minds!"

In that moment, Soff spoke not as a teacher but as a sorcerer.

Plop!

Plop, plop, plop!

A-ori rained down around Kunon's feet.

*"…"* 

Everyone was speechless. Even Azel, who had cast the first spell, felt his jaw drop in astonishment.

No one knew what had happened, except for the pure and simple facts. The tsunami rushed at Kunon. But because Soff chose not to come to his aid, no one else moved to protect him or intervene. And yet, ultimately, the tsunami did not reach its target.

It came close. Then, right before it hit, it turned into countless individual

spheres of water that tumbled to the floor, bouncing lightly as they landed.

The water—that entire, looming wall of it—became a pile of A-ori covering the floor from end to end.

"That's no good," Kunon said, pouting a little. "You have to keep hold of your magic, even after you release it. Otherwise, your opponent will seize control."

The unspoken message in his words was this: I could have launched a counterstrike, I merely chose not to.

The Advanced class is full of monsters.

And one of them was here, right before their eyes.

"A-faruzo!"

More than thirty water lances appeared, then flew straight toward Kunon with shocking speed. Kunon took a single step forward, evading every single one. It was the strangest thing—as if the lances themselves were avoiding him.

"I could read their trajectory the moment you created them," Kunon said. "You have to add an alteration, like a distortion or a time lag, or it won't work."

Azel suspected that Kunon had sized him up during his very first move. As soon as he saw Azel's A-ryubia, he understood the difference in their ability.

"A-bouzen!"

A large A-ori appeared in the air above Azel's head, then started hovering toward Kunon, as if gravity was pulling it there.

A-bouzen created a compressed A-ori—a water bomb. When the sphere made contact with something, the compressed water was released with explosive force. If a water sorcerer was skilled with the spell, they could produce a blast as powerful as those used by fire sorcerers.

And yet Kunon simply caught the sphere out of the air.

"You could compress this a bit more," he said. "Look."

With his arms wrapped around the A-bouzen, Kunon *squeezed*. He smushed and pressed with both hands, making the sphere smaller.

When he was done, it was about the size of his palm. The water had become

unnaturally dense, and there was an abnormal stillness to the A-ori, which had turned a deep blue. It looked like Kunon was holding the deepest, most untouchable depths of the ocean right there in his hands.

"At this size, you could probably send it flying a little faster, too."

At that, Kunon made the little ball of ocean he was holding disappear.

He'd evaporated it. Water as dense as the crushing abyss—just poof, gone.

"What next?"

Kunon had recognized the gulf between himself and his opponent from the very first move and had long since lost any interest in attacking.

"Is it okay if we call it now?"

Kunon's question came as Azel, his magic power completely spent, fell to his knees.

Azel O'vig Aselviga, huh? He's quite good, Kunon thought.

His power reserves and magic were both excellent, and he could use a wide range of spells—more than double the number Kunon knew. But that was probably to be expected of a three-star sorcerer.

It had quickly become clear why Azel was the leader of the first-year Second Level water users. His magic was a bit wild and sloppy, but as long as he pursued his studies seriously, there shouldn't be any problems. He was a talent of great interest to Kunon.

"...Why didn't you attack?" Azel asked. He glared at Kunon as his two cronies rushed over to help him up. His face was pale and drenched in sweat.

"Because I'm a gentleman. And so are you. I didn't feel it was necessary."

Azel may have picked a fight with Kunon, but he hadn't insulted him or been especially cruel. He had waged a fair fight with no dirty tricks, and above all, he'd come at Kunon with everything he had right from the start. He'd pushed himself to the very limit.

Kunon was the type to resent people going easy on him out of kindness. So regardless of Azel's intentions, his immediate onslaught had made Kunon warm

up to him a great deal.

He'd never once underestimated Kunon, even after seeing his eye mask. From start to finish, Azel had faced him head-on, sorcerer to sorcerer.

To be honest, Kunon thought the other boy was a lot more upright and gentlemanly than Soff had made him out to be.

"...I'll allow it this time," Azel spat. "But don't do it again."

With that, his entourage led him away.

The fact he's willing to admit defeat is quite impressive, Kunon thought.

His choice of words left something to be desired, but it was true that Azel had just acknowledged his loss. That wasn't such an easy thing to do for someone in his position.

He really did seem nicer than the picture Soff had painted.

"I'm next, Professor."

Azel left, and someone else's hand shot into the air, requesting a match. It was Radia, the girl with the curly hair.

"I don't mind, but you're smart enough to see the difference in your abilities, right?"

Since Soff had okayed it, Radia went to stand in Azel's former position.

"Naturally, if I'm going to do this, I'll be aiming to win," she said. "However, I believe there's a lot I can learn from practicing with a partner of superior skill."

Kunon himself had yet to agree to this second duel, but— "Excellent. I never hesitate to accept an offer from a woman. I'm a gentleman, after all."

—since the invitation had come from a girl, and she wanted to duel him with magic, there wasn't a single reason for Kunon to refuse.

"Here I go!" she shouted. "A-hiuru!"

A large magic circle opened up close to the ceiling, and hail started to pour down like rain.

"...Well, that's a shame," Kunon muttered, though no one heard him.

Radia, however, caught a glimpse of Kunon's face just before it was obscured by the hailstorm.

He was still smiling, but he looked a little disappointed.

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It had all begun the day before, when Kunon went to Satori's office after finishing his final class with the First Level students.

There, he ran into Soff, who had arrived before him and had a favor to ask.

"You see, I'm temporarily in charge of the Second Level class for water users."

At Satori's request, Kunon went to join her and Soff at the table. Then Soff explained the trouble he was having.

"Second Level water users?" Kunon asked. "Isn't your attribute wind, Professor?"

"Yeah. That's why it's only temporary. Just a stopgap to fill an unexpected vacancy."

An unexpected vacancy. That meant something must have happened.

"Did the class's original teacher quit, by any chance?"

"Close. She went on sabbatical."

So the teacher had left.

"Um, I'm not really following... Why a sabbatical? Did she have a reason to leave?"

"Simply put, she reached her breaking point."

Breaking point? Kunon wasn't sure he understood that, either.

"In short..." Sensing his struggle, Satori intervened. "...she'd had enough of dealing with a bunch of brats who wouldn't take their studies seriously. She was diverting precious time from her own research to teach the class, yet her students paid no attention. Finally, they pushed her too far."

With that much context, Kunon began to understand. Just a day ago, Lim Lace's lack of enthusiasm had taken the wind out of his sails. The class's original

teacher had probably felt the same.

"They're enrolled in magic school, and they still won't take their studies seriously? How is that possible?"

"Second Level has always been difficult."

"Even for you, Professor Satori?"

"Oh yes. The time I have left is short, and I can't afford to waste it. If some twerp in my class didn't listen... Well, I'd drown them half to death."

Kunon wasn't sure if someone would survive being drowned "half to death." Despite the addition of "half," it seemed like it might still be too late to save them...

"Rippel really is quite the woman. Awfully kind of her to up and leave before she was tempted to take more violent measures."

Kunon surmised that this Rippel person was the absent teacher in question. Though Satori had called her a kind teacher who'd chosen to leave rather than resort to more violent measures, her tone was so sarcastic, even Kunon picked up on it.

"That's right," Soff added, nodding. "Magic is power, and that power can be wielded like a weapon. It's important for these kids to realize how dangerous it is to neglect their studies."

Listening to his teachers' views on the matter, Kunon remembered the time his father had said something similar while scolding him at the royal castle. It was a memory Kunon would have preferred to forget.

"And that, Kunon, is where you come in."

In summary, it seemed Soff wanted the class to take their studies more seriously.

"You say that, but...I have no idea what should be done, so I don't think I can help you."

Kunon understood the issue. But he didn't have the slightest clue how to go about solving it.

"Don't worry. Just be yourself. Everything else will fall into place."

"Are you sure? I can only do beginner magic, remember? I'm not confident in anything else."

"That's fine. As a matter of fact, that's what I want."

If that was the case, perhaps Kunon could help.

"So what exactly is the situation?"

"Second Level has a lot of royals, nobles, and their associates. As a result, their circumstances back home and differences in social status carry a lot of weight, and you end up with a bunch of students who are more wrapped up in politics than magic. It's like they've formed a little microcosm of high society, and since this school draws magic students from all over the world, things get complicated. We've had royals, high-ranking aristocrats, even people from enemy nations attending together. Despite all that, things remained calm for the most part, but it's gotten a little hairy in recent years."

So that was it. In other words...

"The students can't focus on magic because of their obligations as nobility?"

"Yeah, I suppose. More or less."

"How unfortunate."

They had managed to enter an institution with excellent teachers, likeminded peers, and so many books and documents that no one could ever read them all. If they didn't dedicate their time to learning now, when would they get another chance? That went double for royals and nobles. It might be okay for a commoner, but someone from a family of status would be hard-pressed to stay at the school forever. Their time here was limited, and yet they weren't able to focus.

"Understood. I'll do what I can."

And that was how Kunon ended up joining the Second Level class.



"Right. Seems we're about finished here."

Four more students threw their hats into the ring after Azel and Radia. They each stood opposite Kunon. Some may have held hostility in their hearts, while others were merely curious or eager to compete.

Once Kunon had dueled exactly half of the Second Level class, Soff spoke. Apparently, it was time to wrap things up. The remaining students had been watching keenly, but none of them seemed inclined to challenge Kunon next. Azel and Radia, who had both fought until their magic ran out, also paid close attention, even after their losses.

"Thanks, Kunon. Your easy-to-follow instructions in the arena were very helpful."

Kunon figured that meant he was being relieved of his duties.

In all honesty, he had rather enjoyed himself. With just a little nudge, the Second Level students caught on immediately and began correcting course. Their foundations had to be well-developed if they were able to adjust so quickly.

Kunon was left with the impression that training would benefit them greatly... If they only had the right motivation, the class could transform in a big way. If he was able to take them under his wing for even ten days, Kunon felt that Azel and Radia, in particular, would see dramatic growth.

...This thought helped Kunon understand somewhat. What if they never developed their abilities, despite their obvious potential? No wonder their teacher had grown frustrated. Seeing these kids with such talent refusing to try must have exasperated her to no end, until she felt compelled to take a break. Kunon finally felt he could empathize with the runaway teacher.

"Is there something you'd like to tell everyone, Kunon?" Soff asked, prompting Kunon to summarize his feelings about the lesson.

It seemed he had completed his task.

"Let's see... I guess what I want to say is, just because you can use magic doesn't mean you're proficient. You can only claim to have mastered a spell once you're able to control it completely. In that sense, can any of you really say you've mastered beginner-and intermediate-level magic? How do you

intend to use magic you can't control? That's way too dangerous, don't you agree? If you make a mistake, you might even hurt someone close to you. I think that's something you should keep in mind when it comes to the upcoming competition... Oh, have I said too much?"

Some realizations had to be arrived at on one's own. Hearing it from someone else, even when the message was understood, often failed to leave a lasting impression.

"Well...," said Soff. "Whatever. It's fine."

Soff *did* think Kunon had said a little too much, but it shouldn't be a problem. After all, if no one said anything to these students, with their lack of focus, they probably wouldn't have figured it out on their own.

"By the way, Kunon," Soff continued, taking a step forward. "What do you say about receiving your reward here and now?"

Reward? Did he mean the private lesson?

"What?! Really?!"

"Yeah. I have the time."

Kunon's enthusiasm skyrocketed. Until only a moment ago, he had been reflecting gloomily about promising sorcerers letting their talents go to waste. But Soff's proposition blew those thoughts from his mind.

This went beyond Kunon's expectations. Theory and discussion were fun, but actually *training* with magic was even better. Plus, his opponent was a superior sorcerer—one he couldn't beat even if he went all out.

The more skilled the sorcerer, the less likely they were to demonstrate their best magic. That was because they tended to keep a lot of their spells secret. It wasn't easy to get a magic user to show off a unique spell only they knew. This private lesson would be a highly valuable opportunity—the kind even power and riches couldn't buy.

"We'll stop if you collapse or forfeit. I'll adjust as necessary, but I won't go easy on you. It's up to you whether you're able to earn a lesson worth your while out of me."

That was good. In fact, it was perfect.

How much he would learn from Soff was up to Kunon.

"Yes, please!"

That meant the longer Kunon held out, the more Soff would unleash his abilities.

"Oh, and add some color, okay?" Soff said, almost as an afterthought. "This match will also serve as teaching material."

"Understood," Kunon replied, nodding.

If they used different-colored magic, its movement would be easier to follow. In this big white room, even water was difficult to see, to say nothing of wind.

Although adding color to Soff's wind wouldn't make an ounce of difference to Kunon, since he couldn't see it anyway.

What in the world was going on?

The Second Level students didn't quite understand how they'd gotten here.

What they did know was that Kunon, the Advanced student who had defeated their class's top fighters as though they were babies, and Soff Cricket, who was a teacher and thus guaranteed to be powerful, were about to duel.

"Oh, one moment. Miss Radia, could you hold on to my cane for me?"

As Soff got into position, Kunon called out to Radia, causing a brief delay. He did so in order to focus solely on magic.

In a room with no obstacles, his cane was unnecessary. Canes and staves containing rare metals or magical components could double as magical aids. But Kunon's cane was just a cane, so he decided to relinquish it for the time being.

"Huh...? Oh, sure."

When Radia heard two powerhouses were about to have a showdown, astonishment and rabid interest had caused her to temporarily lose her head. Thanks to her upbringing as a lady, however, she hid it well.

"While you're at it, Radia," Soff said as she retrieved Kunon's cane, "could you give the start signal for me?"

At that point, both Soff and Kunon were focused squarely on each other.

"O-okay, and... Begin!"

The instant the match started, wind arrows flew out from Soff's body.

This was the beginner-level wind spell Fu-jira. Its function was simply to create wind, but in the hands of a skilled sorcerer, that wind could become a rush of air that moved at the speed of sound. Sometimes it cut like a knife, other times it felt like being pummeled with stones.

Leaving trails of red in their wake, five dyed projectiles hurtled toward Kunon—and ran him through.

"Oh-!"

Kunon had taken a direct hit. What's more, he'd been impaled. Just as onlookers began to gasp, however, Kunon's swaying figure abruptly vanished.

Then, not a second later, blue water burst out from under Soff's feet. A pack of water lances with sharpened points stabbed at him from every direction, as if the floor was rigged with spiked booby traps.

"Oop-"

The attacking water hit an invisible wall and dispersed. Soff had protected himself with wind.

"Now that I think of it, we haven't done this since the entrance exam. Circumstances were different then, though."

Perhaps reacting to Soff's voice, Kunon suddenly appeared right in his line of sight.

"That's true," he replied. "But I can't afford to make small talk at the moment."

"Relax. I'm not much better off."

In fact, if I make a mistake, Soff thought, I might actually lose.

Kunon was craftier than he'd expected. That much was clear from the beginning.

Soff never imagined he would have a way of cloaking himself. Most likely, he

was using colored water as camouflage or to make a decoy. If someone looked closely, they'd probably be able to tell. But Kunon wasn't going to allow that to happen.

And now he was producing a continuous flow of water, trying to fill the whole room with water droplets so small, they couldn't be seen.

Kunon wanted to expand his control over the playing field. That level of cunning was an unpleasant reminder that he was *Zeonly's* disciple.

"...Water is such a pain!" he shouted, creating a huge gust of wind.

A red Fu-jira big enough to swallow someone whole flew at Kunon—followed instantly by another.

"It's rapid fire!" a student yelled.

They were correct. Because Fu-jira was a beginner spell, it could be cast repeatedly in quick succession without burdening the user.

The gusts of wind had been loosely aimed on purpose. If Kunon tried to run, he'd be hit. His escape routes were all blocked. Plus, his water handiwork would be blown away.

*"…"* 

Kunon didn't move as the wind swooped down on him.

Whompwhompwhompwhompwhompwhmpwhmpl!

The moment it hit, a noise ripped through the air.

It was the sound of wind being trapped inside A-ori. Kunon had divided and contained the huge gusts inside a number of water spheres. The speed with which he produced A-ori was something else, but his way of dealing with attacks was downright unheard-of.

"I'd like to return these," he announced.

The trapped wind was still active as Kunon sent the A-ori flying back toward Soff. He carefully weaved the spheres and their payload of red air through ongoing blasts of Fu-jira. The A-ori weren't very fast, but there were a lot of them.

"Ha-ha! Nicely done! I'm turning up the pressure a bit! Don't die!"

Soff Cricket was usually a perfectly composed adult. But deep down, he was enthralled by magic. And when such a person had the chance to participate in a particularly enjoyable magic duel, their true nature was bound to come out.

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The results of their match could be summarized as follows: Kunon exercised his judgment perfectly and came out on top.

Normally, under such circumstances, Soff's defeat would have been certain.

However...

Though they would've liked to draw things out, it simply wasn't possible.

Both competitors were in agreement.

Soff was bewildered by how unexpectedly accustomed to fighting Kunon was, and Kunon was unable to devote himself to defense, due to Soff's surprisingly ruthless attacks.

Their thoughts were different, but their conclusions were the same. Both Kunon and Soff wanted to prolong their educational duel but couldn't. They had both realized that drawing things out would mean defeat.

"Tch!"

One of Kunon's attacks grazed Soff, and he couldn't help clicking his tongue as he pictured how things would progress.

He could no longer afford to maintain the air of a teacher. His own attacks were being trapped in spheres of water and returned to him despite his rapid-fire Fu-jira blasts.

The A-ori were slow, and judging by their size, each one's power was negligible.

But there were so many. And they wouldn't stop.

The A-ori he evaded came back at him from behind and floated around in his vicinity. Then, every once in a while, one would suddenly launch at him, as if

remembering its purpose.

The duel had only just begun, and Soff was already being hounded by hundreds of A-ori.

Now and then, he paused his Fu-jira blasts to repel the spheres with a defensive sweep of wind. But even then, they didn't disappear. They remained hovering a little farther away—until they launched at him once again.

Despite everything, Soff managed to keep attacking as he ran, dodging the A-ori.

His movements were impressive, but inevitably, one of the attacks connected. It hit his upper left arm and wasn't even a direct hit. One sphere merely grazed his clothing.

On its own, the lone A-ori's power was minimal. However, Soff could see how much danger it posed even before it struck.

"So irritating!"

If one were to strike him head-on, and he stopped moving for even a second, the rest would attack him all at once.

If even ten A-ori struck him, Soff was done for. Unless he could end the match soon, he was going to lose. Each individual sphere might be no big deal, but it wouldn't feel that way if he was hit by hundreds of them.

Soff couldn't prolong things any longer.

Timewise, they were barely getting started. But to Soff, who had already fired off nearly a hundred spells, it felt like a lifetime.

Kunon was holding on by the skin of his teeth.

*"…"* 

Fu-jira projectiles kept zooming toward him in great numbers.

Before he even realized it, several of them had grazed him. He captured any that would have resulted in fatal injury inside A-ori and dispelled them, but he didn't bother dealing with the others.

Each gust had such *power*. If even one hit him head-on, he would probably be

down for the count.

His shoulders, arms, and legs took one glancing blow after another. His clothes were being torn to shreds. A gale shooting past his face blew off his eye mask. Blood trickled down from his temple, though Kunon himself had yet to notice.

Why would he pay attention to something like that, when he was having so much *fun*?

Kunon's unseeing silver eyes stared straight ahead. With a smile on his face, he continued to handle the situation as best as he could—both defensively and offensively.

Kunon had to keep attacking to make the fun last. If he stuck to defense, things were bound to fall apart.

Unable to see, Kunon had only a rough idea of the magic coming toward him. Consequently, he couldn't simply run around to avoid it like Soff did. Not to mention how fast the wind attacks were flying at him. Under such conditions, there was no way for him to maintain his concentration and go on the offensive.

Kunon could determine Soff's position from the direction of his Fu-jira and from the microscopic beads of water Kunon had dispersed into the air, filling as much of the room as possible.

Yes, Kunon knew where Soff was, and he was waiting.

He was biding his time until the situation became untenable for Soff and the older man charged at him. Or until Kunon himself sustained too much damage and collapsed. Whichever came first.

Their magic attacks flying back and forth probably looked quite flashy. Perhaps it appeared the field was shifting chaotically.

In reality, though, this match was a test of endurance. For a short time, at least, they were locked in a stalemate, caught between two outcomes: Either Soff would charge, or Kunon would pass out.

Understanding that fact was the difference between winning and losing.

Kunon had realized it. Soff had not.

That was why Kunon was able to think several steps ahead—to victory.

Soff charged forward, blowing back the A-ori shadowing him in one big sweep. Then he closed in on Kunon with terrifying speed.

He moved faster than his own Fu-jira, overtaking them.

Speed was the advantage of wind. For a sorcerer of Soff's level, increasing the pace of his own movement was simple. The degree of increase depended on the ability of the caster.

Even watching from the sidelines, the Second Level students couldn't follow Soff with their eyes. In an instant, their teacher was *behind* Kunon, who was still handling the onslaught of Fu-jira.

One fought magic with magic. So how was one to deal with a sorcerer like Kunon?

The answer was—by slamming magic directly into his body. He would have no way to defend against that.

It would ensure he couldn't pull any of his typical A-ori stunts, such as trapping or dispelling. When literally *struck* with magic, even Kunon would be helpless. And besides, he was currently busy protecting himself from the rapid-fire Fu-jira slamming into him from the front. He had probably lost track of Soff entirely.

No hard feelings!

Soff no longer saw Kunon as a student but as an opponent to be defeated. Showing no mercy, he clad his right fist in wind and aimed a punch at Kunon from behind.

"I've been expecting you."

Kunon dodged, catching hold of Soff's right arm.

Dread ran down Soff's spine.

Kunon had anticipated Soff's actions, but Soff had failed to do the same. He knew instantly that he had lost.

And the chills weren't all from this realization—his right arm had started to freeze.

When he tried to run away, he realized his legs were already frozen. He'd been totally outmaneuvered.

From the very beginning, Kunon had spread water around his own feet that could be turned to ice at any time.

And now *they* were coming—the A-ori that had been following Soff were flying straight at him. Hundreds of water spheres holding Soff's own wind captive were aimed right at him, and there was no escape.



"...How should I...?" muttered Soff. "I mean... I don't even know what to say."

Kunon was lying in tatters. He had lost consciousness, and Soff simply stood there, looking down at him. Rubbing at the arm that had been frozen a moment ago, he scowled.

If asked to identify the factor that had decided the match...he might say it came down to the difference in body weight or physique between an adult and a child.

Just before the approaching A-ori hit, with Kunon still clutching at his arm, Soff had yanked the boy even closer and used him as a shield.

This was the result—Kunon was struck by hundreds of A-ori and had passed out.

"...I mean..."

The moment his arm was caught, Soff knew he had been read like a book. And in that brief instant, he had accepted his loss. That was why he wasn't quite satisfied with the current situation.

Using Kunon as a shield had been a reflex; there was no conscious thought involved. Soff had merely moved on instinct to cover himself. He hadn't actually expected it to work. In fact, he hadn't even thought about it. He had just been a drowning man grasping at straws.

".....Seriously, I don't even..."

There was no relief. No sense of having won whatsoever. He couldn't even enjoy his triumph.

The bitter taste of defeat was thick on his tongue. And yet victory was his.

An indefinable feeling sat heavy in his chest. He was exhausted.



"So you're saying you got carried away?"

"I have no excuse."

Satori, hearing all about the incident from Soff, grinned.

"Hmph. Sounds like a job well done."

Just as Soff had hoped, Kunon had breathed some fresh air into the Second Level class and had lost during his private lesson.

That was fine. The perfect outcome.

"That kid likes losing more than winning, you know?" said Satori. "He says he learns more that way."

"l...see..."

Soff had come to Satori's office the moment the Second Level's combat exercises were over. He had just finished telling her what had happened.

Since he'd used some less-than-mature methods during the fight, Soff had prepared himself for a certain amount of scolding, but Satori didn't seem particularly bothered. Actually, she looked rather pleased.

Soff had left the unconscious Kunon in the care of his classmate, the Saint, who could use healing magic. While Kunon appeared to have suffered only scrapes and cuts, there was no way to tell for sure. Soff had asked the Saint to treat him immediately, just in case any bones or internal organs had been damaged.

Jenié, who had just returned from her class, left for the Saint's room immediately after hearing what had happened. She seemed worried about Kunon. Some time had now passed since that morning's private lesson, so it was possible he would wake up soon.

"I think he realized what you were up to," said Satori.

"...He's a talented kid. When I was twelve or thirteen, I was desperate just to show off what I could do."

Soff had been a member of the Advanced class, too, once. He didn't particularly enjoy remembering how cocky he had been in those days.

"So how did your class react?"

"It's too early to say. Waves were made. Pots were stirred. We'll have to see

how things progress from here."

Soff felt sure Kunon's presence had stimulated the other students. However, it was difficult to predict whether that would lead to any major changes. Still, it felt like something was shifting...

"I suppose you haven't yet dealt with the root of the problem."

"Yes. Unless that imperial prince does something to stop it, Second Level may only get worse. There are at least two more years until he graduates... It worries me."

Whether the boy in question cared or not, the fate of the Second Level class depended on the Inferno Prince. The current environment made teaching difficult, and more importantly, it was bad for the students.

Soff wanted to do something to remedy the situation, but it wasn't easy. He had called on Kunon to help solve the problem, but it was hard to say how things would pan out.

"Ah! The match!" Kunon exclaimed the moment he woke up.

He sprang up from where he lay and braced himself. Had something happened to make him faint?

Everything was okay. He remembered what had happened. And so, if possible, he'd like to continue the private lesson...

"It's over."

The sound of a familiar female voice brought him back to the present. It seemed everything had come to an end while he was unconscious.

"Miss Reyes?"

Kunon activated his Glass Eye for just a moment to ascertain that he was correct about his present location—the Saint's office. A place he knew well.

As usual, the Saint sat at a table with a book open in front of her. It appeared he had been lying in the bed she used to nap.

Reyes had furnished her office with a place to sleep in case she needed to stay overnight while conducting research. She had petitioned for the bed on the reasoning that, since she was keeping plant growth records, nighttime observation would be necessary as well.

"Before you ask, let me update you. You dueled Professor Soff during your private lesson, and you lost. You were brought here unconscious because of your injuries. How do you feel now? I healed the wounds I could see, but does anything seem abnormal?"

Incredible. She had answered all the questions Kunon could have thought to ask, before he even posed them.

"Professor Soff must have brought me here counting on your healing magic," he said.

"Yes."

That made sense.

"Thank you. I feel fine. Nothing hurts, either."

The Saint was the simplest light magic user to get ahold of, since she was almost always holed up in her office. Plus, she was acquainted with both Kunon and Soff. Soff had probably brought him here because she was the easiest one to ask.

"By the way, Professor Jenié was here, too."

"Huh? Miss Jenié?" That was not a name he expected to hear. "Why?"

"To visit you, I'm sure. She heard that you fainted from your injuries and came because she was worried."

"Ah. I see."

While Kunon didn't exactly welcome injuries caused by magic, he wasn't bent on avoiding them, either. Pain and injuries resulting from magic were yet another thing he could study and inspect, after all. But he still felt guilty whenever he ended up causing someone needless worry.

"So where is she?"

"She went to acquire clothing for you."

"Clothing? ..... Huh?"

Patting his palms against himself, Kunon realized something—he wasn't fully dressed. He had no shirt. He *did* have on pants, though they were a bit ragged at the ends. Falteringly, Kunon raised both of his hands to cover his chest.

"...I'm sorry for looking so provocative."

He'd been flaunting...

...his nakedness...

...to a girl...

To a saint, no less.

As a gentleman, it was still too early for him to be sexy. Kunon was ashamed of his state of undress and tried to hide as much of himself as he could.

"Don't trouble yourself. I'm quite used to seeing children naked... To be clear, that's because I've been volunteering at orphanages since I was very young, all right?"

Apparently, Reyes had often helped with bathing and dressing the little ones.

"More importantly, Kunon, I'd like to know the particulars of how you ended up like this."

Soff, carrying Kunon in his arms, hadn't offered much of an explanation. It didn't appear that he was trying to keep it a secret, however. He said he'd come straight from conducting practical exercises, so he had probably just been short on time. And in that case, she doubted he'd mind if she asked Kunon.

"The particulars, huh...?"

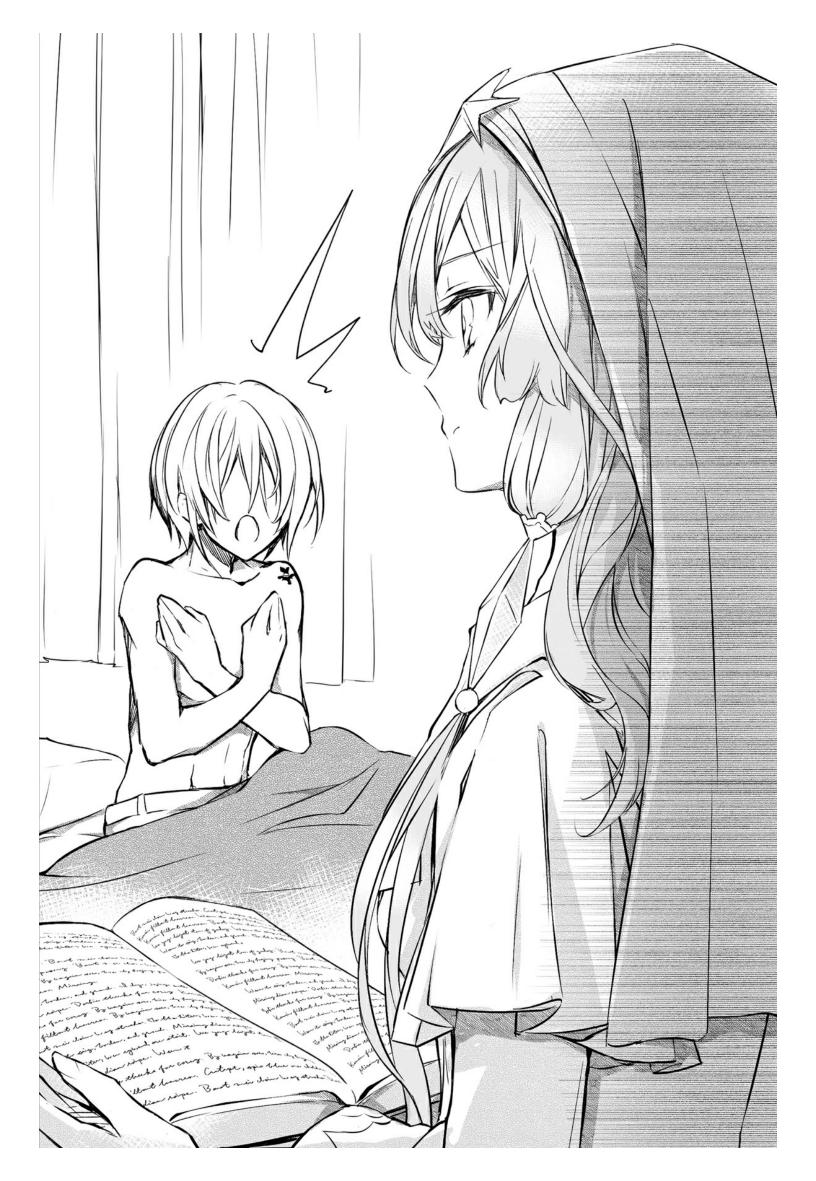
Kunon recalled the private lesson. He wanted to verify what had happened with Satori, Jenié, or Soff himself as soon as possible. But there was no reason to fret. Either way, he couldn't leave this room until he was fully dressed. He was a gentleman, after all.

"Professor Soff gave me a private lesson in the form of a duel. I lost."

"So I heard. But I'd really like to know how, if you don't mind..."

"Before I tell you the details, you need to understand the conditions of the match."





Thinking back, Kunon reflected once again that the magic school's teachers were incredible. He felt he'd gotten a taste of just how great the gap was between their abilities and his own. Or at the very least, he had realized they were leagues apart, though he wasn't sure how far, exactly.

"The circumstances and location put Soff at a great disadvantage. Do you know the basics of wind magic?"

"No, I'm not familiar."

"In general, wind sorcerers prioritize speed. Propelling things through the air and rapid flight are their two focal points, it seems. I believe that when they get to Professor Soff's level, long-range fighting is their forte. They attack from a distance their opponent's magic cannot reach, and which someone like Soff could probably close in an instant. Keep those conditions in mind while I tell you about today's match. We were indoors, in Laboratory Six. The floor, walls, and ceiling were all specially designed not to be damaged. I don't think Professor Soff was able to use even half of his true power."

And yet he had defeated Kunon. No matter what was said or done, that outcome wouldn't change.

"Wind becomes dramatically stronger with something enveloped in it, you see. A simple gust of wind is a lot more intense when it contains sand or gravel."

"I see. That's why a room that can't be damaged would be a disadvantage to him."

"On top of that, I think he limited himself to using only beginner magic."

Their match had been no more than a private lesson—a learning opportunity. Kunon imagined that was why Soff had given himself such a handicap.

Kunon was certain the teacher possessed abilities he would have no way to counter. But if he couldn't use them, he wouldn't be able to deliver a decisive blow. Kunon had predicted this, and that was why his strategy had worked.

He knew Soff would attack directly once he'd judged that a prolonged fight was not to his benefit. Fearing he would inevitably be caught by the ever-

increasing A-ori, Soff would come at Kunon in a way the latter couldn't use A-ori to defend against. On this assumption, Kunon had waited for Soff to make his move.

"...So those were the circumstances. What do you think? You wanna know more, right? You wanna hear about all the amazing things Professor Soff did, don't you? I had so much fun."

Kunon always smiled when he talked about magic. He spoke about Soff's actions with great enthusiasm, grinning as though he was recounting his own deeds.

"In that case, why don't you stop hiding yourself and come over here?" suggested Reyes. "I'll make you some herbal tea."

There was a short distance between where Reyes sat and the bed.

Though she was interested in how Kunon had been defeated, she didn't particularly care about the match itself. But if Kunon wanted to talk about it, she would listen.

"I must look alarmingly seductive right now... Is it really okay for me to come over there?"

"Please don't worry about it."

Kunon moved to sit across from Reyes, his hands still covering his chest.



Once class was over, the first-year water users in Second Level assembled in their classroom.

"...So that's the rough conclusion, I guess."

Azel, the students' leader, looked around at everyone else.

No one said anything. That probably meant he could finally put down his pen.

As his classmates shared their recollections and opinions, Azel had made a note of each one, using up several sheets of paper. Their theories and interpretations varied so much that the first few pages had nearly devolved into scribbles. Azel had never written such a disorganized series of notes in his life.

Some of the class's students typically went home as soon as lessons were over. But that day, no one even considered it. That was how strong an impression the teacher-student match had left on them. The whole class was dying to discuss it, and the only people they could do that with were the ones who had actually been there—one another.

The duel had been fascinating. Though it hadn't lasted long, it had given them countless things to think about. Everyone was riled up, venting their lingering excitement through reflection and interpretation.

"I'm just not buying it. Is that really what Kunon did?"

"How else would you explain it?"

"Okay, but have you ever heard of someone splitting magic up into smaller pieces? And then, on top of that, containing it?"

"I mean, no. But he did it right in front of us."

Azel had thought they'd reached a conclusion, but it seemed some people still weren't convinced. The students' agitation was difficult to calm; it just kept smoldering.

But maybe, Azel thought, that's a good thing.

It was proof that they were passionate about magic. That was something he hadn't felt in Second Level for some time.

He wanted to get to the bottom of the match's events, too, someday. But he didn't know if that chance would come.

"Well, we've reached a tentative conclusion, so let's stop for today."

Some of the students had yet to get their fill of the discussion, but they couldn't sit there and debate it forever.

There were also those in the class who felt they couldn't go home as long as Azel, a royal, still remained. Not everyone had such an easy time leaving political matters at the gate, as the school's unspoken rules dictated.

"Azel."

As Azel left the classroom, his entourage in tow, a curly-haired girl followed

behind, calling his name.

It was Radia.

"...This is unexpected. You, talking to me."

Azel belonged to the royal family of the Kingdom of Aselviga, while Radia was the daughter of the Empire's Duke Rhodia. Out of the whole class, they came from the two most powerful families.

That said, across Second Level as a whole, students from the Empire were in an increasingly better position. If Radia so wished, she might have become the class's leader instead. Either that, or the students might have split into two factions.

Both Azel and Radia were well aware of all this and avoided contact with each other as much as possible. The two of them knew that if they were to fight, it would only hurt their own classmates.

Because social status ostensibly didn't matter at the school, no one addressed royalty with titles like "Your Highness." But that was only on the surface.

"I believe discussions like the one we just had are this school's original purpose."

Radia's sudden, straightforward statement both pleased Azel and caught him off guard.

"Yes, I think so, too. You and I both have a difficult time of it, don't we?"

Azel had found the discussion quite enjoyable and wondered if Radia felt the same. They had forgotten all about their families and countries and talked about magic with pure passion and interest.

Azel had hoped that attending magic school would give him the chance to spend all his time thinking about magic without worrying about complicated family and political issues. And back there, when they were debating back and forth, he'd gotten a little taste of the life he'd dreamed of.

"...What should we do, Miss Radia...?"

Azel's feeble words slipped out like a sigh. He wasn't expecting a response.

Right now, the Second Level class was a microcosm of the kind of power struggles endemic to high society.

People from the Empire were in a favorable position and threw their weight around at every opportunity, walking all over anyone who wasn't one of their own. This put all the students on edge, and no one could focus solely on magic.

Partly because of his lineage, Azel had ended up being looked to as a leader. Basically, that meant shielding his classmates from the brunt of the unpleasantness by taking it on himself.

Azel accepted that role because he knew he was the only one who could. And now—well, he was feeling the pressure in all sorts of ways. Because his first priority was to protect the students in his own class, his day-to-day was nothing like the ideal he'd wished for.

Though Radia was the daughter of an imperial duke herself, she seemed committed to treating him with complete indifference. For that, at least, he was grateful. The fact that she was standing here talking to him probably meant the situation had been on her mind, too.

Had Azel's quiet entreaty a few moments ago truly been unintentional? Or had something inside him been hoping for a reply? Whatever the truth, his words had set the ball in motion.

"If you want to change the state of affairs," she began, "wouldn't striking the strongest target be standard protocol?"

The strongest target. At the moment, that was...

"...Do you have the connections?"

"We've exchanged greetings a few times, so yes, we are acquainted."

"That should be enough."

Choosing that route might only create more problems. Perhaps they would be too powerless to achieve anything.

But the current situation was completely unsustainable. And unless they took action, nothing would change.

"If we really do this...it might end up turning into a small revolution."

But if they wanted to study magic in earnest without distractions—then a rebellion was just what they needed.

•

"Oh, Kunon. Are you feeling better now?"

Jenié returned to the Saint's room with a change of clothes in hand. Relief washed over her when she saw Kunon already up and moving.

"...Wait, you don't need clothes anymore?"

Suddenly, it seemed she'd gone on a useless errand. Kunon was wrapped in something that looked like a white robe, as if he had just taken a bath.

"Oh, no. I'll take them. This is just an A-ori."

So the robe was yet another use of his kaleidoscopic A-ori. Kunon could reproduce the fine strands of an animal's fur, so making a bathrobe was probably as easy as breathing for him.

The idea hadn't occurred to his muddled brain when he first awoke. But by now, he'd managed to safely conceal his sexiness without incident.

"And, Miss, thank you so much for coming to visit me. Once I'm dressed, let's go to Professor Satori's office."

"Oh, if you'd like."

Kunon had just finished recounting his match with Soff to the Saint. But she didn't have endless free time to spend entertaining him, and he didn't want to overstay his welcome.

"Thank you as well, Miss Reyes. I'm much obliged. I'll repay the favor next time."

"There's no need. I'm far more indebted to you."

"...? You are?"

"Yes. Financially, for the most part."

If it weren't for Kunon's help...

Reyes was sure that if Kunon hadn't stepped in, she would have had to switch

to Second Level for monetary reasons. She had the same thought every time she received some income.

Right now, she was able to learn and conduct her research freely. And she had Kunon to thank for all of it.

Plus, vegetable growing was really fun. She loved it.

Occasionally, she even felt the stirring of something that might be emotion. But for now, that was irrelevant.

"I'll drop by again soon," Kunon said.

"Okay."

Reyes watched Kunon leave the room, now dressed, and went back to her reading.



It seemed they had been lying in wait for him.

"Kunon, I heard. You lost?"

The following morning, as Kunon entered the school grounds, he ran into Hank Beat, his classmate.

"Everyone's saying you dueled Professor Soff."

Riyah Houghs, another of their classmates, was with him.

"Long time no see, you two," Kunon replied.

Due to his work involving the sacred herb and magic tools, Kunon met with Reyes quite often. But he hadn't encountered either of their other classmates for a while.

By now, they had each joined their desired factions and found ways to earn their living expenses. As a result, their free time dwindled, and lately they hadn't seen much of one another.

After hearing of Kunon's match with Soff, Hank and Riyah had apparently waited around for him all morning. It had provided a good reason for them to meet up.

"About that, listen—"

Kunon didn't hesitate or try to ham up the story; he just started talking. This was already his fourth time retelling it.

The first time had been with the Saint. The second was in Satori's office. Soff had been there, too, and he had verified the events. Then Kunon had recounted the story a third time to Rinko, his maid.

The clothes Jenié brought back for him had come from the house Kunon was renting, and so Rinko had heard something of what had happened. The second Kunon got home, she pounced.

"I heard your clothes got stripped off during a fight!"

Rinko was full of excitement and glee, and Kunon was forced to explain himself.

When, in the end, Rinko declared that "a man undressing another man feels quite naughty! I'm intrigued!" Kunon felt bewildered in a way he hadn't for a long time.

Being bewildered by a maid's comment made him remember years past. Thinking back on those days, he realized for the first time how much confusion lko had caused him.

Now, here he was, quite used to all of it. But he was no longer a little kid who didn't know anything. Something had begun to dawn on him.

Was it possible that Iko's teachings were wildly out of alignment with the accepted practices and common sense of the world at large?

The barest of misgivings was starting to form in Kunon's mind...

...But now was not the time for that.

Having already told the story three times, Kunon was now quite good at it. He gave his classmates the full run-through as they walked.

"Yo, Kunon! I heard a great story and came here to find out if it was true!"

"Eh-heh. You're not hurt, are you...? Ha-ha. Oh, you were?"

"Hi! Long time no see!"

Later that day, Kunon was back in his own classroom for the first time in a while. Recently, he'd been spending his days in the First and Second Level classes. And just as he was settling in, three people from the Ability Faction walked through the door: its representative Bael Kirkington, Genevis, and Elia.

"Miss Elia, it's been too long! I've missed you!"

"Ah-ha-ha. Still the same Kunon, I see."

Kunon often met with Bael and Genevis regarding the Medicine Boxes, which was why they received no special welcome.

"So you heard about my duel with Professor Soff?" he asked.

"Yeah. Matches against teachers are really rare. Probably rarer than you'd think."

*I see,* Kunon thought, nodding.

That would explain why his classmates had ambushed him that morning *and* why Bael and the others had dropped by: They all knew just how valuable an experience it was to duel a teacher.

Kunon had assumed it was an uncommon occurrence, but maybe the opportunity had been even more precious than he realized.

That wasn't the last of Kunon's visitors, either.

He wasn't surprised when some of his other acquaintances among the senior students—Rationality Faction representative Lulomet and Harmony Faction representative Shilto—came to see him, too.

Naturally, they also wanted to hear about his duel with Soff, but they had come to check on him, too, since they hadn't met up in a while.

After chatting and making vague promises to do some research together in the future, they eventually left, though Shilto spent some time tidying up Kunon's room first.

"There."

Despite the small stream of visitors coming to chat with him, Kunon managed to finish writing up a report from the notes and memos he'd accumulated over

the past few days. He wrote about his new spells, the things he'd learned from Satori, his battle with Soff, and various other matters. He'd been writing a lot at home, too, but at last he was finished. For the time being, he'd done what needed doing.

"...Well, then."

What next?

Satori had told him to stop by anytime and that she'd put him to work.

It appeared that what he needed to do and what he wanted to do could overlap. If he went to Satori's office, he could learn from the teacher he admired. Plus, Jenié was there.

It was the perfect environment. And that was exactly why Kunon thought he might lose track of time there if he wasn't careful. But maybe that wouldn't be so bad...

"...No, stop."

As that thought began to creep in, Kunon shook his head, dismissing the option.

It was easiest to work with people who shared the same attribute. In Kunon's case, that was water. But working with people whose attributes differed from his own was also very educational.

In fact, Kunon's second teacher, Zeonly, was an earth sorcerer. His tutelage had greatly improved Kunon's techniques and approach, which had still been very basic at the time.

New discoveries could be made precisely because different attributes had different capabilities.

Kunon was at a magic school attended by sorcerers of all attributes, including rare ones. If possible, he wanted to work with an attribute he didn't have much experience with.

In that case, it came down to...

"...Fire, I guess?"

Zeonly had an earth crest, and they'd spent two years in frequent contact, so Kunon felt he'd seen enough for now.

He had just gotten some experience with wind from Professor Soff. Though he was interested in a rematch, he wanted to take some time to brainstorm countermeasures against wind magic.

One of the rare attributes, perhaps? But they were all busy and probably didn't have any room in their schedules for him.

Kunon had worked with light magic when he and Reyes cultivated shi-shilla, and they were still actively testing the salve. What's more, the Saint had to continue observing and recording her plants' growth, so she couldn't leave her room for long periods. If Kunon asked her to help him with an experiment, she'd probably turn him down.

As for dark and foul magic—Kunon only knew of one sorcerer with either crest, and they seemed perpetually busy, too.

"...Fire, huh? Okay. Fire it is."

In the end, Kunon concluded that he'd like to collaborate properly with a fire user for the first time.

He would start by going to see Hank. If Hank was busy, Kunon would simply ask him to introduce another fire user. Maybe they could even do some kind of joint experiment.

Kunon hadn't decided what he wanted to do yet, but he knew he wanted it to involve fire magic.

Water and fire. What could those two seemingly opposed attributes do together? There were so many things he wanted to test out.

"Hank is in the...Harmony Faction, I think."

If Kunon remembered correctly, the Harmony Faction's base was a short, trapezoidal tower. He had only a vague idea of its location, but he could always ask a girl passing by for help.

His course of action decided, Kunon left his lab.

Only a few steps outside the room, Kunon stopped.

If he hadn't paused then and there, he would certainly have ended up at the Harmony Faction base. But right at that moment, he realized something.

"I'm hungry."

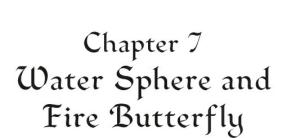
Kunon didn't have a great sense of the passage of time. He'd spent so long writing his report that it was already well past noon. It made sense that he was hungry.

First, to the cafeteria.

He turned and started walking in a different direction—a direction that would lead to a certain chance encounter.

The person he would meet was, oddly enough, just the sort of person Kunon had been looking for: a fire sorcerer.







It was probably down to the time of day.

For Kunon, who was unconcerned with time, it didn't matter if it was morning, noon, or night. Since he couldn't see, things like darkness and light didn't affect his work. If he was hungry, he ate. If he was sleepy, he slept. Unless someone—usually his maid—pointed it out to him, Kunon followed the demands of his body rather than the hands of the clock.

And that day, everything just happened to work out.

"Excuse me!"

"Yes?"

Kunon was ordering a sandwich to go from a cafeteria cook when a voice called out to him from behind.

"You are Mr. Kunon, the Advanced class water sorcerer, correct?!"

"...Um, yes."

Addressed by name, Kunon automatically responded. But the speaker turned out to be a girl he didn't recognize. Maybe they had met somewhere before and

he just didn't remember ...?

"I'm Ilhi Bolyle, a second-year fire user in the Second Level class!"

"...Okay."

He didn't know her. They hadn't met, and he had never heard her name. What's more, she spoke with such vigor that Kunon felt a bit overwhelmed—so much that he was unable to voice any of his usual frivolous chatter.

"Would you happen to be eating lunch?! I would love it if you joined me! It may seem impolite for our first meeting, but please!"

"...Okay."

Though he was feeling quite overwhelmed, when it came to a woman's invitation, Kunon had only one answer.

"Miss, your voice is very loud," cautioned the cook gently as she handed Kunon his sandwich. "You're probably frightening him."

At that, Ilhi cleared her throat and apologized.

"I'm from a military family... One of our family rules is to always greet people with a loud, clear voice. Please excuse me for not taking into account our location."

So her family was military. No wonder her voice and appearance were both so dignified. The way she was standing—hands clasped behind her back, chest forward—made her the very picture of a soldier.

"Miss Soldier?"

"I'll probably be one someday. But right now, I'm just a sorcerer in training... So then, your reply?"

"Oh, I'll join you, of course. I'm incapable of turning down a woman's invitation."

Earlier, Kunon had reflexively blurted out a response, but now he was being asked for a more official answer. Either way, his mind remained unchanged.

"Thank you very much! Now, please come with me! Oh, I'll carry your sandwich!"

Kunon handed his sandwich to Ilhi, then followed her.

He was going to have lunch with a girl. He couldn't help but be excited.

She had even gone out of her way to greet him, a stranger. That must mean she had some kind of business with him. If that business involved magic, he would enjoy it even if it was something troublesome.

A meal with a girl, and some kind of magic-related task—two reasons to be happy! Despite himself, Kunon was feeling optimistic.

But his hopes were about to be dashed. He was being led away—to a room full of men.

At the rear of the cafeteria, there were a few private rooms. Because Kunon always got his sandwiches to go, he never used the dining area. So while he knew about the private rooms, this was his first time visiting one.

"...Is this one of those 'honey traps' I've heard about?"

It was well past noon, and the cafeteria tables were largely vacant. Ilhi walked right by these empty tables toward the back of the room, so Kunon knew he was being led to one of the private spaces.

But when they arrived, the room was already occupied. Kunon realized this when Ilhi stopped in front of the door and announced herself.

"Ilhi Bolyle here! I've brought a guest!"

"Come in," replied a male voice.

Kunon never imagined that there would be nothing but other boys inside the room. Five of them, no less.

Cities are full of surprises. Riyah's words from before flashed through Kunon's mind. He had been tricked. This was a honey trap. Cities were full of surprises, and Kunon was learning just how alarming they could be.

"Oh, I just remembered something I have to do—"

"Come now, go on inside! Don't be shy, please!"

Kunon was unable to escape. Before he could turn and run, Ilhi gripped his arm and shoulders and marched him straight into the room—just like a pushy,

smooth-talking salesman dragging a girl into a store.

All the boys inside turned to look at Kunon, and one of them offered this captor a few words of praise.

"God job bringing him here, Ilhi."

"Yes, sir! Thank you for the privilege!"

Judging from that exchange, the invitation hadn't come from Ilhi but from the boy who had just spoken. Kunon felt more and more like he'd been ambushed.

It seemed this was indeed a honey trap. Maybe not the traditional sort, but it was the same, in essence.

"You're Kunon, right? The water sorcerer from the Advanced class?"

"Yes, well... Is this a honey trap?"

"...? A honey what?"

The boy addressing him did not appear familiar with the term, but two of the others burst into laughter.

A man, thrilled at being singled out by a woman, threw caution to the wind and followed her, only to find their destination full of men waiting for him.

The situation was exactly the same, at least superficially. But the two laughing boys were soon making excuses.

"Kid, a honey trap has to have an attractive woman."

"That's right. Ilhi doesn't fit the bill."

"Hmph. How rude," Ilhi said, offended.

Kunon joined in to take the woman's side. "Well, she's more than attractive enough to make me follow her."

"See? Mr. Kunon thinks so! Maybe you all just aren't paying attention! Not to brag, but I've been told I have a nice butt several t—"

"I'm not quite following, but could you all quit ignoring me and talking among yourselves?" The boy who had been temporarily left out of the conversation brought the room to heel. "Anyway, Kunon."

"Yes... So, is this a honey trap?"

"No. I've been wanting to talk to you for a while now. I asked Ilhi and the others to bring you to me if they saw you."

"I see... You want to talk..."

It seemed Kunon was correct. It was this boy who had wanted to speak with him, not Ilhi. What a dirty trick, getting a girl to ask him. If he'd known the invitation came from a guy, he probably wouldn't have come.

"I'm Gioelion."

Actually, scratch that. He might have come anyway.

Gioelion. Kunon knew that name.

"...Are you the Inferno Prince...?"

Gioelion F'louvain Arcion was the second imperial prince of the Arcion Empire. Kunon had heard countless rumors about him. But until now, there had been no particular connection between them.

Using the Glass Eye, Kunon stole a glimpse of the other boy for just a second.

He was on the slender side, with a clear complexion, black hair, and blue eyes. He looked perhaps one or two years older than Kunon. His stern mouth paired nicely with his extremely handsome features, and there was an air of royal dignity about him—an unmistakable impression that he was a member of the ruling class.

*"…"* 

But what Kunon really wanted to see was the thing *behind* him. Frankly, he didn't care what the Inferno Prince looked like.

It was incredible.

So far, the *somethings* he had seen around fire sorcerers were typically red creatures made of sparks or flames.

The Inferno Prince Gioelion was possessed by a huge, fiery wolf.

Its dazzling body was made of blinding heat, and its flames were so *intense*— it felt like they would swallow him up if he stared for too long.

The blaze was so beautiful, Kunon wanted to keep gazing into its depths. Though it shouldn't have been physically present, Kunon could feel its heat just from his fleeting glimpse, even though there shouldn't have been any heat to feel. Was its presence simply that strong?

Kunon sensed the boy was of a higher rank than other fire users he had encountered.

Probably a three-star. Possibly even four.

"You know my name? I see... So it's been getting around. That wasn't my intention."

"Getting around" was quite an understatement. Kunon had heard of Gioelion without even trying, though it didn't seem the boy himself meant for his reputation to precede him.

When had Kunon first heard of the Inferno Prince?

He felt sure he'd been aware of the name before he'd even arrived at magic school. And since then, he'd heard rumor after rumor.

Kunon never thought to actively learn more about Gioelion, though. He didn't pay much attention to what he heard, either. Since the Inferno Prince wasn't a girl, Kunon wasn't especially keen to meet him. All he really knew was that Gioelion was an amazing fire sorcerer attending the same school, and that the three Advanced class faction representatives were keeping an eye on him.

Any excellent sorcerer was a target of Kunon's interest. But regrettably, the Inferno Prince was still a prince and not a woman. As a result, Kunon had spared him no thought beyond, *It would be nice to run into him somewhere someday*.

"Please sit, Kunon. Feel free to eat your lunch."

For a moment, Kunon waffled over what to do, but ultimately he sat.

He was curious why the rumored Inferno Prince had called for him. But more importantly, regardless of how things had played out, he had a reason to stay as long as the girl who invited him was present.

Ilhi had asked, and Kunon had agreed. Even though the invitation ended up feeling more like a honey trap, if Ilhi was there, his reply was still valid. There

was no reason for him to leave.

"Then please excuse the brief intrusion," he replied.

"Of course. Garth, make our guest some tea."

The private dining room also contained a simple kitchen where students could make both tea and less complicated meals.

At Gioelion's instruction, the large young man sitting to his right stood up.

"Oh. Since you've so kindly offered, I'll have milk tea without the milk, please."

"Got it. Milk tea without... So black tea, then."

He looked unsure for a moment before getting to work on the tea.

After joining the group at the table, Kunon unwrapped his sandwich without hesitation. The freshly made bacon was still warm, the cheese melty and soft. The sandwich had only just been made and looked delicious.

"So was there something you wanted from me?" he asked.

"To satisfy my curiosity."

Curiosity, huh?

"The things they say about you intrigue me," he continued. "I really wanted to talk to you. That's all."

So he's just curious. I see, Kunon thought, nodding.

"So this has nothing to do with yesterday's incident?"

"You mean the story about you dueling a teacher? I'm intrigued by that as well, but my interest goes back a bit further. I heard you frequent the cafeteria and figured we'd have the chance to talk one day. I've been waiting for the right time."

"In other words, our meeting today was a coincidence?"

"I suppose."

So Gioelion hadn't been lying in wait for Kunon. He had merely been hoping for a chance to meet. And today, it turned out, was his lucky day.

"We've actually just missed each other on a few prior occasions. Bad timing on my part. But today the stars aligned, and here we are."

It seemed Gioelion had been keeping an eye on Kunon for quite a while.

And now, because of "yesterday's incident," a bunch of Kunon's acquaintances and female friends had been paying him visits all morning, and his schedule just happened to match up with Gioelion's.

In short, because Kunon's day went a little differently than usual, he and the prince were able to meet.

Kunon ate his sandwich and drank his milkless milk tea while he chatted with the rest of the group.

They were all Second Level students from the Arcion Empire. Naturally, not all of them turned out to be fire users—it seemed Gioelion and Ilhi were the only ones among them with fire crests. Kunon supposed they were all friends with each other.

He had learned from Soff not long ago about the source of Second Level's unruliness. Apparently, this group was the cause. But speaking with them now, they didn't give him so bad an impression.

First it was Azel, the first-year in Second Level, and now the Inferno Prince. Just what was the truth?

While Kunon was mulling this over in one corner of his mind, the conversation turned to Gioelion's nickname, the Inferno Prince.

The prince's composed features showed a vague discomfort.

"Kunon," he said, "I don't know what kind of rumors you've heard about me. But I have never once used my family name at this school. I've never indicated or shown off my royal heritage. I wanted to spend my time here as a student and nothing more, and that's still the case. But people started calling me the 'Inferno Prince' without my knowledge, and those close to me mistakenly thought my identity had gotten out and spread the word, exposing everything."

Kunon processed the information he had just received.

"So you were trying to hide the fact that you're an important figure in the

## Empire?"

"Yes. But that's not such a strange thing to do. A lot of royals and aristocrats keep their identities hidden. You don't use your family name at school, either, do you? That makes you the same—another noble hiding their identity."

It was true that few people used their family names at school. Kunon, too, almost never used the Gurion name so he wouldn't have to think about things like social status. It was an unspoken rule: Don't bring up your country's circumstances or authority while at magic school.

"It was probably never going to work for you, though, Master Gio," said a tall boy named Caquetta.

"Indeed," Ilhi agreed.

"What do you mean?" asked Gioelion.

"The face, the dignified bearing, the magic. It all says, 'Inferno Prince."

No one knew who had coined it, but the phrase "Inferno Prince" had begun as a simple nickname.

Because of the boy's superior demeanor, appearance, and presence, not to mention his outstanding magic, people had started calling him "Prince." And as it happened, that's exactly what he was.

"With how exceptional you are, it's only natural people would start to suspect something," said Caquetta. "I think the truth about you would have spread even if everyone had kept quiet."

"If anything, it was foolish to think you could hide it," Ilhi added.

"Oh-ho. Bold words, Ilhi."

"Yes, sir! Thank you!"

"That wasn't a compliment."

Despite being Gioelion's subordinates, the others seemed to get along well with him. But didn't that mean he *wasn't* throwing his weight around as an imperial prince? The story behind the unrest in Second Level grew ever more puzzling.

"Well, anyway. Enough of such boring topics. Let's get down to business." Gioelion began speaking the moment Kunon finished polishing off his sandwich. He must have been waiting for the right moment. "Kunon, I first became interested in you when I heard you could make animals out of water."

"Ah, yes."

That was common knowledge, so it wasn't particularly surprising to hear.

"I thought you might be like me, and that made me happy."

But the prince's follow-up comment had been unexpected.

"...Pardon?"

Kunon was like Gioelion? In what way?

Gioelion held up his right hand, his index finger pointing into the air.

"You can see colors, right?"

Something fluttered—light and delicate—at the tip of his finger. The creature, resembling a red scrap of paper, then flitted unsteadily across the table and ended up right in front of Kunon. It came to a stop on the rim of his teacup.

"Reproducing living things and replicating their movements is the ideal subject for manipulating and controlling magic. I was interested to learn someone else had come to the same conclusion as me."

The red thing was magic. Fire magic.

It was a butterfly made of flames.

"...Amazing."

Kunon stared.

While he didn't use the Glass Eye, he did concentrate all his energy on what he could detect with magic.

He perceived a red butterfly, perched on the edge of a cup. Its wings flapped slowly, as if it were alive. Was it material? No, but it was burning. Watching closely, he could see the tips of its wings wavering almost imperceptibly. In that case...

"Is that...a simple Ka-shi?"

Ka-shi was a beginner-level fire spell. Like A-ori for water sorcerers, it was the first thing fire sorcerers learned.

"You can tell?"

"Yes."

The magic power it contained was small. Its shape was complex, and controlling it was probably difficult, but the spell itself was basic.

The moment he figured that out, Kunon noticed something else.

Now that he was faced with someone else's spell, Kunon finally realized how much of a threat magic could be when it used so little power. Because the power used to create it was so minimal, the butterfly was difficult to sense.

And so, upon seeing Gioelion's Ka-shi, Kunon finally understood the nature of his own A-ori. This was the type of magic that a defensive magic circle wouldn't recognize as an attack. Having always been on the casting end of such magic, Kunon hadn't been aware. This was, without a doubt, a threat.

He realized then that being his opponent in a duel was probably much more difficult than he had imagined. And yet Zeonly and Soff had still beaten him. Kunon was struck again by their incredible skill as sorcerers.

"I can't see movement, so I can't make things that move. If I try to do it anyway, I'm told their movement looks unnatural."

After observing the fire butterfly thoroughly, Kunon produced a water cat, as if in response.

"This is the one people talk about!" someone said, and the men around Gioelion leaned over the table.

"You can touch it," Kunon said.

No sooner were the words out of his mouth than the water cat vanished from its spot.

The cat, which had been sitting in the center of the table, was now in the hands of a large young man—the one called Garth who had served Kunon his

milk tea without milk. His full name was Garthries, but those close to him called him Garth.

He was petting the cat and nodding, as if in understanding.

"It's a cat. Definitely a cat."

"That's not fair, Garth."

"Hey. Shouldn't Master Gio be the first one to touch it, look at it, and pet it?"

"Shut up. As his guard, I'm just checking to make sure it isn't dangerous... I can tell just from holding it a little that it's cute and harmless. But I think I need a bit more time... So cute..."

Garth was Gioelion's guard, apparently, and Kunon suspected he was currently being just a little bit selfish.

Gioelion was staring at him intensely, but Garth didn't look like he wanted to give the cat up anytime soon. Evidently, he really liked cute things.

"Well, I can produce quite a few, so..."

Kunon had found Garth very masculine in both voice and physique, and was quite confused by his unanticipated reaction to the cat.

Nevertheless, Kunon proceeded to make enough water animals for everyone in the room.

"I had heard it was possible to recreate something down to the feel of it, and I see it really can be done," Gioelion said, stroking a giant hairless rat.

This animal was the most popular feature of Kunon's business. Though the word "hairless" was in its name, it actually had very short fur—so short that its skin looked wrinkled.

Just for fun, Kunon had made a long-haired version, too. He could make adjustments to the rat quite freely, since it was an artificial creature.

As it happened, the rat had garnered a semi-rabid fanbase that was split between those who liked the hairless version and those who preferred the long-haired one.

Kunon didn't really have a preference, himself. And because he didn't care

either way, he had decided not to get involved in the matter.

"Naturally, you can't touch my magic."

No matter how tangible they seemed, Gioelion's creations were made of fire. Unlike water and earth, fire was only the phenomenon of combustion and didn't include physical matter. Consequently, his fire animals didn't have a texture to change.

"What other things can you make, Gioelion?"

"I've practiced making most of the animals and magic creatures you see in picture books. Mine might be easier than the ones you produce with A-ori, since there's no need to make them feel a certain way."

"I see..."

No need. Was that really true?

For a moment, Kunon contemplated types of fire accompanied by physical matter, such as lava and flammable liquids. If one used something like that, perhaps it would be possible to make a fire one could touch...

Despite thinking that far, Kunon remained silent. He didn't know if fire sorcerers could produce things like lava. But more importantly, he worried that if such an experiment failed, it could result in anything from minor burns to utter disaster.

If it was possible, Gioelion would probably think of it himself one day. Until then, it was better not to say anything ignorant. Such a concept was too dangerous even to test.

"My main focus is on creating a shell or outward-facing membrane as a framework, so it differs from your fire even in terms of the approach to its construction."

Fire needed to be molded into a shape, while water needed to be formed into the framework of a shape.

Kunon wasn't sure which was harder. Since the magic was of two different attributes, it was difficult to compare them directly.

"It's an interesting subject," said the prince. "What are your plans after this? If

you have time, I'd like to talk a little more."

"I agree."

Kunon also found the topic fascinating. Fortunately, he had basically no plans that day.

Just when he'd been thinking that he'd like to work with a fire user, he'd met Gioelion. Because of that, he'd already achieved his goal for the day.

The Inferno Prince.

Talking to him was bound to be interesting. After all, just as his nickname suggested, he had a deep, authoritative understanding of magic.

"Aaah! Please stop! I don't really like animals! Cuteness doesn't matter to me, I judge them only based on whether or not I can eat them!"

"You have a lot of nerve, telling a stupid lie like that in your position."

"Stand up already if you don't like it. We're nowhere near done."

It was unclear how things had progressed to the current situation. At some point, Ilhi had lain down on the floor, and the boys had begun piling water animals on top of her in some weird sort of game.

Ilhi was now completely buried. Dogs, cats, giant hairless rats, scaled-down horses—some with wings—and ponies surrounded her. Or rather, they *covered* her. She was their foundation.

"You wanna switch? Hey, can we switch?"

Garth seemed extremely jealous, but despite Ilhi's complaints, she didn't appear to have any interest in letting him take her place.

"Have you gotten it?"

"Yes. So this is a dragon..."

"Don't touch it. You'll get burned."

Gioelion and Kunon remained engrossed in their conversation, as though unaware of the surrounding commotion.

Kunon produced more water animals when pestered, but he did so mostly

without paying attention. Talking to Gioelion was far more interesting.

There was now a small dragon standing on the table. Gioelion had made it, and Kunon was observing it very closely. He had seen them in picture books before, but illustrations were flat. Having only two-dimensional pictures as a reference hadn't allowed him to truly comprehend their form.

But with this fire dragon... Though it was intangible, it had depth. It could be meticulously studied from every possible angle.

"How intriguing..."

Looking at the dragon, Kunon recreated its shape with the A-ori in his hands. And as he worked, Gioelion watched his process, totally engrossed.

Everyone else had moved away from the table to keep from disturbing them. No one could keep up with them and their lively conversation on such complex topics. The pair didn't even notice when everyone else got up.

There were several other boys and a girl in the room with them, but by that point, Kunon and Gioelion had no attention to spare for anyone else.

Apparently, quite a lot of time had passed.

"I'm sorry. I overstayed my welcome," said Kunon as the group was exiting the private dining space.

He had arrived at the room in the afternoon, and now it was evening. The winter sky was already growing dark.

He had gotten totally lost in conversation with Gioelion, and night had fallen without him noticing. Because of Kunon's indifference to the passage of time, this wasn't a rare occurrence, but this time it had affected someone else, too.

When it came to magic, a person's gender didn't matter. Kunon had no desire to bring such matters into it... Well, okay, he supposed he would prefer to talk to a woman. But leaving that aside, Kunon still felt indebted to the other boy for giving up so much of his time on their first meeting.

Kunon had enjoyed himself so much, he'd forgotten everything else. But what if Gioelion didn't feel the same?

"No need to apologize. I had fun, too," said the prince, and he meant it.

Kunon was his guest, of course, and his host had to be polite. But even if that weren't the case, Gioelion would have said the same exact thing, thought Kunon. The prince's words in that moment held an undeniable ring of truth.

"It's going to be rough when we get home, Master Gio."

"I know. I'm prepared."

**"...?"** 

Kunon didn't understand the short exchange between Ilhi and Gioelion.

"Is there something you have to do?" he asked.

"Don't worry about it. Just some boring business that's been delayed."

He'd simply whiled away all of his imperial study time to continue a fun conversation.

Gioelion was the second imperial prince of the Empire, and it was expected that he would either assume some key position in his own country or be sent abroad to marry in another.

Whichever path he took, he would do so as a member of the imperial royal family. Accordingly, it was his duty to complete assignments set by the Empire, even if he was enrolled in magic school.

There were a lot of wealthy kids and those connected to royal and noble families in Second Level who needed the extra time to study for their respective futures.

Some would inherit titles, and some were destined to serve as sorcerers in royal palaces or courts. Others might have different circumstances, such as those who planned to inherit the estate they married into.

Under normal circumstances, Gioelion was at the age when he would have attended a school for nobles. Yet he had chosen this school instead. And in that case, where was he going to acquire all the knowledge and etiquette that royals and aristocrats were supposed to have? The answer, of course, was "in his spare time outside of school."

That made the Advanced class an unrealistic option. He would have had to study magic, memorize whatever they taught at the school for nobles, and earn his own money on top of everything else. A schedule that packed would have been unmanageable.

Gioelion's afternoons were usually spent studying at home. That day, he just happened to stay behind at school a bit later in preparation for the interattribute competition to take place at the end of second semester.

Once class ended, they practiced. After that, they are a slightly late lunch and were merely relaxing a little before heading home—when Ilhi arrived with Kunon, the boy Gioelion had been longing to meet. And now here they were.

Once home, he would do the studying he'd originally meant to take care of in the afternoon. He would probably have to keep studying after dinner, too. His plans had gotten delayed quite a bit.

The prospect held little appeal—and weighed against more time spent with Kunon, there was no contest. And so Gioelion had chosen to be here, even if it meant throwing all his afternoon plans to the wayside.

"If you want to talk again sometime, come visit me at my house," the prince said. "I doubt we'll see each other much at school."

Talk of Kunon had reached the prince fairly early on. And yet several months had passed before they were able to meet. Gioelion was busy, and Kunon was occupied with his own studies. They'd see each other sooner if Kunon came over.

"Are you sure? I'll really do it."

"Of course. We have spare rooms, so you can even stay the night."

An overnight stay at an upperclassman's house. That was a troubling prospect for Kunon.

What exactly was his relationship with Gioelion? Was it okay to call the boy his friend? Could he think of this as "visiting a friend's house" or "sleeping over at a friend's house"? Was it even possible to become someone's friend when you'd only just met them?

Kunon's fretting was interrupted by Ilhi exclaiming, "Garth and I live with him, too!"

"Huh? You live together?"

"Ilhi and Garth also serve as my guards."

It seemed they were his friends and his bodyguards.

They continued their conversation as they walked to the school gates.

They had already talked for some time, but there was still much more to say.

They had hardly spoken about anything other than magic, so now they switched to casual topics like what neighborhoods they lived in and which shops they frequented.

"Oh, Miss Reyes lives in that area, too."

When he asked, Kunon learned that Gioelion's house was in an affluent residential neighborhood.

It made sense for an imperial prince. All the properties in that area had large houses and big gardens, and were sure to have extra rooms. Their residents wouldn't have to worry if they received unexpected visitors.

As the son of a marquess, Kunon had also been shown a bigger property, just in case.

But since he lived together with his maid... Or rather, to save his maid the extra work, he had chosen a house meant for two.

Unlike other expenses, the school *did* cover rent for Advanced class students. If Kunon had wanted to, he could have stayed in luxury housing, too... But that would have made Rinko's job harder. And since Kunon didn't have any complaints with his current situation, he figured things were fine as is.

"Oh, you mean the Saint who enrolled this year. Our maid and hers are friends, but I've only ever said hello."

Gioelion and Reyes had met several times at public functions. And shortly after enrolling, the Saint had come to greet him as a new neighbor. But they hadn't seen each other since then.

"Her experiments are quite interesting," Kunon said.

"I've only heard about them, including that you were involved."

The conversation returned to magic.

Kunon and Gioelion never ran out of things to discuss.

The two of them had only just met, but they already seemed like old friends.



Earlier that day, while Kunon and Gioelion were talking in the private dining room, an incident was taking place in Laboratory 3.

"Hff, hff..."

Azel O'vig Aselviga, a first-year water user in the Second Level, was propped up on one knee, shoulders heaving.

His head spun. He had used too much magic. He was bleeding a little, but not enough to cause dizziness.

"Azel—"

Radia F'le Rhodia was in a similar state.

She held out a hand to help him, but Azel brushed it aside. Then, driving his almost spent body into motion, he stood, using only his own strength, and declared: "...We win!"

The ones he and Radia had just defeated lay sprawled on the floor or down on their knees—five first-year students from the Second Level earth class.

"Listen! As agreed, you now follow us! From now on, forget about the Empire and all that! You will obey our command!"

No one raised their voices in agreement, but neither was there any opposition.

They had lost, despite an indisputable advantage. They were defeated, five-to-two.

None of them could say a thing. Not the ones who had fought, nor their classmates who had merely watched, nor any of the other first-years.

Complaining now would only mean disgrace. In fact, the reason no one had spoken up in agreement yet was because they were stewing in remorse.

Frankly, they were embarrassed by their loss.

"As I explained beforehand..." At last, Azel and his allies finally had control over every single first-year classroom in the Second Level. They could finally take on the second-year students. "Next, we'll challenge the second-years to a duel! You'll stand with us and observe the fight!"

At long last, it was time. They were going to challenge the second-year Inferno Prince. The small flame of rebellion they had lit was unmistakably spreading.

Strike down the Inferno Prince, the imperial students' symbol—that was their aim, and they had finally come this far.

Everything was in preparation to drag the enemy out and into battle. If they removed all the obstacles between them—if they defeated the other imperial students first—ultimately, the Inferno Prince would have nowhere left to run.

As an imperial prince, he couldn't turn away from a challenge. It would be shameful.

The ones who would watch over that battle...who would support him, were the students of the classrooms they had taken over. They already had nearly forty people.

Under these circumstances, the Inferno Prince would have no choice but to accept Azel's challenge. With this much pressure on him, as a royal, he couldn't possibly decline. And Azel wasn't about to let him try stalling by suggesting they start with the first-years.

If they defeated him, the Empire's influence would be severely weakened, and life in the Second Level would get a lot easier.

Steadily, the flames of rebellion spread.



The day after Kunon met Gioelion, Ilhi came to his lab.

"Pardon me!"

"Huh? Miss Ilhi?"

Kunon, in the middle of reading a book, was caught a little off guard by her loud entrance. They had only met the day before, and she'd already come to see him. It seemed a bit soon for a reunion.

"Oh my. What a privilege to encounter such a dignified young woman two days in a row."

Kunon had no problem with it, of course.

"You're too kind! Actually, there's something we forgot to mention yesterday! Also, I think you should do a little cleaning in here!"

Something they forgot to mention?

"What is it?"

Kunon ignored the comment about tidying up; he was more curious about the other matter.

"Master Gio is planning on having a short lunch at the school, starting now! I know he mentioned that you are welcome to come to the house! But I don't believe lunch was discussed!"

"Is that so?"

Kunon recalled the previous day's events. Talking with Gioelion had been so much fun.

"Just between you and me," Ilhi continued, lowering her voice. "It seems like Master Gio really enjoyed spending time with you yesterday, Mr. Kunon. He's always busy, so... If you don't mind, would you spend some more time with him, if you're free? You could go see him now, during lunch..."

"Oh, I'll go."

The other boy had even gone so far as to invite Kunon to come stay the night at his house, whether he truly meant it or not. His time with the prince had been so pleasant that Kunon wanted to believe the sentiment was genuine. He had been wanting to spend more time with him. He had even decided that he really would visit his house someday. That was how much fun he'd had the previous afternoon.

If now was convenient for Gioelion, Kunon wasn't going to object. What

reason did he have to refuse another delightful conversation about magic?

"A gentleman never says no to an invitation from a lady, after all."

And on top of everything else, the offer had come from a girl.

Kunon wouldn't embarrass himself as a gentleman by turning it down.

Once again, Kunon went to the private dining room and joined the group of imperial students.

"Nice to see you. Come on, sit."

Gioelion welcomed him. He was having more fun than he had experienced in a long while, first the day before, and now today. He had no reason not to welcome Kunon.

They talked while they ate. Just as Gioelion had thought, everything Kunon had to say was interesting.

"I wanted to join the Advanced class, too, you know," he said.

Kunon spoke of exploring the depths of magic—of his experiments and discoveries. It was all fascinating, and Gioelion envied him so much.

At present, the Second Level class was in disarray.

Gioelion, who found himself at the center of the conflict before he even knew what was happening, was frankly fed up with it all. He truly wanted nothing to do with the whole messy, irritating situation. He had precious little time to waste on things like that.

In truth, what he really wanted was this: To spend every day thinking and talking about nothing but magic. He had dreamed of having this kind of life at magic school.

When he was home, he was busy with other things, but...at least while he was at school.

"Are you interested in experiments?" Kunon asked.

"I am. We don't really do them in Second Level."

All they did was study the curriculum prepared by their teachers, and nothing beyond. He supposed that meant they could perform experiments on their own

outside of class, but... Gioelion, at least, did not have the time to spare.

"I rarely get to spend my time as I please. Even talking to you has to happen over lunch."

When he wasn't in magic class, Gioelion studied things he would normally have been taught at an imperial school. It was as if he was receiving a dual education.

He had resigned himself to it as something that came with his title, but it wasn't ideal.

"Then would you like to try a simple experiment?"

"What?"

"I'll have to make preparations, but I just happen to have an idea that won't take much time. I thought of it while talking to you yesterday."

Gioelion was in turmoil.

From an early age, it had been hammered into him that royalty did not let their emotions show. It was a skill he had practiced for as long as he could remember and finally mastered.

"Really? An experiment even I can do?"

Despite all that, at Kunon's suggestion, Gioelion's face nearly gave him away. As his heart pounded in his chest, he worked desperately to suppress his reaction and control his facial features. Perhaps his efforts had resulted in a rather odd expression. He could see Ilhi smirking in his periphery.

"It's a really simple one, though. It might bore you, it's so easy..."

"I don't care. Let's do it."

The look on Gioelion's face as he immediately blurted out his response was beyond his control. He was surrounded by his friends, and Kunon, his guest, couldn't see it. Surely it was okay to let his emotions slip just this once. Or maybe just for the day.

"What's this?"

"It's processed bone from a monster. Do you like stuff like that, Gioelion?"

"I do... Actually, I'm not sure. But I think it's interesting... What is it used for?"

"That depends. Bones containing magical elements have many uses. Since it's in that section, I would guess it's used for some sort of divination."

"Divination? Like fortune-telling?"

"Exactly. I can do it, too, more or less. I studied hydromancy and water scrying for a brief period. I'll tell your fortune for you sometime."

"Pff. Well then, I'll be sure to take you up on that."

Kunon and the others had arrived at a general magic goods store. They were just making a quick detour on their way home.

Standing side by side, Kunon and Gioelion looked as thick as thieves. Watching over the pair from behind, a short distance away, Ilhi and Garthries were grinning.

Though his expression didn't change much, the perpetually sullen and uninterested Gioelion seemed to be having a wonderful time.

It was a rare and heartwarming sight. Actually, this might have been the first time they ever saw him let down his guard to such an extent.

"They really are two peas in a pod, aren't they?" said Ilhi.

"Yeah," Garthries agreed.

The two boys had only known each other for a day. And yet they seemed so close, it was almost impossible to believe.

"Well, all that matters is that Master Gio is enjoying himself," Garthries said.

"Agreed... By the way, doesn't it look like they're on a date?"

Hearing those words made Garthries think it, too: She's right. It really does feel like they're on a date.

He hadn't realized it before, because there was a reasonable amount of distance between them. Space enough for two other people or so.

But there was a sort of closeness between Kunon and Gioelion—something that had nothing to do with physical space. It was hard to put into words.

"...I'm glad Mr. Kunon is also a boy," he said.

That meant there wouldn't be any disputes over marital status. If Gioelion, as an imperial prince, desired such a relationship with someone, there was a good chance things would get complicated.

"Yes, it's good they're the same gender. It cleanses my spirit to see boys flirting with each other. I should sear this image clearly into my mind's eye."

There had definitely been some kind of misunderstanding between himself and Ilhi just now, but Garthries didn't bother to correct her.

Maybe it did "cleanse her spirit." But Ilhi's face, distorted with glee, made her impure thoughts rather obvious. Even if he said something, he doubted she'd hear a word of it.

"Well, see you tomorrow."

Their brief shopping excursion over, Gioelion's group parted ways with Kunon in front of the store.

The following day, Kunon visited the private dining room once again. It had already become their go-to meeting place.

"Hello," he said. "I'm looking forward to our experiment today."

Gioelion, Garthries, Ilhi, and two of their friends were already in the room.

"Is it okay to ask about it now?" Gioelion replied.

They had been talking about conducting a simple experiment and planned to start right after lunch. Gioelion hadn't asked for details the day before, hoping to save some of the fun for later.

That turned out to be the right choice. He spent the night tossing and turning, too excited to sleep. It had been a long time since he'd last felt this way.

"Of course. I want to make an Eternal Glass, but with a twist."

An Eternal Glass was a kind of glasswork vessel. Essentially, it involved enclosing some kind of handicraft or other trinket within the glass vessel to produce a beautiful ornament or decoration.

They weren't particularly difficult to make. Consequently, there were tons of

earth sorcerers who could produce one. They were quite commonplace and not all that special.

"Oh... You think we can do it?"

"Ah, is it too simple after all? You're not interested?"

"No, I just thought such things were more the earth attribute's wheelhouse."

An Eternal Glass was indeed the domain of earth sorcerers. Neither Gioelion nor Kunon used earth magic, and so the prince wasn't convinced they could succeed.

"It is originally an earth magic creation, but today I thought we could try reproducing it with a chemical solution."

Kunon's tone was light and casual.

Gioelion wasn't quite following, but it appeared Kunon knew of a method they could use to make an Eternal Glass that didn't require earth magic.

"That's possible?" he asked.

"Yes. Without getting into the complexities behind it, I've prepared a solvent and solute that will turn into glass as a solution. You remember the materials I bought yesterday? It costs quite a lot just to make a small piece of glass, so this method isn't very common. It's wasteful."

So that's the idea, Gioelion thought, satisfied with Kunon's nonchalant explanation.

But if that was true...

"I see... But then you don't need my help, do you?"

Gioelion was a fire sorcerer. There were few scenarios in daily life that required fire magic. In fact, using it casually could even be dangerous.

Fire magic was flashy and pleasing to watch, but it lacked practicality and versatility. Sometimes it seemed almost worthless.

"Ah-ha-ha, what are you talking about? You're the leading actor in this experiment."

"...Me? A fire sorcerer?"

"Yes. Actually, this wouldn't work with anyone else. I wouldn't have even thought of it if I hadn't met you."

As they spoke, they finished up their lunches. Finally, it was time to begin the experiment.

"Let's get started." Kunon pulled two flasks and two beakers from the bag he had brought. "These are the solution components I made from the materials I purchased yesterday. Dissolved saltpeter and...well, let's just say they're the ingredients needed to make glass."

The liquids were each poured from their respective flasks into separate beakers. Both were tasteless and odorless, like water.

"If you mix these together, you get glass. Earth sorcerers don't need them, of course."

Gioelion, watching with immense curiosity, wondered what in the world was about to happen.

Naturally, so did everyone else in the room. The rest of the group, however, had an unspoken agreement to keep mostly quiet so as not to interfere with Kunon and Gioelion's conversation.

"Please make a fire butterfly out of this A-ori," Kunon said, as a small sphere of water appeared a short distance from his face.

It drifted gently through the air to stop in front of Gioelion.

"You want me to make one out of this?"

"Oh, it's flammable, so it'll burn. Don't worry."

"All right."

The A-ori caught fire, just as Kunon had said it would. Then its shape shifted, and it became a butterfly.

"...This is..."

"You understand, right? This butterfly is a product of both of our magics."

Ilhi whispered excitedly, "Their first collaborative effort," but everyone ignored her.

"Yeah, I get it."

The burning water had been molded into a fire butterfly. In other words—it was fire that had substance.

"Keep it just like that, please. Now we anchor it with one of the glass components."

Kunon used an A-ori to make the liquid in one of the beakers float up out of its container...then it swallowed the fire butterfly up.

"It's anchored now, so you can relax. Thank you."

As expected of an experiment described as "simple," the work involved was very easy. However— "It...trapped the fire...?"

An Eternal Glass was a glasswork ornament with an object contained inside. Pretty things like flowers and jewel beetles were common choices for containment. But Kunon had chosen to trap fire—an immaterial phenomenon—inside glass. What a fascinating idea.

"Now we put it back into the beaker temporarily, mix in the second glass component, and secure it until the glass has totally crystallized, and... I think that's enough. There we go, all done."

Thunk.

Kunon removed the crystallized structure from the beaker.

Left on the table was a beautiful butterfly made of fire, enclosed in a glass cylinder.

The fire's constantly flickering form and color gradation had been captured intact, preserved exactly as they had been the instant the butterfly was engulfed.

"Wow, so it *can* be done!" Kunon exclaimed. "I wasn't sure if it was possible when I came up with the idea!"

He had trapped burning water in glass, while it was still actively burning. It was hard to believe he'd really done it.

"Yeah... I'm surprised, too."

They'd just conducted an experiment. They'd taken a proposal—something they weren't sure they could do, something they might fail at, something that seemed impossible—and they'd attempted to make it happen, or to confirm that they were right.

The Advanced class sounds really fun, Gioelion thought.

"This Eternal Glass, can I have it?" he asked.

"Of course."

Ilhi whispered excitedly, "The fruits of their union," but everyone ignored her.







## Chapter 8 Anxiously Awaiting

"Master Gio, Master Gio! I have something interesting to share!" Caquetta announced, bursting into the private dining room.

"At least knock," said Gioelion. "We have company."

"Oops, my mistake. I didn't know you were here, Kunon."

"Pardon the intrusion," Kunon replied.

Yes, Kunon was also present.

It had already been four days since he'd met Gioelion. And every one of those days, Kunon had spent his lunchtime here.

All of them were busy, so they only saw each other during lunch. There were still so many things they hadn't talked about yet, and more joint experiments Kunon wanted them to try, but there was nothing they could do about the lack of time.

The group was made up of four boys, counting Gioelion, and one girl, all from the Empire.

Garth and Ilhi were the prince's guards, while Caquetta, Euvan, and Castello

were friends. Sometimes they would join them for lunch, and other times they'd be absent.

That day, Castello was absent and Caquetta was only just arriving. As always, the percentage of men in the room was high.

"You mentioned something interesting?" Gioelion prompted.

"Oh, should I leave?" asked Kunon, but Caquetta waved off his concern.

"No, you're fine," he said, sitting down at the table. "The first-years started an uprising. They're storming the second-year classrooms right now."

"What...? An uprising...?"

"Yep. And you're their target, Master Gio."

"...? What in the world?"

None of this made any sense.

"That sounds fun!! Depending on their motive, I might want to turn against Master Gio, too!!"

Ilhi, who was expected to protect Gioelion, had just said she wanted to be his adversary, but no one acknowledged her statement. It seemed she was just the type who said things like that.

"Remember how there was talk of people from the Empire walking around acting like they own the place and using your authority as a shield? They're rebelling against that."

"Oh, that."

Just as understanding dawned on Gioelion, a small "oh" escaped from Kunon.

"I've also been concerned about that issue," he said, knowing it was not the time to stay silent.

He had mentioned his stint with the Second Level class not too long ago. However, he hadn't gone into the reason behind it. All Kunon had said was that he participated in the class after the teacher lured him in with the promise of a private lesson. He had kept the details to himself. But now...

"The more I've gotten to know you," he continued, "the more I've realized

there has to be some kind of misunderstanding."

And that meant his justification for keeping the truth to himself had disappeared.

Kunon had spent time with this group every day for the last four days, and during that time, not one of them had acted even slightly domineering or arrogant. Gioelion least of all.

Second Level was in an uproar because of the Inferno Prince, and his presence had strengthened the Empire's influence. As far as Kunon had heard, Gioelion was the main culprit.

"You've never made any statement or taken any action as the imperial prince of the Empire. So how could you be exerting any influence?"

The Inferno Prince that Kunon knew was just another sorcerer in training, at least as obsessed with magic, if not more so, than Kunon was himself. Everything else, quite frankly, was secondary to him. That was just the kind of person he was.

The thought had run through Kunon's mind countless times: *He's just like me*. They were so similar that Kunon almost thought of him as a second self.

"...I see. So that's how you see me, Kunon?" Gioelion breathed a small sigh. "Personally, I think people often get the wrong impression of me. I don't mean to act arrogant, but sometimes I come across that way, despite it not being my intention. I have nothing to do with this incident. Some people from the Empire are just using my name to throw their weight around."

In other words, that was the *real* reason behind the unrest in the Second Level class.

Euvan, who was usually quiet, spoke up in a soft voice. "To be a bit more precise, they're using Master Gio's skill as a sorcerer to bolster his influence. I think his reputation as a magic user is why things have turned out this way."

In short, they were relying on his powerful presence.

"You haven't tried to stop them?" Kunon asked.

"Why would I, when it has nothing to do with me? I don't have any reason to

get involved."

Garth, who was sitting with a water cat in his lap, was exasperated by Gioelion's flat refusal.

"That indifferent attitude is what leads to these misunderstandings, you know?" he shot back. "You should make yourself clear. We've known you for a long time, so we understand what you mean. But if you don't convey things better, you'll put Kunon off."

"...I suppose you're right." It seemed Gioelion's approach had already met with a few failures. "When I'm at magic school, I'm just a student. I abide by the rule to leave my position at the gates. If other people here are using my authority, does that mean I'm at fault? I just want to study magic. I don't have time to stick my nose into other people's business."

As perpetually busy as he was, Gioelion's time at school was precious to him. He didn't want to get involved with anything troublesome, and he didn't want to do anything that didn't pique his interest. That was why he never used his family name.

He was just another student here. He wasn't Gioelion the imperial prince right now, so what was he supposed to do?

"Suppose these so-called imperial forces end up hurting someone or committing a crime in the course of their bullying," he continued. "That would be a reason for me to intervene. If they're disgracing the Empire somehow, I'll put them in their place, even if it means using my name. But there's no justification for me to get involved right now, because they haven't caused any trouble for the Empire yet."

Gioelion hadn't done anything wrong, and his country hadn't been inconvenienced. So he did nothing.

There were princes and sons of high-ranking nobility from other countries here, too. If he made a wrong move, he could very well start an international dispute. That was why he kept his focus purely on his own country.

"Anyway, both sides are in the wrong, aren't they? There is no such thing as royal or noble authority here. Kunon, what do you think? What do we have

here?"

Kunon could feel the expectation in Gioelion's words that they must share the same opinion on this matter.

"You're right. There's no such thing as royal or noble authority in this school. There's only magic."

He gave his answer firmly, and it was exactly what Gioelion was hoping for.

"Exactly. Only magic. Which means there's only one correct course of action. If they have some kind of issue, they can settle it with magic. No matter who they are or what the problem is. These *imperial forces* or whatever are acting like that because they're obsessed with politics and social status and influence—all things that don't exist here. There's no reason for something as overblown as a rebellion. All they have to do is face me and tell me exactly how they feel."

If Gioelion were to phrase this sentiment a little more aggressively, he might put it like this: If you have something to say to me, say it with magic.

"Second Level is so lucky." Now it was Kunon's turn to be jealous. "They have tons of reasons to oppose you. They can duel you any number of times, even start an uprising against you. I bet you'd accept every challenge. This is the first time since I came to school that I've felt dissatisfied with being in the Advanced class."

Gioelion laughed.

"Maybe it's coincidence, or maybe it was inevitable... But I've been wanting to duel you for a long time, too."

If only they were both in Second Level. Kunon would already have challenged Gioelion. The "imperial forces'" activities would have served as a nice pretext. They could have had countless duels by now.

"Will you accept my challenge? Even though I have no reason for it?"

"Of course I will. But now isn't the right time."

Second Level's final exam was fast approaching. And there was the rebellion, too. Someone was sure to come looking for a fight with Gioelion soon.

"If I was in Second Level," said Kunon, "we wouldn't have to negotiate like

this, would we? I could just say, 'I don't like you, fight me,' and that would do it."

"And I would say the same to you."

Gioelion stood. Lunch was almost over.

"Let us anxiously await that day together."



After that, there was no reason for Kunon to go to the private dining room.

Instead, he decided to attend to his own affairs while he waited for time to pass. For now, he was satisfied with having created an Eternal Glass.

He had fulfilled his original goal of doing something with a fire sorcerer. They had created a single object from two supposedly contradicting attributes—water and fire. Not bad for an experiment conducted with limited time.

In addition, Kunon was content with having met Gioelion. They even had a promise to duel. Just as Gioelion had said, the wait wouldn't be easy. But Kunon patiently endured, sure they both felt the same.

The rebellion was, apparently, unsuccessful. The first-year water class had challenged the Inferno Prince and lost. But the flames of revolt weren't extinguished; rather, the first-year students were demanding rematch after rematch.

Kunon's one-time acquaintances, Azel and Radia, along with the students allied to their cause, were rising up. From what he'd heard, their days had become quite wild. They picked fights with anyone from the Empire, and Gioelion was at the top of their list.

I'm jealous of that, too, Kunon thought.

He genuinely envied them not only for getting to duel Gioelion, but also for getting to challenge other students.

Most people in the Advanced class were absorbed in their own magic and research, and duels were relatively uncommon. Kunon thought the Advanced class was much better suited to collaborative efforts. Because everyone worked

alone more often than not, the occasional chance to join forces was welcomed.

Second Level students probably got into disputes more readily because they were all being made to follow the same path. It was a group of people of similar age, whose backgrounds and beliefs were all different, crammed into the same place and pursuing the same goals. Though it was hard to say why, that kind of environment seemed like a breeding ground for headstrong individuals.

"Oh. Kunon. It's you."

Kunon hadn't heard that voice in a while.

"It's been too long, Miss Cassis. Is the highlight of your ensemble today the maiden's heart in your chest?"

"I have no clue what you're talking about."

Kunon had just been summoned to a teacher's office on a business matter.

He was heading home after finishing his work, and as he was about to exit the school building, he ran into Cassis from the Rationality Faction.

She seemed to have a negative impression of Kunon, as her standoffish demeanor made clear, and she spoke in a low voice, like she was pouting.

Those things made no difference to Kunon, however. She was a girl, so he treated her like one, and that was that.

"I don't think we've seen each other since our joint research project," he said.

"Don't." Her voice sank even lower. "Don't remind me of all that money that slipped between my fingers."

A while ago, a team of water sorcerers—Kunon among them—had gone hunting for sunken ships. Various things had led them to veer off from their original research topic, and they'd ended up exploring a shipwreck.

They successfully recovered jewelry and other valuables from the site, and everything seemed to be going well, but ultimately, circumstances led to the spoils being claimed by their original owner—the country the ship had belonged to.

As a result, the team's expected earnings took a big hit.

For Kunon, who hadn't been anticipating making any money from the project when it began, the positives outweighed the negatives.

He had ended up earning both credits and money. And above all, he had gotten to see Lulomet's dark magic in action. Not that he could *actually* see it, of course.

"...That ruined all my plans," muttered Cassis. "I was hoping to go on an extravagant spending spree with a nice boy..."

Cassis still seemed bitter over the incident, though quite some time had passed.

"A nice boy?" asked Kunon. "Would I do?"

"I don't like guys who say things like that so casually."

"Oh, really?"

"I mean, you'd say that to anyone, right?"

I would indeed, Kunon thought.

"You say it as easily as you say 'hello,' don't you?"

That's very true, he thought again.

He had a feeling Cassis would get angry if he said what he was thinking, however, so he kept it to himself.

"I'm looking for a nice boy who will say things like that only to me."

In that case...

"I hope you find one."

There was nothing in particular they had to discuss, since they had only encountered each other by chance. After that simple exchange, Kunon and Cassis parted ways— "Oh, Kunon! Wait!"

—but only very briefly, before Cassis started chasing after him.

"I heard you recently made friends with the Inferno Prince! Is that true?!"

The Inferno Prince. Apparently, Cassis had heard people talking about him and Gioelion.

"Introduce me! Please!"

"Oh, I can't do that."

"Why did you answer so fast?! Are you picking on me?"

Kunon's heart gave a little flutter, perhaps because a girl had accused him of "picking on her." It was a nice phrase, filled with the power of femininity.

"No, it's just that Gioelion and the people around him aren't like that. How do I put it? They're rather sedate, I suppose. Or perhaps 'serious' is the word? I don't think I could just casually introduce someone to him or introduce him to someone else. You understand, right? So why don't you try greeting him yourself, Miss Cassis?"

"...It's irritating, but I do kind of understand."

Cassis agreed that the prince didn't seem like the kind of boy one could casually introduce girls to. His guards were always with him, and she had never once seen the prince do anything boys his age were wont to do, like having a nice time with friends.

In short, he seemed like a wet blanket. Whether that attitude was affectation or his natural state, Cassis didn't know, but the prince could hardly be called approachable. And in any case, Cassis was still really shy around strangers.

"...Hmph. Well, whatever. I'll just admire him from afar."

It seemed as though Cassis had come to some internal conclusion and decided to carry on as before.

"Anyway, do you know when the final exam is?" she said. "It's really soon, right?"

"Exam? Does the Advanced class have one, too?"

"No, we don't have exams or classes. I meant for Second Level. Aren't they holding a competition at the end of the semester?"

Come to think of it, Kunon had heard something like that.

When he was taking First Level classes, Jenié had seemed preoccupied, and kept saying something about "preparing questions for the final exam." Soff had

talked about it, too, as had students in the Second Level water class, and even Gioelion.

Kunon had thought the exam had nothing to do with him, since he was in the Advanced class, but...

"Is there a reason I should know when the exam is?"

"Huh? You're not going to watch?"

"What? That's allowed?"

No one had told him that before. When people discussed the exam in front of him, he got the sense that the Advanced class was completely uninvolved.

"Oh, that's right. You're a first-year. You must not know. You didn't hear it from me, but people who want to can watch it in secret. Of course, you have to make sure the students taking the exam don't find out. That's why the official stance is that we aren't allowed...probably. I'm pretty sure anyway."

Huh?

Her tone had gotten a bit vague at the end, but the point was clear. What mattered was that he could watch the exam.

"So I can observe, too?"

"I think so. You haven't seen the Inferno Prince fight yet, have you? When you do, you'll know right away how he got his name."

When she put it like that, there was no way Kunon could miss it.

At least—that was what he wanted to say.

"If that's the case, I'm afraid I'll have to decline."

But Kunon decided to hold back instead.

It was a heartbreaking choice. If he was being honest, he would have said, "Obviously, I want to go." If someone told him the competition was going to start immediately, he would want to go even if it meant canceling the rest of his plans for the day. But now was not the right time.

"Huh? Well, okay. I mean, it's not like I care."

Cassis, who had expected Kunon to jump at the offer, was a little disappointed.

After that, she headed off, for real this time.

"...It's really not the right time...," Kunon muttered.

He wanted to go. He wanted to watch the exam. He wanted to turn on his heel and dash after Cassis and say, "I'm coming with you!"

But right now, he just couldn't.

Right now, he was supposed to wait with bated breath until his duel with Gioelion.

Kunon wasn't in the mood for experiments or research; he was just single-mindedly counting down the days.

What would happen if he saw Gioelion's magic in his current state of mind, before they got to fight? What if he figured out its secrets? He was sure to regret it.

It wasn't that Kunon didn't care whether he won or lost. But more than anything, he wanted to fight a fair match. And that meant not only being polite and respectful but refraining from gathering any information that might give him an advantage. Kunon wanted no part in that. He wanted the two of them to start on equal footing, as much as that was possible.

Several days passed, the First and Second Level students' exams concluded without incident, and the second semester came to an end.

The day Kunon would finally see Gioelion once again was right around the corner.





## Epilogue The Letter

To my beloved fiancée,

How are you faring during these days of bitter cold that make one yearn for spring?

Personally, I long for you even more than that lovely season.

Has anything new or interesting happened lately?

I'm busy earning credits so that I can advance next year. I'm so wrapped up in experiments and research that each day passes in the blink of an eye.

Soon it will be five months since I began my life here at the Dirashik School of Magic. Practically half a year.

I'm totally accustomed to school life now, and I'm overjoyed to have discovered so many sorcerers more incredible than me.

The number of female friends I've made has increased as well.

Just recently, we went to the sea, stayed overnight, and conducted some magic experiments in the ocean.

I would like nothing more than to take you to the sea someday.

The more I get to know different women, the more your charm stands out in my mind.

Though I am still a long way from graduating, my feelings for you only continue to deepen.

Oh, right!

I ran into my old mentor, Jenié Kors, here at school.

I don't remember if you ever met her, but I'm sure I've mentioned her name several times before.

I was so glad to see her again, though it was a little embarrassing seeing someone who knew me as I used to be.

How are you, Your Highness?

I'm sure training for knighthood must be difficult.

Eventually, I want to develop and send you a magic tool that can be of use to you.

That is currently my secret goal.

I want you to think of me and cherish it.

But that's still a long ways off, so...please don't be mad if I can't manage it.

It gets quite cold at night.

Please take care of yourself.

With eternal love,

Your Kunon Gurion

PS

I also got to meet a female teacher I have long admired. She's so incredible, I got a little carried away.

Is there anyone you admire, Your Highness?







It was too soon—everyone thought so.

"He's my disciple, y'know? Why are you so surprised?"

Everyone except Zeonly Finroll, that is.

Kunon was quite accomplished. Though not as much as Zeonly, of course. There probably weren't many his age as successful. That was precisely why Zeonly had been able to send his disciple off with confidence.

"But what are you going to do about it?"

Londimonde's question was reasonable.

They were in his office—that of Grand Master Londimonde, the man in charge of Hughlia's Royal Sorcerers.

It was evening. Winter made the days short. Already the light filtering in through the window was growing dim, and they could see the sun setting in the sky.

The only people in the room were Londimonde and Zeonly, who sat facing each other across a table.

"There's no way the royal family is gonna keep quiet about this, is there?"

Around the end of spring, Zeonly had seen off his disciple, Kunon Gurion. The trouble had arisen when Zeonly brought one of his letters to the royal castle. The boy was already causing problems for them—much to Londimonde's delight.

Though he put on a stern face, the Grand Master was all smiles inside. He had a soft spot for troublemaking kids, so he wasn't bothered in the least.

"You know you're grinning, right? If you're gonna pretend you're not enjoying this, at least try to hide it."

"Oh, my apologies." Evidently, he'd failed to hide his smile. "But we do need to figure out what to do. Do you have any ideas?"

"That's why I came to you."

"To me, eh...?"

No longer interested in keeping up appearances, Londimonde smirked as he reread the letter Zeonly had handed him.

He had been right, after all. This was great fun.

"So he teamed up with a saint—one of his classmates. Interesting choice. And already their work is bearing fruit. It's premature, in my opinion, but I suppose not out of the realm of imagination for a disciple with your personal stamp of approval."

"S'pose so."

Kunon teaming up with a saint had surprised Zeonly as well. After all, during his own school days, Zeonly had lived a lonely—ahem, solitary existence. He almost always worked alone and had done just fine that way.

From his point of view, Kunon's ability to collaborate with others was his strength. If he could get along with a master of Zeonly's *potent* personality, he could probably get along with anyone.

Zeonly was proud of his disciple's success, but he was also a little frustrated. To work in collaboration with another person even while butting heads was a blessing Zeonly had not known until he took on a disciple. He vaguely wondered

what it would have been like if he'd had such a friend back in school. He would have accomplished so much more, no doubt—achieved even better results.

But it was pointless even imagining it. There hadn't been anyone capable of keeping up with a genius like himself.

"I'm guessing you'll have to tell the higher-ups about this." he said.

"I have no choice."

Successfully cultivating the shi-shilla herb and creating a medicine from it, not to mention the development of the proposed "Medicine Box," were major achievements likely to become known around the world.

The rights to such a discovery would be of enormous value. So much so that even if they didn't notify the government, those in charge would find out in no time. Concealing such information was pointless. In fact, it would probably only bring more trouble.

"This is going to cause quite the fuss. It will be hard on Princess Mirika as well."

**♦** 

"Princess Mirika. An invitation to a tea party has arrived from Duchess Miressa."

"What?"

Mirika was caught entirely off guard. She had already completed both her knighthood training and her private lessons for the day. The invitation delivered by her personal maid, Laura, had assailed her as she was catching her breath after nearly falling asleep in the bath.

"From Sister Miressa?" she asked.

Miressa Aglia, formerly the third princess, was Mirika's twenty-two-year-old elder sister. She had married the Duke of Aglia several years ago, and Mirika barely knew her.

"We've never said more than hello to each other..."

They weren't close in age and didn't have many chances to interact. Plus,

neither of them had a lot of free time, and they had never gone out of their way to meet. Their relationship consisted of exchanging pleasantries whenever they happened to see each other in passing.

Mirika's impression of her...wasn't bad. It wasn't much of anything.

The only memory Mirika had of Miressa was of her sister returning her greetings with a polite smile. That was all.

For someone above Mirika in the line of succession, that reaction alone made Miressa seem like a reasonable person.

The Hughlian royal family—due to the succession issue—was rife with tension. It was hard on the family, to say nothing of how it affected others. It wasn't uncommon for siblings to react to each other with scathing hostility.

"Will you go?"

"I have to."

Though she had left the castle, it wasn't as though Miressa had left all her ties. It wouldn't be smart to give an improper response and make more enemies in the palace.

Mirika didn't yet know if Miressa was aiming for the position of queen. And as long as she didn't know, she had to tread carefully.

"Yes," she continued. "I don't think I can refuse."

Reading over the invitation letter, Mirika sighed.

The appointed time aligned neatly with the end of knighthood courses for the day. If it had overlapped with school hours, she could have used that as a reason to decline, since it was her duty as a royal to attend the senior school. But it appeared that wasn't an option, either.

That meant Miressa had sent the invitation after acquainting herself with Mirika's schedule and daily life. In other words, her sister was making it clear—she had no intention of letting Mirika escape.

"See you later, Princess Mirika."

"Good-bye."

The school day ended, and everyone went off toward their respective destinations.

Mirika, still labeled the Delinquent Princess, tended to be given a wide berth by the other students.

But she *had* managed to make a friend. She'd formed something of a fellowship with her opponent from the summer exam, Kears Freshim. They were both busy with training, though, so they chatted only occasionally.

Mirika watched Kears leave before heading for the exit herself.

She was attending Miressa's tea party that day. Unfortunately, the weather was nice, even pleasant for a winter's day. That meant the tea party would not be canceled, as she'd hoped.

She stepped outside and climbed into her carriage, then headed for the Aglia estate.

Mirika spent the short ride gazing vacantly out the window. The family's primary residence was located in the Aglia duchy, of course, but their villa in the royal capital was quite splendid as well.

She rode the carriage onto the property and got out in front of the estate.

"Welcome, Your Highness."

"Thank you for inviting me here today."

Guided by the butler who had received her, Mirika made her way to the rear of a spacious, well-kept garden.

As she approached, she heard the exchange of affected, elegant female voices. At first, they sounded like the chirping of little birds. But noblewomen needed to be approached with caution. Despite their beauty, ferocious hawks and vultures lurked within.

When Mirika appeared in her school uniform, the dolled-up little birds stopped chirping.

"It's been a long time, Sister Miressa."

"How nice of you to come, Mirika."

They greeted each other pleasantly. No one would believe they had hardly ever spoken before.

"Allow me to introduce you. This is my younger sister, Mirika."

Four other people sat at the table in addition to Miressa. Three of them, judging by their ages, were Miressa's friends. The fourth was a girl... She was the same age as, or perhaps a little younger than, Mirika.

"Mirika, this is Shirene Hijua, Ané Hohnen, and Marlene Weinar. And this is Marlene's younger sister, Eley."

"A pleasure to meet you."

Mirika struggled to commit each name to memory as Miressa rattled them off.

Shirene was married to the eldest son of the Marquess Hijua. Hohnen, she thought, was a noble family from the Kingdom of Aselviga. And Weinar was a baron who was currently enjoying some success in trade.

She felt relief wash over her as she just barely managed to recognize them all. It was unacceptable for someone in Mirika's position to not know the names of other royalty and aristocrats.

"All of them are friends of mine from my school days. Oh, except Eley."

That was no surprise, Mirika thought, as Eley was the only one in a different age bracket.

"I beg your pardon for appearing in my school clothes," she said as she sat in the chair offered to her.

Miressa had given her permission to attend in her uniform, but that didn't mean it wasn't ill-mannered. Still, Mirika was grateful she didn't have to go home from school, change, and get ready, before going back out again.

"A school uniform, how nostalgic."

"Isn't it? I wonder how many years it's been since we last wore one."

The little birds began chirping anew.

All smiles and pleasantness, by appearances.

And yet—a strange tension filled the air.

Time passed, and their conversation rambled on as the sun began to set.

Behind her smile, Mirika was steeling herself, thinking whatever it was would be coming anytime now.

She had been invited to a tea party by a sister who was practically a stranger. *Something* had to be coming.

"Say, Mirika."

Miressa, for her part, was feeling a little antsy. Mirika had put up a stronger front than expected.

Despite not yet making her formal debut into society, she knew the ways of nobility. She was dignified and spoke without stammering. She showed neither weakness nor flaw.

She might have been quite a threat if she was closer to the throne.

"What about your fiancé?"

In particular, Mirika hadn't let slip a single word about her fiancé, Kunon Gurion. Time was running out, so Miressa had decided to adopt a more direct approach.

"What about him? I'm not sure what you mean."

"He left for magic school at the end of spring this year, didn't he? You haven't seen him at all since then, and I expect you won't for several years. Are you not unhappy? Or at all apprehensive?"

"How about you, Sister? How would you feel if you didn't get to see your husband for several years?"

"We're talking about you at the moment."

"But we're sisters. I'm sure I feel the same way you would."

As expected, the little miss was skilled at evasion. Just like this, she had been sidestepping the point, managing to do nothing but pass the time.

Despite Miressa's more direct question, Mirika had dodged it once again.

"I'll speak plainly, since this is going nowhere. Do you have any intention of breaking your engagement with Master Kunon?"

"I do not."

"If you would consider it, I could make arrangements for a partner who is Master Kunon's equal or better."

"There is no need."

"I'm hesitant to say too much, but didn't Master Kunon cause some sort of incident in the palace a while back? He's already got a stain on his record, hasn't he? You will definitely have a hard time married to someone like that."

"I don't mind."

"You enrolled in the knighthood course to marry Master Kunon, correct? Covered in sweat and dirt every day, working yourself to the bone. It's entirely unlike the life of a princess. And you don't really fit in at the castle, do you? I also heard you've earned a nasty reputation at school. Most importantly, when you're lonely or hurting, Master Kunon isn't there. Perhaps he wouldn't notice even if he was. A new fiancé would never be allowed such behavior. He would be by your side always, looking only at..."

Miressa stopped talking.

Mirika had asked the servant in attendance to refill her tea. She was acting like she hadn't heard a single word. It was as if she was using a breach of etiquette to say, "You are speaking nonsense."

"...It would appear I'm wasting my time."

Miressa smiled wryly.

This is as far as I can get, she thought. She realized now she had no chance of changing Mirika's mind.

"Have you finished talking?" It was Mirika's turn to ask a question. "I'm past the point of being strong-armed or deluded by flattery, Sister. I intend to marry Kunon Gurion—no matter what."

Her mind was made up. She would marry her fiancé and accept any hardships that came with him. Mirika was determined. And so all of Miressa's questions

were a waste of time.

"I want to make a deal with you, Mirika."

"...Pardon?"

Stealing Kunon Gurion away would be difficult. In that case, Miressa simply had to take a different approach.

"It's too soon."

The moment she returned to her room, Mirika put her head in her hands.

"Did something happen at the tea party...?"

Her maid, Laura, addressed Mirika with concern after taking care of her bags. Immediately, the princess's head snapped back up.

"It's too soon!" she exclaimed.

"E-excuse me?"

It had come at the very end of the tea party. Miressa said she wanted to make a deal, and then briefly explained the current situation.

"Kunon did it."

"...Huh? What did he do?"

For a moment, Laura worried he had conceived a child or something, but that seemed unlikely.

"He did it!"

"Did what?"

"Became accomplished! He's getting noticed!"

Mirika hung her head again with a little wail.

*I see,* Laura thought, nodding.

He hadn't sired any children, but he seemed to have made a name for himself.

It had been about half a year since he'd entered magic school. In that short time, Kunon had already earned enough success that word had come all the way back to Hughlia.

"What did he accomplish, specifically?" Laura asked.

"I was told he collaborated with a saint and managed to cultivate sacred herbs!"

Laura nodded again.

Sacred herbs were medicinal plants that sold for high prices. This was probably the first ever successful cultivation of a sacred herb. Bad news, indeed. That kind of achievement could earn someone a place in the history books.

"And! He's figured out how to make the medicine last longer!"

Laura gave another nod of understanding and looked at Mirika with pity.

So there was more, she thought.

Many medicines made with sacred herbs were tricky to handle. Solving that problem could be the first step toward their more widespread use. It could lead to a whole new industry.

In short, Kunon had proved his own talents very publicly. And in so little time.

"I doubt the First Prince or any of the others will stay out of this now, will they?"

That was why Laura felt sorry for Mirika.

Her older brothers and sisters, those ahead of her in line for the throne, had better connections and wouldn't hesitate to use every trick and scheme they could manage.

They were going to want Kunon. And if they got serious, Mirika wouldn't stand a chance against them as she was now.

"...It is indeed a bit too soon."

Both of them had known Kunon would be a success. That one day he would accomplish something big enough that talk of him would make it back to his homeland.

Mirika had been preparing and working hard so she could keep up with him.

And yet to think he would earn that renown in only half a year. It was too soon. Sooner than she could have imagined. In the same time, Mirika had accomplished practically nothing.

"Wh-wh-what do I do, Laura?! My elder siblings are definitely going to try something, aren't they?!"

"Yes. They'll be fighting to make the first move."



"What should I do?!"

"Isn't that your only option at this point?"

"That's not ready yet! I need a little more time...! Oh, wait..."

Mirika suddenly took a piece of paper from her pocket.

"Maybe there is something I can try..."

The paper was proof of the deal—or rather, the pact—that Mirika had just made with Miressa.

Her older sister had been aiming for Kunon. But when it became apparent she wouldn't get him, she shifted gears and offered Mirika a business proposal. That was when Mirika heard about Kunon's success with the Saint and the sacred herb.

Miressa was a supporter of Baron Weinar's wife—who had also been at the tea party—and was lending a hand with the Weinar business. She wanted the company to have dealings with Kunon.

But Mirika didn't know the particulars of Kunon's current state of affairs, so she couldn't make any definite commitments. In the end, their agreement was no more than a promise to prioritize negotiations. Mirika just needed to aid in that as much as she could.

Such were the terms of their pact. The agreement would not go into effect until after Mirika married Kunon, which meant that as long as she had this paper, Mirika had proof of Miressa Aglia's backing.

Though she was already married, Miressa was the third princess. Plus, she had married a duke. Not even the royal family could easily challenge someone of her status.

In short, Mirika had bought a little extra time for herself.

"It's a little—no, actually it's a lot too early, but let's begin preparations."

"Understood."

Both Mirika and Laura had been expecting Kunon to make a name for himself someday. And so they had been thinking—what would they do if one of

Mirika's older siblings tried in earnest to take Kunon away from her?

"Soon, I'll leave the capital," Mirika declared.

Putting some physical distance between herself and her siblings was the only solution Mirika had been able to come up with. But it also seemed like it might work. After all, those higher in the order of succession had to be ever vigilant to protect their privilege and positions. In other words, they couldn't leave the playing field. They had to stay in the castle.

Hopefully, all her older brothers and sisters would be left in a standoff, unable to advance. And meanwhile, Mirika would marry Kunon!

...She didn't expect things would go *that* smoothly, but still. What she needed now was time.

She had no choice but to scrabble for a foothold. And that meant she had to make her move.



Mirika was preparing to do just that, but let's rewind the clock a little...

...back to that day in Londimonde's office, and to the conversation he was having with Zeonly.

"This is going to cause quite the fuss. It will be hard on Princess Mirika as well."

Londimonde had also heard from Zeonly about matters regarding Kunon's fiancée.

It was rare for Zeonly to take such an interest... But perhaps it was just proof of how much he cherished his disciple. His attitude had changed somewhat after taking on a student.

Zeonly was concerned with Mirika's circumstances, too. He knew she was aiming to become a knight in order to be a good match for Kunon.

She was a ninth princess with no accomplishments to her name, and Kunon was sure to be racking up achievement after achievement from that point on.

It was highly unlikely the two would be able to marry if things continued this

way. The more Kunon's star rose, the more probable it was that some rival would snatch him away.

There were always going to be those who would want Kunon for themselves. The question was what would happen when those forces started to appear.

The quickest way to bring a desired person under one's influence was to make them part of the family—to bring them into the inner circle, as it were. Binding someone through marriage was the tried-and-true method.

"Don't worry about her," Zeonly said. "She's already prepared for the worst."

"Oh?"

"She's gotten pretty strong, too. Plus she has Dario. And Lyle."

"Lyle? Prince Lyle?"

"Yep. The royal pain in the ass. Seems they get along well."

That's an unexpected pair, Londimonde thought.

"Lyle knows how to survive outside the castle. Worst case scenario—as long as she's with him, I think we could toss her right out of the palace."

"For goodness' sake, 'toss' her...?"

"Anyway, Kunon will be given territory when he returns. Some cleared land in a border district, right?"

Excellent sorcerers also made good land developers. For an ordinary person, such a task was a massive, lifelong undertaking. But that wasn't true for a sorcerer. Kunon could probably establish a whole town without even batting an eyelid.

"I think it would be smart to send the princess off to that territory right away."

"It's too early for..... Oh. Actually, I suppose you're right. What a clever idea."

Understanding the meaning behind Zeonly's words, Londimonde widened his grin.

"We can move pretty freely outside the castle, too."

"That's what I'm sayin'."

Inside the castle, their research had to stay small-scale—cramped, even. Outside, those constraints didn't apply.

"For us, all you'd have to do is say something like, 'Anybody want to go on a research vacation somewhere remote?' and you'd have a bunch of them lined up and ready to take off. Then you could tell 'em to help with the land development here and there when they have some free time."

In some empty border district, they could conduct large-scale experiments and make discoveries to their hearts' content. An area with no people would even make it easier to get permission. And they would be supervised, of course.

"You're right," said Londimonde. "And I'd love to take a trip."

"As if you could go."

"Same applies to you."

"Well, I'll leave you to it. I gotta go get my things in order."

"Hey. I said you can't go. You're staying here with me. I mean it! Zeonly Finroll!"

In the end, the Delinquent Princess was indeed chased out of the capital. But that story will have to wait...

## i **♦** i Afterword

Hello, it's Umikaze Minamino.

Somehow or another, the third volume of *Kunon the Sorcerer Can See* has made it into the world. Due to some personal reasons, I have a bit of an emotional attachment to this book. I'll be very happy if it sells well.

I'm writing this afterword at the end of October 2022.

A lot has happened recently.

Some of it can't be shared here, but with that in mind, I'll tell you what I can.

First, I bought a new computer to replace my old one. During the data transfer process, about 80 percent of my important files were lost. I cried.

Next, I upgraded my old smartphone. Because of stock availability, I had to go with the latest model even though I would have preferred not to. I can't get the hang of using it, *and* it was expensive.

I got hooked on *Splatoon 3* but had to quit playing. I couldn't afford to spend any more time on it than I already had. It was heartbreaking. Well, I had also started to lose my motivation to play. My character kept getting killed, and I couldn't figure out why.

I accidentally ordered the kind of protein powder that makes you put on weight. I can't use it, since I want to lose weight instead.

There was a coupon for a free drink at a restaurant called Tenkaippin on my old phone that didn't carry over when I upgraded to a new one. The transfer failed due to some issue with the ID, and I got really annoyed.

My new phone might be difficult to use, but at least my *Arknights* data was transferred safely, which was a relief. I was happy about that.

The *Arknights* fandom is really excited because the anime is about to start, but it probably won't be broadcast in my area, which makes me sad.

The conveyor belt sushi shop near me raised its prices, which was probably inevitable.

I gave my first autograph as a writer. It might be the only one I ever do. It was a precious experience.

Hunter x Hunter resumed.

I always go to the bookstore when a new volume of this novel is released to see how it looks, but I had a sprained foot when Volume 2 came out, so I couldn't go. I had visited a shrine to pray for the volume's success, but I twisted my ankle the minute I stepped through the *torii* gate. It hurt. The pain lasted for about a month. That was back in August, though.

It really has been a period of many ups and downs. So much happened. All I want is to lead an uneventful life. Just peaceful days with no incidents—that's my ideal.

The lost Tenkaippin drink coupon is especially regrettable. To me, at least. I'm totally serious.

Thank you as always to Laruha for the wonderful illustrations in this volume.

I could hardly stand how beautiful Cassis looks. It was hard to believe such a cute girl could exist, even as a drawing, but I guess it's fine, since she's a boy.

Congratulations to La-na, who is responsible for the manga adaptation of this story serialized in *Monthly Comic Alive*, on the release of the first compiled volume! Also, as the original story author, I cannot thank you enough. I am so grateful.

I look forward to seeing more of your thoughtful and beautiful manga in the future.

To O, the lead editor, I am once again in your debt.

I'm sure I missed some sort of deadline this time, too... Things have been

more hectic lately than they have been in several years. My deepest apologies.

Finally, to you, dear readers.

Thank you for buying this book.

We're on the third volume, and it's all thanks to your support.

The serialization of this story on *Shousetsuka ni Narou* is still ongoing, but the web version has a very different feel to the book version. There are lots of extras and revisions in the books, so I believe even those reading the web version can find something to enjoy.

So if you're unsure whether to purchase this book, please take it straight to the register now!

I hope to see you all in Volume 4.

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